HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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16 April 2018
House of Commons

Monday 16 April 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Police and Fire Service Collaboration

1. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services. [904739]

16. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services; and if she will make a statement. [904755]

18. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage greater collaboration between police and fire services. [904757]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): This Government firmly support collaboration between emergency services and have invested more than £88 million in projects to support that since 2013. The Policing and Crime Act 2017 introduced a host of measures to enable collaboration to go further and faster, which include a statutory duty to collaborate and allow elected police and crime commissioners to take on fire and rescue governance.

Mary Robinson: I welcome the recent Government investment of £24 million, following the Manchester bombing last May. The package includes almost £10 million to cover the cost of extra staffing and other pressures on Greater Manchester police. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is much we can learn from the response to the Manchester Arena terrorist atrocity and that we should continue to work to try to improve further how our excellent emergency services respond to such tragic events?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Of course, the important report highlights the acts of bravery and compassion that took place on the night of 22 May and in the following days. As Lord Kerslake noted, the response was “overwhelmingly positive”, but the report also shows a need for improvement in some areas. As she points out, it makes certain recommendations, which I know the local emergency services and the Home Office will follow up.

Michael Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend as pleased as I am to hear that Staffordshire fire service is now not going to take to judicial review her decision to merge the governance of Staffordshire’s police and fire services? Does she agree with me—and, more importantly, with Matthew Ellis, our excellent PCC—that this merger will mean that an additional £10 million a year will be saved, which can go into frontline services?

Amber Rudd: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for his local leadership in achieving this. It was not uncontroversial for a while, so I am grateful that it has been able to go through, and that he accepts and the local authorities have accepted the independent advice we have received. I hope he and Matthew Ellis, and all the other organisations involved, will make a great success of it.
Luke Hall: Clearly, when we are looking at these reforms, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will suit every part of the UK. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Government are going to be driven by a pragmatic approach, which will ensure that cross-service collaboration will be driven by what is best in terms of delivering results for communities up and down the UK?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is absolutely right to say that this is not a case where one size fits all, but it is the case that collaboration will lead to efficiencies, cost savings and a better service for all. I hope that the leadership we have seen across the country from some PCCs will be taken forward by others.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Collaboration between all the emergency services is vital, not least because these workers face some of the same threats, including a large and increasing number of assaults on them. Will the Home Secretary support my amendment to my own private Member’s Bill, which we will be discussing next week, to make sure that sexual assault on emergency workers is also an aggravated offence? It is wrong that these emergency workers are facing these abuses.

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should do more to protect emergency service workers, which is why we are working closely with him on the Bill. I hope we will arrive at an accommodation in order to get it through.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There is a lot to be gained from the police and fire services working closer together, but this cannot be used as an excuse for cuts. Efficiencies could come from it, but does the Home Secretary acknowledge that both the police and fire services are significantly underfunded at the moment and we cannot have more cuts coming in as a result of closer working?

Amber Rudd: One way of avoiding the impact of cuts that the hon. Lady highlights would be by having greater efficiencies and having collaboration between the emergency services is an excellent way of doing that. That is what we have seen up and down the country, and I urge her to see more of it in her own area.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The PCC takeover of fire services will change the perception of firefighters from “public safety” to “law enforcement”. My question is: when are the Government going to provide adequate funding so that councils are not forced to hostile PCC and fire service mergers? I am looking for a meaningful response on central Government funding, not another brush-off about earmarked reserves.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady underestimates the high regard in which firefighters are held right across this country. The public know the difference, and are able to distinguish between firefighters and policemen and women, but they want to see better working of emergency services together.

Domestic Violence

2. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps is the hon. Member taking to tackle domestic violence?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government have put tackling domestic abuse at the heart of their agenda. We have introduced a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour; rolled out new tools, such as domestic violence protection orders; and committed £100 million to support victims of violence against women and girls. Furthermore, on 8 March, we launched a wide-ranging consultation, and we will introduce a groundbreaking domestic abuse Bill, which will offer further support.

Helen Whately: Domestic violence harms victims mentally as well as physically. Women who have experienced domestic abuse are far more likely to suffer from a mental health condition, as are children who have witnessed violence at home. I urge my hon. Friend to use the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill to make sure that victims of abuse and their families get the mental health support that they need.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; she is a long-standing campaigner on mental health. We recognise that mental health can be a theme in domestic abuse situations. We are already funding a number of projects through the VAWG transformation fund. For example, we have given £377,000 to the London Borough of Southwark for therapeutic support for victims and their children with complex needs. We want to use the consultation to get the best possible deal for victims of domestic abuse and to stop the cycle of violence.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As well as putting the offences of psychological abuse and coercive control on the statute book, the Scottish Government have allocated funding to train 14,000 Police Scotland officers and staff to spot those offences in domestic abuse settings. Will the Minister commit to following that example in England and Wales?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to hear that Scotland is doing that. New police training has been developed by the voluntary sector in England and Wales. It is called Domestic Abuse Matters and focuses on the recognition of controlling and coercive behaviour, and it is being rolled out to forces throughout the country.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Government’s domestic abuse consultation proposes the tagging of perpetrators. The Victims’ Rights Campaign is calling for best use to be made of GPS tracking technology to warn police and victims when an offender enters a court-imposed exclusion zone. Does the Minister agree that such an alert system would provide vital security for victims and reduce reoffending?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that issue. She does a great deal of work in this area. It is an interesting idea, and I know that she and others will submit it to the consultation.

Modern Slavery

3. Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What steps is the Government taking to eliminate modern slavery.

[904740]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government remain committed to stamping out the abhorrent crime of modern slavery, both at home and overseas. We have strengthened the operational law enforcement response and introduced new requirements for victims to report on slavery in their supply chains, and we are now transforming the support that we provide to victims. Internationally, we continue to work with partners to build capacity and consensus to prevent modern slavery, wherever it occurs.

Alberto Costa: I welcome the Minister’s answer and the extensive work that she and the Government are doing to tackle this horror in our society. Will she expand on what steps the Government are taking to provide ongoing support to victims of modern slavery?

Victoria Atkins: The Government’s comprehensive reforms of the national referral mechanism will significantly improve support for victims of modern slavery. Move-on support for confirmed victims will be trebled to 45 days, giving a minimum of 90 days of support. During that period, victims can access accommodation, financial assistance, counselling, health services and signposting to legal support. In addition, confirmed victims will be entitled to a further six months of post-NRM support.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend will know that section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 stipulates that companies and organisations with a turnover greater than £36 million are liable to report on slavery in their supply chains. In addition, we are learning from the leading large businesses that make up our Business Against Slavery forum, so that we can apply the best business practice to our own supply chains.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that interesting question. Section 54 of the Act does not cover the public sector, but the Government are committed to taking action against modern slavery in our supply chains. The Home Office and other Departments are piloting a new detailed questionnaire to get more information about modern slavery risks in our supply chains. In addition, we are learning from the leading large businesses that make up our Business Against Slavery forum, so that we can apply the best business practice to our own supply chains.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I talk to many people from the police who do not think they have sufficient resources to tackle the evil gangs in most of our towns and cities that exploit people—women, normally, although not just women—whether from this country or brought in, and force them into prostitution. This is happening in every one of our towns and cities. When are we going to get more action?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Local police forces work with the National Crime Agency so that we have a nationwide response to modern slavery. Let us be clear that trafficking, particularly if it involves women and victims of sexual trafficking, is completely unacceptable. I encourage local police forces to work with the NCA to investigate and prosecute those offences when they can.

22. [904762]John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): Last year, in a meeting of the all-party group on the hair industry, I praised the charity Unseen for its work on tackling modern slavery, particularly given the number of victims being exploited within the lifestyle, hair and beauty sectors. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State, or her Ministers, agree to meet me and the chief executive officer of the Hair Council to discuss what actions the hair and beauty industry can take to help end this exploitation?

Victoria Atkins: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. Nail bars can be a particular source of exploitation, which is why they are the focus of the anti-slavery commissioner and of the director of labour market exploitation. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): What steps has the Minister taken to report on slaves being retraﬁed in the UK and recorded in the national referral mechanism more than once?

Victoria Atkins: One reason why we are improving the national referral mechanism is precisely to build resilience during that vital period. We are trebling the period once a person has been found to be a victim of modern slavery in order to build resilience in respect of those people, so that they are not prone to becoming victims of modern slavery or trafficking again.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration recently found no evidence that the Home Office is actively monitoring the link between the use of right to rent and victims of modern slavery, despite concerns that the scheme makes it difficult for victims of modern slavery to come forward. The inspector also found that the Home Office is failing to measure the scheme effectively, and yet it has refused to fully implement the inspector’s recommendations for a proper evaluation. Will the Minister do so now?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. We have looked at the national referral mechanism because we are conscious that criminal gangs, as they find out what law enforcement and others are up to and as crime develops, change their modus operandi. If there are particular issues that he wishes to raise with me, I will be happy to meet him to discuss them further.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that modern slavery is not simply a national problem, but an international problem with international gangs? When we leave the European Union, will we continue to work very closely with our European colleagues and co-operate with them to deal with this evil trade?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. Public safety will always be part of the Government’s priorities both in the EU negotiations and beyond. We already work very closely with our EU partners and with other partners because, sadly, victims are brought from all over the world. It is a programme that has the personal commitment of the Prime Minister and I know that that will continue to be the case.
Joanna Cherry: The problem with the Modern Slavery Act is that it does not actually place a duty on the UK Government—unlike the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, passed by the Scottish Parliament, which places a specific duty on Scottish Ministers to provide the sort of support and assistance that we are talking about. I am aware that there is a private Member’s Bill going forward in the other place at the moment, but can the Minister tell us whether her Government have any plans to amend the Modern Slavery Act to bring it up to the standard of the Scottish Government’s Act?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. and learned Lady is referring to section 30 of the Act, which provides for regulations. Those regulations are being reviewed at the moment—indeed, we have been in contact with the noble Lord who brought that private Member’s Bill before the other place. The regulations are very much under review.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with the emphasis that the hon. Lady places on the balance needed between robust law enforcement and early intervention and prevention, to steer young people away from violent crime. That is exactly the balance that we are setting out in the serious violence strategy.

I also agree with the hon. Lady’s second point. In fact, I heard it directly from youth workers in north Manchester, when I visited a factory there recently. They said, “Don’t pin all this on gangs in large parts of Manchester.” This is not about gangs; it is about very serious work to steer young people away from a path that can have devastating consequences for them.

Does the Minister agree that prevention is an absolutely key aspect of policing youth violence, and that part of that prevention is a more sophisticated approach to how we police? Young people from certain neighbourhoods—especially if they are black or ethnic minority—are too often wrongly labelled as gang criminals when, in fact, they are groups of youths. Will he look at this issue?

Mr Hurd: With respect to my hon. Friend, with whom I go back a long way, there is absolutely no evidence to support his first assertion. In fact, the last big decline in knife attacks and violent crime coincided with a fall in stop and search. I will say, quite categorically, that we see stop and search emphatically as a vital tool in the police armoury as part of the robust law enforcement that we want. However, we have been clear that it needs to be used legally, targeted, intelligence-led and, ideally, increasingly supported by body-worn video.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I would call the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) to pose a supplementary question, given that her own question is not entirely dissimilar. She is not standing, so I will not call her; but if she does, I will.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I had been thinking that Question 9 might have worked, but thank you very much for calling me now, Mr Speaker.

Organised crime groups south of the border are believed to be behind a recent spate of burglaries of gold from Asian families’ houses, including 12 in East Dunbartonshire, leaving families terrified. A UK-wide response is clearly needed. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how policing efforts can be co-ordinated across the border to bring those responsible to justice?
Mr Hurd: I am happy to say that the Minister for Security has muttered his acceptance of that invitation to me. We are increasingly aware of the need to better align national, cross-national, regional and local capability to bear down on serious organised crime as it becomes more complex and affects more of our constituents.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There is widespread support for what the Minister has said—that we need both a policing response and a response based on intervention to prevent young people from being involved in gang violence—but what is he doing to deliver on the crucial task of assessing which interventions are the most effective and deliver the best results?

Mr Hurd: As my right hon. Friend says, the serious violence strategy balances the need for robust law enforcement with really effective work to support prevention and early intervention. That needs to be evidence-led, otherwise we will waste money. Part of the Home Office’s responsibility is to ensure that commissioners have the best evidence about what works.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The serious violence strategy made no reference at all to falling police numbers, but we have the document that was put together by Home Office officials, which clearly says that rises in serious violence are “likely to be facilitated by...a shift in police resources meaning less proactive policing...and falls in arrests/charges relating to serious violence”.

So will the Minister explain on what evidential basis he or the Home Secretary removed that reference from the serious violence strategy? Was it a purely political decision to airbrush the strategy and risk our communities in the process?

Mr Hurd: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady should focus on that, not least because she was more sensible on the “Today” programme when she said, “We do not say that there is a direct causal factor between the number of officers on the ground and the number of crimes.” In saying that, she joined the Met Commissioner, who was also quite clear that causes of violent crime are complex and cannot simply be reduced down to resourcing. I give the hon. Lady credit for her sensible on the “Today” programme when she said, “Good try,” says the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mr Hurd), chuntering from a sedentary position to what he will regard as an obvious purpose.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), chuntering from a sedentary position to what he will regard as an obvious purpose.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot answer that question on the Floor of the House, but if she writes to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, we will look into it.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Home Secretary for her response. The already socially excluded are likely to have the most difficulty in completing settled status applications in time. According to the Migration Observatory, 64,000 non-Irish EU citizens said that they had never
used the internet. How will the Home Office ensure that those people can complete their online settled status applications in time?

Amber Rudd: I am glad to have the opportunity to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. The settled status application process will be very straightforward and very swift, with an assumption that people will get their status when they apply for it. We need to recruit many people and expend money to get this right, precisely because we need to make sure that we have the resources and facilities available for people who are not comfortable going online. We are aware of that and will be getting advice, and we will make sure that we have a system that works for everybody.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): EU citizens have a clear pathway to British citizenship, but British Indian Ocean Territory nationals, many of whom were exiled and denied citizenship, do not. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary could consider my private Member’s Bill, to ensure that justice is restored to those British nationals, for whom we are responsible.

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a particular interest in that. We spoke about it when I saw him in his constituency, and of course I will engage with him carefully on his private Member’s Bill.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Home Secretary will be aware of the Law Society’s new evidence that the Government are losing 50% of immigration appeals. Given that the workload of this flawed immigration system is about to have the biggest increase in its history, with EU citizens applying for citizenship and then settled status after Brexit, what is she doing to sort out the complete mess of the immigration system?

Amber Rudd: I think that in the core of that question there was an inquiry about the settled status of EU citizens, which I know is the right hon. Gentleman’s particular concern. As I said in response to a previous question, we are making sure that the new system will be completely online and straightforward to use, and the default position will be to accept.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the Home Secretary is confident about EU citizens, but there is widespread concern as to whether her Department has enough resources, and we now learn that the Windrush generation are going through what the Home Secretary is confident about EU citizens, who, after all, are British citizens in the eyes of many of us?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend makes a fair point. I know that there will be an opportunity to answer questions on that later. I am very concerned about how the Windrush generation have been treated, and I will be making some further statements about what we are going to do about that. She is right to identify that they have the right to be here, and I will make sure that the Home Office delivers on that.

Cannabis Oil Prescription: Epilepsy

7. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What progress has been made on bringing forward legislative proposals to license cannabis oil for prescription for epilepsy.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The World Health Organisation has committed to reviewing the scheduling of cannabis under the 1961 United Nations convention. It is due to consider the therapeutic use, dependence on and potential to abuse constituent parts of cannabis. The Government will await the outcome of that report before considering next steps.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. With special reference to Dravet syndrome, the seizures associated with which are aided incredibly by cannabis oil in a larger dose, can he confirm whether his Department will legislate for specific uses, to allow doctors to prescribe it to the likes of little Sophia Gibson in my constituency, whose parents Darren and Danielle are at this moment in Holland, where Sophia is receiving medical treatment?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman has raised his constituent’s case with me in writing, and we have a huge amount of sympathy for Sophia Gibson and her family. He will know that we need to ensure that doctors and patients are assured of the quality, safety and efficacy of medicines before they come to market, but I have written to the hon. Gentleman to arrange a meeting to discuss his constituent’s case.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister, who met Alfie Dingley and his family, will know the pain and anxiety caused by the cumbersome licensing process. Does he accept that a wider range of cases than this very rare form of epilepsy involve the use of cannabis oil in palliative care and pain relief, and that they also need to be investigated?

Mr Hurd: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman completely; it is hard not to feel a huge amount of sympathy for Hannah Deacon and Drew Dingley, not least having met them with Alfie. We have said that we want to explore every option within the existing law. The right hon. Gentleman talks about a cumbersome licensing process. In fact, we are waiting for someone to make an application. We cannot process a licence application until we receive one, and we are waiting for that.

National Crime Agency

9. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle organised crime through the National Crime Agency.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): We have made significant progress in the fight against serious and organised crime since the National Crime Agency was established in 2013. Capabilities have improved, partnership working is better and we intervene earlier to prevent criminal activity. The agency has been instrumental to that progress and has gone from strength to strength, with an impressive and sustained track record of disruption across the full range of serious and organised crime threats.
Andrew Bridgen: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, contrary to recent media speculation, politicians from within the European Union can be subject to unexplained wealth orders, and that this will continue to be the case after we leave the European Union?

Mr Wallace: I am sure my hon. Friend will be delighted to learn that no one is above the law when it comes to unexplained wealth orders—whether a Member of the European Parliament, a European politician or even, indeed, a Member of this House.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Young people who have in effect been groomed into county lines are themselves victims of serious and organised crime, but so too are their families indirect victims. One thing that all the families affected by this issue in my constituency have in common is that they provide loving homes for their children, but they feel they have very little support from agencies in going through what must be a very traumatic process. What do Ministers plan to do not just to tackle the causes and symptoms of county lines and this kind of organised crime, but to provide adequate support to families who suffer enormous distress as a result?

Mr Wallace: I recommend that the hon. Gentleman looks at examples in other parts of the country of how county lines are dealt with using other agencies. I think his local authority is Ilford. Many local authorities and police forces work together on county lines in a pan-agency group, including social services and other local authorities. I saw one recently in Merseyside, which is doing exactly what he urges. If he thinks Ilford is not doing that, I would be very happy to meet him and the council to see what it can do to improve.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A wave of organised crime and burglaries is happening in the Wellingborough constituency. In one case, two 60-year-olds—a man and a woman—were taken into separate rooms and threatened with all sorts of things that would happen to their other half. This was in the early evening, and the burglars just smashed in the front door. Those people said to me, “What would happen if we’d defended ourselves? If we’d protected ourselves, would we have ended up in prison?” We need to look at what we can do to improve.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point about self-defence and the rights of homeowners. He will obviously have seen the recent events—I cannot of course refer to that case because it is sub judice, or certainly an issue in hand—but there is clear guidance about this from the Ministry of Justice. It is important that people understand they have a right to self-defence, but they should sometimes be careful not to take the law into their own hands. If the organised criminals are well armed and dangerous, people should rely on the help of the blue light services.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for facilitating my further visit to the National Crime Agency this morning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) referred to the increasing threat posed by county lines. Will the £3.6 million allocated to the new national co-ordinating centre come from elsewhere in the Home Office budget, and if the National Crime Agency needs additional resources, will they be provided?

Mr Wallace: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s first question, that will be part of the overall funding package from the Home Office through either normal police transformation funding or existing National Crime Agency funding. However, county lines are developing more and more across the country, and that is why the Home Office—internally, with the National Crime Agency—has put together a strategy to look at what intelligence can be learned. If the lessons are that we require more resource or better inter-agency working, we will obviously reflect that in the serious and organised crime strategy that is due to come before the House soon.

Mr Speaker: We still have a lot to get through, and I am keen that we should do so.

Biometric Residence Permits

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What estimate has she made of the number of people born outside the EU who have leave to remain in the UK but do not have biometric residence permits?

Amber Rudd: Since August 2015, all non-EU nationals with a UK visa of more than six months have been issued with a UK biometric residence permit. We have no current estimate of the number of non-EU nationals born outside the UK who have leave to remain in the UK but have not obtained a biometric residence permit.

Jessica Morden: Constituents of mine from Commonwealth countries who have lived here on paper visas for many decades have now been refused universal credit because they do not have biometric residence permits, which they have never been told they need. This is causing real hardship—not least to those with no papers, with the immigration issues that that brings—and the BRP process is costly and lengthy. What are the Government going to do urgently to address this for those who have contributed so much to our country?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s view that they have contributed so much to this country. I am today announcing that I am setting up a new taskforce across the Department to ensure a swift response. I am also introducing a waiver for the fees involved and a number of other measures that I hope will go a long way to assisting the Commonwealth citizens who should have their rights confirmed without charge.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know there are people who came here 50 years ago who have now lost their jobs, lost their homes and lost their healthcare as a result of Home Office decisions. Now we discover that some of them have been locked up as a result of Home Office decisions and may even have been deported—wrongly—as a result of Home Office decisions. Can she tell us how many of the Windrush generation have wrongly been deported away from their family and friends, and what action is being taken now to urgently bring them back home?
Amber Rudd: I have agreed, and I have volunteered, to meet this week the high commissioners who would like to meet me, to find out whether there are any such people who have been removed. If they want to bring me situations such as that, I will certainly look at them.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware that one of her ministerial colleagues will apparently say tonight that some of these people were deported in error, so can she tell the House how many and how she plans to rectify the situation?

Amber Rudd: As I say, I will find out from the high commissioners whether there have been any situations where such people have been removed. I would respectfully remind the Labour party that the workplace checks were introduced by Labour in 2008. What is happening now is part of the pattern of making sure that people are here legally. I do not want any Commonwealth citizens who are here legally to be impacted in the way they have been. Frankly, some of how they have been treated has been wrong—has been appalling—and I am sorry. That is why I am setting up a new area in my Department to ensure that we have a completely new approach to how their situation is regularised.

Online Radicalisation

11. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard vulnerable people from online radicalisation. [904749]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): This Government have been clear there should be no safe space online for terrorists and their supporters to radicalise or inspire people. We are working closely with industry, including through the Global Internet Forum, to counter terrorism and to encourage industry to develop innovative solutions to tackle online radicalisation.

Alex Burghart: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the world’s leading internet companies need to do much more to take down violent and terrorist material online, and that if they do not, we should make them?

Mr Wallace: I do agree with my hon. Friend. It was the Home Office that took the initiative to set up the counter-terrorism internet referral unit, which has seen 300,000 pieces of terrorist propaganda taken down—voluntarily, but taken down none the less. It was the Home Office that worked with ASI Data Science to develop an automatic model, which has a 99.9% accuracy rate. If we can do it, why can those companies not?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I recently held a community meeting to contribute to Mayor Andy Burnham’s consultation on community integration and preventing radical hate speech. One issue that came up was the extent of online hate speech against Islam coming from around the world, and particularly from the United States. Will the Minister say what discussions he is having internationally to ensure that this kind of derogatory and offensive material is taken down as quickly as possible?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady makes a really valid point. One of the challenges is that, while broadcast is obviously covered by Ofcom and so on, some individuals move online and broadcast speeches that would be illegal if they were broadcast under Ofcom’s responsibility. I am due to visit the United States this week, and that is exactly one of the points that I shall be raising, so her question was very timely.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If a relative suspects that a vulnerable family member is being radicalised online, what advice would the Minister give that relative about what would happen to that vulnerable person if they were reported?

Mr Wallace: First of all, the relative could make a report to the police, the local authority, local safeguarding officers or safeguarding officers at school. That report would then be looked at in conjunction with a Prevent panel. People’s names would not be logged; they would not be part of a deep surveillance operation. They would simply be looked at, and the case would be discussed at a multi-agency level. Over 30% of cases are referred to other safeguarding—it might be domestic abuse or sexual abuse—and about half see no further action taken. So it is all done delicately, with respect for the individual and respect for the community. At the end, we get a good outcome, whereby a significant number of people are given assistance and are no longer radicalised or a threat.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that, with the invention of the internet, radicalisation is now global and crosses international boundaries, so how is he working with our international partners? He will be aware that last week a Labour delegation visited Etidal in Riyadh, which has extraordinary technology to counteract online radicalisation.

Mr Wallace: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question, and the question from the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), there is no doubt that the only way to curtail such radicalisation is by working with all our international partners, whether in the middle east, Europe or the United States. We have to act together, which is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary sits on the Global Internet Forum to ensure that we push those countries together. The United Kingdom’s lead has raised awareness and proved that solid solutions can be delivered.

Vulnerable Syrian Families

12. Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What progress the Government have made in placing vulnerable Syrian families in the UK. [904750]

14. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What progress the Government have made in placing vulnerable Syrian families in the UK. [904753]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is important that we focus our support on the most vulnerable refugees in the region who are fleeing the atrocities in Syria, whatever their nationality. We are more than halfway towards reaching our commitment to resettle
20,000 refugees. As of December, 10,538 refugees had been welcomed in the UK under the scheme. We will continue to work closely with local authorities and devolved Administrations to ensure that we meet our commitments.

Mrs Trevelyan: Northumberland County Council is providing homes and resettlement family support for 28 Syrian adults and their 41 children, but we currently have no Syrian refugee children as we are short of foster carers to provide the necessary support. Does the Minister agree that we must encourage people who want to support those Syrian children to apply to be foster carers?

Caroline Nokes: I am very grateful to all the local authorities, including Northumberland County Council, that have participated in both the resettlement scheme and the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Northumberland County Council recently received funding through the controlling migration fund to boost its capacity to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The Government are reviewing funding arrangements for local authorities that look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In last year’s safeguarding strategy, the Government committed to further boosting fostering capacity, including by commissioning 1,000 training places for foster carers and support workers who are caring for unaccompanied children.

John Howell: Is my right hon. Friend continuing to work closely with local authorities? She mentioned a figure of 10,500, but how is she doing at meeting the 20,000 target within a couple of years?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of working collaboratively with local authorities. We also work hard with charities, housing associations and civic society to help refugees on the road to integration. During the recess, I was fortunate to visit World Jewish Relief, Coventry City Council and Horton Housing, among others, which are fortunate to visit World Jewish Relief, Coventry City Council and Horton Housing, among others, which are working with resettled families who are being helped into work as part of their integration. He is right to mention the 20,000 target and I am absolutely confident that we will reach it by 2020.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Families belong together, and vulnerable refugee families from Syria in particular belong together. Will the Minister use the opportunity of the current attention on Syria to commit the Government to standing by Members on both sides of the House who support the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, the private Member’s Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)?

Mr Speaker: What wonderful pronunciation, upon which the House will want to congratulate the hon. Lady.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I am conscious of her keen interest in this subject. She will of course know that, since 2010, 24,000 family reunion visas have been issued, but I will look very carefully at the Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), which has received cross-party support. We will continue to look at what we can do to help the most vulnerable families from the region. They should, quite rightly, be our priority.

Police and Law Enforcement: Recruitment

13. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps is the Home Secretary and I attach great importance to this because we have policing by consent, and it is incredibly important that our police forces represent better the communities that they serve. They are more representative than ever, but are nowhere near where they need to be, and that is why the college, the police chiefs and the superintendents are working together to develop a national diversity strategy, which is being presented to chiefs this week. We attach huge importance to the strategy’s implementation so that our police reflect the society that we all live in?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that fundamental point, because more and more of our constituents are vulnerable to crime online—crime enabled by the internet—and it is absolutely vital that our police forces have the right skills to tackle crime. That is why, as part of our £1.9 billion cyber programme, we are investing in awareness programmes such as CyberFirst and creating the cyber digital career pathways project to ensure that officers have the skills that they need to face modern crime.

Alan Mak: Following the publication of the Government’s race disparity audit, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to build on the work that has already been done to make sure that our police reflect the society that we all live in?

Mr Hurd: The Home Secretary and I attach great importance to this because we have policing by consent, and it is incredibly important that our police forces represent better the communities that they serve. They are more representative than ever, but are nowhere near where they need to be, and that is why the college, the police chiefs and the superintendents are working together to develop a national diversity strategy, which is being presented to chiefs this week. We attach huge importance to the strategy’s implementation so that our police forces can become increasingly representative of the communities they serve.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will we be members of Europol next April, or will we have to recruit to fill the skills that will be lost without our membership?

Mr Hurd: We have said clearly that we want to preserve the capabilities that we have worked hard over many years to develop with our European partners.
That is why we have proposed a comprehensive new security treaty, in the mutual interests of our European partners, who recognise—this relates to the right hon. Gentleman—we point about Eurotop, and I think we are its second biggest contributor—that our continued active presence in that agency, along with the other tools that we have developed over many years, are absolutely critical to our security going forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, recently said that the police need to be better trained to tackle and prosecute upskirting, but police and crime commissioners have argued that a change in the law is needed. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the Justice Minister or with police and crime commissioners?

Mr Hurd: I think that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) colleague, who is responsible for crime and safeguarding, has agreed to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this important point further.

Prostitution

15. Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to reduce the demand for prostitution in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government’s focus remains on protecting those selling sex from harm and enabling the police to target those who exploit vulnerable people involved in prostitution. We recognise the need for research on the nature and prevalence of prostitution before we consider any changes to legislation and policy. We have commissioned research by the University of Bristol to achieve this aim.

Laura Smith: Article 6 of the 1979 United Nations convention on gender equality and the empowerment of women positions prostitution as symbolic of women’s continued discrimination and inequality. What is being done to address that and to prevent inequality and discrimination happening to women who find themselves in that vulnerable position?

Victoria Atkins: We are very clear that we want to tackle the harm and exploitation that may result from prostitution. We want a strong evidence base to inform any changes that may or may not be made in future, and that is why we have commissioned this research. However, we are clear about the harm from prostitution and that enabling people who want to leave it must be accommodated.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Many young girls are forced into selling their body as a result of being in coercive and controlling relationships. Prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls. What more can the Government do to protect victims from the harsh reality of this form of abuse?

Victoria Atkins: We are very clear that any such abuse is against the law. Indeed—this follows on from the previous question—we have awarded £650,000 to Merseyside police from the VAWG service transformation fund to provide services for sex workers who are the victims of, or at risk of, sexual and domestic violence and abuse, exploitation or human trafficking. We have provided £389,000 to organisations that help those who want to leave prostitution and sex work.

Mr Speaker: We now come to topical questions, and it is a top of the league day for Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Still champions, Mr Speaker.

Topical Questions

T1. [904764] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am deeply concerned about the recent experiences of people from the Windrush generation in terms of the appeal for their documentation and any confusion that has caused. This is a unique cohort of people who have automatic leave under our legislation and therefore are entitled to reside here lawfully. The vast majority will already have documentation that proves their right to be here. For those who do not, I am today announcing a new dedicated team to help them evidence their right to be in this country and access services.

The team will be tasked with helping applicants to demonstrate that they are entitled to live in the UK, and with resolving cases within two weeks of the evidence being provided. The team will work across Government to help applicants to prove they have been living or working in the UK. Of course, no one should be left out of pocket as they go through this process. Given the uniqueness of the situation in which the group find themselves, I therefore intend to ensure that they will not pay for this documentation.

We have already set up a webpage and dedicated contact point for people with concerns, and I have been engaging with charities, community groups and high commissioners to reassure people. The Prime Minister will meet Heads of Government tomorrow, and I will be meeting high commissioners later this week.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Home Secretary for that response and put on record my gratitude for the fantastic leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). However, is this not a case of too little, too late for many? Is not what has happened to the Windrush generation a broader reflection of the over-pernicious nature of the Home Office, which is going after the soft targets instead of those who are much more difficult to identify—those who are here illegally and should be deported?

Amber Rudd: There is no question of going after any soft targets or of our trying to single out a particular cohort—and, yes, we do go after the illegal cohort. It is because we do that that some of these people have been caught up in the process. As I referenced earlier, it was the Labour party that put in place the labour market tests in 2008, meaning that people had to evidence their right to work here, but because the Windrush cohort has been caught up in this, I am making sure that we put in place particular arrangements to support them.
T3. [904766] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend the Government for their work on— 
[Interruption.] It says here, “law enforcement with regard to the dark web”. What steps are the Government taking to best protect families and businesses from those who use the anonymity of online platforms for illegal activities?

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I think that my hon. Friend might have got lost in the dark web just then.

Our dark web programme is investing in specialist capability to disrupt and bring to justice those who use online anonymity to trade in illegal goods and services, including personal data. Much of the risk to families and businesses can be defeated by simple best practice. The Cyber Aware campaign encourages small businesses and individuals to adopt simple, secure online behaviours to protect themselves and their data from cyber-criminals.

T2. [904765] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that hundreds of thousands of people have already signed petitions opposing giving the passport printing contract to a foreign company. Like me, they are concerned—indeed astonished—that while France, Germany, Italy and Spain all back their own industry, she seems unwilling to back Britain. They also question whether British firms are actually competing on a level playing field. Even at this late stage, will she call in the decision and engage with De La Rue to preserve British jobs for British workers in the north? Will she also publish the data on which she made her decision?

Amber Rudd: This was a fair and open competitive process. It is right to have a tendering process that looks after taxpayers’ money and of course ensures that British companies can compete. I wish that a British company had won the contract, but the process has to be carried out fairly, on the basis of quality and cost, and on that basis we saved the country £120 million. I wonder how the right hon. Gentleman would choose to spend that; I know that we can put it to good use.

T4. [904767] AlexBurghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Essex police, fire and crime commissioner, Roger Hirst, who has used precept powers to increase the number of frontline police officers in Essex by 150?

Amber Rudd: I welcome the action of my hon. Friend’s police and crime commissioner. PCCs have been given powers to raise additional funds, if they want to do so, to provide extra policemen and women on the frontline, and most are choosing to do that.

T5. [904768] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): More money is being raised by tax for more police, but every single police officer and constituent I speak to says it will not be enough, and that we will not have, and do not have, enough police on the streets of Bassetlaw. What does it say about Government priorities that nobody accepts what the Home Secretary is saying—that we have enough police?

Amber Rudd: I note that someone on the left-hand side of the Opposition Benches wants me to spend another £120 million while a Member on the right-hand side has asked me where more money is to come from.

We have made it very clear that we will run an efficient Government, particularly in respect of public procurement, to ensure that we have the funds to support our public services. As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is not just about police numbers. Last year I commissioned a new serious violence strategy, which has come up with new information and a new approach to stopping the sort of crime to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I hope that our new serious violence taskforce will be able to do that.

T6. [904769] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): For a number of years, businesses, shopkeepers and residents in The Stow, in Harlow, have been blighted by antisocial behaviour. We saw the tragic murder of a Polish man in 2016, and only last Saturday youths were spraying CS gas, forcing shops to shut. I welcome the extra police in Essex, but will my right hon. Friend have urgent talks with the police and crime commissioner in Harlow and do what she can to help us to deal with this antisocial behaviour?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): May I answer the question on behalf of my right hon. Friend. The Home Secretary?

I read about the incident in The Stow, which must have been extremely unsettling for my right hon. Friend’s constituents. He is tireless in acting on behalf of Harlow, and he was one of a number of Essex Members who lobbied me asking that the police and crime commissioner be allowed to increase the precept. That increase is enabling the commissioner to invest in providing 150 additional police officers across the county. I will of course join my right hon. Friend in speaking to the police and crime commissioner to reassure his constituents that the area is being policed.

T8. [904771] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Policing and uniformed police training are not devolved in Wales, so will the Minister ensure that Welsh police forces receive their full share of the apprenticeship levy for training? It is just not good enough to pass responsibility to the Welsh Government when the money involved does not even cover their Treasury spending cuts.

Mr Hurd: I share the hon. Lady’s concern about the training available to Welsh police officers. I have been very clear about the importance of ensuring that our police officers have the right skills, but there is currently an impasse, as Welsh police forces are paying tax to the Welsh Government and getting nothing in return. There is a difference of view on the issue, but we are trying to resolve it. A meeting is imminent, and I hope that we shall be able to make some progress then.

T7. [904770] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): We have all been shocked by the incidents of knife and gun crime in London, Manchester and other locations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that stop-and-search still has a role to play, especially when it is intelligence-led?

Mr Hurd: Yes, I strongly believe that the approach has a very important role to play. As I have said before, it is a vital tool, and we expect it to be used vigorously as part of a robust law enforcement approach to the terrible cycle of violence that we are seeing. We welcome the news that the Metropolitan police, for example,
has increased its use significantly in the most affected areas. However, as we have made clear for some time, it must be used legally, and be proportionately targeted and intelligence-led, and the use of body-worn video must increase. We must not go back to the old days when more than a million people a year were stopped and only 9% were arrested.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Two and a half weeks ago, I telephoned 999 after witnessing a prolonged and serious fight in a petrol station in Chesterfield. I have not been contacted by the police since then. Although I have been unable to establish this for certain, I believe that the incident was not recorded as a crime because none of the protagonists considered themselves to be victims of crime, although it was also reported by the people who run the petrol station. Is this part of a wider policy? Are the Government encouraging police forces not to record as crimes incidents that would clearly be seen as crimes? What guidance do the Government give police forces in such circumstances?

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s frustration about that particular incident, and one hears similar anecdotes, but the Government’s policy is, in fact, completely the reverse. We have pressed the police, with the help of the independent inspectorate, to get better at recording crime. Back in 2014, an independent inspection showed that only about 81% of reported crime was recorded. That has improved, and the improvement is feeding into increased pleaded recorded crime. The truth is therefore completely the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman has asserted.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is very much against us, but we must hear the voice of Shipley. Mr Philip Davies.

T9. [904772] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Home Secretary tell us what has happened to the police forces in such circumstances?

Home Secretary: We must hear the voice of Shipley. Mr Philip Davies. When it might appear before the House?

Home Secretary: I have not been contacted by the police since then. Although I have been unable to establish this for certain, I believe that the incident was not recorded as a crime because none of the protagonists considered themselves to be victims of crime, although it was also reported by the people who run the petrol station. Is this part of a wider policy? Are the Government encouraging police forces not to record as crimes incidents that would clearly be seen as crimes? What guidance do the Government give police forces in such circumstances?

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is very much against us, but we must hear the voice of Shipley. Mr Philip Davies.

T9. [904772] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Home Secretary tell us what has happened to the long-awaited and much-needed immigration Bill and when it might appear before the House?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We will, of course, be bringing forward a White Paper later this year and an immigration Bill as soon as possible after that.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The drug commonly known as Spice has as strong an impact on its users as any class A drug, yet its categorisation as class B means that its dealers receive much lesser sentences than others. Will the Minister commit to looking again at this drug's classification so that that reflects its impact more accurately?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has long expressed concern about the impact of Spice, not least on Torquay town centre, and I have seen at first hand the terrible effect it has. I hope he welcomes the progress that we have made in relation to the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and the fact that over 300 retailers across the UK have either been closed down or are no longer selling these substances. We are making arrests and a great deal of progress, and usage is falling. On changing the classification, I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that any decision has to be led and guided by advice from the advisory council, and its position at the moment is not to reclassify.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Charles Mukerjee has special educational needs. He and his family were recently detained in Yarl’s Wood. In detention, his medication was taken away, and he had a number of seizures and stopped eating. A doctor who saw him there said that he was traumatised. Will the Home Secretary urgently look at this family’s experience and see what changes need to be made to ensure that we treat all people who are detained humanely and in a dignified way, especially those with learning disabilities and mental ill health?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue. The answer to her question is yes, I will, and I ask her to send me the information, which I will take a look at personally.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Home Secretary welcome the additional 200 police officers who are being recruited and deployed by Sussex police in her Hastings and Rye constituency and mine of Bexhill and Battle?

Amber Rudd: Yes, this is good news. The police and crime commissioner for Sussex, the excellent Katy Bourne, has told us that she will be recruiting 200 officers this year and 200 the following year. Kent has said the same, and I understand there will be another 1,000 officers in London.
**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Online radicalisation and cyber-crime are no respecters of boundaries, yet policing in Scotland is devolved. Will the Minister assure me that there will be maximum co-operation and co-ordination between Police Scotland and the UK police forces to stamp out these terrible and terrifying crimes?

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and that is why at Gartcosh, just outside Glasgow, we have put together the National Crime Agency and Police Scotland to tackle, through cyber-crime units, that very problem. It is absolutely true that the best thing to do is to make sure we work in solid partnership, whether that involves the agency, local police or regional organised crime units.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the ease with which users can remove unacceptable online content and how quickly that content is then taken down?

**Mr Wallace:** The biggest challenge in that space is often that when we make a referral to internet companies, the speed at which they take content down is not as rapid as it should be. We often identify it quickly. By working with a technology company, we have managed to produce a system that is 99.95% accurate. Let us see what the internet companies can do, but there is still more to be done.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Fear stalks many streets in Erdington with gang crime, gun crime, knife crime and attacks with machetes on the rise. The police are doing a magnificent job in very difficult circumstances, but does not the Policing Minister accept that cutting 2,000 police officers from West Midlands police, the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing and huge cuts to youth services are making it so much more difficult for them to keep the public safe?

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I have always recognised that our police system is stretched. That was why I personally led the demand review and why we took through the House a funding settlement that will see another £460 million going into our police system this year. That will mean that we are investing £1 billion more this year than we were two years ago. That is additional money for the west midlands that I would have hoped that he would support, but he voted against it.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Clarke—get in there, man!

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last week, there were some serious incidents of antisocial behaviour in Saltburn in my constituency. Will Ministers assure the public in Saltburn that they will work with me and the PCC to give the best advice on how to deal with youth gang violence, and will they commend the officers of Cleveland police for their response?

**Amber Rudd:** First, I am of course pleased to commend the officers for their response. I am sorry to hear about the example that my hon. Friend has given. I urge him to work with us in terms of looking at the serious violence strategy, because there is a lot of new work on, and new approaches to, how we handle gang violence, which is often the driver not just of serious violence but of antisocial behaviour.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Listening to colleagues is endlessly inspiring, and my appetite for doing so is usually insatiable, but we must now move on because we have other important business to address.
Windrush Children (Immigration Status)

3.41 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make an urgent statement on the status of Windrush children in this country.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I should like to thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for raising this question and for giving me the chance to build on what I have already told the House this afternoon. I recognise the concerns of some people in the Windrush generation, and I would not want anyone who has made their life in the UK to feel unwelcome or to be in any doubt of their right to remain here. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already made clear, there is absolutely no question about their right to remain, and I am very sorry for any confusion or anxiety felt.

While the vast majority of people who came here before 1973 will already have documentation that proves their right to be in the UK, I know that some do not. I know that there are those who have never applied for a passport in their own name or had their immigration status formalised. That is why today I am announcing that a new dedicated team will be set up to help those people to evidence their right to be here and to access the necessary services. The team will help the applicants to demonstrate that they are entitled to live in the UK, and it will be tasked with resolving cases within two weeks when the evidence has been provided.

Of course no one should be left out of pocket as they go through this process, so, given the uniqueness of the situation this group finds itself in, I intend to ensure that the group will not pay for this documentation. We have set up a webpage and we have been speaking to charities, community groups and high commissioners about providing advice and reassurance to those affected, and we will set up a dedicated contact point as well. Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will meet the Heads of Government, and I will be meeting high commissioners this week to discuss this issue as a matter of urgency. I hope that this will provide people with the reassurance that they need.

Mr Lammy: The relationship between this country and the West Indies and the Caribbean is inextricable. The first British ships arrived in the Caribbean in 1623, and despite slavery and colonisation, 25,000 Caribbeans served in the first and second world wars alongside British troops. When my parents and others of their generation arrived in this country under the British Nationality Act 1948, they arrived here as British citizens. It is inhumane and cruel for so many of that Windrush generation to have suffered for so long in this condition and for the Secretary of State to be making a statement on the issue only today.

Can the Secretary of State tell us how many people have been deported? She suggested earlier that she would ask the high commissioners, but it is her Department that has deported those people. She should know the number. Can she tell the House how many have been detained as prisoners in their own country? Can she tell us how many have been denied healthcare under the national health service, how many have been denied pensions and how many have lost their jobs? This is a day of national shame, and it has come about because of a “hostile environment” and a policy that was begun under her Prime Minister. Let us call it as it is: if you lay down with dogs, you get fleas, and that is what has happened with the far right rhetoric in this country. Will the Secretary of State apologise properly? Will she explain how quickly the team will act to ensure that the thousands of British men and women who have been denied their rights in this country on her watch in the Home Office are satisfied?

Amber Rudd: I share the right hon. Gentleman’s admiration for the people who came here from the Caribbean and contributed so much to our society in many different ways, and that admiration remains in place. I am concerned that the Home Office has become too concerned with policy and strategy and sometimes loses sight of the individual. This is about individuals, and we have heard the individual stories, some of which have been terrible to hear. That is why I have acted. That is why I have put a clear limit on the amount of time it will take to correct the situation. That is why I am so committed to ensuring that there is no cost involved. That is why I am so committed to making sure that we can work across Departments. We hope to be able to get the necessary information ourselves in the same way that we are looking ahead to the EU settled status, when we will be able to engage with other Departments to look at national insurance numbers. We will share things and will take the responsibility for finding the evidence, so that we can get the documents for those who need them.

Finally, on one other point that the right hon. Gentleman raised, I am not aware of any specific cases of a person being removed in these circumstances. That is why I have asked the high commissioners if they know of any cases, and they should bring them to me. If anyone here knows of any such circumstances, they should bring them to the Home Office.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Home Secretary is right to have set up a special unit so that the necessary reassurance can be provided as soon as possible. With that in mind, will she tell the House what the minimum level of evidence that the new Home Office unit will accept is, so that people will be able to demonstrate quickly and easily that they are genuine Windrush-generation citizens of this country?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend, who has some experience in this area, will be aware that we cannot have a situation in which anybody can perhaps falsely declare anything—that would not assist the Windrush generation, whom we are trying to help. We are going to work with them in a cross-Government way, so if they come to us with their address and date of birth, we will start from that point and try to build a picture to evidence the circumstances and, within two weeks, get them the permits that they need to be able to access services.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): In the week of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, is the Home Secretary aware of how shameful it appears that we are treating the Windrush generation of Commonwealth citizens in this way? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, they came here after the second world war to help rebuild this country, and they worked hard and paid
their taxes. There are few more patriotic groups of British citizens than the generation from the West Indies that we are talking about.

The Home Secretary mentioned her special team. Is she aware that hundreds of these people have been trying to get their situations sorted out with their lawyers, presenting what information they have? Months later, however, things have not been resolved. How much confidence can people have in the special team when people with lawyers have been unable to resolve their situations? Why does she not simply issue an instruction to her officials today that no one in such a position can be deported until the case is clarified? There must also be an apology to any who were wrongly deported, and the Government must consider compensation.

Is the Home Secretary aware that in 2014 the Government removed the immigration protection that existed for the Commonwealth citizens who had come here previously? Theresa May was the then Home Secretary, and there was no parliamentary debate or scrutiny at the time. Theresa May could simply—

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] I do not need any advice from people chuntering from a sedentary position for their own satisfaction but to no wider benefit at all. The position is that Members should not refer to other Members by name—[Interruption.] The hon. Members who are wittering away from a sedentary position probably feel better for doing so, but it does not advance the interests of the House.

Ms Abbott: I apologise for naming the former Home Secretary in that way, but we are talking about a very serious matter. I believe the Home Secretary could now simply table a statutory instrument restoring the protections, which were removed without debate in 2014; there would be no objection from this side of the House.

Finally, this policy and this scandal did not fall from the sky. It is a product of the bent of Government policy: the “hostile environment” for migrants generally. We now hear warm words about the contribution of Commonwealth migrants who have given their lives to this country, but warm words are not enough. We have to establish the facts on the deportations; we have to make apologies where necessary; and as the Commonwealth Heads of Government are gathered in London, we have to acknowledge what a disgrace it is that this Government have treated Commonwealth migrants in this way.

Amber Rudd: Nobody disputes that the people who came here as part of the Windrush cohort are highly valued here and have the legal right to stay. In this week in which we celebrate the Commonwealth, I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to acknowledge the changes that we as a Government are making today to ensure that this cannot happen again and that the new processes in place will indeed reach out and protect all Commonwealth citizens who need additional help to get their documentation in place.

The right hon. Lady asks particularly about removals and detention, and I reassure her and the House that I have given an explicit instruction. In accordance with my wishes today, there will be no removals or detention as part of any assistance to help former Commonwealth citizens get their proper documentation in place.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome what the Home Secretary has set out today—I also welcome the detail given by the Minister for Immigration in her media interviews today—and the calm and measured tone in which she set it out.

Given that many people will not be aware that they are in this position until they run into difficulties, can the Home Secretary say any more about what steps the Government could take proactively to communicate what they are doing to some of those who might be affected, so that they are never actually put in this position in the first place and can have their status regularised?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is right. I really do want people who are in this position to realise that we have made the changes and have set up a system that will be easy to use and accommodating to them. There will be no charge for it, and I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to pass that on to their constituents, so that people have the confidence to approach us so the situation can be addressed. Of course, the Home Office will be doing its own media work to ensure that is the case.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this urgent question. The Scottish National party shares his outrage, on behalf of the Windrush generation, at how some of these now quite elderly people have been treated by the Home Office.

The Home Secretary is wrong. This is not just about individuals; it is about a systemic policy put out by her Department. It is symptomatic of the politically driven “hostile environment” policy, and it is a sign that that has to stop. I hope that, in what she has said this afternoon, there is a big chink of optimism that she will review this “hostile environment” policy.

On the Mall this morning, I saw all the flags out for the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference, but all the Government’s warm words about the Commonwealth will be seen as weasel words unless they take proper steps to address what is happening to these people, who are as much part of our country as the Home Secretary and myself.

I have heard what the Home Secretary has to say about the procedures she is putting in place, but the Migration Observatory at Oxford University says there are up to 50,000 Commonwealth-born people in this situation. What will she do to recognise the almost impossible nature of the task those people face in evidencing their right to be here, and will she give them access to legal advice to help them combat the Home Office’s often unfair procedures?

Amber Rudd: The hon. and learned Lady has raised a number of important points. I would just say that it is right we have a policy that distinguishes between legal and illegal migrants, and the Commonwealth group—the so-called Windrush cohort—are legal. That is why I have put in place these measures to protect them. That is a clear difference between them and other groups, where we have a compliant environment, to ensure that people who are here legally are looked after but people...
Amber Rudd: As I have said, I do not have any evidence to suggest that anybody has been removed in that way. Some people are talking as though this has taken place and it has been suggested in some media companies that it has, so I invite people who have any such evidence to bring it to the Home Office so that we can take a look.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): May I say to the Home Secretary that the way this trailblazing generation and their families have been treated in this year, the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush on our shores, is a complete and utter disgrace? So many are my constituents. She has talked about individual cases. A well-publicised one involves someone who has not been able to get access to cancer treatment that he needs from the NHS because of his immigration status. She has said that these cases will be processed quickly. Okay, that is welcome. She says her Department will help individuals in this situation to identify the evidence, but what happens if the evidence does not exist? On healthcare, will she commit to ensuring that indefinite leave to remain is granted—

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful. We have a lot to get through and it is very self-indulgent if people spend ages. I understand the importance, but colleagues have to do this pithily—it is as simple as that.

Amber Rudd: I completely understand the urgent need to get this issue addressed so that people can access the NHS when they need it. I am going to make sure that we do it in such a speedy manner that we will address people’s particular needs. It should not interfere with their treatment. The fact is that hospitals are increasingly asking for evidence of residence; we will help people to get the evidence. The hon. Gentleman asked what will happen if there is none; there is always going to be evidence of people living in a country. My taskforce will make sure that we find that evidence so that we can get it to people.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We owe a debt of gratitude to the Windrush generation for coming to this country’s aid. Will my right hon. Friend enable all MPs to access an appropriate means of communicating to the Home Office the cases that come to us, so that they are dealt with speedily and in a way that ensures that people are thanked for their service?

Amber Rudd: Yes; my hon. Friend makes a good point. I will ensure that everybody in the House has the details of the taskforce contact point and that we are able to communicate to everybody who has assisted this country—the people from the Windrush generation—our thanks and support.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assurances will the Home Secretary give to people who settled here from parts of the Commonwealth other than the West Indies, including the many in my constituency who came from Bangladesh and Pakistan? Will she commit to the suggestion made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) about a statutory instrument to restore the protections for people from Commonwealth countries?
Amber Rudd: Respectfully, I will have to come back to the hon. Lady on that point about a statutory instrument. My purpose today is to reassure this particular cohort and to make sure that we have in place the right systems so that we can act swiftly and efficiently, as they would expect.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s absolute clarity that the Windrush generation’s right to remain here is unchallenged. As constituency MPs, we want to do all that we can to help them, so will she confirm that there will be an MPs’ hotline, through which we can help our constituents who are most unable to help themselves?

Amber Rudd: Yes, I am of course aware that as leaders in their own areas, Members of Parliament will need to be able to access that hotline and to access all the information so that we can act fairly, efficiently and effectively for the Windrush generation, which is so valued in this country.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): A number of my constituents have been caught up in the Government’s hostile environment policy, including Paul, who has been here for four decades. He was removed from his home and detained at one of the Croydon detention centres. Will the Home Secretary commit to introducing a statutory instrument that will reverse and restore the Windrush generation, which is so valued in this country?

Amber Rudd: Unfortunately, I cannot comment on individual cases in the Chamber, but if the hon. Lady would like to write to the Home Office or bring to me that particular case, I will make sure that it is looked at.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has said, but urge her to consider whether, if applicants who ultimately prove successful have already incurred legal fees in trying to make their case, those fees could be compensated.

Amber Rudd: I am happy to take that away and come back to my hon. Friend on it. Going forward, it is my strong commitment to ensure that the system that we put in place will not require legal advice. It will be straightforward and effective to use. My team in the taskforce will work with individuals to deliver that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have previously written to the Home Secretary about my constituent, Bill Samuel, who as a six-year-old came to the UK with his grandmother from St Vincent back in the ’60s. He has worked and paid taxes since 1973. He was told by the Home Office that he would have to pay £273 to apply for no-time-limit status; will the Home Secretary confirm that he will not have to pay that amount of money or to apply for no-time-limit status in order to apply for a British passport?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that we are not going to charge for the no-time-limit status to which the hon. Gentleman refers. In respect of the individual journey to a passport, I am afraid that we will have to take that away and look at the individual case.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the value of immigration in this country. I share her views on our approach. I need to ensure that the Home Office is more focused on individuals than on policy, so that individuals do not receive the type of treatment that we have seen over the past few weeks, but instead have a Home Office that leans in and tries to assist others as well.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On that note, I very much welcome the Government’s assurances today that they will help these Commonwealth citizens. I particularly wish to cite the case of a constituent of mine from Uganda who came here after he was thrown out by Idi Amin. Will the new systems help him? He has lived in my constituency for 40 years and has had a heartrending experience with people wanting to throw him out.

Amber Rudd: I am sorry that my hon. Friend’s constituent is having such a challenging time. I urge her to ask the Immigration Minister to take a look at his particular case.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her clear message today that the Windrush generation not only have the legal...
right to stay, but are welcome here and we want them to stay, if that is their desire. Will she reassure us that her Department will provide every sensitive assistance possible to help the affected people produce the documentation that is required?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to reinforce that point. We value immigrants in this country, and we value the contribution that the Windrush community has made. I will ensure, going forward, that that value is conveyed to them.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary aware that there is real fear spreading through some of our diverse communities? One impact of that is that people who are entirely legitimately entitled to make use of public services are being deterred from doing so. Will she be speaking to other departmental heads in order to ensure that the message goes out, particularly in respect of the health service, that nobody should avoid accessing services because they are frightened of what the “hostile environment” will do?

Amber Rudd: Of course I do not want people who have health issues not to be able to contact the national health service. One of the saddest things in some of these stories is hearing about people not being able to do that. That is one reason why I feel so much urgency in addressing this matter, so that such a thing happens to fewer people.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement of a special taskforce. Will she confirm precisely how quickly cases will be processed and, crucially, when she envisages the backlog of cases will ultimately be dealt with, as people need this shadow removed from their lives?

Amber Rudd: The most important thing that we can convey from today’s statement is that the Home Office is going out of its way to ensure that we can reassure people that they will be able to get that information. I do not expect there to be a great rush of people who will want to apply, but whenever people need to do so, I will ensure that the process is done quickly, effectively and efficiently.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the sense of anticipation in the Chamber about subsequent business, but I gently point out that we are discussing the rights and the futures of residents of this country. This is an extremely serious matter and the issue, and the people speaking about it, should be treated with respect. It really should not be necessary for me to say that again.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Is not the key point in all this the pernicious and “hostile environment” has an impact on everybody, whether they are here legally or otherwise? People can hardly get out of bed these days without somebody asking to see their passport. Is it not time to scrap the “hostile environment”? I

Amber Rudd: I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation. He is not correct to say that people have to show their passport at every step. It is important to make a clear distinction between people who are here legally and people who are here illegally. The point of today’s statement is that the people who came with the Windrush group are here legally, and we will look after them.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his work and leadership on this issue. Today’s decision will cost all people from the Windrush generation, including those who are my constituents, huge amounts of money in legal fees. Will the Home Secretary set up a unit within the Home Office to deal with the cases, and refer them back to Members of Parliament to deal with?

Amber Rudd: We are setting up a team of about 20 people who will be able to engage with the generation, who need to have their situation regularised. I hope that people will not need legal advice. Of course, if that is the case—the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point—I will take a look at whether we need to assist.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline what engagements she will have with charities and community groups to ensure that people do not need to go to expensive lawyers to find out about the procedures that she has outlined today?

Amber Rudd: I share my hon. Friend’s view about expensive lawyers. We have begun engagement with charities, non-governmental organisations and the high commissioners who have been in touch with us. I will ensure that we have thorough public engagement to ensure that people are aware of the process that we have set up, and that it will not cost them money.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I emphasise to the Home Secretary that some of the problems faced by the Windrush generation go well beyond people who came here from the Caribbean? For example, a constituent of mine was born in a Commonwealth country to Polish refugees from Nazism, has lived in this country since 1951 and has served in the Grenadier Guards, but he was turned down for a UK passport. Will people in his situation be subject to the fast-track procedure that the Home Secretary outlined today?

Amber Rudd: I would fully expect them to be subject to it. I find the hon. Gentleman’s statement very surprising and ask him to write to me about it. The default position of the team that I am setting up will be to get the information and to accept people. The only situation where people would not be accepted is on grounds of serious criminality.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much welcome the sentiment expressed by my right hon. Friend. Those affected may well approach local advice services, such as the citizens advice bureaux in our constituencies, seeking support. Will she undertake to disseminate comprehensive guidance to them as soon as possible?
Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful suggestion. Of course, I will engage with Citizens Advice to ensure that it has the information. I also urge Members of Parliament to tell their constituents about the positive arrangements that this Government have now put in place so that the people from that cohort can be looked after and can stop fearing for their situation.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I would be grateful if the Home Secretary would tell me how I should explain to the elders of the Afro-Caribbean community in my constituency why they are being expected to prove that they have a right to be in the country to which they have paid taxes and national insurance, and contributed so much—rather than the other way around, with the onus being on the Home Office to prove that they do not have such a right.

Amber Rudd: The dedicated team that I am setting up will work with individuals from the hon. Lady’s community to ensure that we look for the information and that they engage with us in that. We cannot look in isolation, if people do not engage with us and do not give us the information that we need. We are going to work with Government to ensure that we try to get information such as national insurance numbers or schools. Will the hon. Lady please tell her community that the Home Office is here to help it?

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary tell me whether there was previously an exemption for leave to remain for Commonwealth citizens who arrived in the UK before 1973? Will she also confirm if and when this was removed from the legislation and, if so, when that was debated by Parliament?

Amber Rudd: I think that what the hon. Lady’s constituents really want to know is whether they have a legal right to be here. The purpose of my standing here today is to confirm to them and to all Members here that they do have the legal right. We want them to take it up, if that is what they want. My unit in the Home Office will be leaning in to ensure that we make the process as simple and effective as possible.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): As the proud Member of Parliament for Coldharbour Lane in Brixton, where many Windrush passengers came to look for work and make their homes, I can tell the Home Secretary that it is entirely wrong for her to present this as a new problem that has suddenly arisen. It has been going on for years, and it is a consequence of Government policy which lacks any grace or compassion and which, in its intolerance, looks for any possible reason why people who have come here from overseas should not be allowed to stay. Will she now commit to looking at the systemic problems with UKVI and reform the immigration system so that people who have made their lives in this country and contributed so much can live with security and dignity in their old age?

Amber Rudd: That is exactly what I want this country to look like—the sort of country where the hon. Lady’s constituents can have confidence here. I point out to her that it was of course Labour who, in 2008, introduced the labour market test so that people had to evidence their status, so this has not started entirely with us. But if we want to live in a country where there is a difference between legal and illegal residence, then it is absolutely right to have a system that addresses that.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If the Secretary of State is saying that there is no way of checking whether someone has been wrongly deported, does that mean that it is the same for asylum seekers as well?

Amber Rudd: I only heard part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I can tell him that I do not know of any cases where people have been removed. However, I have said to Members here, as I have said to the high commissioners, that if they know of any cases, they should bring them to us.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): My constituent Paulette Wilson came here from Jamaica in 1968 aged 10. She worked in the UK all her life, including here in Parliament. Last October, she was detained at Yarl’s Wood and threatened with being deported. The Home Secretary says that she does not know the extent of this problem or the numbers, but surely a simple search by date of birth and origin would give her that data. Will she go away and have a look at that?

Amber Rudd: If the hon. Lady wants to write to me about a particular case, I will certainly look at it. I have put out an instruction today that there will be no detention or removals of anybody in this cohort who raises any questions, so I have removed that fear. But I am much more ambitious than that. I want to make sure that our new dedicated unit really addresses this and sorts out, to the satisfaction of everybody involved, the individual status of the people who have come here and contributed so much.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Home Secretary instruct the Home Office to be supportive to individuals who apply under this scheme rather than leaving already traumatised individuals having to meet very, very difficult requirements when they are already in such distress?

Amber Rudd: Yes. The default position will be to accept. The only real change to that will be if there is serious criminality. We will need to work with the individuals to ensure that the information is collected. I want to make sure that this works for the individuals. As I said earlier, this is about individuals whose lives have been upset and who need reassurance, and I want to make sure that they get it.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I offer Conservative Members who may not understand what it is like to work with the Home Office every single day the chance, if they would like, to come and work in my constituency office. As somebody who works with the Home Office every single day, can I ask how many people will be in this team and how long it will last for, because this is not a problem that is going to go away overnight?

Amber Rudd: I work with the Home Office every day, and I am aware of some of the challenges. The team will have 20 people in it, it will deliver what I have set out today, and we will see how long it is needed for. What I am interested in is outcomes—effective, sympathetic outcomes for the people who need it and who are so valued by this country.
Syria

4.19 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I come to the substance of my statement, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Sergeant Matt Tonroe from the 3rd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, who was killed by an improvised explosive device on 29 March. Sergeant Tonroe was embedded with US forces on a counter-Daesh operation. He served his country with great distinction, and it is clear he was a gifted and intelligent instructor who was respected by everyone he served with. Sergeant Tonroe fought to protect British values, our freedoms and to keep this country safe.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the actions that we have taken, together with our American and French allies, to degrade the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capabilities and to deter their future use.

On Saturday 7 April, up to 75 people, including young children, were killed in a horrific attack in Douma, with as many as 500 further casualties. All indications are that this was a chemical weapons attack. UK medical and scientific experts have analysed open-source reports, images and video footage from the incident and concluded that the victims were exposed to a toxic chemical. That is corroborated by first-hand accounts from NGOs and aid workers, while the World Health Organisation received reports that hundreds of patients arrived at Syrian health facilities on Saturday night with “signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals”.

Based on our assessment, we do not think that those reports could be falsified on that scale. Furthermore, the Syrian regime has reportedly been attempting to conceal the evidence by searching evacuees from Douma to ensure samples are not being smuggled from the area, and a wider operation to conceal the facts of the attack is under way, supported by the Russians.

The images of this suffering are utterly haunting: innocent families seeking shelter in underground bunkers found dead with foam in their mouths, burns to their eyes and their bodies surrounded by a chlorine-like odour, and children gasping for life as chemicals choked their lungs. The fact that such an atrocity can take place in our world today is a stain on our humanity, and we are clear about who is responsible.

A significant body of information, including intelligence, indicates that the Syrian regime is responsible for this latest attack. Open-source accounts state that barrel bombs were used to deliver the chemicals. Barrel bombs are usually delivered by helicopters. Multiple open-source reports and intelligence indicate that regime helicopters operated over Douma on the evening of 7 April, shortly before reports emerged in social media of a chemical attack, and that Syrian military officials co-ordinated what appears to be the use of chlorine weapons. No other group could have carried out this attack. The opposition do not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs. Daesh does not even have a presence in Douma.

The reports of this attack are consistent with previous regime attacks. Those include the attack on 21 August 2013, where over 800 people were killed and thousands more injured in a chemical attack also in Ghouta; 14 further smaller-scale chemical attacks reported prior to that summer; three further chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2015, which the independent UN Security Council-mandated investigation attributed to the regime; and the attack at Khan Shaykhun on 4 April and urgent relief, the Syrian regime used sarin against its people, killing around 100, with a further 500 casualties.

Based on the regime’s persistent pattern of behaviour and the cumulative analysis of specific incidents, we judged it highly likely that the Syrian regime had continued to use chemical weapons on at least four occasions since the attack in Khan Shaykhun and we judged that it would have continued to do so, so we needed to intervene rapidly to alleviate further indiscriminate humanitarian suffering. We have explored every possible diplomatic channel to do so, but our efforts have been repeatedly thwarted.

Following the sarin attack in eastern Damascus back in August 2013, the Syrian regime committed to dismantle its chemical weapons programme, and Russia promised to ensure that Syria did that, overseen by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. At the weekend, the Leader of the Opposition cited that diplomatic agreement as a “precedent that this process can work”, but this process did not work. It did not eradicate the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime, with the OPCW finding only last month that Syria’s declaration of its former chemical weapons programme is incomplete. And, as I have already set out, it did not stop the Syrian regime carrying out the most abhorrent atrocities using these weapons.

Furthermore, on each occasion when we have seen every sign of chemical weapons being used, Russia has blocked any attempt to hold the perpetrators to account at the UN Security Council, with six such vetoes since the start of 2017. Just last week, Russia blocked a UN resolution that would have established an independent investigation able to determine responsibility for this latest attack. Regrettably, we had no choice but to conclude that diplomatic action on its own is not going to work. The Leader of the Opposition has said that he can “only countenance involvement in Syria if there is UN authority behind it”.

The House should be clear that that would mean a Russian veto on our foreign policy.

When the Cabinet met on Thursday, we considered the advice of the Attorney General. Based on this advice, we agreed that it was not just morally right but legally right to take military action, together with our closest allies, to alleviate further humanitarian suffering. This was not about intervening in a civil war and it was not about regime change: it was about a limited, targeted and effective strike that sought to degrade the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people by degrading the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring their use.

We have published the legal basis for this action. It required three conditions to be met. First, there must be convincing evidence, generally accepted by the international community as a whole, of extreme humanitarian distress on a large scale, requiring some immediate action. Secondly, it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved. Thirdly, the proposed use of force must be
necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian suffering, and must be strictly limited in time and in scope to this aim.

These are the same three criteria used as the legal justification for the UK’s role in the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Our intervention in 1991 with the US and France, and in 1992 with the US, to create safe havens and enforce the no-fly zones in Iraq following the Gulf war were also justified on the basis of humanitarian intervention. So Governments of all colours have long considered that military action on an exceptional basis—where necessary and proportionate, and as a last resort to avert an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe—is permissible under international law.

I have set out why we are convinced by the evidence and why there was no practicable alternative. Let me set out how this military response was also proportionate. This was a limited, targeted and effective strike that would significantly degrade Syrian chemical weapons capabilities and deter their future use, and with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties.

As a result, the co-ordinated actions of the US, UK and France were successfully and specifically targeted at three sites. Contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition said at the weekend, these were not “empty buildings”. The first was the Barzeh branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre in northern Damascus. This was a centre for the research and development of Syria’s chemical and biological programme. It was hit by 57 American TLAMs and 19 American JASSMs.

The second site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons bunkers, 15 miles west of the city of Homs, which contained both a chemical weapons equipment and storage facility and an important command post. These were successfully hit by seven French SCALP cruise missiles.

The third site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons storage site and former missile base, which is now a military facility. This was assessed to be a location of Syrian sarin and precursor production equipment, whose destruction would degrade Syria’s ability to deliver sarin in the future. This was hit by nine USTLAMs, five naval and two SCALP cruise missiles from France and eight Storm Shadow missiles launched by our four RAF Tornado GR4s. Very careful scientific analysis was used to determine where best to target these missiles to maximise the destruction of stocked chemicals and to minimise any risks to the surrounding area. The facility that we targeted is located some distance from any known population centres, reducing yet further any such risk of civilian casualties.

While targeted and limited, these strikes by the US, UK and France were significantly larger than the US action a year ago after the attack at Khan Shaykhun, and specifically designed to have a greater impact on the regime’s capability and willingness to use chemical weapons. We also minimised the chances of wider escalation through our carefully targeted approach, and the House will note that Russia has not reported any losses of personnel or equipment as a result of the strikes. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to all the British servicemen and women, and their American and French allies, who successfully carried out this mission with such courage and professionalism.

Let me deal specifically with three important questions. First, why did we not wait for the investigation from the OPCW? UNSC-mandated inspectors have investigated previous attacks and, on four occasions, decided that the regime was indeed responsible. We are confident in our own assessment that the Syrian regime was highly likely responsible for this attack and that its persistent pattern of behaviour meant that it was highly likely to continue using chemical weapons. Furthermore, there were clearly attempts to block any proper investigation, as we saw with the Russian veto at the UN earlier in the week.

And let me set this out in detail: we support strongly the work of the OPCW fact-finding mission that is currently in Damascus, but that mission is only able to make an assessment of whether chemical weapons were used. Even if the OPCW team is able to visit Douma to gather information to make that assessment—and it is currently being prevented from doing so by the regime and the Russians—it cannot attribute responsibility. This is because Russia vetoed, in November 2017, an extension of the joint investigatory mechanism set up to do this, and last week, in the wake of the Douma attack, it again vetoed a new UNSC resolution to re-establish such a mechanism. Even if we had the OPCW’s findings and a mechanism to attribute, for as long as Russia continued to veto the UN Security Council would still not be able to act. So we cannot wait to alleviate further humanitarian suffering caused by chemical weapons attacks.

Secondly, were we not just following orders from America? Let me be absolutely clear: we have acted because it is in our national interest to do so. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] It is in our national interest to prevent the further use of chemical weapons in Syria and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should not be used, for we cannot allow the use of chemical weapons to become normalised—within Syria, on the streets of the UK or elsewhere.

So we have not done this because President Trump asked us to; we have done it because we believed it was the right thing to do. And we are not alone. There is broad-based international support for the action we have taken. NATO has issued a statement setting out its support, as have the Gulf Co-operation Council and a number of countries in the region. Over the weekend I have spoken to a range of world leaders, including Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Gentiloni, Prime Minister Trudeau, Prime Minister Turnbull and European Union Council President Donald Tusk. All have expressed their support for the actions that Britain, France and America have taken.

Thirdly, why did we not recall Parliament? The speed with which we acted was essential in co-operating with our partners to alleviate further humanitarian suffering and to maintain the vital security of our operations. This was a limited, targeted strike on a legal basis that has been used before. And it was a decision that required the evaluation of intelligence and information, much of which was of a nature that could not be shared with Parliament. We have always been clear that the Government have the right to act quickly in the national interest. I am absolutely clear, Mr Speaker, that it is Parliament’s responsibility to hold me to account for such decisions, and Parliament will do so. But it is my responsibility as Prime Minister to make these decisions—and I will make them. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]
As I have been clear, this military action was not about intervening in the civil war in Syria or about regime change, but we are determined to do our utmost to help resolve the conflict in Syria. That means concluding the fight against Daesh, which still holds pockets of territory in Syria. It means working to enable humanitarian access and continuing our efforts at the forefront of global response, where the UK has already committed almost £2.5 billion—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

Next week, we will attend the second Brussels conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, which will focus on humanitarian support, bolstering the UN-led political process in Geneva and ensuring continued international support to refugees and host countries, driving forward the legacy of our own London conference held in 2016. And it means supporting international efforts to reinvigorate the process to deliver a political solution, for this is the best long-term hope for the Syrian people. The UK will do all of these things. But as I have also been clear, that is not what these military strikes were about.

As I have set out, the military action we have taken this weekend was specifically focused on degrading the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring their future use. In order to achieve this, there must also be a wider diplomatic effort, including the full range of political and economic levers, to strengthen the global norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, which have stood for nearly a century. So we will continue to work with our international partners on tough economic action against those involved with the production or dissemination of chemical weapons.

I welcome the conclusions of today’s European Foreign Affairs Council, attended by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, which confirmed that the Council is willing to consider further restrictive measures on those involved in the development and use of chemical weapons in Syria. We will continue to push for the re-establishment of an international investigative mechanism that can attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use in Syria. We will advance with our French allies the new International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, which will meet in the coming weeks. We will continue to strengthen the international coalition we have built since the attack on Salisbury.

Last Thursday’s report from the OPCW has confirmed our findings that it was indeed a Novichok in Salisbury. I have placed a copy of that report’s executive summary in the House of Commons Library. While of a much lower order of magnitude, the use of a nerve agent on the streets of Salisbury is part of a pattern of disregard for the global norms that prohibit the use of chemical weapons. So while the action was taken to alleviate humanitarian suffering in Syria by degrading the regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring its use of these weapons, it will also send a clear message to anyone who believes they can use chemical weapons with impunity. We cannot go back to a world where the use of chemical weapons becomes normalised.

I am deeply conscious of the gravity of these decisions. They affect all Members of this House and me personally. I understand the questions that, rightly, will be asked about British military action, particularly in such a complex region, but I am clear that the way we protect our national interest is to stand up for the global rules and standards that keep us safe. That is what we have done and what we will continue to do. I commend this statement to the House.

4.36 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to start by thanking the Prime Minister for our phone conversation in advance of the bombing raids on Friday night and for the advance copy of her statement today. I also join her in paying tribute to Sergeant Matt Tonroe, the SAS sniper from Manchester who was killed on 28 March with US forces in northern Syria, and Master Sergeant Jonathan Dunbar from Texas, who was killed in the same attack.

I welcome the fact that all British military personnel involved have returned home safely from this mission. The attack in Douma was an horrific attack on civilians using chemical weapons—part of a civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people.

This statement serves as a reminder that the Prime Minister is accountable to this Parliament, not to the whims of the US President. We clearly need a war powers Act in this country to transform a now broken convention into a legal obligation. Her predecessor came to this House to seek authority for military action in Libya, and in Syria in 2015, and the House had a vote on Iraq in 2003. There is no more serious issue than the life-and-death matters of military action. It is right that Parliament has the power to support or stop the Government taking planned military action. The BBC reports that the Prime Minister argued for the bombing to be brought forward to avoid parliamentary scrutiny. Will she today confirm or deny those reports?

I believe the action was legally questionable. On Saturday—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I urge Members to calm down. In my experience, some Members who shout from a sedentary position also entertain the fanciful idea that they might be called to ask a question. I wish to disabuse them of that idea. The Prime Minister was heard in an atmosphere of respectful quiet. That will happen for the Leader of the Opposition as well: no ifs, no buts, no sneers, no exceptions. That is the position.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that the action was legally questionable, and on Saturday, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, said as much, reiterating that all countries must act in line with the United Nations charter, which states that action must be in self-defence or be authorised by the United Nations Security Council. The Prime Minister has assured us that the Attorney General had given clear legal advice approving the action. I hope the Prime Minister will now publish this advice in full today.

The summary note references the disputed humanitarian intervention doctrine, but even against this, the Government fail their own tests. The overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe due to the civil war in Syria is absolutely indisputable, but the Foreign Secretary said yesterday that these strikes would have no bearing on the civil war. The Prime Minister has reiterated that today by saying that this is not what these military strikes were about.
Does, for example, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen entitle other countries to arrogate to themselves the right to bomb Saudi airfields or its positions in Yemen, especially given its use of banned cluster bombs and white phosphorus? Three United Nations agencies said in January that Yemen was the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, so will the Prime Minister today commit to ending support to the Saudi bombing campaign and arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

On the mission itself, what assessment have the Government made of the impact of bombing related military facilities, where the regime is assessed as storing chemical weapons? What about the impact on local people of chemicals being released into the local environment? News footage shows both journalists and local people in the rubble without any protective clothing. Why does the Prime Minister believe that these missile strikes will deter future chemical attacks?

As the Prime Minister will be aware, there were US strikes in 2017 in the wake of the use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykun, for which the UN OPCW team held the Assad regime to be responsible. In relation to the air strikes against the Barzeh and Him Sinsar facilities, the Prime Minister will be aware that the OPCW carried out inspections on both those facilities in 2017 and concluded that “the inspection team did not observe any activities inconsistent with obligations” under the chemical weapons convention. Can the Prime Minister advise the House whether she believes that the OPCW was wrong in that assessment, or does she have separate intelligence that the nature of those activities has changed within the last five months? In the light of the Chilcot inquiry, does she agree with a key recommendation about the importance of strengthening the checks and assessments on intelligence information when it is used to make the case for Government policies? Given that neither the UN nor the OPCW has yet investigated the Douma attack, it is clear that diplomatic and non-military means have not been fully exhausted.

While much suspicion rightly points to the Assad Government, chemical weapons have been used by other groups in the conflict—for example, Jaish al-Islam, which was reported to have used gas in Aleppo in 2016, among other groups. It is now vital that the OPCW inspectors, who arrived in Damascus on Saturday, are allowed to do their work and publish their report on their findings, and report to the United Nations Security Council. They must be allowed to complete their inspections without hindrance, and I hope the UK will put all diplomatic pressure on Russia and Syria, and other influential states, to ensure that they are able to access the site in Douma.

There is a bigger question. More than 400,000 Syrians are estimated to have died in the Syrian conflict—the vast majority as a result of conventional weapons, as the Prime Minister indicated—and the UN estimates that 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance and that there are more than 5 million refugees. It is more important than ever that we take concrete assistance and that there are more than 5 million refugees.

We have the grotesque spectacle of a wider geopolitical battle being waged by proxy, with the Syrian people being used as pawns by all sides. Our first priority must be the safety and security of the Syrian people, which is best served by de-escalating this conflict so that aid can get in. Will the Prime Minister now embark, therefore, as I hope she will, on a renewed diplomatic effort to try to bring an end to this conflict, as she indicated she would in the latter part of her statement? She stated that diplomatic processes did not work. This is not exactly true. The initiative negotiated by John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov led to the destruction of 600 tonnes of chemical weapons, overseen by the OPCW. No one disputes that such diplomatic processes are difficult and imperfect, but that should not stop us continuing diplomatic efforts.

The refugee crisis places a responsibility on all countries. Hundreds of unaccompanied children remain in Europe, but the UK has yet to take in even the small numbers it was committed to through the Dubs amendment. I hope that today the Government will increase their commitment to take additional Syrian refugees. Will the Prime Minister make that commitment today?

The Prime Minister: I will start by responding to the Leader of the Opposition’s comments on the Syrian conflict more generally. I think that everybody in the House recognises the nature of the conflict and the impact it has had on the Syrian people, including on the millions of people displaced either within Syria or to countries in the surrounding region. As I said in my statement, the UK, having given almost £2.5 billion, is now the second biggest bilateral donor for Syrian refugees in the region. We have been clear that we believe we can help more people by giving aid in the region, and we have been able to support hundreds of thousands of children in the region through the aid we have given to them. We will continue to provide that support, and we continue to be grateful for all that is being done, particularly by Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, to support refugees in the region. It is a significant task for those countries, and we are supporting them in their effort.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to launch a new diplomatic effort. As I said in my statement, we will indeed be continuing the work in relation to the wider issue of the conflict in Syria. As I said, that means continuing and concluding the fight against Daesh; it means our humanitarian work, as I have said, and continuing to press for humanitarian access; and it means supporting the international efforts to reinvigorate the process to deliver a long-term political solution in Syria. It is necessary for all parties, however, to be willing to come together to discuss and develop that long-term solution.

I come now to the strikes at the weekend and the issue of chemical weapons. The right hon. Gentleman asked about the legal basis. We have published the legal basis for our action, and I have been very clear—I went through the arguments in my statement—that this is about the alleviation of humanitarian suffering. That is a legal basis that has been used by Governments of all colours. As I said, it was used in 1991 and 1992. It was also used by the Labour Government to justify intervention in Kosovo as part of the NATO intervention.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to other areas of conflict in the world. Let me say to him that what sets this apart particularly is the use of chemical weapons.
This is about alleviating the suffering that would come from the use of such weapons, but I believe it is also important, and in this country's interest and the interests of other countries around the world, for us to re-establish the international norm that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited. We cannot allow a situation to develop in which countries and people think that their use has been allowed to become normalised. That is important for us all.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and about its investigation in Douma. As I said in my statement, the problem is that the investigation is being stopped. The regime and the Russians are preventing the OPCW from investigating. Moreover, again, the regime has reportedly been attempting to conceal the evidence by searching evacuees from Douma to ensure that they are not taking out of the region samples that could be tested elsewhere, and a wider operation to conceal the facts of the attack is under way, supported by the Russians.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the possibility of chemical weapons being used by other groups. As I pointed out in my statement, it is understood that these chemical weapons were delivered by barrel bombs, which are normally dropped from helicopters. There is the evidence that I cited in relation to regime helicopter activity in Douma on the date in question, and it is not the case that the groups to which the right hon. Gentleman referred have access to the helicopters and barrel bombs that would be able to deliver such a chemical weapons attack.

I think that that is clear, and it was on that basis that the Government decided to act, together with the United States and France. I think it important that this was a joint international effort. The strikes were carefully targeted, and proper analysis was carried out to ensure that they were targeted at sites that were relevant to the chemical weapons capability of the regime. We did this to alleviate further human suffering. We targeted the strikes at the chemical weapons capability of the regime to degrade and deter its willingness to use chemical weapons in future, and I continue to believe that it was the right thing to do.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I fully support the proportionate, targeted action that we have taken against these sites, and I hope that the Government will consider similar action in future if anyone is so foolish as to repeat chemical weapons attacks. We can all debate these matters, but it takes a real Prime Minister to actually face up to the grave responsibility.

As for the question of the parliamentary role, I think that the Prime Minister was not relying on the archaic narrow interpretation of the royal prerogative, which no Government have invoked in this country for more than 50 years. Governments will always come to Parliament for debate, and votes if possible, on any military action. The Prime Minister said that there was a problem of time, but surely once President Trump had announced to the world what he was proposing, a widespread debate was taking place everywhere—including among many Members of Parliament in the media. However, there was no debate in Parliament.

Would the Prime Minister consider establishing, once the immediate issues are over, a cross-party commission of some kind to set out precisely what the role of Parliament is in modern times in the use of military power against another state, and what exceptions, if any, there can be to the usual rule that the Government need parliamentary approval before taking grave actions of this kind?

The Prime Minister: Let me first thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his comments about the action that was taken in Syria by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. He referred to the parliamentary position. The decision to act was made on this basis: first of all, obviously, an effort was made in the United Nations Security Council to propose and pass a resolution that would have enabled investigation and enabled accountability for the chemical weapons to be determined. That was vetoed by the Russians, so it was not possible to follow that diplomatic route, but the timing enabled proper planning to take place so that this was a targeted and effective set of strikes, it was done in a timely fashion and it maintained the operational security of our armed forces. Any Prime Minister who commits any of our armed forces into action of this sort must have a care for their safety and security in doing so.

I also refer my right hon. and learned Friend to the written ministerial statement in 2016 on the war powers convention, which concluded: “After careful consideration, the Government has decided that it will not be codifying the convention in law or by resolution of this House in order to retain the ability of this and future Governments and the armed forces to protect the security and interests of the UK in circumstances that we cannot predict, and to avoid such decisions becoming subject to legal action.

We will continue to ensure that Parliament is kept informed of significant major operations and deployments of the Armed Forces.”—[Official Report, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 11WS.]

That is what I have done today: I have come to Parliament with a statement on the action that took place. As I said in my statement, Parliament will hold me to account for the decision that has been taken.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks on the sad demise of Sergeant Matt Tonroe and pass on condolences to his family and friends? May I also thank the Prime Minister for the phone call ahead of the engagement at the weekend, as well as for advance sight of her statement today?

All of us in this House have an absolute revulsion for the use of chemical weapons, and we need to work here and internationally to make sure that we remove the scourge of chemical weapons from the landscape in Syria and elsewhere.

The Government now seem to have accepted that this House needed time to debate Syria, but why have we had to wait for today? When the Prime Minister called a Cabinet meeting last week, she should have recalled Parliament. The Prime Minister leads a minority Government. As was the case with the action against Daesh in 2015, this should only have happened with parliamentary approval. It was perfectly possible for the House to have been recalled in advance of the Saturday morning airstrikes. Why was that not done? And what does this mean for the Prime Minister’s position if there are further chemical
attacks in Syria? Will she continue to authorise military action without consulting and without the authorisation of Parliament?

I am glad to hear the Leader of the Opposition support our calls for a war powers Act, because that is the best way to protect us from getting into this situation again. Have the Government learned nothing from the Chilcot review? Once again we have been dragged into military action with little regard for the humanitarian situation on the ground and no long-term strategic plan. The human suffering in Syria knows no bounds: hundreds of thousands dead; millions fleeing for their lives and 400,000 civilians still trapped in appalling conditions, deprived of food, medicine and basic aid; and over 13 million civilians in desperate need of humanitarian aid. Will the Prime Minister revisit the issue of refugees, particularly child refugees? We must do more than we have been doing.

Why was action taken before international weapons inspectors completed their investigation? In February the Prime Minister told me in this House that she was committed to “finding a political solution for Syria.”—[Official Report, 21 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 153.]

Why, then, did the UK not support Sweden’s draft UN resolution calling for an international investigation into chemical stockpiles reportedly held by the Syrian regime?

Is the Prime Minister as surprised and concerned as I am at the US President’s language that the situation in Syria was “mission accomplished”? Who does she agree with, the US President or the UN Secretary-General, who like most of us is clear:

“There is no military solution to the crisis. The solution must be political”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised a number of issues.

I recognise that the issue of refugees, particularly child refugees, has been of concern to Members across this House for some time, and has been raised in this Chamber on a number of occasions. We took the decision that we could help and support more children and more refugees in general—men and women, as well as children—by acting in the region, and, as I have said, we have become the second biggest bilateral donor to the region. But we also took the decision that there were a number of refugees who were particularly vulnerable and who perhaps required particular medical support, and that it was right to bring them to the United Kingdom under our commitment to the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which we have been putting in place and continue to put in place. We are operating a number of other schemes to bring refugees—children in particular—here to the United Kingdom, but we continue to ensure that we are supporting the greatest possible number of refugees by acting in region, and that continues to be what we should be doing.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the issue of Parliament. I am sure he would recognise that it is always necessary for the Government to be able to act when decisions need to be taken, but to ensure that if a decision is taken that has not been discussed by Parliament, an opportunity for Parliament to discuss it and ask questions on it should be given at the first opportunity. That is exactly what we have done in this particular circumstance. We have also been as open as possible in terms of publishing the legal basis on which we have taken this decision, making information available to a number of parliamentarians on a Privy Council basis, and trying to ensure that we provide the maximum possible briefing, commensurate with the fact that some of the intelligence on which we are operating cannot be shared with Parliament. We will be as open as possible with this Parliament and, as I have said, I will continue to answer questions from this Parliament on this issue.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend’s narrow target of stopping the Syrians using chemical weapons further and given the need to take swift action, I commend her for taking that action, notwithstanding the fact that others have criticised her for not coming to Parliament. Coming to Parliament is a must, and the Prime Minister has done that today and will do it later on as well. I also want to raise the issue that the Russians and the Syrians are blocking the OPCW from going into the target area, and I understand that a lot of clean-up and change is happening while that block is in place. I therefore have a simple question for my right hon. Friend: given the confusion among some about who is the greatest threat to world peace, does she think it is Russia or America?

The Prime Minister: I think that people are seeing the actions that Russia has taken in support of the Syrian regime. As my right hon. Friend has pointed out, efforts are being made in Syria to ensure that it is not possible for OPCW inspectors to go in to ascertain the truth about what happened in Douma. We took a decision, and we made an assessment, together with our allies. The three parties that took part in the strikes agreed that all the evidence we had seen—from open-source reporting, and from the reporting of non-governmental organisations and the World Health Organisation—suggested that this was a chemical weapons attack. As I have indicated, a number of pieces of information and intelligence showed that it was highly likely that that was undertaken by the Syrian regime.

My right hon. Friend is right that more could have been done by the OPCW if Russia had not vetoed the resolution in the United Nations Security Council, and it would be possible to make greater efforts on the ground now to establish what happened in Douma if Russia and the regime were not blocking the opportunity for the OPCW to go to the site and if efforts were not being made by the regime to ensure that material from the site was not available for analysis. It is quite clear that every effort is being made. As I pointed out in my response to the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition, it is perfectly clear that Russia is preventing, stopping and blocking our opportunities to ensure that we can properly hold to account those responsible for chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I also regret the fact that the Prime Minister did not seek the prior approval of Parliament, especially as at least some of her arguments are compelling. Further to a question from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) that the Prime Minister did not answer, if the Syrian regime is now foolish enough to use its residual stocks to attack other holdouts, such as Idlib,
does the Prime Minister intend to order fresh strikes, or was this, in the words of President Trump, a one-off operation and “mission accomplished”?"

The Prime Minister: This was a limited, targeted set of strikes by the United Kingdom, the United States and France. The targets were carefully chosen, and the intention was to degrade the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and to deter its willingness to use those weapons. Nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we do not see a situation in which the use of chemical weapons is normalised.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that the public well understand that when our forces need to act quickly, decisively and safely, in concert with our allies, it must be right to authorise strikes without giving notice? Is it not also clear that if the use of chemical weapons goes completely unchallenged, dictators in other countries will use these awful weapons to suppress opposition?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comment. In fact, the 2016 written ministerial statement from which I quoted earlier was made in my right hon. Friend’s name. It states:

“In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised.”

It is important that we are able to do that, and I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): This was clearly a vile attack by Assad on his own people, and we have a responsibility to consider how to respond while also not escalating global conflict. However, Parliament has considered these kinds of complex issues before. We have voted for and against military action. We have got things right and got things wrong, and so too have the Executive. The Prime Minister and her Cabinet appear today not just to be arguing about the circumstances of last week, but to be rejecting the entire principle of consulting, debating and voting in Parliament in advance of military action. Given the importance of us pioneering democratic values across the world, will she clarify her position on that and say how important she thinks it is for Parliament to decide on issues of war and peace?

The Prime Minister: It is not a question of the Government rejecting that principle. If I can return again to the written ministerial statement, it observes:

“The Cabinet Manual states, ‘In 2011, the Government acknowledged that a Convention had developed in Parliament that before troops were committed the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter and said that it proposed to observe that Convention except where there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate.’" It subsequently goes on to make other references and, as I just said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), states:

“In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised.”—[Official Report, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 10WS]

When the Government take a decision and act without a debate in Parliament, as has happened on this occasion, it is right that I come to Parliament at the first opportunity to explain that decision and to give Members an opportunity to question it, and to hold me and the Government to account.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I can only imagine the burden on the Prime Minister’s shoulders as she took this onerous decision. From the other side, I can say that when such orders are received, they are about the most sobering thing that one can ever get. I congratulate her on taking action that I believe to be not only legitimate, but right and, indeed, urgent. I also congratulate her, her colleagues and our international partners on standing together on this matter. However, will she reinforce the efforts of the Foreign Office? Few have been shouldering the burden as heavily as Karen Pierce at the United Nations, although others in our diplomatic network have done so. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Foreign Office’s role is to promote the aims and interests of our Government and our people whom we are here to represent, not to wait for a veto and the news that Moscow says no?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it must be the UK Government who determine UK foreign policy. We must not hand over our foreign policy to a Russian veto. It is absolutely essential that we determine our foreign policy; the Foreign Office, of course, is a key part of delivering that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There are many who support the principle of humanitarian protection and what it achieved in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and who recognise what its absence cost in Rwanda and, indeed, Syria. Of course we must uphold the international prohibition on the use of chemical weapons but, as someone who supported military action against Daesh in Syria in the vote in December 2015, I say gently to the Prime Minister that she should have come first to the House before committing our forces to action. Therefore, may I ask her to give us an assurance that in the event—heaven forbid—that President Assad chooses to use chemical weapons against innocent civilians once again, she will come to Parliament first, she will share such evidence as she can with us, as she has done today, and she will trust Parliament to decide what is to be done?

The Prime Minister: I set out in my statement the basis on which we took this decision. I recognise the importance and significance of Parliament and of Parliament being able to make its views known on these issues, but it is also important that the Government are able to act. There will always be circumstances in which it is important for the Government to be able to act and, for the operational security of our armed forces, to be able to do so without a debate having taken place in Parliament. There will be circumstances where that is the case, and the Government have consistently set that out. If those are the circumstances, as I have said, it is right that the Prime Minister comes to Parliament at the earliest opportunity.

In relation to potential future action, as I said in response to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), this was a targeted attack. It was
targeted at degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. We now look, alongside that, to undertake international work through diplomatic and political channels to ensure that we reinforce the international norm of not using chemical weapons. Nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we do not see a situation developing in which the use of chemical weapons is normalised.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If the Leader of the Opposition persists in changing the Labour party’s previous adherence to the rule that international law justifies taking unilateral action in the event of humanitarian necessity, does my right hon. Friend agree that the consequence will be that any tyrant, megalomaniac or other person intent on carrying out genocide, if they have the support of an amoral state on the Security Council will be able to conduct that genocide with total impunity, even if it were within our power to act to prevent it? Does she agree that in those circumstances, far from upholding the international rules-based system, the reality is that it would be dead?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. If we were to say that we are prepared to act only when we have the support of the United Nations—given that, as we have seen in this circumstance, a member of the UN Security Council will be able to conduct that genocide with total impunity, even if it were within our power to act to prevent it? Does she agree that in those circumstances, far from upholding the international rules-based system, the reality is that it would be dead?

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I associate my right hon. and hon. Friends with the Prime Minister’s remarks on the passing of Sergeant Tonroe? His courage and valour is another example of the courage and valour of all our servicemen and women, as was exemplified in Syria at the weekend. I thank the Prime Minister for her call with me prior to the action on Saturday morning and for her statement today. Its cogent and well-argued nature in addressing the challenges of these difficult times stands in stark contrast to today’s contribution made by the Leader of the Opposition in this House. Given that this is limited and targeted action, and that diplomacy was tried and, sadly, was unable to succeed, the Prime Minister is utterly justified in the action that she has taken. She should have the support of every right-thinking Member of the House in upholding international law and defending the national interests of the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. He is absolutely right: we undertook this action because we believed it was the right thing to do and it was in our national interest. I believe it is important that all of us across this House recognise the need to uphold the international rules-based order and do what we can to ensure that we maintain it.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome the calm and measured assessment of the Prime Minister, as I suspect do a considerable number of Opposition Members. She mentioned the year 2011. Bearing in mind what happened in Libya after the House retrospectively approved air action in 2011—namely the toppling of the regime—will she give us an absolute and unequivocal guarantee that the use of airstrikes now, specifically, as she says, to degrade and to deter chemical atrocities, will absolutely not be allowed to lead to the Royal Air Force becoming, in effect, the air arm of the jihadist-led rebel forces in Syria? The two roles are and should be held to be entirely separate.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right—they are separate. This was about the degrading of chemical weapons capability; it was not about regime change and it was not about an intervention in the civil war in Syria. It was about the use of chemical weapons and the prevention of future humanitarian suffering.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): There are no easy solutions to the appalling humanitarian crisis and civil war in Syria, but Assad’s repeated use of chemical weapons against his own people, in violation of international law, cannot go unanswered. What is the Prime Minister’s assessment of Assad’s chemical weapons capability after these strikes, and what further and urgent humanitarian action is she planning to protect Syrian civilians?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her words. We, of course, continue to complete assessments of the action, but the assessment of the strikes that took place in the early hours of Saturday morning is that they were successful and that they will have degraded the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. But we will continue to ensure that we are encouraging humanitarian access to those people in Syria who require it. Again, attempts have been made, through the United Nations, to encourage that access and so forth. Sometimes those have not been successful, but we will continue to press, because we believe it is important that we can ensure that support is available to those people in Syria who need it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): As a former Secretary of State for International Development, I can say that the harrowing stories I heard from Syrian refugees—men, women and children—will stay with me for the rest of my life. Does the Prime Minister agree that, on their behalf, we simply cannot turn a blind eye to this breach of international law and that there will be times when action is urgent and must be taken? Does she also agree that we cannot also allow countries such as Russia and Syria to simply dictate our foreign policy through barring action?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. As she said, she had the opportunity in her former role to speak to and hear from Syrian refugees about their experiences. Nobody who has seen the pictures or read the descriptions of what happened in Douma can think anything other than that this was an absolutely barbaric act that took place, and that it is right that we act in response to that and to the continued use of chemical weapons, because this was about the continued use of chemical weapons and the potential for those weapons to be used in future.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The sight of children and adults suffering from the effects of chemical weapons cries out to all humanity for a humane response, but planning for war without equally robust planning for peace is anything but humane. Conventional
and chemical weapons are indiscriminately horrific. In what way will this weekend’s strikes protect children from future monstrous attacks?

**The Prime Minister:** We have undertaken a limited and targeted set of strikes, alongside our allies in the United States and France. The purpose of those strikes—as I just indicated in response to a previous question, our assessment is that they were successful—was to degrade the Syrian regime’s capability to use chemical weapons. They were also intended to deter the regime’s willingness to use chemical weapons. It is that degrading of the regime’s capability that we believe will have an impact and will help to alleviate the situation and ensure that we do not see the same humanitarian suffering in future.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend will agree that the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances, is illegal, contrary to all the laws of war and utterly reprehensible. Will she therefore confirm that the Government will at a later date seek the arraignment at an international court of those who instigate these vile acts, whoever they may be?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the illegality of the use of chemical weapons and the impact of their use. We believe that those who are responsible should be held to account.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The pinpointing and degrading of Assad’s chemical weapons was necessary and appropriate. Intervening to save civilians from future gas attacks was, although not without risks, absolutely the right thing to do. Does the Prime Minister agree that a policy of inaction would also have severe consequences and that those who would turn a blind eye—who would do nothing in pursuit of some moral high ground—should today also be held accountable for once?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with him. Many people focus on the impact of action, but inaction would have given the regime’s capability to use chemical weapons and the impact of their use. We believe that those who are responsible should be held to account.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): There are no words to describe the appalling nature of the humanitarian disaster that confronts Syria, which is why I commend my right hon. Friend for the strong action that she has taken and the support she is giving to the Syrian people. Will she assure the House that in the face of the abhorrent abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime, hers will continue to be a strong voice in favour of the international rules-based system, and will she show that Britain will not stand idly by when cruel weapons are used to murder innocent children and families?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. We will ensure that our voice is heard. It is absolutely right that it was the right thing to do and was in our national interest, but it is also important that we are standing up for that international rules-based order and continue to do so.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Britain was absolutely right, with France and America, to take this long-overdue action in response to Assad’s proven and repeated use of chemical weapons. Since 2013, his regime and the Kremlin have lied and lied again about the continued development of his chemical weapons programme and their continued use. Will the Prime Minister reassure the House that if this does not prove to be a sufficient deterrent, she and our allies will not hesitate to act again? In those circumstances, though, I urge her to come to the House to seek Parliament’s consent first.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to refer to the proven and repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. As I said earlier in response to a number of other questions, nobody should be in any doubt about our resolve to ensure that we alleviate human suffering by dealing with the use of chemical weapons and to ensure that their use is not normalised.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The Prime Minister was indeed heard in respectful silence because her moderate, determined and sensible attitude deserves respect from this House. May I ask her a question on behalf of the persecuted Christians of the middle east who will face further persecution if it is believed that their sponsors in the west are taking sides in the civil war? Will she assure us that, not just in terms of this airstrike, but generally, we are no longer in favour of regime change, that we do not take sides and that we are only on the side of peace? While we Back Benchers can of course not have access to intelligence, she does, and having had that access, can she look me in the eye and say that she is absolutely clear in her own mind that, beyond reasonable doubt, the regime was responsible for this attack?

**The Prime Minister:** On the first point, I recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns about persecuted Christians in the region. Indeed, we are discussing with the Foreign Office how we can look at this issue of Christians and other religious groups who find themselves persecuted in wherever they might be, including in this region. I can give the absolute assurance that, from the intelligence that I have seen, from the analysis that I have seen and from the assessments that I have heard, I am in absolutely no doubt that the Syrian regime was responsible for this attack in Douma.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister has said that the legal basis relies on there having been no practicable alternative to the use of force. Further to that, can she confirm exactly when the UK identified Him Shinhar as a chemical weapons storage facility, when it identified the chemical research facility at Barzeh as a chemical weapons research centre, when this information was reported to the OPCW and whether the UK has asked the OPCW to inspect both sites?

**The Prime Minister:** We have been very clear that we would like it to be possible for the OPCW to investigate sites in Syria, for there to be proper identification of the chemical weapons and for there to be proper accountability for the use of those chemical weapons.

**Caroline Lucas:** Did you ask?
The Prime Minister: Well, I say to the hon. Lady that, last Tuesday at the United Nations Security Council, there was going to be a proposal and resolution that would have enabled a proper investigative mechanism to be re-introduced to look at the use of chemical weapons and at what chemical weapons were available in Syria and held by the regime and at their capabilities and to be able to ascertain accountability for those chemical weapons. That draft resolution was vetoed by Russia.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the coming days, weeks and months, the image that we must hold in our minds is of children coughing up their lungs? Does she understand that many of us, from all parts of this House, want an Executive, when they are planning such a limited operation, to act in the full knowledge that if they do not and if they try to lay the matter before the House at great length, we will not only put at risk the operation, but possibly put at risk our airmen and complicate working with our partners?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that, when we think about this issue, we should hold in our minds the horrific suffering of children and others in Douma as a result of the use of these chemical weapons.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has just said that we should hold in our minds the images of the suffering of those children—the human cost of the consequences of Assad and his Russian backers using chemical weapons against the people and it becoming normalised—but we know that this is not the first time. With that in mind, may I beg the Prime Minister to rethink her approach to those Syrians who have fled to Europe, because they are the same people fleeing this horror? They are the people who needed a safe haven. Forty per cent. of those in the Greek camps are Syrian, a third of whom are children, and there is only one Home Office official to deal with the issue for the entirety of Greece. Do those people not deserve more direct support from us, too?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office has been looking at this issue very carefully. We have changed the arrangements to ensure that a wider group of children will fall within the remit of our proposals for bringing refugee children into the United Kingdom. There are a number of ways in which we are ensuring that we accommodate, and offer shelter and security to, refugees from Syria, including refugee children. But as I said earlier, we must also recognise the many millions of people from Syria who have been displaced both within and from their country. It is right that we look to ensure that we can provide as much support as possible for them, and that is best done by supporting them in region.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): May I offer the Prime Minister my support for the action that was taken at the weekend and for her stance on Parliament? She is absolutely right that Members of Parliament are there to scrutinise the decisions of the Executive, but it is the Prime Minister’s right, with her Government, to make the difficult decision that she made at the end of last week. In her statement, she talks about continuing to work with “international partners on tough economic action against those involved with the production or dissemination of chemical weapons”. May I suggest to her that that should extend to those who are complicit in the use of chemical weapons, those who turn a blind eye to the use of chemical weapons and those who veto resolutions of the United Nations? I am talking about much tougher sanctions on Russia and Russian citizens.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution and for her specific proposals. We will be looking very carefully at what further levers can be used. I am pleased that the European Union Foreign Affairs Council has today agreed that it is willing to look at what further measures could be taken, and I will certainly take on board and note the specific suggestions made by my right hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: It is always good to be able to call a fairly new and young Member, particularly when that Member is celebrating her birthday. I call Paula Sherriff.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. After the appalling scenes we saw in Douma, all of us in this House agree that there is a desperate need to provide humanitarian relief and medical care to the civilians who have fled the city and to those who have remained. What action has the Prime Minister taken to that end?

The Prime Minister: May I first wish the hon. Lady a very happy birthday?

We will be continuing to work with our international partners to see what more we can do regarding our humanitarian support and to press for humanitarian access. As the hon. Lady and others will know, this has been one of the problems. Time and again, groups of people in Syria have been suffering as a result of the conflict and it has not been possible to get humanitarian access to them. We will continue to press for that access at the international level.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On Sunday’s “The Andrew Marr Show”, the Leader of the Opposition said that “our exports that go to Saudi Arabia…end up somewhere in very bad hands, in Syria and other places.”

The Leader of the Opposition has rightly called for evidence to support this intervention and for the Government to be satisfied about it. People who demand evidence and then repeat malicious gossip for which there is not only no evidence, but which is contradicted by the non-governmental organisations that are specialists in the area, are guilty of very poor double standards.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree.

Mr Speaker: On the subject of new, young Members who are early in the parliamentary careers, let us hear from Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is not my birthday, but I was born in London on the worst weekend of the blitz. My next-door neighbour’s family were killed that night, including the two children, so I want action when I hear of a tyrant killing children. I have no criticism of the Prime Minister, but I do have one problem and demur. I have been a passionate pro-American for all the time that I have been in this House, and I have seen America as a beacon of our democratic world. But I was at the United Nations on different business last week when all this happened, and
the conversations there were quite chilling. Many of us passionate pro-Americans could not remember a time when we were seriously worried about American leadership and the American President at the same time that we did not trust Putin and his horrible gang. We need a Prime Minister and European leaders to show the way in these troubled times. Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Gentleman has seen from the fact that the United Kingdom and France came together with the United States in this action that there is leadership being shown in Europe on this matter. We will continue to work with France, as I said, on the international grouping that it has put together on the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons. It is clear that Europe has taken a stance on this and has shown the way on the importance of the international rules-based order.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Had the Prime Minister first sought our consent, with what detail might she have persuaded us without fundamentally compromising our intelligence-gathering capability?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has put his finger on a particular aspect of this issue. It is not possible to bring all the intelligence through to this House; it is not possible to make all that intelligence public. Sometimes, actually, more information can be made available after the event than in advance of the event, because we do need to maintain the operational security of our armed forces.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Among those of us who have been trying to follow President Trump’s tweets over the past week, I cannot be the only person who has found it extremely difficult to keep track of whether he was for military action or against military action, so I wonder whether the Prime Minister can tell us at what point the President instructed her that military action would be taken.

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. Lady’s question is this: at no point at all. I took this decision, because I believed it was the right thing to do and it was in our national interest. It is a decision that should, I believe, be supported by anybody who recognises that we need to re-establish the international norms in relation to the use, and the prohibition of the use, of chemical weapons.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Prime Minister deserves the support that she is getting from across the House for the action she has taken, just as it has had support from democracies not just in Europe but all around the world. Is not the problem for those who are advocating any and every type of action except military action that the action by the Assad regime was part of a repeated pattern of barbaric use of chemical weapons and that therefore, if she and our allies had not taken military action, we would have sent the message that using chemical weapons was no big deal, thus encouraging their further use on innocent civilians around the world?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was important, I believe, that we took action because what we saw in Douma was part of a repeated pattern of behaviour by the Syrian regime. It was precisely to degrade its capability and to prevent further humanitarian suffering that we took this action.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I accept that the Prime Minister had no real easy options in making this consideration, but given that members of the Security Council are now acting outwith the norms that she says she has acted to defend—ultimately, if the veto is dead for Moscow, it is dead for London—how exactly does she plan to restore order and reform the Security Council?

The Prime Minister: We will continue to operate through the United Nations Security Council and continue to make the arguments for ensuring that every country recognises the importance of ensuring that we maintain the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. As I said earlier, the strikes that took place were about degrading the Syrian regime’s capability, but I believe they should have given a message to others as well that we will not accept the use of chemical weapons with impunity.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the Prime Minister on her leadership and on her sheer guts to take a decisive decision over the weekend to deal with Assad and his friends? In the event of a retaliatory cyber-attack from Russia on our NHS or any other vital part of our infrastructure, would she then, working with our NATO allies, consider invoking article 5?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises the issue of potential cyber-attacks. We have done a great deal as a Government to reinforce our capability to identify and deal with any potential cyber-attacks. The establishment of the National Cyber Security Centre has been a very important development from the United Kingdom’s point of view, enabling us to deal with the issue of cyber-attacks. We always remain on the alert for any such attacks, and we continue to enhance our capability to deal with them.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister referred to the actions of previous Governments. May I remind her and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that it was a Labour Government, with Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary, that carried out airstrikes in Iraq under Operation Desert Fox in 1998 without a UN resolution, that it was a Labour Government that restored President Kabbah in Sierra Leone without a UN resolution, that it was a Labour Government that stopped the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo without a UN resolution, and that there is a long-standing and noble tradition on these Benches of supporting humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; decisions have been taken by Governments of all colours to take action where it was believed to be in the national interest and important in order to prevent humanitarian suffering. As he said, there has been a long-standing and proud tradition in the Labour party of being willing to step up to the plate and take those decisions when it is necessary to do so.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Such decisions are always difficult, and Prime Ministers must retain the leeway to commit armed forces in extremis,
but I hope the Prime Minister will understand that many are concerned, given our track record of errors in previous interventions and in Syria, that Government should be properly scrutinised before committing troops.

Given the possibility of future interventions in Syria, under what circumstances does the Prime Minister think it right to come to this place and consult before committing armed forces?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely understand the concern that my hon. Friend and other Members of the House have in relation to the role of Parliament, particularly given the experience, and I know that he has in the past and continues to be concerned about that issue. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), we are not saying that no debate should take place in Parliament; we are saying simply that there needs to be a recognition of the fact that there will be occasions when it is important to act in a timeline and with consideration of the operational security of our armed forces, which means it is not possible to have that debate in advance of a decision being taken.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One of the last discussions I had with our murdered former colleague Jo Cox was on the need to protect civilians in Syria. We cannot fire and forget, but neither can we simply debate and talk and forget. What is the Prime Minister’s comprehensive political, diplomatic and humanitarian strategy—not just one-off military actions—to protect civilians in Syria? Does she agree that councils around the country, including Vale of Glamorgan Council in my constituency, need to do much more to support the resettlement of Syrian refugees under the resettlement programme, which they are currently not doing?

**The Prime Minister:** Certainly. There are two areas in which we will undertake this diplomatic and political process. The first is in relation to the use of chemical weapons, following up within a number of international forums on the military action that has taken place. As I said, there have already been comments coming out of the European Foreign Affairs Council and the Gulf Co-operation Council, and we will be discussing with a number of leaders around the world how we can re-establish the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. That is one strand of activity we will undertake.

The other strand is the full support we will continue to give to the United Nations process in trying to find a solution to what is happening in Syria. We support the work that Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations envoy, is doing in that area. We hope that the Geneva process can be reignited and that we see the parties coming together around the table to find a genuine solution; that means not just all the parties in Syria but actually the backers of the parties in Syria being willing to do that.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has argued that the airstrikes were illegal, but is it not true that the only illegal act that has taken place in this situation was the war crime—and it was a war crime—of using chemical weapons to murder families and children? Was the Prime Minister not entirely right to authorise these airstrikes to defend the principles of the chemical weapons convention and, in so doing, to uphold international law?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. What is illegal is the use of chemical weapons, and it is entirely right that we have acted.

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): I have not heard much clarity on this, so will the Prime Minister tell us whether she is planning to use Executive powers again with regard to military action in Syria—in breach of the commonly understood parliamentary protocol that would have given the House a say in a matter of war? There is clear opposition from British people to airstrikes, and I think the public are right to be sceptical, so will the Prime Minister also explain how Friday night’s airstrikes have improved the safety and security of Syrian people practically, when we are aware that the bombing and violence are continuing unabated throughout the region?

**The Prime Minister:** I have responded to a number of questions in relation to Parliament. In the second part of the hon. Lady’s question, she asks about what impact this will have. The strikes that took place were about degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. As I have said in answer to other questions, the assessment we have made is that the strikes were successful. We obviously continue to build that picture, but that is our assessment of the strikes that have taken place. It is by degrading its chemical weapons capability that we can have an impact and ensure that we are reducing the likelihood of the humanitarian suffering in the future.

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): The conflict in Syria has had the most serious impact on other nations in the region, not least countries friendly to the UK such as Jordan, which has done so much to accommodate refugees from the fighting. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that our regional allies have been kept fully informed about the action we took last weekend, and that they will be similarly informed should any future action be necessary?

**The Prime Minister:** I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. He specifically mentions Jordan. In fact, I spoke to His Majesty the King of Jordan on Saturday about this and about the support that the United Kingdom continues to give to Jordan, which is important. There are a large number of refugees in Jordan, and it is absolutely right that we continue to support that country in providing for those refugees and in other ways.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The policy paper on the UK Government’s legal position says:

“The UK is permitted under international law, on an exceptional basis, to take measures in order to alleviate overwhelming humanitarian suffering.”

It does not, however, cite any authority for that proposition: it does not quote the UN charter, and it does not refer to any Security Council resolution nor any international treaty of any kind. Will the Prime Minister tell us why that proposition is unvouched for in the policy paper?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to the hon. and learned Lady that the basis on which we undertook this action is one that has been accepted by Governments previously and one under which previous action has been taken. I believe that it continues to be the right basis for ensuring...
that we can act to alleviate humanitarian suffering, and I would have thought the alleviation of humanitarian suffering was something that should gain support from across the whole House.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is an historic reality that, of the many hundreds of occasions on which this country has gone to war or committed troops, only four have been voted on in this House prior to taking place, the most notable being when Tony Blair illegally committed our troops to war in 2003—not a great precedent. Does the Prime Minister not agree that she has the secret intelligence, she has the legal advice and she has the military advice to take that most awful and terrible of decisions—to commit our troops to war—and that by coming here and looking for political top cover, rather than empowering Parliament, she is actually emasculating it?

The Prime Minister: I think the position that the Government have taken on these matters, as set out in 2016, is absolutely clear: we must retain the right to be able to commit our armed forces where it is necessary and right to do so in a timely fashion, without having a debate in Parliament. However, we recognise the significance and importance of Parliament, and if it is the case that a decision is taken without that prior consideration by Parliament, the Prime Minister should come at the first possible opportunity to the House, which is what I have done.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I am glad that we are finally debating this situation in Syria, but the Prime Minister could and should have recalled Parliament to discuss and vote on this issue last week.

The heartbreaking and sickening images of these chemical attacks leave us in no doubt why so many Syrians have felt forced to take their children and flee their homes and their country. In the same circumstances, which of us would not do the same? But with deeper engagement comes greater responsibility, so does the Prime Minister recognise the jarring contrast between the humanitarian arguments she makes for this military action and her Government’s inhumane and inadequate approach to Syrian refugees, which has left vulnerable children stranded and alone?

The Prime Minister: We have been providing significant support to Syrian refugees since the start of this conflict—it is the biggest single humanitarian intervention that this country has made. We have been providing water, food and medical consultations for tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Syrian refugees, and we continue to do so. I believe it is right that we continue to recognise the need of those people and that we continue to provide for it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend for making sure Britain stands up against these chemical weapons attacks. Did she see the investigation in The Times on Saturday, which shows that a number of senior academics across universities, including Sheffield and Edinburgh, are disseminating extremist Assad propaganda? The Times describes it as “an insult to the victims of a depraved regime and a stain on the reputation of the institutions which host its authors.” Will she act to stop this extremism in our universities?

The Prime Minister: I have to confess to my right hon. Friend that I had not seen that particular report, and I will, of course, look at it. There are a number of values that underpin our society; of course, academic freedom is one of them. However, I will certainly look at the instances he has referred me to.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I regret that there was not a parliamentary debate and vote on this military intervention. However, standing by and letting President Assad use chemical weapons against his own people would have been the wrong thing to do. To prevent the further deterioration of the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding in Syria, and has been for the last seven years, will the Prime Minister support President Macron’s initiative to push for humanitarian corridors to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: We will be pressing for humanitarian access. The exact form in which that humanitarian access might occur, of course, might vary, but we will continue to press with our international allies for humanitarian access.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very grateful for the Prime Minister’s robust action over the weekend. Given that this action has been legal, precise and timely, would she agree that those who seek to play politics around this issue by raising spurious legal questions do a great disservice to their office and a grave disservice to the innocent civilians in Syria who have faced the horror of chemical attack?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. From the contributions that have already been made, it is clear that, across the House, there is support for action being taken against the use of chemical weapons and in support of those who have been suffering so abominably from the action of the Syrian regime.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The military action that took place was both correct and proportional in response to the horrific spectacle of women and children being gassed in their own homes in Douma. The military action is, though, only part of the strategy, so could the Prime Minister expand a little further on what will take place in the next few weeks in terms of the broader strategy, including the suggestion from the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) about economic sanctions against those who support the Assad regime?

The Prime Minister: There are a variety of ways in which we will be pursuing further action on the international stage. We will be looking at various economic levers, as I have said, and I take on board the comments that have been made in the House about the importance of doing that. We recognise that it was not just a case of the strikes taking place on Saturday morning and that we need to follow up with international action. We will look at the economic levers that we can use. As I have referenced, the Foreign Affairs Council in Europe has already been looking at the willingness to take further action. I have discussed that with a number of European Union leaders as well.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Prime Minister has today made a compelling case for limited military action against the use of chemical warfare in Syria,
but the wider diplomatic and political initiatives to bring about the end of these ghastly conflicts in Syria and to achieve a lasting peaceful solution seem no closer to success today than they were five years ago. What does my right hon. Friend believe is possible in trying to refocus all the parties involved on achieving that desperately difficult goal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that it has been difficult over the years that this conflict has taken place to bring the parties around the table. It is important not only that the opposition parties in Syria are willing to come around the table, which they are, but that the regime is, and Russia needs to play its part in ensuring that the regime is willing to come forward and to sit down and discuss the future of Syria.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): We all know that the Syrian civil war will end only through diplomatic means, which is why this evening's Stop the War demonstration should be taking place outside the Russian embassy and not outside this Parliament. The truth is that, had the UN Security Council fulfilled its obligations, we would not be facing the scenario that the Prime Minister described this afternoon. However, can I ask her to look again, with the same degree of urgency and same scale of response that she has provided in the last week, at the humanitarian crisis? This country has taken only 11,000 refugees. Syria's neighbours, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, are bearing the brunt of the humanitarian crisis. We have a responsibility to protect Syrian civilians, whether they are in Syria, in surrounding countries or making their way to this country, and we have not stepped up to the mark, not nearly enough.

The Prime Minister: As I said before, we are of course providing support in the region to those refugees. We have done so on the basis that we believe it is important. We want to see a resolution to the Syrian conflict, such that people will be able to return home in the future. That support in region is more likely to enable that to happen. However, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right when he says that Russia must bear its responsibility for what is happening in Syria and for the continuation of this conflict.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate the level of interest in the House. This is an extremely important occasion, and in my experience the Prime Minister never complains about having to answer questions—or at least she never does to me anyway. I am very grateful for that, and I appreciate that, but it would be helpful if colleagues could be succinct. I know that quality will be magnificently exhibited now by Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Don't hold your breath, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister was absolutely right in ordering the airstrikes this weekend. Does she agree that the Leader of the Opposition, however, was completely wrong—wrong in his failure to blame Assad for the chemical attacks on his own people and wrong when he said that this country has not been playing its part in assisting refugees? We are the second biggest donor in the world. Broxtowe has taken four—soon to be five—families, and we are very proud of that. For a borough of our size, that is a serious achievement, and we hope to take more. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that it is now imperative that countries across the world play their part in providing humanitarian relief for those who have had to flee from Assad's regime?

Mr Speaker: I can deal with most things, but it is quite difficult dealing with lawyers.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend asks about other countries playing their part in providing humanitarian support and support for refugees. She is absolutely right. I hope, at the conference due to take place in Brussels towards the end of this month, that countries will step up so we can ensure that support is available.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In the Prime Minister's statement, she said: "We are confident in our own assessment that the Syrian regime was highly likely responsible".

Surely the burden of proof should be beyond reasonable doubt, as opposed to being "highly likely"? In addition, I would be interested to know who "we" are, given that Parliament was not consulted.

The Prime Minister: The Government made their assessments. Those were not just the view of the UK Government; they were shared by our allies and on that basis we acted.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I support my right hon. Friend's decisive action this weekend. Were we waiting for war crimes prosecutions to take place, we would still be waiting for prosecutions dating back to the events she described that took place in 2013. I urge her to collect evidence relating to war crimes, but if this position arises again may I urge her to act as she did this weekend?

The Prime Minister: We will always act in the national interest and there should be no doubt about our resolve in ensuring that we return to the international norm of the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

James Cleverly (Brain tree) (Con): From Prime Minister Trudeau in Canada to Prime Minister Abe in Japan, and from European leaders to leaders in Australia and New Zealand, the leaders of international bodies around the world stand shoulder to shoulder with my right hon. Friend, France and the United States of America in taking this action. Will she assure me that she will not listen to the increasingly small and isolated number of voices who insist that the Russian regime has a veto on our international actions? Will she instead listen to the numerous voices around the world who support the action she took at the weekend?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Inaction and indecision has its cost. So far in Syria it has been met by the children of Syria, the parents who have lost their homes, the people who have lost their lives and the families who have been displaced. The Prime Minister is, of course, right to take action when there is an emergency—she
has that prerogative right. Nearly always, however, it is better to come to the House of Commons first. In the end, the most pernicious role in Syria has been played by Russia: it has systematically refused to allow people to investigate where war crimes have been committed, and it has advanced its own territorial ambitions. Is it not right that we must ensure that it pays the price in the end?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Nobody should be in any doubt about the role that Russia has played. Russia could play a role to ensure we find a diplomatic and political solution to what is happening in Syria. It has been unwilling to do so and it has supported a regime that has illegally used chemical weapons to kill and injure its own civilians, including young children.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Many of the ghastly chemical attacks my right hon. Friend announced this afternoon would be classed as war crimes, so she was absolutely right to take the action she has taken. In contrast, what would have been the consequence for future tyrants if the Leader of the Opposition had failed to take military action?

The Prime Minister: The fact is that without action the message would have been sent that it was okay for this regime, and any other regime that chose to do so, to use chemical weapons. It is very important that we re-establish the fact that chemical weapons use is illegal and that the international community will not stand by and see them used.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It seems this is a week in which the Government have sought to lead the Commonwealth, but have nearly deported its citizens; to defend the international rules-based system by ignoring the United Nations; and to reclaim parliamentary sovereignty by not using it. Will the Prime Minister advise the House on where that all fits in with the plan for a global Britain?

The Prime Minister: We have not ignored the United Nations. We have tried to work through the United Nations, but Russia has vetoed action in the United Nations. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that this country should effectively give Russia a veto over our foreign policy, then I have to say to him that I absolutely disagree. The United Kingdom Government will determine the United Kingdom’s foreign policy—nobody else.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Russia is waging a propaganda war and it is involved in the cover-up. It is reporting that the attack was staged and it has, over many months, systematically and strategically used social media to undermine western engagement and intervention in Syria. While it is right to hold the Government to account, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Leader of the Opposition is at risk of becoming a voice for our country’s enemies?

The Prime Minister: It is important that everybody across this House is in no doubt about the way in which Russia has supported the Syrian regime and the way in which Russia has acted. That has meant it has been much harder to do what the Leader of the Opposition and others have looked for, which is to bring an end to the conflict in Syria. Russia is playing a negative role. It could play a positive role. We should be in no doubt about the actions Russia has taken and the role it is playing.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When David Cameron came to the House in 2011 following the start of our intervention in Libya, it was for a full debate on an amendable motion. He got that approval by 557 votes to 13. I offer no prizes for guessing who was in the 13. Mr Speaker. Will the Prime Minister follow the precedent set by David Cameron and tomorrow allow the House a vote on an amendable motion, not just a general debate?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman puts his finger on it: unless the Russians are willing, within the Security Council, to put aside the position they have taken previously and accept it is important that we re-establish the international rules-based order, we allow the investigations to take place and we hold the Syrian regime accountable for its actions.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This debate is heavily coloured by the vote that took place in this House in 2013 against the use of military action, after the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons at that time. Can the Prime Minister tell the House how many times the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against its own people since we took that vote and since Russia promised to oversee the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme?

The Prime Minister: I made reference in my statement to a number of occasions on which the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, as evidenced and accepted by the United Nations. This is exactly the problem. The Syrian regime said it would get rid of its chemical weapons and the Russians said that they would guarantee that that would happen. It did not happen. Chemical weapons have been used on a number of occasions since.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I support the decision that the Prime Minister took both to authorise action that degraded chemical weapons capability and to send a very clear message about its unacceptable. I have listened carefully to the Leader of the Opposition and looked at what he has done in this House when
opposing military action, whether it was authorised by the UN or, indeed, asked for by the Government of Iraq to deal with Daesh. I know that the Prime Minister took this decision with great care and attention, as a Prime Minister must do, but a Prime Minister who is never willing to use military action is not fit to hold that office.

The Prime Minister: There is no harder decision for a Prime Minister to take than to commit British armed forces to action. It is a grave responsibility, but sadly there are occasions when it is necessary to take that decision—and yes, be held accountable for it. But the idea that we would never commit our armed forces to action is completely unacceptable. We have to accept that there are occasions when it is right for our armed forces to be sent out there into action on our behalf, and that is what we have done.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The international community has a responsibility to protect civilians caught up in conflict, so would the Prime Minister explain how she and the international community intend to hold Assad and his allies fully to account in the interests of preventing further atrocities?

The Prime Minister: The first step we have taken in the interests of preventing further atrocities is to take action to degrade the chemical weapons capability of the regime. We also want to follow this up with diplomatic and political pressure on the issue of using chemical weapons. We believe that this is not just about degrading the chemical weapons capability of the regime; I hope that it has sent a message to others as well that the international community is resolved in not being willing to see the use of chemical weapons being normalised.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition suggested that Britain acted only because it was instructed to by the US. I find that hugely disrespectful to the British Government, the British armed forces and our allies in France. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that the Government can take action rapidly when it is needed and that it is vital to send a message to Putin and Assad that we are ready to use such powers?

The Prime Minister: Let nobody be in any doubt: we did not act under instruction from anybody. We acted in the national interest.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): So far today the Prime Minister has ducked out of questions about Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world—Yemen—and she has not answered why she did not wait until the outcome of the OPCW inspections. She has not explained why a parliamentary recall would jeopardise the action that President Trump had already tweeted about. She has not answered about providing further humanitarian assistance and additional support for refugees, and yet she talks about parliamentary scrutiny. How is a statement after the event parliamentary scrutiny when she will not answer any hard questions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about me not answering questions on refugees, but I have done so, or on the OPCW, but I have done so. I have answered many questions and I have to say that I will be answering many more on this particular issue.

Dr Andrew Marrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The UK and the men and women of our armed forces should be enormously proud of being part of a triumvirate that over the weekend delivered necessary, proportionate and humane military effect, and the Prime Minister should be proud of her leadership. Would the Prime Minister agree that Russia, in addition to its disgracefully deployed veto at the UN Security Council, has another veto that it is able to exercise—by virtue of shifting its military assets around Syria?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we should look very carefully at the role that Russia is playing in Syria. Russia has the capability of acting in a different way by ensuring that the parties can sit down together, resolve this issue and find a political solution. It has not been willing to do so thus far, but we will make every effort to ensure that all parties are willing to do that and to ensure that we can find a political solution.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): If the targeted buildings were not empty, what assessment does the Prime Minister have of the casualties?

The Prime Minister: We have no evidence of casualties so far. If there are reports of casualties, those will be properly investigated. Of course, that is in sharp contrast to the approach taken by the Syrian regime and its Russian backers. The planning was done very carefully to ensure that we minimised the possibility of casualties.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend put to bed the less than constructive comments we are getting from some Members of the Opposition—that Friday’s action was taken as a knee-jerk reaction to President Trump? Rather, can she give assurances that action was taken in the national interest to give a clear message that using chemical weapons anywhere, whether in Syria or Salisbury, is simply unacceptable, and that we cannot turn our backs on action like this?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to repeat to my hon. Friend that this action was taken and we believed that it was the right thing to do. It was in our national interest. It was not under the instruction of anybody else. We determined that it was right for the United Kingdom to be part of this action in order to degrade a chemical weapons capability that could have been used to inflict further humanitarian suffering.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): If not regime change, what is the endgame?

The Prime Minister: The step we want to see is the parties coming together around the table to agree a political solution to the future of Syria. There is a key role; we have been pressing for that. We have been supporting the Geneva process. We continue to support Staffan de Mistura and the work that he is doing. It is up to not just the Syrian regime but its backers to ensure that they are willing to see that discussion take place and a proper solution for Syria being resolved in the interests of all its people.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Leadership takes great courage. My right hon. Friend has shown it in spades and I commend her, as do most in the House today. I am sure she would agree that I would be failing
[Richard Drax ]

if I did not mention the money spent on our armed forces in difficult times such as this. I ask her, please, to consider spending more money on our defences so that we are ready if, God forbid, they are needed more in the future.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the interest that my hon. Friend has shown in this topic and the way in which he has championed the armed forces in relation to the financial settlements. Prior to Easter, I was able to announce that some extra money was being made available to the Ministry of Defence, and we have in hand the modernising defence programme, in which we are looking to ensure—he referred to our capabilities—that we have the capabilities necessary to deal with the variety of threats that we face. The capabilities for our security will be of a variety of sorts, not all of which will lie in the Ministry of Defence.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), after this House voted against strikes in 2013 the Government and the Opposition accepted Russia’s assurances that it would oversee the dismantling of Assad’s chemical weapon capability. Yet over the past five years, Russia has used its veto no fewer than five times at the Security Council. Five of those vetoes were specifically on motions that could have hampered the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Does she believe, like me, that we were wrong to accept Russia’s commitment, and can she tell the House about what her next steps will be at the UN Security Council?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I was one of those who voted in favour of action being taken when the vote was taken in this House in 2013. A guarantee from Russia was accepted, and it has been proved that that was wrong because it did not deliver on that, and the Syrian regime has not delivered on its commitment. It is important that we take the issue of the use of chemical weapons into the United Nations. I spoke to the United Nations Secretary-General about further steps that can be taken over the weekend.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that, contrary to claims over the weekend, there is no evidence that any British defence export products have ended up in the wrong hands in Syria?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I pay tribute to our Royal Air Force personnel, some of whom I had the privilege to meet on a NATO delegation to Qatar last month. Does the Prime Minister agree that international humanitarian law is clear that there is no time and no place, ever, where chemical weapons may be used, and that enforcing that law—that taboo—is absolutely imperative, whether the weapons are used on the streets of Salisbury or the bunkers of Douma? Many Labour Members support the action that she took, and we also support Labour’s proud tradition of taking action to intervene in conflicts to provide humanitarian protection, notably in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. We will act to protect that tradition.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. She is absolutely right that we should be proud of our air force personnel, as we should be of all our armed forces and the work they do to keep us safe. As she said, there is a proud tradition in the Labour party of being willing to take action on these matters when necessary, and she has reflected that proud tradition today.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Following the British military action in Syria over the weekend, what assessment have the Government made of the asymmetrical threats facing the UK, and what actions are being taken to combat them?

The Prime Minister: We have been enhancing our ability in a number of areas to deal with potential threats— I referred earlier to the potential for cyber-attacks, and we have enhanced our capability to deal with those—and of course we continue to ensure that we have the right defences whatever the potential threat.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I regret that there was not a parliamentary vote on this issue, but I wish to tell the Prime Minister and the House that she would have had my vote had I been asked to give it. In the future, however, it would be better were the country able to understand what was going on. I also rise to ask that everybody in this place try to have better faith in one another in critiquing whether this is right or wrong. This is not an opportunity for politics about the local elections; it is about children being gassed, and I have heard ridiculous politicking and bad faith on both sides. People need to have good faith in us. And it is not about our voices; it is about the Syrian people’s voices. So with that, I ask: where are they in all this, and what are the British Government doing with aid to try to build Syrian civic society?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and she is right. It is important that across the House we deal with such issues with the solemnity they require. As she says, at the end of the day this is about the impact on children and men and women in Syria. We will continue to work with Syrian refugees in the region and we want to ensure, of course, that when it is possible for them to return they are able to build a stronger and more stable and secure Syria.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does the Prime Minister believe that when urgent targeted action is required, waiting for a parliamentary vote could not just put our armed forces in harm’s way but give those stockpiling chemical weapons time to conceal them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that in deciding whether to take such action, it is imperative that we consider the operational security of our armed forces as well as timeliness to ensure that we have the impact we wish to have.
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the professionalism of the Royal Air Force in carrying out its task last week, and I agree that deciding to take military action is the most difficult decision a Prime Minister or parliamentarian can take, but does she not understand the frustration of elected Members of the House of Commons at being sidelined in last week’s decision? We had to rely for information on the Twitter account of the US President and the mainstream news. [Interruption.] We did. We should have been consulted, because that Twitter account was giving away all America’s future actions, and we had to find out that way. We should have been called back to the House of Commons to offer our support to the RAF and others.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the support he has given to the Royal Air Force. I simply say to him, as I have said to others, that this is not a question of whether on every occasion one particular approach or another is taken; it is about ensuring that action can be taken in a way that will ensure it meets the need. This was limited, targeted action taken on a legal basis that had been accepted by several previous Governments.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for so clearly laying out the humanitarian grounds on which she made the very difficult decision to take action last Friday. What more humanitarian aid could be provided if only Assad and Putin would allow access to Syria?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. If we could have that humanitarian access, many more people in Syria could be supported and provided with the medical support they need and with food and water and the other necessities of life. Sadly, the Syrian regime and its Russian backers are preventing that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of thousands of people lie dead, 1.5 million people are injured and millions have been displaced by the use of chemical and conventional weapons. Should the House not have been recalled last week to discuss how a de-escalation of the crisis can be brought about? Such de-escalation is vital to long-term security within the region.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, this action was limited, targeted and taken with a view to minimising the possibility of civilian casualties and the risk of an escalation of the conflict.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Russia and Syria have lied and lied again about the use of these vile weapons for the mass murder of civilians in Syria, but this is not just a distant conflict; we have also seen these vile weapons used in Salisbury, where they would have resulted in the deaths of three people had it not been for the intervention of intensive care and the expert medical help we have access to here. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for people to stop acting as the useful idiots of the Russian regime by appearing on networks such as Russia Today and to look at the facts and bear their own responsibility?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Nobody should be in any doubt about the actions of Russia, and nobody should be supporting them. We should all recognise the role that Russia has played in backing the Syrian regime and in failing to guarantee that it was dismantling all its chemical weapons, and that it continues to play in vetoing action on the UN Security Council and in not encouraging the Syrian regime to come to a resolution of this conflict.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The UK should be proud of the role it has played in advancing the principle of intervention to prevent humanitarian catastrophe, and it would be shameful if that were abandoned now by people who in fact would not countenance intervention under any circumstances. But something else is necessary to enable humanitarian intervention in Syria, and that is the military’s guaranteeing the safety of aid convoys getting into besieged areas. It meets the Government’s test. Will she consider it?

The Prime Minister: We have, over the time of this conflict, looked several times at how we can ensure humanitarian access to those who need it in Syria. Our overriding consideration must be to ensure that, whatever decisions are taken and whatever access is given, it will genuinely work and provide that access. Unfortunately, of course, the Syrian regime and its backers have been preventing that humanitarian access so far, but we will continue to press for it.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her leadership on this very difficult issue. The use of chemical weapons, whether in Syria or on the streets of Salisbury, is completely unacceptable. Will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that she will stay absolutely resolute and continue to advocate against the use of chemical weapons, and not listen to those in the House who seem happy to put the interests of countries such as Russia before those of our great country?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to press this case to ensure that we can restore the international norm of a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister set out what her Government are actively doing to prevent the further escalation of the conflict in Syria, given that she has apparently left open the possibility of more strikes should another chemical attack take place? Does she think there is sufficient public support for more strikes?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we took limited and targeted action to degrade the chemical weapons capability, to deter the willingness of the Syrian regime to use chemical weapons and to give a clear message to others on the use of chemical weapons, but we are resolved—and no one should doubt our resolve—to ensure that we can restore a position in which no one believes that the use of chemical weapons has been normalised.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Given that representatives of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council have blatantly lied and suggested that Britain somehow staged the appalling
atrocities that we have all witnessed, can my right hon.
Friend confirm that she had no choice but to take the
actions that she took to help the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. These
actions were taken to alleviate future humanitarian
suffering by the Syrian people. I continue to believe—and
I think this has been made clear by many Members—that
they were the right actions to take.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth)
(Lab): Following the UK’s military intervention in Kosovo
in 1999 on humanitarian grounds, Russia invaded Georgia
using the same legal justification. What assessment has
been made of the misuse of humanitarian reasons for
military intervention that may be used by other states in
the long term?

The Prime Minister: We are responsible for the actions
that we take. As the hon. Lady has said, and as I said in
my statement, we have used this legal basis on a number
of occasions, and I think it was absolutely right to use it
on this occasion.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): In 2013, I
voted against action in Syria. I did so on the basis of no
more information than I had seen on the six o’clock
news. That is why we have an Executive, drawn from
and accountable to Parliament, and that is why the
Prime Minister’s action was 100% correct in this case.
The vote that we took in 2013, and the question of
whether we were responsible for some of these attacks,
will weigh on my conscience ever more.

This afternoon, Members have stood up and accused
the Prime Minister of operating on the basis of instructions
from Washington. Will she go further and say that not
only are their suggestions wrong, but they are a smear,
they are disgusting, and they are insulting to our troops?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon.
Friend. I think that that accusation is indeed insulting.
It is certainly not true. It is insulting to the Government,
and, as my hon. Friend has said, it is insulting to our
troops who so professionally and bravely carry out the
action that we need.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister acted
entirely appropriately. If these chemical weapons became
normalised, not only would they be used against civilians
in the future, but the time would surely come when our
own servicemen and women would go into action for
our country and they would be used against them too.
That would be unforgivable. However, military action is
not a replacement for diplomacy. Does the Prime Minister
accept that we need a global response on the scale of the
Glenegles summit—when we focused the world’s attention
on international development—to tackle Syria and put
strategy behind it once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for
making the point that if chemical weapons were allowed
to continue to be used, they would be used by other
people not just against civilians, but potentially against
service personnel.

We do want to ensure that there is a major effort on
the diplomatic side to find a resolution to the situation
in Syria. That is why we continue to back the Geneva
process and will work to ensure that it is reignited.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I
congratulate the Prime Minister on the clear and calm,
but courageous and decisive, leadership that she has
shown over the past week. As a humble Back Bencher, I
also thank her for not placing on me the responsibility
to make this decision without having the full information
and intelligence that were available to her. Does she
share my view that while we need to learn the lessons of
the past, it is time for the House—and, indeed, our
country—to get over the mistakes of the past and stand
proud on the international stage again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Information
will be available to the Government that it is not possible
for them to make available to the House on all occasions,
and it is important to be able to operate in a timely
fashion to protect the safety and security of our armed
forces when that is done on a legal basis that is accepted.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Children escaping
from war and terrible atrocities in Syria have been
refused asylum and protection by this Government in the
past. Let me be clear: Britain is better than that, and
this military action has not been taken in my name.
May I ask the Prime Minister whether bombing a
country, then refusing to give asylum to children seeking
refuge, reflects the Government’s idea of British values?

The Prime Minister: We have been granting asylum to
both children and adults from Syria, through a number
of schemes. However, we have also been supporting and
maintaining, and providing food, medical assistance
and water for, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees
in the region. Members of this House, including the
hon. Lady, should be proud of the fact that we are the
second largest humanitarian bilateral donor.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham)
(Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her leadership
in the face of the awful atrocities that we have seen in
Syria and the use of these chemical weapons, and for
trying to prevent them from being used in the future. A
decision to use military force is clearly a very serious
decision, and serious decisions need to be made by
those in possession of all the intelligence and advice
and in full knowledge of our military capabilities. Will
the Prime Minister tell the House whether making such
information available to Parliament in advance of military
action could risk the lives of our intelligence and military
personnel and the effectiveness of the operation itself?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely
right. That is one of the factors that a Government
must bear in mind in weighing such decisions. We must
bear in mind the extent to which information can be
made available—and, as I have said, not all of it can—and
also the impact that making information available in
advance of a decision to act could have on the operation
and security of our armed forces personnel, on capability,
and on whether or not the action, when it is taken, is
successful.
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister referred to casualties with foam in their mouths, with burning eyes and in respiratory distress, and to an associated chlorine-like odour. Those symptoms are more in keeping with Assad’s repeated use over the last five years of the respiratory corrosive chlorine gas than with the paralytic neurotoxin sarin, which seemed to be the main target of the military action. Given that chlorine is commonly available, how, without an overarching plan to end the war, does the Prime Minister hope to limit the production and dropping of chlorine gas by the regime on its own civilians?

The Prime Minister: This is about chemical weapons, and about continuing action against chemical weapons. The hon. Lady is right: some of that action will have been in relation to the capacity and capability of sarin, which, of course, has been used by the Assad regime. The regime’s willingness to use a variety of types of chemical weapon is what underpins this, and our need to act to degrade that capability and deter its willingness to use such weapons in future.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Eleven million Syrians have been either displaced or killed since this action was taken by Assad’s Government. Like a number of other Members on both sides of the House, I met many of the refugees in the camps that British aid is supporting. Those people want to go home. Does the Prime Minister agree that we have two options? We can either send the message that we will not stand up for chemical warfare that kills and maims, or we can close our eyes, pretend that this is not happening, talk about diplomatic solutions that cannot be delivered, and effectively condemn more innocent people to their deaths.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is imperative for us to act, and to give a very clear message about the use of chemical weapons. This is about preventing humanitarian suffering in future. To stand by would have given the message that such weapons could be used with impunity, and we cannot accept that.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): One of my constituents, who is from eastern Ghouta, came to me inconsolable, in floods of tears, to plead for a ceasefire that would help to protect her family, who are still in the area. May I ask the Prime Minister what comes after this? What action will it garner international support to prevent the loss of more civilian casualties, to assist my constituent’s family and everyone else who is suffering?

The Prime Minister: Sometimes what appear to be simple solutions in relation to matters such as ceasefires do not operate or act on the ground. We have been encouraging ceasefires and humanitarian access. The hon. Lady asks about the longer-term solution. As I have said, this is not just a question for the United Kingdom; it is a question for us and our international allies to work on. We continue to work, and we want to see the Geneva process—the United Nations process—under Staffan de Mistura once again able to come together to find a long-term solution. But it is also necessary for the Syrian regime and its backers to be willing to see a political solution in Syria, and to be willing to come round the table and provide peace and stability for people in that country.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): In recent weeks we have heard claims from the Russian Government that the British Government were behind the nerve gas attack in Salisbury. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is typical of Russian propaganda, that it shows that Vladimir Putin is not serious about stopping the use of chemical weapons, and that he must not be given a veto over this country’s foreign policy?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): First, I want to pay tribute to our armed forces, who serve so bravely and professionally whenever they are called upon. My husband served in the armed forces, and absolutely nothing would have stopped me returning early from recess last week to Parliament to deliberate such grave matters—not specifics that put service personnel at risk, but the premise of action, as has been the parliamentary precedent. We cannot set the opposite precedent, so will the Prime Minister reassure the House that matters will be debated and agreed by Parliament in the future?

The Prime Minister: I have already made reference to the 2016 written ministerial statement, which set out the position. I stand by that and suggest that the hon. Lady looks at it. I thank her for her comments about the armed forces; their professionalism and bravery are beyond doubt.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is unfortunately clear that some who claim to support the introduction of a war powers Bill actually wish to see the introduction of a no war powers Bill, the main beneficiary of which would be countries and groups around the world whose interests and values are diametrically opposed to ours? Ultimately, that would make the world a far more dangerous place.

The Prime Minister: I sympathise with my hon. Friend’s comments. The Leader of the Opposition says that he wants United Nations support for action, but I believe that even when it supported action in Syria against Daesh, the Leader of the Opposition opposed that.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Recognising that there can be circumstances that preclude a Government from consulting Parliament before taking military action, does the Prime Minister agree that the default position, as per convention, is that Parliament should be consulted in advance—not on operational details, but on the strategy within which those operational details fit? Nothing that she has said so far convinces me that on this occasion there was not the time or opportunity to consult this House. In relation to the future strategy, given that the action was taken to limit further humanitarian catastrophe, what action does the Prime Minister believe that Britain should take? How will it garner international support to prevent the loss of civilian lives in Idlib on the scale of the loss of life in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to others, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the position set out in the 2016 written ministerial statement about Government action versus parliamentary debate. We have
set out very clearly that we will be working with international partners in a number of ways. We have worked with France on the international partnership to ensure that chemical weapons cannot be used with impunity, which has now been established, and through the United Nations and in other forums.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, which included a timely reminder that the UK is the second largest bilateral aid donor to the region. Does she agree not only that this action sends a clear message to despots who might consider using chemical weapons in the future, but that by taking out the chemical weapons facilities, we will make sure that more vulnerable innocent citizens in Syria are protected?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: by degrading the chemical weapons capability, we will ensure that we alleviate further humanitarian suffering.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The situation in Syria is clearly very grave and complex, and we cannot ignore it, but for the Government to continue their systematic contempt of Parliament with a retrospective statement is to be regretted. To avoid such an event in the future, will the Prime Minister commit to heeding the calls of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for a war powers Act that would allow the House to debate the exact parameters within which a Prime Minister could order military action without prior parliamentary approval, which would be useful to Members on both sides of the House?

The Prime Minister: This is not about saying that Parliament can never have the opportunity to debate these matters. It is about saying that limited and targeted action can be taken on a legal basis that had been accepted by Governments of all types, over a number of years, and that that can be done in a timely manner, allowing for proper planning and also ensuring we are able to have an impact and be effective in our action.

Mr Speaker: I hope the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) is comfortable; I am quite bothered that he might not be.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I am trying to avoid walking between the Prime Minister and her questioner.

Mr Speaker: That is characteristically solicitous of the right hon. and learned Gentleman; we would expect nothing less of him.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Without the support of the Kremlin, it is unlikely that Assad would have been in a position to carry out this and many other atrocities on his own people, but according to a leaked EU report last week, Russia is using its gas supplies to the EU to further its foreign policy ambitions. Does the Prime Minister agree that every nation should seek to reduce its reliance on Russian oil and gas supplies?

The Prime Minister: Everybody should think very carefully about the role that Russia is playing in a number of ways—not just in Syria, but in its activities across Europe and elsewhere—through destabilising activities, propaganda, cyber-attacks and the like.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister’s action and I am sure that the decision weighs heavily on her shoulders. Does she accept that her Government still have a job to do to convince millions of people in this country that they can show the same resolve and commitment to the search for an end to this conflict that she has been able to show over the way she has dealt with this matter?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that, seven and more years on, we have not been able to find a resolution to this conflict. We retain our determination to do so, but it is not just about the UK’s determination; it is about the determination of a whole variety of parties, including the Syrian regime and its backers.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I totally and utterly support my right hon. Friend’s actions. It was right that she took her decision because capitulation allows chemical weapons to be used. The idea that we must come to Parliament and ask first—especially coming from the Leader of the Opposition, who once said that the Falklands conflict was a Tory plot to enrich our business friends—is simply ridiculous. On not taking action—as in 2013, when there was a clear chronological link to the actions that President Putin later took in Crimea and east Ukraine that led to the deaths of tens of thousands more people—does my right hon. Friend agree that inaction has its consequences?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that inaction has its consequences. If people take a particular action such as using chemical weapons but see that there is no reaction or response to that, they assume it is possible to carry on using chemical weapons. It is important that we as an international community have said that we do not want to restore the international norm against the use of chemical weapons. We have acted in this way to give that clear message about degrading such a capability in order to alleviate future humanitarian suffering.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): That the butcher Assad and his Russian backers hold the lives of the Syrian people cheap is evidenced by the use of not only chemical weapons, but other weapons of war, siege and barrel bombs. Does the Prime Minister agree that, whatever happened this weekend, the hideous Syrian civil war is not “mission accomplished”? Does she agree that we urgently need to do more to raise the costs of those Syrian lives by taking far tougher action in respect of sanctions and restrictions on the activities of Russian state banks?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we need to put every effort into finding ways to ensure that the parties come round the table and that we see a political solution in Syria. That is the way to ensure the security and stability of the country such that people can return and get on with their lives in peace.
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): One of the darkest stains on the international community’s conscience was the inaction by the EU and the United Nations in preventing the massacre of Muslim men in Srebrenica. International humanitarian and military action was right then. It was right in Bosnia and it is right now to prevent the massacre of innocent people in Syria. We have a moral duty to act.

The Prime Minister: I agree with what my hon. Friend has said.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I for one will not be congratulating the Prime Minister on the action taken this weekend. The reason why I say that is that only one day before the airstrikes on Homs and Damascus, the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, told Congress that the US did not have any hard evidence concerning the chemical weapons attacks, only social media indicators. Can the Prime Minister tell us whether more evidence emerged in the space of those 24 hours, or did she take her action on the basis of social media indicators?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady looks at my statement, in which I set out what led to our assessment in relation to the Syrian regime’s actions.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Having seen the sickening photographs of suffering children who have been poisoned by their own regime, I am in no doubt whatever that the Prime Minister took the right action. Does she agree that that is one of the reasons why so many global leaders of different political persuasions have backed the humanitarian action that she took?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had support from around the world—from Europe and elsewhere—and from people of all political persuasions who saw the humanitarian suffering, and the need to act to alleviate it and prevent it in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her courageous decision—well done! Last weekend, sources of chemical substances were destroyed. Should another chemical attack take place, can the Prime Minister assure the House that the apparatus of war—helicopters and aeroplanes—will be destroyed next time?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, when we took this action, we looked carefully at targeting it so that it would have what we believed to be the necessary impact on the capability of the Syrian regime in relation to chemical weapons. It was a limited attack, and its intent was to degrade capability and deter future use.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): In my previous role, I was security cleared and briefed to the highest level; as an MP, I am acutely conscious that I am not so well informed. While it is right that the Prime Minister comes to the House to explain these matters to us and to listen to sensible voices from across the Chamber, will she assure me that in future she will take action where necessary in an emergency to protect humanity?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that the Government must have the ability to act in an emergency, where it is necessary to do so in order to alleviate human suffering, as was set out in the ministerial statement in 2016.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will want to congratulate the armed forces on their forensic and brilliant intelligence gathering on the location of those chemical weapons dumps, but can the Prime Minister now give us an assessment of Assad’s remaining stockpile and capabilities after this strike? Families in Syria will not be able to sleep easily in their beds if they know that they could still die at night, choking with their children in their arms.

The Prime Minister: The action was targeted very carefully on chemical weapons capabilities. It was designed to degrade those capabilities and also to deter the willingness of the regime to use those chemical weapons and to give a message to others about the resolve of the international community to return to a situation in which it is accepted that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): In contrast to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), I should like to say that taking action to prevent the gassing of men, women and children will always be done in my name. Does the way in which the Russians and the Syrians are now attempting to cover up their crimes in Syria not speak volumes about what has occurred and the wilful naivety of those who attempt to deny it?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have set out, attempts are being made to ensure that it is impossible to collect evidence on the ground about what has happened. That speaks volumes about what has been done by the Syrian regime and the position taken by Russia.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Our response to the atrocity of a chemical weapons attack must be measured and made in the interests of the Syrian people, not just to reassure ourselves that we have taken action. This year, the UN has received only 5% of the $3.5 billion that it needs to assist the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people, so will the Prime Minister now increase the aid that we send to help to alleviate the suffering on the ground?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are the second biggest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees. We will be working with others at the conference that is taking place in Brussels towards the end of this month to ensure that people step up and provide the support that is needed.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Permanent membership of the Security Council is a privilege, but it is one that comes with huge responsibilities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in acting as it has done over this whole issue by blocking peaceful diplomatic solutions and defending the actions of Bashar al-Assad at every stage, the Russian Federation is not only shirking those responsibilities but complicit in the continued horrendous suffering of the Syrian people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Russia has the ability within the Security Council, and also in its relationship with the Syrian regime, to stop the use of chemical weapons, but it has not done so.
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): This is a matter of concern across the country, and I want to thank my constituents who have written to me about this issue to reflect their real and urgent concern that we will not see an end to the Syrian conflict without a diplomatic and political solution for the long term. I am concerned that this does not seem to be happening with the same urgency as military action in a humanitarian emergency. Can the Prime Minister confirm that there will be redoubling of diplomatic efforts and other non-military muscle, that any further military action will be subject to a debate and vote in this House, and that there has been no discussion of any extension of the role of our armed forces as a result of this decision that has not yet been brought to the House?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I recognise that, in relation to the wider Syrian conflict, we need to ensure that we press ahead with every effort possible to bring that conflict to an end, but this is not just about the position that the United Kingdom has taken. There are other parties that need to be willing to come to the table and to develop that political solution for the future of Syria, not least the Syrian regime and its backers.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is frankly astonishing that over the past week the Leader of the Opposition has spent more time and effort attacking us than attacking President Assad? Does she also agree that it is therefore hardly surprising that some people question whose side he is on—thiers or ours?

The Prime Minister: When the decision to act was taken and when the planning was put into place, we were careful, and one of the issues that we considered was about ensuring that we reduced the risk of escalation. The way in which the strikes were undertaken and the action that we took were about minimising not only civilian casualties, but the risk of escalation.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my hope that the events of Saturday and subsequently have sent a clear message to Mr Putin and, indeed, to President Assad that the so-called protective arm that Putin believes he has put around the shoulders of Assad and Syria, effectively making them inviolate and untouchable, is not true? When small children gurgle their last soaked in chlorine and when our values and international law are undermined by the Putin-Assad axis, we will not stand by; we will always be active.

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we have sent a clear message to the Syrian regime, to Russia and to the Syrian regime’s backers that we will not stand by when we see chemical weapons being used. We have taken action, and we will now follow that up with diplomatic and political action, but we are clear about our resolve to ensure that we return to the international norm of prohibition of the use of chemical weapons.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It adds nothing to our debates if people suggest that Members on either side of the Chamber are not determined to see chemical weapons eradicated. They may will different means, but everyone is equally determined. With that in mind, I believe that Bashar al-Assad should be pursued for all his days until he is arraigned before a court to answer for the crime of gassing his own people. And to either imply or say, “Hear, hear”—only for someone effectively to attack someone else’s motives a few minutes later. I say to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that that is a technique to be used very sparingly, if at all. We are democrats in this place, and we attack each other’s political positions but we should not impugn each other’s integrity—

Gareth Johnson rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no! No response is required from the hon. Gentleman. I have said what the position is, and I suggest that we leave it there.

The Prime Minister: Like me, I am sure that my hon. Friend welcomes the many statements of support that have come from the Labour Benches, as well as from our Benches. Many in the Labour party recognise that it has a long, fine and proud tradition of being willing to take action not only in our national interest, but to ensure the alleviation of humanitarian suffering in the world.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Many of my constituents have contacted me with their fears about the potential escalation of conflict with Russia and to say that we might be sleepwalking towards it. They are also worried that their voices were not heard before the Prime Minister launched this attack, because as their MP I was unable to debate the issue. Will the Prime Minister please reassure the House that the Government have a plan for the de-escalation of the conflict now that airstrikes have taken place and that her decision to act without a parliamentary vote has not set a precedent for the future?

The Prime Minister: When the decision to act was taken and when the planning was put into place, we were careful, and one of the issues that we considered was about ensuring that we reduced the risk of escalation. The way in which the strikes were undertaken and the action that we took were about minimising not only civilian casualties, but the risk of escalation.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In September 2013, the OPCW secured an agreement with Syria, Russia and the United States to dispose of
such weapons, starting in the middle of 2014, but we are now in 2018 and have seen atrocities committed time and again. Does the Prime Minister agree that the judgment of the Leader of the Opposition is flawed, because the decision was legal and we carried it out on a legal basis?

The Prime Minister: I reiterated the legal basis in my statement this afternoon, and that legal basis has been used by Governments of all colours to support action when it has been considered necessary.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister prayed in aid the written ministerial statement from 2016 by the previous Defence Secretary. I have read it carefully, and the problem is that it re-emphasises the Government’s support for the convention and mentions airstrikes carried out in 2013, 2014 and 2015 that were not materially different from the action taken just this weekend. Is it not the case that the Prime Minister could and should have used the convention and come before the House before taking that action?

The Prime Minister: I will repeat what I said previously. One element of that written ministerial statement states: “In observing the Convention, we must ensure that the ability of our Armed Forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised.”

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Prime Minister was absolutely right to take action with her allies, and it is the sort of action that should have been taken five years ago when this House rather disastrously decided not to act against the Assad regime. Does the Prime Minister agree that not acting now would have been a complete abdication of our moral responsibility both as a nation and as a member of the international community?

The Prime Minister: I agree. Failure to act would have sent a message that chemical weapons can be used with impunity, and we must not allow that message to go out. We must show that the international community is resolved to ensure that chemical weapons are not used.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Her Majesty’s armed forces enjoy the respect and admiration of Members right across the House, so the Prime Minister is wrong to suggest that her critics are somehow insulting our armed forces; we are all proud of them regardless of her decisions.

As for the legal basis for the decision—the alleviation of humanitarian suffering—the vast majority of Syrians murdered by Assad have been killed with conventional weapons. Is the Prime Minister only alleviating the suffering of those who are killed with chemical weapons, or does she consider there to be a legal basis for alleviating the suffering of those killed by conventional weapons, too?

The Prime Minister: Resolution of the wider conflict in Syria needs to come through a political solution that ensures the security and stability of Syria’s future peace, and that is where we will put our diplomatic and political efforts, which is what we have done in the past and will continue to do.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): There should be no acceptance of and no place in this world for the use of chemical weapons. However, there seems to have been worrying increase in tolerance of their use. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is vital that we send a clear collective message that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that that is an important message for us to send. Our action with the US and France has sent that message, and it is an important message for this House to send, too.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Given what the Prime Minister said about the careful targeting of the strikes, will she tell us what sites involved in the manufacture and stockpiling of chemical weapons had to be ruled out from the scope of the strikes due to their location and proximity to civilians, what the risk of those sites continues to be and what the anticipated consequences of any future attack on them might be?

The Prime Minister: We obviously looked at where we felt it was possible to have a clear impact on degrading the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime, and that is what we did.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the Russian veto on the Security Council not just on investigations in Syria, but on referring Syrian matters to the International Criminal Court, only the use of force is left to deter the usage of chemical weapons. What message would we send to despots around the world if we just sat down, wrung our hands and did absolutely nothing?

The Prime Minister: I fear that the message those despots would have taken is that they could use chemical weapons with impunity, and that is unacceptable. We must ensure that the use of such weapons is stopped.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): With two brothers having served, past and present, as officers in the British Army, I of course commend the bravery of our armed forces personnel.

No evidenced chemical attack can go by without consequences, but when our national security was not at immediate risk and when the Prime Minister had time to consult her Cabinet, why did she not recall Parliament so that my constituents could have had their say, as I am convinced they would have done had last week been a sitting week?

The Prime Minister: I have already set out the basis on which we took the decision: the need for timeliness and an opportunity for proper planning to ensure that we were able to act in a way that would be effective.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will the Prime Minister do me the service of responding to some concerns raised by my constituents over the weekend drawing a comparison with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan by explaining to them precisely what the UK action was—how many missiles has the UK launched in Syria this weekend—and by explaining to them why that comparison is without foundation?
The Prime Minister: I am happy to do that. Eight Storm Shadow missiles were launched from our RAF jets, and of course more missiles were launched by the French and Americans together. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that the key issue for his constituents is that this was a targeted and limited action taken in relation to the use of chemical weapons. There has been for nearly a century an acceptance in the international community that chemical weapons should not be used. We have seen the Assad regime use them on a number of occasions, and it was important that we gave the very clear message that we will not accept their use and that we will not stand by and see these weapons being used.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As my party’s defence spokesman, I commend what the Prime Minister has said thus far. When she is asked why she has not built that cohesive agreement at the UN, would it be useful to reflect that in 2013, when the UN Security Council did pass a resolution, articles 1 and 21 specifically envisaged and outlined coercive action to secure adherence to the protocol?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information and for the support he has shown for the action.

Fiona Bruce ( Congleton ) ( Con ): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, which I fully support, and for the leadership—indeed, statesmanship—she has shown in the measured, appropriate and clearly reasoned action she has taken in this grave matter and in the manner in which she has taken it.

The Prime Minister has spoken today of the need for a wider diplomatic effort to strengthen the global understanding that chemical weapons should never be used. To ensure those diplomatic efforts are most effective, will she confirm that not only the UK as a country but she personally, as Prime Minister, will continue to take a similarly strong and engaged global lead?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. This Government and the United Kingdom have a role to play in ensuring that we continue to uphold the international rules-based order both in this and in a number of other areas.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) ( Lab ): The Prime Minister has been categorical in explaining that the need to take action was based on principle. As I was not here in April 2017, may I simply ask why the same action was not taken then?

The Prime Minister: I assume that the hon. Gentleman is referring to Khan Shaykhun. The United States of America did take action in relation to Khan Shaykhun, and we supported that action. A wider action was undertaken this time to degrade the chemical weapons capability, and it is right that a wider international community took part in it.

Alan Mak ( Havant ) ( Con ): Britain hosted the London conference in 2016, bringing together international donors and humanitarian supporters to help civilians in Syria. Will my right hon. Friend commit to showing British leadership in this area in the years ahead?

The Prime Minister: There is to be a Brussels conference later this month that will build on the work done at the London conference, and we will continue to put our efforts into ensuring that that humanitarian support is available.

Anna Turley ( Redcar ) ( Lab /Co-op ): I understand fully the purpose of the action that has been taken this weekend, and I understand that it was both targeted and limited to degrade chemical weapons and to reinforce the international norm that we do not use chemical weapons. I support the Prime Minister in the action she has taken, but the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria are a result of bombs, barrel bombs, torture, starvation and other means, not chemical weapons. If this is not about intervening in civil war or about regime change, as the Prime Minister has said, what is the Government’s wider strategy to save Syrian lives? If Assad is still in power in a year’s time and killing and maiming with impunity, what will that mean for “mission accomplished”?

The Prime Minister: It is, of course, through the diplomatic and political process that the final resolution of the Syrian conflict can be brought about. That is why we will continue to support the United Nations efforts and the Geneva process, but it needs all parties to be willing to accept the need for bringing about a solution and for ensuring that we can see a peaceful Syria to which displaced people can return and in which the Syrian people can live in peace and security for the future.

Nigel Huddleston ( Mid Worcestershire ) ( Con ): Does the Prime Minister agree that the obvious and inevitable consequence of seeking prior parliamentary approval for airstrikes would have been to give the Syrian regime a heads-up on our plans? A debate on what, where, how and when the attacks would take place would have given the regime the opportunity to move the very weapons that we were seeking to destroy.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is important to plan, to ensure that we are able to do these strikes in a timely and effective fashion. From one or two of the questions that I have been asked this afternoon, it seems that some Members do not realise the importance of keeping certain operational information not public, to protect our servicemen and to ensure that we are effective.

Peter Grant ( Glenrothes ) ( SNP ): The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that she wants to deter dictators who may be minded to use chemical weapons against their own people or against anyone else. Does she also agree that we need to deter dictators who commit other heinous war crimes against civilians, including the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia that currently stands accused of around 150 separate war crimes against innocent civilians in Yemen? Does she not see the slightest contradiction between the severe action she has taken in Syria and her willingness to sell another £2 billion-worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia and to invite the Saudis to investigate themselves, rather than submitting them to an international court of inquiry?

The Prime Minister: What we are talking about in relation to what has happened in Syria is the use of chemical weapons. Chemical weapons are prohibited—they
are illegal—yet we see a Syrian regime that has continued to use those chemical weapons over a number of years.

It is important that the international community has come together and said that we will not accept this use of chemical weapons. We must return to a situation in which people accept that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited. We have taken this position to alleviate the humanitarian suffering that comes from the use of chemical weapons, and we continue to support the work that will be necessary to ensure the continued prohibition of the use of these weapons.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her calm and well-calibrated response to this situation. Some Opposition Members have questioned the decision to proceed without a vote. Does she agree there are circumstances in which we need to act without a prior vote? If the speed of military or diplomatic movements on the ground make it impossible, if the disclosure of intelligence to the House would make it impossible for the House to make a decision, or if such disclosure would give adversaries a sense of the scope, scale and timing of what is going to happen—if one or more of those conditions applies, it is neither reasonable nor necessary to seek the House’s consent first.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks appropriately about the need to ensure, when one is looking at taking action, that that action can be effective, that nothing is done that reduces the effectiveness of that action, that the action is taken on the basis of intelligence—not all intelligence is able to be made available to everyone—and that we respect and recognise the need to maintain the security and safety of our armed forces personnel.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): When last week did the Prime Minister decide not to recall Parliament? Did she discuss that with the Cabinet on Thursday?

The Prime Minister: Of course we looked at the timetable for the action we were going to take. The Cabinet considered a number of matters when it met, and it was fully informed of all aspects of this decision.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): When this country was subjected to a chemical attack just a month ago, we called on the support of our allies, and they supported us with strength and speed. They have now asked us for that same support. How credible would we look to the international community, and to those same allies, if we turned an ideological cold shoulder on them when an attack was made on a much greater scale against the innocent civilian population of Syria?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend; it is right to remember, when we talk about the use of chemical weapons, that they have been used at scale in Syria, but of course we have seen one—a nerve agent—used on the streets of the UK. It is imperative that we give a message that these weapons cannot and must not be used.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): A decision of this magnitude required a parliamentary debate and vote. Will the Prime Minister commit to respecting that convention in the future?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the position that has been taken in relation to that convention, which is to accept that there are circumstances in which it is necessary for Government to be able to act without coming to Parliament first, but that when Government do so act, they should come to Parliament at the earliest opportunity to explain that action.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The situation in Syria is deeply complex and full of uncertainties, with perhaps the only certainty being the tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children who have been butchered and killed. Further bombs will result in further death, and we need to pursue diplomacy and the political solution. Will the Prime Minister therefore inform the House what actions she has recently taken to pursue all political channels?

The Prime Minister: The strikes that took place were about degrading the chemical weapons capability such that we can alleviate and prevent further humanitarian suffering. Of course it is right that we need diplomatic effort to get a political solution to what is happening in Syria, and we will continue to push on that diplomatic effort, as we do with a variety of international partners. We will continue to support the UN intervention and the Geneva process.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister has described this action as a targeted strike that does not increase tensions in the region. If that is the case, can she confirm that she has ruled out the possibility of any retaliation from Russia?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of questions, when we were looking at this action, one of the issues we took into account was the need to ensure that we minimised the risk of escalation—we did that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I value the aid we give to the region and the urge that says aid is better provided to refugees in the region, but parts of that region are full to capacity. One in four of the population of Lebanon is now a Syrian refugee, and Lebanon is struggling. Is it not now time for the Prime Minister urgently to review, at next week’s Brussels conference, as many different options to help refugees, both in and out of the region, as we can?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for what the hon. Lady says about valuing the support we are showing to refugees. It is important that we have been providing support in those countries of the region that have accepted significant numbers of refugees from Syria. She refers to Lebanon, but of course Turkey and Jordan have also accepted significant numbers. So we are addressing this across a number of fronts, both providing that support in the region and bringing some refugees here to the UK, and encouraging other countries to ensure that they step up to provide that support as well. As she says, we value the fact that we are the second biggest bilateral donor, and we want to encourage others also to step up in the support they are giving.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Obviously, this is the first major military action since the publication of the Chilcot report, which recommended the need for
public support and public understanding, and for sound legal advice. Given that Parliament was not recalled and legal advice was published after the fact, is it the Government’s position that they reject those Chilcot recommendations?

The Prime Minister: The Government were clear in their response to the Chilcot recommendations and I suggest to the hon. Gentleman looks at the response we provided.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): For this action alone, eight Storm Shadow missiles cost £6.32 million. Deploying an RAF Tornado GR4 reportedly costs £35,000 per plane per hour. How much money is the Prime Minister willing to invest in winning the peace in Syria and rebuilding?

The Prime Minister: We have also provided nearly £2.5 billion of humanitarian support for the refugees from Syria. I say to the hon. Lady that we acted because the Syrian regime was using chemical weapons and had done so on a number of occasions, and it is important that we alleviate future humanitarian suffering by degrading its capability to do that.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Except for the target list, there was very little in the Prime Minister’s statement that could not have been said to Parliament and to the public last week. In reviewing what has happened in the past week, will she and her advisers review whether she could have been clearer about the strategy, objectives and legality ahead of action, as that could have taken more of the public with her? I fear that those actions and decisions not to reveal have produced the opposite effect with the public.

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question about the timetable for the decision, and the fact that that was taken and Parliament did not have an opportunity to discuss it in advance. That is why I have come here at the first possible opportunity, to enable everybody to question me on that and to set out clearly in my statement the basis on which we took the action.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Although I readily acknowledge that the Democratic Unionist party is the largest party representing people in Northern Ireland, the 10 DUP Members do not speak for everyone in Northern Ireland and they certainly do not speak for me. So may I reflect to the Prime Minister, as graciously and gently as I can, that many, many people in Northern Ireland, including me, are bitterly disappointed that she is having an issue which the 10 DUP Members do not speak for everyone in Northern Ireland, but for the entire country.

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said in response to others, that that issue of the risk of escalation, which I recognise she and others have identified, was considered when we took the action. The action was taken in a way so as to minimise the risk of escalation; this was targeted and limited, and it was about degrading the capability of the Syrian regime in relation to its chemical weapons. I continue to believe it is important that we give a very clear message that we will not accept the use of chemical weapons.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): All right-thinking Members of this House will utterly abhor the atrocious use of chemical weapons against the civilian population of Syria, which constitutes a gratuitous war crime upon that population. But the Prime Minister said there was an immediate need to act—contravening the normal practice of consulting Parliament prior to any military action overseas—due to the immediate need to alleviate further humanitarian disasters in Syria. Was that based on a specific intelligence report that there was an imminent risk of further chemical weapons attacks in Syria? Does she accept that the key way of preventing further attacks in the future is by achieving a no-fly and no-bombing zone, internationally policed by the United Nations in Syria? That would be a way of denying the Syrian air force access to the delivery of these weapons.

The Prime Minister: As I laid out in my statement, there has been clear evidence of a continuing use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria. We saw what had happened in Douma. We gave time to make the appropriate assessments of what had happened in Douma and to make the proper planning for strikes. We took those strikes in a timely fashion to ensure that they were effective and had an impact on the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian regime. That was the basis on which we took the decision we took. It was clear from the behaviour we have seen from the Syrian regime that it would be prepared to continue to use chemical weapons, with the danger to civilians that we had already seen in Douma and elsewhere, and we were seeking to prevent humanitarian suffering for the future. That was the basis on which we took that action.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we move on to the next business, I would like to thank the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Scottish National party and all 140 Back-Bench Members who have questioned the Prime Minister over the past three hours.
Business of the House

7.29 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, I wish to make a short statement about this week’s business.

Monday 16 April—The House awaits your decision on the application for an emergency debate under Standing Order No. 24, Mr Speaker. Notwithstanding your decision, the House will no longer proceed with today’s announced business.

Tuesday 17 April—General debate on anti-Semitism, followed by a debate on a motion on redress for victims of banking misconduct and the Financial Conduct Authority.

Wednesday 18 April—Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords], followed by a general debate on industrial strategy.

Thursday 19 April—Backbench Business Committee debates on surgical mesh and on cancer treatment.

I shall make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for early sight of it. It is disappointing that the Government have not bowed to the inevitable pressure to hold a debate on the action in Syria in Government time. Earlier, the Prime Minister said that she wanted to be held accountable, but the Government seem to rely on the outcome of an application under Standing Order No. 24 to debate this important issue.

The Prime Minister was right when she said that there is no graver decision than to commit our forces to combat. A debate is not about interfering with operational matters, which are left to our brilliant armed forces and defence capabilities, who defend this country every minute of every day, for which we thank them. A statement, although welcome, allows only short answers and questions, as we have just seen—I thank you, Mr Speaker, for sitting through the questions from 140 Members. A debate is about Parliament and Members from all parties having the views of the country, through our constituents and as elected Members, heard and responded to in full. A debate in Government time would have respected conventions, democracy and Parliament.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I join the hon. Lady in thanking our armed forces for the superb work that they did. I point out to her that in fact the Prime Minister did seek an urgent debate today, but that was not to be granted. I also point out that the Prime Minister just answered questions for three and a quarter hours. I hope that the hon. Lady feels that that was something of a useful contribution to the parliamentary debate.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Many important issues that came out of today’s exchanges will continue to cause interest and concern for Members of Parliament. Will the Leader of the House make sure that in the months ahead the Backbench Business Committee has plenty of days to allocate, to ensure that all Members of Parliament can continue to raise their concerns on the Floor of the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Procedure Committee is absolutely right that it is vital that all Members get the chance to debate a wide range of subjects. There is a huge number of interests across this place, of which tomorrow’s debates on anti-Semitism and the Royal Bank of Scotland redress scheme are two examples. I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work carefully with the other business managers to ensure that there is always plenty of time for Back-Bench debates.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your steadfastness and mettle in sitting through those few hours of the Syria statement. I am glad that the Leader of the House sort of knows what is happening with the business this week, because the timetabling of business has been nothing other than the usual shambles and chaos that we see from this Government. They were going to apply for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 themselves, but that was taken away, and apparently we are going to have a debate under Standing Order No. 24 again tomorrow.

We need the Leader of the House to come to the House to say that we are going to get a full debate tomorrow, with an amendable motion, and that directly elected Members of Parliament will get the opportunity to vote on behalf of our constituents, who expect nothing else. We have been denied a say before the Government took us into military action; they should now be doing everything possible to ensure that we can reflect our constituents’ views on such an important issue.

Andrea Leadsom: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that the decision to allow or not to allow an urgent debate under Standing Order No. 24 is a decision for Mr Speaker. The decision as to which application, if any, Mr Speaker chose to take was for him. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister has made it clear that she is always willing to come to the House. She has just been on her feet for three and a quarter hours, answering questions from across the House. She fully intends to be, and has shown her commitment to being, accountable for the decision that was taken.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I very much welcome the Leader of the House’s statement, but I welcome even more her reference to the three and a quarter hours that we have just been through. Does she agree that in the course of that extraordinary sequence, we not only had the opportunity to hear my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) make important points about international law and many other Government and Opposition Members make important contributions, but were able to witness a Prime Minister who showed, in the moderation, good sense and compelling arguments that she put forward, the capacity to lead this country at a time when we need such a leader?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my right hon. Friend is exactly right. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) made some important points about the law, and there were many good contributions from throughout the House. I was delighted to see that a good number of Opposition Members support the Prime Minister’s decision to protect our armed forces and ensure operational success while taking moderate steps to make sure that chemical weapons cannot be used with impunity.
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, pay tribute to the Prime Minister’s dedication this afternoon—it was a remarkable performance—but, with respect, she did not answer all the questions put to her. In particular, I asked her why she was not following the precedent set by David Cameron in 2011 in respect of the intervention in Libya by granting the House a vote on an amendable motion. That is surely the precedent that should be followed. Why are the Government so resistant to it?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will recall that the Prime Minister alluded to the 2016 written ministerial statement that set out the position in terms of the need to take urgent action for humanitarian relief. He might also be aware that the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, has supported the action taken by the Prime Minister for the reasons given.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. One of the accidental and perhaps injurious by-products of the postponement today of the Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords] is that the House will not have the opportunity to hear the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) expatiate on the matter, to which I know that he enthusiastically looked forward. Nevertheless, we can have a mini version of his oratory now.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): That will be a cause of grave disappointment to many Members in all parts of the House. Nevertheless, also displaced from today’s business was an important debate on housing. Members from all parties have expressed strong views about homelessness, home ownership and the Government’s consultation. The Leader of the House has announced that we are going to consider the laser Bill to which you referred, Mr Speaker, but she did not mention that debate on housing. Can she tell the House that that general debate on housing will indeed take place, so that we can explore the matter in full and to the degree it deserves?

Andrea Leadsom: Like you, no doubt, Mr Speaker, I was very much looking forward to hearing my right hon. Friend’s contributions to that debate. It is certainly a top domestic priority for the Government to improve the plight of those who need their own home and, of course, to alleviate homelessness. Those are incredibly important issues, so we will certainly reschedule that debate in Government time as soon as we can.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I remind the Leader of the House that the Prime Minister does not need to brief the media or indeed ask Mr Speaker for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 to have a matter debated in the House. The Government control the House’s timetable, so why on earth were they trying to use that procedure to do something that they have the power to do anyway?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said previously, the Prime Minister requested an urgent debate under the Standing Order No. 24 procedure, and it was not granted.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has explained why Parliament was not recalled. Would it not be a good idea to have a full debate on a voteable motion about Syria tomorrow, so that the House can show its support for the Prime Minister’s view? I think the House would vote overwhelmingly in favour. Will the Leader of the House consider coming back later to make another business statement to announce a full debate for tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I would be delighted to change the business of the House every few minutes, but the patience of the Chamber might wear a bit thin. My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and without giving too much away, Mr Speaker, you will be getting another application for a Standing Order No. 24 debate, which may have a bearing on tomorrow’s business.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady agree that, although coming to this House and answering questions for three and a quarter hours is commendable, it is actually the Prime Minister’s job in a moment such as this, and that the job of this House is to debate important matters, and this is a very, very important matter? Answering a series of questions is not the same as having a full, frank and detailed debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very fond of the hon. Lady, but that was quite an ungenerous response to a three-and-a-quarter-hour marathon. Let us be clear: in a statement, there is a personal reply to every single question, which does not happen in a debate, so that was actually commendable of the Prime Minister.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I listened carefully to what the Leader of the House said. The Prime Minister set out in her statement, and in her replies to the questions from Members, the very clear reasons why she did not recall Parliament last week for a debate and a vote before the decision for military action was taken. I accept her decisions for doing so, but I do think that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has a point when he says that the precedent set in 2011 for a statement by the Prime Minister followed by a debate is a good one. Having listened to every question in today’s statement, my judgment is that a full day’s debate tomorrow, opened by the Prime Minister and followed by the Leader of the Opposition, would lead to a very clear judgment by this House that would strengthen, not weaken, the Government’s position.

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I feel like I am on shaky ground here, because as you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the Government did offer a debate for tomorrow, but I think that you already had applications for Standing Order No. 24 debates for tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that the Leader of the House is trying to respond to the question that she has been asked, but it is extremely important that the procedural position is understood.

First, it is a fact that applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24 are applications in the first instance to me and then to the House. I have invested in me by the House the power to grant the right for the application to be made, and if support exists in the House, such a debate, with my approval, can go ahead.
Secondly, however, the Government control the Order Paper for future days. It is therefore open to the Government to table a motion—a substantive motion or a take-note motion and if a substantive motion, an amendable motion—on any matter that they choose.

I know that the Leader of the House, whom I have known for a long time, would not seek to misrepresent the position—she was just trying honestly to answer the question of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)—but it is important to be clear that I am not an obstacle to an amendable Government motion. If the Government had wanted to table such a motion, they could have done so. If they had told me that they were going to do so, that would have been fine, but they did no such thing. I am simply discharging my obligations to allow SO24 applications and to adjudicate on them. The waters must not be muddied.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If the Government wanted to have a debate earlier today and had pursued an SO24 application in order to secure it, why do they not want a debate now, and why do they not table a motion now in order to have a debate tomorrow? Is it within their power. Why should they be using powers that are available for Back Benchers to call on the Government when they have the power to do so themselves?

Andrea Leadsom: We are now awaiting an SO24 emergency debate on the subject of Syria.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Mr Speaker, you probably were not aware of my interest in the Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill until now. We are now due to have it on Wednesday, but on Wednesday we should have been considering the Committee and remaining stages of that Bill. Can my right hon. Friend shed some light on when that might now take place?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right: it is a very important Bill that will help ensure the safety of vehicles from laser misuse, and we will schedule it as soon as we can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): No parliamentarian worth their salt should accept this flannel from those on the Government Front Bench. Will the Leader of the House outline from that Dispatch Box why she will not leave this Chamber after this statement and table an amendable motion for the House to debate tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I have made it very clear that the Prime Minister has just made a statement and taken questions for three and a quarter hours. We are awaiting an SO24 emergency debate. The Prime Minister applied for an urgent debate for today. We looked at having a debate tomorrow, but we understand that there will be another SO24 application heard later for a further debate tomorrow, so we have decided to leave the business unchanged. I hope that that is clear.

Mr Speaker: As the Clerk has just advised me, my judgment on the SO No. 24 debate—I know this because we discussed it earlier—could have been impacted by a Government decision to table a motion for a substantive debate tomorrow. I am sorry but I cannot overstate the importance of accuracy and correctness in these matters.

My decision about an SO No. 24 application is independent of, and can be separable and distinguishable from, a Government decision to table a substantive motion. It is entirely open to the Government to do that if they so wish. I was pleased to see the Father of the House nodding from a sedentary position when I was making that point. I do have the advantage, procedurally, of being correct.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Given what the Prime Minister just said about the urgency of taking action on Saturday and the fact that she did want to listen and respond to the House, the business statement that we have just heard is utterly extraordinary and flies in the face of everything we heard during the Prime Minister’s statement. My constituents expect me to tell them how I would have responded to this matter, and it is a matter of record that may last for many years in the future.

I support entirely the SO24 application of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), but it is not the same as an amendable motion, in Government time, where we as Members of Parliament are asked to justify to our constituents our view on this matter. The response of the Leader of the House is utterly unsatisfactory and demeans Parliament. She should go away and come back with a much better response.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already said, the Prime Minister has just answered questions for three and a quarter hours. She gave individual responses to individual questions, which is a much more detailed response than in a general debate. We are now looking forward to the urgent debate put forward by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), and that is what we are all waiting for.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I have been asking myself for some days why the Government would not table a substantive motion in this House and put the matter to a vote. I cannot rid myself of the unworthy suspicion that there may have been some doubts as to whether we would get a majority for it, and whether we might repeat the 2013 experience.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, having listened to three and a half hours of questions—a performance by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister of outstanding endurance and assurance—it is quite obvious that there is a large majority in this House in favour of the action that the Government have taken? Will the Leader of the House discuss the matter further with colleagues and lay any fears on one side? We would be in a stronger position if the House gave a big majority for the action.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the Father of the House for his advice, and I will, of course, take it away.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): After the farcical and contemptuous folly of not recalling Parliament last week and given what Mr Speaker has just said, why does the Leader of the House not have the courage to come forward with an amendable motion for us all to debate and vote on tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: I am in danger of repeating myself. We have just had a three-and-a-quarter-hour statement from the Prime Minister, with individual replies to
individual detailed questions. We are now looking forward to a three-hour debate under Standing Order No. 24, with the prospect of a further such debate tomorrow.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Leader of the House has said that she is a champion for the will of Parliament. On this gravest of grave issues, regarding conflict, does she agree that we should test the will of this House by having a vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there can always be a Division when the House does not agree on two different sides of an argument. We are now looking forward to an urgent debate on the question of Syria, the application for which will be made momentarily by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Leader of the House quite often tells us that Parliament is taking back control, so hon. Members can imagine my surprise when I sat in front of my TV set on Saturday and watched the Prime Minister in a wood-panelled room taking questions from journalists, rather than from Members of this House. But there is a wider point about the recall of Parliament. People have been calling regularly for the recall of Parliament over the past week, which only the Government can currently do. If the Leader of the House is serious about Parliament taking back control, will she support changes to the Standing Orders that would allow Members of the House—not just the Government—to recall Parliament and at least allow us to take back control?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have always made clear, I will always listen to sensible proposals about changes to procedure with recommendations from the Procedure Committee. It is right that we should take such issues seriously. The hon. Gentleman will, however, be aware of all the arguments that the Prime Minister has just made for taking action without recalling Parliament. That decision was entirely legitimate and justified.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House also consider taking away the excellent recommendation from the Father of the House to form a cross-party commission to examine and clarify the role of Parliament vis-à-vis the Executive on the question of deploying British forces in military action overseas?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there have been a number of reviews of the use of the royal prerogative and the way in which Parliament works in relation to Executive decisions about military intervention. The Prime Minister has clearly set out the written ministerial statement in 2016, which is the latest assessment of how we would act in the case of the need for urgent humanitarian relief, and I think that she answered all those questions.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Mr Speaker, you have made it absolutely clear that the Government have the ability to table an amendable motion on this subject. Why do they not do so?

Andrea Leadsom: We have just had a three-and-a-quarter-hour statement from the Prime Minister, with individual questions and responses. We are now looking forward to a further three-hour urgent debate on Syria.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Leader of the House must be heard, as she was answering the question. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked that question and there was a lot of bellowing—it was not chuntering—from a sedentary position from her party colleagues. The Leader of the House must be heard.

Andrea Leadsom: I had finished, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am very happy so to be advised. I am grateful to the Leader of the House.

I shall this evening hear two applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24. First, I shall hear the application from the Leader of the Opposition, who has up to three minutes in which to make his application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24.
Military Action Overseas: Parliamentary Approval

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

7.53 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I rise to propose that this House should debate Parliament’s rights in relation to the approval of military action by British forces overseas. In the light of Friday’s airstrikes on Syria, this House should urgently debate the important matter of the Government’s obligations under parliamentary convention to seek the approval of the House before committing UK forces to premeditated, hostile military action overseas.

The Cabinet manual, published by the Government in 2011, confirms the Government’s acceptance of that convention and guarantees that the Government will “observe that convention except when there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate.”

Two years ago, even while reneging on the Government’s previous commitment to enshrine that convention in law, the then Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), guaranteed in this House that the Government would “keep Parliament informed and...of course seek its approval before deploying British forces in combat roles into a conflict situation.”—[Official Report, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 630.]

Members on all sides are therefore rightly concerned that no such approval was sought by the Government prior to the air strikes against Syrian Government installations, to which the UK was a party last Friday night, alongside the USA and France. Indeed, this House was not only denied a vote, but did not even have the opportunity to question the Government in advance on the legal and evidential basis for their participation in this action, on their new strategy in regard to Syrian intervention, or on why they acted before the conclusion of the ongoing inspection in Douma by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Members will also be concerned that these strikes have been explicitly presented, by the Government and by the United States, as a possible precursor to even stronger intervention against the Syrian regime if that is judged to be necessary. Therefore, the Government’s failure to seek—let alone obtain—parliamentary approval for these air strikes sets a precedent for potential and more dangerous future action, not just in Syria but in other countries where similar situations may arise.

I therefore ask, Mr Speaker, that you allow urgent consideration by this House of the Government’s approach when it comes to the rights of Parliament to debate and approve military action overseas.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24—namely, Parliament’s rights in relation to the approval of military action by British forces overseas. I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Gentleman. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. Gentleman the leave of the House?

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to colleagues for exercising their knee muscles. The right hon. Gentleman has secured the leave of the House. I should inform the House that the debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 17 April, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman’s application.

I said to the House a small number of moments ago that I would be hearing two applications for debates under Standing Order No. 24. I now call Alison McGovern to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.
Syria

7.58 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I rise to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the current situation in Syria and the UK Government’s approach.

The need for this debate first arose last week, during recess. As we know, on Saturday 7 April, two incidents were reported of bombs filled with toxic chemicals being dropped on Douma in Syria. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and I agreed during the recess that, on the House’s return, we would seek an emergency opportunity for the House to discuss the atrocity. The need for such a debate is all the stronger now, given the Government’s action in response. Members will have different views on the Government’s action. However, whatever their view, it is pretty clear that the House ought to have the opportunity to debate the matter.

On the basis of that principle, and no other, I have been pleased to receive support for this SO24 application from the following Members: the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House; my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House; the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell); my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); and a whole host of Back Benchers who hold various different views on the situation in Syria and what the Government’s actions ought to be but none the less agree that we ought to discuss it in this House, whatever the Government’s attitude to process in Parliament. To quote the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield in a previous debate: “In a hung Parliament, political power tends to pass from the Cabinet Room to the Floor of this House.”—[Official Report, 21 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 109.]

As I said, on Saturday 7 April two incidents were reported of bombs filled with toxic chemicals being dropped on Douma. Children suffocated in the street, frothing at the mouth as the chemical became acid in their lungs, and the powerful smell of chlorine was in the air—a vicious and disgusting chemical that tears into pieces the airways of those who breathe it in and the skin of those who touch it. This House, with 19 coats of arms commemorating MPs who died in the first world war, should know better than most about the devastating impact of the use of chemical weapons in war. In the 1920s, Britain was at the forefront of efforts to ban these vile weapons. Our country’s role in containing the devastation they cause is clear.

We have heard the Prime Minister’s statement on the action the Government took over the weekend. However, I remain of the view that what is required is a much wider debate in this House on the UK’s strategy for protecting civilians, including the need for much greater action on refugees than we have so far heard. Syria as a whole must be on the agenda, not just chemical weapons. That is why this debate should proceed urgently.

In the words of Jo Cox, whose coat of arms is on the wall of this Chamber, right behind me, “despite all of the dangers and difficult judgements that lie ahead, burying our head in the sand is not an option. We must face up to this crisis and do all that we can to resolve it.”

Her words, Mr Speaker, still stand.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, to whose application I have listened carefully. Colleagues, I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

Mr Speaker: Very clearly, the hon. Lady does have the leave of the House, and to her debate, colleagues, you will be pleased to know, we will proceed momentarily. That debate will take place today for up to three hours.

Before I invite the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) to move her motion, it might perhaps be helpful if I explain the timing. Standing Orders do not expressly provide that a debate granted under Standing Order No. 24 is exempt from interruption at 10 o’clock on a Monday. They do, however, allow for business delayed as a result of such a debate to have injury time, if necessary beyond the moment of interruption at 10 o’clock. I have taken advice and benefited from the contents of the scholarly cranium of the Clerk of the House. On the strength of that, I am ruling that the debate can continue despite the moment of interruption because I am interpreting the power given to me under subsection (2) of Standing Order No. 24 to determine the length of a debate as embracing the power to permit the debate to continue beyond the moment of interruption. It will therefore continue for up to three hours. We now come to that emergency debate on the current situation in Syria and the UK Government’s approach.
Syria

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

8.3 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the current situation in Syria and the UK Government’s approach.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate.

On the morning of 14 April, British and allied forces conducted strikes on Syrian installations involved in the Assad regime’s illegal use of chemical weapons against its own people. The strike was launched as a response to the Syrian regime’s latest chemical weapons attack on 7 April in Douma, as I mentioned a moment ago, which killed up to 75 people, including young children.

I want to begin by quoting a Syrian, Bilal Shami from Rethink Rebuild Society, which is a Syria-led organisation that I have visited in Manchester. Bilal said:

“The UK’s latest reactionary military response seems to be detached from a wider comprehensive strategy that helps end this devastating seven-year conflict.”

It is that wider strategy that I want the House now to turn to.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making a very powerful case for this debate today. This week I have had several emails from Rethink Rebuild Society, which is based in Manchester, imploring Britain now to redouble its efforts to protect civilians at the heart of its strategy and to make sure that the abhorrent actions of Assad that we saw a few days ago can never reoccur. I just wanted my hon. Friend to know that.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend, and, through her, all those in the Syrian community in Manchester and in the UK beyond for the assistance they have given me in working on Syria.

We know that we cannot continue to allow the erosion of international laws that prohibit the use of chemical weapons. I explained earlier our country’s historical role in containing the use of chemical weapons—and we ought not to forget our own experience. But I do not wish to constrain our discussion today merely to chemical weapons, because, vile though they are, they are not the only means of savage killing that has taken place.

Let me remind the House that the conflict in Syria began when Assad’s forces opened fire on protesters demanding the release of political prisoners. They were not violent anarchists or subversives with questionable ties to foreign Governments, but a 13-year-old boy, his cousin and a dozen of their friends who had sprayed graffiti on a wall calling for Assad to step down. With the Syrian civil war now in its eighth year, the lack of a strategy from our Government beyond hoping that the Assad regime’s illegal use of chemical weapons against its own people. The strike was launched as a response to the Syrian regime’s latest chemical weapons attack on 7 April in Douma, as I mentioned a moment ago, which killed up to 75 people, including young children.

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Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend will know that a no-bombing zone was precisely one of the policies that Jo campaigned for when she was in this House.

This is why I will use my time today discussing what I feel we need to consider in beginning a new road map for Syria here in the UK. We need to start from a simple question: what can be done to save human life not on the basis of our simple short-term interests, but on the basis of the humanitarian principle? I know that some in the House will be sceptical. They will say, “We’ve seen this all before.” They will say that my humanitarian principle is just words. Well, in some ways they are right, because we should always be judged by our actions and not just our words.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): After seeing the horrific pictures of suffering children, one with an oxygen mask over them, does the hon. Lady agree that had we not taken action over the weekend, it would have been more likely that more chemical weapons would have been used against the population of Syria?

Alison McGovern: We do not know, and we should not engage in crystal ball gazing over matters that are so serious.

Whatever actions we choose, we ought to do so in a way that promotes humanitarian principles in this country and everywhere else in the world. While actions taken in the name of humanitarian principles have not always been perfect, and we must always know and understand our own history, we cannot drive looking only in the rear-view mirror. We have to face what is in front of us and try to apply humanitarian principles in the most helpful way that we can, with the benefit of past experience, rather than in an attempt to address issues passed. I ask all Members for the next three hours, whatever their view, to just focus on Syria. Do not the Syrian people deserve that from us?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison McGovern: I will make a little progress and give way in a moment.
Because of what has happened, the international community is now seized of the importance of Syria, so it is important that we make the most of this window. The Prime Minister’s actions so far are open to debate, but I ask that we use our time now not just to review what she has done, but to task her to do more.

Let me turn to what I believe the UK’s role can be. As I said, Jo Cox asked—I ask again today—for the Government to bring forward a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians. What does that mean? In short, we need to get aid in, get desperately injured people out, deter further violence, defund Assad and demonstrate our commitment to the victims of war. All that must be done alongside a search for progressive partners around the world who wish to rebuild the consensus that saw the responsibility to protect passed in 2005. The UN needs reform—we know that—but the deadlock in the Security Council has meant half a million people dead on Syrian streets and the biggest movement of refugees since 1979. That is clearly wrong. There must be a better way, and we have to find partners who will help us.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison McGovern: I will not give way at the moment.

First, on getting aid in, medical supplies are desperately needed. I have been hearing from professionals in the region who are trying to help to save lives, and Assad’s tactic has been simply to block them. We have the resources, and we have supplies in Jordan. We have to focus on getting medical supplies and other forms of necessary aid into the places where people are besieged. I will return to that in a moment.

I want to highlight the pledging conference coming up in Brussels shortly, which the Prime Minister mentioned. I am pleased that there is an overwhelming majority in the House in favour of our aid budget. Given that support, all we ask is that the Prime Minister makes the best possible use of the aid budget for people in Syria.

Secondly, on getting people out, the tactic of Assad and his regime has been to direct civilians to a concentrated area and to group them together, saying that that will make them safe, and then to attack them. It is a bitter falsehood to say to people, “We’re going to shift you out of here to make sure that you’re safe,” before later coming back to attack them. We need to help to mount a rescue, and that means searching for the people who humanitarian organisations know are the most injured, as well as disabled children, and helping to get them out of there.

Thirdly, we ought to deter further violence. I caution everyone in the House against engaging in the behaviour of an armchair general. We should not be coming up with military solutions off the top of our head, but that does not mean we should not use the skill of our armed forces or that we should not say to our military advisers, “Look at the different groups of people in Syria, be they besieged or attacked, and give us a strategy to help each and every one of them. Tell us what we can do to deter further violence.” It is not just chemical weapons that people are facing there. Barrel bombs ought not to be dropped on children’s heads—it is as simple as that. If we cannot get the best advice on how we can deter that, I am not sure what we are for.

Alison McGovern: I give way in a moment, but I will come back to others first.

In addition, surveillance and reconnaissance assets can conduct monitoring and reporting of attacks against civilians. The UK and its coalition partners should be providing protection and support to the UN. It is within the coalition’s gift to establish a favourable air situation so that we can ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid. We have to get the right supplies in, and I simply ask the Government to go back and find what more they can do to open humanitarian corridors and get aid in.

As a guarantor of the rules-based international order, the Government must now ask all parties to the conflict to permit the unrestricted delivery and distribution of that aid. This has to be put in as simple and stark terms as possible. We have to articulate what we see as the next stage for accountability and whether there is a role for other routes through the UN and the International Criminal Court. The Government ought to say what they think now. The French Government recently made a number of suggestions, and I ask the Government to look at those and work with the French to see what can be done.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on the case she is making. Like all hon. Members, I have had contact over the last few days from constituents who are very concerned about the plight of the Syrian people. Does she agree that what she is describing is not the kind of one-off event that occurred over the weekend, for reasons that I understand—immediately to degrade chemical weapons—but a long-term and sustained diplomatic, political and, if necessary, military response? Part of that must be a communications strategy to ensure that the public in this country and more widely understand what we are seeking to achieve.

Alison McGovern: I will give way in a moment, but I will come back to others first.

We have been coming back to this place after each horrific event and asking ourselves, “How did we let this happen?” Let this time be different. Let this be the moment when we decide to take a long-term view and bring together all the best efforts of everybody in Britain to secure peace.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case, particularly about the importance of aid. What does she think should be done to ensure that other countries follow the UK in standing by their responsibilities to deliver aid to Syria?

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. As someone who fought the battle to get a Bill through Parliament to guarantee the aid of this country, I would happily talk to parliamentarians in other countries about what they ought to do, but this debate is not about what others should do. Our Prime Minister is here, and my focus is on what she can do and what our country can do to try to assist vulnerable Syrians.
Fourthly, we need to defund Assad. Unfortunately, Syria has still managed to function as an economic actor in the world, but that cannot be right. It cannot be okay that business goes on as normal in the face of such brutality and inhumane actions by that country’s Government. I ask the Prime Minister to investigate what actions we can take to remove Syria from the SWIFT system, which provides for international financial transactions. That would send a strong signal that we are no longer prepared to tolerate Syria just going on as normal. It has involvement in a number of forums around the world, and we must go through each one and remove Syria. We need to send a message that the Syrian Government are beyond the pale and that their actions prove that they can no longer be treated as a normal member of the international community in any sphere of life, especially economically.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One thing that has been absent from these debates—whether we are talking about Iraq, Libya or Syria—is that what would offer the people of Syria a lot of hope is a reconstruction plan for after we achieve peace in Syria. That has always been absent from the Government’s thinking.

Alison McGovern: At some point, Syria must be rebuilt, but right now the bombs are falling. We ought not to have an idea that we can somehow put money into Syria and that will make it better, because my argument is actually the opposite: that would make it worse. My hon. Friend is right, however, in the sense that we have to work with Syrians—especially those in this country, and all those who are our constituents—and talk to them about the kind of vision they have for Syria post conflict. I will come on to the precise point he mentioned in a moment.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work not just on this, but, like all its members, on the all-party friends of Syria group. Does she agree that, in relation to Russia and finance, the UK could look at taking a similar approach to that of the US towards oligarchs? The rouble actually dropped 30% 10 days ago because of measures that the Trump Government brought in. Does she think that such an approach would be relevant, to apply financial pressure on Russia?

Alison McGovern: I do. My hon. Friend pre-empts me, and she is quite right. In my view, the sanctions we have currently levied against Syria and its backers are insufficient. She is no longer in her place, but the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), spoke very well earlier about the need to look again at this situation and to consider secondary sanctions to reach those who trade with those trading with Syria and its backers. I am pleased that the Treasury Committee is going to investigate this matter in detail.

Fifthly and finally, we have to demonstrate our commitments to the victims of this war. We now have a large number of Syrians—people from Syria who were here before the conflict and those who have come in since—who form part of our UK society. I really think we ought to listen to and work with them and that we should build up another track of peace building. We know that the Geneva talks have stalled and that the Astana process is not going to produce what we would see as an answer, so why do we not learn the lessons of Northern Ireland and recognise that peace needs to involve not just the warring parties but all those with a stake in Syrian society? Why can we not reach out across Syrian civil society and have a British-led effort to consult those impacted by the war and who hold no power but may do so in the future? I really believe that in working with Syrian civil society, most especially women, we would find some of the answers to peace. That will not come immediately or straightforwardly, but by doing such early work, we could put in train a better Syria for the future.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I have been listening very carefully to the hon. Lady’s well-informed and very correct speech. I was pleased that she mentioned the Geneva process. One of the reasons why the process has not actually produced any positive results is that the west—the Europeans and the Americans—could not decide whether Assad should play a part in the peace process or in any interim Government. Will the hon. Lady give us an idea of her views on this subject?

Alison McGovern: I have a very firm view, which is that that is a question for Syrians to decide. In this country, the United Kingdom, we are a democracy, and we decide who we are led by. I believe that that should be the same for every country in the world, especially for Syria. It will be for Syrians to decide their leadership, not a British politician in the British Parliament.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I appreciate that my hon. Friend is making a very important speech. While we may be on different sides of the argument on bombing—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Wait a second, because I want to say something positive—[INTERUPTIONS]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say very gently to the hon. Gentleman, blurt it out briefly, man.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I spent the first week of the recess in northern Syria—I left the day before the attacks happened—and I met the Kurdish leaders. My hon. Friend mentioned the involvement of women. Does she recognise that the role of the Kurdish people in involving women is really important and that any discussions must include the Kurds in northern Syria?

Alison McGovern: That is extremely helpful. I would just say to all Members that if they think they can do politics without women, well, they are wrong.

As I say, we have the potential to show British leadership in bringing people together for a longer-term vision of the peace. It will not be easy, but work invested in this now would bear fruit in the future.

On demonstrating our British commitment to the victims of war, I must ask the Prime Minister to turn her attention to the refugees. I am pretty sure she is not going to agree with me. The Government previously committed to taking 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, but I am afraid that, to me, that is not good enough. It is just 4% of the number taken in by Germany. When it comes to the figure of 3,000 children taken in under the Dubs amendment—they are not all Syrian, but some are—I just think that that is not nearly good enough, given the size and scale of this conflict. We have to
[Alison McGovern] demonstrate good faith, which means putting our arms out and offering a chance of life—not just to be alive, but to truly exist—to people who are some of the most unfortunate in our world. Surely, it is in our British nature to do that. Our reputation is really being diminished on the world stage, and the issue of refugees has rubbished our global reputation.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. Does she agree that it is particularly sad that even where British communities have reached out and wanted to help Syrian refugees, as people have done in Penarth in my constituency, the logistical and bureaucratic hurdles they have had to go through mean that they have been unable to do that, even when supported by the Home Office to resettle them? They have raised the money, got the property and put everything in place, and they want to welcome Syrian refugees, yet they are being prevented from doing so, and that has been replicated up and down the country.

Alison McGovern: I am afraid that that is the case. I agree that it is very important to get this right—it is very important to take a cautious approach and especially to work very closely with local authorities—but I am afraid the point my hon. Friend makes is true everywhere in our country. The level of foot dragging by the Home Office reveals the kind of hostile attitude that has been created when it comes to people from elsewhere. Conservative Members will disagree with me, and it is not in my nature to be unduly partisan, but I can only say to them that this is an issue on which I truly believe that to be the case and I would honestly say to them that they should look at it again.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I totally respect what the hon. Lady is saying, but I have been to a refugee camp on the borders of Syria, and most of the people there just want to go home. Does she not agree that, if we could facilitate some way of letting those people go home from the camps, it would make Syria a better place after the war?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman is right in a sense. In a conflict, we know that it is by and large better for people to be in the region if there is a possibility of their going home. That may have been a relevant argument seven years ago, but, unfortunately, the likelihood of the conflict coming to an end anytime soon is less than it was then.

Given the size and scale of the refugee camps and given the fact mentioned earlier this afternoon by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that 25% of citizens in Lebanon are now refugees, the fact that we have committed to take 20,000 by 2020 is just insignificant given the task in front of us. There will be many people for whom a return to Syria is neither appropriate nor what they want, and I simply ask Members whether it is not part of our national character to be welcoming and to bring people here if they really need it.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and she is making an incredibly powerful point. On one occasion, she and I were in the same Lobby when it came to one of the Syrian refugee votes, but it is important that we take refugees in the context of the overall package of support that the British Government are giving to the Syrian region. We are the second largest bilateral donor in terms of international aid—second only to the United States. The hon. Lady referenced Germany, but we have given more in international aid than the rest of the European Union combined.

Alison McGovern: As I said earlier, I am very proud of my country’s record on aid. It is a record I believe all of us, right across this House, should be proud of. Unfortunately, our country’s record on aid does not do much for a sick Syrian child in a refugee camp who needs to come here and be treated by the NHS. That is the reality of the situation we face: we cannot hold up our record on aid to a family who desperately need a roof over their head—we just cannot. All I am asking is that the Prime Minister do a little more.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, and I share the admiration of everyone else for the speech she is making. We have heard a great deal today about the aid cheques we have signed, but her speech is revealing that a huge amount of that aid is not actually getting through to the people who so desperately need it. Is not part of our commitment to those people not just to sign the cheques but to have the political will to ensure that the aid gets to where it is needed?

Alison McGovern: I could not have said it better myself. I want to offer the Prime Minister another chance to do something about this. I accept that, immediately, this may be a forlorn hope, but I still want to offer her the chance. I would like her to stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me that she will double the number of refugees that we will take by 2020. Then we will know that she is really serious about global Britain. She should stand at the Dispatch Box and tell me that we will double the number of Dubs kids that we will accept, and then I will think that she really means it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way in what is an incredibly powerful speech. I am so pleased that she raised the issue of the Dubs children, because we know that there are Syrian children in the refugee camps in Greece. This conflict has been going on for seven years, and of course people have fled further than just the nearest camps. Turkey is taking 3 million, and we have not even taken the 3,000 we said we would take when we passed the Dubs amendment. We are talking about a small fraction, but it is a fraction that is life or death for those we do not take. The Prime Minister is shaking her head. I urge her to go to the camps in Greece, see those children and tell us that they are not as worthy as the children in Ghouta, because they all need our help.

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend. For her intervention, and I will mention her activism again in a moment. I just want to say to the Prime Minister that I am really serious about my request. I really feel that if we are to restore our global reputation, bring true meaning to global Britain and send a message to the world that Britain is back on the world stage, it is, as she will know, deeds, not words, that we require.
Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just in the large urban areas that people care about suffering and that the same welcome would be there in our smaller communities, our rural communities and our small towns? There is a welcome there, too. I believe that the people in this country are deeply, deeply compassionate. That may not always be the case in the abstract, in terms of concepts such as the refugee community, but when it comes to meeting others one on one, I think people behave differently.

Alison McGovern: There is certainly nowhere more welcoming than Clwyd South.

I will conclude on refugees by reminding the Prime Minister that the reputation of our country—our honour—is at stake. As a proud British person, I cannot accept that there is will enough to send our incredible and brave armed forces to attack Assad’s killing machine, but little will to reach out to those who ran from him. The current situation is simply unacceptable, and if the Government think this problem will go away, it has been shown that it will not. I, my hon. Friend the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Bristol West and many, many others will never, ever stop demanding that the Government do more.

In conclusion, let me be clear that I do not seek to exaggerate the British role. We should be asking neither to be the world’s policeman nor some rehashed imperialist power. We should simply be acting like a paid up member of the human race. If our open eyes see innocence treated with brutality, we should think of ourselves neither as their only savours nor helpless to do any good. We have the capacity to work with others to help; that is all. No grandstanding is needed, just practical help. Britain on the world stage used to have a reputation for reliability and competence. It is time we got it back. We have the capacity to work with others to help; that is all. No grandstanding is needed, just practical help. Britain on the world stage used to have a reputation for reliability and competence. It is time we got it back. I believe the five approaches I have detailed could provide practical help to those who need it: no heroes, just assistance to bring the peace.

I want to leave the House with the words of a Syrian doctor, Radwan Al Barbandi, who now works in our NHS in Liverpool. This morning, he reminded me of the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Radwan said to me:

“We need this domino effect to stop in Syria. We do not want any nation to be gassed by a dictator.”

I simply ask the Government to listen to Radwan and to listen to Syrians. The world will be a safer place if we can rebuild the simple principle that no ruler has the right to brutally slaughter their own citizens, not in Syria and not anywhere.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask you to clarify whether, at the conclusion of the debate, there is a difference of view within the House, it is in order for the House to divide in the normal manner even if we are beyond the moment of interruption?

Mr Speaker: Yes, because if the matter can be debated, the matter can also be resolved by a Division of the House. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, to all Members.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on her very eloquent, if rather idealistic, speech. I think we all share her ambition that we should make the maximum possible contribution to humanitarian relief in Syria. The issue is what is actually practical and deliverable. On the Conservative Benches, I think we all think the British Government’s record is exemplary compared with that of most other powers.

I also congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this emergency debate, which was a splendid initiative on her part. I was rather bewildered by the whole issue being reduced, in a way I had never seen before, to applications for emergency debates. It is my opinion that we should probably be having a two-day debate on a Government motion, so that everybody could have a reasonable length of time in which to speak. I must keep my contribution very short on this occasion and I will say no more about parliamentary accountability. At least we are having a debate now.

I am in the position of being a strong supporter of the action taken, while holding the view that we should have followed the precedent set when we liberated the Falkland Islands, when the House was recalled on a Saturday to give its approval. Margaret Thatcher did not invoke royal prerogative on that occasion. On the action that has been taken, I strongly support it. I strongly supported the action that should have been taken in 2013, when I was a member of the National Security Council. We resolved that the really serious use of chemical weapons that had taken place on that occasion should have been met with a military response as both a punishment and an attempt to deter any future use of chemical weapons. Despite the fact that I support parliamentary sovereignty on this matter, Parliament got it wrong on that occasion, as it did on Iraq a few years before. Nevertheless, the policy on Syria was, with hindsight, plainly correct. We should have responded to that attack. That we did not is one of the things that has slightly contributed to the temptation, which has been given into by Assad, to see how far he can go in using chemical weapons.

It is extremely reassuring that the British Government and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have played such a strong role in supporting this three-nation intervention, which has given a targeted, very precise and proportionate attack on sites associated with chemical weapons. As I said earlier, we should hold ourselves ready to do the same thing again if Assad is in any doubt about whether he might get away with going further.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: No, with great respect, I should not take too long, so I will not give way. The hon. Member for Wirral South rightly did because it is her debate, but I do not think I should.

The reason I feel so strongly is that unless we respond properly, there is a very serious danger that the use of chemical weapons, nerve agents and so on will rapidly spread. The nature of warfare in Syria and in a lot of other places in the middle east and elsewhere at the
moment is essentially urban, guerrilla-type and militia-based. It is not only regimes such as Assad’s who can see that if they wish to take somewhere like Ghouta, it is much quicker, easier and less of a risk to use chlorine gas, Sarin or whatever they have than it is to rely on bombardment and street-to-street fighting, where forces are engaged in long, dragged-out, dangerous activity in which they take heavy casualties. If someone has no regard for the ethics of warfare, it is obvious common sense for them to use a substance that will wipe out every living thing in the area that they propose to occupy, once it has all blown away and been cleared up.

If we look at the world at the moment, we see I think that not just Assad but countless groups will be tempted to do that. If we had not acted last weekend, Assad, who probably intends to go on to conquer Idlib next to recover control of his country, would undoubtedly have used bigger chemical attacks. We wait to see whether he will do so in the face of threats from the United States, France and the United Kingdom. I very much hope he does not, but we should not underestimate the importance now, in the real world, in several political crises, of establishing the principle that the British Government will react and will not tolerate and allow a return to the use of chemical and similar weapons, which the world community has at least managed to ban. We have not done much else to improve warfare in this world, but we have at least managed to ban that for decades, and we should stop it coming back.

As I said, that is the reason why I feel so strongly and, for what it matters, why I was arguing in the interviews I gave last week not only for parliamentary accountability, which got picked up, but for targeted action of the kind last week not only for parliamentary accountability, which got picked up, but for targeted action of the kind which gave last week not only for parliamentary accountability, which got picked up, but for targeted action of the kind which matters, why I was arguing in the interviews I think we are doing pretty much what we want to do. If military action is to be taken in these circumstances, it will support effective action to stop their use—we shall see whether the action taken on Saturday has a deterrent effect on President Assad—but as I said in my question to the Prime Minister, I genuinely believe that if military action is to be taken in these circumstances, it must be Parliament’s decision, not the Cabinet’s. If we do not get Parliament’s support, I do not think we will win the support of the public and give our decisions the greatest force they could have.

Why does that matter? First, ever since the vote on Iraq in 2003—I had forgotten about the Falklands vote, to which the Father of the House referred—Parliament has been asked to approve the commitment of UK forces to action: in Libya in 2011, Iraq in 2014 and Syria in 2015. That gives me the opportunity gently to point out that, two and a bit years after we took that decision, following the combined effort, on the ground by the Iraqi forces and the Kurds in the main, with the support of a number of countries from the air, more than 3 million people have been liberated from the cruel rule of Daesh, which committed genocide, war crimes and many other things. Parliament rejected both motions on Syria in 2013, although in the retelling of that story the House needs to remember that either of those resolutions, had they been carried, could have resulted in military action against Assad for the use of chemical weapons. If it was right to seek Parliament’s approval then, in respect of precisely the same country and exactly the same issue—the use of chemical weapons on innocent Syrian civilians—it was right to have done so last week, for exactly the same reasons.

The second reason I argue that Parliament should have taken the decision is that military action is never without risk, particularly in this case given the number of states that have become directly involved in the Syrian conflict. I freely confess that the temperament of the current occupant of the White House, who shows little if any understanding of the responsibilities he have a great deal to offer—but let us not pretend that Britain at the moment can usefully take a political role. I see nothing that could happen that would call for military intervention by the British Government in the Syrian civil war, whether seeking regime change or anything else; indeed, that would be madness. I think that the Government have retained influence by taking part in this tripartite attack. They have acted courageously, sensibly, in the national interest and in the interests of proper humanitarian values and proper international rules of law—even in warfare—in the action they have taken.

8.45 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on having made this application for an emergency debate and on the passion she showed in her speech—a passion she has shown over many years in pursuit of principle.

There will not be any victors in the war in Syria; there are only victims—the 400,000 or so whose lives have been lost and the many others whose lives have been changed by the injuries they have suffered. More than half the population have been forced to flee their homes, which have been destroyed, and large parts of the country have been laid waste. We all, without any equivocation, support the upholding of the convention on the prohibition of chemical weapons, and I am sure that the House would support effective action to stop their use—we shall see whether the action taken on Saturday has a deterrent effect on President Assad—but as I said in my question to the Prime Minister, I genuinely believe that if military action is to be taken in these circumstances, it must be Parliament’s decision, not the Cabinet’s. If we do not get Parliament’s support, I do not think we will win the support of the public and give our decisions the greatest force they could have.

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Article 28 states: 

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Article 28 states: 

“Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”

Yet for millions of people in Syria, those rights, so nobly expressed all those years ago, have remained only words on paper—because they have lacked the means to protect themselves and their families from the attacks being made on them, because we have lacked the will to act or have acted imperfectly, or because some have chosen to look the other way and to pass by on the other side of the road. I believe that we all support the principles of the universal declaration of human rights, but we should ask ourselves how we are to uphold them in practice. They mean something—they are the ultimate expression of our responsibility for one another—yet we live in a world in which they cannot be fully realised. Let us imagine for a moment a United Kingdom in which there was peace and stability in London, genocide in Manchester, and civil war in Leeds. We would not regard that as in any way acceptable. We live in a country where it is not the case, because we have established the rule of law and democracy, but we live in a world where it is the case.

What are we discussing here? We are discussing how we fashion the means, collectively, through the United Nations, to ensure that those rights and principles are applied to all our fellow citizens.

The reason why this matters is that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, more than at any other time in human history, our relationships are defined by our interdependence. There are those who argue—I have heard them: “It is not our problem; it is not our business. We really feel sorry for them, but there’s nothing we can do about it.” The truth is that we live with the consequence of this in our minds, in the shame or concern we feel, and also in respect of refugees. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South made that point extremely forcefully, because that is a consequence of allowing conflict to happen that is not brought to an end. We cannot shut the door and close the curtains and wish that what is happening in other countries will go away.

It was out of this concern that the idea of the responsibility to protect was born—developed by the Canadian Government, adopted by the world summit. In 2009, following Ban Ki-moon’s report, the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution on the subject. It was based on the simple but important idea that state sovereignty is a privilege, but it also comes with a responsibility. The responsibility to protect is concerned with preventing genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

Of course, that responsibility is not without controversy. Some argue that the nation state should be sovereign, and some object to military action in all circumstances. Others say its scope is too narrow or that we have been selective or inconsistent in how we have chosen to act in the world, and I freely grant that that is the case. But the answer is to make the system work more effectively, and I want that system to be the UN. It has a unique responsibility because of its authority and legitimacy, but it is not always capable of acting. That is why the question of the veto and whether that will in all circumstances stop us doing something is so important. I commend to the House the initiative the previous French Government took to try to persuade the five permanent members of the Security Council to agree that they would forgo the veto in circumstances where there were war crimes—crimes against humanity, genocide.
I am the first to recognise the difficulty of trying to persuade countries to do that in those circumstances, but it was, and is, an attempt to deal with the conundrum we are facing. One has only to read the list of the UN Security Council resolutions that have been vetoed or threatened with vetoes or the list of the resolutions on Syria that have been passed, including at least three that call for ceasefires. We do not want in this conflict for resolutions, even passed by the UN Security Council, which call for a ceasefire.

The second issue is how we build diplomatic and public pressure and capacity to act. We know that one of the most powerful forces for action is bearing witness to what has happened—those who risk their lives to go and report on what has occurred. That is why President Assad is so anxious to kill those who are reporting and the doctors who say, “Why have so many hospitals in Syria been bombed?”

We must also acknowledge that we live in a world in which fake news is becoming ever more common. We used to call it lies. It is lies, but for a purpose; it is about sapping morale, undermining understanding and preventing people from acting.

I make this argument because the truth is that we have been here before, and we will be here again unless we can build a better system for stopping conflict before we get to this point. Let us be honest: in relation to this, the chances are that President Assad is going to win, although what he will do with his country—which he, more than anyone else, has been responsible for destroying—I have no idea whatever.

In conclusion, I simply say that we can debate particular action at particular times and we hope it will have a beneficial effect, but the truth of this tragedy is that we can, and we must as a world, do much better.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It will shortly be necessary to impose a time limit. Before that, I will call the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who will be free of said limit, to which, however, I know he will have informal regard.

8.59 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am going to keep my remarks brief, Mr Speaker, as previous speakers have done justice to a huge range of subjects. I shall try to stick narrowly to the subject of the Government’s role. First, I should like to compliment the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing the debate. I listened with great interest to her speech and will make a couple of comments about some of the things she said, but I will not follow her down that road, if she will forgive me. I want to deal specifically with what took place in the past few days and the reasons for it.

It is important to get the background absolutely straight and to consider what led to the Prime Minister having to take this decision. Sometimes it is easy to skate over some of these things. I was looking at the House of Commons Library paper on this, which is well worth reading. It lays out in considerable detail the number of times that the Syrians have broken all the accords they made on chemical weapons. It goes on to point out, as the Prime Minister did, that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons does not apportion blame, even when it inspect. It was supposed to be going in fairly shortly, but it is now blocked from going in and we have deep suspicions about the reasons for that. There is a major effort to clear up what is in there and to get rid of people who might be able to show that they have been attacked by these weapons.

Russia has vetoed every single resolution in the Security Council. Something else that is quite interesting, and that has not come out so far, is that in December 2017 an attempt was made to get an extension of the OPCW-United Nations joint investigative mechanism’s mandate. That would have enabled the JIM to look at what was going on and would have given it the power to apportion blame. The Russians vetoed the extension of that mandate without a single question, and it was clear that they did so because they did not want that investigation to take place.

It is worth reminding ourselves that, back in 2013—when I was a member of the Government—the Government came to the House to ask for a mandate to attack areas of command and control or of chemical stockpiles. I was sad to see, when the House voted against that motion, that there were some party politics involved. However, I am not going to revisit the past, other than to say that I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given due regard to the lesson from that. We had to take action then, and serious consequences flowed from our not doing so. Back in 2013, Assad was on the back foot. There were some quite reasonable groups—I do not say that lightly—opposing him, including the Free Syrian Army. Yes, some of the more extreme groups were there, including the jihadists, but there was perhaps an opportunity to influence the direction of what might happen in Syria.

The rejection of the motion in 2013 was probably the single most devastating blow to Syria, and it has led to serious consequences. It emboldened President Assad to believe that he could go on doing what he wanted. The Russians then persuaded President Obama not to pursue the matter by guaranteeing that President Assad would produce no more chemical weapons, and that he would never use such weapons even if he had them. Of course, they have failed completely on that. So perhaps they are complicit in the use of chemical weapons; I begin to wonder whether they are, as they have used them so liberally elsewhere, particularly here on our own home soil in Salisbury.

The vote also gave the Russians the green light to pursue their own agenda aggressively in Syria, and to make the war even worse than it might otherwise have been. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned the appalling attacks on hospitals, and he was absolutely right to do so, but the question is how closely Russia has been involved in the deliberate targeting and bombing of hospitals and other civilian areas. We are beginning to see all of that in this.

The final bit about the vote in 2013—I hope the House really considers this—is that it opened the door to the takeover of most of the opposition to Assad by jihadi groups, who were untrammelled and un-resisted. With America stepping back, the reality was that the rest was left to the influence of Russia. We then ended
up dealing with the worst of all worlds, with Daesh attacks both in Syria and subsequently in Iraq. That shut down many of the options that might well have been available to us.

I am in favour of the House being consulted, but the House also has to give a little leeway to the Executive when it comes to moments such as last week, when it was quite clear that urgent action needed to be taken. Urgent action is based on deep intelligence and if it is not taken quickly, there could well be further consequences later. Such circumstances are difficult, and it behoves a Government to ensure that the action they take is narrowly targeted and therefore effective in its limited regard.

Had the Government been proposing a wider operation, such as the one conducted against Daesh in Iraq or in northern Syria, they would certainly have had to come to the House to explain the nature of that. Last week was an exception; an Executive do need the ability to take such action and then come to the House to explain it and, as the Prime Minister rightly said today, take the consequences of the House’s view about that action, including whether it was justified both legally and in moral terms.

The really important point here, which we do not talk about enough, is the reality that Russia sits like a great beast behind all of what is happening. Without Russia’s involvement in Syria, much of what is going on would not be happening today. Russia’s direct and selfish involvement, which is only about its procurement of a decent-weather port in the Mediterranean and its ability to position its aircraft in Syria and to involve itself in the region, has led it to get involved in some of the worst activities that it is possible to imagine, and with complete indifference to the world order.

If we look back over what Russia has done, we see not just its invasions of Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia and so on, but its involvement in chemical warfare. In 2013, the Russians guaranteed that Syria would not use chemical weapons again. What kind of a guarantee is that, coming from a nation that poisoned the President of Ukraine, killed Mr Litvinenko by radiotion, and went on to use a nerve agent to attack Mr Skripal and his daughter on British soil? That is the kind of guarantee given by a criminal to another criminal, and yet we should somehow allow it to be the protector it has not been. It suits Russia’s purposes to have Syria able to do as it pleases; that does not matter to Russia at all.

I say to the hon. Member for Wirral South that her speech was full of fine principle, which I of course absolutely sign up to and back her on, but even that fine principle prompts some serious questions. The most serious relates to what she said about keeping open the principle prompts some serious questions. The most serious relates to what she said about keeping open the principle of allowing the use of such weapons, even if the Russians are behind it. That is the important point.

We have to pursue an aggressive position towards Russia. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, Russia is not just producing disinformation but is lying outright about what has been going on. We need to pursue the money, and we need to put it to our European colleagues that they have to think carefully about the use of energy from Russia. It is the energy Russia sells to Europe and others that sustains this tiny economy to build its weapons and to produce its chemical warfare. If we can cut the money to Russia, we begin to cut its ability to interfere in nations such as Syria, Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia and others. The world will be a better place if Russia is restricted on that basis, and I urge my right hon. Friends to do so.

I fully accept the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took her decision, and she was right to do so. She was right in that sense to take the decision without coming to Parliament, and she is right to come to consult Parliament today. I hope we back her fully.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A four-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech will now apply.

9.11 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing it, and I thank Members on both sides of the House for supporting it at this important time.

I spoke in a previous debate on Syria about my experience of visiting Sarajevo and Srebrenica on a cross-party trip with Remembering Srebrenica. One particular thing that sticks in my mind is visiting an exhibition in Sarajevo of photographs of atrocities, of mass graves and of horrific scenes from Sarajevo, Srebrenica and other locations from the Bosnian conflict. The photographs were juxtaposed with images from the current horrific conflict in Syria, and I could not tell the two sets of images apart. We see all the same hallmarks: the same mass graves, the same attempts to hide evidence and the same utter violations of all the laws and standards of war, whether in the use of chemical warfare, the deliberate bombardment and barrel bombing of civilians, the denial of humanitarian aid or the denial of access to bodies such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South and particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and many others, have said has been excellent, but I will emphasise two or three key points. First, we must listen to what the Syrians themselves are saying. I have been repeatedly contacted by Syrians in my constituency, and I have met Syrians who fled the conflict. It is not just the horrific
stories of those who have fled very obvious scenes of hostility but the families separated and denied access to each other. A family came to see me who had elderly family members suffering from terminal cancer, unable to access any form of medical treatment and trapped in Aleppo—the family in the UK are deeply worried.

We need to listen carefully to all those individual, personal stories, which is why I particularly support the strong points made about refugees. I have mentioned the situation of councils and what they can do. I am disappointed that the efforts being made by Croeso Penarth in my constituency to house Syrian refugees are being frustrated by the local council. I am disappointed to see the very strict rules on family reunion being interpreted in the way they are, which is why I was happy to support the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, and it is why my hon. friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and others have rightly campaigned so hard on the issue of the Dubs children.

We must also listen very carefully to the non-governmental organisations and those who are giving witness to what is going on. We need to listen to the likes of Médecins sans Frontières when it talks about 200 fleeing patients arriving at its hospital with trauma injuries in recent days, as well as women in childbirth and children suffering from malnutrition—the UN estimates that nearly 151,000 people have fled into north-west Syria. The International Committee of the Red Cross talks of the 13 million who need aid, the four in five now living in poverty in what was once a rich country and the 1.75 million children now not in school.

There is a danger that we get caught up in online conspiracy theories and fake news. We need to listen to those Syrians, we need to listen to those NGOs and we need to listen to those journalists who are giving that testimony, rather than engaging in some sort of fantasy about who is responsible. It is Assad who is responsible, it is his allies who are responsible and it is those who block humanitarian aid, like Hezbollah and others, who are responsible. That is where the responsibility lies, and that is where we should direct our anger, our frustration and our strategy.

I come to my greatest concern, whatever the rights and wrongs of this action: I believe the Prime Minister should have come to this House before now. I believe the Government have the right to act in certain circumstances without coming here, but I do not see why that applies in this case. There needs to be a clear circumstances without coming here, but I do not see why that applies in this case. There needs to be a clear

Mr Kenneth Clarke: May I correct what my right hon. Friend said earlier? In 2013, we had discussions in the National Security Council and in the Cabinet, and we were absolutely clear that we were asking only just targeted, proportionate attacks on sites connected with chemical weapons. The then Government had discussed and agreed that we were not going to get involved in the
wider Syrian civil war, and I agree with my right hon. Friend that that is as desirable an objective now as it was then.

**Dr Lewis:** I am glad to have the extra time to say that my right hon. and learned Friend did not mention the conflict in Libya. With Libya, we were told exactly the same thing: that we were voting for a protective measure—a no-fly zone to protect the citizens of Benghazi—but the moment that we retrospectively gave our approval for that, it was all out for a bombing campaign to topple that regime. I do not doubt for one moment what my right hon. and learned Friend has said to the House, but I have it from other sources that I cannot quote that I am not at all far from the truth in saying that had we acted in 2013, the result in Syria would have been the same as the result in Libya. Even if that were wrong, the people who are at fault are the people who misled the House in 2011 about Libya when they did not say that we were going to try to topple Gaddafi. Had they said that, I would have voted against that action. I believe we were going to try to topple Gaddafi. Had they said that, I and the 29 other Conservatives who voted the way we did on Syria in 2013 were absolutely right to do so.

With that, my time is up, so I simply say that we should spend more money on defence so that we will have more defence options.

9.21 pm

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Britain is an open and outward-looking country and our interests do not stop at our borders. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime, even within the context of the atrocities of war. This year, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of world war one, in which we know and can recall from literature how gas attacks were used with such horrendous effect. That led to the processes in which the UK and others were so involved that led to the creation of the 1928 Geneva protocol and, indeed, the international consensus throughout the 20th century that the use of chemical weapons crossed a line and should not happen.

I recognise that the Government have set out some compelling points in the arguments that they have made about the need to uphold international law and the agreements that ban the use of chemical weapons. I take some reassurance from the fact that the strikes seem to have been so precisely targeted. I was concerned about the rhetoric in the run-up to the strikes about the risk of escalation, particularly with Russia so involved in the region, but the fact that there have been no hits on Russian infrastructure is certainly a positive sign. Indeed, there is a certain logic to making the attacks specific to chemical weapons facilities and research. The fact that it looks like there have not been any civilian casualties is very much a testament to the skill of our armed forces in their deployment.

Although the Government have made some strong points, I have some significant concerns. It is important in these matters to build wider support. An opportunity was missed last week, in respect not only of Parliament but of building the case with the country more widely. There was a vacuum in Government communication until the strikes had been launched. It is also important to build the case internationally. I recognise the support that has been obtained from NATO and EU partners, and I entirely appreciate the huge frustration of the Security Council veto. Russia cannot even agree to hold, or at least withhold its veto on holding, an independent investigation of chemical weapons attacks.

There are avenues that can be pursued when the Security Council is paralysed, including the United Nations uniting for peace protocol, which uses the General Assembly. What is the Government’s assessment of that? I imagine it is not without its problems, but has it been considered and could it be tried? The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about the responsibility to protect, which is an important doctrine, but I slightly fear that if we do not get wider international buy-in, there is a danger that R2P being invoked by three Security Council members might undermine its wider legitimacy.

There are also concerns about President Trump. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that this was her decision, and we do not need to question her sincerity on that in recognising that, none the less, there are genuine concerns about the US Commander-in-Chief. He is erratic and unpredictable, and the question is not just whether the UK has an influence over him, but whether the sensible voices within his own Administration have an influence over him. Given that there are those within his circle who are looking for a fight with Iran, it is particularly important that we make sure that our view is expressed to them.

**James Heappey:** Does the hon. Lady have similar concerns about President Macron, who was also involved in the decision making last week?

**Jo Swinson:** There is a very easy answer to that. I have many, many more concerns about President Trump than about President Macron, in whom I have much more confidence as a world leader.

As I have said, there are people within Trump’s inner circle who are threatening the Iran nuclear agreement, and who are suggesting that perhaps the sanctions should not be waived again when they come up for renewal in May. Given what the UK put into negotiating that agreement in the first place, it is incredibly important that we use whatever influence we can to maintain it.

In my earlier remarks to the Prime Minister, I mentioned the issue of refugees. I absolutely agree with the hon. Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) that we need to do more on that issue. There is also the long-term issue of how we create the conditions for peace. Anyone who says that that is simple, or that there is an easy soundbite for what to do, fails to understand the complexity of the situation. There is no obvious answer and no neat solution. I wish that I had one, and I am sure the Government do too. These atrocious attacks show us that, if anything, we must redouble our efforts to press, cajole and explore every possible way. I regret the way in which the Government brought this matter forward, though I accept that, in some areas, they have made a good case. I remain concerned about the issues that I have raised and hope to hear some reassurance. I recognise that there are no easy answers, but we must keep trying to find a way forward.

9.26 pm

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): As we continue to learn—sometimes belatedly—from the lessons of conflict, it is right that we always strive to push ourselves forward as...
a nation to make better judgments about how and why we engage in conflict and who we serve to protect through our actions.

It is because of that responsibility to protect that we owe it to those who are suffering around the world not to simply stand back in the cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, and to be there for them in their hour of need. Knee-jerk isolationism, ideological pacifism and anti-interventionism are not in Britain’s national interests, nor are they in the interests of the weakest and the most vulnerable in the world.

As a champion of international law, a rules-based international system, human rights, tolerance, openness and democracy, an engaged and activist foreign policy is part of who we are as a country, and those values are associated with our global influence and the leadership that we are demonstrating in the world. Of course that applies to Syria and the awful and abhorrent crisis that we have seen over the past eight years. This is the largest humanitarian crisis that we have seen in a generation, and we know that Britain stands tall, shoulder to shoulder with others, through the great leadership that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been providing to the Syrian people. I am talking about not just aid but the support within the region that she and her Government have been able to provide. That also applies to long-term reconstruction in the region and support to the countries around Syria.

At the same time, justice and accountability must be sought for the millions who have been displaced, killed and harmed through the brutality of this conflict. Those who are responsible should be subject to the right form of prosecution in the right way internationally.

As we discuss the recent events that have brought us here today—the murder of Syrian civilians, including innocent children, with chemical weapons that were outlawed by the world nearly a century ago—we know that the haunting images of human suffering will stay with us all for a very long time. Chemical weapons are uniquely indiscriminate, and we must never forget that. It is right that we proceed with care and that we openly hold the discussions that we are having today in the House. It is right that we ask ourselves what kind of nation we would be if we turned away and closed our eyes to the horrors that are killing women, children and many men every single day in the war and the atrocities that we have seen. It is absolutely right, as the Prime Minister has shown, that we send a clear message out that, if and when a brutal regime kills its people with chemical weapons that are prohibited under international law, with its commitment to peace and stability around the world, remains absolutely committed to upholding the principles of international law.

9.29 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Last weekend’s chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians in Douma was a brutal and barbaric act. Seventy-five people, including children, have died. More than 500 have been treated for symptoms of nerve agent poisoning. This outrage clearly breached the Geneva protocol of 1925 and the 1993 chemical weapons convention. Only Assad has helicopters and barrel bombs. His culpability can be in no doubt. It was at least the ninth time that Assad has used chemical weapons on his own people, and he chose to use chemical weapons in Douma specifically to target civilians. This was a war crime that led to unimaginable humanitarian suffering, death and destruction. Such barbarity cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

There should, of course, be a UN investigation, but that is impossible because the Russian Government continue to veto any attempts by the Security Council, and the Syrian regime is now preventing the OPCW from entering Douma. The Syrian regime is responsible for this chemical weapons attack, and its sponsors in the Kremlin are complicit, not only because of their support for Assad and his brutal regime but because of their relentless work to undermine the ability of international institutions to function properly, thereby rendering effective diplomatic action impossible.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment that it was absolutely right for the Prime Minister to take this action. It is not only Assad who is using chemical weapons in Syria; he is being propped up very much by the Russians. We need to send a message to Assad and the Russians that chemical weapons are just not acceptable.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a universal message that needs to be sent to all those brutal dictators who may be considering going down this route.

With the Kremlin effectively dismantling the diplomatic route, we are left with no option but to apply military force. It pains me to say this, but the sad reality is that the future of Syria is in the hands of the Kremlin, Iran and the Assad regime. However, that does not mean that we have no agency or that we should allow the international norms around the prohibition of chemical weapons to wither on the vine. That is why it was right to act in the name of humanitarian concerns and assert the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. But Parliament should have had a say. That has been the way we have operated in this place for over a decade. The dispute about parliamentary authorisation reveals the shortcomings of a convention-based constitutional system. The Leader of the Opposition is therefore right that we should have a war powers Act. Of course, the devil will be in the detail. Such an Act must not be so loose as to allow the Government to do anything, but it must not be so tight as to bind the hands of the Government and those on the frontline to the extent that it would become an impossibly high bar to pass.

The costs of non-intervention are clear. Non-intervention would equate to a tacit approval of the abhorrent use of chemical weapons. A targeted strike on the installations that enable the use of chemical weapons not only degrades the Syrian capacity to deliver and use chemical weapons again, but sends a signal that their use will not be tolerated. We must therefore be steadfast and consistent. We must also do more to support those who have fled Syria to escape this barbarity, and step up to fulfil our obligations to address the refugee crisis.

My party has a proud history of standing up for the most vulnerable. We led the world to intervene in Kosovo to prevent genocide; understanding that the Russian veto precluded the UN route at that time. The Labour party is not a pacifist party. Indeed, it was a Labour
Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who was the driving force behind establishing NATO. I am truly proud of the Labour party’s role, 60 years ago almost to the day, in the signing of the treaty of Brussels. We are a party that understands that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men—and, indeed, women—to do nothing. We understand the costs of non-intervention, just as we appreciate and learn from the costs of intervention. Where would we be if pacifists had been in charge in 1939?

If the only intervention that we contemplate is that with UN Security Council approval, we will be allowing the Kremlin to dictate our foreign policy. I refuse to allow my country or my party to be held hostage by Vladimir Putin. I will always uphold the fine history of my party, which is to be ready, willing and able to intervene, and to shoulder our responsibility to protect.

9.34 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I think that most of us would accept that there are no easy answers to questions of this sort, just a series of hard and difficult decisions. I, for one, believe that Prime Ministers should retain the right—the leeway—to act in extremis, with the use of armed forces if circumstances demand. However, I also think that the Government accept that the reason why we are having this debate, in many respects, is that many of us believe that Government plans for military action should be subject to close scrutiny before being executed, because we have seen a litany of errors regarding our previous interventions, whether in Iraq, Helmand or Libya.

In Syria, our initial proposed policy was to arm the rebels, not realising that therein lay the greater danger. We then excluded the Russians and the Iranians from the diplomatic process. There has also been an inconsistency of objective on our part. One minute we are calling for Assad’s removal; another time we realise that his opponents perhaps represent the greater danger. Only two weeks ago, President Trump suggested that the US would turn away from Syria, and that could only have sent the wrong message to Damascus and Moscow.

Perhaps the international community’s biggest failure has been on humanitarian aid. We can be very proud of our record as a country in providing £2.5 billion since 2012-13. However, given the underfunding of the humanitarian effort in general—that contribution of £2.5 billion dwarfs those of other countries, apart from the US—the Government need to try to do more to encourage the international community to follow our lead and meet its obligations.

While acknowledging the debt that we owe to our armed forces, my concern about the latest missile strike is that our previous engagements in interventions suggest that there is a real danger of being dragged into a bigger conflict. There have been scores of chemical weapons attacks in Syria since this vicious civil war started and I worry about the risk of escalation. Russia has many more troops on the ground. This is a proxy war, as we well know, reflecting regional conflict. There are very few moderates left in Syria. The prospect of more violence, and even heightened violence, is very real indeed.

I believe that a policy is generally better if Parliament does have some oversight. I therefore suggest to the Government that they should focus on the question I posed during our proceedings on the statement and at least give some consideration to the circumstances in which they would think it right to consult Parliament before actually committing our armed forces, and to what they should reflect on in order to avoid the mistakes of the past. The biggest danger is being dragged into this conflict. There is no easy answer. We need to focus on the fact that the humanitarian aid needs to be sorted out, and we need to learn the lessons of the past if we are to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

9.38 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to rehash the points made by other hon. Members, but generally I support the tone of the debate. I totally agree with many colleagues who have said that we must have a joined-up and co-ordinated strategy for how we support the people of Syria in diplomatic, humanitarian and other ways.

On the diplomatic strategy, resolution 377A of the General Assembly—the “Uniting for Peace” resolution—would allow this Government to convene an emergency session of the GA to seek a majority there. If that majority was found, it would provide a level of backing under international law that would give some legitimacy to further actions and strategies on Syria.

I want to focus most of my comments on my trip to northern Syria a week ago. I met a number of the Kurdish but also the Arab and Turkmen leaders who hold joint positions in the northern Syrian region administration. Often we talk about the disaster of Syria, but what the northern Syrian authority has managed to achieve despite all the disaster going on around it is rather remarkable, and we should be basing our strategy for Syria on that. It has achieved a bottom-up democracy in which local organisations co-ordinate at the parish level to ensure basic humanitarian provision, in which women must co-chair every single level of government—that is remarkable for the region and for the world—and in which there is a quota to ensure that 40% of seats in all authorities in the northern Syrian region are reserved for non-Kurdish minorities, which shows the pluralism that these people are trying to build. It also has a fighting force that led in fighting Daesh and its fascist ideology all the way back to the borders.

What I heard there was a feeling that these people are now being let down by the British Government. With the incursion into Afrin by Turkey, a supposed British ally, they feel that they have been left out in the cold. I spoke to the co-Prime Minister there, who said that Russia and Syria had made them an offer: if they got into bed with them, they would give them protection against Turkey. They rejected that offer; they could not get into bed with Assad because they wanted democracy.

We must ensure that we uphold the work that those people have done, rather than abandoning them to the onslaught. Hundreds of thousands of people have now been displaced in Afrin and hundreds have died. There is one thing that the Government could do. A number of military fighters in the region who have fought Daesh are ill and need advanced medical treatment, but the Government are refusing them visas through the new corridor that has opened up into Iraq—
9.42 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this important debate and introducing it with such evident passion.

The barbaric attack on Douma killed around 75 men, women and children, with about 500 additional casualties. According to doctors and aid workers who treated the victims, their symptoms were characteristic of an attack utilising chlorine gas. Chlorine was first weaponised as a gas by German scientist Fritz Haber and was then employed by the German army against unsuspecting French troops at the second battle of Ypres in April 1915. In contact with the air, chlorine gas vaporises into a low-hanging cloud. That would collect in the trenches, much as it did in the cellars of Douma last week, one century later.

Chlorine gas reacts quickly with water in the airways to form hydrochloric acid, swelling and damaging lung tissue and causing death by suffocation. It is a truly horrific way to die. The war poet Wilfred Owen gave a graphic description of a gas attack in his famous poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

“Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”

The victims at Douma who choked and drowned were not soldiers, but innocent civilians, non-combatants, families, kids.

During the 1980s, at the height of the cold war, I served as an infantry officer in the Territorial Army. Our war role was to reinforce the British Army of the Rhine. We assumed that any conflict would go chemical almost from the outset, which is why I happen to know a bit about the subject. When we went to Germany, we trained in special protective suits to defend us against NBC—nuclear, biological and chemical—warfare. We were also equipped with gas masks or respirators, which were designed to give us at least a fighting chance against chemical agents in particular.

The citizens of Douma had no NBC suits. They had no respirators and they had no chance. They were sheltering in cellars as a defence against Syrian and Russian airstrikes, and that was precisely why the Syrians used gas against them, knowing that it would penetrate to the cellars and that the occupants would have no defence against it. This tactic was utterly barbaric, and I cannot believe any Member of this House would do anything but utterly condemn it.

Part of today’s debate has been about whether our airstrikes were illegal. They were not illegal; it was the Syrian chemical attack on Douma that was illegal. Our airstrikes were targeted to defend the principles of the chemical weapons convention and thus uphold international law. That is the stark reality from which the leadership of the Opposition cannot escape. We have already heard reference to Burke’s dictum:

“All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”

We in this country did something, and we should be proud of it.
9.50 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) recalled the dreadful events in the battle of Ypres in 1915, which led in 1925 to the Geneva protocol, under which no country was allowed to use chemical weapons.

In 2013, Syria signed up to the chemical weapons convention. In 2014, the Russians signed an agreement with the OPCW that guaranteed that all Syria’s chemical weapons would be destroyed. Russia has vetoed resolutions in the Security Council 12 times since 2011, so I agree with the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that the UN resolution mechanism is not working.

Syria is one of the most persecuted countries on the planet. It will be one of the worst human catastrophes in the world in the 21st century. If the world does not stand up to the use of chemical weapons, as foreshadowed by the battle of Ypres, the world will have lost its moral compass. If we allow one or two dictators with warped minds to continue to use chemical weapons, the world will be a much poorer place. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was therefore absolutely right to send a signal with our allies last weekend by taking part in joint actions.

As I said, Syria is one of the most persecuted countries on the planet. The good Samaritan, all those centuries ago, did not walk by; he stopped to help that persecuted person. The world should be helping Syria; it has 6.3 million internally displaced people and 4.8 million externally displaced people. I have been to Nizip 2 refugee camp, and it is a pitiful sight.

Mr Nigel Evans: I have seen Syrian children being educated in the Lebanon, and I have seen Syrian children looking absolutely bewildered in camps in Jordan by what they have witnessed. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the international community should be stepping up to ensure that more money is made available to assist these Syrian refugees?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He, like me, has been to refugee camps—he in Jordan, I in Turkey—and we have seen the very difficult conditions these refugees live in. I am proud that our country and our Government, under the excellent leadership of our Prime Minister, is one of the largest donors in the world, helping make life just a little better in these camps.

In the last bit of my speech, I want to focus on one issue. A lot of people in this debate have said, “Well, we should do something,” but nobody has actually come up with what we should be doing. If the United Nations system is not working, we have to find another mechanism, and it seems to me that the only other mechanism at the moment is the Geneva peace process. The problem with the Geneva peace process, which has been going for at least five years and probably longer, is that the Americans, the Europeans and the west in general cannot make up their minds whether they want to see Assad continue in power or whether they want to see Assad go—whether he should be part of an interim Government or whether he should not.

We should learn the lessons of Iraq. We deposed Saddam Hussein and all the Ba’athists who knew how to govern Iraq. We must not make the same mistake in Syria. If we depose Bashar al-Assad, we must not get rid of the Alawites. If we do, we will lose the ability of those who know how to govern this very difficult country, which is composed of a lot of ethnic minorities. If it is to succeed and we are to come up with any sort of peaceful solution, the Alawites have to be a part of it.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend’s speech. What would be the plight of the Christians in Syria if Bashar al-Assad were deposed?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: It is very hard to know. There are so many ethnic minorities in Syria—the Kurds, the Christians, the Shi’a, the Sunnis and numerous other groupings—it is very hard to see how a peace process would work. Suffice it to say that we have a duty to the Syrian people to try to find a peace solution.

We must work doubly hard at the Geneva process with our American allies. We have to decide whether the Assad Government should continue. We have to decide who is invited to that peace process. There are different views on whether the Iranians, the Saudis or the Israelis should be invited. Who else should be invited? Get them all around a table, start talking and see whether we can come up with a peace process. I simply end by saying again that all those centuries ago the good Samaritan did not walk by. He stopped and tried to help. It is imperative that the British Government not only continue to help the refugees in the camps but strain every last sinew to see what we can do to help to produce a successful peace process in Syria.

9.56 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has done a typically valiant service for the Syrian people today by reminding us all that the focus of our efforts ought to be, ultimately, on them. I will spend a few moments on the action the Prime Minister rightly authorised at the weekend, but I want to use the majority of the few minutes I have to talk about what the future can be.

On the authorisation of strikes, as the Prime Minister knows, many of us have been pushing for this for months and, in some cases, years. It was the right decision. It was courageous. We should all welcome the fact that the RAF seems to have executed them in such a professional way, destroying the target while minimising civilian casualties and wider collateral damage. The action was necessary and worth supporting to reset the red line against chemical weapons use anywhere in the world, but I hope we also can use this opportunity to make a genuine difference for the Syrian people.

I understand and accept what the Government say about wanting to avoid escalation by not seeking to change the balance of the civil war in Syria, but let us be careful in understanding what we potentially mean by that. This is a regime that uses chemical weapons as part of a worked out panoply of violence and war crimes against civilian people. It is worth remembering that the chemical attack last weekend only came about as part of an effort to try to move rebels out of the enclave in Douma.
When they refused to go, the next day a chemical weapon was dropped on them. It was therefore part of a grotesque siege strategy that breaks all international conventions.

The consensus was that Russia, Assad and Iran would have it all their own way in Syria and that nothing could be done. We have shown that that is not the case. When the right targeted action is taken, we can make a difference. While we should not seek to intervene in the outcome by taking sides in the civil war, there is more that we can do with military support to back up the Syrian people. The people of Idlib now face a final, terrible siege, just as many other towns and cities have across Syria. We have shown that that is not the case. When they refused to go, the next day a chemical weapon was dropped on them. It was therefore part of a grotesque siege strategy that breaks all international conventions.

Let us be clear: we are responding to war crimes. We are responding to a dictator who gassed children in his own country. We had the capacity to do the right thing, and we did it. I am not a warmonger in advocating such a course of action, nor is the Prime Minister. I was sent by Her Majesty’s Government into harm’s way in Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland four times. I know what it is to be sent into those situations and to put my own life on the line. I also know that the Prime Minister has in the past sat down with the families of soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country, so she, too, knows the gravity of the decisions that she is taking and the cost that it can have for those who serve in our nation’s armed forces.

Having been in a situation where I have gone away at the behest of Her Majesty’s Government to do what was deemed to be in the UK’s national interest and having heard those conflicts being debated in this place, I have found it outrageous today to hear the Prime Minister’s motives questioned in the way that they have been. The idea that she took the decisions that she did to give us a boost in the local elections or to suck up to Trump is just an outrageous accusation and it cannot at all be true. My right hon. Friend carries a responsibility that the rest of us do not. We all see the pictures on TV and in the press. We all share the outrage, but only she gets the full intelligence and only she has the power to direct a response. It was brave of her not to delegate that decision to Parliament last week. She did absolutely the right thing for our country and for the people of Syria.
Part of the international rules-based order concerns human rights, and the way to enforce that is through the International Criminal Court in the context of war crimes. The problem is that it takes years. We have all seen the cases involving Rwanda and Kosovo, and we know how long it has taken to secure justice in those cases. The fact is that, given this dreadful blight—this barbaric and horrific use of chemical weapons—we cannot afford to wait.

Justice will, I hope, come to all the commanders who have been involved in those decisions in Syria. I hope that very good records are being kept, but we know that, ironically, the Syrian Government are keeping their own records. In the words of Human Rights Watch, there has been “a bureaucratic effort by the Syrian security apparatus to maintain a photographic record of the thousands who have died...since 2011.”

We have access to some of those records through defectors. I support what the Prime Minister has done. I urge the House to make the effort to secure the evidence which, in the longer term, will lead to the prosecutions and convictions of Assad and the Russians who were on the ground acting as so-called advisers, who turn a blind eye to these breaches of international law, and who, I would argue, are complicit in encouraging them. That, in the longer term, is where we need to take action. However, I completely support the Prime Minister and the action that she took on Saturday.

10.12 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last night I held a meeting in my constituency. Many experts—academics, as well as people who had worked in Syria to deal with the humanitarian crisis there in Syria—wanted me to convey to the House their universal condemnation of the heinous crimes that we have all witnessed, and that condemnation has also been expressed throughout the House. This is not just a question of chemical weapons. We must also focus on the conventional weapons that have stolen the lives of so many, injured so many more, and displaced even more again.

I am not talking about an intervention here and there; I am talking about a consistent foreign policy that will address the real crisis that we are seeing in so many failed states in the world. It confuses me that we do not talk about the consistency of the atrocities that we are witnessing in Yemen, in Gaza, in the Rohingya community and in Syria, and about applying the same processes to them. That is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has called for a war powers Act, which is essential. We need consistency if we are to engage with members of the international community, and we need consistency from them too. We must not only find a mechanism for the future, but assess the instruments that are available to us, as global players. We must ensure that the instruments of the United Nations are working effectively to serve the needs of the universal crises that we are witnessing today.

A couple of other issues were raised at the meeting last night. First, the voices of the Syrian people have not been heard in this debate. It is absolutely crucial that we listen first and foremost to the people either displaced or currently living in Syria; those voices have so much more weight. This is about Syria, not other state actors, and we must turn to it.
We must also raise the real concerns about the humanitarian efforts. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) was absolutely right to talk about the need for consistency in our approach, and whether somebody is suffering within Syria or is displaced in the region or is elsewhere in camps across Europe, it is vital that the UK steps up to the mark and fulfils its responsibility to so many people who are suffering today.

That means looking at the small number of people we have brought into our country to date and asking whether more can be done. There is a question about the Dubs amendment, and we must ask whether that is enough and whether we can, as a country, go further; I say we can.

We must also look at the way we conduct our foreign policy. I listen carefully to the words spoken in this place. Often I have heard loose language from the Foreign Secretary, or words of provocation. We need to make sure there is good governance over our foreign policy, too.

10.16 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Committing British forces is a grave responsibility; no right-thinking Prime Minister takes any pleasure in doing so, but no responsible Prime Minister should shrink from taking action where basic humanity and the national interest demand that.

On basic humanity, I fear we might as a world collectively have forgotten the peculiar horror of chemical weapons. They are particularly appalling, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) did us a service by invoking the poetry of 100 years ago. No one who heard it can fail to have been struck by some of what he quoted, and I remember as a child being appalled by the description of “white eyes writhing” in the face of a British soldier who had been affected and blood coming “gargling” from “froth-corrupted lungs”. There can be no doubt that President Assad would, if left unchecked, use this means as an easy, cheap and ruthless weapon to mop up any lingering resistance, so this must never be normalised.

The second point is that the credibility of the rules-based order is at stake. Over 190 nations are signatories to the chemical weapons convention, including Russia and Syria. To turn a blind eye is in effect to give a green light.

It is important that the rules-based order is not purely focused on chemical weapons; there are so many other aspects to this. The 1951 refugee convention sets out the rights and responsibilities of nations to grant asylum, and there is the Paris climate accord and the Geneva conventions with the restrictions on the use of mines and cluster munitions. If one pillar of the rules-based order is corroded, the whole structure is weakened, and rogue nations could become a rogue world.

It is also important to make clear the limits of this action that are in place. The UK is not in the business of regime-change. We know from history that large-scale intervention of that nature is very difficult and the middle east presents boundless opportunities to make a bad situation worse. That is not what this was about; it was targeted, limited and proportionate, and focused on protecting civilians and upholding international law. It was manifestly the right thing to do.

10.18 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I start by echoing the disappointment of many of my colleagues that there was not a parliamentary vote on this issue. The Government do not have an overall majority. Given that there were going to be legal questions, that the President of the United States was tweeting about this on Wednesday and that the Prime Minister had clearly come to the conclusion that we were going to act on Thursday, there was time for Parliament to be recalled on Friday. The points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) were powerful, and it is very regrettable that the vote did not happen.

Notwithstanding that, there is no question but that Assad is a murderous tyrant. He is undoubtedly breaking international law and guilty of war crimes. It is important to make the point that stopping someone else committing war crimes does not, in itself, mean that you have acted within the law. The measure that the Government are citing in relation to the alleviation of humanitarian suffering would count equally for the hundreds of thousands of people murdered by Assad using conventional weapons. The Government need to be clear on the legality of what they are saying. However, I entirely share their revulsion at the use of chemical weapons, and I entirely recognise why that is seen as a red line.

During the earlier statement, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said that all the evidence pointed to the attack being chlorine-based, and that the Government seem to be attacking sites at which sarin was produced. That was an important point. The fact that the President of the United States has made a glib response suggesting that this is “mission accomplished” and that it has all been dealt with is a real cause for concern. We will watch with great care to see what happens now, but the idea that we have taken a substantial step and will never see a repeat of this kind of attack is deeply questionable.

The important point has been made tonight that inaction has just as many consequences as action does. However, I do not share the shame of some of my colleagues over the vote in 2013. As the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, if we had taken a decisive step against Assad back in 2013, we would have paved the way for ISIS. It was right for us to have concerns about that vote.

I want to finish by focusing on the United Nations Security Council. I entirely recognise the Prime Minister’s concerns about Russia’s role in that. Russia is clearly acting as a block on the Security Council. We have not heard, however, whether the Government will make serious efforts to stop Russia being on the Security Council. If we are saying that the United Nations route is broken, what are we actually doing to get the international community to recognise Russia as the pariah state that it is and to stop it being a permanent member of the Security Council, where it is currently able to block any steps that we take? I look forward to hearing what the Prime Minister has to say on that. I am very concerned about the steps, but I also recognise that—

Mr Speaker: Order. Thank you very much. I call Dr Sarah Wollaston.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In her powerful opening speech, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) rightly pointed out that chemical weapons were not the only method of vile killing in Syria. However, there is a reason why their use is such a heinous crime under international law. I would like to address that, and also to make some remarks about those who fail to accept the role of Russia in attacks—not only in Syria, but here on the streets of the UK.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) spoke immensely powerfully about the effect of chlorine gas, and I would like to add some comments about nerve agents—or cholinesterase inhibitors, as those chemicals are known. They are also indiscriminate. They can affect anyone who comes into contact with them—not only the women and children who are their intended victims in Syria, but those who come to their aid. They are particularly dangerous because they persist in the environment and because their victims require intensive care facilities that are simply not available in countries such as Syria.

It is only because of the availability of that intensive care here that the three individuals affected in Britain have survived, but their injuries will be persistent. These are hideous chemicals. They attack both the peripheral and the central nervous system, leaving people’s lungs filling up with fluid while paralysing the muscles that would allow them to clear their lungs. They cause painful blurring of vision, terrible abdominal pain, muscle twitching and incontinence of bowels and urine. Nerve agents are a particularly cruel way for people to die, which is why it is absolutely right that the Prime Minister took decisive and timely action on the behalf of this House.

The lesson of 2013—I regret my vote at that time—is that inaction also has consequences. Of course, Iraq hung heavily over the debate then, and we can never know what might have been. As the hon. Member for Wirral South said, we should not constantly be looking in the rear view mirror, but we must learn from the past as we look forward. The lesson from the past is that if we do not act, we will see the increasing use with impunity of these truly hideous weapons of mass destruction. To those who say that this is not our fight, I say that it absolutely is. It is our fight in Salisbury, and it is a grave threat to humanity all around the world. To those who deny Russia’s involvement, I say look at the findings that have already been presented to the United Nations. There is incontrovertible evidence of the use of sarin gas and chlorine gas.

Proportionate and limited action has been taken to degrade the storage and production of truly horrific weapons, and I think we will all come to feel that the action that has been taken jointly with our allies will save lives in the future. It was humanitarian action. I fully support the Prime Minister, and I hope that the whole House will at some point have the opportunity to vote to show that this was the right thing to do.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful that the House has finally been provided with the opportunity to debate the merits of engaging in further military action in Syria—nearly 72 hours after the UK, US and France carried out air strikes. Whether we send our forces into action overseas is the most important decision that this House can debate. However, instead of that being fully debated here, the first reports that our forces had engaged on foreign soil came through the tweets of President Trump on Saturday morning. That is not good enough.

Let me be clear: no one in the House will think that the use of chemical weapons on innocent civilians should go unpunished. However, the Prime Minister has been unable to say to this House that the weekend’s action in Syria will absolutely prevent such acts from happening again. She has been unable to say what the long-term strategy is for ensuring the safety of civilians and bringing an end to the conflict. She has been unable to answer the question, “What is next?”

To be clear, I am not some sort of absolute pacifist. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) made a strong argument for action, stating that if we did not act, the use of chemical weapons, nerve agents and the like would become more widespread. I get that, and it is hard to disagree with that basic premise. If presented with evidence beyond reasonable doubt of an abhorrent act, clear objectives set out as part of a strategy to end the violence and a clear exit strategy with a plan for peace, I would vote for action.

We owe effective planning of any military action not only to the Syrian people, but to our armed forces before we commit them to action. By any measure, we have not had that. Instead, taken with no long term strategy or parliamentary consultation, this action risks escalating the situation in one of the most complex theatres of war ever seen on this planet, and innocent civilians will suffer the most.

We are living through the worst humanitarian crisis since the second world war, with more than 5.6 million Syrians fleeing the country and 6.1 million people having been displaced since the conflict began. The UK Government have shifted their military approach towards Syria, so the UK Government now have a duty to look again at their approach towards helping the refugees who have been displaced as a result of the violence in Syria. I accept that the Government’s work to assist refugees in the region has been good, but we must, particularly after our own escalation, do more to support those who have fled to Europe to escape the violence, particularly those children currently residing in European refugee camps. Not to do so would be an abdication.

We all want to see a peaceful resolution to the situation in Syria. The use of chemical weapons on innocent civilians is unforgivable, and those responsible must be held to account. As we seek to find a way forward, we need calm heads and strong leadership—I am not convinced that any leadership team involving President Trump offers either. His tweets leading up to the action were worthy of the school playground. If it were not for the fact that these are the cold war foes, the USA and Russia—with unpredictable, perhaps even unstable, Presidents sitting each other up—it would be funny, were it not so deadly serious.

Finding a peaceful resolution to the atrocities committed in Syria should be a cross-party endeavour that seeks to unite this House and this country. The Prime Minister’s rushing ahead without Parliament’s approval is a serious mistake, and I urge her not to make the same mistake again.
10.30 pm  

**Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this debate.

I, like many, am horrified by the Assad regime’s actions against its own people. It is beyond belief that any regime would use conventional weapons, let alone chemical weapons, against civilians, and I would expect any Government to condemn the regime and take action. The UK has the capability and the world standing to act for those who cannot. The Prime Minister has the heavy burden of judging the security assessments and making decisions to act in defence of the British people or to act on humanitarian grounds.

It therefore disappointed me that the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, chose to describe the action in Syria as “a macho strongman stand-off.” I am proud that we have a United Kingdom Prime Minister who can take the difficult ultimate decisions, because to ignore the use of chemical weapons is to encourage their use, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) made clear. If the SNP is waiting for the UN, it is clear that Russia will block it. If it is waiting for absolute proof, how? Again, the Russians and the Assad regime will block it.

This is important because it is now that we should stand shoulder to shoulder and show leadership. The hon. Member for Wirral South spoke passionately about the suffering, and we must stop the atrocities. We must act to defend international law. It is more likely that the Assad regime will take notice if the protection of its Russian overlords is undermined.

The precision of the proportionate response has demonstrated to Assad and his forces that they are not beyond the reach of international action, and I ask hon. Members here and in Holyrood to show leadership and to recognise that we can achieve our humanitarian aid ambitions, as the hon. Lady said, only if we take action. I implore the Prime Minister to take action if intelligence shows it is needed.

To argue for no action is to turn a blind eye to a far-off atrocity. We cannot say, “This is not our country and not our cause.” This is chemical weapons, this is a war crime and this is our cause.

10.32 pm  

**Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP):** I thank the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing this debate and for her powerful speech.

Earlier this month on 7 April, in the town of Douma in eastern Ghouta, the absolute horrors of chemical weapons and chemical warfare were laid bare. There were two chemical strikes in one day. At 19.45 more than 500 patients, mostly women and children, arrived at local medical facilities suffering from exposure to a chemical agent. Gassed as they sought shelter, families and loved ones were murdered in the most horrifying circumstances.

The survivors showed signs of respiratory distress, excessive oral foaming, corneal burns and the emission of a chlorine-like odour. None of us in this Chamber could have been unmoved by the distressing pictures of children that were streamed across the world revealing the atrocities unfolding in Syria, but it is important to note that eastern Ghouta has now been besieged for months. Over the last few months, more than 1,700 civilians have been killed there. The horrors of war, of chemical and conventional weapons, have terrorised the people of eastern Ghouta and the people of Syria.

In February, I raised the perilous situation with the Prime Minister, calling on her to redouble efforts in upholding UN resolutions and seeking a political solution. She pledged to work towards finding a political solution. I accept the position of leadership that the Prime Minister has, and I warmly welcome the way she has conducted herself with the other party leaders, the way she has communicated over the course of the past few days and the briefings we have had from the intelligence agencies, but Scottish National party Members cannot associate ourselves with the attacks that took place last weekend. In our opinion, the actions of the UK Government have weakened the UK’s ability to act as a peace broker to bring the warring parties back around the table.

We must see what has happened with the chemical strikes as a wake-up call to all of us, and we must redouble our efforts to make sure the Geneva talks can yield results. We must do this for the benefit of the people of Syria, who the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) talked about. As the images of children being treated for breathing difficulties and the irritation of their eyes were beamed around the world, the US President lost no time in tweeting senseless comments, telling Russia to “get ready” for a missile strike on Syria. I call on the Prime Minister, with her Government, to join me in condemning such reckless and foolish language from the President. UK foreign policy should be set by the Government, with parliamentary approval, and not by the US President or anyone else.

Last Thursday, the SNP cautioned the Prime Minister against taking a decision on airstrikes without a full parliamentary debate and vote. We called for Parliament to be recalled on Saturday and for democracy to be respected. Regrettably, we have not been able to have a debate in Government time, with a meaningful vote on a motion that we can amend. For that reason, and with considerable regret, I must signal to the House that we will seek to divide the House on the motion. We will do that because we do not believe that on the basis of a three-hour debate this evening we have had sufficient time for Members of Parliament to fully reflect and give their opinion on what has happened, and to discuss the way forward. I regret that so many of my SNP colleagues have not had the opportunity to speak on behalf of their constituents.

It is disappointing that Parliament was sidelined in favour of presidential tweets. I hope that the Prime Minister will disassociate herself from the President’s most recent tweet, which crudely stated “Mission Accomplished!” Once again, we have seen OPCW investigators disregarded and Parliament bypassed. That is why the SNP has reiterated calls for a war powers Act. [Interruption.] I regret that I can hear people saying that that is nonsense, because the Government had the responsibility, as the Father of the House said, to make sure we had a two-day debate. We owe it to the people of this country, as well as to the people of Syria, to make sure that democracy takes place, and that is what we have failed on. We must have a Government who are accountable to Parliament.
I realise that time is short, but I make the point that many countries around the world place constitutional controls on the use of military power. The SNP believes that a triple lock on military deployments, based on the principles that military actions need to be in accordance with the UN charter, and properly agreed by government and by Parliament. I shall sum up by saying that we must all do what we can to bring an end to the crisis in Syria. Efforts must be redoubled to kick-start the Geneva peace talks. The suffering of the Syrian people has gone on for too long. Will the Prime Minister leave no stone unturned in increasing diplomatic efforts to bring all sides together? For the good of the Syrian people, that is our humanitarian responsibility.

10.39 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): This is a Back-Bench-led debate, so I will be brief to give time for the Prime Minister and, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) to respond.

This debate should have taken place before action was taken—we made that clear during proceedings on the statement. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South on securing not just on the debate, but on the way in which she opened it. She is absolutely right to call on the Government to redouble their efforts to put the interests of civilians in Syria first. I hope that the whole House shares my respect for her demand and for her commitment to that cause, particularly to the cause of refugees from Syria whose lives have been torn asunder and who see ahead of them a future of waste in refugee camps all around the region, or of trying to get to Europe to try to survive. We need to have them at the forefront of our minds and just think what their memory is going to be, decades down the line, of this era in the early part of this century in which they lived in refugee camps while everybody else in the world was getting on with their lives.

The House has been asked to vote on military action in Syria twice; both times it has been heavily divided. Syria does not suffer from a lack of military action. Multiple actors have committed atrocities—chiefly the Assad Government, but also ISIS and a whole host of different groups. In a brief speech that drew on the history of the interventions in Iraq and Syria, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) described the situation in Syria as a choice between “monsters and maniacs”. I would not choose those words myself, but the primary forces in that country are indeed totally unpalatable to all of us in the House. Multiple powers are funding and arming groups on the ground, and they have been there ever since the outset of the terrible Syrian civil war seven years ago. Let us not forget, however, that human rights abuses in Syria did not begin seven years ago; it has been a place with an appalling human rights record for a very long time.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) was correct in his analysis that Russia wants to retain a regional ally that allows it to maintain a naval base in the Mediterranean. There is some equally brutal realpolitik on the part of the US in its wanting to diminish an opponent in the region. That agenda is shared by Saudi Arabia, which has also been funding various jihadi groups. Iran fears the outcome and is intervening. Israel fears a greater Iranian influence in the region, so it is intervening, too. Unfortunately, Turkey has grasped the opportunity to attack Kurdish communities across the border in Syria. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for the visit he made and his support for the Kurdish people’s right to their own identity. Whatever the final outcome in Syria, I hope that the Kurdish people are respected and get the right to their own self-identity, as they deserve.

We have a grotesque spectacle of what Lord Curzon once described as the “great game” being played out, with the Syrian people treated as expendable by too many sides. I agree with Members who have expressed their will that the Syrian people must be put first. No one pretends that diplomatic efforts are not incredibly difficult, and they are often imperfect, but they have to be an alternative to yet more military action. It is too easy to advocate bombing raids and too easy to be cynical about the potential of diplomatic efforts. We all know that the UN-led Geneva process has stalled and that the talks have collapsed, but we can also remember the limited success that was achieved by John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, which did indeed lead to the destruction of 600 tonnes of chemical weapons, overseen by the OPCW.

Mr Nigel Evans rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not giving way as there is not much time.

Everyone knows that the United Nations has to be the central part of bringing about long-term peace in the region. It is the only body capable of securing that peace. Let me be clear: we all deplore the vetoes by Russia that have prevented the process from going ahead. But let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Preserving a rules-based international system through the United Nations is in all our best interests. As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres said:

“There’s an obligation, particularly when dealing with matters of peace and security, to act consistently with the Charter of the United Nations and with international law in general. The UN Charter is very clear on these issues… I urge the Security Council to assume its responsibilities and fill this gap. I will continue to engage with Member States to help achieve this objective.”

Indeed, the Government’s own “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015” identifies “the erosion of the rules-based international order” as a particular challenge that is likely to “drive UK security priorities for the coming decade”, and one that would make it “harder to build consensus and tackle global threats.”

There are dangers in arrogating to ourselves the right to take action selectively under the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. For example, there is a crisis in Yemen, and there have been vetoes at the UN Security Council by other parties, and indeed by the UK, to prevent even moderate criticism of the pernicious role played by Saudi Arabia in that conflict. When three agencies call Yemen the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, does that give a green light to other countries to intervene on humanitarian grounds and under a right to protect? I argue that it does not.

In October 2016, the Government floated a draft resolution calling for a permanent ceasefire in that country to allow for immediate humanitarian relief and talks on a political solution, yet, seven months on, that draft resolution has still not been formally presented to...
the Security Council. Ironically, there is a danger that selective interventions can undermine an international legal process.

I pay tribute to many who have spoken in this debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who talked about the refugees and demanded that the British Government make a greater contribution. One should consider the impact on Lebanon and Turkey. Those countries are far poorer than our own, but both are hosting more than a million refugees. The impact on Greece is enormous. Germany, to its credit, has taken a very large number of refugees. We should consider the future of those children growing up in refugee camps. We have a humanitarian obligation to support refugees and children, and to offer a place of refuge to them. I ask this question: have the Government done enough? Have they done enough to support refugees and have they taken enough into this country? I argue that they have not.

The chemical weapons attacks were unbelievably disgusting, illegal and wrong. We all know that, at the end of the day, the only solution in Syria has to be condemnation and the resumption of a political process. The appalling use of chemical weapons has at least drawn the attention of the House to a crisis in which 400,000 have died, 500,000 have been made refugees, and 13 million people are in need of support. I urge the Government to do all that they can to reconvene the Geneva process and to encourage a political process that will eventually bring peace to the people of Syria.

This debate has, for the most part, been conducted with calm and dignity. We have listened with interest to what everyone has said. Let us make the call from this House that we want to see peace in Syria, and that is best brought about by a political process. Let us make our energies available to bring about that process.

10.49 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing the debate—I congratulate her on doing so. I welcomed her powerful contribution, which included her support for the action that we have taken. Nobody can doubt the passion with which she spoke about this subject. She has shown care, concern and compassion for Syrian refugees in many of her contributions in this House.

The persistent and abhorrent use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime cannot go unanswered. It is in our national interest to prevent the further use of these weapons in Syria, and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should never, ever be used.

Although I recognise that there are some issues on which there have been disagreements this evening, I welcome the widespread revulsion of this House over the use of chemical weapons, whether in Syria, on the streets of the UK, or elsewhere in the world. I welcome, too, the universal admiration and support that has been expressed today for the remarkable men and women in our armed forces. They once again put their lives on the line to serve this country, and their bravery and professionalism was essential to the success of this mission.

I would like to address head-on some of the most critical questions that have been posed about the military action that was taken. First, there was the question of whether we should have just tried harder at diplomacy. Together with our international partners, we have tried time and time again to use diplomatic channels to prevent the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against its people. The chemical weapons convention, UN Security Council resolutions and decisions of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons executive council all require Syria to produce a comprehensive declaration of its chemical weapons programme.

Following the sarin attack in eastern Damascus back in August 2013, the Syrian regime even committed to dismantle its chemical weapons programme, and Russia promised to ensure that Syria did this, overseen by the OPCW. The Leader of the Opposition referred to action that was taken, but more than five years later, the reality is that Syria did not dismantle its chemical weapons programme and the Russian guarantee had no value. Indeed, the director general of the OPCW reported just last month that Syria had not provided credible evidence to account for 22 serious issues. This includes agents present at facilities that have not been declared and types of chemical warfare agent that Syria has not declared at all. Furthermore, the OPCW has recorded more than 390 allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria since its fact-finding mission was established in 2014.

The OPCW-UN joint investigative mechanism has found Syria responsible for using chemical weapons on four occasions between 2014 and 2017, including at Talamenes in April 2014, at Sarmin and Qamenas in March 2015—both involved the regime using chlorine—and at Khan Shaykun on 4 April last year, when the regime used sarin to kill around 100 people, with a further 500 casualties. Relying on diplomatic action alone has failed to alleviate the humanitarian suffering caused by chemical weapons in each of these cases. It did not prevent the atrocity in Douma on 7 April, and it would not prevent future chemical weapons attacks either.

I remind the House that, as a number of right hon. and hon. Members have said, inaction is not an option—my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made that very clear. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that inaction would have led to more significant chemical attacks. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who I think we all recall making a passionate speech in this House on the issue of action in Syria in 2015, said that selective silence in the face of brutality is not a principle and is not a policy.

Let me address one of the biggest concerns that I know many people had in advance of the decision to take this military action in Syria: would such action make things worse? I was clear that the answer is no, but only because of the specific and precise nature of the intervention that we have made. This action was not about intervening in a civil war and it was not about regime change. Neither have we begun a long military campaign; the action that we have taken was limited and targeted. It was purely about alleviating further humanitarian suffering in Syria caused by chemical weapons attacks by degrading the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring the use of these weapons in Syria and beyond. So this was a limited, targeted and
effective strike with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Did the prospect of a retaliation of a cyber nature from the Government of Russia feature in the Prime Minister’s calculation?

The Prime Minister: As I said during my statement, of course, when we were considering taking this action, we considered a whole variety of ways in which reaction might be possible, but as I also said in response to a number of hon. Members, we ensured that we took the action in a way that reduced the risk of escalation taking place. As I have said, the way we did this expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties. But if the hon. Gentleman is talking about the possibility of Russian cyber-attacks, he does not have to wait for us to take action in Syria for Russia to get involved in cyber-attacks on this country or, indeed, on many other countries.

Together with our allies, we have hit a centre for the research and development of Syria’s chemical and biological programme, we have hit a chemical weapons command post that contained both a chemical weapons equipment storage facility and an important command post, and we have hit a location of Syrian sarin and precursor production equipment whose destruction would degrade Syria’s ability to deliver sarin in the future. Hitting these targets with the force we have used will not have a negative impact on the already complex situation in Syria. What it will do is significantly degrade the Syrian regime’s ability and willingness to research, develop and deploy chemical weapons. That is a good thing for the Syrian people and for the security of the wider world.

As we consider our action, we should recognise the role that Russia has played in Syria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and I believe that it is important that we are providing this significant amount of support in the region as the second-biggest bilateral donor. We have been able to provide healthcare, educational and other support to hundreds of thousands of children in Syria and the surrounding countries for the same investment that it would take to support 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children here in the United Kingdom.

These are not easy decisions to take, but it is right to get a balance of support in the region, which enables us to give more support to more people and more children, and at the same time to bring here those who are particularly vulnerable and in need. The hon. Lady is right: while the military action was focused on degrading chemical weapons, we need that wider effort in terms of resolving the conflict in Syria, dealing with Daesh and continuing to press for action in the Geneva process.

This year, we mark the centenary of the end of the first world war, brought home to us starkly this evening by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). The international community came together at that point to stop the use of chemical weapons. This weekend Britain, France and America sent a clear message to those who seek to rip up the international rulebook: stop, and stop now.

11 pm

Alison McGovern: I want to finish this debate by thanking each and every Member who has contributed. I want to thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has made a special effort to come for the end of the debate; I have always appreciated his friendship in this matter. I want to thank all those Members who wrote to you, Mr Speaker, in support of the debate. What we do in this House, we do best when we do it together. I want to thank the Prime Minister. I may disagree with her on many issues, but today I have admired her fortitude.

Most of all, I want to thank Syrians—Syrians in the UK and Syrians elsewhere in the world who have shared with me their experience and told me what they have been through. It is they and they alone who should listen most carefully. I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, too. He heard my message that we ought to focus on Syrians. The Father of the House described me as elegant if idealistic. That is a badge I am proud to wear. [HON. MEMBERS: “Which one?”] Both.

The Leader of the Opposition describes neither of the primary forces in Syria in very glowing terms. Perhaps it is idealistic to think that the primary forces for Syria are Syrian civilians, but that, I am afraid, is what I think. It is them we ought to listen to. I am glad that the Prime Minister heard what we all have to say. I remain deeply uncertain about her strategy, and I am sure, not taking for granted the views of my colleagues, that the all-party parliamentary group on friends of Syria will want to write to her.
I will finish where I began, with the words of Jo Cox. She said:

“British policy on Syria has wandered aimlessly, a deadly mix of timidity and confusion. The lack of a coherent response, not just by Britain but by the wider international community, has allowed the situation in Syria to fester”.

It must end.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly.

The House divided: Ayes 314, Noes 36.

Division No. 136] [11.3 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afzami, Sam
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Peter
Berrymen, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Aliastair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Choose, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coaffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davis, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Helen
Dodd, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downend, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Fryer, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Gammier, 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
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Phillip
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
Heap, rh James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollihan, Kevin
Hollonbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudson, rh Sir Alan
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
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen

NOES

Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
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
Mercer, Johnny
Mercrim, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs 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
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Priti, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Resolved,
That this House has considered the current situation in Syria and the UK Government’s approach.

**LASER MISUSE (VEHICLES) BILL [LORDS]**

_Bill to be read a Second time tomorrow._

**Mr Speaker:** I always make this point but I make it again: if, unaccountably, Members or others are leaving the Chamber or its environs because they do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) address the House on the important matter that awaits, I trust that they will do so quickly and quietly, so that the rest of us in large numbers can listen with rapt attention to the hon. Gentleman.

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Stuart Andrew and Mike Freer

**Tellers for the Noes:**
Kirsty Blackman and David Linden

**Question accordingly agreed to.**
Cyber-bullying: Young People’s Mental Health

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

11.20 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am delighted to be able to lead this debate, even at this comparatively late hour, about the effect of cyber-bullying on young people’s mental health. This important debate arises out of a cross-party inquiry that I set up in Parliament to look into this issue and which published its report earlier this year. It took evidence from over 1,000 young people and was supported by the excellent charities the Children’s Society and YoungMinds, which showed conspicuous dedication, skill and professionalism. Without them, this important work could not have been done. I am very grateful too to colleagues from across the House—Conservative, Labour and Scottish National party colleagues—for their valuable input, as well as to the many witnesses who gave evidence.

Just to provide a bit of context, this all really arises out of my experiences as a constituency MP. I visited schools in Cheltenham, from Bourneside to All Saints’, and I spoke to parents and agencies such as Teens in Crisis, which has been commissioned by some schools to provide regular support. I became deeply struck—I fancy that other hon. Members in this House have as well—by the apparent increase in child and adolescent mental health problems. To me at any rate, it does not feel so much like a temporary spike, but more like a lasting surge. I want to say a bit about that before turning to the specific issue of cyber-bullying and what our inquiry found.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): As a member of that panel, I want to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend for his permission beforehand to intervene. With 20% of young people—that is one in five—indicating that their fear of cyber-bullies makes them reluctant to go to school, does he agree that much more must be done to thwart the faceless keyboard warriors who are making the lives of so many young people so very difficult?

Alex Chalk: I do agree. The hon. Gentleman makes the point very powerfully, and in a moment I will develop why I agree with him so wholeheartedly. I found from speaking to young people that the role of social media has become impossible to ignore. It is not the only issue, of course, but it is a recurrent theme. Although there appeared to be a correlation between the rise of social media and the decline in adolescent mental health, I, colleagues and hon. Members wanted to know if there was causation, too. The report provided powerful evidence to suggest that there is.

By way of context, I should make it clear what the inquiry and this debate are not about. The inquiry was not set up to blame all the world’s ills on the internet or social media. My view is that social media is broadly a force for good. Equally, the internet as a whole fosters social mobility and opportunity. It spreads ideas and enhances freedom across the world. The inquiry did not seek to address all the concerns posed by social media use either. It deliberately left out the issues of fake news, sexting, sleep deprivation and others. All those are important but have been traversed elsewhere, and dealing with them would have made the report unwieldy and unfocused.

Instead, the report and this debate are about one issue only, cyber-bullying, and that is because the evidence from young people, including those we spoke to in the inquiry, suggested it was the single biggest risk factor in mental ill health associated with social media use. We wanted to drill down on that by taking evidence not just from young people but from experts in brain development, and the evidence from more than 1,000 young people was clear: cyber-bullying can be utterly devastating. It is relentless and inescapable. We heard harrowing evidence from young people taken to the very edge of despair. No one is saying of course that bullying does not exist in the analogue world, but it is this added toxic cyber layer, with its extraordinary capacity to amplify torment, that can prove so destructive.

What is so troubling is that the inquiry also found that children are using social media at a very early age—61% had a social media account at the age of 12 or under—and for a long time too: nearly half use it for more than three hours a day and nearly 10% check their social media feeds between midnight and 6 am, with girls twice as likely as boys to be high-intensity users. A troubling proportion—68%—of young people were affected by cyber-bullying, and the medical evidence showed that its impact could last into adulthood, with what one expert called “lasting consequences on the adolescent brain”.

It seems that this searing experience can be a scarring one too.
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his powerful speech tonight. I speak as an MP from Scotland, where this is very topical, the issue of revenge porn online having been highlighted in the Sunday Herald. My colleague Councillor Rhiannon Spear, a young female councillor in Glasgow, had a powerful impact this weekend when she talked about boys taking photographs of her naked and posting them on Twitter. Does he agree that the Government need to look more at revenge porn, given how these images are distributed on social media and the impact it has on young people’s mental health?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman rightly raises a really important point. It is only recently of course that revenge porn has become a criminal offence, but I dare say there is more that could be done. It is just one aspect of the hinterland of cyber-bullying but an extremely important one to raise.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing us tremendous service by bringing this topic to the House. To what extent is anonymous bullying a factor? We all know from before the age of the internet the devastating effect of poison pen letters, even on a small scale; here one can have anonymised poison pen electronic letters that are accessible worldwide. Is it people who are known to victims mainly or is it people sheltering behind anonymity?

Alex Chalk: That is an extremely good point. In truth, it is both, and not only is it the nature of the bullying but the volume. Social media provides the opportunity, whether through sham accounts, spoof accounts or whatever, to multiply the torment, so my right hon. Friend raises such an important issue.

The most striking thing of all perhaps was that 83% of the young people told our inquiry that they considered the social media companies should do more to tackle this scourge. They felt that the onus was on the victim to act—to block or delete—and that reporting all too often felt like shouting into an empty room. There is a perceived lack of consequences for those who engage in bullying behaviour online in a way that is different from real life. There is some evidence from some platforms of temporary sanctions for cyber-bullies to nudge them back to good behaviour, but they remain the exception.

In fairness, the message is starting to get through. In his new year 2018 message, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, vowed to “fix Facebook”. One of the priorities he highlighted was “protecting our community from abuse and hate”, and he admitted that enforcement of house policies was failing. I am afraid we concluded that he was right. It is particularly impactful and devastating when the people who are being affected are under the age of 18. They are just children.

While we were grateful for the constructive engagement of social media companies—and it is true to say that the larger companies tended to take the issue more seriously—the unavoidable overall impression was that announcements and measures were largely tokenistic: slow and inadequate. Because there was so little transparency about the number of reports and the nature of the response, it was, in effect, impossible to determine whether the resources allocated bore any relation to the scale of the problem. The companies essentially continue to mark their own homework. As one witness put it, companies faced with growing alarm about the implications for young people’s mental health are “walking backwards slowly”. That is not acceptable, because our evidence showed that those failures have an impact on children and young people, and that the effect is particularly profound, concerning and long-lasting.

It is important to emphasise that tackling cyber-bullying must be a joint endeavour. Parents, guardians and teachers all have a role to play, but it is equally true that when it comes to minors, social media companies bear responsibility as well. It is simply not enough to sign children up and then just let them get on with it. It is important for the companies to be age-appropriate, and to do more to identify under-13s and, when appropriate, gain explicit consent from parents or guardians. They should provide timely, effective and consistent responses to online bullying, and they must become more accountable. What do I mean by that? I mean that they must publish data about their responses to reports of online bullying. Only then—if we know the number of reports, and the nature and timeliness of the responses—will any sensible assessment of the efficacy of those responses be possible.

As for the Government, I think that they ought to do what they reasonably can to improve our understanding of the role of social media in adolescent mental health. We are very much in the scientific foothills of our understanding of these issues, and the firmest possible evidence base will help to tailor the best solutions. I recognise, however, that the Government have gone a long way with the digital charter to increase the tempo, and I urge them to continue that important work.

My final comments are thanks. I thank the young people—more than 1,000 of them—who responded to the inquiry and gave evidence, and without whom the report would have had no currency. It was their evidence that gave its conclusions their heft, and it was their experience that left such a marked impression on all who took part in the inquiry.

11.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this timely debate on the important issue of the effects of cyber-bullying on young people’s mental health. He articulated extremely well the challenges that we need to tackle, and I agreed with much of what he had to say about them.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the report that was published recently. As he said, 1,000 young people participated in the inquiry and produced a useful body of evidence from which to draw conclusions. I also thank the Children’s Society and YoungMinds for their role in the inquiry. I met representatives of YoungMinds today, and I have regular dialogues with them on the broader issues relating to the mental health of children and young people. They are very important partners for us in this context.

As my hon. Friend recognised, a number of Departments have an interest in this matter. I have often said that silo culture is the enemy of good policy making, and I am pleased to say that the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are
all approaching the issue from their own unique perspectives, and attacking it from different angles. We are all committed to tackling the scourge of cyber-bullying, although, as my hon. Friend pointed out, it is an emerging issue that requires careful consideration of the evidence and joint working to enable us to start stemming the flow. He was right to say that we need to draw conclusions in a timely way to ensure that we have the appropriate tactics for prevention.

It is important to recognise that the term “cyber-bullying” is often misleading. We are talking about two separate elements. Bullying is a kind of behaviour that can take many forms, and social and other cyber-media are tools for that bullying. As my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) have said, this has become a particularly acute problem to tackle as those tools can be anonymous. That dehumanises both the bully and the victim, and if we do not get it under control more effectively it will become the epidemic my hon. Friend has warned of.

Turning to what the Government are doing, the Department of Health and Social Care is focusing on improving services for children and young people’s mental health. We know that children and young people’s mental health services need to improve, and we have a programme of work under way, supported by more than £1.4 billion of additional funding, to achieve just that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham will know, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education recently published a joint Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health, which was supported by a further £300 million.

Through that Green Paper, we acknowledged the potential impact of social media and the internet on children and young people’s mental health, but, most significantly, we identified that effective mental health care for young people does not have to take place in a clinical setting. That reinforces the importance of getting the right support in schools, which underlines my hon. Friend’s priority of preventive measures. That is why we are placing much more support in and around schools, where young people spend so much of their time.

We are also taking action to use the digital world to our advantage, using positive digital interventions for mental health. For example, NHS Digital is producing an apps library that brings together a number of digital tools to help improve health, including mental health and wellbeing, for all ages. Over time, many more tools will be added to the library to support more health needs and drive up quality.

Turning to the online world, where I think my hon. Friend is more interested in holding other agencies to account, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport last year published our internet safety strategy Green Paper. A response to the consultation process will be published imminently, and I am sure my hon. Friend will be first in the queue to read its conclusions. It will include a number of preventive initiatives to tackle cyber-bullying so that all users of all ages feel confident in being online. For example, during the consultation we proposed a voluntary social media code of practice. The intention is for the code to provide guidance to platforms about how they should tackle abusive behaviour and content and support all users, because adults can be bullied just as much as children on social media platforms.

I personally think the providers can do a great deal more. My hon. Friend referred specifically to Facebook. While Mark Zuckerberg’s comments to which he referred are welcome, I think a lot more can be done. Given that reporting to social media companies is low among those who recognise that they have been cyber-bullied, and that children have little confidence in social media companies to resolve cyber-bullying, the internet safety strategy Green Paper also involved consultation on annual online safety transparency reporting by companies. That reporting is intended to both develop better understanding of the extent of bullying behaviours and encourage those who are being bullied to make referrals to those companies. Social media companies must do more to raise awareness and improve the clarity of their reporting mechanisms in relation to cyber-bullying, and we hope that improving transparency reporting will help improve the likelihood of young people reporting these issues in the future.

As I have said, however, this is not an online-only issue, and the Department for Education is taking action to prevent bullying in general as well as cyber-bullying. All schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying. The Government have already put in place a number of powers and a range of support to enable schools to prevent and tackle cyber-bullying. For example, headteachers have the power to regulate pupils’ conduct when they are not on school premises. Where bullying outside school is reported to teachers, it must be investigated and acted on. We have also ensured that schools have the power to ban, limit the use of, or search mobile phones in school, and the Government Equalities Office funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop cyber-bullying guidance for schools and an online safety toolkit to help schools deliver sessions about cyber-bullying, peer pressure and sexting. I can advise the House that the Department for Education is also providing £1.75 million of funding over two years to support schools in tackling bullying, with cyber-bullying being an integral element of that.

Returning to the role of social media companies, we really believe that they have a central role to play. That is why we set up a joint working group with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to discuss how to make progress in specific areas, particularly that of age verification. My hon. Friend said that many young people are spending a great deal of time online—more than was good for their health—and we want to explore time limits. On the question of age verification, I am clear that the social media companies could do a lot more to protect young people. The reality is that if they can collaborate on developing apps that allow people to harvest data, they can use the intelligence on their platforms to identify young people and communicate with them. We recognise that some companies have existing work in place, and we congratulate them on that, but a lot more can be done. There are significant challenges to overcome, and there remains a need for further action to be taken. We are actively encouraging companies to work with us and to make tangible progress in this area.
We have heard what the Government are doing to tackle these problems as they arise, but we also need to recognise that, without further research, our efforts will not reach the level that we need and that young people deserve. We have heard the statistics already this evening. Social media and the internet are an ever-growing part of children's and young people's lives. As my hon. Friend has said, some individuals are spending an inordinate amount of time online. More than half of 12-year-olds have a social media profile, and those are the people who really need our protection. However, although evidence has shown links between increases in social media use and poorer mental health, it is not clear whether that increased use causes poorer mental health, or whether poorer mental health drives an increase in use of social media. We need to develop more evidence on that.

We should also recognise that there are positive impacts of social media use that can really improve the lives of children and young people suffering with mental health issues. It can build a community that they can access to increase their self-esteem and get social support. In practice, that could mean children collaborating on projects through better online communities—for example, a homework WhatsApp group for people in the same class or a Twitter hashtag for those studying for school or university exams. So let us keep a balance here: there are some positives. Young people also take advantage of being able to access supportive online networks of people with similar health conditions, which could be more difficult in the offline world.

I should also like to welcome the Science and Technology Committee's recently launched inquiry into the effects of social media on young people's health. I am sure that my hon. Friend is about the need to take action to tackle and prevent the increase in cyber-bullying, as well as the need to improve the support available to those suffering as a result of it. We are incorporating such action within related work streams across the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It is clear that a cultural shift is needed to ensure that future generations do not accept cyber-bullying as the norm, and that they know when and how to access support and help. We need to make it clear what online behaviour is acceptable and what is not. We have made it clear as a Government that we are prepared to work with social media and technology companies in this area, and, like my hon. Friend, we expect them to take significant further steps. However, the buck stops with them. The ball is in their court and they need to do much more. We will continue to maintain the dialogue on that basis. I thank my hon. Friend again for raising this important issue. I have no doubt that we will come back to the subject again.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With the blessing of the Government Whip here present, may I ask whether any steps have been taken to reinstate the curtain-and-commode system that used to envelop the Chair, so that on occasions like today, when you have sat there continuously from when the House first met until the House adjourns this evening, you might be able to do so in a little more comfort?

Mr Speaker: Well, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I am not aware that any such steps are planned. In so far as my personal comfort is a matter of interest or concern to the right hon. Gentleman, which is very touching, and might conceivably be to other colleagues, I can assure him and them that I have not felt other than comfortable, privileged and exhilarated to have been in the Chair for the past nine and a quarter hours.

Question put and agreed to.

11.46 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 17 April 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

1. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What progress has been made on reducing tax avoidance and evasion.

2. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What progress has been made on reducing tax avoidance and evasion.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Since 2010, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has secured more than £175 billion that would have gone unpaid and introduced more than 100 new measures to crack down on tax avoidance, tax evasion and other forms of non-compliance, so that the tax gap is now at a record low, and one of the lowest in the world, at 6%.

Alex Chalk: It is extremely encouraging that the UK tax gap is at a record low, but it appears that multinationals are trying to run rings around HMRC, so will my right hon. Friend outline what further steps the Government are taking to build on that excellent success?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is a great achievement to have got the tax gap down to one of the lowest in the world, but we are not complacent. We are currently calling for evidence on whether online platforms should play a greater role in ensuring tax compliance by their users; we are consulting on an innovative split payment method to tackle online VAT fraud; and we will continue to lead in the G20 and other forums on seeking agreed multilateral solutions to the challenge of where and how to tax global digital companies, which are particularly difficult to tax under the current system.

Nigel Mills: I echo the praise for HMRC’s performance in tackling tax avoidance and evasion over recent years. Is the Chancellor becoming more convinced of the importance of having public country-by-country reporting, so that not only HMRC but customers and campaigners can see where multinationals are making their profit? That way, we can make sure that they are paying the right tax in the right countries.

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend will know, the UK was one of the first countries to implement the OECD model for country-by-country reporting to tax authorities. Those reports have been required for periods that started on or after 1 January 2016. On public reporting, the Government are committed to a multilateral approach to ensure that reporting provides comprehensive information and is fair between UK-headquartered and non-UK-headquartered multinationals. We are engaging constructively on the EU proposals for public country-by-country reporting, which we see as a step in the right direction.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Chancellor will be aware of President Macron’s proposal for taxing the revenue of the big internet platforms, which the Chancellor acknowledges are difficult to tax under the existing rules. Are the Government considering building on the entente cordiale of recent days by co-operating with and learning from the French model for how we should tax that revenue?

Mr Hammond: I would not call it a French model; it is a Franco-German initiative. We have been working closely with the French and the Germans on this issue. We discussed it at the G20 in Buenos Aires a couple of weeks ago and we will discuss it again at the informal ECOFIN meeting in Sofia at the end of next week. The Government’s position is that we are supportive of the EU proposals, but we want to be clear that any such measure can only be a temporary solution. The long-term solution has to be an agreed multilateral approach to the taxation of the digital economy. That requires us to get the United States on side, because most of these global digital companies are domiciled there. Without the United States’ co-operation and support, it will be difficult to make any tax system sustainable.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is critical that HMRC collects tax correctly. To that end, will Ministers tell me when I am likely to receive a reply to my letter of 6 February regarding the Roadchef case? HMRC is still to settle with the Roadchef employees benefit trust in respect of money paid to HMRC as tax in error.

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury tells me that he agreed to meet the hon. Gentleman but has not heard from him to arrange a meeting. Let me reiterate on my right hon. Friend’s behalf that he would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this case.

Mr Speaker: Young Philp was standing a moment ago. The fella has stopped standing. Do you want to get in there, man? Go for it.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; I could hardly resist such encouragement.

I wished only to say how much I welcomed the Government’s recent paper, published by the Financial Secretary—[Interruption.] There is a serious point. The paper on corporate tax and the digital economy demonstrated again that this country is showing leadership. I encourage the Treasury to look into working with the European Union on a sales tax, and even to consider a user tax, if we can do that more quickly.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s job application is in the post.

Mr Hammond: Thank you for your very carefully tailored piece of demand stimulation, Mr Speaker. It was much appreciated for the economy of the Chamber. My hon. Friend is right. As I have already said, working with the EU on this interim proposal for a turnover-based tax is, we believe, the right thing to do. We have, of course, also introduced an interim measure of our own, seeking to tax licence fees that are paid to low-tax jurisdictions where we judge that the underlying basis of the licence fee is economic activity taking place in the UK. We have that measure already in place, and we will continue to work with the EU on its proposed measure.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Despite promising to tighten up on Scottish Limited Partnerships, not a single non-compliant SLP appears to have been fined, which could have raised up to £2.2 billion. When will SLPs be banned, and what action are the Government taking on other shell companies to stop tax fiddling and money laundering?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady asks a specific and detailed question about Scottish Limited Partnerships. The legislation is designed to deter the kind of activity to which she refers. The absence of fines should not be taken as an indication of an absence of activity. As she will know, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs always seeks, first of all, to deter non-compliant behaviour before it moves into hard compliance. If I may, I will write to her with a more detailed answer on the very specific point about Scottish Limited Partnerships.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To follow up on that question about Scottish Limited Partnerships, I am concerned that the Chancellor is not able to stand up and talk about tangible action that he is taking on this matter. This has been a live issue for a very long period of time. Will he commit to taking action on Scottish Limited Partnerships?

Mr Hammond: What I can commit to the House is this: wherever HMRC detects non-compliant behaviour, it will act, but it is for HMRC to determine how best to act in individual cases, and it is right that Ministers do not have direct involvement in HMRC pursuing individual cases. I will write to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), and I am sure that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) will be interested in that reply.

Kirsty Blackman: There were 2,800 Scottish Limited Partnerships registered last year, only 1,100 of which have registered persons of significant control. That is a very low percentage. Of that 1,100, 172 are registered as belonging to Russian individuals. Given all that is happening just now, it is vital that the Chancellor takes urgent action on this—not just a letter at some point in the future. This needs to happen as soon as possible.

Mr Hammond: I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets the letter as soon as possible. It is right to focus on groups that are using structures for non-compliance or purposes that we would wish to deter, and HMRC will always do so. I will update her by letter, hopefully later today.

Tax: Small Businesses

2. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will reduce taxes on small businesses.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Government are bearing down tirelessly on the tax burden on businesses of all sizes, reducing corporation tax from 28% for large companies in 2010 to 19% today, and for small businesses from 21% to 19%. We will go still further, reducing the burden to 17% by 2020. For unincorporated businesses, we are, of course, increasing the personal allowance, in the previous Budget, to £11,850. That will increase further to £12,500 in 2020—further relief to many small businesses.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that encouraging answer. Businesses are, of course, unpaid tax collectors for the Exchequer and the Federation of Small Businesses recently estimated that businesses spend, on average, three working weeks a year on tax compliance. Is there anything further that the Minister can do to reduce that kind of expensive burden on businesses?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the FSB’s report. I have not only read it, but met the FSB to discuss the report in detail. I highlight to the House two of its important recommendations: one is around better guidance on taxation, and I have tasked officials on that mission within HMRC; and the second is Making Tax Digital, which we are rolling out for VAT-registered companies in 2019. The report states that this “presents an opportunity to simplify and speed up tax compliance.”

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Is the Minister not concerned that the Office for Budget Responsibility report into welfare trends from January this year estimates that £1.5 billion of support for small businesses will be taken from them through the minimum income floor in universal credit? The Select Committee on Work and Pensions heard that 70% of small businesses currently last for 18 months, but that that will reduce to 20% for those on universal credit. Small businesses will be strangled at birth.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady neglects to mention the fact that small business confidence in the UK is now in positive territory for the first time in many years. We have gone to great lengths within the tax system, as I have just explained, to reduce the burden on small businesses. We rolled out £9 billion of business rates relief in the 2016 Budget and a further £2.3 billion of relief in the autumn Budget last year. We will continue to be on the side of small businesses.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): A significant number of businesses in west Cornwall and the constituency of St Ives, which I represent, are facing extreme hardship because of business rate increases in 2017 and 2018. This is becoming a burden that is too great for them to bear. What immediate help can the Minister make available to these hard-working business owners?
**Mel Stride:** As I have just identified, the Government have done a huge amount to reduce the burden of business rates. We recognise the important fact that these taxes need to be paid, irrespective of whether businesses are profitable or otherwise. That is why we have gone to such lengths, providing £9 billion of relief in 2016, including transitional relief for those facing the largest potential increases in business rates, and a further £2.3 billion by way of bringing forward by two years the change in the indexation of business rates from retail prices index to consumer prices index, saving businesses £2.3 billion over the next few years.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Business rates are really hitting businesses in York, particularly in the retail sector. This is having a huge impact on our city. On 8 March 2017, the Chancellor promised this House a complete review of business rates, yet we have only seen sticking plasters from the Government. When will that review begin?

**Mel Stride:** The business rates review is being undertaken by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

**Productivity**

3. **Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con):** What fiscal steps his Department is taking to increase productivity.  

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** My hon. Friend is asking the right question. The only way to deliver a high-wage, high-skill economy of the future and to sustainably raise living standards is to raise our productivity growth rate. This requires investment by the Government in infrastructure, skills, and research and development. Since 2010, this Government have provided over half a trillion pounds in capital investment, increased investment in skills and reduced taxes for business. But raising the productivity growth rate also requires action at the level of the firm. Lower taxes provide a strong incentive for businesses to invest in raising their productivity. These tax reductions include the £9 billion package to reduce business rates that the Financial Secretary has just mentioned.

**Andrea Jenkyns:** Productivity is a key element in determining our future standard of living. The current productivity gap in Yorkshire and the Humber provides great opportunities for growth. However, significant and sustained investment is required to achieve this. Will my right hon. Friend commit to the excellent northern powerhouse project and ensure that the region gets the vital investment in infrastructure that it needs to improve productivity?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend is right again. We will only build an economy that works for everyone and every region if we succeed in narrowing the regional productivity gap. For that reason, the Government are fully committed to the northern powerhouse project. We have announced a funding boost of £436 million to improve transport connections within the northern city regions through the transforming cities fund, with a further £840 million to be competitively allocated to the largest cities in England. This builds on the record amounts of more than £13 billion over this Parliament that we are already investing in northern transport, which is more than any previous Government.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** One of the ways in which the Chancellor could improve productivity across south Wales and beyond is to invest in the tidal lagoon project, which will bring skills and investment to the area, in line with what he said in answer to the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). So may I encourage him please to bring this investment forward and start delivering for the people of south Wales?

**Mr Hammond:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the tidal lagoon project is under careful consideration by the Government, and a decision will be made and announced in due course.

**Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con):** One of the consequences of increasing productivity is of course higher wage growth, which I think would make everyone feel much better. The Chancellor may be aware of the Treasury Committee’s recent report on childcare, which called for more childcare support for those undergoing retraining—another way of increasing productivity. What were his thoughts on that, and what is his progress on talks with the national retraining scheme?

**Mr Hammond:** I am happy to tell my right hon. Friend that we have had a very productive first meeting with the CBI and the Trades Union Congress to flesh out the shape of the national retraining partnership, which is clearly going to be a crucial part of our investment in skills in future. I do take her point on childcare. We have of course seen the Select Committee’s report and will respond to it in due course.

**Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab):** On 6 April, the Treasury bizarrely used a “thumbs up” emoji in a tweet celebrating the worst decade of productivity figures since 1817. I will help the Chancellor with the arithmetic—that is 201 years ago. I know that he has a new-found Tiggerish optimism, but is not his Department’s tweet, even with his misplaced exuberance, more like self-delusion for which local government, the police, the NHS, the fire service and public services more generally are paying the price?

**Mr Hammond:** We have a challenge in this country around productivity, and it is not a new challenge, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. For eight years, the OBR has estimated UK productivity growth, and on eight occasions it has had to revise down the estimates that it had made. This is a long-term challenge facing this country. Rather than trading insults about what has happened in the past, I suggest that the most constructive approach would be for us to work on improving the UK’s productivity performance. That means investing in infrastructure—this Government have committed half a trillion pounds of capital investment since 2010—addressing the skills gap, ensuring that capital is available to businesses, and addressing management challenges at the level of the firm. All those strands need to be taken forward together if we are going to create the high-tech, high-wage economy that we all want to see in this country.
Children’s Services: Funding

4. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the adequacy of funding for children’s services.  

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In 2016-17, local authorities spent £11.9 billion on children’s services and childcare support, and we have seen child development outcomes improve significantly since 2013.

Tracy Brabin: With the number of young people subject to child protection inquiries rising by 140% in the past decade, it is deeply troubling that by 2020 there will be a £2 billion funding gap in children’s services. The Minister knows as well as I do that local authorities are crying out for more support, so what urgent funding can she now make available to protect these vulnerable children?

Elizabeth Truss: First, we have actually increased the spending for the most vulnerable by £1 billion since 2010. That is funding for the most vulnerable through local authorities. I would point out to the hon. Lady that the important thing is the outcomes we are achieving. The fact that child development outcomes have improved since 2013 and that more children are getting that good level of development shows that we are investing our money in the right areas.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): There can be no greater service to children than that provided by our teachers. The Chancellor has been very generous in helping the people in these jobs to achieve more at the same time as giving them a pay rise. The situation in schools is different. Headteachers have much more power over what they pay individual teachers. In fact, last year schools is different. Headteachers have much more power over what they pay individual teachers. In fact, last year teachers got an average pay rise of 4.6%, including over what they pay individual teachers. In fact, last year teachers got an average pay rise of 4.6%, including what we do with that money, and that is why the Home Secretary has outlined the serious violence strategy to deal with that issue.

Small and Medium-sized Cities: Infrastructure

5. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to invest in the infrastructure of small and medium-sized cities.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): In this Parliament, investment, including in infrastructure, will be at its highest sustained level since the 1970s, and our cities large and small are an important part of that strategy. We recently launched the £1.7 billion Transforming Cities fund to upgrade infrastructure, in addition to £345 million of funding for local road projects in England.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for his response and for meeting me recently. Does he agree that cities such as Stoke-on-Trent are perfectly placed to benefit from investment through the Transforming Cities fund?

Robert Jenrick: I quite agree: Stoke-on-Trent is exactly the kind of city that we designed the Transforming Cities fund to benefit. From the meeting we had, I know that my hon. Friend sees opportunity in Stoke—in Stoke station, at junction 15 on the M6 and in the proposal for a ceramics park. With the dynamic Conservative leadership in Stoke at the moment, we look forward to receiving that application.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not often get angry in the Chamber, but can I ask the Minister to stop spending his time in Maidenhead and Runnymede and come to the real towns and cities of this country like Huddersfield, where we can see the deterioration of infrastructure everywhere we look? That is because this Government have cut and cut local authority spending—that is the truth. He should get out more and see what this country is really like.

Robert Jenrick: The independent Infrastructure and Projects Authority has said that by the end of this Parliament, central Government funding for infrastructure will be greater in the north than in the south. The hon. Gentleman is speaking to the wrong Minister if he thinks that we do not care about the north. This son of a Liverpudlian and a Mancunian, born in Wolverhampton and representing North Nottinghamshire, needs no lessons from him.

Mr Speaker: I accept that Huddersfield is a most admirable place. My grandma lived there all her life, as I have told the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) before. Splendid place, splendid woman.

Mr Sheerman: And a good football team!

Mr Speaker: Indeed, that too.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Cities are important, but so too are seaside towns such as Weymouth. We desperately need investment in those places, or they will just go to rack and ruin. Having met a Minister from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local
Government recently, I understand that Government are looking at initiatives for towns and seaside towns. Can the Minister confirm that that is true? If so, what money will be available?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government’s strategy is not limited to cities. The Transforming Cities programme is for our smaller and larger cities, but we are also interested in coastal towns and communities. I recently met a number of parliamentary colleagues representing those communities, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about how the Treasury will be working with CLG.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that as we leave the EU, many people across the United Kingdom will want to see economic development beyond the south-east of England, and that enterprise zones such as the one in my constituency could be used to maximise inward investment and produce productivity and prosperity for everyone across the UK?

Robert Jenrick: I entirely agree. That is why we are working with Mayors such as the Mayor of Tees Valley, who is producing a development corporation and has new powers of planning reform and so on to drive forward the economy of that part of the north-east. We are very happy to talk to other hon. Members who would like to take forward similar proposals.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

6. Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): How much his Department has spent on preparing for the possibility of no deal with the EU when the UK leaves the EU.

[904779]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that in the spring statement we allocated £1.5 billion to make sure that we are prepared for all eventualities in the European negotiations.

Mr Bone: I am grateful to the deputy Chancellor for her response. Has she had an opportunity to look at table 4.28 in the Office for Budget Responsibility report accompanying the autumn Budget, which shows a Brexit dividend of £55 billion in the four years between 2019 and 2023? Does the deputy Chancellor agree with her own figures showing that leaving the EU will be a great economic benefit to this country?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There is indeed money that will be released as a result of our leaving the European Union. We are working on the spending review, which will take place next year, and part of the job of that spending review will be looking at how we allocate that money domestically.

24. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many of my constituents work in the financial sector—the financial services sector, specifically. Does the Chancellor not recognise that the closest possible alignment with the single market is the best possible outcome for this vital sector?

Ruth Cadbury: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently made a speech outlining the future of financial services and making sure we get the best possible deal with the European Union. Let us remember that London is a global financial centre—it was recently rated the best in the world—and as well as getting the best deal with the EU, we need to make sure that we can trade with the rest of the world.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It seems to me that over recent months the UK has changed its position from negotiating the final deal before the transition period to negotiating the final deal during the transition period. Is not the reality that the British Government’s negotiating position will be considerably weakened once we have left the EU?

Elizabeth Truss: We have made huge progress in the European negotiations. We are seeing business confidence increasing and investment increasing, and by this autumn we should have agreed a clear framework with the EU so that businesses have certainty about future investment.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The UK’s economic growth in the final quarter of 2017 was the weakest of any economy in the G7, and the OBR is forecasting that the UK is on course for our worst period of economic growth since the end of the second world war. However, none of these already dire forecasts factors in a no-deal Brexit, which would have a severe impact on jobs, growth and tax revenues. We know the Chancellor knows this; indeed, he has said so publicly. The question is: why are his colleagues not listening to him?

Elizabeth Truss: It is very important that in the negotiations with the European Union we always keep the option of no deal on the table; otherwise, we will not get the best possible deal. But we are very confident of achieving a good deal. Why is the hon. Gentleman not welcoming the fantastic economic news we have had this morning: the lowest unemployment—again—since 1975, and wages up by 2.8%? It seems to me that there are an awful lot of Eeyores on the Opposition Benches.

National Living Wage

7. Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the introduction of the national living wage on low pay.

[904780]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The national living wage has increased levels of pay. In fact, we have seen the wages of the lowest fifth of our population in terms of earnings increase by 7% in real terms since 2015.

Johnny Mercer: My right hon. Friend will know that the two biggest policies that have put more money into the pockets of the lowest earners in this country have come from this Government—namely, the increase in the tax threshold and the minimum wage. What more will the Government do to make sure that private businesses, together with public services, are working to continue to increase wages and improve the quality of life in cities such as Plymouth?
Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to increase productivity, which will help drive up wages. That is why we are working with employers on the national training scheme, and why we are increasing our investment in areas such as maths and computer science to make sure that our young people have the skills for the future that will enable them to earn high wages and compete with the rest of the world.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The national living wage applies only to people over the age of 25, yet the cost of living in places such as Stoke-on-Trent is the same for people under the age of 25: there is no discount on their rates, mortgage or utility bills. Do the Chancellor and his Ministers think it is fair that these people are expected to earn less when their living costs are not affected?

Elizabeth Truss: What is unfair is the fact that, under the last Labour Government, youth unemployment went up to 20% and those young people were left on the scrapheap, whereas we have reduced youth unemployment by 40%. We have more young people in work earning the vital skills for their future.

21. [904794] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Despite this increase in the price of labour, why is unemployment continuing to fall, particularly youth unemployment?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is right, and the reason is that we have taken the time to reduce the deficit to make it easier for employers to take on staff. We have reduced corporation tax, making it easier for companies to hire people. That is why we have the lowest unemployment since 1975, and rising wages. It is a shame that Members on the Opposition Benches cannot acknowledge that massive achievement.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is completely unacceptable that a 17-year-old and a 25-year-old starting on the same day in the same job face a £3.63 gap due to their ages. When will the Chief Secretary end the scandal of state-sanctioned age discrimination?

Elizabeth Truss: It is extremely worrying that those on the Opposition Benches would rather see young people out of work and without opportunities than in work, learning and getting the skills for their future. All the evidence shows that if we set the rate too high we see youth unemployment, which is exactly what happened under the previous Labour Government.

Corporation Tax

9. Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effect of the recent reduction in corporation tax on employment and wages.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): There can be no doubt that this Government’s record on reducing corporation tax from 28% in 2010 to 19% now, and further on down to 17% in 2020, has driven growth, kept prices down, pushed wages up and, indeed, led to more employment. Since 2010, we have seen more than 3 million more people in employment, and, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has just outlined, the lowest unemployment since 1975.

Mr Jack: Successful businesses create jobs and pay taxes. What steps are the Government taking to back businesses that play by the rules?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend uses the expression “play by the rules”. I should make it very clear to the House that those that do not play by the rules will be clamped down on by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. We have brought in £175 billion in respect of clamping down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance since 2010. We have, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has outlined, the lowest tax gap in our history, at 6%. Those who play by the rules will benefit from our pro-business policies: bringing taxes down, providing relief on business rates, and other measures such as the employment allowance, worth £3,000 for the first employee as a relief on national insurance contributions.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): When it comes to employment and wages, and the impact that corporation tax cuts have had, we have heard a lot of crowing from Ministers this morning, but we all know that our economy is wildly different, depending on where people live. Has the Minister asked for a distributional analysis of the impacts that he has just been talking about?

Mel Stride: We have debated at great length the issue of distributional analysis, in this Chamber and around the Finance Bill and other measures. The hon. Lady will know that all tax measures are subject to TINs and to various assessments. We are also bound by the Equality Act 2010 when we take decisions in respect of taxation. As a Minister, I can assure her that I take my duties in that respect extremely seriously.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Businesses in my constituency welcome the cut in corporation tax, but does not my right hon. Friend share my concern that businesses in Gordon are being damaged by punitive business rates and the highest income tax rates in the United Kingdom?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which is probably best listened to very carefully by some of those on the Opposition Benches. I can only speak for the UK Government here in this House, and we will continue to be on the side of businesses, small and large, to ensure that their tax burden is as low as possible.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Lining up and bg of the spring 2017 Budget predicted that the cuts in corporation tax would cost the Treasury over £24 billion by 2022. If the Treasury had had that money to invest in infrastructure and construction, how many well paid construction jobs could the money have created?

Mel Stride: Let me make two simple points. First, corporation tax cuts are clearly to the benefit of businesses who employ people, create wealth and generate the taxes we need to fund our vital public services. Secondly, we have cut corporation tax from 28% to 19% since 2010, and the corporate tax take has risen by 50%.
Mr Speaker: A moment ago the Financial Secretary was banging on about TIMS. I was not informed about this matter, but the Clerk has consulted his scholarly cranium and he tells me that it stands for Treasury information management systems.

Mel Stride: Tax impact notes, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, TINs! Well, I am sure everybody attending to our proceedings was perfectly well aware of what the right hon. Gentleman had in mind. I am sure I was in a minority of one in not knowing. And what are those pigs I see flying in front of my very eyes?

Productivity

10. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What plans he has to increase productivity. [904783]

15. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What plans he has to increase productivity. [904788]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Productivity, as I have already said, is at the very forefront of the Government’s agenda. That is why we established the national productivity investment fund, a £31 billion package of investment in infrastructure and research and development, and committed to introducing a national retraining scheme, which we are developing in partnership with the CBI and the TUC to ensure that British workers have the skills they need to benefit from technology change. The focus now has to be on moving forward with firm-level initiatives, such as Be the Business led by Charlie Mayfield and Made Smarter led by Juergen Maier, that start to look at the challenges we face at the level of the firm in this country to make sure that we are doing what we need to do not only in infrastructure and skills but in investment in management at the level of the firm.

Sir Nicholas Soames: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on all the steps he is taking, with the Government, to improve productivity, which is very badly needed indeed in our economy? Does he agree that it is becoming increasingly difficult, with a very modern, interconnected, internet-driven economy, to successfully garner the information needed to truly assess how well we are doing on productivity and across the whole scale of Government statistics on the economy? Does he agree that this is first-order business and that the whole scale of Government statistics on the economy is badly needed indeed in our economy? Does he agree Government, to improve productivity, which is very

Mr Hammond: The Government are highly committed to the apprenticeship programme. I recognise that starts are down—we always expected that—but something else is happening, because analysis shows that now that employers are contributing with their own levy to apprenticeship programmes, they are opting for higher-level apprenticeships. There are fewer starts than we expected, but we are seeing a much higher level of apprenticeship. There are more degree-level apprenticeships and more apprenticeships at the higher levels. The Department for Education and the Treasury are looking carefully at how this is working—[Interruption.] This is a serious issue, but the important question is about making sure that the skills that the economy needs are generated.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The only productivity figures worse than the UK’s are the Chancellor’s—that is not an insult, but a statement of the blindingly obvious. Is he aware that a recent TUC assessment indicated that, in effect, the UK economy is on a negative trajectory? GDP growth is weak—an annual basis, it is the weakest it has been for five years—and hours worked have declined. Public investment lags significantly behind that of our comparators. Wages remain stagnant and inflation is stubbornly high. What is his answer to this—perhaps a tweet, and maybe with a smiley emoji this time?

Mr Hammond: Not for the first time, I do not recognise the picture of our economy that is painted by Opposition Front Benchers. Figures today tell us that we have new record high numbers of people in employment, and new record low unemployment figures. That should be
something that we are celebrating. Real wages are forecast to turn positive from this quarter and to go on growing thereafter. Employment is expected to grow by another 500,000 by 2022. We are working hard to ensure that productivity performance increases across the economy because that is the only sustainable way to achieve higher wages and higher living standards.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that progress has been terribly slow today. I would like to get through some more questions from Back Benchers, but we will need to have single-sentence questions and pithy replies. We do not have time for long pre-prepared speeches.

Building our Future Programme

11. Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): What progress has been made on implementing the Building our Future programme. [904784]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Progress has been excellent on the Building our Future programme. We have now secured locations for 12 of the 13 regional hubs and negotiations are continuing on the final site.

Dr Williams: The HMRC office in Stockton South is closing. Hundreds of staff are being offered jobs in Newcastle, which involves a three-hour minimum round trip that people say they cannot make, because their family lives are built around a job that they are proud of. Will the Minister please meet me given what we now know about the impact that the closure will have on Teesside and its people?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will know that all staff who may be affected will have face-to-face consultations with HMRC staff a year before any changes occur. Some 90% on average of those across the programme will be in a position of having left employment or retired, or finding it perfectly acceptable to move, in this case to Newcastle. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issue.

Productivity

12. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring that people have high-tech skills to increase productivity. [904785]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government are working across Departments to help to prepare businesses and working people to seize the opportunities that technology will bring. At the Budget we announced, among other measures, a trebling of fully qualified computer science teachers, the creation of a T-level in digital skills and the retraining partnership that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has spoken about.

John Howell: What steps are the Government taking to make sure that these skills are widely available?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are trying to roll out our changes in apprenticeships, T-levels and other matters as quickly as possible across the country. We commissioned the Juergen Maier “Made Smarter” review to increase the adoption of digital technology in businesses—particularly small and medium-sized enterprises—and we will follow up on that in the months to come.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The circular economy has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about how we can maximise these opportunities?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We are working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a call for evidence on single-use plastics in the spring statement. We intend to make proposals in due course.

National Debt

13. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of the size of the national debt (a) today and (b) 12 months ago. [904786]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Public sector net debt as a percentage of GDP was 85.1% at the end of February 2018, which was 0.9 percentage points higher than last February. The latest forecast shows that debt will fall this year, two years before the fiscal rules require.

John Mann: The national debt is going up by £5,000 a second. Can I be helpful? Will the Minister join me in stopping hospitals that are outsourcing staffing to avoid VAT, with an estimated 6% savings on wages lost to the Treasury, from doing so?

John Glen: The important point is that the debt is going down this year. We want to avoid a situation like that in the last three years of the last Labour Government, when public sector net debt doubled.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) can very easily shoehorn this in his own inquiry on this question. Question 14 is not dissimilar to 13—have a go on 13, man.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Well done.

14. [904787] Michael Tomlinson: That is very kind of you, Mr Speaker. Is it not vital that we reduce our national debt, stop wasting taxpayers’ money on debt interest repayment, and spend it on our public services instead?

John Glen: I concur absolutely with my hon. Friend. He might like to know that between 2010 and 2017, we spent £300 billion on debt interest, which is twice the current annual budget of the NHS.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The session would not be complete without the voice of Shipley.
Philip Davies: Given all the talk of austerity, will the Minister tell us what Government spending was in cash terms in 2010 and what it is in this financial year?

John Glen: I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government have taken a balanced approach to the public finances, reducing the deficit by three quarters. We have also made tough decisions to invest as well as to spend on public services, which is what the public expect of us.

Topical Questions

T1. [904799] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people. I shall do so by building on the plans set out in the autumn Budget and the spring statement. The Government are determined to meet the important challenges we face and to seize the opportunities ahead as we create an economy fit for the future.

Jessica Morden: The Treasury is holding on to £10 million from the Roadchef employees benefit trust following a High Court dispute. Can Ministers ensure that HMRC returns the money to the trust with interest so that the 4,000 workers and former staff, including a number of my constituents, can finally receive what is owed to them?

Mr Hammond: We touched on this matter earlier, I think. It is important that HMRC deals with matters separately from Ministers, but we are aware that HMRC is in discussion with the trustees in this case and we hope for a resolution soon.

T2. [904800] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that consideration should be given to making expenditure such as gym membership and welfare counselling on-site workplace gym membership and welfare counselling. Perhaps I am in need of the gym, Mr Speaker.

Mr Hammond: I do not have a figure for the latest valuation of those assets. Many of the assets in question will be property assets, I suspect, meaning that the values will move from time to time. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Treasury is fully engaged in the process across Whitehall of seeking to deal with unacceptable behaviours of the type that we have seen in Syria. Financial sanctions will remain an important tool in our armoury, whether we are dealing with chemical attacks in Syria or attacks on the streets of the UK.

John McDonnell: I welcome the Chancellor’s response, but the problem is that the lack of transparency in our financial system makes it virtually impossible for him to know exactly how many assets linked to such regimes are owned in the UK. It is estimated that more than £5 billion of assets owned by Assad and his associates are being held overseas and, according to international reports, the UK is recouping far less of the corrupt assets owned by individuals linked to the Syrian regime than is being recouped by other countries. For example, assets linked to the Assad regime worth more than half a billion pounds have been not just frozen but seized by the Spanish authorities. So far, no unexplained wealth orders have been used against Syrian regime figures.

The Government promised to give a date for the publication of a register of owners of UK property based overseas back in 2015, but now, three years later, we are told that a register will not be published until 2021. Will the Chancellor bring forward the date for the introduction of what is an essential defence against corruption?

Mr Hammond: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is being a little bit harsh on the unexplained wealth orders. The legislation has been in place for only a couple of months, and we will of course look at opportunities to use it. As for his challenge on the date for the registers, I will look into the matter, as he has asked me to do. I will then write to him to let him know the reason for the date that we have set, and whether there is any opportunity for it to be brought forward.

I think that we are all in the same place on this issue. We all want to ensure that London cannot be used as a route for dirty money—for the ill-gotten gains of regimes that are stealing from their people and channelling money offshore. It must be recognised that London is the world’s largest global financial centre, which presents us with some challenges, but we will continue the work.

T4. [904802] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): High street retailers such as Toys R Us and Carpetright are closing branches because of the rise in online sales. What measures are Ministers taking to reduce business rates, which currently penalise property-based businesses to the advantage of online retailers?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend puts her finger on the significant structural challenge that we face. This country has a higher penetration of online retailing than any other major economy—we are at the cutting edge—but that, of course, has an impact on traditional retailing, and we have to expect that patterns of retailing will change. We have brought forward by a year the switch to three-year business rates reviews, and we have introduced
Mr Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman will well understand, I much prefer a system based on mutual recognition. There are problems with the EU’s equivalence regime: it is arbitrary, it is unilateral, and it can be withdrawn with zero notice. No one can operate a multitrillion-dollar business on the basis of such arbitrary arrangements. However, we are working with the Commission and key member states, and I am optimistic that we will reach a satisfactory solution.

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year compared with the previous year. Britain is booming, and that is because we have taken the important measures of reforming our welfare system, making it easier to take on staff and reducing corporation tax. The Labour party wants to stop all that, raise taxes and make it harder for businesses to succeed.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Government’s green rhetoric is nothing more than empty promises. They say that they have ambition, so when will the Chancellor commit funding for onshore wind, solar and, importantly, the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon? The benefits of these investments would boost not only our green economy, but the supply chain and jobs.

Mr Philip Hammond: I have already answered the question on the Swansea Bay lagoon—we are studying the project. All of these projects have to meet value-for-money tests. We already have a fantastic offshore wind sector, with record low costs to the consumer through offshore wind generation. We have to decarbonise our economy in a way that also keeps electricity prices as low as possible for consumers and businesses.

Mr Speaker: Single-sentence inquiries: I call Vicky Ford.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Last night, the pound hit its highest rate against the dollar since the referendum. Will the Chancellor join me in welcoming this sign of international confidence, which is so contrary to the run on the pound predicted by the shadow Chancellor?

Mr Hammond: I welcome all signs of international confidence, but I never comment on the exchange rate of the pound.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Six in every 1,000 people in the UK have lymphoedema. What commitment will the Government make to deliver a comprehensive and equitable strategy for NHS England and to end the postcode lottery for lymphoedema patients in the United Kingdom?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a question for the Secretary of State for Health, but I would point out that we are putting extra funding into the health service, including an extra £10 billion to help with nurses’ pay and to ensure that we are investing in the technologies for the future.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The shadow Chancellor mentioned frozen Syrian assets. There has been a long-running cross-party campaign to unfreeze frozen Libyan assets so that money can be spent compensating the victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism. Will my right hon. Friend look at that again? Is he aware that it would require a UN resolution? Is that the case with Syria’s assets, and does he think that all the members of the UN Security Council would be in favour of such a move?

Mr Philip Hammond: My hon. Friend tempts me down a complex route. I will look at that again; I am familiar with the issue from my time as Foreign Secretary. The decision that Ministers have to make around the freezing of assets is a quasi-judicial one, and it has to be made very carefully in the light of the specific facts. There are great complexities in Libya, where in some cases competing authorities are claiming ownership of assets.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: You are a patient fellow, Mr Stone, and you have been waiting for a long time. Let’s hear you.

Jamie Stone: Thank you, Mr Speaker. One way to boost the UK’s productivity is to give disabled people employment opportunities. Can the Chancellor of the Exchequer tell me what discussions he has had with the Department for Work and Pensions and possibly the Scottish Government about maximising the potential of our disabled people?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that getting more disabled people into work is vital for our economy and also for helping with their quality of life. I am very happy to look at what he has suggested.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Last year, the Department of Health announced £7.8 million for building a cancer unit in my constituency, which of course I was delighted about. However, the money is stuck in the Treasury and the Humber NHS Foundation Trust is unable to withdraw it in order to start the building work. Please can the Minister urgently unlock that money so that the trust can start to build that desperately needed cancer unit straight away?

Mr Philip Hammond: I will look at what the hon. Lady has said, but I very much doubt that an amount of money of that size will be stuck in the Treasury, because of the NHS’s delegated limits. But let me look at it, and I will write to her.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): In Bury, a small business and its supply chain are still owed £4.1 million by Carillion for their work on the Royal Liverpool Hospital. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me and them to hear their ideas about how we can prevent the likes of the Carillion collapse from happening again and protect our small employers from the changes in the construction industry?

Elizabeth Truss: The important thing about the issues with Carillion was that, first, we made sure that public services operated, and that, secondly, we did not give rewards for failure in a company that went bust. I would be very happy to look at the specific situation that the hon. Gentleman has outlined and to meet him.

Mr Speaker: A sentence without subordinate clauses from Mr David Linden?

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): How many apprentices in the UK are being paid just £3.70 an hour?

Mr Speaker: Very well done. Unfortunately, it was so well done that the Chancellor did not hear it. Blurt it out again, man!
David Linden: How many apprentices in the UK are being paid just £3.70 an hour?

Mr Philip Hammond: I will write to the hon. Gentleman, Mr Speaker. I do not have the number immediately to hand.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What message will the Chancellor be sending to the thousands of public and civil servants who will be at the march organised by the TUC on 12 May asking for a fully funded, above-inflation pay rise?

Mr Hammond: The Government have been clear that the cap on public sector pay has been abolished and that it is for individual Departments and bodies to talk to their workforces about how pay can be increased in a self-funding way through productivity enhancements. We have seen that being done in the NHS with the “Agenda for Change” deal, which is now with the unions and staff for voting. It is a very good pay deal, but it will be supported by significant improvements in productivity. If we can do it there, we can do it across the piece.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. One colleague has been standing for a long time and has not asked a question. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is a straightforward question. In this age of online shopping, what help is available for start-up businesses that are focused on internet shopping?

Mr Hammond: Start-up businesses involved in online shopping are able to avail themselves of the full range of support for any start-up business. There is no specific regime for online shopping businesses.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Very well. If the question is a sentence, I call Stephen Lloyd.

Stephen Lloyd: Thank you, Mr Speaker. An elderly couple in my constituency, Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald, are about to lose their home. They have an interest-only mortgage with Santander, which does not allow mortgages for people over 75, although the Nationwide allows them for people up to 85. Will the Minister help me to persuade Santander so that Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald do not lose their home in the coming weeks?

John Glen: Clearly, the lending decisions of individual banks are a matter for them, but I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to consider the case and see what has happened.
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I cannot provide that clarity, but I think the request for same is entirely reasonable. To be fair, the Chancellor has heard the point of order, so may I suggest a quiet word and that an attempt is made to provide satisfaction? It is extremely important that Members are not unreasonably frustrated in pursuit of factual information. We will leave it there for now.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I brought this to your attention this morning so that I can raise an important matter. It has been brought to my attention by several sources that the Government have been selectively offering intelligence and security briefings by the Prime Minister’s National Security Adviser on the current situation in Syria and the UK’s military response to it. The briefings appear to have been offered to members of the Labour Opposition not on the basis of Privy Counsellor status, but on the basis of those who are sympathetic to the Government’s position. That leads to concerns that the Government are using intelligence and security briefings here to manipulate Opposition Members—not to inform those Members but to potentially bolster their own case.

I understand your point, Mr Speaker. Of course the Government can share briefings on Privy Council terms with non-Privy Counsellors, but surely the deeply cynical fashion of only doing so if one agrees with the Government cannot go unchallenged.

Mr Speaker: It has not gone unchallenged because the hon. Gentleman has raised the matter. The truth is that sometimes in life a problem does not have a solution, and this might be an example. At any rate, if there is a solution, it is not in my hands to provide it.

What I very politely say to the hon. Gentleman is that the only solution I could offer yesterday to the very widespread sense that the situation in Syria should be debated was to use my powers to grant a Standing Order No. 24 debate, and that is what I did. It was open to me to do that for today, and that is what I did. I do that in order to try to help the House.

I do not want to be flippant about it. I will always try to help the hon. Gentleman, but I also believe in being absolutely candid with him and other colleagues. Is this something I can resolve? It is not, but he has aired it. If he can persuade a Minister to see him about the matter—it is an arguable proposition whether he will be successful in his mission—I know he will pursue the matter like a dog with a bone.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you have any indication of a Minister coming to this House to make a statement about a purported legal challenge to the Scottish Parliament’s UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill? There are media reports that the Attorney General has confirmed that such a challenge is to proceed to the UK Supreme Court, notwithstanding the fact that the legislation was ruled as within the Scottish Parliament’s competence by Scotland’s chief Law Officer, the Lord Advocate, and the fact that it was passed in the Scottish Parliament by 95 votes to 32, with only the Tories and one Lib Dem voting against it. The Bill was due to become law tomorrow.

It is surely a very serious matter that the Tory party, having been defeated by a democratic vote of the Scottish Parliament, is now seeking to challenge it. Is there any way I can secure a ministerial statement, rather than Ministers briefing to the media as per usual?
Mr Speaker: I understand entirely why the hon. and learned Lady is concerned about this matter. When I came into the Chamber I had received no notification of this matter—it may be that something has become public more recently.

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not need the matter dilating further, so the hon. and learned Lady cannot do so. I gently say to her that she knows some Members wanted to raise the matter in the Chamber today via another mechanism and, on grounds of pressure of time, I declined for it to be raised by that other mechanism. In those circumstances it is more than a tad, if I may say so, cheeky of Cherry to seek to raise it via a point of order. [Interruption.] That was a very good-natured reply. The hon. and learned Lady should consider herself very fortunate that I am being so patient.

It is perfectly possible for the matter to be raised on another day and, knowing the pertinacity of the hon. and learned Lady, I feel sure she will make an attempt on a subsequent day, and it is open to her to do that. I hope that is helpful. [Interruption.] “Generous”, says somebody from a sedentary position. Well, that is my middle name.

Points of Order

Prisons (Substance Testing)

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

12.48 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about substance testing in prisons and similar institutions.

Drugs in our prisons are a major problem, which we need to do more to tackle. A recent review by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons in 2015 showed that 52% of prisoners had used drugs in the two months before they went to prison. A survey from 2016-17 showed that 31% of female prisoners and 47% of male prisoners found it easy or very easy to get drugs in prisons. In 2016, there were almost 11,000 incidents of drug finds in prisons in England and Wales alone, with 225 kg of illicit drugs recovered.

Psychoactive drugs are a newer problem for our prisons system and for our society, but they are a growing and dangerous problem, and further action is needed. These drugs are often incorrectly termed “legal highs”. Not only do they alter the mind in broadly similar ways to class A drugs, but they have particularly pernicious and damaging effects on mental health—on issues such as anxiety and depression. A recent Centre for Social Justice report in 2015 suggested that a majority of prisoners had tried Spice, a particularly famous psychoactive drug. Last July, the former prisons and probation ombudsman, Nigel Newcomen, said that 79 deaths were directly linked to psychoactive substances between June 2013 and September 2016.

So what does this Bill actually do? Currently, the Prison Service can test for prohibited drugs specified under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. In order to add a newly formed and manufactured psychoactive drug to this list of prohibited drugs, the Government need to manually add each and every psychoactive drug to it. As Members will fully appreciate, that can be cumbersome and time-consuming. It is relatively easy for drug manufacturers and chemical experts to get around the law. They do that by producing slightly different versions of these psychoactive drugs, which means that our Government and Prison Service are entirely reactive and slow. As a result of our legislative process, the Government can get a psychoactive drug added to the banned list only after it is already doing a huge amount of damage to our system.

The Bill is straightforward and simple. It allows a generalised definition of “psychoactive drugs”, one provided by the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, to be added to the statute book, which will allow the Prison Service to test prisoners for any and all psychoactive substances, now and in the future. This allows our Prison Service to be proactive, not reactive. As we go through the legislative process, I would hope to get cross-party and Government support—I can see the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) in his place—to expand the powers of the Prison Service to test for the misuse of pharmaceutical drugs and to provide for generalised prevalence testing. That would allow prisons to have a better understanding of the drugs that are running through the system.
We spend lots of time in this House debating how to cut the reoffending rates of prisoners. I believe, as I suspect do many Members, that excising the cancer of drugs from our prisons would be one of the most significant things we could do to cut reoffending rates. We know that drugs are a problem, but the Government and the Prison Service are fighting this with one hand tied behind their backs. Let us untie that hand, and untie the hands of prisoners who become addicted to or stay addicted to drugs throughout their time in prison because there are, sadly, too many drugs in our prisons.

If hon. Members are serious about prisons being drug-free, they should support this Bill. If they are serious about rehabilitation of offenders, they should support this Bill. If they are serious about social mobility, by which I mean the ability of men and women to leave prison without the burden of drug addiction, so that they can get on and make the most of their lives, they should support this Bill. I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered.*

That Bim Afolami, Gareth Snell, Nicky Morgan, Ben Bradley, Priti Patel, Gillian Keegan, Mr Simon Clarke, Vicky Ford, Sir Henry Bellingham, Lee Rowley, Alex Burghart and Leo Docherty present the Bill.

Bim Afolami accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July, and to be printed (Bill 195).*

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**Military Action Overseas: Parliamentary Approval**

*Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)*

12.56 pm

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Parliament’s rights in relation to the approval of military action by British Forces overseas.

It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Speaker. All I have to say is that the nation stands in admiration of your constitution and as you were in the Chair yesterday from bell to bell for eight and a half hours we are all now in admiration of your personal constitution as well. I also thank you for granting this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) was right in yesterday’s debate when she said, in quoting the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), that this is a hung Parliament and therefore political power must pass from the Cabinet to the Floor of the House. But I do not totally agree with that analysis; the lack of a majority makes it more urgent, but the principle of accountability to Parliament when it comes to war making was established in 2003, when the Labour party had a large majority, and that principle must now be enshrined in law. Indeed, the tombstone of the former Foreign Secretary, our friend the late Robin Cook, who warned so eloquently in this House against the decision to invade Iraq, records his words:

“I may not have succeeded in halting the war, but I did secure the right of Parliament to decide on war.”

I am sorry to say that the Government are now attempting to overturn that democratic advance.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that protecting the lives of UK servicemen and women will sometimes require the use of surprise and that therefore prior parliamentary approval could on occasion be life-threatening?

**Jeremy Corbyn**: I will be dealing with that point during my speech. I do understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making and the need for urgent action at times, and there are provisions for that in the proposals we are putting forward.

During yesterday’s statement, the Father of the House—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)—the leader of the Scottish National party and the leader of the Liberal Democrats, as well as of the official Opposition, agreed that Parliament should have been recalled. That is a common position on all sides of the House, absolutely irrespective of our views on the action undertaken in Syria last Saturday morning.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should listen not just to voices inside the Chamber, but to voices outside—the great British public? A woman on the doorstep in Ealing said to me this weekend, “Did we just regain the sovereignty of Parliament to hand it over to a Prime Minister with no majority or, worse still, to Trump?” Did she not have a point?
Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend’s constituent is right that parliamentary sovereignty requires that Parliament holds Government to account.

The Father of the House said that

“Once President Trump had announced to the world what he was proposing, a widespread debate was taking place everywhere—including among many Members of Parliament in the media. However, there was no debate in Parliament.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 47.]

It was happening everywhere, except here. The SNP leader put it more succinctly:

“When the Prime Minister called a Cabinet meeting last week, she should have recalled Parliament.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 48.]

The UK Prime Minister and the Executive must be accountable to Parliament, not to any other Government, let alone to the whims of any President or other head of state. The need for an independent British foreign policy, based on human rights and international law, has never been more urgent.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that we have a Prime Minister who inherited a parliamentary majority that she managed to lose rather clumsily, and rather than responding to her situation by trying to build consensus throughout the House on a whole raft of issues—this is the most important, but I include all Opposition days and so on—she has decided to respond by ignoring Parliament?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is right that all kinds of debates could have taken place and a consensus reached, or not. Either way, there could have been that opportunity. That is what Parliament exists for. Parliamentary approval can be crucial to ensure the democratic legitimacy of any planned military operation or warlike act, just as it can establish public consent for a Government’s wider strategy.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentions a vote; had there been a vote in this place last week to protect innocent civilians in Syria, how would he have voted?

Jeremy Corbyn: This is a debate about process. [Interruption.] Could the hon. Gentleman contain his aggression for a moment? I made very clear my concerns about the strike, its legitimacy and the legality behind it, so I should have thought it was pretty obvious what my view on it was. That is not to say, as I pointed out last night—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a very fine speech yesterday. He spoke on his feet with considerable passion and integrity, but he should not now rant from a sedentary position. He used to misbehave 30 years ago, when he stood against me in Conservative student politics. We have both grown up since then.

Jeremy Corbyn: Are we going to get a video of that debate, Mr Speaker?

Currently, the Government of the day, of whichever hue, can, under the powers of the royal prerogative, deploy our armed forces without obtaining parliamentary consent for that action. It is important that our armed forces know that they have the democratic backing of Parliament and the support of the public for any action that they undertake.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is not the essential point that the action that the Government have taken goes against the statement they made in 2016, when they prayed in aid action taken in 2013, 2014 and 2015, the nature of which was essentially similar to the action that was taken last week on the Prime Minister’s prerogative? Unless it is clarified and codified in law, the uncertainty will remain as to whether the Government really respect the convention to which they say they still adhere.

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed, my hon. Friend is right. There is an established convention, and I fear that the Government were trying to breach that convention with their actions yesterday. I welcome the parliamentary convention that has developed since the Iraq war, whereby the Government are expected to seek the approval of the House before they commit forces to action.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a point of order.

Mr Duncan Smith: It is. Following the intervention by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), I wish to clarify the difference between this most recent operation and what happened in 2013—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, that is not a point of order.

Mr Duncan Smith indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: First, the right hon. Gentleman should sit down when I am on my feet. Secondly, in deference to his very great seniority, I will hear him if it is a short sentence.

Mr Duncan Smith: In 2013, America and Britain had not gone to the UN and were planning to; with this most recent operation, we had been to the UN and it had been vetoed.

Mr Speaker: It is an extremely interesting debating point but, if I put it very politely, as a point of order I am afraid it would be, in old-fashioned O-level terms, an unclassified.

Jeremy Corbyn: The previous Prime Minister came to the House to seek authority for military action in Libya in 2011 and in Syria in 2015. In 2013, he sought authorisation for military action in Syria that the House denied. I am sorry to say that the Prime Minister’s decision not to recall Parliament and to engage in further military action in Syria last week showed a flagrant disregard for this convention. That was underscored by the Secretary of State for International Development, who said yesterday that “outsourcing that decision to people who do not have the full picture is, I think, quite wrong. And, the convention that was established, I think is very wrong.”
James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No, not at the moment.

It seems that the convention that was established in 2003 and that is in the Cabinet manual is being tossed aside as simply inconvenient. It is necessary and urgent that the House has the opportunity to discuss its rights and responsibilities in respect of decisions on UK military intervention.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not giving way for the moment.

Those rights and responsibilities are not currently codified by law and, as we have discovered in recent days, cannot be guaranteed by convention alone. The Prime Minister's actions are a clear demonstration of why Parliament must assert its authority on this subject.

But this is not solely about the actions taken last weekend, although they illustrate the case, or what action the Government might seek to take in the coming weeks and months; this is a principle that I know has long-standing support across the House. No matter on which side of the House Members sit, we all recognise that we are here to represent the interests of the people who elected us and sent us here. This is a parliamentary democracy: the people put us here to take decisions on their behalf.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not giving way for the moment.

Enshrining the right of elected MPs to decide on matters of peace and war is an essential, vital development of hundreds of years of democratic development and parliamentary accountability. In effect, 17 countries have the rights of their Parliament to approve military action enshrined in their own laws. It should escape no one that the general public want to see an increased role for Parliament in decision-making processes around military action.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is the role of the Government to put our citizens' safety first, and that the Government therefore have to have the power to act in the national interest for security, and to act swiftly and confidentially, taking into account the safety of our servicemen and our allies' servicemen?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is perfectly clear from what I am proposing that Parliament should have the right to hold Government to account, and that Government should seek prior parliamentary approval before they undertake major military actions. The hon. Lady might not agree with me, but that is the joy of a parliamentary democracy.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know what has happened to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). Decades ago he was a student at the University of Oxford, and my wife always said to me subsequently, “He was a very well-behaved young man.” He seems to have regressed since then. It is very unsatisfactory and he must try to improve his condition. We cannot have people constantly ranting from a sedentary position. Let us be clear that the Leader of the Opposition will be heard, and so will every other speaker.

Jeremy Corbyn: It should not have escaped anyone that the general public want to see an increased role for Parliament in decision-making processes around military action. Talking to people on the streets of this country last weekend, I found that many said, “Why wasn’t Parliament recalled? Why is Parliament not being consulted? We elected people to Parliament to do just that.” We obviously have a diversity of opinion around this Chamber, that is what a democracy throws up, but I believe both that we have a responsibility to hold the Government to account and that the Government have a responsibility to come to this Chamber before they make those major decisions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I wish to make progress, so I shall not be giving way again.

Indeed, a recent Survation poll found that 54% of people thought that it was wrong of the Prime Minister to have ordered airstrikes without parliamentary approval. I urge Members of this House not to forget the duty placed on us by the Chilcot inquiry. The Chilcot inquiry was the result of the war in Iraq. It was the last of many inquiries held into that process. It was the most thorough and painstaking inquiry that there had ever been. I would have thought that it provided a salutary lesson to all of us on the importance of there being total scrutiny of what goes on, and of the Government being required to come to the House in advance of major decisions. Many of us opposed that decision, but that is not the point; the point is whether or not Parliament has the right to have a say in it. I urge those Members who are trying to intervene on me at the moment to take a break and read a bit of the Chilcot report while I am finishing my speech.

It is important that the House holds the Government of the day to account on matters of national and of global security. In 2011, William Hague, the then Foreign Secretary, outlined a commitment to enshrine in law for the future the necessity of consulting Parliament on military action. The Cabinet manual, published in 2011, also confirms the acceptance of that convention, so what we are doing is actually going back on an established position. It guarantees that the Government will observe the convention except where there is an emergency and such action would not be appropriate, thereby reserving the right for the Government to act in a matter of emergency. A war powers Act could specify at what point in decision-making processes MPs should be involved as well as retain the right of Ministers to act in an emergency, or in the country's self-defence. Yet Government policy now seems to have shifted against this process.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He turned in his speech to the question of whether such approvals would be required by Parliament; he talked about emergency situations and so forth. If embedded operatives—our armed forces—were to be deployed in other countries, would parliamentary authority be required? Can he just point to where his proposal is, because the motion obviously does not contain that level of detail?
Jeremy Corbyn: The motion does not contain that level of detail because the draft Bill has not yet been prepared. Obviously, that level of detail is a matter for debate. What I am proposing is that Parliament has a fundamental power over Government to decide on issues of war and peace and the conflict that goes with them. I have made it quite clear that the caveat is in there of an overriding emergency or of a threat to people’s lives.

The Government have failed to accept the case, which was put forward by the Chilcot inquiry, “for stronger safeguards to ensure proper collective consideration by the Cabinet on decisions of vital national importance” most notably the decision to take military action. Those are not my words; they are the conclusions made by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s 2017 publication on the Government response to its report on Chilcot. The Committee’s assessment should alarm us all. This Government have failed to introduce the proper safeguards into their Cabinet decision-making process. Why should we leave it in their hands to make these crucial decisions when they have clearly failed to learn many of the lessons of the past? This report also draws attention to concerns about the ability to ensure that Ministers take proper advice on the provision of evidence and on how decisions based on this evidence are made.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, at the very minimum, the lessons learned from the Chilcot inquiry and Iraq should be the basis of the war powers Act?

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): People were gassed.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Shelbrooke, be quiet. I know that you feel strongly, and I respect that, but I am not having you shouting out. You either undertake now to be quiet, or I strongly advise you to leave the Chamber for the rest of the debate. Stop it. You are well-intentioned and principled, but you are over-exitable and you need to contain yourself. If it requires you to take some medicament, then so be it.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for his intervention. He is quite right: we have to learn the lessons of the past. The Iraq war is seared on the memory of every Member who was in this House at the time, and on the memories of all those millions of people outside this House who expressed the deepest concern about what was going on.

It is for this House to take matters into its own hands and to take back control—as some might put it. I am clear that, as an absolute minimum, Parliament should have enshrined in law the opportunity to ask the following questions before the Government can order planned military action: is it necessary; is it legal; what will it achieve; and what is the long-term strategy? It is difficult to argue that requiring Governments to answer those questions over matters of life and death would be anything other than a positive step. There is no more serious issue than sending our armed forces to war. It is right that Parliament has the power to support, or to stop, the Government taking planned military action.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has laid out a test, which he thinks could be met in emergency circumstances. Does that not mean that we may have a situation in which British forces need to be urgently committed, yet court action would end up determining whether or not that could happen? Would it not be wrong that judges, rather than the Cabinet, made those kinds of decisions?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not quite sure where the hon. Gentleman gets that logic from, because it certainly does not come from anything that I have said. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to keep interrupting. This debate must be conducted in a seemly manner, as a number of Members on both sides of the House suggested yesterday. Members must calm down. It is as simple and incontestable as that.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I was pointing out, there is no more serious issue than sending armed forces into war and what actions we, as Members of Parliament, could or should take. That is why we are elected to this House. That is what our democratic duty requires us to do.

I therefore hope that this motion will command support—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you please advise that if a statute law is passed by this place, it then becomes judicially reviewable by the courts, which was the point—

Mr Speaker: No, that is not a point of order. If the hon. Gentleman does not trust his own exegesis of the law that is his problem not mine, but it is not a matter for the Chair. He has made his own point in his own way, but he has done it in a disorderly fashion and he should not repeat the offence.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am trying to get past the point where I am saying that there are no more serious issues and decisions made by Parliament than on matters of war and peace, and the Government taking planned military action. That convention was established in 2003 and was enshrined in the Cabinet manual in 2011. The then Foreign Secretary gave every indication that he supported the principle of parliamentary scrutiny and approval of such a major step.

I have outlined the caveats in a case of overriding emergency, but it is very important that the House of Commons—one of the oldest Parliaments in the world—holds the Government to account not just on the immediate decision, but on the longer-term strategy and the implications of the actions that are taken. Going to Afghanistan and Iraq, bombing Libya and many others have long-term consequences. We all need to know what thought process has gone into those long-term consequences by the Government and the officials advising them.
Today I have tried to set out a simple democratic demand. It is not taking an opinion, one way or the other, about what the Government did last week. It is asserting the right of Parliament to assert its view over the Government. The Executive must be the servant of Parliament, not the other way around. I therefore hope that this motion will command support from both sides of the House, as we work to bind this Government and any future Government to this basic democratic principle on one of the most serious and crucial issues of foreign policy that we face. I hope that today’s debate will help us in that process of bringing about a change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am not going to give way anymore because I am about to conclude my speech. [Interruption.] I do not know why hon. Members are cheering the end of my speech, if they want to intervene; there is no logic there, but that is their problem, not mine. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to Members—

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Harper. You do not stand when I am standing and that is the end of it. You have sought to intervene and your attempt has not been accepted. You will now remain seated. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that he is bringing his speech to a conclusion. That is his prerogative and he will do so without being subjected to a concerted effort to stop that conclusion. You are a former Government Chief Whip. You know better than that, you can do better than that and you had better try. And I would not argue the toss with the Chair, if I were you.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is about democracy, it is about accountability and it is about making very serious decisions. That is what MPs are elected to do. It would bind this Government and future Governments to this basic democratic principle on the most serious and crucial issues of public policy that we are ever asked to take a decision on. As I said earlier, all those who were here during the debates on Iraq in 2003 remember them very well, just as they remember very well the questioning from the public about what they did and how they voted. That is why we are elected to Parliament.

I hope that the House will approve this motion on the principle that it is an assertion of the great tradition of the advancement of democratic accountability of this House on behalf of the people of this country.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the Prime Minister, I will hear a very courteously articulated point of order from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, could you give your ruling at this early stage that the vote must go with the voice? There are rumours that the Opposition are thinking of voting against their own motion, but the Leader of the Opposition has just moved that motion. Would he therefore be entitled, under normal procedures, to do so?

Mr Speaker: The answer to that question is yes.

1.24 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I start by paying tribute to the professionalism, dedication and courage of our armed forces. As I said in the House yesterday, there is no graver decision for a Prime Minister than to commit our servicemen and women to combat operations. Understanding where authority and accountability for their deployment and employment lies is of vital importance.

Let me begin by being absolutely clear about the Government’s policy in relation to the convention that has developed, because there is a fundamental difference between the policy and the perception of it that is conveyed in today’s motion. The Cabinet manual states:

“In 2011, the Government acknowledged that a convention had developed in Parliament that before troops were committed the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter and said that it proposed to observe that convention except where there was an emergency and such action would not be appropriate.”

More detail on the Government’s position was then set out in 2016 in a written ministerial statement from the then Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who wrote:

“The exception to the convention is important to ensure that this and future Governments can use their judgment about how best to protect the security and interests of the UK. In observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised...If we were to attempt to clarify more precisely circumstances in which we would consult Parliament before taking military action, we would constrain the operational flexibility of the armed forces and prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of those forces”—[Official Report, 18 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 10WS.]

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am extremely grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way at this stage in her speech. She may know that I raised a point of order with Mr Speaker prior to this debate to ask whether the National Security Adviser has given intelligence briefings to Members of the Labour Opposition who are not Privy Counsellors, but who were selected on the basis that they were sympathetic to the Government’s airstrike policy. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether that is the case?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that any intelligence briefings have been given to Privy Council Members of this House, and that all Privy Council Members of this House have been invited to attend such briefings.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The Prime Minister has talked about the possibility that the efficiency and security of British armed forces in any military action could be compromised if we were to go down the route suggested by the Leader of the Opposition. Would not that be even further magnified when our military action takes place in co-operation with, for example, the United States of America, France and perhaps several other countries?
The Prime Minister: I will be coming to the security of our allied forces as well as our own a little later in my speech.

Kevin Brennan: When the International Development Secretary gave her interpretation of this to the media recently, she said that it was always wrong to outsource decisions about war to Parliament because parliamentarians would not have, in any cases, sufficient intelligence. Was she representing the position of the Prime Minister and the Government on the convention?

The Prime Minister: I have just set out the convention. I am very clear that the Government follow that convention, but the assumption that the convention means that no decision can be taken without parliamentary approval is incorrect—it is the wrong interpretation of the convention.

I wish to make the response that I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) absolutely clear. I believe that a number of briefings have been given. Those who have been given intelligence briefings that would not be made available to Members of this House are Privy Counsellors—that is my understanding of the situation.

I share completely the principle that, in a parliamentary democracy, the elected representatives in this House should be able to debate the deployment of British military forces into combat. As I said—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman as I have just clarified my response to him.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am grateful to the Prime Minister. I do not mean to test her patience any more than I feel I have to, despite some prompting behind me. She says that it is her understanding that only Privy Counsellors received intelligence briefings from the National Security Adviser—I see that she is being passed notes along the Bench—but can she say from the Dispatch Box that no Member of Parliament who is not a Privy Counsellor received an intelligence briefing from the National Security Adviser?

The Prime Minister: Briefings have been offered to all Members of the House, not just Privy Counsellors, subsequent to action. Before action, briefing was only offered to Opposition leaders.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): We spent half an hour listening to the Leader of the Opposition talking about process. Children who have been gassed in Syria are not interested in process—they are interested in action. Since the Leader of the Opposition refused to take an intervention from me, may I ask the Prime Minister this? Does she recall any time in his 35 years in this House when he has supported any move to countenance military action or legislation to counter terrorism that sends out the clear message that illegal aggression, the likes of which we saw last week, will not be tolerated and has consequences?

The Prime Minister: My recollection is that the Leader of the Opposition has consistently opposed military action and also consistently opposed us ensuring that our security services and our law enforcement agencies have the powers they need to be able to deal with terrorism.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way, as I am now on my best behaviour. Is this not surely a matter of degree? For instance, the United States already has a War Powers Act, but I am not aware that anybody in America has sought to invoke it over the strike that took place—[HON. MEMBERS: “They have.”] Well, I do not see that going anywhere at all.

Is it not the case that if we had sought to commit troops into combat to fight a war, as we did in Iraq in 2003, we clearly would have expected a debate and a vote in this House, but that for a targeted military strike designed to uphold international law, the approval of the House would not be necessary as a prerequisite?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point. Indeed, I said during yesterday’s exchanges in the House that these strikes were of a particular nature. They were targeted, they were about upholding the international norm in relation to the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons, and they were carried out on a legal basis that had been used by Governments previously—I will come on to that later in my speech.

Simon Hoare: Will my right hon. Friend confirm my understanding that the targets that we and our allies had in our sights were eminently manoeuvrable and that therefore the element of surprise in the attack was clearly required to maximise the opportunity for their destruction?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point that I will come on to address later in my speech.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition said many times that the duty of Members of Parliament is to represent those who elected us. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if that is the limit of our powers, it leaves the many citizens in our overseas territories and dependencies who are not represented in this place very vulnerable?

Some people in this place would not have authorised military action to retake the Falkland Islands in 1982. I think, I am afraid, that some would not authorise military action to retake the Isle of Wight if it were invaded.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes his point very well.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab) rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way one further time and then make progress.

Karen Lee: Does the right hon. Lady think it is right that Members of this House seem to have less say in the foreign policy of this country than President Trump?

The Prime Minister: I was asked this question on a number of occasions yesterday and I answered it on a number of occasions yesterday. Let no one in this House be in any doubt that neither I nor this Government
take instructions from any President or any other national Government. When we act, we act in what we believe to be the national interest—that is our only concern. The hon. Lady might give a little more consideration to the national interest and to the importance of upholding the international norms of our rules-based order that have kept us safe over the years.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I know that the Prime Minister supports the conventions of this House and I think that the vast majority in this House will have thought that last week’s action was entirely correct. Does she agree that it would be useful if, after the action has taken place, the House could demonstrate its support for the Prime Minister by having a vote on the issue?

The Prime Minister: I will come on to the role of the House in more detail, but I think that is absolutely right. The Leader of the Opposition made several references to the importance of the House holding the Government to account. That was why I came to the House at the first opportunity. It was why I answered every single question from Back Benchers yesterday, and it was why I participated in the SO24 debate that was secured by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister: I will give way one further time and then I must make some progress.

Conor Burns: I am grateful to the Prime Minister. She has spoken movingly in recent days about the burden that she carries and the responsibility she feels in committing our troops to action—her predecessors have also spoken in such terms. However, it is necessary that we are led by people who have the courage and resolve to take these decisions. What does she think would be the consequences for our national security if a future occupant of her office lacked that resolve?

The Prime Minister: These are indeed grave and difficult decisions for a Prime Minister and a Government to take, but it is important that anybody in the position of Prime Minister recognises that there will sometimes be times when it is necessary to commit our armed forces into combat in some shape or form, be that in the more direct defence of our land or our interests, in defence of international norms, or for the prevention of humanitarian suffering. It is imperative that the person who occupies this position is able and willing to take such decisions.

I share completely the principle that, in a parliamentary democracy, elected representatives in this House should be able to debate the deployment of British military forces into combat. As I said yesterday, I am deeply conscious of the gravity of these decisions and the way in which they affect all Members of the House. There are situations—not least major deployments like the Iraq war—when the scale of the military build-up requires the movement of military assets over weeks, and when it is absolutely right and appropriate for Parliament to debate military action in advance, but that does not mean that that is always appropriate. This therefore cannot and should not be codified into a parliamentary right to debate every possible overseas mission in advance.

Mr Duncan Smith rose—

James Heappey: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister: I will make just a little more progress.

As the exception makes clear, there are also situations when coming to Parliament in advance would undermine the security of our operations or constrain our armed forces’ ability to act quickly and decisively. In these situations, it is right for the Prime Minister to take the decision and then to be held accountable to Parliament for it. I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith).

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend; I know she wishes to make progress. I was struck by the intervention by the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) on his leader when he asked the very specific question about whether, under the motion, any change in embedded forces, for example, would deliver the necessity of a parliamentary vote. May I connect that with the question raised about legislation, because surely it would be the case that had the Government decided not to have a vote, an injunction would almost immediately follow under that legislation, thereby absolutely puncturing a hole through Government action when that was necessary and leaving complete confusion for us and our allies?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In this area in particular, clarity of decision is crucial. It is crucial not just for Government, but for our armed forces personnel, as we are asking them to put their lives on the line for us.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. Nobody disputes the Prime Minister’s ability to act outwith consultation with Parliament on an issue of national security. However, that is not the case in this instance. The President of the United States tweeted the week before the action to suggest that it would happen, and the Prime Minister’s own Cabinet meeting indicated that the Government would be supportive on Thursday. She could have perfectly well recalled Parliament on Thursday. Is it not the case that she was just afraid of losing a vote, and that is why she did not recall Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I will come on to the specific issue of the vote that the hon. Gentleman would have preferred to see on the action that took place last week. He says that nobody is in any doubt of the Government’s need to be able to act by themselves and make their own decision on a matter of national security. Having heard the Leader of the Opposition’s speech, I am not sure that that statement flows for every Member of the House. As I understood it, the Leader of the Opposition was saying that it should always be the case that Parliament takes a decision in advance of the Government taking action.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I will make some progress. I want to set out for the House today four fundamental reasons why this exception is right and why it applied in the case of our military action last weekend.
First, coming to Parliament before undertaking military action could compromise the effectiveness of our operations and the safety of British servicemen and women. In the case of our actions last weekend, the Syrian regime has one of the most sophisticated air defence systems in the world today. To counter such a system, it is vital to confuse the enemy as much as possible and to conceal the timing and targets of any planned attack. For example, if they had known even the category of target we had identified—in other words, our narrow focus on chemical weapons—that would have allowed them to concentrate rather than disperse their air defences. They could also have pre-empted our attack by dispersing their chemical weapons stocks, instead of leaving them at the target sites that we had identified.

Our ability to exploit uncertainty was a critical part of the operation, and that uncertainty was also a critical part of its success. We know that the Syrian regime was not aware in advance of our detailed plans. If I had come here to the House to make the case for action in advance, I could not have concealed our plans and retained that uncertainty. I would quite understandably have faced questions about the legality of our action. The only way I could have reassured the House would have been to set out in advance—as I did yesterday after the event—the limited, targeted and proportionate nature of our proposed action. I would have faced questions about what aircraft and weapons we were planning to use, when the operation was going to take place, how long it was going to last and what we were going to do.

All of that would have provided invaluable information that would have put our armed forces at greater risk and greatly increased the likelihood of the regime being able to shoot down our missiles and get their chemical weapons away from our targets. I was not prepared to compromise their safety and the efficacy of the mission. [Interruption.] To the shadow Foreign Secretary, who from a sedentary position is saying that it is nonsense to argue about the security of our armed forces, I say that that should be at the forefront of our thinking.

Clive Efford: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. Nine days have elapsed since the attack on Douma. The President of the United States tweeted about it, and there was a highly publicised Cabinet meeting on the morning of 12 April. On that day, comments of the Prime Minister in that Cabinet meeting were reported in the press. No one here would have asked for secret details of the attacks. We would have asked about the long-term strategy for getting people around the table to discuss the future. She set out yesterday her objective in this attack, but is that attack likely to increase the possibility of getting those people around the table to bring a solution to the problem in Syria? No, it is not.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that the strikes were undertaken because of the concerns about the use of chemical weapons. They were not about the longer term issues of the resolution of the conflict and civil war in Syria, and they were not about the issue of regime change. They were about degrading a chemical weapons capability and deterring the use of those chemical weapons.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware that the comments she is making reflect accurately a Ministry of Justice report published under the previous Labour Government in 2009, which stated that any relaxation of prerogative powers would “dangerously” weaken our ability to respond in a crisis?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point in quoting from that report. We have to be able to retain the flexibility we need to make the decisions necessary for our national security and our national interest and to act in the way that we have.

James Heappey: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. She knows that the decisions she often has to take are in response to very dynamic security and military situations. Legislating in this place for the mission brings with it an inflexibility that would be very unhelpful when targets change, missions change and rules of engagement sometimes need to be adjusted. She cannot allow her freedom of decision making to be limited in such a way.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; it is important to have that freedom and flexibility. May I say how striking that comment is coming from him, as I believe he has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan?

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make progress. Quite a few Members wish to speak in the debate, and I have taken a lot of interventions.

The second reason is the nature of the information that I see as Prime Minister, along with the National Security Council and the Cabinet. The Government make use of a wide range of sources of information, both those in the public domain and secret intelligence. In this case, drawing on the lessons of the past, we made a rigorous assessment of the available open-source material and intelligence about the Douma attack. Indeed, when my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) looked me in the eye and asked me to tell him that it was the Syrian regime that was responsible, I could do so in part because of the intelligence and assessment I had seen, and because I had discussed that intelligence and assessment with senior security and military officials, the National Security Council and Cabinet.

In the post-Iraq era, it is natural for people to ask questions about the evidence base for our military actions, including when we cite intelligence. They want to see all the information themselves. But we have an obligation to protect the safety and security of our sources. We must maintain secrecy if our intelligence is to be effective now and in the future. We have obligations to our partners to protect the intelligence they share with us, just as they protect intelligence we share with them, and we have to be judicious even in explaining the types of intelligence we use in any given case, or risk giving our adversaries vital clues about where our information comes from.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?
The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make some more progress.

The Government have access to all that information, but Parliament does not and cannot. This is not a question of whether we take Parliament into our confidence. It is a question of whether we take our adversaries into our confidence by sharing that material in a public forum. Officials have briefed Opposition leaders on Privy Council terms, and I have set out to the House elements underpinning our assessment, but our intelligence and assessment cannot be shared in full with Parliament. It is my responsibility to decide the way forward based on all the intelligence and information available to Government. I should make the decision as Prime Minister with the support of the Cabinet, and Parliament should hold me to account for that decision.

Layla Moran: I am extremely grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. I found the statement on the evidence for it being Assad’s regime that carried out the chemical attack, on the type of helicopter and the movements, very compelling. Would she have been able to share just that evidence prior to the attack?

The Prime Minister: I was able to share more evidence with the House after the attack than I would have been able to share before the attack, and it is not possible to share with the House all the intelligence on which we base our judgments.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make some progress.

The third reason is our need to work together with our closest allies. A year ago, following the despicable sarin attack at Khan Shaykhun, the US immediately sought to deter further chemical weapons attacks by launching 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the airfield from which the Khan Shaykhun atrocity attack took place. But Assad and his regime have not stopped their use of chemical weapons, so this weekend’s strikes needed to be significantly larger than the US action a year ago and to be specifically designed to have a greater impact on the regime’s capability and willingness to use chemical weapons. That was firmly in the British national interest. Working together with America and France, and doing so at pace, was fundamental to achieving that effect.

If I had come to the House in advance of this operation to set out the totality of our effort, I would also have had to share with Parliament the breadth of our allies’ plans, for this was a combined operation where the totality of our effort was key to delivering the effect. Not only would this have constrained their flexibility to act swiftly, but it would have fundamentally undermined the effectiveness of their action and endangered the security of our American and French allies. In doing so, we would have failed to stand up to Assad in the face of this latest atrocity. We would have failed to alleviate further humanitarian suffering by degrading Assad’s chemical weapons capability and deterring their future use, and we would have failed to uphold and defend the global consensus that says these weapons should never, ever be used.

The fourth reason is that the legal basis for UK action has previously been agreed by Parliament. As the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) said so movingly during the statement yesterday, there is a long tradition on both sides of this House that has considered that military action on an exceptional basis—where necessary and proportionate, and as a last resort—to avert an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe is permissible under international law. The three criteria that I set out in my statement yesterday are the same three criteria used as the legal justification for the UK’s role in the NATO intervention in Kosovo. As I also explained, our intervention in 1991 with the US and France and in 1992 with the US to create safe havens and enforce the no-fly zones in Iraq following the Gulf war were also justified on the basis of humanitarian intervention.

So it was right for me, as Prime Minister—with the full support of the Cabinet, and drawing on the advice of security and military officials—to take the decision on this military strike last weekend, and for Parliament to be able to hold me to account for it. By contrast, a war powers Act would remove that capability from a Prime Minister and remove the vital flexibility from the convention that has been established, for it would not be possible to enshrine a convention in a way that is strong and meaningful but none the less flexible enough to deal with what are, by definition, unpredictable circumstances.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I am grateful for the Prime Minister’s time. Should this motion be passed would it mean theoretically that if we are attacked anywhere in the world, we would have to come to Parliament before we could act in retaliation?

The Prime Minister: That would not be the upshot of the motion before the House today, but it could be the upshot of a war powers Act of the type suggested by the Leader of the Opposition.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): If consulting Parliament in advance of this military action against the Syrian regime would inevitably have compromised operational details and intelligence in the way the Prime Minister suggests, what was it about the debate that took place in 2013 on possible military action in Syria that would have compromised the same details had the vote gone the other way?

The Prime Minister: There was a rather different set of circumstances in 2013, when that vote was taken by the House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): As a former soldier, may I paint a picture in which British hostages are taken and a rescue mission is needed? As I understand it from the Opposition, we would have to come to this place before such a mission was launched—or we might have to—if the law worked in that way, but the best time to rescue them would actually be when we in this place are talking.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. My understanding is that he has understood the potential consequences of what is being proposed by the Opposition.
Let me be absolutely clear what such a war powers Act would mean. It would mean that many smaller scale, timely and targeted interventions—like the action we have taken to alleviate further humanitarian suffering by degrading Syria’s chemical weapons capability and deterring their use—became unviable. They would be unviable because it would significantly reduce the effectiveness of any operations and endanger the safety of our servicemen and women.

As David Cameron stated to the House back in 2014, “it is important to reserve the right that if there were a critical British national interest at stake or there were the need to act to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, you could act immediately and explain to the House of Commons afterwards.”—[Official Report, 26 September 2014; Vol. 585, c. 1265.]

Put simply, making it unlawful for Her Majesty’s Government to undertake any such military intervention without a vote would seriously compromise our national security, our national interests and the lives of British citizens at home and abroad—and for as long as I am Prime Minister, that will never be allowed to happen.

Mr Speaker, before I make my concluding remarks, may I apologise to all those participating in this debate? I will have to leave the House after I have spoken in order to have a meeting with Cyril Ramaphosa, who has taken over as the Head of Government in South Africa, but Members will understand that it is important for me to do so.

I realise that for some in this House, and especially for those who have not had to do what I have had to do, the attractive purity of a democratic principle that Parliament should always decide may still appeal more than the practice of how to ensure an effective military operation that delivers in our national interest. Notwithstanding this disagreement, however, I think two things are clear. First, while we may disagree over my decision not to recall Parliament, over my decision to commit our forces in combat on this mission and over the very principle that I should be able to make such a decision, I hope we can agree over this: from the time I spent at the Dispatch Box yesterday, no one can doubt my commitment as Prime Minister to being held to account by this House for the decisions I have taken. Secondly, the mood of the House yesterday was unquestionable: we have the support of the House for the measures that we took to alleviate further humanitarian suffering by degrading the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring its future use. A clear majority of the House believes we did the right thing.

1.56 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I suggest to the Government that we need to reflect very carefully on the important matters we are debating? I respectfully suggest that the Government should consider bringing forward a Bill that would provide the protections many of us in the House are arguing for today. I say that because legitimate questions are being raised about what the scope of that Bill or Act would be so that the Government, in exceptional circumstances, still have the power to act. We are not talking about a set of provisions that binds the Government and prevents them from acting in all circumstances; that would be ludicrous, and I do not believe that anybody would support that.

May I say that, as we have this debate, we must keep at the front of our minds the humanitarian situation in Syria? All of us in this House must have a desire to work together, and to work together internationally, to bring the war and the suffering in Syria to an end. May I also say that we ought to commend our armed forces for the way in which they have conducted themselves? We can be grateful that those who engaged in the activity last week, whether or not we agreed with it, returned to their bases in safety.

It is important at this time to reflect on the principles in this debate. This place may have no constitution, but it has long-held conventions that are based on precedent. In 2013, Parliament was recalled to debate the UK’s military response to a chemical attack in Syria. The UK’s political system has been turned upside down since then, and that appears to include parliamentary procedure and parliamentary sovereignty. The timeline of events last week showed our Prime Minister chasing the President’s timetable, rather than planning a recall. Parliament should authorise military action, and it is a disgrace that the Prime Minister appeared beholden to the US President, instead of to the UK Parliament. [Interruption.] I hear some Conservative Members saying “Rubbish”, but it is important that we examine these matters.

Let me say to the House that it is my contention that, if we had not been on recess last week, we would have had such a discussion—the nub of the problem, above all else, was the failure of the Government to recall Parliament—and there is no way that this House would have been able to avoid a debate on what was happening in Syria, particularly in the light of the tweets coming from the US President.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I was out last week in my constituency knocking on doors. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, my constituency is Washington and Sunderland West? My constituents asked me, “Why weren’t the views of the constituents of Washington UK taken into consideration, rather than the views of President Trump of Washington DC?”

Ian Blackford: I find myself in strong agreement with the hon. Lady, because the fact of the matter is that everybody else was discussing the Syrian situation last week; hardly any other subject has been discussed in our media. When all our constituents are rightly concerned about the humanitarian situation, the only people—the only ones—who have not had a voice are Members of this Parliament. That is to be deeply regretted.

Mr Tammanjjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is not acceptable and not good enough for the Prime Minister not to seek parliamentary approval before getting our brave servicemen and women involved in a military conflict? As he rightly says, thanks to the tweets of the stable genius, hundreds of millions of people were debating the issue in their house, but it seems that this House is the only one where we are not allowed to debate.
Ian Blackford: I think the hon. Gentleman is correct. Let me say this respectfully; we are living in challenging times; we all agree on that. We had the attack in Salisbury, and it is important that we tried to reach as broad a consensus as we could have done on that matter. I simply say to the House that it is in all our interests that we are able to debate these matters. Nobody is talking about tying the hands of the Prime Minister; all we are asking is that democracy can take place.

Chris Philp: First, we should keep it in mind that last week’s action was limited and targeted, not a more general engagement. To the right hon. Gentleman’s specific question on why Parliament was not recalled, let me provide this answer. First, to have provided full justification to the House would have entailed the disclosure of confidential intelligence. Secondly, it would have inhibited our ability to co-ordinate with international allies. Thirdly, it would have given our adversary some sense of the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Ian Blackford: I have to say that that is wrong on so many levels. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we met, we discussed and we voted in 2015 to take action against Daesh. Nobody is saying that intelligence matters have to be declared to Members of Parliament—of course not. We are talking about the principles of taking action. Do not hide behind the smokescreen of saying that intelligence information has to be shared. It does not, and nobody would expect that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister has said that this so-called targeted action would not increase tensions in the region, yet she could not give any guarantees about retaliation from different parties. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that that is exactly the kind of thing we would have debated had this come to Parliament?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. I wish to see all of us—the United Kingdom—taking a leadership role in making sure that we can get rid of the scourge of chemical weapons, but, as I mentioned in my introductory remarks, we need to work together in the interests of the Syrian people to break the logjam of the Geneva talks. That should be our biggest priority in order to do—

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I must apologise to the House. I know that many Members want to speak and I want to make progress if I can.

I remind the House that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Father of the House, said yesterday that

“once President Trump had announced to the world what he was proposing, a widespread debate was taking place everywhere—including among many Members of Parliament in the media. However, there was no debate in Parliament.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 47.]

We should listen to the wisdom of the Father of the House.

As the President tweeted reckless comments, simply heightening tensions, the Scottish National party immediately called for the Prime Minister to recall Parliament for last Saturday. We have been clear: any proposed change to the role of UK forces in Syria must be subject to a vote in Parliament. Cabinet was recalled. Why wasn’t Parliament?

There is no good answer to that question, because the Prime Minister knows she should have done so. As I have said, precedent has been set. In 2013, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, recalled Parliament for a debate and vote following a suspected chemical attack on Syrian civilians in the suburbs of Damascus. After the 2013 vote, Professor Malcolm Chalmers of the Royal United Services Institute commented:

“It is now hard to see how any UK Government could undertake significant military action without the support of Parliament, or indeed of the wider public.”

We know what a lack of rigorous analysis and thought can lead to. We must—absolutely must—have learned the lessons from the Iraq war, and we must fully endorse the conclusions of the Chilcot report. A full debate in Parliament would have allowed for many questions about the UK’s military action and role to be asked. For example, what is the Government’s long-term strategy for Syria?

James Heappey: Chilcot has been cited a number of times by Opposition Members. The Iraq war was voted on in this place, but on the basis of incomplete information. What intelligence would the right hon. Gentleman propose to compromise to Members of the House so that they could make a better decision and what analysis has he made of the impact of sharing that intelligence on the operational security of those who would prosecute the mission thereafter?

Ian Blackford: None. How do we—[Interruption.] Well, look. I am trying to be—[Interruption.] I see the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) waving her arms. I have already made the point, as the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) would know if he had been listening to what I have been saying, that I do not expect the Government to have to share intelligence information with Members of Parliament. Let me also be clear, for the absence of doubt: I accept the case that has been put that the Syrian regime is responsible for the chemical weapons attack. I am happy with the explanation that has been given, and, in my case, I have been made aware of some of the intelligence information.

Let us not say that Parliament cannot take action on the basis of being told what it can be told. But it does not need to be told what is sensitive intelligence information. That is the way Parliament has worked, and we are asking that parliamentary democracy continues to take place.

Taking military action is not easy; we accept that. Finding a way through the morass in Syria and offering hope to the people is more difficult, but that is an issue that, as part of any plan for military action, has to be discussed.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con) rose—

Ian Blackford: I happily give way to my learned friend.

Mr Grieve: Is there not this difficulty? If we in the House seek to debate, in anticipation, a military action that is of a high level of specificity, in reality, where the Government cannot explain the specifics, we will be in
considerable difficulty having a sensible debate on that subject. Let us look at this realistically. That is in fact one of the issues that has to be addressed. I hope I may have a chance to speak about that later.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for that intervention, but no one is asking for the Government to be specific to that degree about the action being proposed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will not take any more interventions because I must move on.

I have already talked about what happened in 2015, when the House voted on taking action against Daesh. Nobody is talking about compromising operational activity; this is about the principle of Parliament giving its consent to military action. That is what we are talking about.

I must make progress. Preparing the groundwork for peace has to be a fundamental part of any proposed military action, as well as developing a clear and coherent plan that addresses the humanitarian crisis. It is a daunting tale that the UK spent 13 times as much money on bombing Libya than it did on rebuilding the country at the end of the conflict. We must not be dragged into the reckless rhetoric of the President of the United States when he claims “mission accomplished”.

I call on the Government urgently to tell the House, by means of a statement, what their long-term strategy is for achieving peace in Syria and helping the nation rebuild after the war.

On Saturday, we were presented with the legal advice the Prime Minister relied on to justify Saturday’s airstrikes. I repeat my comments from yesterday: the SNP has grave concerns about the extent of the legal advice. As I noted yesterday, in the absence of a UN resolution or self-defence, the two clean-cut legal grounds for attack, the Prime Minister’s legal reliance is based on averting a humanitarian crisis. Syria is the most besieged and bombed placed on earth right now. It is not easy to see how adding war planes and airstrikes to the Syrian skies averts further humanitarian suffering: thousands dead, millions fleeing for their lives, 400,000 civilians still trapped in appalling conditions, deprived of food, medicine and basic aid, and over 13 million civilians in desperate need of humanitarian aid. I heard the cry about refugees—yes, our responsibility for refugees. We can look back with pride to the Kindertransport in the months leading up to the second world war, when 10,000 children were let into this country. Where is that spirit of humanity to deal with the crisis in Syria today?

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is said that many a true word is spoken in jest. I think it was the comedian Frankie Boyle who said that the UK cares very much about the Syrians until they reach a beach. We have to make sure that we put as much effort into refugees as is being put into dropping bombs.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. The situation on the ground in Syria is desperate. We cannot and must not look at Syria through the narrow prism of military action. There are fantastic people, groups and organisations on the ground just getting through each day and they deserve the international community’s full support. I pay tribute in particular to the White Helmets, who have not only saved so many lives but have continuously run into danger to protect civilians.

We must work with the UN and international partners to ensure all action in Syria meets with international law. I have grave concerns that the Prime Minister did not wait for OPCW inspectors to complete their visit and investigations in Douma before taking a decision to respond. Many countries around the world place constitutional controls on the use of military power. The SNP believes in a triple lock on military deployments, based on the principles that military action would need to be: in accordance with the principles of the UN charter; properly agreed by Government; and approved by Parliament. If I may say so, those are principles that any independent Scottish Government would adhere to. Those of us on the SNP Benches believe that the time has come for a war powers Act. A long-standing policy of the SNP, we believe it will stop situations such as that we saw last week, where Parliament is completely bypassed in a reckless fashion.

Parliamentary approval was the Conservative party’s position not so long ago. In 2011, the then Foreign Secretary William Hague stated that the UK Government planned to “enshrine in law for the future the necessity of consulting Parliament on military action.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 799.]

Then the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee identified “an urgent need for greater clarity on Parliament’s role in decisions to commit British forces to armed conflict abroad”.

It recommended that the Government should in the first instance bring forward a draft parliamentary resolution for consultation and for decision by the end of 2011. As we all know, that did not happen.

In conclusion, we on the SNP Benches warmly welcome the support of the Leader of the Opposition for bringing forward a war powers Act. I hope that we can work together—indeed, across the House with Government Members, too—to create a war powers Act for this place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the number of people wishing to take part in this debate, I am afraid it is necessary with immediate effect to impose a time limit of five minutes on each Back-Bench speech.

2.14 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will endeavour to be as swift as I possibly can.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has, I think, just punched a hole in his own argument. He responded to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), a former Attorney General, by assuring us that in any debate about some putative military action nobody would ask the Government to reveal specifics. I am sorry, but that is what this place does: we ask about specifics. He expects to debate forthcoming military
action when the Government would be reluctant to reveal targets, the objectives of the operation and the nature of the deployment. That is ridiculous. I will come back to that point in a minute.

I rise as Chair of the Parliamentary Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which covers both the question of strategic thinking in government and the question of the relationship between the Government and Parliament. My predecessor Committee produced three reports on strategic thinking in government and I challenge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, who is in his place, on this. The Government have listened to the arguments and developed their capacity for strategic thinking, but the published literature of government is way behind the curve in dealing with the situations we now face. That underlines how we have to a large extent been asleep and complacent about the security we enjoy in this world. We are effectively now confronted by two great powers who are intent on subverting the international legal order. The problem in Syria is just a symptom of the superpower conflict that is already taking place, and which is simply not reflected in the 2015 strategic defence and security review or the 2015 national security review. I think we need to attend to those matters with some urgency.

I wish to concentrate on the more immediate question about the relationship between Government and Parliament. It is a complete misconception that there is an established constitutional convention that Parliament votes on the question of foreign deployments. This is a relatively new fashion. The Cabinet manual says that, but the Cabinet manual has no constitutional status whatever. It has no legal force. It is merely the expression of the opinion of a particular Prime Minister at a particular time—it was not even drafted by this Prime Minister—and it is vague.

The basis of the relationship between Government and Parliament is that Parliament controls laws and the supply of money to the Executive. Parliament is required to give its confidence to the Government in office for them to continue in office. It scrutinises Government decisions and holds Ministers accountable. However, I say to the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition that accountability is not the same thing as control. This Parliament does not control the Executive. We do not run the country. We hold the Government accountable. Parliament should not seek to directly control the decisions of Ministers.

Mr Jenkin: It is ironic that the decision to go to war in Iraq is continually held up as an example of how these decisions should be made, when in fact the determination of the then Prime Minister to bring the decision to Parliament actually blurred the whole debate. It made the debate about a whole lot of factors that were irrelevant to the manual. I say to the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition that the manual says absolutely nothing about the nature of the decision. It says it was a sensible decision to go to war in Iraq. It also seems ironic to hold that up as an example of how decisions should be made when so many Members of that House regret taking that decision. It is easier to hold the Government accountable if we say, “You the Government made the decision and we will judge you on your performance after the event.”

When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister received her seals of office from Her Majesty, she did not just take on the right to decide when, where and how our armed forces should be deployed. She took on the obligation, intrinsic to her office, to exercise her judgment, on proper advice and in consultation with her Cabinet, on military deployments of this nature and then to bring those decisions to this House when she has made them.

The Chilcot report has been raised. My Committee has considered it, and we made recommendations on how Government procedures might be improved to make sure that legal advice is not concealed from the Cabinet and that proper procedures are followed in Government. In particular, on the basis of a proposal from the Better Government Initiative, we recommended that it would be a good idea if the Cabinet Secretary had some mechanism to call out a Prime Minister who was deliberately bypassing proper procedures in Government. The Government have so far rejected that recommendation, but I hope they will continue to consider how we can be reassured that the proper procedures are being followed in Government. However, my right hon. Friend’s commitment to her sense of accountability and proper procedure seems to be absolutely unchallengeable—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Mr George Howarth—

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I start by saying from a purely personal point of view that I accept that, on occasions, the use of military force is necessary to achieve humanitarian aims. Regardless of which Benches we sit on, I think most of us in this House accept that that probably has to be correct as a principle. What most of us are now debating are the circumstances in which we take such decisions, and in the few minutes available to me, I will concentrate my remarks on that specific point.

It is worth starting from the perspective—a lot of right hon. and hon. Members have argued this—that the United Nations should be front and centre in the decision-making process. In principle, that sounds like a good thing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) quoted articles 3 and 28 of the universal declaration of human rights, which the UN General Assembly adopted in 1948, and they bear repetition. Article 3 states:

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Article 28 states:

“Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”

They are laudable objectives that all of us could easily subscribe to. The difficulty we have with the United Nations, however, is that the way in which Russia can exercise its veto at the Security Council—as it does
regularly and repeatedly—means that the achievement of the high ideals set out by the United Nations in 1948 becomes increasingly difficult when one permanent member of the Security Council effectively prevents those ideals being carried out in practice through the use of a veto.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making an extraordinarily central point. Does he agree that the whole structure of the P5 essentially depends on the assumption that all permanent members of the Security Council have it in mind to enforce the international rules-based order? When that breaks down, we have a fundamental problem.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who I think is just saying what I said using different words. In so far as that is the argument that I am using, I accept what he is saying.

Before I move on to another matter, I want to say a further word about Russia. There is a view in some quarters that Russia is, if not benign, then a neutral force in all these matters—[Interruption.] I said on the part of some people. Although the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) is shaking her head, I would never have thought such of her. However, some people do genuinely and sincerely believe that. I spent 11 years as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee—I resigned because I thought that was long enough—and members of that Committee find out some things they cannot talk openly about. However, one thing I will say is that I have seen in real time how Russia tries repeatedly to interfere with the apparatus of state through cyber-attacks and even in terms of the confidentiality of products in the defence industry. Any idea that Russia is this friendly state that we can all rely on is frankly not borne out by the facts.

I want to conclude with a word about what the Prime Minister had to say earlier. First, she said that she came with each point separately.

Unlike the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), I accept that the convention that the Prime Minister has relied upon to justify what she did is appropriate. It says, basically, that “parliament will be given the opportunity to debate the decision to commit troops to armed conflict and, except in emergency situations, that debate would take place before they are committed.”

I accept that there have to be exceptions, and any legislation or convention would have to allow for that fact. I would argue, however, that the Prime Minister could have recalled Parliament last week. We could have had a debate not about the intelligence that was involved, but about the open-source materials that she referred to, and this Parliament could, on the basis of a general resolution about humanitarian aims, have come to a conclusion, so I reject that assertion on the Prime Minister’s part.

Mr Speaker: Order. Has the right hon. Gentleman completed his oration?

Mr Howarth: I have.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to him.
for centuries and is highly effective. The Executive are only the Executive as long as they command the confidence of this House. It would have been open to the Opposition, instead of going for a Standing Order No. 24 debate, to have asked for a vote of confidence in Her Majesty’s Government. I think that that would have been the right thing to do, having listened carefully to the Leader of the Opposition’s speech. The Opposition fundamentally do not have confidence—or their leadership does not—in the making of this decision. We would then have seen whether this House had confidence in the Executive to make the decisions that are the legitimate business of the Executive.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will not give way again because time is short.

If that were to happen, we would know that the use of force had not been agreed by this House, but it is a retrospective agreement. This is established in our constitution and has been for the longest time, and that is very important, because Executives have the confidential information that allows them to make decisions. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber asked why the Cabinet was called when Parliament was not. The obvious reason is that we have Cabinet government in this country. The Prime Minister cannot act on her own; she has to act with the consent of the Cabinet. That is how our constitution functions.

Ian Blackford: Would not the hon. Gentleman concede that in the case of any military action since the Iraq war, the consent of Parliament has been sought on every occasion before troops have been engaged?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is not correct. With the bombing raids on Libya, retrospective consent was given by this House; it was not sought in advance. That is the issue that goes to the heart of this matter. Yes, we have a flexible constitution, but it is not right to say that we have no constitution. The flexible constitution allows a Government to come to this House when they are considering certain types of action, when no secret information needs to be given out, and when there might be a long-term plan for an invasion or whatever there is. It also allows the Government the flexibility to act when times are urgent and business is pressing, and when the information is of the greatest sensitivity. That was why I made the point that it was right and inevitable that the Cabinet should be consulted, as that is where power rests, but it is absurd to suggest that the House of Commons could give its consent. In fact, the only way that the House of Commons can consent is by legislation, and then we would need to go to their other end of the Palace and ask their lordships as well. By the time we had passed a law saying that we could engage in conflict, the whole conflict would be over.

The issue is that the Armed Forces Act 2016 already covers this question, and that Bill was passed unanimously. This House gives confidence in the Government and controls supply. The armed forces cannot go to war not only if the Armed Forces Bill has not been passed, but if supply is not voted to allow the Army, Navy and Air Force to go about their business. That is where we have control every year over the actions of our military. We have it quinquennially and we have it annually, and we have confidence or not in the Government. That is our correct and established constitutional situation. There are ways for the Opposition to deal with a Government of whom they do not approve, and that is through a vote of confidence. That they have not chosen to go down that route shows that the opposition is of a pacifist tone. That might be honourable, and it might be noble, but it is different from upsetting our constitution merely to entrench inaction.

2.35 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): My approach to this question was well captured by some of the independent-minded Labour Back Benchers yesterday, and particularly by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) when she said “If only the Prime Minister had asked of me, I would have been inclined to support her.” The Prime Minister did not ask, and as a result she missed a significant opportunity to build consensus in this place and support in the country. She has clearly received other advice.

I was very struck in the middle of last week by the avalanche of editorials—one by the Prime Minister’s former colleague, the editor of the Evening Standard—saying that of course Parliament must not debate this issue. It had nothing to do with high-minded constitutional principles or military secrecy; the argument was, “We might lose, and if we lose that will be terrible for our prestige vis-à-vis France.” There are of course more serious arguments, which have been aired and which were put by the Prime Minister, on the grounds of secrecy and national security. I respect them. I am a Privy Counsellor and have benefited from the briefings that have been available.

We are here on an issue of trust. I like to think that in this House and in the country we have progressed beyond the poisonous legacy of the Iraq war. We are not in the position of the United States, where the President is at war with his own intelligence agencies. We have trust and should have trust in the advice that is given. If the Prime Minister had any doubt about that, she should have been reassured three to four weeks ago when she came to the House to address the Salisbury question and said, “Look, there are things I cannot explain. There are facts and information.” What happened was that almost everybody on this side of the House—nationalists, Liberal Democrats and Labour—except for those on the Opposition Front Bench, took her word, and that was as it should have been. She could have done that on this occasion, but because she has chosen to ignore a practice established by Mrs Thatcher, Tony Blair and David Cameron—admittedly in difficult circumstances—we are now in the position of having to talk about legislative remedies for something that should have been accepted on the basis of trust.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I do not understand the logic of the right hon. Gentleman’s argument. He has admitted that there are circumstances that would mean that the House could not be fully informed. The House would therefore be having a debate and making a decision that, by definition, would be ill informed. What is the sense in that?

Sir Vince Cable: Of course, not all information could be made available. That is why having trust in the Prime Minister, which I do as an individual, and in our security
services and military, as I do, are absolutely imperative. If that were in place, the House would have a mature debate on the principle. I think that the Prime Minister would have had a significant majority had she followed that path.

Mr Nigel Evans: When the right hon. Gentleman was a member of the coalition Government, he made decisions as part of that Government. He is now part of the legislature. Does he not accept that there is a distinction? He says that he trusts the Prime Minister, and surely that is what today’s debate is all about.

Sir Vince Cable: I am also well aware that I have had to fight my way back into the legislature and I am no longer a member of the Government. When I was a member of the Government, I supported military intervention in this place. I think that, on that occasion, Parliament got it wrong. I also think that it got it wrong over the Iraq war, but the process was a necessary discipline. It is a pity that we are now having to talk about legislative remedies when there was a perfectly good and sound convention that successive Prime Ministers were following, but this one is not.

That is all I wish to say about the process issues, but I want to raise several specific questions of substance that I do not think were dealt with in yesterday’s debate. The first, which was raised by me and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), is whether this is a one-off operation, or a continuous series of strikes for which we need to be prepared. That is not an academic question. A lot of open-source material suggests that the number of chemical attacks in Syria is far greater than the number—five, I think—that was cited yesterday. The White Helmets, the Syrian human rights organisation, has come up with the figure of 213 in the last five years. In other words, every week the Syrian armed forces are using chemical weapons. Low-level divisional commanders are using crude chemicals, notably chlorine, and it strikes me as being perfectly plausible that they will do so again.

The question, then, is this: what is the threshold at which we once again intervene? Is it any use of chemical weapons? Is it a certain number of deaths? Is it the indignation of the President of the United States when he has seen something on television? What is the threshold for continuing involvement in this struggle? This is all the more reason why we need parliamentary authorisation for continuing action.

My second question, which relates indirectly to that, is about the role of the President of the United States. I regard the United States as an ally and a friendly country with which we have long and strong bonds, but I think that we all have problems with a President who is erratic, capricious and regarded with open contempt by the public officials who have worked with him, and who even now, in the middle of this crisis, seems to regard President Assad and President Putin as less of a country with which we have long and strong bonds, but I regard the United States as an ally and a friendly country. I would like some assurance at the end of the debate that the British Government are holding fast with France and the rest of the European Union in honouring and supporting that agreement, and are not being over-influenced by the American Administration.

My third and final question relates to Russia. In her statement, the Prime Minister linked Salisbury with the chemical weapons attack. It is very striking that while we have followed the United States—perhaps rightly—in military action, we have not followed the Americans in imposing penal sanctions on oligarchs and stock market dealings. The impact is blatantly obvious. The Russians must be asking themselves, “Why haven’t they done it? Are they afraid of retaliation? Are there vested interests in the City?” That is the kind of question to which we need an answer.

We should have had answers to all those questions last week. I hope that we will improve the processes of the House to ensure that they are given in future.

2.42 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I observe that in this debate, for all that it has become heated at times, we agree on much. We all agree that decisions to take military action must be brought to the House and explained to the House in detail as soon as possible after they have been made. We all agree that the Prime Minister and other Ministers must be held to account by the House, as often as the House wants, for the decisions that they have made in regard to that military action. We all, I think, agree that decisions on substantial long-term military engagements—what I would call, borrowing a phrase from President Obama, “wars of choice”—must be brought to the House in advance of the commitment. Although many of us believe that the decision made in 2003 to invade Iraq was a mistake, I do not think that there is anyone here who believes that it was a mistake for the House to debate that decision and be given an opportunity to vote on it. So we agree on that principle as well.

James Gray: My hon. Friend is making an extremely convincing speech, but he is quite wrong on that point. I think that the great mistake in 2003 was that Tony Blair did come to the House, and did secure political cover for himself by allowing a vote. Had we not had a vote, it would have been much easier for many of us to hold him to account thereafter.

Nick Boles: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. I heard him make it earlier, and I think it is a very interesting point. I suppose my conclusion is that it is simply not realistic to think that a major modern democracy can invade another country where there is no immediate national security threat and where no immediate national interest is at risk without coming to its Parliament, explaining its strategy and receiving approval for it, although I do accept my hon. Friend’s argument that that subsequently limited the power of Parliament to hold the Government to account for their decision.

Let me now briefly focus on what I think are the two points of disagreement. We disagree on the question of which military actions should not require a prior vote in Parliament, and we disagree on the question of what
form the convention should take. Should it be statute, or should it be a convention that is unwritten, as so many of our conventions are?

On the first question, I think we would all accept that if troops landed on the beaches of the Isle of Wight, as was mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister should be able to act that very night without a prior vote in Parliament. I suspect that if one of our NATO allies were attacked—let us say that Russian troops rolled into Estonia on a Saturday afternoon—many of us, although I am not sure about the Leader of the Opposition, would accept that fulfilling our duties under the NATO treaty should also not require prior parliamentary authorisation through a vote.

However, I do believe that there are difficult cases. I believe that we saw—and I saw, and I voted—one of the most difficult cases when we were last asked whether we should respond to a chemical weapons attack by President Assad on his own people in Syria. That, of course, was the vote that took place in 2013. My contention is that we made a fundamental error. We should never have held that vote. It is not just that we were wrong to vote, as we did collectively in Parliament, to reject action; the Government, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were wrong to bring that issue to Parliament and ask for a vote, for the very reasons that have been laid out so well by Members, particularly those with military experience.

This Parliament did not have the information necessary to make that decision. This Parliament could not share in the intelligence information about what President Assad was up to. As a result, Assad saw that we would not act when he used those chemical weapons, and what did he then do? As the leader of the Liberal Democrats has pointed out, he has used chemical weapons serially—not just on four or five occasions, but on many occasions since then—because he saw that the west would never do anything about it.

The reason the United States did not do anything about it, and the reason France did not do anything about it, was the vote that had taken place in this House. They were all going to act until we were given a vote, which we should not have been given, to question the Prime Minister’s judgment that action should be taken. We rejected his advice, and as a result the Syrian people have suffered much, much more. We made a fundamental error that cost many hundreds of lives of Syrian families and Syrian children. This is not an arcane debate about process; this goes to the heart.

That is why I urge Members to resist the suggestion that we should put these matters into legislation. The genius of our constitution is that it is not written down. The genius is that it is based on convention, and the genius of convention is that convention can evolve in response to actual facts. It is true that it has now become a convention that Parliament has a vote on military action in many circumstances. Through the decision made by this Prime Minister last weekend, that convention is rightly evolving again to re-establish the idea that when a major humanitarian crisis takes place, she should be able to act, and come to Parliament afterwards.

2.49 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a huge privilege to follow the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), and it is great to see him in such fine form. I agree with almost everything that he said, although we can parse the toss on what happened in 2013. I certainly agree with what he said about the principle that our Government have the authority to make the decisions that were made last week. That authority rests with them. They have the authority, they have the justification, they have access to all the intelligence and the evidence, and they are duty bound to defend not only this nation, but national interests and the international standards with which this House agrees. So I agree most fundamentally that the decision rests with Government and that it is one for Government to make.

I am increasingly impressed by the principled position that I hear from the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). I have not had so much contact with him over the many years, but I have listened carefully to his contributions in this Chamber since his return to Parliament. He cited 2013 and the principle of parliamentary approval in 2013; yet decries the fact that this Parliament did not approve of action. The consequence of our Prime Minister—charged with the defence of this nation and our interests and international standards—not seeking the comfort of parliamentary approval should be, some now argue, to put in a process and to remove that decision-making ability from her. That is fundamentally wrong. It would be wrong for this Parliament to remove that power from our Government on the basis of a decision that was the right one to take, and that was constitutionally and legally taken with the best advice available. If we all agree that it was the right thing to do, why should we believe that it is now appropriate to consider this House putting in place a legislative barrier that has the potential to stop the right decision being taken when it needs to be taken?

The title of this motion does not take us very far, and nor does the speech of the Leader of the Opposition. I have learned nothing more about what he actually wants to achieve from a war powers Act, but we should know this: it really matters not what this Parliament passes as a war powers Act, because if our action does not adhere to the seventh article of the UN charter, it is illegal and it would not matter if we had parliamentary approval or not. We either take action that adheres to the UN charter or we do not; we take action that is internationally legally justified, or we do not.

From looking at a brief history of the positions of the Leader of the Opposition, it is clear that the arguments he puts forward would have a much stronger imprimatur if he had ever believed it was appropriate to act against a monster or despot or dictator internationally. He has not done so; he refuses to do so, and a quick glance at history demonstrates that. When UN peacekeepers needed to be rescued from Sierra Leone, the Leader of the Opposition voted against; when we took action in Kosovo and Bosnia, the Leader of the Opposition was against those actions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gavin Robinson: I will give way, as I will get an extra minute.

Mr Dhesi: The substance of today’s debate is not the intention or voting record of the Leader of the Opposition; the debate is about process, and that is what the hon. Gentleman’s speech should concentrate on.
Gavin Robinson: If we focus simply on process today and ignore principle, we will make a huge mistake. I am looking very much at the reasons why.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about dictators and tyrants and events elsewhere in the world, but the UK took no action against Mugabe or Pinochet, and regime change is illegal under international law. The problem is that if we start to flout international law, how do we challenge others?

Gavin Robinson: We have not flouted international law, of course. After Kosovo, there is a clear legal justification for action for humanitarian purposes, as has been clearly outlined. We could even go back to the UN resolution of 2013: articles 1 and 21 specifically provide for military action where there has been a breach of, or failure to adhere to, the chemical weapons prohibition charter. That is there. The UN has been talked about, and everyone knows about the process and the problems we have had in getting Russian approval in the Security Council for a position for action.

The UN did back action for the first Gulf war; it mandated action for that, but the Leader of the Opposition put down motions in this House condemning the UN for giving its approval for such actions. This matters, because the motion before the House is not about a noble justification for the introduction of a legislative barrier on our Government in taking action; this matters because there are those in this place who dress up as noble their position, while all they want to do in each and every instance is frustrate the ability of this Government or the international community to take action against tyrants.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: This debate is not about the voting record of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). It is about a principle and practice going forward where 650 Members of Parliament representing the people of the United Kingdom make a decision on such matters. It is not about those who might happen to find themselves in certain positions in Government; it is about Parliament having oversight of what they are doing.

Gavin Robinson: That is the point the hon. Gentleman has made, and there are people who genuinely believe that: there are people who genuinely take a principled position and on each and every occasion will take a decision on the basis—

Leo Docherty rose—

Gavin Robinson: I apologise to my good and hon. Friend, but I have taken a number of interventions and have little time left and think I should conclude now.

People have the ability to take a principled decision and stand on each and every occasion that we consider military action internationally. I highlight the Leader of the Opposition’s record because he introduced this motion. He suggests that the Government should be frustrated from taking decisions that are in our national interest or in defence of our nation, or that stand up for international standards and norms. He suggests there is some noble principle behind the position he puts forward; I suggest there is not. It is a cover for impotence and inertia.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a privilege to follow such a thoughtful and principled speech by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson).

Most Members of this House—certainly myself and certainly the Prime Minister—are naturally cautious about deploying members of our armed forces and putting them in harm’s way. There is of course a risk in intervention, which has been well-articulated in the last 24 hours in this House, and we pay the price of past interventions that have been wrong, but there is also a price in not intervening, and we need to understand the dynamics of events when Governments decide whether or not to deploy our troops.

In doing so, we need to understand the nature of conflict. We think too often that conflict is between two opposing armed forces, with one seizing and holding ground. Such conflicts are easy to understand, but we now live in a world where there is hybrid warfare and there are counter-insurgency operations, and we could be talking about an operation to rescue a downed pilot or a drone attack against individuals who present a direct ability to harm our constituents, and decisions have to be taken very quickly. So this comes down to the nature of our leaders and what goes through their minds and how they make decisions at such times.

There is a perfectly honourable tradition in this country of pacifism. There were pacifists with whom, had I been around at the time, I would probably have profoundly disagreed but who had a certain nobility when in 1914 they stood up against an enormous rush to war and said, “No, we think this is wrong,” and many of them paid a huge price for doing that. The Leader of the Opposition has been a frequent visitor to Greenham common in my constituency and has spoken with pride about his mother’s time spent outside the wire there. He has also spoken about visiting the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. I can both respect and totally disagree with him, and indeed his mother, for the decisions they were taking at that time, but I can respect him if he did that.

Geraint Davies: The right hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that a Syrian doctor in Swansea approached me to say that his wife’s family had been involved in a gas attack in which their two-year-old died in front of them. He says that the doctors in Douma
have been told by the Syrians at the point of a gun: "Unless you give a testimony that there was not a gas attack, doctor, we will kill your children."

Richard Benyon: I think the hon. Gentleman needs to look at a lot more of the open-source material that I have looked at. For example, the other night, the BBC was interviewing the parents of children there. He can follow some of the rather eccentric people who were in Parliament Square yesterday, or he can follow the facts. I strongly suggest that he does the latter—[Interruption.] I am sorry. I am told that I might have misunderstood the hon. Gentleman. If I have made that mistake, I do apologise to him.

The Leader of the Opposition spoke about the Survation poll. I would just ask him to consider whether the 54% of people in that poll were given details of the exact measures that the Government were having to take, and of the complications involved in controlling an operation with two other nation partners. Were they told about the difficulties of trying to put together an operation that sought to minimise the risk of collateral damage? Were they told about the need to ensure the secrecy of the targeting? The measures needed in these events are so complicated that to talk about them in terms of a public opinion poll involving a binary decision, and indeed in the context of debates in this House, is extremely difficult. What sort of debate would we have? I have sat through debates in which people have said, "I will not walk through the Division Lobby with the Government until I have had more details of the operations that are planned, and unless I hear that x, y, and z measures will be taken." Anyone who has had anything to do with military operations will know that the plan falls apart when the first shot is fired, and that we are then in the hands of events.

When I was a member of the Executive, I found coming to this House or being quizzed in front of a Select Committee quite tiresome at times. I immersed myself in the details of the issues, and being held to account was sometimes not much fun. Now, as a Back Bencher, I find holding the Government to account enormous fun. I find it very invigorating, but that does not preclude us from trying to do what is right. The problem is that there are some elements in this House for whom this has become a vanity operation. This is more serious than that, however, and I hope that we will therefore tread very carefully when it comes to doing this. We have the complication of an article 5 commitment, whereby if a NATO nation is invaded, we are treaty-bound to respond. I therefore urge hon. Members on both

Catherine West: I often feel that the language used can prevent us from getting to the goal that we want to achieve. That is certainly the case in relation to questions about peace and war.

It has been mentioned that Lord William Hague committed himself and others to enshrining this kind of an idea in law, in exact legal language, but I understand that he has now changed his mind. Due to other commitments, I did not have time to listen to his contribution this morning, but I will go back and listen to it because I am interested to know why he felt this matter to be pressing when he was in this place and why, now that he is no longer in this place, it is no longer so pressing. We carry a certain mantle on our shoulders as parliamentarians in this House, but I do not think that that sense of responsibility applies in the other place to the same degree. There is not that same sense of the ballot box and the sense of our being pushed here. We have to live up to that responsibility.

In conclusion, there was plenty of time last week to recall Parliament, and I wish that we had had yesterday's debate—perhaps not with every single security detail—at that point. Many of us could have taken losing a vote—or, indeed, winning a vote. Whatever might have happened with that vote, at least we would have done what we wanted to do, which is to debate, to contend, to get cross, to get sad, or to get happy. We would have done what we do in this place and gone through the Lobby to produce a result for the people we represent.
3.9 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Lady. One of the issues here is that when we debate military intervention, we quite often get things quite wrong on the basis of limited information, the rest of which we are not privy to. In 2013, this House was recalled to debate, discuss and vote on a motion to approve military intervention against Syria on the basis of Assad’s use of chemical weapons in the past. At that time, the chemical used was sarin, and 1,700 people died, and who knows how many of them were children. It was an ever-worsening situation that came after two years of inaction from the UN, and it was backed by evidence from the UN’s weapons inspectors. As we know, that vote was lost. I did not back the action, and I carry a sense of guilt following how I voted.

At the time, many Members on both sides of the House argued that if we did not vote to take action, that would be perceived as a weakness. They argued that no action, in addition to the UN’s intransigence, would mean that Assad would strike again and would use chemical weapons against Syrian civilians and children again in the future. Those Members were absolutely right. We are debating here today after the same thing has happened again.

After the 2013 vote, the first country to say that it welcomed our voting not to bomb Syria was Russia, strangely enough. What happened last week was a necessary one-off strike to attack and disable some of the chemical depositories and bases owned by Assad and to leave him in no doubt that the international community will never accept his breaking of a century-old accord—his crossing of the red line—and his use of chemical weapons on his own civilians. The Prime Minister, along with France, America and our allies, will not accept that, and they have stood by the side of the civilians and children of Syria.

Until recently, my constituency was home to RAF Henlow and is still home to the RAF Chicksands intelligence base. My constituents include many former and existing military service personnel. Launching a one-off, pre-emptive strike with no discussion or vote was the Prime Minister putting the safety of those personnel at the heart of her decision. Let none of us here be so arrogant as to think that we know best, that we know more or that we should always have the final say, because it has already been proven that we do not always get it right, and some would argue that we got it wrong when we voted to go to war in Iraq in 2003. If the Prime Minister was proposing regime change or to go to war or to enter into a sustained campaign, we would of course have a debate, and we would expect the Prime Minister to bring that case to Parliament, perhaps even for a vote. However, she was not.

Before we vote today, I ask every Member to imagine what I am about to say, because this is not about a process and there is no substance to the motion that we will be voting on.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Ms Dorries: I will not give way.

Imagine that the children of Syria, with their eyes streaming and their bloodstained spittle, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) just described, are stood here in the Chamber with us. Imagine that they are sat among us, listening to us. How would they want us to vote? This is not about process or whether information is brought to the House of Commons.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Dorries: No, I will not.

Returning to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), how can we cast a vote when we do not have all the information? How can we make such an ill-informed decision, as we have done in the past? Would the children of Syria want us to do that? I know what will happen when I next cast a substantive vote on an issue such as this: I will imagine the hand of one of those Syrian children slipping into mine and guiding me into the right Lobby.

3.14 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to be able to make a short contribution today. In 1996, on the back of outrages in east Africa and the fact that Sudan had not long gotten rid of Osama bin Laden from its territory, the US launched a cruise missile attack on Al-Shifa on the basis that it was the site of a plant for the creation of VX. It later transpired that the Al-Shifa plant was producing pharmaceuticals and that there was no evidence whatsoever that chemicals were being used in any improper way. The Sudanese still refer to the incident, keeping the site as rubble, and, on the occasions that I have been there, have offered to show people, including the Americans, what the plant was. I use that as an example of where things have been found to be wrong. Intelligence is not sacrosanct. I have never been a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee and am never likely to be, but it is right for this Parliament to hold the Government to account, and there is nothing more important than Parliament holding the Government to account on whether it is right to go to war.

The Al-Shifa example is about the Americans and their lack of intelligence in this respect. The strike became known as a wag-the-dog incident, because it was more to do with President Clinton trying to offset some of his own problems at home. I cannot say what the motive behind the thinking of the current President of the United States is, but there are sometimes ulterior motives for why people launch attacks. In our case, we have Afghanistan, when we were told that not a shot would be fired and that it would be a straightforward invasion, and Libya, which we were told was about regime change and evolving a democratic structure.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Drew: I am not giving way, because we are short on time.

In our case, however, this is more about Iraq. I was in the House at the time of the Iraq war, and I remember that the Government did not willingly give Back Benchers a vote. We dragged it out of the Government, and there was so much opposition that they had to give us a vote. In a sense, Back Benchers created that precedent, which is an important convention.
It is important that Parliament has a view, and one of the problems is that our constituents have been emailing us and stopping us in the street to ask, “What is your view? Why haven’t we heard what Parliament has to say?” The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) made that point, and I totally agree with him. It is important that Parliament has a say. Parliament can get things right and get things wrong, but so can Governments, and it is right that we exercise our democratic right as elected representatives.

A war powers Act—remember that this is just an SO24 debate—would undergo proper scrutiny, as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) made quite clear, and go through all the process. He suggested that there could be other ways of doing this, but I strongly believe that this debate should be had, because things are unclear at the moment. The Government have changed the convention. They should have come here for a debate—not a question session, but a debate and a vote. They chose not to, however, so the situation is unclear. A precedent was created on Iraq, but it has now been changed, so I merely say that it is right and proper to have this debate today and that we therefore begin to move towards clarity on what was previously a convention of the House. It no longer exists, and it is about time that Parliament had its view and was able to decide on whether the convention is right or wrong.

3.18 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you for granting this debate today, Mr Speaker. I think everybody knows my position, but I want to lay it out clearly. I profoundly disagree with many Members when it comes to a potential war powers Act, which would be an act of calamitous insanity for our foreign policy. I am going to make it very clear why I think that and why the Prime Minister has done absolutely the right thing, and I ask Members to hear my remarks in context.

I have done the other side of the veil. I have operated at the highest possible strategic level for this country on operations, and I must be honest: if we are to continue to have the freedom to manoeuvre and the opportunity to keep this country safe, we cannot enshrine these powers of the Prime Minister in a war powers Act.

First, there are the practical reasons. It is absolutely right that some aspects of intelligence in this country will never be made public. Why? Because the way we gather them is a secret, and our opponents do not know how we gather them. If we bring them out into the public domain, we expose that capability and we make this country less safe, simply so we can have a say in the House on foreign policy. That is not right.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Johnny Mercer: I will not give way. I have heard a lot of the arguments in this House.

The speed and secrecy that we try to uphold in military operations cannot be curtailed by decision making. Should Parliament have a say? Should Parliament have a debate? Should MPs be listened to? Are MPs important in this debate? Absolutely, but when it comes to the defence of this nation and the defence of the freedoms and privileges that we in this House live up to and enjoy every day, we cannot retrospectively inhibit the people who fight for them by introducing a war powers Act.

This country has a role to play on the global stage. Think for a moment of the Americans and the French and of how we would look when they ask us in the dead of night, in that last decision-making process, whether or not we will stand shoulder to shoulder with them in some of these highly contentious operations. Do we want our Prime Minister to have in the back of her mind, “I’ve got to go to Parliament and I may lose a vote, so therefore I am not going to do the right thing for the country”? Or do we want to empower her to do the right thing in the British national interest to keep this country safe?

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): We all accept that the sources of intelligence should never be disclosed to the House of Commons, but surely these are essentially political and foreign policy judgments about whether to use force to defend the national interest. These arguments could be applied to health, education and lots of other areas. The concept that the gentlemen in Whitehall know best has never been allowed to overrule Parliament in any other area of policy, certainly not in modern times.

Johnny Mercer: I respect the position of the Father of the House, but there is a fundamental difference between intelligence on national security and policy on health, social security benefits or whatever it is.

Jeremy Quin: Picking up on the intervention of the Father of the House, how could this House have possibly taken a decision on the proposed action unless we broadly knew the nature of the action, how limited it would be and what would be targeted? That is exactly the information that would have been of use to the Syrian regime.

Johnny Mercer: My hon. Friend makes a very clear point. Some of the contributions in this House lend weight to why Parliament should not have a say in this. Time and again, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence have stood up in this country and said, “This is a limited action. This is a one-time action. We are targeting chemical weapons.” Yet there is question after question: “Is this part of a greater war? What are you going to do about Russia?” The Prime Minister must have answered those questions 47 times, and they keep coming.

I am afraid that one of the most galling points in all this is how anybody in this House can take it upon themselves to accuse this Prime Minister, either personally or professionally, of being willing to commit UK service personnel to a conflict at the whim of anybody else when it is not in line with British interests. That is offensive and childish. It is the place of student politics, and it is not acceptable.

I respect all Members of this House, and I profoundly respect those who disagree with me. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) mentioned vanity, and everyone got upset about that. This is not a game. This is not a TV show in which we get to make profound speeches and try to make tactical decisions about military operations of which we know
nothing. This is not a game. Inaction while Syria burns is not acceptable, and it has been accepted for too long in this country.

I gently say to my Prime Minister—I have sympathy with Opposition Members—that we have to bring the British people with us. It is a fundamental duty of every Member of this House to go out there and advocate for this nation if we are to take it to war. We have to do that in a way that people will support. People have to understand why they are being committed to war, and we can always do better on that, particularly after Iraq.

I went to Afghanistan and fought what were very lonely conflicts, and every single day I tried to motivate young people to do very dangerous things that nobody in this country really knew about, and sometimes did not care about. Every Member on my Front Bench and in this House has a duty to advocate in that regard.

Finally, on Iraq, I was not here in 2003 but if for the next 20 or 30 years we are persistently to consider the foreign policy objectives of this nation of ours through the prism of Iraq and of the profound mistakes that were made in that process, we will not become the Britain that we all know we want to be. It will inhibit our ability to project our interests into what we want to do. Profound mistakes were made in the decision-making process in Iraq, and we have raked over it for generations. The great British people do not want us to do that at such interminable length that we never actually play a role in the world and become the global Britain that we all know we want to be.

My plea is that on this we listen even more intently to the professionals. If anyone can find a security service professional in this country who thinks the war powers Act is a good idea, I will vote for it tonight, but they will not find a single individual with working knowledge of how security works in this country who will support this Act, and that is why I will not support it, either.

3.26 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): This debate today, about how we take decisions on UK military action, is an important one. The Prime Minister’s decision to commit British service personnel to involvement in limited airstrikes against Syrian targets last week has generated strong feelings on both sides.

I have mixed views on the rights and wrongs of that action, and I do not know how I would have voted had the decision been presented to Parliament, but this debate is not about that. It is about the process by which decisions of this nature are taken and the right of the Government, the Executive, to retain flexibility to act without recourse to Parliament. I think the Executive should have that right, and had I been in the Prime Minister’s shoes last week, it is likely that I would have chosen a similar course.

There is an erratic President in the White House upon whom we wish to exercise influence, a UN Security Council rendered powerless by the Russian veto, a hung Parliament and the reuse of chemical weapons in a country that was supposed to have eradicated its stockpile five years ago. I do not have access to the intelligence that the Prime Minister does, but I recognise that the context in which she was acting could not have been more complex.

This debate, though, is not about the specifics of the past week; it is about the nature of the decision-making processes in future and whether we should constrain the hand of government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making some strong points. I believe the Prime Minister should have come here last week and we should have had that debate on whatever the rights and wrongs of this were. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that not only would a very fixed war powers Act be difficult to achieve in debate, because of the wide range of views, as we have seen in this debate, but that in the one example where such an Act does exist, the United States, it has never, as far as I know, been used to prosecute a President and many actions have been taken beyond the 60-day limit? Even in practice these things do not operate in the way it is claimed.

Heidi Alexander: I have great sympathy with what my hon. Friend has said.

Much has been said in recent years about the Syria votes that happened in this place in 2013. Something that is often forgotten is that the two votes that took place on that night five years ago were about two different decision-making processes. One, the Labour motion, was a more rigorous process; the Government motion was less defined. Had either of those motions passed, there would have been another vote—a substantive vote on the question of military involvement—the following week. That vote never happened because the then Prime Minister decided he could not risk it.

I remember the build-up to that vote—I felt sick. I knew I was elected to this place to be part of these decisions, but the responsibility, even as a junior member of the Opposition Whips Office, weighed heavily upon me. The truth is that I spent 48 hours on Google, trying to locate reliable sources in order to educate myself, when I felt I should have been studying it for two years and not two days. What factions were fighting whom and where? What was the objective? What did the responsibility to protect in international humanitarian law mean, and how could one judge the legitimacy of any action? I envied the moral certitude with which some colleagues spoke. It felt enormous and it was.

I do not regret the decisions I took that night; had the outcome of the vote been different it is likely that many thousands of people would still have died as they have done in Syria since—different weapons, different culpability. Nor do I regret the decision to vote for airstrikes against ISIS targets in December 2015. In fact, I am proud of that—different proposals, different decisions. I believe that different circumstances will sometimes require different decision-making processes.

If we are to change the way in which we make decisions about military action in this country, let us do it with cool heads. Let us not start the debate when it will only be seen through the prism of last week’s action. Our attention this week should be on the children of Douma, not the consciences of Westminster MPs. We owe it to those children to come up with real solutions for their country, which has been torn to shreds. Internal retrospection on our part, however well-meaning, will not help them.
3.31 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I believe that the Government’s argument about the legality of last week’s action is technically correct: the use of military force is part of the royal prerogative; her Majesty invests the Government with that power; the Queen is commander in chief; and this is an important power, which is vital to the effectiveness of our armed forces. So I have no constitutional disagreement with what the Government have done. However, there is a word of warning here. As Chesterton put it:

“To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it.”

There is a risk here and a moral to be learned. I do commend the Prime Minister for the limited scope of the intervention. Although it is true that the Government can intervene technically and militarily without consulting Parliament, I believe that the power should be used on as few occasions as possible, if at all. That is where I echo what the Father of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Clarke), has said.

I do not accept that we need a war powers Act, because it would be justiciable. I do not believe in referring everything to the UN, where, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) has said, one power has a permanent right of veto. But I think we should proclaim this afternoon the right of Parliament to debate and vote on military action in the future, unless, as was probably the case here, there is an urgent humanitarian case to be made.

I want to say a word about some of the problems we face in the middle east, one of which is that we are seen to be parti pris in this conflict. We are seen by many people not to be primarily engaged in humanitarian concern for the people of Douma, but to be engaged in a proxy war. I know that that is not a fair point of view but, unfortunately, we have in the past proclaimed our desire to replace the Assad regime. The conflict began in 2011; Assad is still President of the Syrian Arab Republic. The idea that the Americans achieved a great deal by backing the Free Syrian Army—a kind of Lib Dems with guns—has proven to be a complete and total fantasy.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank you for allowing me to intervene, Mr Speaker; I was late for this debate, for which I apologise.

I cannot resist rising to that challenge. We heard the line of questioning from constituents about whether Parliament was going to be recalled—“Are you going to have a vote on it?” My answer that I did not know led to puzzlement and confusion. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that in itself is corrosive to the electorate’s democratic confidence in their elected Members and what we do in this place?

**Sir Edward Leigh**: I have considerable sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s argument. I have just said that I agree with the Father of the House that in general Parliament should have its say before action is taken.

I believe that there is so much opposition to what we are doing in the middle east because from the beginning western Governments have not really been cognisant of the sheer complexity of the situation. The Americans are against Assad and the Russians, and for the Kurds, many of whom are against Assad, but the Americans are also allied to the Turks, who are against the American-backed Kurds, and the Turks will do anything to stop the Kurds, even though both are friends of the Americans. That shows the sheer complexity of the situation.

I must quote the patriarchs of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Melkite Catholic Church. They are based in Syria and rely on the Assad regime for protection and their continual survival. This can perhaps be dismissed, as they are subject to pressure from the regime, but their beatitudes say:

“It causes us great pain that this assault comes from powerful countries to which Syria did not cause any harm in any way.”

They are Christian leaders speaking in Syria. We should be very careful.

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): Did any of those Christian leaders in Syria comment on the atrocities visited on innocent children that we have seen in the past week?

**Sir Edward Leigh**: I have just said that these Christian leaders are under great pressure from the Assad regime to toe the party line, as it were, but the fact is that their responsibility is to protect their own communities, which are under unprecedented pressure. We have to take some account of the pressure on Christian communities.

Last week, when the Vatican all-party group was in Rome, we had a meeting on persecuted Christians in Syria. We met every single expert from the refugee services and from all around the world who look into this issue, and they all told us that bombing was a dangerous thing to do with regard to opinion in the middle east and pressure from Muslims on the remaining Christian communities. I was struck when the representative of the Catholic Church in Pakistan said that the Catholic communities there would get it in the neck even more because, unfairly, so many Muslims do not differentiate between Russian bombs, American bombs, French bombs and British bombs. They say that the misery in Syria has been caused by foreign Christian powers raining bombs on their communities. That might be an unfair point of view, but it is generally held in the middle east.

This point has not been made by anybody else in the debate so far: I accept that the Government were right to act, and that they have powers under the royal prerogative to act, but I do not believe that we should pursue any more our objective of trying to change the Assad regime. If we then do act for humanitarian reasons—if we intervene to deter a possible chemical attack—we will have much more credibility in the middle east, because we would not be seen to be taking sides. That is the way forward.

**Mr Grieve**: Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Sir Edward Leigh**: Unfortunately I cannot give way because I am running out of time.

I have agreed with my right hon. and learned Friend, but I hope that when we debate these matters in future we will remember this and avoid all hypocrisy. The fact is that as much as we detest Assad and as much as he is a dictator, none of us, as Christians, would want to live in an area of Syria that was outside Assad’s control,
because he would protect us. That is a difficult thing to say in Parliament and not everybody will agree with it, but I have to say what I have to say.

3.39 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In 2011, this House was promised that the Government would “enshrine in law for the future the necessity of consulting Parliament on military action.” That would have completed a painful journey that started before the Iraq campaign. It took the threat of a wildcat Parliament in Church House to drag the Government to this place to set up a vote on that matter. It would have seen Parliament play a formal role, under statute, in the process of war and of action overseas. There were discussions over five years about how this might happen, before another Secretary of State came along and abandoned these plans because he believed that they would constrain operational flexibility.

Although those plans were abandoned, we have seen this week that the discussion is far from over. If we all look at our mailbags from the past few days, we will see that our constituents expect us to play a role in this process. They expect to hold us to account for our actions, and I want that.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—

Alex Norris: I will not give way for the minute because I wish to make some progress.

Of course, that would be exceptionally difficult, but we were sent here to tackle the exceptionally difficult. In 2013, Parliament debated military action—that has been played out many times over the past few hours—and MPs were given the opportunity to have their say, for better or for worse, to cast their votes, to speak up on behalf of their constituents and to be held accountable. It seemed at that point that a good convention had been established and that it reflected the way that things would be done.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On my hon. Friend’s point about a convention, a law in the United States, the War Powers Resolution, requires the President to notify Congress of his intent and to justify within 48 hours the sending of military forces equipped for combat into foreign nations. Is that not exactly the situation that we were faced with last week?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend and I share a real passion for all matters American—not just basketball and American football, but the American constitution. He highlights my very point very well.

Sir William Cash: In view of the fact that the hon. Gentleman is invoking statute as a means of achieving his objectives, would he be good enough to explain that, effectively, this would mean surrendering national decisions of the utmost importance to the United Kingdom to the courts to decide, because that is where this would lead?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman has not given me the chance to make my case. I am arguing for a formalised, codified role for this place so that we are not in the situation of last week when, for as many tweets as there were about whether we should be acting at all, there were tweets questioning whether Parliament should be recalled. We should not be in this fudge at a time when we are making such important decisions.

We are not asking to constrain operational flexibility—of course we are not. I do not believe that I and all other Members collectively should be setting a strategy for a campaign, but we should have the opportunity to make sure that there is a strategy for the campaign and to ask questions.

Sir Hugo Swire: This was not about a campaign. In this instance, it was effectively, about a surgical strike. Does not the hon. Gentleman recognise that he would constrain the flexibility of the Prime Minister if there was a question of timing? If she were obliged to come to this House first, that could seriously impede any operational activity.

Alex Norris: I am not arguing for that. We could weave into the statute circumstances in which there was a clear and immediate need to act in the national interest, and the right hon. Gentleman will be glad to hear that I am getting to that very point.

I want to draw on the work of the former Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. I know that you have a keen eye for detail and strong powers of recall, Mr Speaker, so you will remember that it was my predecessor, Graham Allen, who chaired that Committee. I am afraid that a keen interest in constitutional reform and all those sorts of matters does not pass down through the generations of Nottingham North parliamentarians—or if it does, it has skipped me. Nevertheless, I say to hon. Members that the Committee’s excellent documents are a manual for how we might have such a statute in our law. They offer comprehensive insight. They list the hurdles that we would face, including those regarding the courts, and outline the solutions that are there at our disposal. The solutions are there, so this can be done if there is a will to do it.

The previous Prime Minister said that consulting Parliament regarding military action was a “good convention”. Clearly that convention leaves too much room for debate, as I think this week has shown. As the Leader of the Opposition said, it is broken. Now is the time to settle this one way or another. We should put Parliament’s role in statute. Even if the position is for Parliament to play no role at all, that ought to be written down, and that is why we need a war powers Act. What happened last week was a fudge. It will not do that we are doing a hokey cokey over whether we are coming to London to discuss these matters when we are dealing with really significant incidents across the globe.

The Prime Minister says that the convention still stands, so she believes that Parliament ought to have a role in military action. Well, now is the time to make good on that. Through legislation, we can show once and for all what Parliament does and does not do, and how—in the popular words of the day—we have taken back control for this Parliament.

3.45 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): In making my contribution towards the end of this debate, I want to reflect particularly on the speeches that were made from the Government
Benches at the beginning. My hon. Friends the Members for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) brought us back to the fundamentals of parliamentary accountability. Parliament controls the laws, supply and confidence over the Executive. Through those mechanisms, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset made clear, we have the ability to hold the Government firmly to account.

The history of the Armed Forces Act 2006 and, underneath that, the evolution of convention regarding Governments coming to Parliament and our flexible constitution have brought us to the place where now we have the expected accountability of Governments coming to Parliament in order to seek authorisation for specific military actions. But this is merely convention. If we examine the occasions on which the Government have come to this House to seek parliamentary authority in order to reinforce their prerogative powers, we find that they have happened because of the political situation and the Government’s assessment of what they need to reinforce their authority. In 2003, the then Labour Government and Tony Blair had a minority of support from their Back Benchers for the proposed action in Iraq. That made it necessary for the then Government to seek parliamentary authority to reinforce their political position.

Regarding the authorisation that Parliament gave to the Government of the day, I sat on the Opposition Benches during that debate, listening to the then Prime Minister make his argument, thinking that it was a bizarre state of affairs. My former colleagues in the armed forces were on the start line, in the final stages of their battle procedure before they conducted the invasion of Iraq, in which the British armed forces were responsible for about a third of the frontline with our American allies. It struck me as extraordinary that we were having a two-day debate in Parliament that was ending at about 10 o’clock or midnight, about six hours before that operation was due to commence, and that Parliament was going to say yes or no to that operation. On those grounds alone, I thought that it would be irresponsible to my former colleagues for us to suddenly say, “No, you’ve got to stop guys. We have decided that it’s the wrong thing to do.”

As we now know from history, it probably would have been better had we said no. But we should have been saying no infinitely earlier than the immediate military commencement of a major strategic operation like that. We know that Tony Blair gave his commitment to President Bush in April 2002. We know that our military were being instructed to make plans for the invasion of Iraq and to be part of that operation from about 10 o’clock or midnight, about six hours before that operation was due to commence, and that Parliament was going to say yes or no to that operation. On those grounds alone, I thought that it would be irresponsible to my former colleagues for us to suddenly say, “No, you’ve got to stop guys. We have decided that it’s the wrong thing to do.”

As we now know from history, it probably would have been better had we said no. But we should have been saying no infinitely earlier than the immediate military commencement of a major strategic operation like that. We know that Tony Blair gave his commitment to President Bush in April 2002. We know that our military were being instructed to make plans for the invasion of Iraq and to be part of that operation from the summer of 2002. This is where Parliament and the conventions that we have appeared to have established collide with military and operational reality.

I am in total agreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) about the circumstances under which one seeks parliamentary approval for operations of the kind that we saw last week. He and I jointly authored a pamphlet, which every colleague in the House received in July last year, on how Britain should respond to chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Our answer to the parliamentary problem that the Government faced was some kind of pre-authorization motion, so we would have had a debate about the circumstances that the Government faced last week and they would have then been able to act within authority that had been given by Parliament for the kind of action involved. Indeed, that parliamentary approval itself might have acted as a form of deterrent, with the Syrian Government then knowing that they would face action involving the British armed forces in response to the kind of situation that the Americans had already reacted to before.

All this involves the development of a convention about the Government coming to this House. I do not think that a war powers Act is the appropriate answer. As my hon. Friends have made clear, this House does have the essential elements of control over the Executive—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We are immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I will call the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on condition that he sits down at 3.53 pm—the start thereof, no later. Is that agreed? It is agreed.

3.50 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): I would never disagree with you, Mr Speaker, for all you say.

This whole thing will look weird to the public after we have had a weekend of Members of Parliament following events on their TV screens and debating in TV studios while this Chamber sits completely vacant. No one can deny that this has been an issue of national importance, and yet there has been barely a finger of protest lifted by Government Back Benches. Worse, we have had the grotesque sight of Members of Parliament willing to sign away their agency to an Executive who wish to grab more power. In fact, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) said that it was not for Members of Parliament to inhibit the Prime Minister. That is exactly the job of Members of Parliament, and it has been since around 1688. Yesterday another Conservative Member of Parliament actually thanked the Prime Minister for not bothering to ask him to make a decision on this matter—that was extraordinary.

Is this place really filled with people who think such foolish things? What kind of supine Member of Parliament would think such a thing in the face of this Executive? With the UN Security Council becoming a more broken instrument each and every day, this is a time for more democratic accountability, not less. As for those saying that we could not have voted without the full picture, let us go back to 2015 when they were falling over each other to heap praise on the then Prime Minister for his decisive actions in calling a vote. I do not recall them then saying that we did not have the full picture and could not possibly take part in a debate. This has been a smokescreen used by Conservative Members of Parliament longing to sign over the agency that the public invests in to hold this Government accountable and to ensure that they do not keep rolling back the powers of this Parliament—and those Members ought to be ashamed of it.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. The debate will be concluded by the Member who secured it. I call the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn.
3.53 pm

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In the two minutes I have available to me, I just want to say that this is a debate about the rights of Parliament and the role of Parliament.

Many Members have made very good contributions to the debate. I was very impressed by the speech by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who took us back to 1688. He is right about the Bill of Rights, but I just gently say to him that I think democracy can go forward even from 1688 to a slightly more modern time. He is right that we have an unwritten constitution, which is why I believe that we do indeed need an Act that would require Governments to seek the approval of Parliament before undertaking major military actions or campaigns.

I was fascinated by the speech by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). I am not quite sure why he brought my mother into the debate, but I am sure she would be very proud to have been mentioned in it. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for his support for two principles: first, that Parliament could and should have been recalled last week and was not, and secondly, that Parliament should have the right to decide on major policy issues and be able to hold the Government to account.

The 2011 doctrine laid down what the process should be, and the Government are trying to row back from that doctrine. This is a time for Parliament and democracy to assert itself on the most serious issues we ever face as Members of Parliament: whether to send people into war or not, and what the Government’s strategy is. I invite my colleagues to vote against the substantive motion, to express our dissatisfaction with the Government’s response and assert the rights of Parliament.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put. Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 256.

Division No. 137

3.55 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob

Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradry, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Allsopp
Cairns, rh Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehaman
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
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankogly, Mr Jonathan
Donchery, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Miss Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, rh Ms Nasrul
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
Gray, James
Graying, rh Chris

Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gymah, 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, 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
Hollóbne, 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
Kaczmarski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grange, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little, Penger, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack


17 APRIL 2018

Military Action Overseas: Parliamentary Approval

[242]
Parliamentary Approval

NOES

Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Ali, Rushanara
Tellers for the Ayes:
Zahawi, Nadhim
Wright, rh Jeremy
Wood, Mike
Wilson, rh Sammy
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wrapp, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kelly Tolhurst and
Mims Davies

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie

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
Merrin, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, James
O'Brien, Neill
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Aksh
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, Anna
Spearman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturz, Joan
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaiyzy, 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, Mr Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wrapp, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Fumiss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
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
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Khan, Atzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
 Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tellers for the Noes:</th>
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<td>Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith</td>
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Anti-Semitism

Mr Speaker: Before I ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to begin the debate, I just want to say two things if I may. First, Front Bench speeches cannot be constrained, but dozens of people wish to speak in this debate. I have exhorted the Department and the shadow team as follows: their Front-Bench speeches should not exceed 20 minutes in total. It is far too long to make a 20-minute speech and take bucketloads of interventions. There are 36 and more colleagues who wish to speak, so I would appreciate it if that were respected.

Secondly, if Members cannot be here for the wind-ups, I hope they will understand that they should not try to speak in the debate, because that is not fair to colleagues. I look to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to open the debate.

4.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I beg to move,

That this House has considered anti-Semitism.

This debate is about a prejudice with a long past, an all-too-lively present and a future that is for us to determine. This is the first general debate on anti-Semitism that we have had in this House. This is an issue that should concern not just the Jewish community, but all communities on both sides of the House. I think I speak for all of us in not wanting this to be an issue that we have to grapple with in the next decade, in the next Government and indeed, at the next general election. This is an issue that has come to a head now, and we must deal with it now.

I believe that the task before us today is more important than just discussing policy solutions. What we need to achieve today is to show the Jewish community in our country, and indeed those who may be watching abroad, that we do get it, that both sides of this House stand united in recognising the pernicious prejudice of anti-Semitism and in recognising the anxiety that is felt within the community here in Britain in 2018, and that we are listening to their concerns carefully, with humility and determination.

It is in that spirit that I thank the Leader of the Opposition for attending this debate. It will perhaps not be the most comfortable three hours of debate that he has sat in on, but he makes the most of—[Interruption]. And his effort is appreciated for attending. There has frankly been a deeply worrying lack of leadership and moral clarity on this issue from him. Being here to listen to what is being said by his concerned colleagues and others is an important step in showing the community that this issue is being taken seriously, and I sincerely hope that he takes the opportunity to once and for all clarify his position on anti-Semitism.

To combat anti-Semitism we must first understand the true nature of the problem. In December 2016, the UK became the first country to formally adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of anti-Semitism, and I pay tribute to my good friend and the UK’s post-holocaust envoy, Sir Eric Pickles, for that. This definition was also adopted by the Labour party, and it includes the following:

“Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective—such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.”

These tropes have been around for a very, very long time—the world’s oldest hatred.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: I will in a moment. In line with what Mr Speaker said earlier, I will take a few interventions, but I want to make sure that as many Members as possible get the opportunity to contribute today. However, I will come back to the hon. Lady.

A century ago, the then US President, William Howard Taft, described anti-Semitism as a “noxious weed”. Unfortunately, in recent years, this weed has found fertile soil in the corners of social media and political activism in our country, especially those cloaked in anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment. Criticisms of actions taken by the Israeli Government are one thing, but for many, it is simply a mask for anti-Jewish, racist sentiment. In general, Britain can be proud of its peaceful and tolerant environment for Jews, but that is in danger of changing. Across Europe and the United States, anti-Semitism is on the rise.

Last year, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,346 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK—the highest on record.1 These incidents include, for example, graffiti at a synagogue in Leeds, social media abuse of Jewish figures—not least, Members of Parliament—and Jewish schoolchildren being physically and verbally attacked on a school bus. In some ways, this type of explicit anti-Semitism is easier to recognise and to tackle head on—the hate preachers, the extremist mosques, and far-right and far-left groups—but much more of it is oblique. A search on Google produces more than half a million hits for “holocaust hoax”. Thousands more pages tell people that a greedy Otto Frank forged his daughter’s diary in a cunning scheme to try to make some money. Then there are the dinner party anti-Semites, self-regarding and respectable people who recoil at the accusation of racism but are quite happy to trot out modern takes on old tropes. In fact, this has become so pervasive that recent research by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, funded by the Community Security Trust and my Department, found that a shocking 30% of those surveyed believed in one or more anti-Semitic trope. Although a lot of that comes down to ignorance and the need for education, we cannot ignore the role that those in public life play in setting the right tone.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I came across anti-Semitism when I used to live in Swansea, at the synagogue there, and I was absolutely appalled, but it seems to me that it has got worse, particularly with social networking these days. Some people think they can write what they like on social networks and remain anonymous, so will my right hon. Friend guarantee that there will be no hiding places for those people?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that, and I will come onto it later. I know that it is something my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has taken very seriously in the hate crime action plan and she is working with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service as well as providing more resources.

Susan Elan Jones: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: Of course. There are 36 interventions.

Mr Evans: I am grateful for your generosity, Mr Speaker. The law is not the only way forward, because you have to prevent something that is being fed in the first place. The community disgraces itself, and we need to talk about it. We have to be bold and brave, and to educate people. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would add that the responsibility has to be on this House, Government and indeed, at the next general election. We are listening to their concerns carefully, with humility and determination.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us make a little more progress, please.

Sajid Javid: That this House has considered anti-Semitism.

Sajid Javid: We have no plans to review the law on this, because we also value freedom of speech, but of course when it comes to hate speech, whether it is online or offline, we must act decisively. This question has been raised by Members in the past, and if the hon. Lady believes that there is a wide body of opinion in favour of considering it, I would be happy to listen to her arguments.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a specific point, I reported a very clear anti-Semitic mural and image to Facebook, which came back to me and told me that it should not have to be removed, stating the usual reasons for not removing other forms of extremist material. Does the Secretary of State not agree with me that it is a high time we took serious action against Facebook, YouTube, Google and all those who continue to propagate extremist material of all sorts on the internet?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to make that point, because there has been a lot more done in recent years to work with the internet giants—Facebook, Google and others—to get them to do much more to take down hate crime, hate speech and hate videos of any type. He is clearly saying that more can be done. More is being done and the speed at which things are coming down once they are reported is faster than ever before, but I agree with the general direction of his comments. More needs to be done.

Anti-Semitism can be found in both extremes of the political spectrum, far right and far left. The British public has a strong record of keeping those fringes out of major parties and out of this Chamber, but although I would much rather that this issue transcended party politics, as other forms of racism have for a long time, we cannot and must not ignore the particular concern with elements within the Labour party, and nor can we ignore the fact that this increasing concern is correlating with the current Leader of the Opposition and the waves of activists that have come with him. I can understand that acknowledging these facts is not an easy thing to do. The easy thing to do is to displace responsibility by bashing the media or blaming Tory attacks, or worse, as some activists have been doing, intimidating those Labour MPs who have taken a clear stand against anti-Semitism.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend surprised as I am that an Israeli Labour MP told me in Israel last week that the leader of her party has written and dissociated herself with the Leader of the Opposition—not the Labour party, but the Leader of the Opposition?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that. It is clear that, not just at home but abroad, there is deep concern about certain elements of the Labour party when a sister party breaks away from it after decades of such a strong relationship.

Sajid Javid: I will take one more intervention, but then I must carry on.

Mr Djanogly: My right hon. Friend, of course, have received an increasing number of complaints from the Jewish community about the rise of anti-Semitism in recent times. Will he take this opportunity to describe to the House the discussions that he has been having with that community?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will know that my Department, along with the Home Secretary and others, engages in a number of discussions. I will say more about that in a moment, and reassure him on the point.

Clearly I am not a member of the Labour party. I speak about this as a concerned citizen, and as a Secretary of State who is responsible for leading on these matters. I will, however, say a couple of things at the outset. First, the Labour party has a long, strong history of rooting out prejudice in our country, from fighting Fascism to establishing sexual equality to passing laws on racial discrimination, a history of which it should rightly be proud. Secondly, the current parliamentary Labour party includes a host of impressive Members of Parliament who have been unwavering in their opposition to anti-Semitism wherever it may appear.

A few weeks ago I stood in the crowd in Parliament Square and had the privilege of listening to some incredibly passionate speeches, not just from the leaders of the Jewish community but from several Labour colleagues, including the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and for Dudley North (Ian Austin), as well as Claire Kober, the former leader of Haringey Council. Let me also pay my respects to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) for his leadership in chairing the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism, and for being instrumental in calling for today’s debate.

Let us be frank. It is not surprising that in any large group of politically minded activists, a few bigots and oddballs sometimes slip through the net. Over the years, some members of my own party have let the side down on this issue. However, the debate deserves more than attempts to point-score on individual cases. The sensible question is not so much whether someone has ever been associated in some way with these people and their attitudes as whether there is a culture that attracts them and is allowed to fester. Unfortunately, when it comes to the Leader of the Opposition, there are simply too many of his apparently accidental associations to list.

As the Board of Deputies of British Jews put it in a letter to the Leader of the Opposition,

“Rightly or wrongly, those who push this offensive material regard Jeremy Corbyn as their figurehead.”

So it really is a question of leadership. Indeed, the first chapter of the Government’s new Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper focuses on the need for exactly that, at all levels of society. We did not expect leadership to be such a problem at such a high level, but, as they say, the culture of an organisation starts at the top.
Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Jeremy Corbyn has just been named. I am a new Member here. Is that something that is allowed in the Chamber—such shameless personal abuse?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I think the Secretary of State was quoting from a letter, but I hope Members are very aware that in all other circumstances he should refer to the Leader of the Opposition not by name, but by constituency.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Did I hear correctly what the Speaker said in his introduction to the debate, when he specified the number of Members who wanted to speak, and also, I thought, asked the Front-Bench spokesmen collectively to speak for no more than 20 minutes? The Secretary of State has already taken 15 minutes of that time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: What the Speaker said was that each Front-Bencher should speak for 20 minutes, including interventions. As the right hon. Gentleman says, there are about five minutes left.

Sajid Javid: Speaking for the Government, I must say that there is clearly more to do, but I believe that we must take the responsibility of leadership seriously. The fight against anti-Semitism is led by my Department in co-ordination with the Home Office, and involves colleagues from across Westminster.

On a practical level, we have increased our funding for security at Jewish schools and places of worship by a further £13.4 million this year. The solid work of the cross-Government working group on tackling anti-Semitism ensures that we are alive to their issues and concerns, and our national strategy for tackling hate crime recognises the importance of dealing with abuse specifically targeted at Jews. The Crown Prosecution Service has made it clear that it will be treating reports of online abuse just as seriously as the offline version. There will be no place anywhere to hide when it comes to hate crime.

That is what we are doing to fight the manifestations of anti-Semitism, but ultimately to win this battle we have to cut out the roots of this weed. The best way to do that and to focus minds is to ask people where anti-Semitism leads if left unchecked. As the Holocaust Educational Trust says, “when we understand where prejudice leads, we can stop it in its tracks.”

If we are going to stamp out that weed of anti-Semitism, we have to change minds and attitudes.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Sajid Javid: I am sorry, but I must continue.

After all, the holocaust did not begin in the gas chambers: indiscriminate killing is simply where hatred when left unchecked reaches its tragic conclusion. The Holocaust began with nothing more than words, but then came the insults, the boycotts, the discrimination; the noxious weed of anti-Semitism crept into everyday life, degrading, denouncing and dehumanising its victims until the stage was set for more.

We cannot assume that modern society is on some inevitable journey towards progressive enlightenment and tolerance. That is a dangerously naive assumption, as anyone who has read a history book would know. Primo Levi put it simply: “It happened, therefore it can happen again.”

Lessons from history do not learn themselves. Even the most barbaric events in human history lose their edge over time. Events as recently as one generation ago have less resonance with the youngest generation, so this has to start with education. My own understanding of these issues did not come automatically or from birth, although my father did teach me an early lesson in tolerance about Israel; it came from reading widely and visiting the excellent permanent holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum and from visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. As a parent and a human being, that is a visit that will live with me forever. We cannot all have the sobering experience of standing in that place and places like it, although I would encourage all political leaders to make that journey.

What we can do, however, is bring back those experiences not just to Parliament, but to our universities and classrooms. That is why my Department is, for example, partnering with the Department for Education in supporting the HET and the Union of Jewish Students to expand its “lessons from Auschwitz” programme to help tackle anti-Semitism on university campuses. We also support the #StandUp, which tackles anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and we are working with the Anne Frank Trust to address hatred and prejudice in some of the most challenging schools. With these measures, we can stop the weed spreading to the next generation.

Finally, and most symbolically, we are supporting with £50 million of public money a new national holocaust memorial and learning centre right beside Parliament. This memorial will be a lasting tribute both to those who died and those who survived. It will also act as a permanent, prominent reminder of mankind’s capacity for darkness through the story of the holocaust and other genocides, but also of the capacity for good by those who refused to look the other way, such as Sir Nicholas Winton.

With that, I would like to end on a positive and optimistic note. Even while hiding quietly in that attic before the Gestapo came pounding up the stairs, Anne Frank still believed in humanity, writing: “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

The British people are fundamentally decent and tolerant, as are the vast majority of those who are engaged in political activism. The reality is that these tropes did not appear overnight, but now that this brand of hatred has emerged from its dark underbelly, we have an opportunity to focus our minds and defeat it. It is my hope that today will be a milestone, when MPs from all parties put down a marker in this place, in Hansard ink, that enough is enough.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Because of the large number of colleagues who wish to contribute to the debate, I will be imposing a five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. First, I call the shadow Secretary of State, Andrew Gwynne.
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): This week, we have been reminded of some of the darkest days in human history as we commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. More than 120,000 Jewish people were transported to Belsen, a high proportion of whom were children. One of those children was Anne Frank, the very person the Secretary of State quoted earlier. She died with her family only weeks before the liberation of Belsen by British soldiers. While in hiding, she wrote:

“How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to gradually change the world! How wonderful it is that everyone, great and small, can immediately help bring about justice by giving of themselves!”

I hope that all of us in this House today will be able to live up to those words.

I want to begin by addressing the comments made by the Secretary of State. As politicians, we all—and I mean all—have a duty to root out anti-Semitism, but recent events have shown that we in the Labour party need to be better at policing our own borders. The Labour party was formed to change society and to give a voice to the oppressed. Reflecting the existing defects of society can never be enough. It is our responsibility to show that we have zero tolerance of anti-Semitism in the Labour party. There is no place for anti-Semitism in the Labour party, on the left of British politics or in British society at all. End of.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I completely associate myself with my hon. Friend’s last three or four sentences. I represent one of the more significant Jewish populations in the country, in Kersal and Broughton, and I have worked with the Community Security Trust over a number of years to try to reduce the number of attacks on Jewish people in my constituency. I have to say that I have never come across anti-Semitism within my Labour party, and I have been shocked to realise that it exists in the party and among people associated with it. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the things we can do to reassure the Jewish community, not just in my constituency but throughout the country, is to deal with any accusations through a proper process as quickly as possible and, where necessary, either throw the accusations out or throw the people out?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and speed is obviously of the essence. We cannot allow any allegations of anti-Semitism to be kept on the back burner. Where there is an allegation of anti-Semitism, we must not only call it out but root it out.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I should like to make a little more progress.

As the Secretary of State said, the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of anti-Semitism, and we have written our outright opposition to anti-Semitism into our own party rules. In the light of recent events, however, I acknowledge that much, much more work needs to be done. That includes, among other things, the overdue full implementation of the recommendations of the Chakrabarti report, including a programme of political education to increase awareness and understanding of all forms of anti-Semitism.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I assure him that the House will have recognised the honest sincerity with which he is addressing the issue and will have taken the tone of his remarks to heart. However, in this game of politics that we sometimes play, he will know that actions speak louder than words, and Mr Livingstone remains a member of the hon. Gentleman’s party. Mr Livingstone’s comments on this issue have become even more eccentric. I know that the hon. Gentleman is not the decision maker on this, but I am sure he will take it from Members on both sides of the House that if the body politic is serious about this issue, Mr Livingstone’s speedy expulsion is required.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman knows that due process is going on and, as I have already said, the procedure needs to be speeded up. I am not going to get into politicking, and there has been some borderline politicking, but there are issues to resolve on both sides of the House. For example, there has been a complaint about the Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council in relation to anti-Semitic views. We all have a duty to call out anti-Semitism and to root it out, whether it is on the right or on the left.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Let me be clear about this: Ken Livingstone claimed that Hitler was a Zionist. That is anti-Semitism, pure and simple. It happened more than two years ago, and there has been ample time to deal with it, so it is a disgrace that it has not been dealt with. Kick him out immediately. It should have been enough when the Community Security Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Jewish Labour Movement and the Jewish Leadership Council all said that it was enough, but we even had the Chief Rabbi speaking out
and still nothing has happened. It is a disgrace. My hon. Friend should stand at the Dispatch Box and tell the leader of the Labour party that Livingstone must be booted out. Boot him out!

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend makes his views very clear. I do not share Mr Livingstone’s views, which are abhorrent, and the Labour party will go through the processes that are well applied to each and every member of the Labour party. That needs to be done far more quickly, but it needs to happen as it would for any member.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way as I want to make some progress, because many Members want to speak.

As we have heard, this year’s CST report found that hate incidents have reached a record level in the UK, including a 34% increase in the number of violent anti-Semitic assaults.

In last year’s statistics, where it could be determined, 63% of incidents were described as being far right in motivation. 6% were described as being Islamist in motivation, and 30% showed anti-Israel motivation.

The CST reports that 88 incidents targeted Jewish schools, schoolchildren or staff, with 50% of those incidents taking place as Jewish schoolchildren made their journeys to or from school. In one incident, fireworks were thrown at visibly Jewish people in public in November; in another, Jewish schoolchildren were hit, kicked and punched on the bus home, but were ignored by the driver when they tried to get help—the children fled the bus at the next stop but were followed, and found safety only after they entered a kosher shop and asked for help. It is a mark of shame on our society that our Jewish schools need security guards to protect their children.

On social media, as we have heard, anti-Semitism is in plain sight on the most heavily used sites. In January 2018, the World Jewish Congress found a 30% increase in anti-Semitic posts since 2016 and almost twice as many posts denying the holocaust.

But anti-Semitism not only appears as swastikas, brown shirts and jackboots; it also haunts our society as coded language and dog-whistle euphemisms. In the 1930s, the terms “usury”, “money power”, “alien” and “cosmopolitan” were used as coded references to Jewish people. Today, Jewish people in the public eye are marked out as “globalists”, “rootless cosmopolitans” and the “metropolitan London elite”. It runs through conspiracy theories, as Holocaust inversion and Holocaust denial, in anti-Zionism and in claims of secret plots against our country that are little different from those seen in “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

In 2011, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), who is now deputy leader of the Labour party, spoke in this House about Fox News propagating disturbing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about secret plots involving Holocaust survivor and businessman George Soros. Those views continue to be broadcast. Only last week, the use of anti-Semitic imagery featuring Soros led to the electoral success of the Fidesz party in Hungary. Thankfully, the importing of those conspiracy theories on to the front pages of UK newspapers generated the outrage that it frankly deserves.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I think we all know that one purpose of Holocaust denial is to undermine the moral foundations upon which the state of Israel was established 70 years ago. I have just spent a week in Poland participating in the March of the Living, joining survivors and young people in visiting the places where history’s greatest crime was committed. When I first entered Parliament 21 years ago, I never imagined that some in my party would suggest that that horror should somehow be a matter for debate. Will my hon. Friend join me in saying shame on them and shame on any who refuse to speak out against them?

Andrew Gwynne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Holocaust was a dreadful chapter in our world’s history. It happened, and we should never ever forget what happened during those very, very dark days.

Those who deny that the Holocaust happened need to be called out at every opportunity. They are wrong, and the deeply wrong and deeply hurtful views they spread have no place in a modern democracy.

We have seen the debate change since 2016, with triple parentheses to identify individuals being employed as an online dog whistle to single out targets by white nationalists, neo-Nazis, anti-Semites and those who share their views. Each of the three parenthesis represents anti-Semitic claims of Jewish involvement in mass media, mass immigration and global Zionism. These people even developed an app to help them to better co-ordinate and target individuals. Earlier this year, the CST reported that online abuse had fallen slightly from last year, in part due to improvements in the policies adopted by social media companies and better reporting, but anyone who uses social media can see that this remains a very serious problem.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is rightly focusing on the dangers of anti-Semitism and the nefarious activities of the far right, but does he not accept that anti-Semitism is one of those areas of public debate where the far left meets the far right, and that if the far left continues to behave in this way, there is a real danger of inciting further hatred and violence against one of our most vulnerable communities?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. As I said earlier, anybody who denies that anti-Semitism exists on the left is not living in the real world. We on the left have a duty to call it out, to root it out and to challenge it every step of the way.

So I do want the Government to act more strenuously with social media platforms to ensure that these abhorrent views are removed, and removed quickly. As the Secretary of State has rightly said, we need to ensure that rightful critique of Israeli Government policy, which is legitimate—as it is against the Government of any nation state—is distinct from spreading the demonisation of Zionism and of the right of existence of the state of Israel itself—that is not legitimate.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept, however, that when people specifically target just the state of Israel, whether they consider the Government of Israel to have acted appropriately or not—only the Government of Israel; not the Governments of other countries around the
world with whom they may have similar issues—that can be and very often is a cover for anti-Semitism?

Andrew Gwynne: And where it is clearly a cover for anti-Semitism, we have to call that out—let us be clear about that. But criticism of the Israeli Government, just like criticism of the British Government, is absolutely crucial, because that is part of our democratic process. Those who cross this distinction have no role to play in the struggle to put an end to anti-Jewish oppression within the United Kingdom, and they have no role to play in the process to establish peace and reconciliation in the middle east.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will not now, as I need to draw my remarks to a close.

That peace will only come through engagement and deep mutual recognition between the two peoples—a recognition of Palestinians’ struggle for freedom and human dignity; and of the centuries of attempts by the Jewish people to flee forced conversion, violence and expulsion. Jewish oppression affects all Jews, in all economic classes, and the oppression of Jewish people cannot be ended without transforming social injustice as a whole.

I want to make this clear in my closing remarks: Zionism is not an insult. It is not a catchphrase, a code word for racism or imperialism, or a name for unpleasant things done by Jews. It stands for a huge range of beliefs and believers. When we fail to recognise this, we assist those on the extremes as they use anti-Semitism to cover up the roots of injustice and shift the blame on to those who are most oppressed. On Yom HaShoah last week, families across Britain lit candles for loved ones who were lost in one of the most evil acts in modern memory. Families remembered how almost one third of all Jewish people were targeted and murdered because of their faith. This day is a reminder that we all have a duty to ensure that such an event can never happen again. Words never seem able to capture the bureaucratic and calculated way in which such a raw and hideous act was allowed to happen.

We know that monsters exist in our world, but they are too few to be dangerous on their own. More dangerous are those who are prepared to act without asking questions. It is our job—the job of all of us in this place—to stamp out anti-Semitism in the Labour party, although it was clear from some interventions from Opposition Members that there is a long way to go in achieving that.

Karen Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman think it is appropriate for Members to use, for instance, the N-word? I condemn all forms of racism; does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Sir Graham Brady: I condemn all forms of racism, but there is a danger in suggesting that anti-Semitism is somehow different from other forms of racism—it is not. I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in condemning all forms equally.

As a contributor to the 2015 all-party inquiry led by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), I was keen to contribute to this debate. Indeed, I am also keen to do so as a Member who represents a significant part of Manchester’s Jewish community.

This important debate is necessarily short because of the previous business, so I must be brief, but it is worth noting that there is a thread that links the business that we dealt with earlier and the business that we are addressing now. The targeted strikes on Saturday were about drawing a clear line to mark the limits of decent human behaviour, ruling out chemical weapons as too horrible to be tolerated, and stopping them from becoming a normal part of a modern arsenal. Similarly, we are discussing in this debate patterns of thought and behaviour that are not new—they have been the cause of terrible crimes and loss of life in the past—but that must not be allowed to become normal in modern Britain.

The Jewish community in Manchester is the oldest and most established minority community in the city, with many Jewish people having fled there from persecution in the 19th or 20th centuries. There are 2,000 to 2,500 Jewish residents in my constituency, but I suspect that there are many more who identify as Jewish but are not particularly observant. We have four synagogues, including the newest Sephardi synagogue in the country, which opened just a year ago. The community is a model of integration, contributing fully to the wider civic and cultural life of the area, but it also maintains its own religious and cultural traditions. There is an excellent record of interfaith co-operation with local Muslim and Christian groups.

Nevertheless, in Manchester, as elsewhere, there has been an insidious growth in the number of anti-Semitic incidents. The CST has been mentioned. It has been collecting data for the past 30 years, but the past two years have seen the largest figures on record, with the number of incidents rising to nearly 1,400 last year, as the Secretary of State said. In some ways, the most worrying thing about that increase is that unlike some previous peaks in anti-Semitism, it has not been driven by wars involving Israel. Rather, it seems that an increasing minority—often on the extreme right or the extreme left of British politics—have come to regard anti-Semitism as in some way normal or acceptable. It is not.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that we are seeing a particularly sharp increase in anti-Semitism on university campuses? Does he agree that Jewish and Israeli students should absolutely never be made to feel unwelcome in their learning environments?
Sir Graham Brady: I unequivocally agree with my hon. Friend’s point.

Some appear to have persuaded themselves that anti-Semitism is something other than racism. They are wrong. It is of course possible to criticise Israel without being anti-Semitic. British Jews themselves often have a lively debate about policy in Israel, but all too often that criticism of Israel blurs into anti-Semitism through the use of language—whether careless or deliberate. In my constituency, recorded incidents of anti-Semitism are thankfully low—five incidents of abuse recorded in the past year. It is much worse in other parts of Greater Manchester, as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish will know well, where 53 assaults were reported in the past year.

The greatest fear comes as people sense a change in the climate. There is a greater willingness for some to tolerate attacks on Jewish people. I was powerfully struck by this a few weeks ago when a Jewish constituent in his sixties sat in my constituency surgery and told me that he is now worried about anti-Semitism for the first time in his life.

Last week, my wife and I attended a very moving Yom HaShoah event in Manchester, commemorating the Holocaust and the Warsaw ghetto uprising. There was a very clear warning from two of the speakers, Judge Lindsey Kushner and Martin Davidson—Davidson is the author of “The Perfect Nazi” which is about the discovery of his German grandfather’s enthusiastic support for the Nazi party before the second world war. The message from both was that the seemingly impossible can happen—that seemingly educated and outwardly respectable people have in the past and could again be anti-Semitic—and that abhorrent attitudes can become engrained or normal. It is incumbent on all of us to stop that from happening by challenging anti-Semitism wherever it arises, by recognising the fear that is being kindled in Jewish communities around the country at the moment, and by understanding where the boundaries of civilised debate lie. This debate is just an important start.

5.2 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What a depressing issue to have to come to the House to debate. My hope, and the hope I am sure of all Members of this House, is that we all learn something from this debate, as opposed to just debating an issue.

As the MP with the second largest Jewish community in Scotland, dwarfed only by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), I had the great pleasure last week of joining Glasgow’s Jewish community, the kindest, warmest and most generous people one could hope to spend any time with, at the Yom HaShoah memorial event in Giffnock, which I attended alongside the hon. Gentleman.

At that commemoration—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree with me on this—there was a long, but really insightful lecture by the daughter of the celebrated Rabbi Gottlieb of Glasgow. Such was his reputation among all Glaswegians of the Jewish faith and of none that a civic function was put on by the city’s lord provost when the rabbi left Glasgow for Israel.

It is worth reflecting on the history of the Jewish community in Scotland. Scotland is the only country in the world that has never had an anti-Semitic text on the statute book. Indeed, the Declaration of Arbroath, which is often sung by those of us on these Benches and is one of the oldest surviving medieval texts in existence, specifically refers to Jews and Gentiles as equal citizens.

Glasgow’s Jewish community—and Scotland’s—have been a precious part of our history, and they deserve to be a precious part of our future as well, because they are a people who have been hunted to the four corners of the world for centuries. All of us in this Chamber this afternoon feel horror and shame that they still feel like a people hunted across the world, the consequences of which, of course, led to some of the darkest moments in our history.

Other Members have mentioned security. I have visited a whole range of museums in the three great cities of Paris, Berlin and New York, but there was only one museum in each city where I had to be searched before I entered. There was only one museum where I had to empty my backpack, check in my jacket and go through metal detectors. It was the Jewish museum in Berlin. It was the Jewish museum in Paris. It was the Jewish museum in New York. This shows a people still feeling hunted, with airport-style security at their museums and security outside their schools. Indeed, silly me thought that I could just walk through the front door at the Yom HaShoah event last week. Instead, I had to tell a security guard who I was before I could go in. Such is the fear and anxiety among the Jewish population in my own home town, as in other parts of Europe and, indeed, the world.

The intimidation and hate has manifested itself in many different ways. The Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State and others have mentioned social media in great depth. I am sure that we will hear a lot more about that as the debate goes on. But I want to turn to the issue of Israel and Palestine. It is rather depressing that we cannot debate anti-Semitism these days without coming to the issue of Israel and Palestine. When that conflict escalates, as it does over time, it is unacceptable to expect Jewish people in this country to shoulder any responsibility for that escalation. I do not hold the Muslim community responsible for the crimes of Muslim Governments across the world, so I will not allow anybody to hold responsible Jewish people in my constituency or elsewhere for the actions of the Government of Israel—a Government I have criticised, just as I criticised the Government of Saudi Arabia in one of my first speeches in this House and just as we criticise, rightly, the Government sat on the Benches across from us in this place.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): To avoid any doubt about the message that we in this Chamber are sending today, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we reject anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and any form of racism, and that we absolutely reserve the right to criticise the Israeli Government for illegal settlement and to criticise Hamas for storing armaments in schools or hospital compounds? The two things are separate and different.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I am an openly gay man. I understand that that might shock some Members. But members of
Hamas would have me hanging from a lamp post if they could get their hands on me.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But there is a connection.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am not minded to take that intervention.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will be charitable.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The difficulty is this: when one makes in this Chamber a criticism of the Government of Israel, as I have done, one receives a number of unsolicited invitations to meet various people. Members need to be absolutely vigilant about those people, and what they have said and done, because there is a very grave danger of being lured into precisely the milieu to which the hon. Gentleman has referred.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Of course it is right to be vigilant, as there are many hidden agendas in different political debates. I always listen to what he has to say on matters pertaining to the middle east, as he is a former Foreign Office Minister.

I return to the displays of hatred, some of which I have seen in my own constituency. The Cathcart Jewish cemetery was once, a few years ago, emblazoned with the swastika in an act of vandalism. A cemetery is a sacred place to go to remember dead people and loved ones. Imagine the horror of seeing the symbol of the gangs who targeted Jews, and gassed and killed them by the millions, in such a place. It would be bad anywhere, of course, but a place such as a cemetery is a particularly poisonous target to choose.

I mentioned the warmth and generosity of the Glaswegian Jewish community. Many right hon. and hon. Members will remember the Muslim shopkeeper in my constituency, Asad Shah, butchered outside his shop, three years ago now, because he wished Christians a happy Easter. It was too much for another man, such that he drove all the way from England to Glasgow to carry out this attack. When that happened, Glasgow's Jewish community were among the first out of the stable to offer support and solidarity in any way they could. In fact, they went to the central mosque in Glasgow to set up a press conference to make it clear that Glasgow's Ahmadi—and non-Ahmadi—Muslim community had their full support.

I turn to the recording of anti-Semitism and action being taken in Scotland. I am sure you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as in Scotland this is not a matter for the UK Government but primarily for the Justice Directorate in the Scottish Government. In 2016, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities carried out a study called, “Being Jewish in Scotland”. Many of its findings should make any Member of Parliament representing Scotland, any Member of the Scottish Parliament or any Scottish councillor deeply worried. It showed us that when tensions between Israel and Palestine escalate, fear levels rise significantly among the Jewish communities in Scotland. It told us that Jewish people in Scotland actually try to hide the fact that they are Jewish. It will be no different in other parts of the United Kingdom, and that should of course shame us all.

Much work is going into tackling this particular kind of poisonous hate crime. I could say more, but I see some Members getting anxious and I am conscious that a great many wish to speak. As I said, Glasgow's and Scotland's Jewish communities have been a precious part of our community and they deserve a precious part in our future. I am sure I speak for every Scottish Member of Parliament when I say that we can all work together to make sure that it is safeguarded.

Andrew Bridgen: My hon. Friend is from the Jewish community and I am not. Does he agree, though, that we all have a duty to fight anti-Semitism, not because it is the right thing to do and the decent thing to do but because it is essential for the wellbeing of our wider society, as history shows us that anti-Semitism is always the thin end of a very nasty and very wide potentially racist wedge?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend puts it exactly right and sums up, in essence, much of what will be debated today.

I have been amazed to see guards outside synagogues. The shadow Minister mentioned schools. I remember being at a synagogue where the rabbi said to the Jewish people inside, “Please do not congregate outside when we finish the service because you might get abuse or something even worse.” I thought, “How can it be, in the 21st century, when we thought we had escaped the horrors of Nazi Germany, that Jews are told that by a rabbi in a synagogue?”

There appears to be in some sections of the left an accepted belief that all Jews are either Israeli settlers, very rich, or part of the capitalist establishment, and these claims are then linked to even more sinister conspiracy theories.

At best, it used to be acceptable to use the fig leaf of “Zionist” or “Israelite” as a cloak for anti-Semitism. Now, anti-Semitism has got so bad that the people who hate the Jews do not even use those terms any more. Anti-Semitism is out in its naked viciousness for everyone to see. The air has grown tighter; you feel very hot, you undo a button on your shirt and your mouth goes dry. This is still a great country and a wonderful place for Jewish people, but things have changed. I always thought
that this was the greatest country in the world. My father was an immigrant here, having escaped from pogroms in Libya, and I never imagined that one would feel the air tightening in this country.

I would like to give special appreciation for the enormous work of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (John Mann)—what a great man he is—and the APPG against anti-Semitism, as well as other Labour MPs, such as the hon. Members for Dudley North (Ian Austin) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who is a good friend of the state of Israel, and many others.

However, I genuinely believe that the current Labour leadership is, at best, turning a blind eye to the problem and, at worst, condoning anti-Semitism. I say that with a heavy heart. I see the membership of dubious Facebook groups, the defence of anti-Semitic murals and the phoney reports produced by the now Baroness Chakrabarti, and they indicate three unwise monkeys: see no anti-Semitism, hear no anti-Semitism and do not speak out against anti-Semitism. That is the first problem.

The second problem is social media. As Front Benchers and shadow Front Benchers have highlighted, the internet has become a sewer for anti-Semitism. We spend so much time worrying about Facebook collecting our data for advertisements, but Facebook and Twitter have become social networks acting as a septic tank in which a disgusting and non-stop stream of anti-Semitic sewage collects. What is even worse is that when someone is a victim of anti-Semitism on social media sites, the duty is on them to get it corrected and not the other way round. Why are books and newspapers rightly punished for the publication of any kind of anti-Semitic content, but social media platforms act with impunity? They should be subject to the same laws as everybody else.

We have to ensure that community leaders and political leaders do everything possible to condemn anti-Semitism in every form it takes without hesitation or equivocation. Leadership has to set an example. We have to do more to support the Holocaust Educational Trust—I have been to Auschwitz with it—and to train teachers. We need to ensure that university campuses are welcoming environments for students of all backgrounds. The Office for Students should play a role, as the APPG against anti-Semitism recommends. The Government must go further in stamping out all extremist terror groups, including proscribing Hezbollah’s political arm. People should not be allowed to march down Trafalgar Square and Whitehall waving Hezbollah flags.

This debate is a vital opportunity to bring to the fore the widespread and escalating problem of anti-Semitism. It is also an opportunity to be constructive. Let us go forward, and let the leaders of all political parties unite and let the leaders of all political parties unite to support the Holocaust Educational Trust—I have been to Auschwitz and Belsen and Auschwitz for the publication of any kind of anti-Semitic content, but social media platforms act with impunity? They should be subject to the same laws as everybody else.

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This debate is a vital opportunity to bring to the fore the widespread and escalating problem of anti-Semitism. It is also an opportunity to be constructive. Let us go forward, and let the leaders of all political parties unite to condemn anti-Semitic content, deal with the social media companies and do more to educate our people about anti-Semitism.

5.18 pm

Luciana Berger: I beg the indulgence of the House to tell my story. I hope she is able to agree that one day it will all have been worth it to change something.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I am fortunate—I have said it publicly, and I will say it in this House—that I have a platform, as an MP, that affords me the opportunity to speak out, and I happen to be very resilient.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I just want to say on behalf of the House that we are all very glad that my hon. Friend is brave enough to tell her story. For lots of people, it feels difficult to stand up and voice their story. I hope she is able to agree that one day it will all have been worth it to change something.

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I will never stop speaking out about all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism.

I say that I have spoken out, but it is important to say that I have been able to speak out because I am resilient, but at a later moment my mental health may mean I am...
not in a place where I have the opportunity to speak out. I am grateful to my family, friends and team of staff, and my constituents and supporters, who serve as a welcome antidote to the bile that gets hurled in my direction. I will not be cowed in using the full force of the law that we have in this country to hold people to account. Having heard victim impact statements read out in court of people who have not been able to speak out—people so negatively impacted that they are now unable to work or to maintain relationships, and who have had their mental health affected—I know that just one instance of racism can have a devastating impact on an individual’s life.

I make no apology for holding my own party to a higher standard. Anti-racism is one of our central values, and there was a time not long ago when the left actively confronted anti-Semitism. The work done by the previous Labour Government to move the equality goalposts in this country was one of the reasons why I joined the Labour party in the first place. One anti-Semitic member of the Labour party is one member too many.

Yet, as I said in Parliament Square outside this place—it pains me to say this as the proud parliamentary chair of the Jewish Labour Movement— in 2018, anti-Semitism is now more commonplace, more conspicuous and more corrosive within the Labour party. That is why I have no words for the people purporting to be both members and supporters of our party and using the hashtag JCforPM who have attacked me in recent weeks for my words for the people purporting to be both members of the Jewish Labour Movement—in 2018, anti-Semitism pains me to say this as the proud parliamentary chair of the Labour party is one member too many.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to put on the record my huge respect for my hon. Friend in the face of all this, and to pledge my solidarity with her?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for her solidarity, and I am grateful to colleagues who have stood by my side and by the side of many others.

There are people who have accused me of having two masters. They have said that I am Tel Aviv’s servant, and called me a paid-up Israeli operative. Essentially, this is anti-Semitism of the worst kind, suggesting that I am a traitor to our country. They have called me Judas, a Zionist and an absolute parasite, and they have told me to get out of this country and go back to Israel.

I am grateful to the Community Security Trust and to the police for their work to keep me and my family safe, and for all that they do for the British Jewish community to keep our Jewish schools and our places of worship safe, but they should not have to do that. When it comes to what needs to be done about it, I know that many colleagues will be putting forward very practical suggestions of what can be done to contend with this very serious issue, but the hurt and anguish of the Jewish community must be understood and must be taken seriously. This is not the time for games or divisive engagement.

For the Government, there is a massive priority to conclude their work urgently, better to protect everyone in this country online from the comments that are made on a daily basis, and just in response to this debate. I urge the Secretary of State to see some of the comments that are already on Twitter, since we have started this engagement.

And my party. My party urgently needs to address this issue publicly and consistently, and we need to expel from our ranks those people who hold these views, including Ken Livingstone.

We have a duty to the next generation. Denial is not an option. Prevarication is not an option. Being a bystander who turns the other way is not an option. The time for action is now. Enough really is enough.

I want to conclude with the eloquent words of the former Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, who said that “an assault upon Jews is an assault upon difference, and a world that has no room for difference has no room for humanity itself”.

[Applause.]

5.25 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I suspect that I will not be getting a round of applause, but I have to say that it is a real pleasure in one sense but also a real burden to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who made a passionate speech. I can imagine what will already be happening on social media after that speech. May I thank her for her bravery? We need more people with her bravery in politics on this particular issue.

Anti-Semitism is racism. There are no ifs or buts—it is simple racism. I want to start by saying that I think Britain is a good place for Jews to live. We are in many ways a beacon in Europe of safety for the Jewish community. I know from my work with the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism just how different the situation is for many Jews in mainland Europe. On a visit to Brussels to see the Jewish community there, I saw people living in genuine fear not just behind security guards in their schools, but behind 10-foot or 15-foot gates with military personnel and tanks outside.

We know how difficult the situation is for French Jews, and the terrible murder of Mireille Knoll—a holocaust survivor—in France recently is more evidence of that. When I asked young Jews who were students at a school in Belgium whether they saw a future for themselves in Belgium, I was saddened by how many of them said, “Not at all.” Not a future for them in Europe.

The situation is not good in Britain, although it is a lot better than that in many parts of Europe and we should recognisef that. But there are difficult questions to be asked about anti-Semitism in this country and where it comes from, and we must ask some of those challenging questions. As I heard from our own Chief Rabbi at the global forum on anti-Semitism in Jerusalem just a few weeks ago, there are questions to be asked about certain communities. A recent study undertaken by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research found that certain communities in this country, particularly the Muslim communities, are twice as likely to hold deeply anti-Semitic views. They are also more likely to be on the receiving end—of Islamophobia, of course, and of racism too, so they are victims, but there are issues that need to be raised, and I urge everyone to read Rabbi Mirvis’s excellent speech from the global forum on anti-Semitism about this particular issue in that community.

However, I know the real issue at the moment is a rise in anti-Semitism on the left of politics. Some of us on this side of the House who try to raise and address
this issue are sadly accused of trying to smear the Labour party. I have no interest in smearing the Labour party on anything, but nor do I have any interest in allowing what is happening in British politics, in which we are all vested and invested, to continue to happen, because it is disgusting that in Britain in 2018, in mainstream politics, we have people who are able to operate freely and to—

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): On our recent visit to Israel, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) said, we met an Israeli Labour MP who said that they were severing their links with the Leader of the Opposition, not with the Labour party. That is the issue and it has to be sorted out at the top of the Labour party to stamp out this anti-Semitism once and for all.

Andrew Percy: Absolutely. The shadow Secretary of State was brilliant in much of what he said and I feel he believes it genuinely. He went on to talk about the far right on social media and the far right in Hungary. Absolutely, there is a problem with the far right. What I did not hear him talk about quite so much, however, are the Labour members who have been defended by a small part of the people sitting beside him. One Labour member, who said that the Jews were responsible for the slave trade, was defended by a Labour Member who sits behind him.

What I saw throughout this debate was the Leader of the Opposition chuntering repeatedly when anybody stood up and tried to hold him to account for some of the things that people have said and done in his name. This is a leader of the Labour party who found himself not in one, but in four or five racist anti-Semitic Facebook groups by accident. He did not look at the material. He did not read the material. He did not know the material was there. He did not understand the material. He looked at the mural and made a comment on the mural, but he did not know about it. How are we supposed to believe any of this?

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend spoke eloquently in the Holocaust debate about the abuse he received during the general election from people campaigning for the Labour party. Why does he think that those people felt able to say, when they touched him, “I now have to go and wash my hands”? That was appalling. Why did they feel empowered to do that?

Andrew Percy: I will talk about those two cases in a moment. One of the individuals is currently on bail thanks to the actions of the South Yorkshire and Humberside police.

I am sorry the Leader of the Opposition has left his place, because he needs to be held to account. The question I would like to have asked him is why he still has not taken the opportunity to respond to the invite from the Labour party in Israel to visit Israel and to visit Yad Vashem. If I have time, I will say something about that in a moment.

What else have we seen? We have seen a campaign group launched within the Labour party called Labour against the Witch Hunt. I made reference to it when I spoke in the Holocaust Memorial Day debate. Labour member after Labour member has made all sorts of disgusting comments about Jews. I just want to give one example—that of a suspended Labour member, Laura Stuart from Hendon. Reference was made earlier to Sir Eric Pickles, the Prime Minister’s envoy on post-Holocaust education. Laura Stuart felt the need to post a picture on Facebook of a photograph from the Holocaust Educational Trust that had been changed to include the words “Zionist fairy tales” and “fat Zionist conference”. A Labour party member did this. There are countless other examples.

I have to say to the leadership of the Labour party: this is in your name by people who are being motivated by the actions of the Labour leader. It is no good pretending otherwise. When you perpetuate a message about a small group of people manipulating the lives of people in this country, you create a space for conspiracy theories.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. First, the hon. Gentleman is using the word “you”. He should not be doing that, as it implies that I am undertaking certain actions. Secondly, robust debate requires a certain amount of moderation. I just ask him to remember that in what needs to be a very respectful debate.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but how can one possibly be moderate in one’s language when we are dealing with a leader of a political party in this country who has stood up and described people who want to wipe Jews off the planet as his friends? It is very difficult to be moderate in those circumstances. To have stood there—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will be moderate.

Andrew Percy: Madam Deputy Speaker, we will have to beg to differ on whether or not one should challenge individuals in this way, but I will of course accept your ruling.

I just want to finish on one point. I have spent several years campaigning in politics. The last general election was the first time anybody stood up and told me I was Israeli scum, and did so having named the Leader of the Opposition as a motivation for saying it.

5.34 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When my family helped to form the Labour party in Leeds in 1906, they suffered terribly because of that. The Jewish community in Leeds stood alongside them and supported them. That is why 13 years ago I took on the role of chairing the all-party group against anti-Semitism. I did not expect today, when Labour Members stand in solidarity with our Jewish colleagues and with the Jewish community, not just no solidarity but to be targeted by an organisation called Momentum, which has happened to all of us who stood in solidarity. But worse than that, there is explicit targeting of Jewish members of the parliamentary Labour party because they are Jewish. That is what is going on at the moment.

When I took on this voluntary cross-party role, I did not expect my wife to be sent, by a Labour Marxist anti-Semite, a dead bird through the post. I did not expect my son, after an Islamist death threat, to open
the door, when he was in the house on his own as a schoolboy, to the bomb squad. I did not expect my wife, in the last few weeks, from a leftist anti-Semite in response to the demonstration, to be threatened with rape. I did not expect my daughter similarly to have to be rung up in the last few weeks by special branch to check out her movements in this country. No, I did not expect any of that.

I will tell you the principles we have operated on, from the very first speech I made on this 13 years ago in this Chamber: every party in this House should look after its own backyard first. I have said that repeatedly on hundreds of occasions since. I have specifically, in private letters to every party in this House, repeatedly challenged anti-Semitism. For years, action was taken, and it was painful action. I am not sure that people in all parties welcomed getting the letters and the discussions that they had with me, but that was the principle that we have operated on, and we have worked cross-party.

I recall that Jewish people used to say when I held meetings, “Is it true that there is a growth in anti-Semitism?” We identified 13 years ago the three forms of anti-Semitism: Islamist anti-Semitism, traditional right anti-Semitism, and the anti-Semitism of the new left. That was all documented and has all been discussed in here. It is not new, and those who say that it is a smear to raise this issue need to publicly apologise and to publicly understand what they are doing, what they are saying and the dangers. It does not end with me and my family. It does not end with Jewish Members of Parliament here. Where this stuff ends is with what happened in Copenhagen, in Brussels and in France repeatedly, including four weeks ago: people murdered because they are Jewish. That is where this ends, and we know where history takes that. That is the reality now.

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech, which I wholly associate myself with. Does he share the deep shame that I, and I think many people within the Labour party, feel that incidents have been repeatedly reported—over and over and over again—and yet action has quite often not been taken?

**John Mann:** It is constant. This weekend in my constituency and last night in my constituency—it is constant. There is explicit anti-Semitism, and then there is the bigger group—the excusers of anti-Semitism, the people who say, “This is something to do with who the leader of the Labour party is and challenging him.” No, it is not—in the 13 years I have been doing this—and what Jewish people say to me now is different from what they said 13 years ago, when they asked, “Is it true that there is growth in anti-Semitism?” Five years ago, Jewish people would come up to me and say, “We are concerned that there is a rise in anti-Semitism.” I am stopped in the street everywhere I go now by Jewish people saying to me, very discreetly, “I am scared.” Young people and old people say, “I am scared.” We see what happened in France, in Belgium and in Copenhagen and we understand why people are scared.

People—young Jewish members—are scared to go to a Labour party meeting with me, because they are fearful that they will be intimidated and threatened and that their identity will be challenged. Any Jewish person is entitled to say that they are, to define themselves as, an anti-Zionist, or a non-Zionist, and I have no right to challenge them. Any Jewish person, as the vast majority do, is entitled to say, “I am a Zionist,” and I have no right to deny them that. Those that do are racists. Just a change in language—in the use of the word “Zionist” as a pejorative insult—by the Labour party would alter the dialogue in this country in a very big way.

We all have a choice in what we do. Stand in solidarity with the Jewish Members of Parliament under attack today. That is the role of parliamentarians.

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5.40 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) on one of the most powerful speeches I have ever heard in this Chamber. I also congratulate other Members, most notably the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). There is no doubt that the debate has been painful listening.

I remember growing up in north London and being taught in school about Anne Frank and the horrors of the holocaust. Although, regrettably, anti-Semitism still existed, there was an assumption that it was dying out—that it was steadily diminishing and that hopefully, one day in the not-too-distant future, it would be confined to history. Sadly, today’s debate illustrates that we are very far from achieving that goal. The view that I and my family and friends had back in those days was hopelessly naive.

As it has in the past, anti-Semitism has mutated into different forms and found different outlets. Yes, it lingers in the poisonous rantings of the extreme right, but there can be no doubt that it has been given a new lease of life by radical Islamism and the militant anti-Zionism of the radical left. It has been given a powerful new platform by social media.

I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism and proud to be so. I helped to produce the APPG’s groundbreaking 2006 report, which led to far-reaching changes in how we tackle anti-Semitism in this country. For example, it led directly to every police force around the country committing to record anti-Semitic incidents separately and systematically. As we have heard today, the report concluded that Jewish students regularly faced harassment and intimidation on campus in a wholly unacceptable way. It is a matter of deep regret that that continues.

The report noted the presence of anti-Semitism online, but of course what was found in that 2006 assessment is dwarfed by the sheer scale of the anti-Semitic venom that is now on social media, which includes the wholly unacceptable abuse of Members of this House such as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree.

The report was also clear that criticism of the Government of Israel can and does become polluted by anti-Semitism. Such criticism is not, as people have pointed out, anti-Semitic in itself, but equating contemporary Israeli policy with the Nazis most certainly is. So, too, is holding Jewish people collectively responsible for the actions of the Government of Israel.

The journalist Stephen Pollard gave evidence to the 2006 inquiry about his sense of shock when long-standing friends made casual remarks accusing Jewish people of responsibility for the actions of Israel and went on to...
express their intention to boycott British businesses that
had Jewish managers. Mr Pollard told MPs:

“The story of the Jews has been the same for thousands of
years: apparent assimilation, friendship and trust, all of which
can disappear overnight. By what arrogant complacency did I
assume that in my generation it could be different?”

That is a deeply bleak assessment, and we must ensure
that it never comes to pass.

The 2006 report warned:

“It is increasingly the case that, because anger over Israel’s
policies can provide a pretext, condemnation of antisemitism is
often too slow and increasingly conditional.”

Twelve years on, that has proved to be a prescient
statement. It is at the heart of the concern about the
failure of the Labour leadership to stamp out anti-Semitism
in its party. I found it shocking that the Board of
Deputies of British Jews was so worried about anti-Semitism
in the Labour party that it felt the need to organise a
protest in Parliament Square. I found it deeply disturbing
to hear Labour MPs describe the scale of the problem.
Perhaps just as depressing, however, was the letter published
on Facebook and backed by 2,000 Labour supporters
which sought to defend the Leader of the Opposition
from what it described as

“a very powerful special interest group mobilising its apparent...
strength against you.”

Those 2,000 people resorted to an obvious anti-Semitic
trope in their attempt to defend their leader from the
allegation that he was not taking anti-Semitism
seriously enough.

There can be no place for this in British politics. It is
time to act; enough is enough.

5.45 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am
devastated that we are discussing this issue in this place.
We should never have had to reach a point at which we
are discussing one of the oldest hatreds and how it is
back in our political discourse as a norm. However, I
am proud to be supported by so many of my friends
and colleagues on both sides of the House. Specifically,
I stand here in awe of the bravery and strength of my
hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree
(Luciana Berger) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman).
It is their dedication and commitment that inspire and
ensure that we stand united against the politics of hate
and scapegoating.

Today I find myself in the bizarre position of feeling
obliged to state for the record that my entry in the
Register of Members’ Financial Interests is in fact
accurate and that I have not failed to report any additional
employment. Specifically, Madam Deputy Speaker, I
feel I must inform you that I am not a CIA spy. I am not
a Mossad agent, nor am I an MI5 operative. I can
assure people who are occasionally foolish enough to
google me—although I would urge Members not to; it
can be unpleasant reading—that I work not for the
people of Tel Aviv, but for the people of Tunstall. Those
are just some of the regular anti-Semitic tropes that have
become normal in my world. Let me also make clear—just
in case I need to say it—that I am not, and nor have I
ever been, a lizard, trans-dimensional or otherwise.

What I am, Madam Deputy Speaker, is a proud trade
unionist, a Labour party activist for over 30 years, and a
lifelong anti-racist. I also happen to be a British Jew.
In three decades of political activism, there has never
come a time when those four parts of my identity have
produced any form of conflict—until now.

I used to run HOPE not hate, with the wonderful
Nick Lowles. I was the Jewish community’s anti-British
National party campaign co-ordinator. I first stood at a
demo against the National Front when I was 12. I have
spent my life campaigning against the politics of hate
and extremism. I have witnessed anti-Semitism and
racism from the far-right—after all, that is what those
people do—and, honestly, I had become desensitised
to it.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Will the
hon. Lady give way?

Ruth Smeeth: I will.

Nick Boles: I just wanted the hon. Lady to speak for
a minute longer.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Over the past two years, however, I have experienced
something genuinely painful: attacks on my identity
from within my own Labour family. I have been the
target of a campaign of abuse, attempted bullying and
intimidation from people who would dare to tell me
that people like me have no place in the party of which I
have been a member for over 20 years, and which I am
proud to represent on these Benches. My mum was a
senior trade union official; my grandad was a blacklisted
steelworker who became a miner. I was born into our
movement as surely as I was born into my faith. It is a
movement that I have worked for, campaigned for and
fought for during my entire adult life, so it was truly
heart-breaking to find myself in Parliament Square just
over three weeks ago, standing shoulder to shoulder
with the Jewish community against the poison of anti-
Semitism that is engulfing parts of my own party and
wider political discourse.

If the House will indulge me, I would like to read out
a small sample of what I have received on social media,
but before doing so, I have to thank the dedicated team
at the CST who have protected me, shielded me from as
much of this abuse as possible, and worked with the
police on the occasions when abuse became threats. As
others have said, they should not be necessary, but
personally I would be lost without them. They have also
worked their way through the thousands of pieces of
anti-Semitic abuse I have received to provide the following
greatest hits, although I must warn the House that my
fan-base has shown scant regard for appropriate
parliamentary language, so I apologise in advance:

“Hang yourself you vile treacherous Zionist Tory filth. You are
a cancer of humanity.”

“Ruth Smeeth is a Zionist—she has no shame—and trades on
the murder of Jews by Hitler—whom the Zionists betrayed.”

“Ruth Smeeth must surely be travelling 1st class to Tel Aviv
with all that slush. After all, she’s complicit in trying to bring
Corbyn down.”

“First job for Jeremy Corbyn tomorrow—expel the Zionist
BICOM smear hag bitch Ruth Smeeth from the Party.”

“This Ruth Smeeth bitch is Britainophobic, we need to cleanse
our nation of these types.”

“#JC4PM Deselect Ruth Smeeth ASAP. Poke the pig—get all
Zionist child killer scum out of Labour.”

“You are a spy! You are evil, satanic! Leave! #Labour #Corbyn.”
“Ruth you are a Zionist plant, I’m ashamed you are in Labour. Better suited to the murderous Knesset! #I Support Ken.”

“Your fellow traitor Tony Blair abolished hanging for treason. Your kind need to leave before we bring it back #Smeeth Is Filth.”

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** On behalf of all Members of the House, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend—we are enormously proud of her and everything she does for her constituents—and my hon. Friend the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman).

**Ruth Smeeth:** I thank my hon. Friend.

To move on to my final piece of abuse:

“The gallows would be a fine and fitting place for this dyke piece of Yid shit to swing from.”

This is merely a snapshot, and the comments are those that I would feel comfortable—if that is the right word—to say in this place. It is a glimpse into the abuse that now seems par for the course for any Jew who has the audacity to participate in this political world.

But this is not the worst of it. There have always been racists and anti-Semites in our country, lurking on the fringes of our society—both left and right—and I dare say there always will be. What is so heartbreaking is the concerted effort in some quarters to downplay the problem. For every comment like those we have just heard, we can find 10 people ready to dismiss it—to cry “Smear”; to say that we are “weaponising” anti-Semitism.

Weaponising anti-Semitism! My family came to this country fleeing the pogroms in the 19th century. Of our relatives who stayed in Europe, none survived. We know what anti-Semitism is; we know where it leads. How dare these people suggest that we would trifle with something so dangerous, so toxic and so formative to our lives and those of our families. How dare they seek to dismiss something so heinous and reduce it to the realm of political point scoring. How dare they, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am speaking not just for me, but for the young Jewish people I meet across the country who are beginning to fear they do not have a place. These are young people who are braver, tougher and better than I could ever be—the kind of young people who make us feel that our future is in safe hands, but right now they do not feel safe.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Ruth Smeeth:** I have run out of time; I am sorry.

There is something more fundamental at stake here than any party’s policy platform or electoral performance: the right of Jewish people to participate in the politics of our country as equals. Last month we heard a plea: enough is enough. I stand here today to say that we will not be bullied out of political engagement, that we are going nowhere, and that we will stand and keep fighting until the evils of anti-Semitism are removed from our society.

[Applause.]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. I completely understand that colleagues have been very generous and that interventions have been taken, but I am sure that colleagues will also appreciate that we are very short of time, so after the next speaker, I shall reduce the time limit to four minutes.

5.54 pm

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** I start by paying tribute to our colleagues, the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for their sheer determination and the courage with which they have spoken today. It is with a great sense of sadness and anger that I feel compelled to speak in the debate today.

It is appalling that, in the 21st century, we are having to discuss the growing tide of anti-Semitism in the United Kingdom. I say this as the daughter of migrants who fled persecution and hate; it is appalling, and anyone who has endured hate crime or been on the receiving end of abusive comments about their religion, their culture, the colour of their skin or their heritage will know just how disgusting and hurtful those comments can be. Many, including myself, had hoped that the attitudes of the past would have disappeared by now, and that we would never see them repeated, yet they feature prominently in our society and our politics today. I hoped that we would have become much more respectful and tolerant as a society.

Racist and anti-Semitic attitudes have fostered and brewed on the hard right but also on the left, and there is absolutely no justification for those attitudes or behaviours. There is no justification for people to claim to be emboldened, perhaps through social media, to make vicious and vitriolic comments about the “Jewish lobby” and the “Israel lobby”, or about “conspiracies”. There is no justification for the stereotypical racist attitudes and abuse that are deliberately targeted at members of the Jewish community in Britain today. It is appalling that we now see anti-Semitism in all forms, and it is right that hon. and right hon. Members across the Chamber have unequivocally condemned those who hold such extremist views.

I pay tribute not only to colleagues but to the Community Security Trust, which has done so much to support the Jewish community and keep it safe. In the community that I grew up in, in Radlett in Hertfordshire, we saw the CST outside synagogues and schools, protecting children and families. Now, however, we see Jewish students at university who feel unsafe because they are being threatened, victimised and targeted. I was shocked to read an account of a debate at City University this year in which a female student was being targeted and experiencing pure hatred. People were taking pictures of her and whispering obscenities in her ear to try to intimidate her. She said that she now felt completely unsafe being a Jew in the city of London. That is shocking and disgraceful, and as politicians, it is right that we should be held to high standards and that we should call out that kind of behaviour.

It is particularly alarming and shocking to hear about what is happening in the Labour party, with Momentum and the hard left now out there perpetrating awful comments and actually celebrating and cheering some of the comments that they are putting out. I pay tribute to the Labour Members who have stood up to anti-Semitism in their party. We must all stand shoulder to shoulder
with them. The hard left’s hatred and intolerance for those with different opinions has gone much too far.

We have heard today about the suffering and persecution that the Jewish community has faced for hundreds of years through mass expulsions, persecution and lies. Jewish people have been stigmatised, forced to wear badges and treated with suspicion. In one of the darkest chapters in human history, they were forced to go through all sorts of horrors that we should not have to speak about in this day and age. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to speak up and be a strong voice against the forces of hatred, prejudice and discrimination within our own community. We must ensure that we continue to stand up against the racism and anti-Semitism that we now see across society and across our politics today.

5.59 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): This week, which marks the 50th anniversary of Enoch Powell’s hateful “rivers of blood” speech, has reminded me of growing up with mixed heritage in Manchester in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Moss Side riots, when racism poisoned social relationships on the streets of Manchester, in the workplace and in the playground. The fact that we are standing in this Chamber having this debate about anti-Semitism 30 years later shames us all. It is devastating that this generation has not grappled and dealt with the problems that were a persistent feature of my childhood. This House has no right to look away now when the problems are happening again. My party has no right to pick and choose how and when we decide to confront racism in this country.

It is right to say, as a Labour Front Bencher did this week, that anti-Semitism exists across society, but it is wrong to go on and say, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) then did, that what is happening in the Labour party is merely a reflection of society, because a particular sort of anti-Semitism has found its home on the far left throughout history. The recent compelling examples that have been levelled at my hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that we need urgent legislation to shut down the closed Facebook groups that many of our party members operate in, because that is where this is getting so entrenched?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is right that we need urgent legislation, but there needs to be a clear message from every single person in this party that such groups and hashtags are not tolerated and that those who use them will be held to account.

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree, but I have also seen such things from other groups. I have just seen a tweet from someone claiming to be a member of Momentum suggesting that those of us who have spoken about anti-Semitism have taken a bounty of £1 million from Israel to undermine the leader of the Labour party. That absurdity must be rooted out, too.

Lisa Nandy: I have seen one shocking instance of that at a party meeting in the past year, but I have seen acres of it online. It is not a lesser form of racism; there is no such thing. Racism is a disease. It does not exist in pockets; it poisons wherever it is found and it must be dealt with.

In recent months, we have seen a rise in anti-Semitic attacks in Britain, a murder in France, attacks on synagogues in Sweden, and fascists on the march in Poland. It is no wonder that, as one constituent who wrote to thank me for speaking out about the issue in the Labour party said, “People are frightened.” Labour has at times been the hope for people who were frightened of racism and anti-Semitism. For me, that is not historical fact; it is personal. My father was part of the small group of people who wrote the Race Relations Act 1976, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Human Rights Act into law and established the Equal Opportunities Commission, and they have had real, tangible benefits for me and my generation.

The Labour party ought to be the light on the hill for people in times of darkness, and it shames us that we are a source of pain because a small group of people has been allowed a voice, and that demands concrete action. Expel Ken Livingstone—it has been nearly two years—deal with the thousands of complaints that are waiting to be heard, and bring in training for members. I call for that not because most Labour party members are anti-Semitic—most, like me, joined because we abhor racism and discrimination every bit as much as we abhor poverty and oppression—but because Labour has a long history of empowering our members, and we are a party that seeks not just to run society, but to change it, and we have a duty to lead.

Those things, taken together, would create a culture in our party in which anti-Semitism could find no fertile ground. I have been a member of this party for 20 years, and what angers me most is the assertion that a person cannot be left wing and stand up to anti-Semitism—standing up to anti-Semitism is a core part of my values.

As vice-chair of Labour Friends of Palestine for the past six years, I have stood together with Jewish and non-Jewish colleagues against illegal settlements and demolitions, and in support and defence of the Palestinian people. I have never been as moved as when I visited the west bank and saw Israeli Jewish mums volunteering in military courts to advocate for the right of Palestinian mums to be heard. It is a disgrace that some in our party seek to divide and sow hatred when those mums have managed to reach across that divide and do the opposite.
Anti-Semitism tells us that something is rotten in our society. It is not enough for us to decry the shrill, sour, hopeless dog-whistle politics that we have heard from the other side in recent years; we have to be better. I implore my party today to act.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Paul Masterton.

6.5 pm
Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): East Renfrewshire is privileged to have the largest Jewish community in Scotland, and I take seriously my role as its representative to defend, support and champion that community. I am honoured to have recently been appointed co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews, working alongside my friend the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and many others.

The Jewish community in East Renfrewshire retains its history and culture while contributing to life across the west of Scotland. The community grew from the expulsion of innocent men, women and children from the continent and today, as it always has, it gives so much back to this country.

On Wednesday evening, I attended the Giffnock synagogue for Yom HaShoah. I stood as page after page of names were turned, listing the relatives of local community members, all of whom had been killed in the holocaust. Stanley Lovatt from Newton Mearns is Israel's honorary consul in Scotland. Stanley is in his late 70s but I remember inviting him and his wife down to a Downing Street reception, and they stepped into that time and again United Kingdom Governments of all colours have defended them and their kin, making them welcome and safe.

Stanley Grossman, again from Newton Mearns, is a champion for his local community and a challenger of anti-Semitism wherever it is found. Rabbi Wolfson, the two Rabbis Jacobs and Rabbi Rubin enrich the religious lives of those who attend shul. They play an active role in the wider community, they are much loved and they forge strong and effective partnerships with other local faith leaders, as the Home Secretary saw for herself when she visited Giffnock in the summer.

But it is not just the acts of individuals in East Renfrewshire who happen to be Jewish that are worthy of noting here today—there are Jewish organisations that do so much. The ongoing care for the community members, all of whom had been killed in the holocaust. Stanley Lovatt from Newton Mearns is Israel's honorary consul in Scotland. Stanley is in his late 70s but I remember inviting him and his wife down to a Downing Street reception, and they stepped into this amazing building, clutching each other's hands, walking around wide-eyed like two giggling teenagers in love. Being here and walking up Downing Street was emotional because it is from this place, from these Benches, that and again United Kingdom Governments of all colours have defended them and their kin, making them welcome and safe.

Stanley Grossman, again from Newton Mearns, is a champion for his local community and a challenger of anti-Semitism wherever it is found. Rabbi Wolfson, the two Rabbis Jacobs and Rabbi Rubin enrich the religious lives of those who attend shul. They play an active role in the wider community, they are much loved and they forge strong and effective partnerships with other local faith leaders, as the Home Secretary saw for herself when she visited Giffnock in the summer.

But it is not just the acts of individuals in East Renfrewshire who happen to be Jewish that are worthy of noting here today—there are Jewish organisations that do so much. The ongoing care for the community provided by Jewish Care Scotland and Cosgrove Care are a testament to the positive contribution to broader life for which the Jewish community strives. At the Maccabi centre, where people like Sue Faber do so much, we have a youth and sports centre where the community can come together for krav maga, badminton and even the celebration of Jewish adulthood with a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah.

Founded in 1914, the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council, from its base in Giffnock, works to develop relationships between the Jewish community and other civic and religious groups. It works under the incredible leadership of Nicola Livingston and Evy Yedd to support the community and prevent and combat discrimination against local Jewish people. They were on the frontline when a sales assistant had acid poured over her head in Braehead shopping centre because she worked on a stall selling Israeli cosmetic products. They were on the frontline when the community woke to find a swastika spray painted on the side of a sheltered housing block with the words—I apologise in advance—“Jewish cunts. Jews out.”

In 2013, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities published a report on “Being Jewish in Scotland.” They have since produced an update, entitled “What’s Changed about Being Jewish in Scotland?” The front cover of that update featured two quotes. The first said:

“I would never before have considered it risky to show my Jewish identity in public. However that is changing.”

The second said:

“I used to be comfortable as a Jew in Scotland, but not any more.”

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does the hon. Gentleman, like me and other colleagues from Scotland, want to work towards a place where Jewish people can wear their Judaism with pride?

Paul Masterton: Yes, I absolutely agree. We can show a real commitment to that on a cross-party basis, both through the work we do with each other and in the Scottish Parliament.

I wanted today to talk about real people, British Jews, walking on the streets of East Renfrewshire, because anti-Semitism is not just about the tweet, the picture on Facebook or the mural on the side of the London building; it is about the recipient—the innocent family member, friend, colleague, who is targeted, provoked, attacked, for no reason other than being Jewish. It is about the person made to feel unsafe and unwelcome in their home, and they do not deserve it. These are good people, their contributions to our country are immeasurably positive, and we are letting them down.

I said I spent Wednesday evening commemorating the 6 million Jews killed in the holocaust—the horrifying reminder of where anti-Semitism can lead. Just 48 hours previously, a brick had been thrown through the front door of that synagogue. The quiet determination and resolve of those who gathered in the synagogue hall last week, like that of the thousands who stood a few steps away from this place in Parliament Square, should not be underestimated. It is they for whom we are fighting. We have heard it many times, and we will hear it many more, but it cannot be said too much: enough is enough.

6.10 pm
Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I, like many Jews, love this country because of its tolerance and sense of fairness. We are proud to be British and Jewish, and no one has ever asked me to choose between the two. That is how the vast majority of UK Jews felt until recently, but, sadly, it is no longer the case. A significant number are deeply anxious and insecure. They wonder aloud whether to leave and question whether their children have a future here. One constituent told me how he was recently followed from a supermarket, first on foot and then by car, by a man who shouted at him, “Jews kill Palestinians”. A few days later, the same constituent was standing outside his home when a passing motorist shouted, “I am looking for Jews.”
Jew hatred has existed through the ages and in every generation—it is the oldest hatred of them all. The Shoah, only 78 years ago, was a unique, evil attempt by the Nazis to destroy an entire people through a barbaric industrial process. But it was also a time when too many nations, including this one, looked the other way and did not do enough to offer refuge to Jews who could have survived. It is so sad that this country is repeating this chapter of shame in its approach towards Syrian refugees.

Anti-Semitism on the left is not new and it did not begin when the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) became leader of the Labour party. Based on the evidence I have seen and my interactions with him, I do not believe he, personally, is anti-Semitic. However, his leadership has attracted new members whose anti-Semitism is pernicious and exposed long-standing members whose use of anti-Semitic language and imagery is shocking. It is also wrong that in the past he has failed to call out ideological allies when their anti-Semitism was clear for all to see.

There are two primary forms of contemporary anti-Semitism that the party must address. The first is imagery and rhetoric suggesting that secret cabals of Jews run the world and are responsible for capitalism’s excesses. In this warped world view, Jews are not worthy of protection from racism because, unlike other minorities, they hold power and wealth. The second is hostility towards Israel and the bastardisation of the word “Zionism”. Zionism means the right to self-determination of the Jewish people in their own state. Other than for a small minority, it does not mean expansionism or aggression. The left leads campaigns for the right of many minorities to self-determination around the world—why are the Jews different?

As a proud supporter of Israel, I have always supported a two-state solution, opposed settlement expansion and criticised the failure of leadership on both sides, which has led to the breakdown of political dialogue and the freezing of the peace process. People of all faiths and none have the right to criticise the Government of Israel, but many on the left fail to recognise the legitimate security concerns of a country that is surrounded by hostile neighbours on every border who seek a one-state solution, without Jews.

Today, in constituencies up and down the country, too many Labour Jewish members and supporters are being challenged to choose between their political party and their identity. It should never have come to this. I hope the Leader of the Opposition will now reject the false echo chamber of those who tell him that this focus on left-wing anti-Semitism is an attempt to silence criticism of Israel or is being used by party critics to undermine him. They are wrong. It would be a big mistake not to recognise that on this issue the Jewish Leadership Council and Board of Deputies speak for a significant majority, rather than a vociferous minority. Those Labour MPs who attended the Parliament Square rally deserve support, not condemnation. They rightly chose to identify with a minority group who feel vulnerable and angry. As the mainstream party that through history has done the most to fight all forms of racism, it is right that Labour be judged to the highest standards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It is obvious that a lot of people want to speak and not everybody is going to have the opportunity. I remind the House that when somebody takes an intervention, it does not add any time to the debate; it only takes time away from other people who have been sitting here and who are not going to get to speak, and that will be a lot of people. I must now reduce the time limit to three minutes. [Interruption.] I know that Members will be disappointed, but it is in order to be fair to everybody. We either have a few people at eight minutes or a lot of people at three minutes. I think it is fairer to make it three minutes.

6.14 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Evil happens when good people stand by and do nothing. There is evil running through and infiltrating the Labour party, but it is full of good people and they are trying to do something about it. I commend them, appreciate them and have nothing but respect for them.

6.15 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Anti-Semitism is a centuries-old virus that mutates but never goes away. As we have heard from my hon. Friends, the reality of anti-Semitism is felt every day by many members of the Jewish community. It is present across the whole political spectrum, but this debate takes place against the background of the furore in the Labour party. The refusal to accept and address anti-Semitism in our ranks led to an unprecedented response from the mainstream Jewish community, when more than 1,000 people poured into Parliament Square in their anger and anguish, to protest against the Labour party’s inaction in dealing with anti-Semitism.

I commend the 40-plus non-Jewish MPs and peers who joined that rally. Those who denounced the demonstrators as having dubious motives, subject to manipulation, and accused them of using this issue to smear the Labour leadership, must ask themselves whether they would make that allegation against any other minority group. I think not. They should look in the mirror and ask themselves why—why do they regard Jewish people in a different light from all others?

It is a fallacy to believe that people who profess to be anti-racist cannot be anti-Semitic, and that anti-Semitism is confined to the right wing of politics. The notion of conspiratorial, powerful Jews—or Zionists—controlling international capital and manipulating the media for their own ends is to be found on the left as well. It is all too evident in the Labour party’s current problem with anti-Semitism.

The small British Jewish community—less than 0.5% of the population—is increasingly disturbed by the growth and normalisation of anti-Semitism. They understand that anti-Semitism comes from all political parties and from right across society, but when that anti-Semitism grows unchallenged in a mainstream political party—a party of Government—they simply feel frightened. Together with feeling frightened, they feel angry and anguished. I share that anguish as I meet, day by day, Jewish members of the Labour party who tell me that they can no longer continue in the party that they once held dear—the party that they now feel has betrayed them. I read with horror reports of Labour Jewish councillors who feel
that they can no longer serve as councillors because they are Jewish. They feel that the Labour party is no longer for them. That is outrageous and despicable.

The Labour party—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Very unusually, I shall allow the hon. Lady to finish her sentence.

Mrs Ellman: The Labour party claims that it now recognises the problem; I will believe that when I see action and we no longer have members espousing holocaust denial and equivocation, invoking the Rothschilds, or declaring that the Jews were the main financiers of the slave trade.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Three minutes means three minutes; it says it on the clock.

6.19 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I feel deeply honoured to be able to speak in this debate.

Last week, I had the incredible honour of being in Israel and present at the national holocaust memorial ceremony. It was a deeply moving experience. I challenge anyone to be there and not be deeply affected by the occasion. It helps us to start to understand the impact that the holocaust has had on the Jewish people. Despite that history, the Jewish people are a people of hope, resilience and incredible dignity. It was a great honour to be there.

What I have found from the Jewish people I have met is that they simply want to live in peace. They simply want to feel safe and to feel that they belong somewhere—whether that is in the state of Israel or wherever it is in the world that they call home. They are a people who simply seek to live in peace.

I want to share, very quickly, a couple of things that I learned while I was in Israel that really brought home to me just how tolerant the Jews are. They are, I believe, among the most tolerant and accepting people on our earth today, which is in stark contrast to the way in which they are portrayed by some people.

The most moving thing that I experienced while I was there was to listen to a young British Jew, who has left this country to go to Israel because, as she said, she did not feel safe here. She did not feel that she belonged here. She could no longer see a future for herself in the UK. It should deeply trouble every single one of us in this House that the Jewish people do not feel that they belong in this country any more.

The UK rightly has a proud history of welcoming the Jewish people, but it should trouble us that that is changing. We have heard stories, time and again, of how the Jews are beginning to feel unsafe, how they are beginning to feel that they do not belong here. I do not want to live in a country where that is the case. I believe that every single one of us in this House has a responsibility to root out anti-Semitism, to make sure that we are addressing these issues at their root, and to ensure that the UK continues to be a place—whatever else is going on around the world—which Jews are welcome to call their home.

6.25 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I am not Jewish, but my wife’s family is. They helped to rescue people fleeing the Nazis in the years running up to the second world war.

I have never felt as nervous and frightened at being a Jew as I feel today. It feels as if my party has given permission for anti-Semitism to go unchallenged. Anti-Semitism is making me an outsider in my Labour party. To that I simply say, enough is enough.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I am not Jewish, but my wife’s family is. They helped to rescue people fleeing the Nazis in the years running up to the second world war.
Anti-Semitism is raw, ugly and utterly toxic. As we have heard today, it is a force that is still present in society—albeit adopting, as it always does, new guises in a new era. I pay immense tribute to Opposition and Government Members who have spoken with such courage on this issue today.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) spoke from the Opposition Front Bench about the Labour party’s moral mission to renew and turn the corner on this issue. The Board of Deputies has pointed out: “For...the last two years, the Jewish community has been exposed to a constant drip-feed of antisemitism coming from Labour members.” It also condemned the “weak, pathetic and slow response from the Labour Party” in the face of these incidents. May I just say how much I associate myself with the calls for Ken Livingstone to be expelled from the Labour party? He has no place in our national life in any party or in any way anymore.

What does it say about the willingness of the Leader of the Opposition to respond meaningfully to this criticism, when Labour MPs are telling us the stories that we have heard today or feel compelled to join the protestors outside Parliament because there is no hope of change within it? I am convinced that it stems from the fact that the leadership of the Labour party has been captured by the man who, more than any other, embodies the selective blindness of his political beliefs in regard to anti-Semitism. It is worth noticing that, after defending the despicable mural in Tower Hamlets, the Leader of the Opposition condemned himself in his own excuse. He said, “I didn’t notice the anti-Semitism”.

I believe him, for failing to notice blatant anti-Semitism is precisely the problem. Perhaps he has become immune. The problem is that he sets the tone. I see it in my own constituency. The former Member for Sunderland South, Chris Mullin, tweeted on 26 March: “Sorry to see Jewish leaders banging up on Corbyn. Far less anti-semitism in the Labour Party than in other parts of society”, and this was swiftly retweeted by the chair of the South Middlesbrough Labour party. This will not and must not stand.

I am pleased that the Leader of the Opposition has committed to upping his game, but I ask him: will he now utterly dissociate himself from Hamas and Hezbollah? Is he proud that Salim Mulla, who said that Israel was responsible for both the Sandy Hook massacre and for ISIS, is still representing his party as a councillor in Middlesbrough? Enough is enough, but it can only change from the top and it must change. Today must mark the turning point.

6.28 pm

I am pleased that the leader of the Labour party has returned, because the current crisis was triggered by the shocking discovery that he had defended a grotesque racist caricature. For three days he issued excuses. Only on the fourth day, with that unprecedented protest planned, did he manage actually to say sorry. Labour party members, all of us, have to ask ourselves what we would be saying—what he would be saying—if a senior member of the Conservative party had defended a racist caricature of anybody else. I am afraid—I want to say this very directly to him—that he spent decades defending these people. Hamas’s charter is avowedly anti-Semitic; Hezbollah too, yet our leader describes them as “friends” and invites them to Parliament. Raed Salah, found guilty in court of the blood libel, was described as “a very honoured citizen” and invited here too.

Stephen Sizer, a Church of England vicar, was disciplined by his own Church when he spread ideas that were “clearly anti-Semitic”, yet our leader defended him and claimed he was “under attack” by a pro-Israeli smear campaign.

The problem with the hard left is that some of them believe they are so virtuous—they have fought racism all their lives so how can they possibly be guilty? That is why they say that this has been whipped up or weaponised. But do they not understand how offensive it is to victims of anti-Semitism when they are told that they are inventing these complaints? Why do they get angry with the people complaining about racism instead of the people responsible for it? They have a big opportunity. Take this much more seriously, deal with the cases more quickly, kick these people out straight away, and respond properly to the letter that has been received from the mainstream Jewish organisations, the Jewish Leadership Council, and the Board of Deputies.

6.31 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am not an expert in these matters, but I was incredibly moved when I went to Israel for the first time 18 months ago and visited Yad Vashem, the world’s holocaust remembrance centre, and saw at first hand the evidence of the experience of the Jewish people before and during the holocaust, and of the survivors afterwards. I was especially moved by the testament of British soldiers who were joyful at the end of the second world war but absolutely crushed within hours to discover concentration camps where there were mass graves, people on the edge of starvation, and gas chambers.

It is our duty now to speak out about anti-Semitism to make sure that that never happens again, because the lessons of history tell us that the start of an increase in
anti-Semitism is a slippery slope. As philosophers have said for many years, unless we learn the lessons of history, we are doomed to repeat them. It is no coincidence that not just in the Holocaust but in multiple genocides that have happened since, such as Rwanda and Srebrenica, and what is happening with the Rohingya and Yazidi peoples now, there is a cycle of behaviour and a pattern of events that warn us that more is to come.

If we facilitate anti-Semitism, then we are on a slippery slope. We know from the CST that anti-Semitic attacks are increasing in this country. There are now, on average, four attacks a day on Jewish people. There is a 3% increase in such events on last year. There is a 34% increase in violent assaults—the highest tally since 1984. That tells us that something is happening in this country, and there is a duty on all of us to speak out. If we look back at the 1920s and ’30s in Europe, we see that that is exactly what was happening then, when synagogues were being deconsecrated, Jewish people were being attacked, and murals were being painted on walls. Is this ringing any alarm bells with people in this Chamber?

I might be accused of overreacting, but history tells us where the direction of travel is going. When we are seeing the democratic process in this country being used to legitimise anti-Semitism, with people who are clearly anti-Semitic being put up for elections, history tells us that we are on a slippery slope. The seeds are being sown now, and this country is in grave danger if we do not speak out. We have a duty not just to speak out but to support those who speak out and are being persecuted as a result. If we think the Holocaust could not happen in this country now or at any time in the future, we must think again. It happened, post the war to end all wars, in the best educated country in Europe. It happened then, and now, not through a mass violent struggle but through subtle levels of anti-Semitism, it could happen again.

6.34 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this quite remarkable debate.

As the beneficiary, as I now see it, of white Presbyterian privilege, this has been a humbling and illuminating experience. Like the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), I was brought up in a time and a place where we were taught that this was something of history. Like her, I now realise that it is certainly not something of history—if, indeed, it ever was—and anybody who thinks that it is could do worse than listen to the quite remarkable speeches of the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth).

The Secretary of State, in opening the debate, said that we should approach this subject with humility, and he is right about that. In truth, this is something that affects us across the political divides, because as political parties, we are reflective of the society in which we live. I confess freely that I have been on something of a journey. When I was first confronted with the spectre of anti-Semitism in our party and in my party, I was too quick to excuse it, because frankly I could not believe that it could be a feature of otherwise sensible, rational people. I now realise that it is.

We find all around us so much casual anti-Semitism—the clichés, the stereotypes and the references even to “these people”. I now find myself in a position where, when I see it, I am not prepared to be forgiving in any way, shape or form. It is incumbent on us all who reject it to call it out when we see it.

I do not want to dwell on matters relating to other parties. It appears to me as an outsider looking in that there is a problem within the Labour party, but we would be wrong to think that it is a problem just for the Labour party. If Jewish people do not feel comfortable within the Labour party or any other party simply because they are Jewish, it is a problem for us all who have faith and confidence in our political system.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) said that anti-Semitism was a racism like any other. With respect, and without wanting to get into the semantics, I do not believe that to be the case. For some reason, anti-Semitism and racism are a pernicious force that we find throughout history and throughout the world, as others have said. How we respond to that is up to us. We must not allow it to be a force that divides us. It can be a force that unites us, as long as there is unity in tackling it and rejecting it.

6.37 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is extraordinary not just that we have to debate anti-Semitism, but that it is so much a part of our current political environment. It is fuelled and propagated by social media, but if wider society gives anti-Semitism a space, that appears to legitimise it. Often it is not obvious; it can be subtle enough not to be noticed in a mural at a casual glance. However, anti-Semitism is often overt and is too often propagated in student societies at our universities, which was why the then Universities Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), had to increase funding to deal with the problem only last year.

We see the frequent and unique demonisation of the state of Israel. That happens only to the Jewish state; nothing comparable happens with any other country in the world. The boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign represents a unique attack on Israel and lends itself to not just anti-Zionism but anti-Semitism. It is the attempted isolation of Israel through commerce, academia and culture. Is it not incredible that we would seek to isolate Israel and to stop businessmen and women, academics, artists and musicians working in and with the state of Israel? Increasingly, Jews in Europe are leaving for Israel. We must deal with anti-Semitism in a manner before British Jews feel they have to leave our land.

6.39 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): In the few minutes available, I want to say that, as a Catholic parliamentarian, I stand in solidarity with my Jewish colleagues in the Chamber today. As chairman of the Catholic Legislators Network and the director of Catholics for Labour, I know that we have to fight anti-Semitism wherever it rears its ugly head.

In October 2015, Pope Francis met Jewish representatives and said in a statement that we had, after 2,000 years, reconciled some of our differences. If I had said that in 1915, I would have been locked up, and if I had said it 50 years ago, I would have been laughed at, but today, some of those differences have been reconciled. In the encyclical “Nostra Aetate” of the second...
Vatican council in 1965, born out of the horror of the holocaust, the Catholic Church condemned anti-Semitism and asked for a transformation of the relationship. It was not until 20 years afterwards that Pope John Paul visited the synagogue in Rome—he was probably the first Pope to go into a synagogue since Peter the Apostle—which symbolised that new relationship.

I make a plea to my own party and my party leadership. Two years ago, I stood in central London at the Cable Street commemoration of how, 80 years previously, Jews and Catholics came together to fight the fascists. In that period, 20,000 protesters came together to fight fascism and Mosley, and having pleaded with the then Home Secretary, John Simon, to ban the march, forced the fascists to turn around. My hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) were both at that commemoration. The Labour party and the Labour movement have a proud tradition of standing up to anti-Semitism in this country, and we must maintain it.

I will finish by saying that power, which is a gift from God, is either coercive or relational, and anti-Semitism is the worst possible type of coercive power. Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, said, when asked whether God exists, that he exists in the space between us. That means we have to build solidarity with one another, day in and day out, to make sure that we create a better world.

Finally, we can look at scripture—Nehemiah—and see that on the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem after their exile, they built the walls of Jerusalem again. Our party walls have been breached, and it is up to each and every one of us to build those walls again. We can do that, and we must do it quickly.

6.42 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council for organising last month’s demonstration, which I attended, alongside many Members from both sides of this House.

Anti-Semitism is not just a problem for the Labour party; we see it across the middle east, in European Union states and, of late, in the USA. However, it is simply not good enough for a party that prides itself on its record of fighting racism and discrimination to offer this an excuse for its failure to get its own house in order. Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Macpherson report, and some people need to be reminded of its core principle that a racist incident is “any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim”.

When Jewish people tell us that the scenes they witness at some Labour party meetings, the bile they view on social media, or the words they hear in defence of an anti-Semitic mural cause them great offence, we should not question, ridicule or reject such an assertion, but accept it and tackle it—full stop.

Some say that this is all about shutting down criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government, but that is a pernicious lie. Let there be no doubt, however, that refusing to acknowledge Israel’s right to exist, equating Zionism with racism, or requiring of Israel “a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation”, as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance puts it, are all forms of anti-Semitism.

A year ago, I apologised to those in the Jewish community for the actions of some in my party. It is a tragic and shameful fact that here we are, 12 months on, and they have been subjected to further anger, pain and hurt. I hope that actions will now speak louder than words, that enough is enough, and that my party—and, most especially, the leadership of my party—will act to drive out anti-Semitism. I hope that Labour can once again be the natural home for all those who are committed to decency, respect, tolerance, fairness and human rights.

6.44 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This has been an emotional debate, and an emotional debate for me—I came into politics to fight racism and I have never resiled from that position. For me, it has always been the case that racism includes anti-Semitism. Jew hatred is race hatred, and one anti-Semite in the Labour party is too many.

I begin by congratulating my colleagues—

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: I need to make some progress. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Bassetlaw (John Mann), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), for Bury South (Mr Lewis), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on their very powerful speeches, but I think—

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: I think that I have to make progress.

But if we are going to frame this debate, I would like to quote from a rabbi, Rabbi Gluck, who was mentioned earlier. He happens to be a rabbi in Hackney. He said:

“Minorities, and especially the Jewish community in Europe, are the weather vane of discontent and a wider feeling of insecurity in society, as people look for easy and quick answers to their problems.”

I am sad that we are having this debate, but I am proud to represent one of the oldest Jewish communities in the country. It is my representation of that community for many decades that shaped my strong views on anti-Semitism. As well as one of the oldest Jewish communities in the country, I have the largest community of Charedi orthodox Jewish people outside New York and, of course, Israel. I have worked with them during all my time as an MP on issues ranging from ritual slaughter to immigration, and that work has included lobbying Ministers for there to be a voluntary aided school.

I want to take the opportunity to raise just two issues that are of concern to the Charedi community, who are not often talked about in this Chamber. One is the rising level of hate crime. The Charedi Jewish—[Interruption.] The Charedi Jewish community—[Interruption.] The Charedi—[Interruption.] I think—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The right hon. Lady has said that she does not want to give way. It is entirely up to her whether she gives way or not, but she must be heard.

Ms Abbott: The Charedi community will want these issues to be raised. One is the rising level of hate crime;
the other is what is happening with the Charedi community maintained schools and Ofsted. I urge the Home Secretary to meet leaders of the Charedi community and leaders of the Shomrim neighbourhood watch organisation to understand and hear their particular concerns.

On the question of the schools, I can do no better than quote Gillian Merron, the chief executive officer of the Board of Deputies of British Jews:

“We understand that Ofsted has a difficult job to do, but the repeated and increasingly aggressive targeting of Charedi schools is fast becoming counterproductive. While some Jewish schools have a good relationship with Ofsted, the Charedi sector is losing confidence in the inspectorate.”

Sajid Javid: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: The Charedi community has asked me to make these points.

Alex Sobel: Will my right hon. Friend give way now?

Ms Abbott: There has been—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Andrew Percy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just for guidance, can you inform the House whether a shadow Minister responding to a debate should make a speech with regard to their constituency or should respond to the debate—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. No, I cannot. What the right hon. Lady says at the Dispatch Box is entirely up to her and not a matter for me. Is the right hon. Lady giving way to Mr Sobel?

Ms Abbott indicated assent.

Alex Sobel: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Perhaps she was not aware that I was the only Jewish parliamentarian who was not called to speak in the debate.

After the holocaust memorial debate, I was subjected to quite horrific abuse. I shall give one example. Mr Leonard said on Channel 4’s Facebook page, “Why is this Jewish Zionazi speaking in the English Parliament?” Does she agree that we need to tackle this not just on social media but also through the courts?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful that Members have allowed me to speak on behalf of the Charedi community. I want to go on, in the few minutes available—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The right hon. Lady does not have to address any point. What she says is entirely up to her. Now be quiet and allow her to finish.

Ms Abbott: I want to talk about what the Labour party is doing about the issue of anti-Semitism. We are looking at introducing a programme of education, quite possibly delivered by organisations such as the Jewish Labour Movement, and we are emphasising that members have an absolute right to raise the issue of anti-Semitism, including on demonstrations. We acknowledge that dealing with some of these complaints has been too slow, so we are reviewing and speeding up our disciplinary process.

We are looking at the workings of the disciplinary committee. We are recruiting an in-house lawyer and a further three temporary lawyers to help to clear the backlog.

Speaking as somebody who has experienced more online abuse than all the women MPs in all the parties put together, I hope that Conservative Members are willing to take this issue seriously. On the issue of online abuse, I believe that more can be done to make Facebook, Twitter and all the online companies take down both anti-Semitic abuse and other abuse more quickly. I believe that we have to look at the issue of online anonymity. It is because people are anonymous and because of online growth that people say things online to members of the Jewish community and others that they would never say if they actually had to put their name out there. I believe that people should continue to be able to post anonymously, but the companies—Twitter, Google and so on—should consider holding people’s names and addresses.

This, as I said, has been an emotional issue. I cannot look into the souls of Conservative Members, but I would like to think that nobody has intervened in this debate with a view of getting party political advantage. We in the Labour party take anti-Semitism very seriously. Nothing is gained by accusing the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition of being an anti-Semite. I want to stand up for the vast majority of members of the Labour party, including some of the most indefatigable fighters against racism and anti-Semitism I know, and say that the vast majority of Labour party members are not anti-Semites, despite what Conservative Members seek to claim. We know what has gone wrong in the past. We realise that there is an issue and we are dealing with that issue. I believe that the public understand that we are serious about fighting racism and anti-Semitism.

6.53 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): This has been an extraordinary and harrowing debate, full of powerful personal experiences. The Government are taking a lot of action to combat anti-Semitism, but I want to tell Members that I will leave the Chamber today even more committed to checking that we are doing all we can and stepping it up where we can.

Many Members have thanked the Community Security Trust, which does such great work. I want to put on record our thanks to the trust. We gave it £13.4 million recently to make sure it can continue its good work.

I also thank a number of the police forces who have been so good at protecting people and making sure that they are well looked-after under this growth of anti-Semitism, which so many politicians have unfortunately been experiencing. I also thank the Jewish Leadership Council and the Board of Deputies of British Jews for their work in raising awareness of anti-Semitism.
centres and shuls in my constituency, it is the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council who speak for the vast majority of British Jews, who are horrified by what they have seen in the Labour party and who I fear will be horrified by the response from our Front Benchers to this debate today.

Amber Rudd: I totally endorse what the hon. Gentleman just said. I apologise for the fact that I cannot mention everybody who spoke so powerfully today, but I thank my Conservative colleagues for their contributions, and particularly the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who spoke so powerfully about his experience. His description of the air tightening is something that I will always remember.

However, this afternoon’s debate really belongs to the Labour party, and its Members who spoke so passionately from their own experiences and did not hold back from bravely and courageously sharing them with us. Many of us have heard about some of those, but nothing compared to hearing their personal experiences today. The sheer horror and scale of what they have had to put up with has horrified the whole House.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who spoke so powerfully of her experience, and of course, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), who is well known in this House for his ability to speak freely. As he rightly said, that is not always so welcome, but in this case it was completely welcome. He stands in a position of such authority because he has campaigned so long on this issue, and I say to him that yes, we all stand in solidarity with him.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) described so strongly her personal experience and her appalling description of the term “weaponising anti-Semitism”. Again, we share her view and her constituents are fortunate to have such a strong and courageous Member of Parliament. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who spoke so strongly and referred to the danger of the Facebook groups that can provide such succour and comfort when anti-Semitism is being passed around. It is important that she carefully drew that out as one of the danger areas.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) also has such a strong history of speaking out so often against anti-Semitism, and spoke of her horror that the Labour party has become a home for it. I also thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who put this in such an important personal and historical context. We could have heard a pin drop when she spoke about that. Finally, the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) reinforced the horror, which we share, of people in his party getting angry with people who call out anti-Semitism rather than focusing on the people who are anti-Semitic. It is something that we all wonder at.

This has been an extraordinary and important debate. I believe that the whole House has delivered a strong message to the leader of the Labour party: take action. The leader’s words have been strong, and they have been heard again and again, but we have not seen the action that we hoped would follow. If the leader of the Labour party is in any doubt about that, I urge him to listen to the speeches that were made by the people behind him. They were powerful, emotional and harrowing speeches that were not in any way anti-Labour. Many speakers went out of their way to explain that they had joined the Labour party to combat racism and anti-Semitism. The Labour party is a noble and honourable party, and it is absolutely wrong that this corner of anti-Semitism has been allowed to flourish. He has an obligation to take action. We expect nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered anti-Semitism.

Business without Debate

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT HEALTH SERVICE SAFETY INVESTIGATIONS BILL
Resolved,
That this House concurs with the Lords Message of 29 March, that it is expedient that a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons be appointed to consider and report on the draft Health Service Safety Investigations Bill presented to both Houses on Thursday 14 September 2017 (Cm. 9497).
Ordered,
That a Select Committee of six Members be appointed to join with a committee to be appointed by the Lords for this purpose.
That the Committee should report by Tuesday 24 July.
That the Committee shall have power:
(i) to send for persons, papers and records;
(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;
(iii) to report from time to time;
(iv) to appoint specialist advisers; and
(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom.
That the quorum of the Committee shall be two.
That Mr Bernard Jenkin, Mr David Jones, Diana Johnson, Andrew Selous, Dr Philippa Whitford and Dr Paul Williams be members of the Committee.—[Kelly Tolhurst.]

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRS (TERM LIMITS)
Motion made,
That this House approves the Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, Term limits for select committee chairs in the 2017 Parliament, HC 816; and accordingly that for the remainder of the present Parliament Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees) shall be read as if the word ‘ten’ were substituted for the word ‘eight’ in the text of that Order.—[Kelly Tolhurst.]

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITION
Proposal to sell Quibell Fields

7 pm
Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Scunthorpe is proudly an industrial garden town and that garden part is very important, so I am proud to present this petition gathered by Cheryl Hassall on behalf of people in Scunthorpe wanting to preserve the green and open space that is the Quibell fields.

The petition states:
Nic Dakin

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe and the wider North Lincolnshire area,
Declares that proposals for land off Dartmouth Road also known as 'Quibell Fields' to be sold and used for housing, should, instead, be retained for community leisure use and a safe place for children to play.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to intervene with North Lincolnshire Council to safeguard the land off Dartmouth Road known as 'Quibell Fields' for wider community use.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Livestock Worrying: Sussex

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

7.2 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): When I was successful in securing this Adjournment debate on livestock worrying, I was questioned by some more metropolitan colleagues about what exactly livestock worrying is, with many references to sheep and Wales that I thought were rather unfair. I can inform the House and colleagues that livestock worrying usually involves dogs chasing and mauling sheep or other animals. The direct attack can cause death or severe injury and, in some cases, miscarriage. The stress of the event can cause great harm to the animals, particularly the young.

It is important to put on the record why I have secured the debate. Not only does Sussex have one of the highest rates of sheep worrying in the country, but my local authority, Brighton and Hove, has a municipal sheep flock, of which I believe the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) is a shepherdess and lookerer. Telscombe, a village in my constituency, also has a municipal sheep flock. The business is not just in private hands but in public hands, private hands and all hands—it affects us all.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear—or perhaps he will not—that I am not standing up to make an impassioned call for the nationalisation of all sheep farming. I congratulate him on securing the debate and he raises an important point; there is more sheep worrying and livestock worrying in Sussex, where both his constituents and mine have the opportunity to walk into open countryside. There is more sheep worrying in Sussex in the average year than there is in the whole of Scotland, and that is not acceptable. I am glad that he secured the debate to raise the concerns of many of our farmers.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I entirely agree. It is also important to put on record the contribution made by farming, not only in Sussex but to our wider economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest, as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union. Livestock worrying costs the farming community some £1.6 million a year, and in Northern Ireland, for instance, about 60% of dog-walkers are letting their dogs off the lead in the countryside. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be done to educate dog owners, so that they understand that all the responsibility lies at their feet and their dogs could be put down if they worry sheep or other animals?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I do agree. I shall be dealing with some questions and points that the National Farmers Union and my local farmers have raised with me, which I know have also been raised with a number of other Members.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is being very generous, and, as a Member who represents a largely urban constituency, he is also
very brave. None of us has suggested that it is the residents of Brighton who are worrying the livestock in the Sussex area.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman supports the Take the Lead campaign, in which many of us became involved recently. Given that some 600 animals have been killed by dogs in Sussex in the last four years or so, the default position must be that dog owners put their dogs on leads when they are around livestock. They need to be educated about that, but if they do not comply, measures must be taken.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Again, I entirely agree. We need to educate, and we need to be able to enforce the requirement for dogs to be on leads when livestock are in fields. When people do not abide by that requirement, there needs to be punishment to deter others from doing the same.

Overall, farming contributes more than £140 million to Sussex’s economy and employs 8,500 people permanently, as well as thousands of seasonal workers. Of course we want to preserve Sussex’s natural beauty, but its proximity to the tourism hubs in London and Brighton provides easy access for dog walkers as well as others who are enjoying our countryside. Farmers look after more than 62% of the Sussex countryside, and manage public footpaths that go through their land. It is vital for us to introduce measures to ensure that both livestock and dogs are safe. The end result of an attack can be the shooting of a dog if it is found in mid-attack, and we want to protect dogs in those circumstances. Owners have a responsibility to ensure that their dogs are kept safe, which is why this debate should cover dog-owners as well.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The hon. Gentleman kindly mentioned me. I should declare an interest, as an urban shepherd in Brighton and Hove.

Many dog owners are not aware of the damage that their dogs can do. They think that the dogs will not attack sheep. However, a dog does not have to attack a sheep physically to worry it. Chasing sheep can be enough to cause miscarriage or even death, because they are very likely to have heart attacks as well.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. The difficulty is that, although most dog owners whom I speak to say, “My dog is perfect; he is a saint”—or “She is a beauty”—“who will do nothing to harm anyone”, the fact is that dogs are animals too. They have urges to play with other animals, and they often think that the sheep are enjoying being chased around. Their motivation is not necessarily malicious, although it may be sometimes. Dog owners need to understand the effect of letting dogs off leads when there are livestock around.

Livestock worrying must be treated as a recordable crime. Dog owners must be given consistent information and act accordingly; farmers must report all instances, and the police must take them seriously. Livestock worrying is one of the greatest problems affecting farmers in Sussex. As we have heard, there are more than 130 cases a year, more than the number in Scotland.

Jim Shannon: At this time of year—spring in particular—when sheep are in-lamb, there is greater onus on dog owners to keep control of their dogs, because dogs chasing ewes across fields can lead to lambs being aborted.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. There are already some protections, but they are too weak, particularly around this time of year.

Over the last couple of years in Sussex, we have experienced some particularly bad dog attacks, including the infamous incident in the constituency of the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), where 116 sheep were attacked, and another incident in 2015 where sheep were driven off Beachy Head by dogs. The region is, of course, heavily populated and that, combined with its grazing landscape, means that these conflicts tend to occur more regularly than elsewhere.

Since September 2013, there have been 497 recorded cases of livestock worrying, but that is only the pinnacle of the problem as many farmers do not report; they do not believe the police will follow up and do anything, and therefore we believe the true number of incidents is much higher.

The blight of livestock worrying has cost Sussex farmers £66,000; that is only the recorded financial loss, but the fines have added up to only £2,224. There seems to be a disparity between the punishment and the loss to our farms.

We are also acutely aware that the number of reported cases from dog owners themselves is very low. We might therefore require dog owners to self-report when their dogs do things wrong. I would like to know from the Minister what plans there are to support the police to take action against offenders and prosecute appropriately with repeat offenders, and what plans his Department has made to ensure that farmers can report attacks more easily and to improve signage and information on farms. Despite the tendency of the law to back the livestock keeper, the problem is continually getting worse and there are very few prosecutions. As we have heard, public education has a huge role to play, as does getting a number of successful prosecutions which can be publicised as a warning to less responsible dog owners.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): My constituency lies in Scotland and faces the same problem as my hon. Friend’s. Does my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that this is a UK-wide problem, and that the effect on individual farmers is enormous and often missed in the statistics? These farmers take great care of their sheep and the financial loss is huge, but so is the loss to the structure of the flock.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I agree; I am raising this as a Sussex issue because of the high number of incidents there and because I am a Sussex MP, but this is an issue across the country where we have flocks, particularly that roam near urban areas or where there are towns nearby. Will the Minister consider having an effective public education campaign, building on some of the campaigns that have already been co-ordinated, to make sure that dog owners in urban areas, as well as rural areas, understand that this is an important issue?

Some have called for the Minister to consider developing dog DNA information and DNA testing to help identify dogs. While that might be going a little too far, it might be interesting to know what forensic detail the Department is thinking about employing to track down those responsible. Will the Minister consider changing the law so that dog owners have the legal obligation to report livestock attacks?
Ultimately, it must be stressed that the No. 1 job of our farmers is to produce safe, sustainable and traceable food for our communities and country. They can do this only if they are able to farm safely and profitably, and livestock worrying is seriously affecting their ability to do that. For small farmers in particular, livestock worrying is devastating because of the huge impact it has on their productivity. It can set them back many months. This problem is entirely preventable. If there were simply enough awareness of the issue, if we were able legally to enforce a leashing requirement for dogs in fields with livestock, and if we were able to ensure that the police dealt effectively with the problem, we might be able to stamp it out and support our farming communities.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I should like to begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) on securing this debate. It is particularly encouraging to see him and a number of other hon. Members who represent urban seats showing a keen interest in rural issues. Members representing urban seats are always welcome to our debates that mainly affect rural areas.

The Government recognise that dog attacks on livestock can cause considerable stress to the livestock owners, as well as causing serious injury to the animals themselves. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) pointed out, attacks on sheep during lambing can have a catastrophic impact even if there is no physical injury. This can severely affect the welfare of the sheep and the income of the farmer. As the hon. Gentleman said, this is essentially an issue of responsible dog ownership. There is no doubt that we are hearing more and more reports anecdotally that this is becoming a problem, with more and more dogs appearing to be out of control and more and more farmers suffering from the problem than in the past.

A couple of recent reports have looked at the problem in some detail. They are the 2018 “Livestock Worrying Police Working Group Final report” from the National Police Chiefs’ Council, and the 2017 report by the all-party parliamentary group on animal welfare, “Tackling livestock worrying and encouraging responsible dog ownership”. Those two reports have done much to highlight the scale of the problem and to identify some possible improvements that we could make.

The 2018 NPCC report showed that there were 1,705 incidents across the five participating forces, resulting in nearly 2,000 livestock deaths a year. Those figures are a matter of great concern and show the scale of the problem that we have. Overall there was an increase of incidents across the five forces over the period from 2013 to 2017. Over that same period, 92 dogs were shot as farmers attempted to protect their livestock. It is also worth noting that in 60% of cases, the dog owner or dog walker was not present. There is a real problem with the lack of responsibility being taken by dog owners, as well as problems being caused by stray dogs and by owners not being in control of the dogs in their care.

Among the recommendations in both the NPCC and APPG reports was that the definition of “livestock” in the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 should be amended to include more species that are now farmed, such as llamas and alpacas, or that we should possibly move away from such definitions and lists and instead have a general description of animals kept for farming. There is also criticism that the 1953 Act is restricted to incidents on “agricultural land” and that it should be broadened to include other areas. Recommendations are also made in relation to allowing police to take DNA samples to help to identify individual problem dogs. The hon. Gentleman raised that point. This would also mean having the power to have a DNA database. There are also recommendations relating to increasing the maximum penalty for offences under the Act.

We will of course look at the recommendations, but I suggest that the police look at using the powers in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 to supplement their powers under the more dated 1953 Act when considering taking forward a prosecution, because it is more up to date and applies anywhere, not just on agricultural land.

The 1953 Act relates directly to dogs worrying or attacking livestock. While it was specifically drafted for such incidents, a lot has happened since those days in relation both to the livestock we farm and to dog control legislation. Since the 1953 Act, other legislation with broader powers has been passed. For example, the 1991 Act makes it an offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control in any place. The Act also contains a power for a police officer to enter premises and seize any dog suspected of being dangerously out of control. There appears to have been a long-held perception among enforcement agencies that attacks by dogs on other animals cannot be dealt with under the 1991 Act. Indeed, the APPG report considered that as a weakness of the 1991 Act, but the Government disagree with that analysis.

The 1991 Act can be and has been used in incidents where dogs attack other animals. The Act provides a definition of when a dog must be regarded as dangerously out of control. It refers to a dog being dangerously out of control when there are grounds for reasonable apprehension that it will attack someone. However, this definition is not exclusive, and the words of section 3 of the 1991 Act could include, for example, a case where a dog attacks another dog or another animal, and there is case law in this area. In 2008, a Court of Appeal judgment specifically pointed out that the definition of “dangerously out of control” in section 10 of the 1991 Act is not exclusive and made it clear that the ordinary meaning of the words in section 3 of the Act could be applied to any given circumstances. Specifically, the Court said:

“In any event the definitions section, section 10, is not exclusive. It does not read as a matter of construction, ‘For the purposes of this Act, a dog shall only be regarded as dangerously out of control...’ and then proceed to the definition. Therefore we feel ourselves entitled to go back to the straightforward words of section 3: ‘If a dog is dangerously out of control in a public place...’."

We therefore believe that the 1991 Act can be used in cases of attacks on livestock.

However, a further criticism of the 1991 Act was that it only dealt with issues after they had happened. So, in 2014, the Government completed an overhaul of the antisocial behaviour powers. The review resulted in more measures and powers for police and local authorities to intervene before a dog becomes dangerously out of control. The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 contains measures that allow police and local
authorities to take action in low-level incidents of anti-social behaviour, including when they involve a dog. Incidents would include where a dog is causing a nuisance, but where no offence is committed under the 1991 Act. In such circumstances, police or local authorities can take action by issuing a community protection notice to the owner, or person in charge of the dog at the time, to control the dog and stop the nuisance behaviour. Failure to comply with a CPN can lead to a fine of £2,500. Many animal welfare organisations and dog keeping groups have campaigned for the introduction of such early intervention notices.

For more serious incidents of antisocial behaviour, such as using a dog to intimidate someone, there is the criminal behaviour order. A CBO would be used in cases where a court is satisfied that an individual has engaged in behaviour that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress. Also available under the 2014 Act is the ability for local authorities to make public spaces protection orders. PSPOs replaced dog control orders and allow local authorities to place restrictions on dogs in certain clearly defined areas. For example, a requirement might be that all dogs must be kept on a lead—a point the hon. Gentleman and others have raised.

Finally, the police also have the option of taking action under a much older Act, namely the Dogs Act 1871, which shows that this particular challenge is not new. That Act requires a lower level of proof—it is basically on a balance of probability—and under the Act a magistrates court can order anything reasonable to keep a dog under control, including that it be muzzled or kept on a lead in public places. The court can also order that a dog be destroyed.

A wide range of legislation and powers are in place to give both the police and local authorities the ability to act in this area. However, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, there is a key challenge in identifying the dogs responsible for these attacks, particularly in the context that some two thirds of attacks happen when the owner is not present. The legislation obviously relies on our knowing who owns the dog and on our being able to take action against that person. To that end, it is important for all the agencies and the police to work together at local level to gather intelligence on who these irresponsible owners are, and there are some examples of that being done.

Police in the London Borough of Sutton, for example, have been working with other local interest groups to encourage responsible dog ownership. Secondly—the hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of raising awareness of this issue—the local environmental awareness on dogs, or LEAD, scheme seeks to provide advice to the public on dog issues, to improve dog safety and dog welfare, and to deal with antisocial and inconsiderate behaviour by individuals with dogs in a way that protects and reassures the public. The scheme is aimed at all dog owners in Sutton, whether in private or rented accommodation. The initiative has also been rolled out to other London boroughs, as well as to one or two other local forces. The police are taking action to raise awareness of these issues.

We want to see more of that sort of joined-up work, and I can report that similar examples are now being rolled out in the countryside specifically to address dog worrying. For instance, I am pleased to see that, on 22 June, SheepWatch UK will host a follow-up meeting on the three public strands—police, farming and dog owners—to try to maintain progress and to raise awareness of some of these issues.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of requiring owners to report attacks. A more fruitful way forward is to try to make sure that we take action against those owners who are absent and not taking their responsibilities seriously. I understand what he says, and I am willing to consider his suggestion. However, the problem is that owners who are culpable of having an out-of-control dog are unlikely to want to report it, and introducing a law requiring them to do so might not make such reporting more likely.

The point made in other reports about potentially allowing DNA samples to be taken where there is a persistent, repeated problem so that we can try to identify the dogs responsible might be a better approach.

The hon. Gentleman has made some important points, and we have had a number of important interventions from other hon. Members. This is a very serious issue, with large numbers of livestock deaths and large numbers of incidents. We believe the legal powers are there to address the issue, but he is right that we should take every opportunity to raise awareness of this challenge and to encourage more responsible pet ownership.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We will be working with our Commonwealth partners to ensure that we address the global goals by discussion and commitments across all the goals, but particularly those on prosperity, education and global health.

Sarah Jones: Goal 16 of the sustainable development goals includes a commitment to provide legal identity for all by 2030. Is the Secretary of State ashamed that her Government destroyed thousands of landing cards of those arriving from Commonwealth nations and are now trying to throw those people out?

Penny Mordaunt: Clearly, the Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa and other Ministers, will be having bilaterals all week with Commonwealth Heads Government and with their Ministers when those Heads of Government are not attending.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Killer diseases such as malaria are a huge barrier to the attainment of the sustainable development goals. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming today’s malaria summit, which will accelerate global action to tackle this deadly disease, and continue to back and thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation?

Penny Mordaunt: The House need take it not from me, but can take it from Bill and Melinda Gates, that this nation has played a huge role. The British public should be immensely proud of the efforts that have been made to combat malaria. It is still a huge problem, particularly in Commonwealth countries, and we are determined to eradicate it.

Sarah Jones: I should thank the hon. Lady for affording me the opportunity to associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister yesterday. This has been an appalling episode taking place during CHOGM week, and she took the opportunity yesterday to apologise and to provide reassurances to Commonwealth partners as well as to people here. It is important to reiterate that anyone who answered Britain’s call all those years ago has the right to remain and call Britain home. The Home Office has, as the hon. Lady knows, put in place new measures to ensure that no one should have any concerns about the process.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer, particularly on health. Will she rededicate herself to the elimination of malaria, polio and other such diseases across the Commonwealth?

Penny Mordaunt: In my speech last week, I reiterated that programmes on health are one of the best ways that we can use UK aid, providing a win for the developing world and also contributing to our own global health security. We have made some commitments on malaria during CHOGM, and there will be a malaria summit this evening.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Will the Government use CHOGM to give a message to Uganda’s President Museveni that, after 32 years in power, he has become a barrier to his country’s development and that good governance includes leaving office?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Tackling climate change is crucial to meeting the SDGs, and we discussed that with the President of Malawi when he visited Parliament yesterday. Is the Secretary of State aware of the letter published by more than 170 faith leaders of a range of religions from across the Commonwealth calling on CHOGM leaders to turn words into action? What leadership is the UK Government showing in achieving the Paris agreement goal of keeping climate change emissions below 1.5° C?

Penny Mordaunt: The Prime Minister of Jamaica referred yesterday to climate change as an existential threat, and he was absolutely right to do so. Prior to CHOGM, we had been working with our Commonwealth partners to work up concrete proposals and commitments, and we have had many meetings this week, including one particularly focused on small island states, which are disproportionately affected by this issue.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said. I must say that an apology from the Government is not good enough, because we need to look at the wider picture. The Government have threatened to deport the Windrush generation and have extended their hostile environment to Commonwealth citizens who are legally here. They are unable to provide data on how many have been wrongly detained or deported, and they have even destroyed their landing cards. Exactly what kind of signal does that send to our Commonwealth partners? I ask the Secretary of State to raise these issues with the former Home Secretary and tell her that this is not the global Britain that we want to build.
Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments. Whatever the policy intent, it is quite wrong if it is not delivering the effect that it should in practice—if people are not reassured and cannot get the answers to basic questions, or if the process is moving so slowly that the person is denied access to healthcare, for example. I am pleased that the Home Office has now gripped this issue and is determined to put those wrongs right. The Prime Minister is providing that reassurance, not just in what she said in public yesterday but in in the bilaterals that she and I have had with members of the Commonwealth.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Last week, she set out her new vision for UK aid, saying that it should act as a “shield” against migration. Does she really believe that the British public want to see our aid budget—meant for poverty reduction—being used to prop up her Prime Minister’s hostile environment?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady has misquoted me; I did not say that. Clearly, migration is a very positive thing. The migration that happened with the Windrush, for example, was hugely beneficial to Britain and, I hope, to those individuals, but other issues will be exacerbated if we do not create jobs and prosperity in Africa. I remind the hon. Lady and other Members that thousands of people have lost their lives in transit across the Mediterranean. We need to do more to alleviate poverty in Africa. People should not have to leave their homes, cross the sea via people traffickers and risk their lives in order to survive.

Yemen: Humanitarian Access

2. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure continued humanitarian access into Yemen. [904702]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The UK has led the call for unhindered humanitarian and commercial access to Yemen, including through the UK co-ordinated Security Council statement of 15 March, the Secretary of State’s visit to Riyadh in December and lobbying from the Prime Minister. DFID is also providing expertise and funding to UN shipping inspectors to facilitate import flows into Yemen.

Nick Smith: Cholera is currently a massive problem in Yemen, so getting medicines in is, of course, crucial. Hodeidah port is still only open on a month by month basis, so what is the Department doing to keep it permanently open?

Alistair Burt: I am conscious of both aspects on the hon. Gentleman’s question. Just the other week, on 3 April, I was in Geneva, where I co-hosted a discussion on cholera with Sir Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs. We had a roundtable of all the major agencies involved in dealing with the cholera outbreak, including the World Health Organisation and others. We are doing as much as we can to encourage preparation for dealing with that outbreak. Of course, we continue to work on ensuring that there is as much access as possible through any of the ports, although the hon. Gentleman is right that the lack of commercial shipping now coming into Hodeidah by choice is an extra burden.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, I welcome the role that the UK is playing in funding the global relief effort. Will the Minister confirm what more work his Department plans to do to ensure that we can get the aid to where it is needed within Yemen?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. On 3 April, DFID announced an additional £170 million for the new financial year in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We work with all partners to ensure that there is greater access and a greater prospect of resolution of the conflict through the new UN special envoy Martin Griffiths.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I welcome the steps that the Department is taking to secure continued humanitarian access to Yemen, and urge Ministers to do the same in Syria in the light of recent events. Does the Minister foresee humanitarian grounds for military intervention in Yemen, as those were apparently the grounds for action in Syria? In any event, will he confirm—unequivocally and without exception—that none of the 0.7% aid budget, which is for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, will be used to fund military activities?

Alistair Burt: There is no prospect of United Kingdom military action in Yemen. The humanitarian efforts are going on at the same time as seeking to resolve the complex political difficulties there. I remind the House of the exceptional difficulties of access in the northern areas controlled by the Houthis.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Minister’s Department assured the public at the start of March, following the Secretary of State’s trip to the region in December, that humanitarian access in Yemen had been restored. However, fuel imports are estimated to be just 30% of what is needed, with food imports at just 9%. Bombing of port areas also continues. Why did the Secretary of State sign a £100 million aid partnership with Saudi Arabia in March, without insisting on full, permanent aid access in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: In March, imports met 61% of monthly food needs and 60% of monthly fuel needs. While we recognise, of course, that the level of access is not as great as we would wish, we are working hard with coalition partners to make sure not only that there is increased access but that the issues concerning the smuggling of weapons into Yemen, which has been a principal cause of the restricted access, are being dealt with as well.

Women and Children’s Education

3. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps she is taking to help enable access to education for women and children in developing countries. [904703]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK is a major investor in education generally and in girls’ education specifically. Yesterday, the Prime Minister committed
£212 million through the Girls' Education Challenge to ensure that almost 1 million girls across the Commonwealth, including the most marginalised, can get the quality education they need to fulfil their potential.

David Evennett: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in this important field. I join her in celebrating the Girls' Education Challenge—the programme supported so strongly by her Department. Will she update the House on the future of this programme going forward?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the amazing work of the Girls' Education Challenge, which is the world’s largest girls’ education programme. Yesterday’s announcement of £212 million will support 920,000 girls in Commonwealth countries and give 53,000 highly marginalised adolescent girls in Commonwealth countries the opportunity to have a second chance at learning.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that one thing that inhibits girls’ access to education is early motherhood? What steps are the Government taking to ensure excellent family planning and contraceptive services in developing countries?

Harriett Baldwin: We remain strongly committed to our family planning programme, under which we work in a variety of different ways, whether through provision of family planning services directly or advice to girls in schools, to try to ensure that girls are not getting pregnant during their education.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Sadly, parents in developing countries are sometimes persuaded to give up their children to orphanages on the promise of a good education. The charity Home for Good told me this morning that the Australian Parliament is looking at measures to tackle orphanage trafficking as part of its modern slavery legislation. Does DFID have any plans to amend our legislation similarly?

Harriett Baldwin: DFID’s policy on orphanages is not to fund those establishments. On my right hon. Friend’s point about whether UK legislation, which has led the world in tackling the terrible issue of trafficking, should be amended, we will certainly be discussing that with Home Office colleagues.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that one of the most disruptive things in a family’s education is when a member of that family is killed by the greatest epidemic of our times—unnecessary, preventable road deaths, which kill 1.3 million people a year on our planet?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his amazing work as a United Nations envoy on this important issue. It is important not only that children can go to school but that they can get to school safely. That is why DFID funds a range of different programmes to tackle the problem.

UK Aid Match Fund

4. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What estimate she has made of the total contribution of the UK Aid Match fund to projects in developing countries. [904704]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): So far, UK Aid Match has provided more than 100 grants benefiting more than 24 million people in 22 countries.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. Will she outline how UK Aid Match funding is allocated to ensure that projects on the ground are receiving the dividends of the generous spirit of so many in the UK? What is being done to ensure that not a penny goes to militarily active groups in any way, shape or form?

Penny Mordaunt: UK Aid Match is a competitive process. We select the strongest appeals and projects, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that not a penny goes to military groups.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that Aid Match is a vital method for building support for international development among the UK public, as it allows them a genuine say over where and how the aid budget is spent?

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Some 89% of the public believe that helping developing nations is a good thing to do, and I know that they support the Aid Match programme.

Modern Slavery

5. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle modern slavery in developing countries. [904703]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Tackling modern slavery is a priority for DFID. We are expanding our work in developing countries through £40 million of new programming that will reach at least 500,000 people at risk of slavery. Today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is announcing £3 million of new funding to tackle child exploitation in the Commonwealth.

Royston Smith: Libya has become a hub for human traffickers who exploit migrants and refugees attempting to make their way to Europe. That has left thousands of women the victims of horrendous abuse. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Libyan Government of National Accord to bring traffickers to justice and to end that abuse?

Alistair Burt: As good fortune would have it, the recess took me to Libya, to Tripoli, where I met the Prime Minister, the Minister for Justice and the Minister for the Interior. We did indeed discuss the difficulties relating to trafficking that my hon. Friend mentions. We are supporting the Libyan Government with capacity building. We are also working on a £75 million programme to try to deter migrants from moving from sub-Saharan Africa where they might be at risk on that route. It remains an important issue for us and the Government of National Accord in Libya.
Gareth Snell: Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires British companies with a turnover of £36 million to make declarations of actions that they are taking to reduce modern-day slavery, yet by their own admission, the Government neither keep a record of companies that should make a declaration nor monitor those that have done. What action is the Minister taking with his Government colleagues to make sure that British companies are not unwittingly perpetuating modern-day slavery?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are setting up a new business hub to try to ensure that companies accept their obligations in that regard, and we will be working hard with them to make sure that they do.

**Technology: Developing Countries**

6. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the development of technology in developing countries.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): Our investments in technologies are saving and changing lives all over the world. Half of DFID’s £397 million annual research budget is focused on new technologies in developing countries in the health, agriculture, climate, clean energy, water, education and humanitarian response sectors.

Stephen Metcalfe: Over the years, I have been fortunate to see at first hand how some of our aid budget has helped to develop technologies and engineer solutions that have changed people’s lives around the world. Can the Minister tell the House, however, whether any of the technologies that have been invented using our aid budget have been of direct benefit to people here in the UK?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome the interest of the former Chair of the Science and Technology Committee in this important work and commend the Committee to hear from the team involved, because there are a range of different examples. Diseases know no boundaries, and the UK’s development of a test for TB is a good example.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Wales and Lesotho share the precious asset of water. Will the Minister support my initiative to bring together Welsh Water—the not-for-profit water company in Wales—and the Government of Lesotho to work on providing technological solutions to the problems that we share?

Harriett Baldwin: That is a wonderful example of the way in which Welsh Water and Lesotho water companies can work together to ensure that everyone has access to clean water.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running out of time—in a single sentence, Vicky Ford.

10. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Last weekend, the Government announced that they would spend another £25 million on cleaning up plastic from the seas and on new research into that. Developing countries are responsible for half of the plastic in our seas, but less than 1% of our overseas aid budget goes on helping those countries with waste management. Should we increase that percentage?

Harriett Baldwin: I know that my hon. Friend tried to give up plastic for Lent and saw what a challenge it is, which is why we were so delighted to announce over the weekend further funding for research that will help tackle the prevalence of plastic not only in developing countries but here at home.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most comprehensive issues is the provision of clean water to many hundreds of thousands of people, and many small charities are doing that. Will the Minister work closely with them to ensure the provision of technology to develop that in future?

Harriett Baldwin: In paying tribute to the wonderful work that those small charities do around the world, I draw hon. Members’ attention to our small charities challenge fund, which is an open window through which they can bid for additional funding.

**Topical Questions**

T1. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We were all appalled by the horrific attack in Douma, Syria, on 7 April. All indications are that this was a chemical weapons attack. We have not had to rely on hearsay to conclude that: UK medical and scientific experts have analysed open-source reports, images and video footage and concluded that the victims were exposed to a toxic element. This is corroborated by first-hand accounts from aid workers.

Luke Hall: May I take the opportunity to welcome the Secretary of State’s speech last week outlining her vision for the future of international development policy? Will she update the House on the practical steps she is taking to make that vision a reality?

Penny Mordaunt: We need to ensure that UK aid is working doubly hard—better delivering on the global goals but also working in the UK’s national interest—and is not just spent well, but could not be spent better. Part of that will be delivered through a new cross-Government ministerial ODA meeting to ensure greater coherence and better spend of UK aid.

T2. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister of State is one of 57 Members who over the years have visited the village of Khan al-Ahmar and its primary school, which was built with international assistance. Does he know that, one week today, that school could be destroyed as a result of a court hearing to make way for an illegal Israeli settlement expansion? Does he agree that the UK Government should make urgent representations to the Government of Israel that such action would contravene international law?
The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The hon. Gentleman is right—I have indeed visited the school and the village. The UK has made repeated representations on this particular possibility of demolition and I assure him that we will continue to do so as a matter of urgency.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Graham. Where is the fella? He is not here, but he ought to be. What a shame.

T5. [904720] Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In the last few weeks, there has sadly been an increase in tension and violence on the Israel-Gaza border. Just last weekend, Israel destroyed a cross-border tunnel that Hamas had built to attack Israeli civilians. I happen to have seen that those tunnels involve a huge amount of construction materials, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that no UK aid is being diverted to fund those terrible tunnels?

Alistair Burt: We are well aware of this threat. We support the materials monitoring unit of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, which oversees the approval, entry and use of materials for reconstruction. We regularly audit spending to ensure that there is no diversion in the manner that my hon. Friend raised.

T3. [904718] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on what progress has been made to rebuild homes, schools and hospitals in Rakhine state after the Burmese Government burned them to the ground?

Penny Mordaunt: Ensuring that we have good access is critical to whatever work we do in Rakhine and our prime concern is to stop any initial violence. Our main effort to help the Rohingya is ensuring that we are as prepared as we can be for the cyclone season that is about to hit Cox’s Bazar.

T6. [904721] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday on malaria that we will remain committed to the fight, and the hosting of today’s summit. However, with the United Nations saying that progress on malaria is now at risk, what influence will the Secretary of State use on Commonwealth countries and others to ensure that the fight continues?

Alistair Burt: We are proud to be a global leader in tackling malaria and we have committed £500 million a year until 2021 to that fight. We will work with global partners to spend that effectively. We particularly appreciate the efforts of Bill Gates and the foundation, and we thank him for his kind words this morning about the British Government’s contribution to that.

Mr Speaker: I call David Linden. [ Interruption. ]

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Gentleman: enjoy it while it lasts, man.

T7. [904722] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last year, I visited Tanzania, where we heard of the desire to get young girls into education. One of the major barriers is period poverty. What are the Government doing to help to solve that issue?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that important issue. I can assure him that there are some 5,000 schools where the Girls’ Education Challenge is supporting many, many girls in their menstrual protection.

T8. [904723] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): The Department for International Development is a founder member of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund. The Government have led the way in funding this work, supporting regional and global networks working with groups disproportionately affected by HIV. Currently, the RCNF can only afford to fund 50% of the quality proposals it sees. Will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing to fund the RCNF’s vital work? What efforts are the Department making to fund the battle against HIV?

Alistair Burt: We are very proud to be a founding supporter of the Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund. So far, the United Kingdom has committed £9 million to it. We will make our decision on future investments to the fund later this year and I hope to attend the international convention on HIV/AIDS prevention in Amsterdam later this year.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Given the Government’s wretched treatment of the Windrush generation and the loss and destruction of paperwork, will the Secretary of State talk to her colleagues about introducing an amnesty?

Penny Mordaunt: That gives me the opportunity to reiterate what I said earlier. The Home Office has now stepped up its efforts to ensure that people are reassured. It has given further reassurances on precisely the point the hon. Gentleman raises. We all have to ensure, as constituency MPs and as members of the Government, that everyone has the information and support they need at this moment.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): DeafKidz International, which is based in my constituency, does great work to protect deaf children around the world. What is DFID doing to redress the imbalance of services available to deaf children?

Penny Mordaunt: I praise the work of DeafKidz International, which has also received UK aid funding. We are doing many things. Through the Girls’ Education Challenge, we supported 46,000 girls with disabilities, including deaf girls, to access education.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It has never been more important to make the positive case for overseas aid. However, delivery of the global learning programme in schools ends in July. May we have an assurance that it will be replaced in time for September?

Penny Mordaunt: We are doing a refresh of some of those programmes. Clearly, programmes such as Connecting Classrooms will carry on and we are doing a refresh of the International Citizenship Service. We think these
are important ways in which we can deliver on the global goals and help young people in our country to learn more about the rest of the world.

**PRIME MINISTER**

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

**Engagements**

Q1. [904724] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 18 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This week, the UK plays host to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. I know the whole House will want to join me in welcoming to London leaders from 52 countries, who collectively represent a third of the world’s population. Over the coming days, we will discuss a range of shared priorities, from oceans and cyber-security to continuing to tackle malaria and ensuring all children have access to 12 years of quality education. With 60% of the Commonwealth under the age of 30, the summit will have a particular focus on how we revitalise the organisation to ensure its continuing relevance, especially for young people.

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.

Neil O’Brien: The whole House will be aware of the stories of people who came to this country from the Commonwealth more than 45 years ago—people who are facing the anxiety of being asked for documents they cannot prove to prove their right to reside in the country they call home. Will the Prime Minister update the House on what she and the Government are doing to provide reassurance in these cases?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which I know has caused a great deal of concern and anxiety, so I would like to update the House.

People in the Windrush generation who came here from Commonwealth countries have built a life here; they have made a massive contribution to the country. These people are British. They are part of us. I want to say sorry to anyone who has felt confusion or anxiety as a result of this.

I want to be clear with the House about how this has arisen. Those Commonwealth citizens—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down. The Prime Minister is responding to the question. There will be a very full opportunity for questioning of the Prime Minister on this occasion, as there is on every occasion, but the questions must be heard and the answers must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. Let me update the House on how this has arisen. Those Commonwealth citizens who arrived before 1973 and were settled here have a right conferred by the Immigration Act 1971 to live in the UK. They were not required to take any action with the Home Office to document their status. The overwhelming majority already have the immigration documents they need, but there are some who, through no fault of their own, do not, and those are the people we are working hard to help now. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made clear that a new dedicated team is being set up to help these people evidence their right to be here and access services, and it will aim to resolve cases within two weeks, once the evidence has been put together.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Last month, I raised the case of Albert Thompson, a man who has lived and worked here for decades, paid his taxes, and yet been denied national health service treatment. The Prime Minister brushed it off. Will she say what she will now do to ensure that Mr Thompson gets the cancer treatment he urgently needs and is entitled to?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman did indeed raise the case of Albert Thompson. It was not brushed off—[HON. MEMBERS: “It was!”] No, the Home Office has been in contact with Mr Thompson’s representatives. First of all, I want to make one point very clear: no urgent treatment should be withheld by the NHS, regardless of ability or willingness to pay—[HON. MEMBERS: “It was!”] No, I also want to make clear that as it happens, Mr Thompson is not part of the Windrush generation that I have just spoken about in answer to the first question. And finally, clinicians have been looking at Mr Thompson’s case and he will be receiving the treatment he needs.

Jeremy Corbyn: On 20 March, the Prime Minister wrote to me stating, “while I sympathise with Mr Thompson...we encourage him to make the appropriate application” and provide evidence of “his settled status here.” Yesterday, we learnt that in 2010, the Home Office destroyed landing cards for a generation of Commonwealth citizens and so have told people, “We can’t find you in our system.” Did the Prime Minister, the then Home Secretary, sign off that decision?

The Prime Minister: No, the decision to destroy the landing cards was taken in 2009 under a Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: All the evidence—{Interruption.}—

Mr Speaker: Order. I said the Prime Minister must be heard. The Leader of the Opposition must be heard, and he will be.

Jeremy Corbyn: All the evidence suggests—{Interruption.}—

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a lot of this yesterday—very noisy and extremely stupid barracking. It must stop now. That is the end of the matter. The public absolutely despise that type of behaviour, from wherever in the House it takes place. Cut it out and grow up!

Jeremy Corbyn: I remind the Prime Minister that it was her Government who created “a really hostile environment” for immigrants and her Government who introduced the Immigration Act 1942.
We need absolute clarity on the question of the destruction of the landing cards. If she is trying to blame officials, I remind her that in 2004 she said she was “sick and tired of Government Ministers...who simply blame other people when things go wrong.” Does she stand by that advice?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asked me if the decision to destroy the landing cards—the decision—had been taken in my time as Home Secretary. The decision to destroy the landing cards was taken in 2009 when, as I seem to recall, a Labour Home Secretary was in position.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was under a Tory Government, and she was Home Secretary at that time, and that is what is causing such pain and such stress to a whole generation. On Monday, the Home Secretary told the House:

“I am concerned that the Home Office has become too concerned with policy and strategy and sometimes loses sight of the individual.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 28.]

Who does the Prime Minister think is to blame for that—the current Home Secretary or her predecessor?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is a great Department of State that touches people’s lives every day in a whole variety of ways. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been swift in responding to the unfortunate confusion and anxiety, for which we have apologised, that has arisen from the Windrush generation. The right hon. Gentleman referred earlier to action that we had taken as a Conservative Government to deal with illegal immigration. It is absolutely right that we ensure that people who access services that are paid for by taxpayers and relied on by people living in this country have the right to do so and that we take action against people here illegally. The Windrush generation are here legally—they have a right to be here; they are British. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to question the idea of taking action against illegal immigration, I suggest he has a conversation with the former shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who in 2013 said:

“we need much stronger action from Government to bring illegal immigration down”.

Jeremy Corbyn: This is not about illegal immigration; this is about Commonwealth citizens who had every right to be here. Cases such as Mr Thompson’s have occurred because it was Home Office policy in 2012 to create “a really hostile environment” for migrants, and the right hon. Lady was the Home Secretary who sent Home Office vans around Brent telling migrants to go home. On Monday, the Immigration Minister said that some British citizens had been “deported in error”. The Home Secretary did not know, and then asked Commonwealth high commissioners if they knew of any cases. Does the Prime Minister know how many British citizens have been wrongly deported and where to, and what provision has she made to bring them back home to Britain?

The Prime Minister: As the Immigration Minister has made clear, we apologise unreservedly for the distress caused to anyone who has been told incorrectly that they do not have the right to be in the UK. We are not aware of any specific cases of a person being removed from the UK in these circumstances and we have absolutely no intention of asking anyone to leave who has the right to remain here, but the Home Office will work to reach out to those from the Windrush generation who do not have the necessary documentation to ensure that that is provided. There will be no cost to them; nobody will be out of pocket as a result. There is a difference between the Windrush generation, who are British, are part of us and have a right to here—we want to give them the reassurance of that right—and those other people who are here illegally. It is absolutely right that the Government make every effort to ensure that people who access our services have a right to do so and that we take action against people who are here illegally.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am informed that Mr Albert Thompson has still not been informed when he will be getting the treatment he obviously needs as a matter of urgency. Does the Home Office not keep records? It has been months since these occasions were first brought to the Government’s attention. We know of at least two British citizens languishing in detention centres in error, and this morning the Jamaican Prime Minister has said that he knows of people who are unable to return to Britain.

This is a shameful episode, and the responsibility for it lies firmly at the Prime Minister’s door. Her pandering to bogus immigration targets led to a hostile environment for people contributing to our country, and it led to British citizens being denied NHS treatment, losing their jobs, homes and pensions, and being thrown into detention centres like criminals and even deported, with vital historical records shredded and Ministers blaming officials. The Windrush generation came to our country after the war to rebuild our nation, which had been so devastated by war. Is not the truth that, under her, the Home Office became heartless and hopeless, and does not she now run a Government who are both callous and incompetent?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, the Windrush generation did come here after the war, they did help to build this country, many of them worked in our public services and they contributed. They have a right to be here: they are British. That is why we are working with those who have no documentation to ensure that they have that provided for them. The decision was taken in 1971 not to require them to have documentation. That is what has led to the problem that we now see in relation to the anxiety of these people.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about being callous and having a disregard for people. I have to say to him that I am the Prime Minister who initiated the race disparity audit, which said: what are we doing in this country to ensure that people have equal opportunities in this country? The right hon. Gentleman talks about being callous. I say to him that I will not take that, following a debate last night where powerful contributions were made, particularly by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). I will not take an accusation of being callous from a man who allows anti-Semitism to run rife in his party.

Q6. [904729] John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): A few weeks ago, a gentleman from Islington called Jeremy visited my constituency of Carlisle and brought with him a
vision of 1970s Britain. When Theresa from Maidenhead next comes to Carlisle, will she reassure the people of Carlisle that she brings a vision of 21st-century Britain, which includes the ideals of freedom, opportunity, choice, personal responsibility and, most importantly of all, national security?

The Prime Minister: May I assure my hon. Friend that Theresa from Maidenhead would bring exactly that? I am very pleased that, in yesterday’s unemployment figures, we see employment in this country at a record high. Any visit to Carlisle will be about jobs, it will be about the future and it will be about national security—our commitment to spend 2% of our GDP on our defence, our commitment to ensure that we have the powers for our intelligence services and law enforcement agencies that they need to keep us safe—and I look forward to my visit to Carlisle.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree with her Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who is sitting just along from her, that the rape clause provides victims with “double support”?

The Prime Minister: I know this is an issue that has been raised a number of times in this House. It is an incredibly sensitive issue, and of course I fully recognise the sensitivities that are involved for the mothers involved. We have taken great care—considerable time and care—to set up procedures, following extensive consultations, that mean that no Government staff will question these mothers about what they have experienced. The point my right hon. Friend was making was that a mother will be granted the exemption through engaging with specialist professionals, such as health and social workers, who may be able to provide them with support in those circumstances over and beyond the issue of their entitlement.

Ian Blackford: That is not quite the point that the Secretary of State made when she seemed to offend all who were at the meeting of the Parliament in Edinburgh.

Rape Crisis Scotland has clearly stated: “Hinging benefits on proving trauma isn’t a choice, it’s a disgrace and one which may well re-traumatise women.” The chair of the British Medical Association in Scotland has said that the rape clause “is fundamentally damaging for women—forcing them to disclose rape and abuse at a time and in a manner not of their choosing, at pain of financial penalty.” This is the form, Mr Speaker, with a box for the child’s name. What kind of society do we live in?

The Prime Minister: We live in a society in which we have taken every care to ensure that this is dealt with in as sensitive a manner as possible. That is why the Government took considerable time and engaged in extensive consultations when putting the arrangements in place. As I have said, no mother in these circumstances will be granted the exemption by dealing with jobcentre staff; mothers will be granted the exemption by dealing with specialist professionals.

Q7. [904730] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): May I add my support to the Prime Minister for the action that she took at the weekend regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria?

In Cornwall there is huge disparity between average house prices and average wages. Many working families earning between £15,000 and £20,000 a year would need to earn 10 times their income to buy an open-market house, and the average salary in Cornwall is about £18,000 a year. The challenges of housing delivery in urban areas are fundamentally different from those in rural and coastal areas. I know that my right hon. Friend cares deeply about getting people on to the housing ladder. Will she therefore meet me, and a group of rural and coastal MPs, to discuss how we can tackle this vital issue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point, and he is absolutely right to do so. Home ownership is a dream, and, sadly, too many young people today feel that they will not be able to achieve that dream. We have been having success—last year more homes were built than in any but one of the last 30 years—but we need to ensure that we are helping people into home ownership and seeing more homes being built. I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend and others to discuss this matter.

The Prime Minister: I understand that it is, in fact, possible for special arrangements to be made for split payments. Domestic abuse—domestic violence—is a terrible abuse, a terrible crime that we must deal with, but I understand that it is possible for those arrangements to be made.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the Prime Minister aware of the proposal to build upwards of 50,000 houses and develop 2,000 acres for new businesses along the length of the A5 from the M1 junction to Staffordshire over the next 12 years? Is she further aware that parts of the road are still single-carriageway, and will she discuss with the Secretary of State for Transport the possibility of releasing £10 million to get the next stage of the expressway project going?

The Prime Minister: I am very much aware of the key role that is played by the A5 in the midlands and of the plans for growth—the plans for new housing to which my hon. Friend has referred—along a route that is so important to him and his constituents. As he will know, we are already making investments in the A5. However, I have also heard his case promoted by Midlands Connect, as has my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, and it will be considered very carefully as we make decisions on further road investment.

Q3. [904726] Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): A National Audit Office report today says that our armed forces are 8,200 people below the current requirement, the numbers leaving the armed forces have increased and
there are significant “shortfalls in critical skills”. In their 2017 manifesto, the Tory party and Prime Minister said:

“We will attract and retain the best men and women for our armed forces.”

Is this not just another broken promise? What has gone wrong?

The Prime Minister: We do of course particularly want to ensure that we are recruiting people with the skills our armed forces need. In the modernising defence programme, we are looking at the capabilities we require to defend this country against the threats we face, and that will also involve looking at the particular skills that are necessary.

Q9. [904732] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): In the autumn Budget the Chancellor announced plans for a mid-Wales growth deal. In an area that has received historically low levels of investment, this vital initiative has been welcomed by everyone, especially by 90% of the small and medium-sized enterprises that are located in that region. Therefore, can my right hon. Friend tell the House what progress is being made and confirm that this welcome growth deal will not only enhance links between north and south Wales, but connect Wales to the midlands engine?

The Prime Minister: We are actively considering the proposals for the mid-Wales growth deal. I know that my hon. Friend has put a lot of effort into this, particularly into bringing local partners together, including by making important cross-border links for this area. We believe that the best decisions and proposals for what will work for mid-Wales will come from people who live, work and do business there. We will be offering help and support, and UK Government Ministers in Wales have already met a variety of local partners to start this process off. We are ambitious for Wales and I am keen to see every part of Wales having a city or growth deal.

Q4. [904727] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Last month, the Prime Minister met six-year-old Alfie Dingley and his family at Downing Street, so I think she understands how vital it is that he gets access to the cannabis-based medicine that treats his very rare and severe form of epilepsy. On Monday, the Home Office received an application for a licence from Alfie’s GP and a leading neurologist so that he can access the medicine. Can the Prime Minister assure his family that she will do what she can to ensure that the application is granted by the Home Office as quickly as possible so that Alfie can get the help he desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: I was very pleased to be able to meet Alfie and his family, and I know the sympathies of Members across the House are with them as he undergoes treatment. I have written to the family to reiterate our commitment to explore a range of options for finding a solution for Alfie. Of course we want to ensure that people get the treatment they need. It is also important that medicines are properly and thoroughly tested, but I will certainly ensure that the Home Office looks at this application speedily.

Q11. [904734] Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): As the second largest donor to the global effort against malaria, the UK has, since 2000, helped cut malaria deaths by 60%, saving nearly 7 million lives, but much more needs to be done. Will the Prime Minister give her personal commitment to maintaining the UK’s global leadership in the fight against this deadly yet preventable condition?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. It is one of the issues we will be focusing on in this Commonwealth Heads of Government week, and yesterday I called on my fellow Commonwealth leaders to join the UK in committing to halving the number of malaria cases by 2023. We are the second largest donor to the fight against malaria and, as the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said in International Development questions, we remain committed to our five-year pledge to spend £500 million tackling it. Yesterday I announced that the UK will commit a further £100 million to the global fund, which has the aim of unlocking a further £100 million of investment from the private sector.

Q5. [904728] John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Three months ago, following the Carillion collapse, building works stopped on the two-thirds finished Midland Metropolitan Hospital in Smethwick. On 28 February, I raised this with the Prime Minister, and she assured me that:

“The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS Improvement are working with the trust and the private finance initiative company so that work can recommence as soon as possible.”—[Official Report, 28 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 828.]

Six weeks later, after endless dithering by those bodies, I have to ask the Prime Minister to get a grip on her Ministers and officials and get a decision, get a deal and get this hospital built. Will she do that?

The Prime Minister: I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this issue with me before. The contract between the trust and the private finance initiative company is still in place, so the PFI company is contractually obliged to manage the project and find another subcontractor who can continue to deliver the building work and the services. As the right hon. Gentleman may know, even before the issue arose with Carillion there were some delays to this project. The Department of Health and Social Care is working actively on it, and my right hon. Friend the Duchy of Lancaster is doing so as well and he has also been in discussions with the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, who has also been in discussions with the trust. We recognise the level of concern being raised on this issue and we are working to resolve it.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Team England on winning the second largest tally of gold medals at an overseas Commonwealth games, as they return on Saturday to Birmingham, which will be the next host of the games?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate Team England on coming second in the medals table—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And Wales!

The Prime Minister: Wait for it. I am also happy to congratulate Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all of whom had a very good Commonwealth games. It was
an excellent Commonwealth games; Australia put on a very good show. I was pleased to see that one of the last results was in the women’s netball, in which we beat Australia.

Q10. [904733] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): This has been an unprecedented year for violent crime in London. Less than four months into 2018, we have already seen almost 60 murders. The Metropolitan police do a fantastic job, but Home Office documents show that there is a correlation between the reduction in police resources and the rise in violent crime. Even after the precept increase, the Met will still need to make savings of £325 million by 2021. Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that these chronic cuts are unsustainable and commit to reversing this harmful underfunding?

The Prime Minister: More money is being made available to police forces in the 2018-19 year, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has taken action in relation to the serious violent strategy that she has published. Also, I have to say this to the hon. Lady: “We do not say that there is a direct causal factor between the number of officers on the ground and the number of crimes.” She may wave her hand at that, but those are not my words but those of the shadow Policing Minister.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly made reference to yesterday’s debate on anti-Semitism. I sat in the Chamber and listened to that debate, including the two appalling testimonies from the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and particularly from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), which were deeply moving. They were horrifying in the sense of the abuse that those hon. Members have faced, but also uplifting in the sense of the bravery that they have shown in tackling their abusers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what came out of yesterday’s debate was that there should be absolutely no place in any political party for anyone who is an anti-Semite and that, just as importantly, any apologists for anti-Semites should be kicked out of their party as well?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is incredibly important for us and for the political parties in this country to show a clear signal that we will not accept or tolerate anti-Semitism in any form. I have made reference to a number of the speeches that were made yesterday, and I also join my right hon. Friend in commending those Members, particularly the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Liverpool, Wavertree, who have suffered incredible abuse as a result of this anti-Semitism but who have also shown incredible bravery in being willing to stand up and set that out to the House. Theirs was a fine example of the best of this House of Commons and the best of Members of Parliament.

Q12. [904735] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This week, the UK becomes the chair of the Commonwealth. Many of us will have walked past thousands of delegates outside Parliament and heard the issue of Kashmir, and I understand that the Prime Minister will be presented with a petition this afternoon. The stalemate in the bilateral talks between India and Pakistan has failed to deliver any solution to this major nuclear flashpoint. How will she use the UK’s new position to boldly pursue peace and human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a question that I know has been raised in the House before. I am sure that it is a matter of concern not only to him but to a number of his constituents. We continue to take the view that the best resolution of this issue is for India and Pakistan themselves to come together and resolve the matter. That will be the way to resolve it that will actually ensure the sustainability of a resolution.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): RBS recently announced plans to reduce the number of mobile banking visits to Dufftown in Moray. Following strong representations from myself, Dufftown and District Community Council, and Speyside Community Council, the bank confirmed yesterday that it would not go ahead with its plans. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming that? However, does she agree that RBS needs to engage more with local communities, because had it done so, it would have realised how unacceptable its proposals were?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming RBS’s decision, but I commend him for his efforts on behalf of his constituents in Dufftown. Such things are commercial issues for the banks, but we have been clear that banks need to consider carefully the impact on people and their access to services when making such decisions.

Q13. [904736] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Following the commitment by Prime Minister Modi and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley to end tuberculosis in India by 2025, will the Prime Minister commit to encouraging other Commonwealth leaders at this week’s Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to make similar commitments in advance of the UN high-level meeting on TB? Will she also attempt to show Britain’s continued support for the fight against TB?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and we are happy to ensure through various channels that we encourage others to follow the example that India has shown in relation to TB. At one stage, it was eradicated here in the UK, but we need to ensure that action is taken in other countries around the world.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): As the Prime Minister said, unemployment is at a 43-year low, and investment in UK industries, including the tech industry, is at a high. When she is on her way to Carlisle, will she come and visit Imagination Technologies? It has received an £8 billion investment, which shows the confidence that overseas technology investors have in our tech industry.

The Prime Minister: I think that that might be a bit of a detour on my way to Carlisle, but I certainly support what my hon. Friend says about the importance of high-tech business and of the work that companies such as Imagination Technologies are doing.

Q14. [904737] Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Ceredigion coastline is among the most stunning in the British Isles, and Cardigan bay has sustained communities on the value of its beauty and bounty. For 150 years, the
lifeboat station at New Quay has valiantly safeguarded those who venture out into the bay, but it is possible that Ceredigion will no longer have an all-weather lifeboat from 2020. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, which does invaluable work, serves as a fourth emergency service and that, as such, it is essential that the coastline of Ceredigion, like every other populated coastline, has access to that service whatever the weather?

The Prime Minister: Search and rescue at sea is provided by several organisations, including the coastguard and the RNLI. The RNLI has a proud tradition, and we should be grateful for its record on search and rescue at sea. It is obviously independent and decides where best to put its resources, but we are supporting the work of independent lifeboat charities through our rescue boat grant fund, which has allocated more than £3.5 million since 2014 to increase capacity and resilience by providing new boats and equipment.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The Commonwealth is a wonderful organisation, but too many Commonwealth countries have anti-gay legislation on their statute book. Of course, a lot of that is a legacy of the colonial days, when Britain was a very different country. What message about gay rights does the Prime Minister have for Commonwealth leaders this week? More importantly, that message should go out to gay people in those countries who are suffering because of such legislation.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We have a special responsibility to help to change hearts and minds on such issues within the Commonwealth. When I addressed the Commonwealth forum yesterday, I said that across the Commonwealth “discriminatory laws made many years ago continue to affect the lives of many people, criminalising same-sex relations and failing to protect women and girls.”

Many such laws were put in place by this country, and I deeply regret the legacy of discrimination, violence and even death that persists today. As a family of Commonwealth nations, we must respect one another’s customs and traditions, but we must do so in a matter that is consistent with our common value of equality. The message that I sent yesterday is that we stand ready to support any Commonwealth member that wants to reform outdated legislation that makes such discrimination possible.

Q15. [904738] Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): When the Prime Minister meets Mr Modi as part of the Commonwealth gathering, might she seek to understand why India is, relatively speaking, so successful in countering child trafficking and draw lessons for this country?

The Prime Minister: I have already met Prime Minister Modi—I did so this morning—and I raised the issue of human trafficking and the work being done in India. We will be setting up discussions between our officials.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): London welcomes our good friend Prime Minister Modi today. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity to condemn absolutely the mobile billboards that are going around London attacking our good friend Prime Minister Modi, and will she congratulate and thank the 1.7 million members of the Indian diaspora on their contribution to the work of this country?

The Prime Minister: India is indeed a good friend of the United Kingdom, and the Indian diaspora here in the UK plays an enormous role and makes an enormous contribution to our society and our economy. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating and thanking them, and indeed in encouraging the continuation of that contribution. When I spoke to Prime Minister Modi, we discussed how we can encourage and increase the links and development between our two countries.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The vile online and social media abuse suffered in particular by female politicians, which was movingly highlighted in yesterday’s debate and also by events at the weekend back home in Northern Ireland, is testimony to how this must be tackled head-on. Can the Prime Minister assure us that steps will be taken to bring social media companies and platforms to account, so that the wild west culture of “anything goes” is brought to an end as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about how these platforms can be used for the sort of abuse that we heard about in the Chamber last night and that, as he says, has also been raised in Northern Ireland in the past few days. We are working with the social media companies. Good work has been done with them on a number of aspects, such as child abuse on those platforms, and we continue to work with them on the wider issues. We are also looking at the issue of the liability of social media companies. They are not publishers, but on the other hand, they are not just platforms. We are looking at that issue urgently.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Free and fair elections are the foundation of our democracy. I am sure that the Prime Minister will be aware of the events that happened in the Gower constituency during last year’s election, where the Labour activist Dan Evans has admitted spreading lies and libellous accusations against our former colleague Byron Davies, to influence the outcome of the election. It appears that his efforts worked. Does the Prime Minister believe that the leadership of the Labour party needs to make it very clear that our democracy has no place for this sort of behaviour? Does she believe that the honourable thing would be for the new incumbent of that seat to resign and fight a free and honest by-election?

The Prime Minister: Of course, our former colleague Byron Davies has received an apology, and I understand that a donation has been made to charity. Of course, our former colleague lost his job as a result of the action that was taken. People across the House talk of free and fair elections—that is what we believe in as a democracy—but political parties need not just to talk about free and fair elections; they need to ensure they put it into practice.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Last week, Shop Direct announced that it is closing all its Greater Manchester sites, with the loss of 2,000 jobs, including nearly 1,400 in my constituency at Shaw. That was without prior warning or discussion
with staff, the unions, Oldham Council or even myself. Given that this is about the ascendance of automation, what specific measures is the Prime Minister taking to support my constituents? Will she meet me and my colleagues to discuss this and the longer-term, more general impact of automation on the labour market?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously, this is a time of great concern for the Shop Direct workers and their families in Greater Manchester. The Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus are working with the company to understand the level of support that is required for employees, and the DWP stands ready to put in place its rapid response service to support any workers who are made redundant and to help them back into employment as quickly as possible. There are a number of ways in which Jobcentre Plus can support workers, and it will ensure that it does that in this instance.

The hon. Lady raises a wider issue about the impact of automation on jobs. We are looking at the question as part of our industrial strategy, and I will ask the Business Secretary to meet her to discuss it.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Malaria has been mentioned by several Members in the Chamber today. In her conversations with the Prime Minister of Canada this week, will the Prime Minister be discussing how the G7 can help to drive progress towards a malaria-free world?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I have not yet met Prime Minister Trudeau this week, but this is certainly an issue that we have made sure is being spoken about here at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and we will raise it within the G7 context.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In 2009, Michelle Samara Weera was raped and murdered. Since 2012, Aman Vyas has been avoiding extradition for this and eight other charges of sexual violence against women in Walthamstow. There have been 47 hearings to date, with the judge not showing up for seven of them, and seven different judges have been appointed. When the Prime Minister talks to her good friend Prime Minister Modi while he is here in London, will she commit to raising this case with him and asking India to take it seriously, so that we can finally get justice for Michelle?

**The Prime Minister:** I have already met Prime Minister Modi for our bilateral discussions. There are a number of issues of extradition between the two countries—the UK and India. We raise a number of cases with the Indian Government, as I did this morning. It is important that we recognise the independence of the judiciary in both countries.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Points of order tend to come after urgent questions, so we will look forward with eager anticipation and a sense of excitement to the contribution of the hon. Gentleman at that point.
12.48 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): To ask the Minister for Women if she will make a statement about Government action to close the gender pay gap.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): May I say that it is a pleasure to answer this urgent question from the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)? It is unacceptable that in 2018 there are still differences in how men and women are paid in business and in industries. That is why this Government introduced new regulations, which came into force in 2017, requiring all employers with 250 or more employees to report their gender pay gap. I am delighted that as of yesterday 10,055 employers, covering all sectors of the economy, have reported their gender pay gap. These new regulations have shone a light on the injustice that has existed for too long and created a new conversation on the need for a step change in gender equality. We are now working with employers to support them to take action to close the gender pay gap; we are building our research base on what works, to drive real change; and we will be supporting employers to understand what has caused their own gender pay gap and what they can do to make a real difference.

We want employers and employees to succeed in driving real change. The Government have launched a range of initiatives that will help. We introduced shared parental leave to enable working parents to share childcare in the first year of their child’s life, and we have extended the right to request flexible working. We have introduced a new £500 million fund to support women and men who have been out of the labour market for a long period to return to work, and we have doubled the early education provision, so that all three and four-year-olds from working households in England can access 30 hours’ childcare a week.

I am pleased that the majority of employers have published action plans, alongside their reporting, to set out what they will do to tackle the gender pay gap in their business or sector. I look forward to hearing more about the ongoing work in this area and the work done to address this great inequality, but there is more to this issue than just the regulations. It is about driving cultural change. From the subjects that girls choose to study at school and university to the expectations of women who are climbing their own career ladder, we want the message to women and girls to be, “We will support and encourage you to achieve your full potential.”

Ms Harman: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for her obvious commitment to this issue. It was Labour legislation that enacted gender pay transparency, but it was her Government who implemented it. It is important that they did that, because it has laid bare what women have always known but previously did not have proof of, which is that there is systematic pay discrimination. It is now clear: eight out of 10 employers pay men more than they pay women—and that is across every sector, including the retail sector, which would not exist without women’s work. Why on earth should women in Tesco put up with £8 an hour on the checkout when men in the stores get up to £11.50 an hour?

Although it pains me to say this, the trade unions that need to be part of the negotiations to narrow the pay gap need to get their house in order. How can women members of Unite believe that that union will champion their rights to equal pay if there is a 30% pay gap in the union itself? The NASUWT, a teachers union, pays its male staff 40% more than it pays women, so it too has to take action. As for the public sector, let us look at the University of Liverpool. Its public policy is to narrow the pay gap, but the University of Liverpool pays men 90% more in bonuses than it pays women. That has to stop.

Does the Minister agree that we are no longer interested in rationalisations, explanations or justifications? The time for excuses has passed. We want stretching targets year on year to narrow the gap. Will she join me in congratulating the women in the House who have spoken up on this issue, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), among many others, including the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and Labour’s Front-Bench team, who have been pushing on this issue? Will she congratulate all the women outside the House who have been pushing on this, not least women in trade unions and the BBC women?

May I give the Minister some sisterly advice on what she should do to really focus on this issue? First, she should stay on the back of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and make sure that it uses all its powers and has the resources to take action. Secondly, she should suggest to the Prime Minister that she has a Cabinet session on the gender pay gap, with all Secretaries of State required to come to Cabinet and say what stretching targets they are going to impose in their Departments and the sectors for which they are responsible. Thirdly, she should commandeering Downing Street for a summit at which business and trade unions can tell her what they are going to do to narrow the pay gap. If she does all that, she will have a great opportunity and a great responsibility, because if she drives forward on narrowing the pay gap, that is not only fair and just but a great responsibility, because if she drives forward on the issue, not only fair and just but the most important thing to help low-income families and tackle child poverty.

Victoria Atkins: I said at the beginning of my statement that I was extremely grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for raising this issue in an urgent question, and I meant it. I fully recognise and thank her for the work that she did in government to introduce legislation on the gender pay gap. Like her, I thank other female Members, including the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who, along with her colleagues on the Committee, does so much to drive through change. I thank female Members from all parties. There is a real sense of urgency and impatience about this issue. For what it is worth, my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister share our impatience—I hope I do not regret that word—to have this matter sorted.

I must of course pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Lady for all the work she does to try to ensure that this place is a little more understanding and accommodating of a diversity of backgrounds, for Members and our staff. I very much take on her advice, although I...
worry that I might be stepping a bit above my station if I commandeered Downing Street for the summit she suggested.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): We will back you up!

**Victoria Atkins**: I assure the right hon. and learned Lady that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is taking a very keen interest in this urgent question and the issue. I welcome her ingenuity of thought. Watch this space.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government’s action means that large companies cannot hide their gender pay gap any more. We should commend the Government on that. That action means that we have transparency of information, and I believe that that transparency will create a momentum for change. If we are to make that momentum as fast as it can be, will my hon. Friend the Minister outline for the House the work that the Government will do to review some of the causes of the gender pay gap, particularly the discrimination that pregnant women still endure in the workplace? What work will the Government do to make sure that pregnancy discrimination is outlawed in this country in the same way that the Minister is trying to outlaw the gender pay gap?

**Victoria Atkins**: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question; I am always grateful for her thoughts and suggestions on this issue and the other subjects that her Select Committee examines. I completely endorse what she said about pregnancy discrimination: discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy is unlawful and wrong. Anyone who suffers from that form of discrimination has the support of the law. My right hon. Friend and other colleagues have raised the issue of the three-month time limit. Tribunals have the power to extend that time limit if they feel it is just and equitable to do so, but I am very conscious of the issues that colleagues have raised in relation to the time limit and am looking into it.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for tabling the urgent question and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her work on section 78 of the Equality Act 2010.

We need actions, not audits. More than 10,000 companies have reported their gender pay gap, which shows that the Government underestimated the number of organisations that should report. The Government might therefore like to review the figure. It is great that more than 10,000 organisations have reported. Labour’s Equality Act—the legislation—was just step 1 of a five-step programme to narrow and close the gender pay gap. In the sisterly way in which these exchanges are being conducted, I wish to tell the Minister the other four steps. She is very welcome to steal them.

Step 1 is the focus on mandatory auditing. Step 2 is companies’ and organisations’ action plans to close the pay gap. Step 3 is Government certification for fair equality practices, which would ensure that those organisations that are doing well are given certification to show their progress. Step 4 is to follow in the footsteps of Iceland with further auditing and fines for those organisations that fail to get certification of their equality practices, taking into consideration their action plans and reporting. Step 5, which is extremely important, is to shift the responsibility to unequal pay from the employee to the employer, so that instead of the employee having to go through court cases to prove unequal pay, it would be the employer’s responsibility.

In addition, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which I am sure has been mentioned a number of times today, needs more resources. Seventy per cent. cuts to its resources will jeopardise its ability to enforce sanctions, so the Government will need to review the cuts that they have levied on the organisation. Labour wants to follow in the footsteps of Iceland, which consistently ranks as the No. 1 country for gender equality. I hope that the Government will see Labour’s five-step plan as a way to accomplish that. The deep-rooted social and economic inequality facing women runs deeper than the pay gap. Women have borne the brunt of 86% of Conservative cuts. More than 60% of those currently earning less than the living wage are women. We need to tackle all the issues.

**Victoria Atkins**: I am actually more ambitious than the hon. Lady. I do not just want to impose regulations on business; I want a change in the culture of business, a change in the culture of the public sector where we know there are gender pay gaps and a change in the culture of schools and universities. This cannot be imposed from the top down; it must be driven with enthusiasm by the organisations themselves. I hope that this will empower women to begin asking very difficult questions of their employers. I would like women to begin thinking about this when they apply for jobs. They should look at the gender pay gap and make decisions about how that shows how that employer treats their female workforce.

The hon. Lady mentioned the number of companies in the Government’s first estimate. This is just the first year. This was always going to be a bit of a learning exercise not just for the Government, but for businesses and the way they manage the system. We are delighted that there are more companies than we initially estimated that meet the criteria. As she knows, the criteria cover big, successful businesses. We are delighted that there are more of those than our initial estimates suggested.

I am very pleased that we have the support of the shadow Front-Bench team in our common ambition to help women in the workplace to get a fairer deal. Of course we must always seek to do better—and we must use the data to improve the way in which women are treated—but I am pleased to note that we have more women in employment than ever before and, what is more, the full-time gender pay gap is at a record low of 9.1%—that is 9.1% too high, but it is at a record low, and it is on a downward trajectory. I am sure that we all support that in this House.

**Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on achieving something that people on both sides of this House have been working towards, which is an audit that gives us an exact understanding of the data. I speak with experience as I...
looked at the gender pay gap back in the '90s as an education and employment Minister. The truly shocking figure for me was not just the eight in 10, but the 8% of organisations that have no gender pay gap between men and women. It is most important that we learn from those organisations. May I just say that the law at the moment applies to those with more than 250 employees? When will the Minister look at lowering that limit, because many women who receive unequal pay are in those smaller organisations?

**Victoria Atkins**: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. Those of us who have been in the House for only a couple of years are very much standing on the shoulders of giants and she, like the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), are among those giants. I am delighted that she has raised the issue of companies or employers that employ fewer than 250 people. I am very much looking at that matter. We must understand that this is world-leading regulation. This is the first time ever that any country has done this on such a scale. By definition, the first year will be a learning process both for the Government and for businesses, but I am very happy to commit to looking at lowering the requirement if the research and data show that that is appropriate.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The gender pay-gap figures show how far we have still to go on this issue. It is very concerning that there are still some 1,500 companies that have failed to report. Perhaps the Minister could tell us a little more about what she intends to do to ensure that they report those figures, because there could be a lot more hiding within them if they have not reported them in time. Will she give more resources to the ECHR to ensure that it can do its enforcement work and follow up on all these cases so that none of that is missed? It occurs to me as well that the reporting is very much the start of the process. It tells us where women are now within the workforce. What more is she doing to look at the pipeline to ensure that women are coming through, because it will take more than just equalising the pay to make that happen? We have to be there right at the start.

I was very glad to hear the Minister’s comments on pregnancy discrimination, which is utterly unacceptable in this day and age. Will she expand on the issues around the time limit, because three months is really not long enough for women to put in a claim; six months would be far, far better. It would be good to hear some progress on that.

For the limited powers that we have in Scotland on this issue, the Scottish Government have introduced stronger reporting requirements for public bodies, asking them to publish their pay gap every two years, and also to bring down the threshold from 250 to 20 employees in the public sector. Will the Government take that on, because it is something that they can do right now? I was glad to hear that the Minister is at least considering reducing the threshold to 150 for all companies, because at the moment many companies that employ women are hiding. They will not be able to demonstrate the gap, and women will continue to lose out in those companies, which, I would argue, provide the majority of the workforce in the UK. They, too, need to be held to account.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. This is an extremely important matter, which I judged rightly, I think, warranted the urgent attention of the House. However, progress has been disappointingly slow. As we have another urgent question and then substantial business thereafter, it would be greatly to our advantage if questions and answers could be a tad pithier.

**Victoria Atkins**: I apologise, Mr Speaker, but I am just so full of enthusiasm for this subject.

Let me answer the hon. Lady’s questions. On the issue of the private sector employers who have yet to report, it has been the responsibility of the EHRC to tackle them since the deadline. It has a programme of action. It wrote to every single employer who did not report on Monday 9 April, and it is considering each and every company that falls within the boundaries that has not yet reported. I should say that 100% of public sector organisations have reported, so they are to be commended for that.

Let me turn now to the issue of the EHRC—I apologise because someone mentioned this earlier. The EHRC will receive £17.4 million in the next financial year. I have spoken to the chief executive and I am not aware that resources are an issue, but of course I will listen to her if she says otherwise. On the very important point about the pipeline, I have to say that that is why the Hampton-Alexander review is so important. At the moment, 27.7% of FTSE 100 companies have women in senior executive positions. We want that to be 33% by 2020, which is a challenge for business, because that will mean that they have to start recruiting one woman for every two places that come through. It is a challenge and I hope that the business community will live up to it.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The Minister is quite right: this is about changing the culture of organisations. Will she therefore congratulate the Conservative party whose own gender pay gap figures show a 15.7% gap in favour of women?

**Victoria Atkins**: I hesitate to say this, but we are leading the way not only when it comes to the pay gap in our central office, but in terms of female leadership of our party and of the country.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The reason why I fought so hard as a Minister in the coalition Government to win the battle to introduce gender pay gap reporting—despite the Minister’s obvious commitment to this today, my goodness it was a battle with No.10 at the time—is that the visibility and transparency of hard numbers help to pierce the bubble of complacency in boardrooms, in newsrooms and in our living rooms where some people still think that we live in a world of gender equality. What concrete action are the Government taking to help employers understand that the gender pay gap is about unequal pay and so much more? It is about the fact that jobs in care and other roles are undervalued and low paid because they are predominantly done by women. It is about the 54,000 women a year who lose their job because they have a baby. It is about the toxic workplace cultures where the boys’ clubs make the decisions and sexual harassment is endemic. Time is up on pathetic excuses. It is time that organisations get serious about action.
Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady and hope that she will forgive me for not including her in my roll-call of honour of female Members who have helped on this issue. She is right that we need to say to organisations, “Look, you need to do more.” I am pleased that companies have followed our best practice guidance so that, alongside reporting the gender pay gap, they have set out their action plan for how they intend to tackle it. We have seen some interesting plans—for example, from easyJet for rebalancing the number of female pilots in its workforce. This is part of the overall programme, along with our expectation about executive positions and addressing a lot of the pipeline issues. For example, we know that the choices that girls and young women make at school and university dictate their career path, so we need to encourage them into science, technology, engineering and maths.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The World Economic Forum does an annual survey of the gender pay gap in 200 different countries. I am very pleased that the UK ranks in the top 10% in the world, although much more can obviously be done. Will the Minister look at the recommendation of the charity Bliss, to give more support to mothers of very premature babies? They are a small number of women who could do with some extra help.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend raises a sensitive issue in her usual sensitive manner. Of course I will look into it. So many issues can impede the career path of a woman or, indeed, a man. It is in the best interests of businesses to find the flexibility to be able to encompass such sensitivities as and when that flexibility is needed. Flexible working really does pay in results for businesses.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is now over 40 years since a heroine of mine, Barbara Castle, introduced the Equal Pay Act. She did so with great support from the labour and trade union movement, because the principle that women should be paid the same for doing the same job as men was believed then. Forty years later, we are really no nearer to achieving that pay gap. I support enforcement mechanisms so that the existing law can actually be enforced is crucial, so that women are illegally sacked can use the law to get proper redress and so that we can drive out this direct discrimination, which has been illegal for years. Does the Minister understand that?

Victoria Atkins: I commend the hon. Lady. Lady’s passion on the issue. Of course, equal pay has been the law for 40 years. Paying people unequally for the same or similar work is unlawful. We are currently seeing the impact that inequality has on workforce morale in various organisations, let alone the anger that individual women feel when inequality comes to light. The gender pay gap provisions obviously deal with the pay gap—unequal pay for the same or a similar job is dealt with under separate legislation. I think that Wendy Olsen’s report in 2010 defined the second highest factor impeding women’s participation in the workforce as “unknown”, which we know is direct and indirect discrimination, so we need to ensure that women are aware of their rights. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has the powers set out under the Equality Act 2010, and we will be looking at how powerful and effective those powers are.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is not the key point that this is the very first reporting that has been required? It is the start of a process that can be developed. Although the criterion of companies having more than 250 employees accounts for 40% of employment and 49% of turnover, there is an acceptance that that threshold number of employees should be decreased. Does the Minister agree, however, that it should be a gradual decrease over time?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, this is the first year. As of this month, we are having a conversation about the pay of more than 10,000 private sector businesses and more than 1,600 public sector organisations. We are also reviewing their data, which simply was not there a year ago, let alone 10 years ago. Although I absolutely understand the impatience in the Chamber to get this issue sorted as quickly as possible, we have to be realistic. Rome was not built in a day. We need to be sure about action plans.

Ms Angela Eagle: It’s the law.

Victoria Atkins: I completely agree; it is the law. But we need to review the action plans and the evidence. We have to give ourselves a bit of time to see what the data says and what lessons we need to learn from that data.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I hope the Minister will agree that it was revealing to see that job segregation by gender has an impact on pay. I hope she will also agree that the opportunity to change that is in our hands today, with apprenticeships. This is urgent. It is disappointing that the Government have not set a target for tackling gender segregation when it comes to apprenticeships, although they do have a target, which I support, for encouraging more people from ethnic minorities into apprenticeship roles. Will the Minister look into this issue and discuss with her colleagues whether more should be done to tackle the gender imbalance in apprenticeships across different sectors, and will she write to me with her findings?

Victoria Atkins: I will happily write to the right hon. Lady about those conversations. We are conscious of this issue, particularly in the STEM subjects, which is why we have committed in the careers strategy to improving STEM careers advice in schools. We are also ensuring that girls and women are being encouraged into the STEM subjects as much as possible, but of course it is not just about STEM. The right hon. Lady’s point about apprenticeships is important; I will take that away with me.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Mandatory reporting requirements are an important step in eliminating the gender pay gap, but does my hon. Friend agree that it will be key for shareholders and customers, as well as employees, to hold businesses to account on those reports?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head when it comes to cultural change. I very much hope that women employees and shareholders are looking at the performance of their companies and asking themselves, “Is this how we want this company to
behave?” Let us be clear: more than 10,000 businesses have been having a conversation about this issue at board level in a way they simply would not have been a year ago. I am keen that we look at this not just in terms of regulations, but in terms of cultural change and cultural ambition.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberrwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for asking this urgent question and for starting us off with her characteristic insight, constructive challenge and no-nonsense approach to the issue.

For employers with a particularly large gender pay gap, would the Minister consider exploring a threshold above which an organisation would be required to publish an action plan for closing or reducing that gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: We have thought about this carefully. At the moment, we are saying that it is best practice for companies to publish action plans, and a lot of companies are doing so. I want to take businesses with us. I do not want to set the Government’s face against them. We want this change to happen and we know that the public will exist, so although we are advising organisations to publish action plans as best practice, that does leave us with options should companies not choose to follow that guidance.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I feel compelled to advocate on behalf of the men who work at Personelle Hygiene Services Ltd, where my wife works, who are paid 6.3% less than the women—we do not want to forget about the men. I appreciate what the Minister has said, but will she commit to naming and shaming companies that do not file their returns? This has gone on long enough, and we need to be aggressive in narrowing the pay gap.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend shows his customary courage in saying that during this particular UQ. The information on naming and shaming is actually out there already—in case anyone has not had the chance to look at it, the names of the companies that have reported, and all their details, are on the gov.uk website. Indeed, when I had the pleasure of appearing before the Treasury Committee, I encouraged colleagues across the House to look at the gov.uk website to see for themselves whether large employers in their constituencies have complied, because I would hope that they would want to encourage those employers to follow the law and report their findings. At this stage, after the deadline, compliance is a matter for the EHRC, which has a range of powers and has considered the issue very carefully. It has published its action plan, and it will be for the EHRC to decide the best action in relation to each and every company.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is estimated that 1,557 companies employing more than 250 people had not reported their gender pay gap by the deadline. Precisely what penalties will affect those companies, which did not report on time and therefore broke the law?

Victoria Atkins: As I said, the EHRC has set out its action plan, because it rightly has responsibility for enforcement after the deadline. It wrote to all the companies that had not complied on Monday 9 April. Since that date, more companies have complied. Let us not forget that it is not necessarily a question of businesses saying, “We have 250 or more employees—this is our gender pay gap.” Some of them will fall just shy of the threshold and so may declare themselves as not meeting the criteria. However, since that letter has gone out, their numbers may have gone up. We are reviewing this very carefully, and the EHRC has set out what it plans to do over the next 28 days in reviewing companies that have not complied and what it will do thereafter.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Would it not further focus minds if companies were required to provide an action statement along with the numbers that are being reported?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend highlights a point that has been raised before. At this stage, we are saying that it is best practice. The advantage of that, I hope, is that we bring businesses with us. I think the vast majority of businesses want to do this. Let us not pretend that those in the corporate sector in the UK are against doing it—they are not. Indeed, the fact that the vast majority of them reported on time—and, indeed, some of them reported way ahead of time—suggests that they want to do it. That is because businesses know, as McKinsey’s most recent report showed, that if we sort out the gender gap, it has the potential to add £150 billion to our economy. That is a figure that we, and companies, are most interested in.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am ambitious, just as the Minister is, to change the culture. However, we are a very long way from that. What are the Government going to do to make it easier for women who now know what they have long suspected to raise this issue? The #PayMeToo campaign set up by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and many other women across this House has shown that it is not that women are not asking; they are asking, but the culture in their organisations does absolutely nothing to support any change. It is not the fault of women. What can we do for women who are currently being silenced?

Victoria Atkins: I would ask for the help of colleagues across the House. If they know of such employers in their constituencies, or indeed constituents who are employed by companies that are not acting in their best interest, then I ask them to please write to me or stop me in the corridor. I will always be happy to hear about it.

This is a matter of compliance for the EHRC. I think that as time goes on, the swell of public opinion will cause the companies in question, which do not have the good will of the public behind them, to really examine their conscience. We know that happened during the reporting period—there were instances where companies’ results came in, they were put on to gov.uk, the EHRC and the Home Office said, “Come on, that doesn’t look right”, and then the companies re-submitted their reports. Public power, I think, has a great deal to play in this.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I raised the Iceland example with the Government some time ago and was simply told
that unequal pay is already against the law, but that does not cut it: women are still losing out. Will the Government look again at Iceland and independent certification for companies above a certain number of employees?

**Victoria Atkins:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman. On being so far-sighted in his question. I am very happy to look at Iceland’s self-certification. I repeat that this is the first year that this has happened. We have conducted a world-leading exercise, led from the top by the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who both share a great passion about this. We will review the data and then see what more needs to be done.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I was very pleased to hear the Minister talk about shared parental leave as a potential way of closing the gender pay gap. However, the number of dads and partners who are taking it seems to have stalled at 2%. A recent survey by the Campaign for Parental Pay Equality has shown that 80% of the self-employed and freelancers would take it if they were offered it. Opening it up to freelancers could mean that it is an engine for change to drive through the cultural change that we need in our society. With that in mind, would the Minister support my “selfieleave” Bill—the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Extension) Bill—which would extend it to freelancers? Will she work with me to persuade the Chancellor that my very able Treasury colleague, the Economic Secretary, is sitting next to me and has heard her question. I am really proud that in 2015 we introduced shared parental leave and pay, which enables working parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in the first year. In February, we launched a joint campaign with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to promote shared parental leave, because we get the point that awareness of it is not particularly high. That is why we have invested in spreading awareness of it.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): Along with outrageous direct discrimination on pay, this reporting also highlights, as the Minister has indicated, persistent under-representation of women at the top level in organisations. Does she agree that this not only amounts to an injustice but is also economically stupid, because we are failing to make use of our human capital? We need to get the message out there that not acting on this is both wrong and stupid.

**Victoria Atkins:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I note the insightful contribution of Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is wonderful to see such a sisterly and, I hope, brotherly approach to the gender pay gap, because if we are to eradicate this social evil, it is very important that women and like-minded men work together. It is good to see that more than 10,000 firms have reported their figures, but what decisive steps will the Government take to ensure that those that have not reported do so? What precise punitive measures will the Government introduce for firms that do not comply?

**Victoria Atkins:** The Act and the regulations place the responsibility for compliance with the ECHR. The EHRC is independent of the Government, but of course we work with it and watch its movements with great interest. It has set out its strategy for dealing with non-compliance. As I said, it wrote to businesses on 9 April, which has helped some to report. I understand that it has given businesses 28 days to comply or to flag up problems—for example, if they do not understand how to use the system or if they are not meeting the criteria for the number of employees—and thereafter the EHRC will look at each company that has not complied and decide what will happen.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister knows of my concern about the gender pay gap in the financial services sector. I want to give her the opportunity to send a message to banks today by answering this
question—a one-word answer is all that is needed. Should they be telling members of their staff who are concerned about the gender pay gap that they ought not to talk to one another about their personal pay?

Victoria Atkins: No, they should not be doing that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Minister’s comments about the need to encourage women to visit websites such as paymetoo.com and to come forward and talk to their employers. Does she agree that something also needs to be done to make it clear to employers that this is not acceptable and that some steps might have to be taken to prevent employers from discouraging women from coming forward and talking about the gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. That is what I mean when I talk about a national conversation. We are now talking about the treatment of women and of workforces generally in a way that we were not a year ago. That is why auditing where we are with the gender pay gap, reviewing the evidence and working out an action plan is the way forward.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is all very well to go after big businesses, top FTSE companies and boardrooms, but there is a much greater number of women in social care, catering and hospitality who feel isolated because they rely on agencies. Will the Government focus their attention more on that end of the scale and end the scandal of zero-hours contracts, which hit women so hard in those sectors?

Victoria Atkins: We focus on all sectors, all parts of the economy and all levels of pay. The press and colleagues throughout the House tend to talk about things such as the Hampton-Alexander review, which I appreciate is not in any way reflective of everyone, but it is important because it is about leadership at the top, from which will flow the expectation of a diverse workforce. We are very clear: we are absolutely not ignoring the women whom the hon. Lady describes. That is why we took the extraordinary step of introducing the national living wage, which was increased in April, enabling more women to find work. That is along with all the childcare help we are providing; we are spending more on childcare than any Government before us—£6 billion. This is all part of a plan to help women into the workforce, so that they have the financial independence they need.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The EHRC has faced savage cuts under both this Government and the coalition Government. Does the Minister genuinely believe that the EHRC has the resources to enforce compliance, or is she passing responsibility without passing the cash?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The EHRC is to receive £17.4 million in 2019-20. I have spoken to the chief executive about the gender pay gap compliance issue. Of course we will keep in mind the EHRC’s responsibilities, but at the moment we are clear that that sum of money should be sufficient to enable it to do the work necessary to help with compliance.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Before I call the next urgent question, could I exhort colleagues to stick to the time limits that are prescribed in relation to these mechanisms and encourage people to be as pithy as they can be? We have a very important matter now of which to treat—I cannot guarantee that everybody who wants to contribute will have the chance to do so—but there is also substantial business afterwards, and I am sure everyone will want to be considerate not only of their own interests but of others'.
Leaving the EU: Scotland and Wales
Continuity Bills

1.35 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Attorney General if he will make a statement on the Government’s position on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill and the Law Derived from the European Union (Wales) Bill.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The continuity Bills—that is, the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill and the Law Derived from the European Union (Wales) Bill—passed, as the hon. and learned Lady knows, through the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly on 21 March. As she also knows, the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 2006 provide the Law Officers with the power to refer to the Supreme Court the question whether devolved legislation falls within legislative competence. That power enables us to fulfil our constitutional roles in upholding the rule of law and monitoring the boundaries of the devolved settlements in the interests of legal certainty.

The continuity Bills raise serious questions about legislative competence that need to be explored. That is apparent from the view of the Scottish Presiding Officer at introduction that the Scottish Bill was not within the legal scope of the Parliament, and the recognition of the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly that the assessment of competence in relation to the Welsh Bill was not a “straightforward” decision,

“as it was recognised that there are significant arguments both for and against legislative competence existing for this Bill.”

The key purpose of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill before this Parliament is to provide certainty across the UK on day one after exit from the EU, and the Scottish and Welsh continuity Bills would frustrate that objective. If the continuity Bills were to become law, there would be impacts not just on the Governments and legislatures but on the widespread understanding of and confidence in UK law after exit. The UK Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments therefore agree that the best place for the provisions to ensure legal certainty after exiting the EU is in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, and we are working hard across Governments to reach an agreement on how that might best be achieved.

However, the four-week statutory limit for making a reference closed yesterday, and an agreement has yet to be struck, so the Law Officers have made references to the Supreme Court in relation to both Bills, as a protective step in the public interest towards upholding legal certainty. This is therefore now a matter for the Supreme Court to determine. However, I remain hopeful that the ongoing negotiations with the devolved Administrations will result in an agreement. It is clear that that would be the best outcome for all involved. Should an acceptable agreement be reached and should the Scottish and Welsh continuity Bills consequently not take effect, the UK Government would seek to withdraw the references.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Attorney General for his answer. These combined challenges are unprecedented in the 20-year history of devolution. Indeed, it is the first time that the UK Government have challenged legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament.

The Scottish Parliament’s Bill was passed by an overwhelming majority of 95 votes to 32. Only the Tories and one Liberal Democrat did not support the Bill. The rest of the Parliament—the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Greens and the rest of the Lib Dems—supported the Bill. Scottish Ministers are satisfied that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. In that view, they have the support of Scotland’s most senior Law Officer, the Lord Advocate.

The purpose of the Bill passed by the Scottish Parliament is to prepare for the consequences for devolved powers of UK withdrawal, and it is designed to work with the Westminster EU (Withdrawal) Bill. Can the Attorney General tell the House why this Tory Government are seeking to defeat a Bill in the courts that they could not defeat by democratic means in the Scottish Parliament? Does he agree that working with the Scottish Government and Parliament to resolve those political differences is preferable to resorting to law? Does he appreciate that this will widely be seen as an attack on the Scottish Parliament and the democratic legitimacy of the devolved settlement? Finally, how much will this cost and who will meet the legal costs?

The Attorney General: I agree with the hon. and learned Lady that the situation is unprecedented. She is right that no reference to the Supreme Court about Scottish legislation has previously been brought. However, she will recognise that that is not the only unprecedented factor here. As she knows, it is also the first time the Scottish Parliament has been prepared to proceed in the face of the advice of its Presiding Officer that the Bill is not within its competence. History is being made in more than one way.

I recognise that, as the hon. and learned Lady said, the Lord Advocate is of the view that the Bill is within competence, and I am heartened by her confidence in the unassailable wisdom of Law Officers, but she will recognise that his is not the only view and that legitimate questions have arisen about the Scottish Parliament’s competence to pass the legislation. Law Officers in the United Kingdom, in accordance with our powers under the devolution settlement, are seeking to refer those questions.

The hon. and learned Lady says that the continuity Bills mirror the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but she will recognise that there are significant differences between them. Those differences create the difficulty about legal certainty. We cannot have two versions of rules operating at the same time. That needs to be resolved.

Finally, the hon. and learned Lady said that we are seeking to defeat a Bill in the courts that we could not defeat in the Scottish Parliament. I gently point out that a substantial part of the Bill that was certainly passed in the Scottish Parliament was a rerun of amendments that she sought and failed to get passed in this House. As I said, there is more than one way of looking at the position. I hope that she and her colleagues would accept that there is a legitimate dispute, at least about competence, and that it is in accordance with the devolution settlement that the Supreme Court resolves it, unless we can do so by negotiation. I fervently hope that that is the case, because I agree with her that that would be a far better way forward.
David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the people of Scotland have voted to stay in the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom has voted to leave the European Union, the people of Wales have voted to leave the EU, and he is trying to implement the democratic will of the British people?

The Attorney General: I certainly agree that, whatever the views of any Member of this House, the practical reality is that, before the UK has another opportunity to consider whether Scotland, Wales or anywhere else should be independent, the UK will leave the EU. We therefore need to address the questions that arise about a workable system of rules, regulations and laws that will apply on the day we leave. That is what the withdrawal Bill seeks to do, and the complications that the continuity Bills cause simply have to be addressed.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for applying for the urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

The UK Government’s challenge to the legality of the emergency Brexit Bills passed by the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales rightly merits consideration in this House. Crucial policy areas currently dealt with in Brussels, such as agriculture, food labelling and air quality, are affected. They will have a great impact on people’s lives in the years ahead.

On those EU powers in devolved areas, there has been widespread concern for some time that Brexit legislation affecting the devolved Governments will be used as an opportunity for a power grab by the UK Government.

I ask the Attorney General to answer a number of questions. First, can he confirm the estimated legal costs of the challenge being brought by the UK Government? Secondly, will he confirm, even at this stage, whether a flexible approach can still be taken to finding a settlement that would resolve the matter? Crucially, does he agree that protecting our devolution settlement is vital and that, on UK-wide matters such as these, reaching solutions by consensus is the better way by far of resolving things? Finally, will he commit to withdrawing his referral to the Supreme Court if the hoped-for consensus is achieved through the Joint Ministerial Committee?

The Attorney General: Let me deal with the hon. Lady’s questions in turn. I apologise to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who also raised the question of costs, which I did not address. I cannot give a figure for how much the challenge will cost, but hon. Members will recognise that, where there is a legitimate question about a devolved Administration’s competence to do what they have done, the devolution settlement provides for a mechanism, which we are using here. It is therefore envisaged in the settlement that where a problem occurs, that is how we deal with it. I do not deny that there will be a cost, but it is part of the devolution settlement that that is how we should resolve disputes when they arise.

The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) asked me about the necessity for a flexible approach to settlement, and I agree. Certainly as far as the UK Government are concerned—that is very much the spirit in which the continuing negotiations are being approached. I remain optimistic, and I hope others are too, that we can settle the matter in that way.

The hon. Lady said that it was crucial to protect the devolution settlement. Again, I make the point that the process that we are undergoing is part of the devolution settlement. It is the mechanism that the devolution settlement set out for dealing with such concerns.

On withdrawal of the reference, I hope I made the position clear in my initial remarks. If we can reach an acceptable agreement—I very much hope that we will—and, flowing from that, the continuity Bills in Scotland and Wales no longer have effect, the Government would seek to withdraw the references.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I assure my right hon. and learned Friend that, from my experience, in private the Scottish and Welsh Governments are considerably more constructive and realistic in approaching the post-Brexit devolution settlements than some of the rhetoric I suspect we are about to hear would suggest. Does he agree that they are being constructive and realistic because establishing a decent settlement is hugely in the interests of the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? The biggest threat to those countries’ prosperity is anything that damages the UK single market.

The Attorney General: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, to whom I pay tribute for his considerable involvement in the hard and mostly unrecognised work of the negotiation. He is right: in the end, we seek to get to a place where we recognise that there must be an enforceable and workable UK-wide market. When that requires that powers do not go to devolved Administrations, we will seek to reach a settlement by agreement. I hope that we will reach such an agreement soon.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the House that I am looking to move on no later than 2.10 pm, so some people might not get in, particularly if other people contribute in such a way that prevents them from doing so.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): This is a shambolic mess entirely of the Government’s making. They could have accepted amendments in this place or tabled amendments in the other place, but they did not. They could have attempted to find consensus on a cross-party basis, but they did not.

The Attorney General mischaracterised what the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly said. She said that the Bill was within the Assembly’s competence. Even UKIP Assembly Members voted for it—Neil Hamilton said that it did not in any way block the Brexit process.

The Attorney General: No, I did not mischaracterise what the Presiding Officer of the Welsh Assembly said. Although the hon. Gentleman is right that she concluded that the Bill was within competence—I did not deny that—I made it clear that she said that there were arguments in both directions. The point that we have made about the references is that, where there is lack of
[The Attorney General]

clarity and serious questions about whether a Bill or part of it is within competence, the devolved settlement makes it clear that it is for the Supreme Court to resolve the matter. That will now happen. I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that we are not attempting to undermine the devolved settlements but to ensure that they are operating as intended.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What elements of the proposed Scottish legislation were rejected as amendments in this House?

The Attorney General: The SNP sought, as part of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, to impose requirements that Scottish Ministers would be able effectively to veto the process of dealing with incompatible EU law after the point of exit. They returned to that, as they are entitled to do, in the course of passing their own continuity Bill in the Scottish Parliament. The difficulty we now have is that in our view the methods they have chosen raise very real questions as to whether in doing so they exceeded the competence of the Scottish Parliament. That is what the Supreme Court, if necessary, will need to resolve.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This is quite extraordinary. There is only a question about this legislation because the Tories have chosen to question it. They have been democratically defeated in the Scottish Parliament by an overwhelming majority and are now showing their utter contempt for Scottish democracy by seeking to have that democratic decision overturned in the courts. First the power grab, now this. Is it any surprise that the Scottish people will never, ever trust the Scottish Tories with the future of our national Parliament ever again?

The Attorney General: I think we will pass over, because it will take too long, how anyone can define as a power grab a situation where one at least retains powers already devolved and probably has a lot more. Leaving that to one side, there is no contempt here—quite the reverse. As I said, what is happening is entirely within the devolution settlement set out in the Scotland Act and the Government of Wales Act. That is what we are doing to resolve what I would have thought sensible elements of the SNP would accept is an undeniable controversy. There is more than one view on competence. That is apparent, because the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament did not just say that there were questions; he concluded that those questions could be answered only by saying that the Bill was not within competence.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My colleagues and I have been concerned that the SNP’s continuity Bill is a political manoeuvre designed to create precedent for legislation on a second independence referendum. Does the right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is time for the SNP to put this grievance to one side and to get serious about working together as one team for the best possible Brexit deal for Scotland and the United Kingdom?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is what we should be aspiring to: a workable situation where we can have a system of laws that works on the day after we leave. That is what we owe to all our constituents in whatever part of the United Kingdom they may live.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I rise to pay tribute to my Plaid Cymru colleague Steffan Lewis AM, who built cross-party consensus in our Assembly for our continuity Bill. I wish Steff well in recovery from serious illness.

Devolution means divergence. Devolution means difference. Why does the Attorney General seek to deny that, knowing as he does that he calls into question the very concept of devolution?

The Attorney General: Again, I do not call into question the concept of devolution—quite the reverse. I seek to assert the provisions of the devolution settlement that enable us to resolve such disputes when they occur. There is undoubtedly a dispute. I am surprised to hear Opposition Members even dispute that there is a dispute. It seems to me that that bit, at least, is pretty obvious.

On the hon. Lady’s point, I accept that there will be differences of approach to devolution. Where the devolution settlements allow for differences in approach, that is perfectly reasonable. What we are talking about, however, is the capacity for the Government to say not just to us in Parliament but to individuals and businesses around the country, that they can be sure what the arrangements will be on the day after we leave the European Union. There simply cannot be two competing versions of that in place at one time. That does not accord with legal certainty and it is that which we seek to address, aside from the very real questions about legal competence, which in the end, if necessary, the Supreme Court will have to decide.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talks about democracy. It is important to remind the House that more people in Scotland voted to leave the European Union than voted for the SNP in the general election. When we talk about respecting democracy, the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament ruled this out of order. The SNP is showing not respect to the devolved Parliament, but contempt. Will my right hon. and learned Friend work with members of the Scottish Government who are willing to be constructive to deliver the best possible result for this House and for my constituents, who, by the way, live in the United Kingdom.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is right that whatever our final judgment may be, or whatever the final judgment of the Supreme Court may be, no one should disregard the views of a Presiding Officer of a Parliament. I feel confident that I have Mr Speaker’s support in saying that at least. My hon. Friend is also right about what we want. We want a negotiated settlement that is agreed between all the Governments involved. That must remain, and does remain, what we seek to achieve.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Minister says he is hopeful. The Minister says he is heartened. Why can the Minister not actually be helpful and recognise that in Wales we now have a reserved powers model?
We know perfectly well that agriculture, for instance, is to be decided in Wales. Why on earth can he not recognise that and why are the Government seeking to pick a fight with the Welsh people? Why do they not just get on and recognise it?

The Attorney General: No, I am afraid the hon. Lady cannot have that. First, the Government of Wales Act 2006 applies here, not the current devolution settlement with Wales. Secondly, the Government have not picked a fight with anybody. What has happened is that particular Bills have been passed—on an emergency basis, by the way—in both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, which raise very serious questions about the competence of each to pass them. That is not just our view; it is the view of others as well. It is therefore the responsibility of the Law Officers to determine how that should be resolved. The way in which it gets resolved, as set out in the devolution settlements, is by reference to the Supreme Court. If we can avoid that, we would all like to do so. The negotiations that are under way—the reason I am optimistic and heartened is that I hope they will be successful—are a better way to do that.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Opposition Members say that this is an attack on democracy, but does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that an independent judiciary is a vital component of a strong and functioning democracy, and, given the judgment of the Presiding Officer that the Bill’s introduction is outwith the competence of the Scottish Parliament, it is therefore only right that the Supreme Court itself makes a judgment on the legality of the Bill?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right. As I said, there surely cannot be any doubt that there is a difference of view about whether the Bills are within competence or not. It is not simply the Government who have done that. The Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament has expressed the same view. To resolve the dispute, the devolved settlements are very clear: it is for the Supreme Court to do that. We make a reference so that they can, but the problem will go away if we can resolve this through negotiation. I certainly hope that we do.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Attorney General stated, along with the Advocate General for Scotland, that it was the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament’s opinion that triggered the legal action in this case. Can we then be given a clear answer on why the Welsh Bill is also being challenged? It is important to be clear about the process. We are making a reference to the Supreme Court so that it can consider whether these particular Bills, one Welsh and one Scottish, are within the competence of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Government. It is not about deciding whether devolution is or is not going to stand. It is about whether, in accordance with the provisions of the devolution settlement, these particular Bills are inside or outside competence. That is what the Supreme Court will need to do. There is a way of avoiding all this, and we have discussed it at length. If these ongoing negotiations, which involve my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and other members of the Government, are fruitful, and I hope they will be, there will be no need for this process to be concluded. However, if there are competing versions of the way in which continuity is dealt with in legislation, in the end the system will require that to be sorted out.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that the SNP Scottish Government should have been focusing on their day job of delivering the best possible Brexit deal for Scotland, rather than pursuing this divisive continuity Bill?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, the Scottish Government are perfectly entitled to bring to their Parliament whatever legislation they wish and to argue for it, and if they can win a vote, good luck to them. But having done all that, it is bizarre in the extreme for them not to recognise that through their own actions, they have created a difference between the way in which the Scottish Government seek to deal with continuity and the way in which the UK Government have set out that they would deal with continuity. When there is a dispute, there is a way of resolving it, and that is what we are seeking to engage with.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Scottish people have been told, “They should not be leaving the UK; they should be leading the UK.” They have also been told that they are a valued and equal partner in the Union. In what way does the Minister think that launching a legal challenge to the continuity Bill that was passed by 92 votes to 32 is in keeping with what the Scots have been told?

The Attorney General: I am in danger of repeating myself, Mr Speaker, and I know you hate that, so I will not. Let me simply say this: it is all very well saying, “There is a democratic imperative to do what the Scottish Government have done because we won a vote in the Scottish Parliament,” but they are forgetting all about the fact that they lost some votes in this Parliament on more or less the same issues. There is a difference of opinion—there is no doubt about it—so how do we resolve it? The answer is that we resolve it through the mechanism that the devolution settlement sets out. That is what we seek to do unless, and this would be better, we can resolve it by agreement.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I find astonishing the level of contempt in which the SNP holds the office of the Presiding Officer—an individual whose role is to uphold the institution of the Scottish Parliament. Does the Attorney General agree that far from undermining devolution, ensuring that no Scottish Government act outwith the scope of their powers is protecting and preserving devolution?

The Attorney General: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and it does not seem to me that we need to invite our colleagues on the SNP Benches to agree with the view of the Presiding Officer. All we really need them to do is to recognise that his view is worthy of respect, that it is valid and needs to be considered and that it represents a clear difference of opinion on the position in this Bill.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I was delighted to hear the Minister say that in the event of a negotiated agreement between the two Governments and the Government of Wales, the references will be withdrawn. Does he agree that what we really need is that agreement between the Governments, some certainty and an end to this endless political, constitutional posturing, which is not really doing anything for the people and businesses of Scotland?

The Attorney General: I can agree entirely with the hon. Lady. Lady that an end to political posturing would be most welcome, but I suggest to her that although she is absolutely right that an agreement is desirable, all agreements require more than one side to consent to them, and we must all do our bit to make sure that agreement is reached.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that this legal challenge does not alter in any way the UK Government’s intention and sincere desire to resolve the genuine issues with clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

The Attorney General: Yes, I can.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am afraid that we have heard quite a bit of tosh today from the Attorney General, cheered on by the alt-Brit Unionist ultras on the other side of the Chamber. Given that he has tried to stop this Parliament having a vote and has failed previously, given that he is in the middle of a power grab and given that he is now taking the Scottish Parliament’s Bill to court, does he not see why some of us think that the Government harbour views to abolish the Scottish Parliament?

The Attorney General: Well, that is a bit of a stretch, even for the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] Look, what we are doing here—[Interruption.] If I can just interfere in the family dispute that is going on across the Chamber at the moment—what is going on is that we are respecting the devolution settlement. I do not expect the hon. Gentleman or his colleagues to love the Scotland Act 1998, but I do expect them to have read it, and when they read it, they will see that when such disputes arise—there surely is a dispute here—a mechanism is clearly set out for resolving it. If he and we can find a better way of doing it without engaging the Supreme Court, then we and no doubt the Supreme Court will be delighted, but until that agreement is reached, we have to rely on the mechanisms set out in the devolution settlement.

Mr Speaker: Yes, there has been excessive gesticulation on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), though he is newly arrived in the House, is what I would call a very over-zealous gesticulator, and we do not need to see his rather eccentric arm-waving, which does not greatly advance the cause. However, having heard him prattling away for the last 20 minutes from his seat, perhaps we can now hear him on his feet.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is clear to the great Scottish public that the SNP is simply playing political games with this issue. It is trying to manufacture a crisis when there is no need for one. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the architects of devolution foresaw issues arising about competence and that the Law Officers of the United Kingdom are now following laid-out due process by referring this matter to the Supreme Court?


Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): At Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said, “It is important that we recognise the independence” of another country’s judiciary. After the Conservatives lost the argument and a vote in the Scottish Parliament, does this referral not highlight the necessity of an independent Scottish judiciary with its own Supreme Court and an independent Scottish Parliament whose democratic decisions are not undermined and overruled by a so-called equal-partner Government in London?

The Attorney General: No, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood. The dispute is not about how many votes the proposals that he is talking about got. The argument here is that once they have passed the Scottish Parliament, we have a real question about
whether there was in fact competence to pass them at all. That is the issue that in the end the mechanisms require the Supreme Court to resolve, unless we can do it a better way.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The SNP does not listen to the Presiding Officer in the Scottish Parliament and it does not seem to be listening to the answers from the Attorney General today. Can my right hon. and learned Friend reiterate that we could have avoided this whole issue if the SNP had put more focus on getting the best possible deal for Scotland, rather than on its narrow-minded party-politicking with its divisive continuity Bill?

The Attorney General: I think that would be a better way forward, and I hope it is the way taken.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Do the Government not accept that this “legal uncertainty”, as it is called, is causing enormous concern to the business community? Would it not be better for the Government to recognise that there is a political choice that needs to be made and that the onus is on them to make it in favour of the devolution settlement?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is right that, as I have said, we need to provide certainty wherever we can, and he is right too that there is a political job to be done as much as there is a legal one. I have indicated to him that I take the view that the political way forward is better than the legal way forward, but there is a necessity to resolve the difference of opinion that currently exists over the way forward. If we cannot do that politically, we will have to do it legally, but I know which way I would prefer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In December, I asked the Secretary of State for Wales what he would do if he failed to gain legislative consent from Wales, and he replied, in his usual way, that he was very confident of success. And now the case is going to the Supreme Court. Is the Attorney General confident that this matter has been handled well, or even half-competently?

The Attorney General: Yes. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I are optimistic, and for good reason, and we will remain so in the hope that a sensible settlement can be reached.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Attorney General accept that however Opposition Members try to dress up the legislation passed in Wales and Scotland, its real design is to thwart the will of the people in the referendum and the legislation passed in this House that gave effect to that will? Does he not also find it hypocritical that those who are complaining about the Government now taking this action to the Court to clarify the issue of competence were supportive of those who used the courts to try to overturn the referendum result?

The Attorney General: There is no doubt that the SNP does not have a great track record of accepting referendum results, but I hope very much that on this issue we will be able to find common ground. As for the UK Government—and, I still believe, the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales—that is what we will seek to do.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): To be clear, the only reason the Scottish and Welsh Governments felt obliged to pass this legislation is the failure of the Attorney General’s Government to come to an agreement with the devolved Administrations on how things should be administered post Brexit, and at the centre of that is an insistence that the devolved Governments should be subservient to his Government. Will he now proceed on the basis of partnership and co-operation to make this situation work?

The Attorney General: I do not accept that a co-operative approach is not being taken, but as I pointed out earlier, all agreements require everyone to engage and play their part. I might add, however, as he might be unaware, that in respect of every Bill that has passed through the Scottish Parliament since it has been passing Bills, the Scottish Government have taken the opportunity to share the text of the Bill with the UK Government before its legislative process, so that any questions about competence could be resolved and discussed beforehand. For the first time ever, that did not happen on this occasion. It might be that he or one of his colleagues can explain why, but it certainly does not seem to accord with the principle of maximising the opportunity for collaboration.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on.
Point of Order

2.13 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said that the decision to destroy landing cards was taken in 2009. I have had it confirmed that the Home Office briefed yesterday that the decision was taken by the UK Border Agency in 2010 and that the records were destroyed in October 2010. Can the House, the Windrush generation, the Commonwealth leaders and the country get clarification from the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that every Member of the House takes responsibility for the veracity of what he or she says in it. If any Member feels that he or she has inadvertently erred, that Member is responsible for the correction of the record. The matter to which she refers is, as we all know, a very public matter about which opinions have been aired in this Chamber and beyond. If it transpires that the record needs to be corrected, I trust that it will be, and I am grateful to her for taking the proper opportunity to air her concern.

Access to Fertility Services

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

2.14 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about access to NHS fertility services, including equality of access to such services across England; to make provision about pricing of such services; to provide for a minimum number of fertility treatments to be available to women on the basis of their age; and for connected purposes.

I first became aware of the totally unequal nature of access to IVF in 2016 when I was contacted by constituents who had been refused treatment because of arbitrary criteria, with couples being judged on the basis of such things as past relationships. Apparently, if one partner has had a child from a previous relationship, no matter how long ago or what their level of contact, that serves as grounds to deny treatment. Similarly, some clinical commissioning groups are starting to introduce restrictions based on the male partner’s body mass index. Such arbitrary and perhaps rather moralistic judgments have no clinical basis.

As I looked at the situation, I found that the provision of fertility services in England varied considerably and that the number of CCGs restricting or completely decommissioning their services had increased dramatically since 2014. I am left wondering how it can be right that people in Thurrock and Luton—good luck to them—have access to comprehensive fertility services while my constituents and many others get a much poorer deal because of where they live.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued guidelines on fertility treatment in 2004 that clearly stated that women under the age of 40 who had failed to get pregnant after two years of trying should be offered three full cycles of IVF. An update in 2013 further clarified that women between the ages of 40 and 42 who met other specific criteria should have access to one full cycle. As members will know, however, NICE recommendations are not binding, and according to the charity Fertility Fairness, which compiled data for all 208 CCGs in England, only 12% of CCGs provide three full cycles, which is half the number offering them in 2013.

Seven CCGs have completely decommissioned their IVF services. Those who live in the areas covered by the Herts Valleys, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Croydon, South Norfolk, Mid Essex, North East Essex and Basildon & Brentwood CCGs are effectively denied IVF on the NHS. Most CCGs offer just one cycle of IVF, and some of these offer only a partial cycle. NICE has repeatedly advised that a full cycle should include one round of ovarian stimulation followed by the transfer of any resultant fresh and frozen embryos. When IVF is delivered in this way, the treatment is both clinically and cost-effective, but when the advice is ignored, the cost to the NHS probably outweighs its effectiveness. I guess that this amounts to saving money by wasting money. Only four CCGs in England follow the NICE fertility guidelines in full; the remaining 197 that provide some services do so in an imperfect and inefficient way. I freely admit
that NHS resources are stretched, but that is all the more reason for insisting on a consistent and cost-effective approach.

I was given assurances by the then Minister in January last year that NHS England would disseminate commissioning guidance to help CCGs. More than a year has passed, but no progress has been made. Through a parliamentary question, I learned recently of NHS England’s decision not to publish guidance after all, and instead to pass the buck back to the commissioners.

The World Health Organisation is clear in classifying infertility as “a disease of the reproductive system”, but we are hardly treating it like other medical conditions. We should not be rationing it in this way. We need to take steps to address poor clinical decisions and the injustice that results from unequal access.

Fertility problems affect one in six couples in the UK. If left untreated, there can be serious consequences involving high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, which often lead to relationship breakdown and other long-term, chronic health conditions that require expensive lifelong treatment. It is important to remember that IVF is not an easy fix—it is hard both physically and emotionally, and not always successful—but if it is administered properly, it is a clinically effective treatment for a legitimate medical condition.

Since 2016, I have discussed this matter with four different Ministers, led a Back-Bench debate and spoken with senior officials from NHS England. As I have mentioned, there have been promises but little progress, and almost every other week another CCG announces plans to reduce or decommission its services. Approximately 17 CCGs are currently in this position. Without action, fertility treatment will be squeezed out of our NHS.

My Bill would eliminate regional variations, including the absurd use of the arbitrary access criteria my constituents have been subjected to, and ensure that all CCGs in England commission fertility treatment in line with NICE guidelines. The Bill would also pursue the development of national pricing to end the wide disparity in costs.

The price for one full cycle can range from as little as £1,343 to well over £6,000—and sometimes much more. Those high costs are used as a justification for reducing the service, but surely it is commissioning failures that need to be tackled. It seems ridiculous that exactly the same treatment can cost the same—supposedly national—health service so much less in Newcastle than in Birmingham. Successive Ministers have confirmed that work on benchmark pricing is ongoing, but that started in 2016 and we are still to see any results. If they cannot resolve an issue like this, what faith can there be in their ability to deal with problems of a larger order?

The simple measures in my Bill would guarantee eligible patients fair and equal access to NHS fertility services wherever they live and minimise commissioning costs. Sir Bruce Keogh, the former national medical director, wrote to me in November 2017, saying: “it remains the fact that the NHS has never been able to fund all the IVF that people would like and this is unlikely to change”.

That is small comfort to those whose needs are being ignored. I accept that resources are scarce, but surely we must not be prepared to accept that individual CCGs can ration treatment on the basis of whatever whim catches their fancy.

My Bill enjoys wide cross-party support because the issue affects people all over the country. I want to thank the constituents and campaigners, particularly Fertility Fairness and Fertility Network UK, that support the Bill and all the couples who have helped me to understand just how unjust things are. They are the victims of rules and decisions that would be completely intolerable if we were discussing any other illness. The NHS was founded on the principle that healthcare should be universal, comprehensive and free at the point of delivery, and as with all illnesses, fertility treatment should be dependent on a person’s medical need, not their postcode or ability to pay. Infertility is a medical condition, and it is time that we started treating it like one.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Steve McCabe, Kate Green, Paula Sherriff, Joan Ryan, Ann Coffey, Mr Edward Vaizey, Tom Brake, Layla Moran, Jim Shannon, Andrew Selous and Will Quince present the Bill.

Steve McCabe accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 196).
Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We can be proud of the safety culture across our transport sector in recent years, but we cannot be complacent and we want to maintain and improve safety standards. That is why we have to look at new areas where legislation is needed, and one of them is strengthening the rules against the minority of thoroughly irresponsible people who shine lasers at aircraft. At the same time, we will make it an offence to shine a laser at cars, trains, ships and air traffic control for the first time.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will not the Bill throw into doubt the long-established police practice of an officer on foot jumping into the highway and waving a torch at a motorist in order to stop a vehicle? Would that not be an offence under the Bill because a strict liability offence is proposed, as I understand it, or does my right hon. Friend expect the police to have to pray for salvation and to rely on clause 1(2) to argue that they have a defence?

Chris Grayling: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that point, which may have been a request to join the Committee and argue about it in great detail. I argue that any potential law and order intervention would judge there to be a key difference between a torch and the modern laser pen that is causing such issues and on which, particularly in relation to aircraft, we need the law to be substantially strengthened.

Sir Greg Knight: I am sorry to labour the point, and I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. That is what I initially thought would be the answer, but if we look at the Bill, we can see that a laser beam is defined in clause 3 as “a beam of coherent light produced by a device of any kind”—in other words, a torch.

Chris Grayling: I am not a physicist, but I think the key word is “coherent”, in that a beam is coherent if it focuses the light in a way that represents a danger to the public. As I have said, I encourage my right hon. Friend to join the Bill Committee—this may be one of the issues that are well worth debating—and I have no doubt that my colleagues on the Treasury Bench will be delighted to offer him such an opportunity. It is a serious point, however, and we will double-check.

I am very grateful to the other place, which has done a detailed job of scrutiny. Amendments made there have removed ambiguity and extended the provisions beyond vehicles to include air traffic control facilities. I thank my noble Friend Baroness Sugg and those in the Lords who took part in debates on the Bill, and the external stakeholders, particularly the UK Laser Working Group, that have made an important contribution to shaping the legislation.

It is important to say that there are legitimate uses for lasers. They are used as alignment aids in the construction industry, by lecturers in classrooms and by astronomers in the course of their work. We intend to legislate not against the use of laser pointers at all, but instead against their illegitimate use. They can dazzle, distract or blind those in charge of a vehicle, with serious and even fatal consequences, in aviation, for example. We know that, in the following year, there were six cases, and by 2008 there were 200. There are now 1,000 a year, as indeed there were last year. Thankfully no aircraft, train or road vehicle in this country has had an accident as a result of these dangerous and senseless acts, but it is all too easy to imagine the potential consequences—for instance, a pilot being blinded by a laser when trying to land a passenger jet, or a train driver being dazzled from a bridge and missing a signal as a result.

It is already an offence, under the Air Navigation Order 2016, to shine a light at an aircraft to dazzle or distract a pilot. However, the maximum penalty is a £2,500 fine, and we do not think the fact that this is a summary offence gives the police adequate powers to investigate and pursue it effectively. Offenders can also be prosecuted, under another air navigation order, for the offence of endangering an aircraft. That carries a maximum prison sentence of five years and a £5,000 fine, but it involves legal complications. It is sometimes difficult to prove the endangerment of an aircraft.

The Bill will simplify the position. It is a straightforward measure, which will make it an offence for a person to shine or direct a laser beam towards a vehicle if it dazzles or distracts, or if the action is likely to dazzle or distract a person in control of a vehicle. It will extend to all transport modes, will give the police the powers they need to investigate, and will provide penalties that reflect the seriousness of the offence. This will be an either-way offence, which means that it can be dealt with in the magistrates courts or, as an indictable offence, in the Crown court. It gives the police powers, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, to enter a property for the purposes of arrest and to search a property after an arrest. Those powers are not currently available to the authorities in respect of existing aviation offences. The maximum fine will be unlimited, and the maximum prison sentence will be five years. The Bill will extend to the whole United Kingdom. We have been working with the devolved Administrations, who are very supportive, and I am grateful to them for their co-operation.

As I said at the start of my speech, the Bill has already faced scrutiny in the other place, where it received strong cross-party support. It reaches us in much better shape as a result. One of the positive additions in the other place was the extension of the provisions to air traffic control, which has a key role in our aviation sector. It is right and proper for those who attempt to shine one of these devices at an air traffic control point to be treated in the same way. That is a constructive example of the way in which debate on such Bills can improve them.

The Bill has received widespread support from both the authorities and the transport industry. The British Airline Pilots Association has welcomed its reintroduction—it was, of course, debated before the general election, but had to be set aside because there was not enough time...
to proceed—saying that it is good news for transport safety. It has also been welcomed by airlines and airports, the National Police Chiefs Council, the National Police Air Service, the Military Aviation Authority, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Rail Delivery Group, Public Health England and the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. That is a pretty good list of supporters.

Everyone agrees that we need to do something about this problem, and everyone agrees that the actions of the small number of individuals who behave in this way are utterly unacceptable. We must give our police the powers to deal with them in the toughest appropriate manner. I hope and believe that today, in the House, we can give our support to a measure that I believe is absolutely necessary for public safety, and whose time has come.

2.33 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Labour fully supports the Bill. Our concerns about it were addressed as it made its way through the other place. However, this is not the first occasion on which I have had a strong sense of déjà vu when discussing legislation introduced during the current Session. The issues dealt with in this Bill, along with those in another two Bills that have been presented since June last year, were first put before the House more than a year ago as part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. The Prime Minister’s gamble in calling a snap election not only demolished her majority in this place, but had the knock-on effect of disrupting much of the business of Parliament. A host of important Bills, including the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, were dropped ahead of the election.

Having expended a great deal of parliamentary time and effort debating issues like those contained in this Bill, we were surprised to note that there was no reference to the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in the Queen’s Speech. Instead, the Government decided to take up even more parliamentary time by fragmenting the previously proposed legislation, splitting it between what became the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Act 2017 and the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill. In fact, the Queen’s Speech made no mention of laser misuse, and it was only after Labour raised the issue with the Government during the debate on the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill that they introduced this Bill.

While Labour Members are happy to see these measures finally making their way into law, it is disappointing to note that 50% of the Government’s transport programme during the current Parliament has consisted of clauses taken from the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which should already have passed into law. Moreover, having introduced three separate Bills, the Government have yet to include a number of clauses from the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill that should be on the statute books by now. There has been no legislation on diversionary driving courses, and the clauses relating to air traffic services appear to have been axed as well.

All those facts only go to show that this minority Government are utterly out of ideas and cannot competently deliver those that they attempt to recycle. It is no surprise that they are willing to take up some hours of Parliament’s time with business that should have been dealt with a year ago, when such a vast number of pressing transport issues require our immediate attention. For example, we have heard nothing from them about what action they will take to address the crisis in local bus services, the collapsing rail franchising system, the huge disparities in regional transport investment, or the air pollution that is causing 50,000 premature deaths each year. This Bill could have given them an opportunity to legislate on drones. There were 70 reported near misses with aircraft in 2016, and the number is rising year on year, but they simply have not addressed the problem at the required pace.

While it is disappointing to see the Government drag their feet on important problems relating to the transport sector, it is nevertheless a good thing that they are listening to the Labour party and legislating on laser misuse. Worriedly, we have seen a sharp rise in the misuse of lasers in recent years. According to figures released by the Civil Aviation Authority, between 2009 and 2016 there was a 70% increase in the number of incidents in which a laser was shone at an aircraft in the UK. The British Transport Police reported 578 laser incidents between April 2011 and November 2017, an average of 96 each year.

It is currently an offence only to direct or shine any light at any aircraft in flight so as to dazzle or distract the pilot of the aircraft, with a maximum fine of £2,500. A suspect can be imprisoned for up to five years under the Aviation Security Act 1982 if intent to damage or endanger the safety of aircraft can be proved. The Bill will extend the offence to other vehicles, remove the cap on the amount that offenders can be fined and make it easier to prosecute offenders by removing the need to prove an intention to endanger a vehicle.

The Government have taken on board the points raised by my Labour colleagues in the other place about the definition of “laser beam” and the types of vehicles covered in the Bill, as well including a new clause making it an offence to shine a laser directly towards an air traffic control tower. The Opposition would like to put on record our gratitude for the work of our colleagues in the other place, particularly Lord Tunnicliffe, to make those significant improvements to the Bill. It is with pleasure that Labour can take responsibility for a piece of legislation that the Conservatives omitted from their programme for government and only introduced after heeding our calls. Indeed, when they did so, the work of Opposition spokespeople in the other place was required to get it into its current shape. If we were in government, we would have passed this legislation into law a year ago, and we would now be getting on with the business of implementing our policies to save local bus services, fix our railways, equalise the disparities in regional transport investment and address the air pollution crisis.

All the Conservative party has to offer are recycled bits of legislation and sticking plasters for an ailing transport system that is in need of major medical assistance. While I reiterate Labour’s full support for the Bill, the transport needs of the nation are many and varied, and, sadly, the totality of the Government’s legislative programme is utterly deficient in addressing them.

2.41 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State was untypically churlish, and I can only attribute that to the fact that since I left the Front Bench he has become more bombastic—I think he is missing me. He is well aware—
indeed, in his final remarks he acknowledged this—that this is a Bill that any decent Government would introduce. As he said, it was the subject of considerable discussion when that earlier piece of proposed legislation was introduced and there has been a broad measure of support across the House about the need for such a measure.

The use of lasers for malevolent purposes has grown, as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) described. These devices were virtually unknown until the early 2000s; in 2003, fewer than half a dozen cases were reported. As he said, however, by last year over 1,000 cases were reported in various ways and forms. The need for legislation is proven simply on the basis that we know that these things can be used by those with malevolent intent to do damage and that they may well get access to a device that can be bought for as little as £1 on the internet and then go about their vile business.

The bringing down of a plane is obviously one of the principal fears, but, as the Bill now recognises, there are others, too—other transport modes are vulnerable. Someone with one of these laser pens could direct it into the face of a driver of a heavy goods vehicle or at a train driver from a bridge, so it is right that the Bill addresses all the risks associated with the misuse of these devices.

As has been said, the Bill encourages the identification of such malevolence, introduces tougher penalties and makes it easier for prosecutions to take place. There is an argument for extending the powers of the police still further by extending stop-and-search to, for example, people loitering on the edge of an airport or at a railway station with the clear intention of doing harm. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that when she sums up the debate.

Burke said:
“Early and provident fear is the mother of safety.”

It is right that we should be cautious and fearful, but it is also right that we should be prepared, ready to deal with any threat to public safety. These pens can present such a threat; we know that from what all the authorities report to us. The Bill is pertinent, prescient and it deserves the support of the whole House. I was proud to report to us . The Bill is pertinent, prescient and it with any threat to public safety . These pens can present potential for harm. It is right that we should be cautious and fearful, but it is also right that we should be prepared, ready to deal with any threat to public safety. These pens can present such a threat; we know that from what all the authorities report to us. The Bill is pertinent, prescient and it deserves the support of the whole House.

Mr Hayes: I can tell that my right hon. Friend does not want me to conclude quite so promptly, and on that basis it would be ungenerous not to give way and so extend my peroration a little further.

Sir Greg Knight: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and join him in praising the Government for introducing this measure, but I think he is right to proceed carefully and to take the whole House into account when considering this Bill.

Mr Hayes: My right hon. Friend is very generous and, of course, absolutely right in all that he just said, and I was just waiting for him to say it; I acknowledge that praise and thank him sincerely for what he said.

Yes, I was involved in the outset of this. The shadow Secretary of State and I rubbed along very well together when I was on the Front Bench—and we did some good work together, too—but I think it is a bit rich to say that we would not have thought of this if it was not for the Opposition. We had been discussing and planning this, considering it and plotting the right way forward, for a considerable time, and I have absolute faith in the Secretary of State and my successor as Minister to take this matter forward with the same kind of diligence and concentrated effort that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) very generously attributed to me.

2.46 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), and I join in the compliments to him: he certainly did have responsibility for the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill before June 2017 and also brought forward the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill after the last general election. He is renowned for working in a cohesive and friendly and collegiate manner, and I pay tribute to him for that.

This Bill is welcome and I am sure it will have the support of the whole House, but its progress sums up this UK Government. As we have heard, the Bill was part of the previous Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which fell because of the Government’s desperate general election strategy, so despite this new Bill supposedly being safety-critical, it is in fact the fourth Bill to be brought forward to cover the four main sections of VTAB. The timing therefore makes no sense.

We should also consider that today’s Chamber business was originally a Committee of the whole House sitting, to debate the Bill’s only two substantive clauses and the two clauses for definitions and extent to complete it. The whole House was supposed to discuss this four-clause Bill, yet following the Government’s taking action in Syria without a parliamentary vote, they refused to bring forward a substantive motion on Syria that the whole House could debate. That sums up the UK Government; it shows how they are padding out Government time, as the shadow Secretary of State said.

I served on the VTAB Committee and heard first hand from the British Airline Pilots Association—BALPA—about the incidents and risks associated with the shining of laser pens at pilots. We also heard about the need to consider air traffic control centres, because of the dangers of their staff being blinded, so it was very surprising that it was not until Report stage of this Bill that the Government included a clause to cover this aspect.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Was my hon. Friend as shocked as I was that it took the Government so long to react to BALPA’s warnings, particularly in respect of air traffic control centres?

Alan Brown: I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend makes the point well. He, too, served on the VTAB Committee and heard the evidence first hand. The shadow Secretary of State took credit for the Labour party for pushing on that issue, but I point out that I challenged the Transport Secretary on it in relation to
the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Act 2017. We all knew how safety-critical and important the issue was and it beggars belief that we are still only at this stage.

Figures from the Civil Aviation Authority show that more than 11,000 incidents have been reported at airports over an eight-year period. That is clearly unacceptable, and although there has been a downward trend, some 1,258 incidents were reported in 2016, so the frequency of such incidents is still much too high. Following a survey that BALPA undertook of its members, it stated: “half of our pilots reported having experienced a laser attack in the last 12 months. 15% said they had experienced three or more”.

That illustrates the extent of the problem. It is not surprising, given its size, that Heathrow has been the most targeted airport. Sadly, however, Glasgow airport has been the next most targeted airport. In 2016, the number of incidents there doubled to 83, compared with 151 attacks at Heathrow. Glasgow has one fifth the number of flights of Heathrow, but more than half the number of attacks. So, on one level, the scale of the problem is much greater in Glasgow.

I support the fact that the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government are taking seriously any actions that could endanger aircraft and their crew and passengers, and the Scottish Government are strongly supporting the Civil Aviation Authority’s efforts to publicise the dangers, as well as the efforts of Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to deal with those who maliciously direct lasers at aircraft and to ensure that they are prosecuted. As we heard from the VTAB Committee, the existing legislation is not robust enough in terms of the need to prove intent to endanger aircraft. I am therefore more than happy to lend my support to this Bill if it will help to provide the stick to impose penalties on those who undertake such attacks.

BALPA has provided further information on the risks from the attacks. For pilots, the major concerns surrounding a laser illumination are those of startled and distraction, but they might also suffer flash blindness, afterimage and glare. BALPA advises that there are four progressive stages of seriousness: distraction, disruption, disorientation and even incapacitation. Bearing in mind the most serious effects, when there is a two-man crew, it might be possible to hand over control of the aircraft to the second pilot, but even that procedure would involve risk during take-off and landing, and of course, only a two-pilot aircraft would have that luxury. Single-man aircraft, particularly helicopters, have no such luxury. If those pilots are attacked, it is a matter of the utmost seriousness. In London, in particular, police helicopters are—let us not be kidded—a target for those with malicious intent. There were even 10 laser incidents involving air ambulances in 2016. The catastrophic consequences for an aircraft are pretty obvious, so it is a minor miracle, given that there have been 11,000 incidents, that there has not been a more serious outcome following what are to all intents and purposes laser attacks.

It is welcome that the Bill covers all vehicles. The British Transport police have confirmed an average of 100 attacks a year on trains, and anyone really wanting to cause mischief will always have easy access to the road network, where they can target any random driver on the roads. It is therefore welcome that the Bill picks up on road users as well. As I have said, this is a short Bill. As I intimated earlier, it is welcome that the Government have added clause 2, which relates to air traffic control. However, as the shadow Minister said, we also need to consider drones and the increasing danger that they present to aircraft when they use them around airports. We know that they are becoming cheaper and more accessible to people of all ages, and we really need to look at this.

We also need to look at controlling the sale of laser pens if we are going to reduce the incidence of their malicious use. Public Health England recommends that unqualified and untrained members of the public should not have access to lasers in excess of 1 mW without good reason. Despite this, it is easy to purchase hand-held lasers in excess of 4,000 times that capacity. I therefore support the fact that, following a call for evidence, the response from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy confirms that the Government will act to improve the frequency and resourcing of enforcement activities at ports and borders with the aim of improving the safety of the market for laser pointers and increasing enforcement activities against their imports. It would be good if the Minister advised us on the timescale for this welcome additional action.

Once the Bill is introduced, the Government will have to advise us on how they will review the effectiveness of these measures and how they will consider what additional steps might be required if these measures alone are insufficient to cut down on the incidence of laser attacks. The Bill is welcome, but I ask the UK Government to consider these other measures relating to the dangers to aircraft in particular. I look forward to at last getting the Bill through and moving forward.

2.54 pm

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I am always surprised by how many people are afraid of flying, given that travelling in a plane is one of the safest things anyone can do. Travelling by car, for example, is 100 times as risky per mile as travelling in an aircraft, and travelling by motorcycle is 3,000 times as likely to kill us. The journey to the airport is likely to be the most dangerous part of someone’s holiday. I was pleased to be able to join BALPA in welcoming the fact that 2017 was the safest year in history for commercial aviation. That did not happen by accident. A number of factors are involved, and the attention to detail has been important. There has always been an underlying culture of safety in the aviation industry, starting with the manufacture and maintenance of aircraft at the excellent companies we have in the UK such as Rolls-Royce, and including the training and professionalism of the crew, both on the flight deck and in the cabin, and the work done by air traffic control. I would particularly like to recognise the work that NATS has done in keeping our skies safe. Indeed, we need to see more innovation in the way our airspace is designed and optimised.

When I first arrived in this House, I became a member of the Transport Committee under the indomitable Gwyneth Dunwoody. We went on a visit to the Civil Aviation Authority, and initially I was concerned to hear about the number of reports of incidents that had been brought to the CAA. It soon became clear, however, that aviation was so safe precisely because of that culture of reporting. For example, on one flight, the pilot and the co-pilot had both eaten the same lunch—I think that they had each had a prawn sandwich—and
that had been recorded as a risk. Because of that recording, such mistakes could be addressed. Having that type of culture in the industry is important. Indeed, when I was the Aviation Minister, I joined Dame Deirdre Hutton, the chair of the CAA, on a ramp check to see exactly how diligently the work of checking our aircraft was being done. That culture is now being looked at by the NHS, so that if there is a mistake or a near miss in a hospital, for example, it can be learned from rather than hidden, as has been the problem.

Today, we have been hearing about the new risk—namely, the misuse of lasers, which are now much more widely accessible. Indeed, I was given one a while ago as a free gift by a political party. In 2004, there were six reported incidents, but that figure increased to more than 1,000 in 2010. When I was Aviation Minister, I met the chair of BALPA, Brendan O’Neal, who explained this to me at the same time as I was endeavouring to land a 747 in the simulator at Heathrow airport. He made it clear to me that people were concerned about this problem, because it is difficult to fly one of those things in those circumstances. He explained the danger to the aircraft and to the eyesight of the flight crews. Incidentally, I did not hit the control tower as I was coming in to land, unlike the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the time. BALPA has stated that 55% of pilots reported an attack in the past 12 months, 4% of whom had reported six or more such attacks. I therefore welcome the Bill. The Secretary of State has described how it goes further than the current measures under article 225 of the Air Navigation Order 2016, in that it covers other vehicles, as well as air traffic control and taxing aircraft, which were not previously covered.

There is a particular problem for police helicopters. Mr Ollie Dismore, the director of operations for the National Police Air Service, was quoted in The Yorkshire Post in 2006 as saying that Leeds-Bradford airport, which is in my region, was the UK’s third worst airport for laser attacks on aircraft. In his 23-year career, Mr Dismore had been targeted well over 20 times himself and cited 108 reports of laser attacks on police helicopters in 2005. In the article, he described the unnerving experience of having the light bounce around the cockpit like a goldfish bowl while he was trying to fly the aircraft and look at the instruments. This is a particular problem at night, when the pilot’s pupils are dilated.

The good news is that technology in helicopters links the on-board camera to the mapping system, and the location of the perpetrator can be pinpointed and recorded. The person can even be photographed. Ground units have a good success rate of seizing the lasers and, depending on the severity of the attack, progressing the cases through the criminal justice system. Police helicopters have also been deployed in that way to tackle attacks on fixed-wing aircraft at locations such as Stansted, Gatwick and Manchester airports.

I am pleased that the measures that fell last year when the election was called will now be put on the statute book, widening the scope of the vehicles protected and toughening the penalties that can be imposed on the criminals who carry out this dangerous, malicious activity.

I want to put on the record the heavy lifting done by my noble friend Baroness Sugg, who started off her career as a staffer at the European Parliament when I was there and has now risen to much greater heights that even I could aspire to. We appreciate the work that has been done and the improvements that the Lords have made to the Bill, and I look forward to the legislation getting on the statute book, so that our skies can continue to be as safe as they are.

3 pm
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): In answer to the point made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), that this measure has been pushed by the Labour Opposition, I say that success has many fathers and failure has none. I refer him to my private Member’s Bill of 2016, on the regulation of sales, ownership and illegal use of laser pens. The Bill was intended to make “the sale, ownership and use of portable laser emitting devices with output power of more than 1 milliwatt unlawful in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.”

At that time, having looked at the matter since 2014, I was grateful to the then Lord Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), whom it is a pleasure to follow today. During that time, he was a Transport Minister and then a Home Office Minister, and I had discussions with him about addressing the misuse of laser pens. More recently, I have had discussions with Business Ministers, because the issue of the misuse of lasers goes across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Defence. I have therefore spoken to and worked with a raft of Ministers to find a coherent strategy to address the misuse of laser pens.

Mr John Hayes: In answer to the point made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), that this measure has been pushed by the Labour Opposition, I say that success has many fathers and failure has none. I refer him to my private Member’s Bill of 2016, on the regulation of sales, ownership and illegal use of laser pens. The Bill was intended to make “the sale, ownership and use of portable laser emitting devices with output power of more than 1 milliwatt unlawful in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.”

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that with the number of convictions under article 222 of the Air Navigation Order, we see that there were only 26 convictions from 1,500 recorded incidents in 2010. In 2011, when 1,912 incidents were recorded by the CAA, there were 48 convictions. In 2014, the number of convictions was 18, but there were 1,447 incidents. It is quite clear that the legislation to address, deter and bring to account those responsible for the misuse of lasers—those who take part in this reckless activity—did not have the necessary and desired effect.

The Bill, which will make the offence one of strict liability, meaning that the prosecution is not required to show intention, is absolutely right and proper. We need legislation to have the right deterrent effect, so the punishment needs to be commensurate with the seriousness of the office. Previously there was only a financial penalty, which was not the right way forward. Under the new measures, the penalties have been increased to include both financial penalties and a sentence of up to five years, which most certainly is the right way forward.

A body that has not been referred to yet is the parliamentary advisory council for transport safety, which wrote to me on 19 April 2016. Its letter reads:

"On behalf of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (All-Party Parliamentary Group), I am writing with regards to your recent Private Member's Bill on the use of laser pens.

Between 2009 and 2015, the Civil Aviation Authority recorded seventeen reports of laser pen attacks affecting air traffic control towers in the UK.

That point is now being addressed in clause 2—clause 1 addresses the need for clarity in legislation by making the offence one of strict liability—and I am grateful that the Secretary of State has taken on board PACTS's representations about infrastructure. It is a wonderful organisation and does excellent work to make transport safe for everyone.

Colleagues from across the House have referred to BALPA, which is an absolutely superb organisation. It wrote to me on 14 April 2016 and said:

"On behalf of Britain's 10,000 airline pilots I am pleased to offer BALPA's support to you in respect of your bill to regulate the sale, ownership and usage of laser pens."

The letter goes on to make a point that many people out there will be familiar with, which needs to be made again. It states:

"The issue has become especially important in recent months with the attack on a Virgin Atlantic aircraft which resulted in the First Officer feeling unwell and having to return to base."

We saw the reports in the media at the time. Any one of us could have been travelling on that plane, and we have citizens who use planes on a daily basis to travel between different parts of the world or internally within the United Kingdom.

For a long time, the legislation was not fit to address this menace, and it is right and proper that we see support coming from the Scottish National party, from Labour and from the Conservative party, all working together. At the end of the day, we all have a fundamental duty to protect our citizens. Safety in transport is absolutely vital, and the Bill helps to address that. On that point, I thank BALPA and our pilots for what they do. They are exposed to risks, but they still do a brilliant job. I cannot read out BALPA's letter in full, but I am more than happy to share it with colleagues.

I am also grateful to London City Airport, which wrote to me on 18 October 2017 in support of the proposals to address the misuse of laser pens and with its own suggestions. One additional point that it raised was as follows:

"Another solution is to create a licensing system where an importer, retailer or consumer must obtain a licence especially for high-powered laser pointers. This will allow the Government to maintain a register of sellers and users. The licence can include a criteria relating to training or insurance, thus improving the users' awareness of the safe use of laser pointers."

Although this is not in the Bill, I am pleased that, following my representations to the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries and other colleagues, in January the Government announced new measures to tackle the sale of unsafe laser pointers. My 2016 private Member's Bill would have addressed the sale of laser pens over a certain output.

First, I welcome the Government's announcement in January—no doubt the Minister will comment further on it—that they will strengthen safeguards to stop high-powered lasers entering the country, which is absolutely right and proper. As the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said, certain laser pointers of exceptionally high power have no legitimate purpose but are easily accessible in the United Kingdom and on the internet.

Secondly, the Government announced additional support to local authorities, ports and border teams to stop high-powered laser pointers entering the United Kingdom. Thirdly, they announced that they would work with manufacturers and retailers to improve laser pointer labelling. The Government have also looked at better policing of laser pointer sales by working with online sellers such as eBay. The problem is the same as with the purchasing of knives online. We have to regulate the purchasing of laser pointers online.

Finally, the Government announced awareness raising of the risks associated with laser pointers, particularly among children, given that many do not know the dangers. We need to get the legislation right and, linked to that, we need to address the use of certain laser pens.

It would not be fair of me if I were not also to thank Heathrow Airport, which wrote to me on 4 October 2017 in support of my private Member's Bill. The final paragraph of the letter said:

"We would welcome any improvements to the regulation governing the sale, ownership and use high powered laser pointers, such that only the legitimate sale, ownership and use of such devices is permitted. We would also support any improvements to the Air Navigation Order (2016) which make it easier for the police to enforce the legislation."

That, to a certain extent, is covered by clause 1.

Finally, I refer back to the representations from London City Airport, and I hope the Minister will take this point forward. When I tried to obtain information on the number of incidents there had been, the difficulty I had in trying to find out the number of convictions under different categories of the Air Navigation Orders is that the Crown Prosecution Service does not keep a record of that. The numbers I gave earlier therefore related to article 222 of the Air Navigation Order 2009. The letter from London City Airport therefore said:

"However, I believe a more informed approach based on better data-sharing between the Metropolitan Police, the Government, CAA and...airports will bring transparency and clarity on the scale of the problem. This will allow the Government to implement solutions accordingly."

…
That would ensure that all the different organisations were working together, and it would ensure transparency of the data that was available.

I have been looking at this matter since 2014 and—this is not often mentioned—I would not have been able to get a lot of the data, research and freedom of information requests if not for my brilliant researcher Barry Watts, who no longer works for me after four years in Parliament. He has now gone on to do other things, but the research we have is down to our brilliant researchers. I thank every colleague in Parliament, including some former Ministers who have spoken today, because whenever I met them, they were absolutely brilliant in understanding that very point.

We have talked about issues with regard to airports, aeroplanes, infrastructure and railways, but in 2016 the defence air safety occurrence report recorded 250 laser-related incidents in the UK in the past five years that put our amazing, wonderful military personnel, and their work, in danger. Concerns have been raised across the spectrum, and the Bill is the right way forward, but I also ask the Minister to look at how it works over the coming years. If the Bill needs to be reviewed, and if further measures need to be taken, I ask her to work with the organisations involved to see how things can be further improved.

I thank the Minister and her team for listening and for taking on board the representations that have been made to me.

3.15 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I do not propose to speak for quite as long as my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) but, of course, he has worked very hard on this issue through his private Member’s Bill, so I will whistle through my comments, many of which have been made already.

The Bill rightly covers all modes of transport, but I will confine my comments to aircraft. I spent much of my working life in aircraft engineering. I joined the Royal Air Force before moving to British Airways, where I spent more than 25 years in the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) talked about people who have an irrational fear of flying and, although I have 25 years in the industry and have flown hundreds of times as an engineer, I am somewhat frightened of flying, too. I have spent far too long thinking about what could go wrong when I am in the air.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I am most interested in the hon. Gentleman’s concern about flying. I enjoy flying but my wife will not fly, so I do understand. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) talked about the danger per mile flown. If it were the danger per hour flown, I suspect the figures for motor travel and for flying might be a bit closer.

Royston Smith: The hon. Gentleman might be right. I did some research on the likelihood of having an accident in an aeroplane, which is why I know that my fear is irrational. Taking probability out of it, a person would have to fly every day for 15,000 years to guarantee themselves on accident. I know that, but it does not stop my thinking about it when I hit a bit of turbulence or when I come in to land.

The first commercial flight was more than 100 years ago and, of course, this year we celebrate 100 years of the Royal Air Force. Across the world, aircraft have clocked up millions of flying hours, and lessons are constantly learned to ensure that our aircraft are as safe as possible. The last thing we need is people on the ground making what can sometimes be a dangerous form of travel even more dangerous than it needs to be.

I am not a pilot, but I know that aircraft are at their most vulnerable during take-off and landing, with by far the majority of incidents occurring during final descent and landing, so it will come as no surprise that the majority of fatalities in aircraft also happen at that time.

There is an airport on the edge of my constituency and an approach flightpath over residential areas and a school in my constituency, so this Bill is particularly relevant and important to my constituents. Aviation accidents are extremely rare and, as I have said, a person would have to fly every day for 15,000 years to guarantee themselves a crash, and we need to make sure we keep it that way. A recent report published by Boeing revealed that 48% of incidents that resulted in a fatality happened during take-off or landing. It is therefore imperative that pilots are not subjected to any unnecessary distractions while trying to land an aircraft.

If someone is foolish enough to shine a laser at an aircraft, it will have the most impact when the aircraft is coming into land, which is the worst possible time for a pilot. I am reasonably sure that most people do not give that a second thought—why would they? Most people are not stupid enough to think it is clever to shine a light at a pilot as they come in to land. But not everyone is sensible, which is why we have to legislate. I know this has been referred to two or three times, but according to the British Airline Pilots Association there are an average of three to four reported laser attacks on aircraft daily. That simply cannot be allowed to continue.

We are talking about someone shining a laser pen at an aircraft, perhaps an Airbus A380, which could carry more than 500 passengers. Let us imagine someone shining a laser pen towards the flight deck just as the aircraft is on its final approach—the results could be catastrophic. Laser illuminations can startle and distract, and in some circumstances may result in temporary vision interference, including flash blindness, after-image exposure and glare. I do not want to labour these points, as they have already been made, but according to the Civil Aviation Authority there has been a 70% increase in laser incidents since 2009. BAPLA surveyed its members in September 2017 and reported that 50% of pilots had experienced a laser attack in the previous 12 months, with 15% having experienced three or more.

Public Health England recommends that unqualified and untrained members of the public should not have access to lasers in excess of 1 milliwatt. However, it is easy to purchase lasers far in excess of that; a basic internet search showed that I could purchase a 200 milliwatt laser for as little as £50. The existing regulation, under the Air Navigation Order, states that a person must not “recklessly or negligently” endanger an aircraft. Evidencing and proving the endangerment of an aircraft is a difficult
task for police officers, so the Bill is to be welcomed, because it will now make it an offence to “direct or shine” a laser beam that dazzles or distracts a driver, pilot or otherwise when a vehicle is “moving” or “ready to move”.

My only criticism is that this does not go far enough. Someone cannot endanger hundreds of lives on an aircraft, and potentially hundreds more on the ground, by accident. There are no mitigating circumstances. It is not a misunderstanding; this crime is premeditated, and perpetrators should be treated like the criminals they are. We know it will be difficult to catch someone in the act of endangering a vehicle, but in the event that we do and they are found guilty they will now face a maximum jail sentence of five years, an unlimited fine or both. That is to be welcomed. It is a step in the right direction. I do not think it goes far enough, but I am otherwise content with this Bill.

3.22 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith). I can offer him the name of an extremely competent hypnotherapist who will help him through his flight problems, if he would like. With a special word, she will keep her fee to about half the normal one.

I support the Bill for all the positive reasons that everyone has given, but I have an additional personal reason for doing so. About two summers back, I was undertaking a parliamentary police course with the Met police. Late on one pleasant summer evening, I was a passenger in a Met police helicopter flying over Kingston, close to the Heathrow flight path. All of a sudden, the pilot shouted, “Duck, laser beam!” He swung the helicopter round through 90° so that the light could not come into the cabin, but before that had happened, unfortunately, the light had hit my left eye. The point has been made that this dazzles, but it does more than that—it damaged my eye.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) pointed out, these police helicopters have fantastic cameras. The film is put up on to a screen which, in effect, has the “A-Z” on it. We hovered around and guided two police cars, which were carrying four police officers. Two of them went in the front door of this individual’s property and two went over the fence at the back. They collected the gentleman with his laser beam—I am exaggerating when I call him a “gentleman”. It was just like the movies.

As this individual was collected by the police, another voice broke in over the air traffic radio. It was the voice of a pilot on an incoming Virgin jumbo jet, which presumably had hundreds of passengers on board. He said, “I have broken in to say thank you. It happens to us as we come into Heathrow time after time after time, and they don’t get caught.”

The following day, I attended a clinic at the Moorfields Eye Hospital, where I was informed that my eye had been damaged, but that it would heal. As I have said, these lasers do not just dazzle; they do damage to the eyes. Wherever someone is, if they are hit by one of these lights, they get their eye damaged.

I found it astonishing that anyone would be stupid enough to deliberately risk damaging another person’s eye, let alone that of a pilot in a plane or helicopter flying over a tightly built-up area such as Kingston. Additionally, I am amazed to find that police helicopters are targeted. I would have thought that people would have to be remarkably stupid to do that, particularly knowing that these cameras are there; the word “Police” is written right along the helicopter and this person must have seen it. So stupidity reigned, and that resulted in this person being collected.

Beyond that is a point that has been made several times: I am staggered that anybody would want to damage the eyesight of a pilot of a passenger plane running into Heathrow, as this Virgin plane was. As I said, there will have been hundreds of people on that plane, and if that idiot had targeted the pilots, he could have damaged the landing of that aircraft, with the potential loss of hundreds of lives.

I was not told the name of the individual, because I would have liked to have paid him a visit. On seeing the film—my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned this—he pleaded guilty, but the fine was not effective enough. The Bill will help to address that, so I have my own special reason for supporting it. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Will there be more speeches with such impact as the one we have just heard?

3.26 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I join colleagues in congratulating hon. Members from both sides of the House who have made knowledgeable contributions in this interesting debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for his deeply personal, moving and thoughtful contribution.

As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State alluded to earlier, Labour supports this uncontroversial Bill. We agree that the growing misuse of lasers is a problem that needs to be dealt with swiftly. Owing to the sheer number of laser attacks on aircraft and other vehicles in recent years, along with the growing power of laser pointers, we support legislative steps to make it a strict liability offence to shine a laser into the eyes of pilots and drivers when in control of vehicles. It is important to place on record the fact that although attacks on aircraft are by far the most common form of laser attack, incidents on railways and on shipping vessels have been reported.

I would also reaffirm our thanks to Labour colleagues in the other place who worked hard on this Bill by tightening up its language and definitions, as well as by gaining clarifications and important concessions from Ministers. There was a heated debate among Members of the other place about whether horse-drawn carriages and submarines should have been covered by the Bill—we thank them for that. Some of our learned Labour colleagues in the other place were more than qualified to speak about this topic, as one is a former airline pilot and another the president of the British Airline Pilots Association. I pay particular tribute to them for their work on this issue, and we thank the Government for the technical amendments that they tabled in response to the concessions that we won.

I reiterate the point that our colleagues in the other place made about enforcement. We have over 21,000 fewer police officers compared with in 2010. We will
raise further questions in Committee about whether the law will be enforced effectively by what I must say are already stretched police forces.

We support the Bill because of the concessions won by Labour peers in the House of Lords. We welcome steps to combat the growing problem of laser misuse and to protect the safety of pilots, drivers and passengers. We look forward to our deliberations in Committee.

3.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate. As my right hon. Friend and mentor the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) when he was a Minister in the Department. He made a valid point about police stop-and-search powers. It is worth noting that the police already have the power to stop and search for laser pointers if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that the pointer is intended to be used to cause injury, because the pointer will meet the definition of an offensive weapon in such circumstances. That covers the more serious instances of laser pointer misuse.

The Government are clear that, when used correctly, the power of stop-and-search is vital in the fight against crime. However, when it is misused, stop-and-search can be counterproductive. The Home Office is conducting a review on achieving greater transparency, community involvement and police accountability in the use of stop-and-search. While that work takes place, it would not be appropriate to consult on extending the power of stop-and-search. While that work takes place, it would not be appropriate to consult on extending the power of stop-and-search to cover lasers.

Mr John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her generous remarks. I take her point, and I of course understand why she made it, but perhaps she might make gentle overtures to the Home Office such that it might take this matter into account as part of that wider consideration of stop-and-search. It would be right to do that, given the broad agreement among those in the Chamber during this short debate.

Ms Ghani: There is no way that I could stand at the Dispatch Box and contradict my right hon. Friend, given that he spent many months preparing the Bill. No doubt his representations will be noted by the Home Office, and I will raise them with colleagues there personally.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) for his contribution. I was a little nervous when I heard about his piloting skills; I am glad to see him safe and sound in the Chamber. He also recognised the work done by the CAA, which provides extra support and guidance for pilots in respect of eye health when they are subject to such attacks.

On the points made by the hon. Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has responded following its call for evidence on the market for laser pointers. The Government have committed to take action to improve the frequency and resourcing of enforcement activities at ports and borders, with the aim of improving the safety of the market for laser pointers and increasing enforcement activities against the import of dangerous high-powered laser pointers. We have also committed to provide additional support for enforcement activities around the import of high-powered laser pointers. A grant of around £100,000 is available to local authorities so that they can increase checks and tests.

Alan Brown: I appreciate that the Minister has tried to give us a bit more clarity, but the key questions are about the timescales for the provision of additional resources, and about what additional resources will be provided at which ports throughout the United Kingdom.

Ms Ghani: The additional resources will be provided not only by my Department, in the form of the £100,000 for local authorities, but by BEIS and border control agencies. Getting the Bill through Parliament is one step towards implementing the restrictions and deterring people from the dangerous use of laser pens. That in itself will raise awareness of the crime and how dangerous it is to point laser pens at different types of transport.

I now move on to the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham, who has spent many years raising this issue, including through a private Member’s Bill. He has met many Ministers across many Departments and is a true champion of his constituency. He raised the valid point of how we collect accurate data about the number of offences that are committed across the many modes of transport. He is right to note that the Crown Prosecution Service does not keep full records of laser-related offences, and I will take that point up with my colleagues at the Ministry of Justice. I hope that he will be patient while yet another Minister tries to address one of his passionate interests by getting a Bill through Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) has huge experience of this matter, which he was able to convey to Members today. He is a strong champion not only for his constituency, but for pilots across this country. He raised valid points about the safety of pilots and on the maximum sentence of five years. Five years represents the maximum prison term and that would be imposed only in the most serious cases. With such offences, it is important that we have an effective deterrent, and the penalty is in line with those for similar existing offences, such as endangering an aircraft, which also carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison under the Air Navigation Order 2016.

The safety and security of the travelling public will always be a priority for the Government. Given that more than 1,000 attacks on aircraft occurred each year, in addition to those on other modes of transport, we have a duty to act. The new offences will act as a deterrent to prevent these dangerous incidents from
happening in the first place, but if they do occur, our proposals will help the police to bring offenders to justice.

We have had a good debate, and I am pleased that there is cross-party support for the Bill. Again, I acknowledge the work undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings. Of course, I also recognise the work of my noble Friend Baroness Sugg in successfully steering the Bill through the other place and of the UK laser working group. I am grateful to everybody who has been involved in the debate, and I hope that I have dealt with the points that have been raised. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to discussing it further at its later stages.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

LASER MISUSE (VEHICLES) BILL [Lords]
(PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)),
That the following provisions shall apply to the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

2. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

3. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Programming committee

4. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

5. Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Paul Maynard.)
Question agreed to.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The individual referred to as Albert Thompson at today’s Prime Minister’s questions is my constituent. I should say that that is not his actual name, because he does not want his real name to be used publicly. In the earlier exchanges, the Prime Minister said that Mr Thompson will be receiving the NHS treatment he needs. That is incorrect. He needs radiotherapy treatment, but he has not received his treatment. If any plans have been made for him to get this treatment, he certainly has not been informed of them. That is a fact and to say otherwise is wrong. He is making a fresh application for indefinite leave to remain. The Prime Minister needs to commit to that application being processed immediately and, at the very least, to him getting indefinite leave to remain so that he can get this treatment, which the Royal Marsden Hospital is not prepared to give him unless he can pay up front or prove his right to residency.

I am sure that the Prime Minister will not want to have misled the House and will want to come here to correct the record. There have also been attempts to lay part of the blame for this particular situation at the door of previous Home Secretaries and the current Home Secretary, but much of this flows from the decisions made by the Prime Minister during her time as Home Secretary. I will be grateful if you, Madam Deputy Speaker, can advise on how I can pursue this with the Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, while I understand that he wishes to put these facts on the record and that, if the record requires to be corrected, he wishes to draw that fact to the attention of the Treasury Bench, this is not a point of order for me. What Ministers, or indeed any other Member of this House, say in the Chamber is a matter for the Minister or the Member. Having said that, if the facts to which the Prime Minister alluded today turn out not to be correct, I am quite sure that steps will be taken to correct them. The hon. Gentleman asks for my advice about how he might draw this matter to the attention of the appropriate Ministers; he has done so. Although I can do nothing about it, he has achieved his aim.
Industrial Strategy

3.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Industrial Strategy.

It is a great pleasure to open this debate. We are at one of the most important, exciting and challenging times in the history of global enterprise. All around the world, new technologies are transforming the way in which we live our lives as citizens, how we work and the products and services that we consume and supply. Whether it is in artificial intelligence, the digitisation of manufacturing, the clean energy revolution or breakthroughs in medicine, such is the scale of change that it has been described as the fourth industrial revolution. Britain is extraordinarily well placed to lead and benefit from this industrial revolution, just as we did in the first industrial revolution.

We are an open and enterprising economy, built on invention, innovation and competition. We are one of the world’s scientific powerhouses, producing more Nobel prize winners each year than any other country apart from America. We are synonymous with creativity, from literature to video games. People know that the UK is a hotbed of new ideas. In an uncertain world, we have a deserved reputation for being a dependable and confident place in which to do business, with high standards, respected institutions and the reliable rule of law. As this week’s Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting shows, we are—and always will be—proudly international. We are a crossing point for the world because of our geographic position, the importance of the English language, our global friendships and our vibrant culture.

Ten years on from the financial crisis, we have built a stronger economy than many people thought possible at the time. Unemployment is at its lowest rate for 43 years and there are more people in work than ever before. Our public finances have been transformed by rigorously reducing the yawning deficit that was inherited.

We have world-beating industries—from financial services to the life sciences, and from the creative industries to advanced manufacturing.

As we look to the future, it is one in which Britain’s strengths are in increasing demand all around the world. The world is avid for our products, services, skills and know-how. To benefit from the opportunities before us, we need to prepare to seize them. We need to ensure that we join all the forces of our people and our economy to reinforce them and extend our strengths into the future, as well as capitalising on the new opportunities that have presented themselves. That is why I stood before this House at the end of November to launch our industrial strategy White Paper.

Deliberately, the exercise of producing the White Paper was a collaborative one. It was the biggest such consultation ever undertaken by my Department and its predecessors, drawing input from more than 2,000 organisations the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. I was particularly pleased that all the devolved Administrations contributed enthusiastically to the consultation. Employers, universities, research institutions, local government leaders and trade unions all contributed to the consultation that resulted in the White Paper, and there was a deliberate reason for this. It seems to me that if the nation is to have an industrial strategy, it has to be for the long term; we must orient our economy and society to the long term. The best way to ensure that policies and institutions endure is to take people with us, and to ensure that the advice and wisdom of all parts of the United Kingdom and all parts of the economy are taken and distilled into something of which all can feel a part.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, Teesside is a powerhouse for industry, but in my constituency unemployment is still double the national average, and across the north-east of England it is considerably higher than the national average. Does he not agree that still more needs to be done to ensure that we balance industrial strategy in favour of those areas where there is high unemployment, and a lack of skills as well?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman knows Teesside very well. One of the things he would welcome is that in recent years the long-standing disparity, going back decades, between constituencies like his and others in the country has narrowed. There is a real sense of progress and achievement on Teesside that I experience every time I go up there; I was up there a couple of weeks ago. However, he is absolutely right that we need to continue that progress. We need to reflect on the fact that, as I said, many of the industries, skills and attributes that are in demand across the world now—marine engineering, for example—are abundant in areas like Teesside. We must capitalise on that, and we have a massive opportunity to do so. The industrial strategy, as he knows—our friends and colleagues on Teesside contributed very fully to it—has, for the first time in an industrial strategy, a real, very clear attachment to the importance of recognising the contributions of different places. This came out very strongly through the consultation, so he is absolutely right.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): We have just seen a hostile takeover of GKN. Some of my constituents work at a GKN plant in Luton. Does this not look like a return to the kind of cowboy capitalism we have seen in the past, where hostile takeovers lead to asset-stripping that will make short-term profit, rather than being about the long-term interests of the economy and our manufacturing sector?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a quasi-judicial role to exercise in response to certain takeovers, so I cannot comment on that particular case. I would say, however, that in technologies such as automotive and aerospace, there is a high degree of interest and, indeed, optimism about the future capabilities of companies right across those sectors and their supply chains. I mentioned marine engineering; aerospace and automotive are also examples of areas of British strength. The industrial strategy commits to build on that. My intention in implementing the industrial strategy is that our current strengths will be extended.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Earlier, the Secretary of State used the term, “this nation”. Does he accept that he has responsibility for growth in the economies of all the nations of the UK?
**Greg Clark:** I do indeed. In using that expression, as I think was evident from the context, I was praising the contribution that has been made from all parts of the United Kingdom. I am looking forward to being in Edinburgh tomorrow to give evidence on the industrial strategy to the Scottish Parliament. The work that we have done with the Government in Scotland has been very important. We had a very effective consultation session in Edinburgh. Many colleagues in Scotland contributed to it, and they see the results of it there.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about an industrial strategy, which, in general terms, we welcome, but running alongside that we need to have an investment strategy, particularly in new technological developments and in energy areas such as electric cars. Will he say something about an investment strategy as well, because the regulator plays a big part in this?

**Greg Clark:** I am coming on to talk about that, but I will say now that one of the major breakthroughs in the industrial strategy is to recognise the utmost importance of investment in research and development, not only on the part of the private sector but on the public sector side as well. All around the world, advanced nations are investing in the future through R&D, and we have in the industrial strategy the biggest increase in research and development that we have ever seen in this country. It is a matter of pride that we were able to achieve that.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the fact that the Government are committed to the industrial strategy. When I was a Minister in the Secretary of State’s Department some years ago, we rebooted and renewed the belief in an industrial strategy in the wake of the financial crisis. I am glad that it has survived and that there has been a lot of continuity through the years of the coalition Government to his tenure. This is a welcome move away from the laissez-faire approach that we had in the 1980s, but it will only work if it is bought into by others beyond his Department. Given that many other countries are trying to do similar things, is he confident that he has the commitment right across the Government and the scale of resources and buy-in necessary from the Treasury and others to make this a success?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. First, in terms of what was achieved before, he is right to recognise that we are building on what have been successes. Successful arrangements that have been put in place in the process industries, for example, are recognised and built on in the strategy. It is very important that we have a long-term approach. He is absolutely right; this is not my Department’s industrial strategy, my industrial strategy or even the Government’s industrial strategy. The ambition for this strategy is to unite all the nations of the United Kingdom and the UK Government certainly, but also the leaders of our cities, towns, counties and universities. The approach we have taken in developing the strategy is precisely for that purpose.

I have a set of responsibilities which the right hon. Gentleman will know, from his tenure in my Department, are limited to those allocated to the Business Department. However, when it comes to skills or investment in transport infrastructure, for example, it is vital that all join together. One of the strategy’s purposes is that we can clearly brigade in a way that reinforces the different contributions.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Greg Clark:** I will, then I will make progress.

**Wayne David:** On that point, one crucial aspect of our industrial base is the defence sector, yet one of the surprising things about the Government’s industrial strategy is that the defence sector is hardly mentioned, if at all.

**Greg Clark:** I would not read too much into that. The defence industrial strategy is a very important part of our overall strategy. There are many references to industries—I mentioned aerospace—in which the innovation that comes from defence work can have important spillovers for the wider economy. We recognise that across the world that tends to be the case. The defence sector is very important to the strategy, and when some of the sector deals that I will come on to discuss are agreed, the hon. Gentleman will see that in abundance.

Drawing on input across the United Kingdom, we have an approach that is the distilled wisdom of many different contributors. It is a vision to help businesses raise their productivity performance, which is essential if we are to increase the country’s earning power. If we want to pay ourselves better as a nation and a society, we need to earn the way to do that by creating better-paid jobs and putting our country at the forefront of the industries of the future.

Let me introduce the four grand challenges that we have set out. I mentioned that we are uniquely well placed in this country, having leadership in some of the areas of the future, but we should not take that leadership for granted. We should have a deliberate plan and programme to reinforce that success. The four areas we have set out in the strategy, on advice, are artificial intelligence and the data-driven economy; clean growth; the future of mobility; and meeting the needs of an ageing society. Those challenges have been identified on the advice of our leading scientists and technologists, and they will be supported by investment from the new industrial strategy challenge fund and matched by commercial investment.

Let us take each of those briefly. We know that, whether in the Alan Turing Institute or in our companies throughout the UK, we have some of the most innovative thinkers and practitioners in AI and the use of data. We already have that reputation, but we need to keep at the forefront of those developments. A big part of the strategy is to recognise that, historically, as all Members know, we have been better at the “R” of R&D than the “D”. We have had brilliant ideas, but sometimes we have let them slip through our fingers and seen them implemented in industrial processes and investments in manufacturing in other countries. A big part of the challenge is therefore not just discovery but applying those discoveries in UK industry.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): When travelling overseas on parliamentary business and visiting universities, I have noticed, particularly in America, that people are
much more entrepreneurial in their research projects and mapping out a route to a market. What might the Department do to encourage that sort of entrepreneurial spirit in our universities?

Greg Clark: We are getting better at it. Most colleagues will have experience of their local universities and others, and most research universities have active programmes to spin out discoveries and reap the benefits. Again, through the industrial strategy challenge fund, funding is available on a match basis to universities to pursue that implementation of good ideas. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Let us take the future of mobility. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and I have had many conversations about this country’s reputation not only for the efficient manufacture of vehicles—that is a proud record—but for innovation, whether in the west midlands or the world-beating cluster of Formula 1 businesses around Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire. The world comes to the UK for the next generation of technologies. Forty-year veterans of the automotive industry say that this is the most exciting time in their career, when not only the powertrain but the way in which vehicles navigate is undergoing a revolution. Around the world, there is increasing demand for that set of technologies and we have a strong capability in them. Again, setting a grand challenge is crucial.

We have set the Faraday challenge to be a world leader in the development and application of new battery technology. It is already attracting great interest around the world, and the hon. Member for Coventry South will know that the national battery manufacturing development facility will be located in Warwickshire at the heart of our cluster there.

On the ageing society, whether in Glasgow and Edinburgh or Cambridge, we have some of the best researchers in the world looking at medical breakthroughs that will be in increasing demand around the world. I make it clear that now and long into the future, we will invest in the facilities and the people to make us the place to come to research new innovations. As Members from Scotland will know, the Glasgow city deal had a big medical component to build on our success there.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Clearly, medical innovation and continued investment are welcome, but when dealing with an ageing population and workforce, we need not just innovation but immigration. We need immigration in the healthcare sector to support an ageing population. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government should review their immigration policy, especially tier 2 visas, which are putting a block on experienced healthcare workers coming to the UK?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman knows—the industrial strategy is clear about it—we benefit from the contribution of workers, scientists and engineers from all over the world. There is no successful future for an economy that does not engage with the world. That means that we should be open to talent from around the world. We need to make sure, as every responsible nation does, that we have an orderly system for managing immigration from around the world. That is what we are achieving and what we will continue to achieve. It is very clear, on every page of the strategy, that this is a vision for an international Britain, rather than one that is moving towards a kind of national self-sufficiency.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for the commitment he is making to ensuring that world-class talent from across the world can continue to come to support science in Britain. When the president of the Royal Society came to speak to the Science and Technology Committee, he pointed out that world-class scientists need to be mobile, anthropologists need to work abroad and those working for the British Antarctic Survey need to go to Antarctica. Will he make sure that the visa system is able to provide that mobility?

Greg Clark: That is very important. One of the commitments in the industrial strategy is to increase the number of visas and studentships for international researchers coming to work in the UK. Nobel prizes were mentioned earlier. I had the privilege, when I was Science Minister, to go to the Nobel prize ceremony. What is notable is not just that a lot of Brits receive these awards, but that most Nobel prizes in the sciences are given to teams of researchers and that those teams are usually international. That embodies the fact that the best ideas come from the connections that are made between researchers from different cultures and different countries.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State mentions the critical need to attract high-quality education graduates from across the world to British universities. Does he also recognise that that is a critical part of growing our population? In Scotland, we had a declining population. The Labour Administration under Jack McConnell introduced a post-study work visa scheme, which reversed Scotland’s historic population decline. That is why today we have a great legacy of an expanding population in Scotland that is adding value to our economy.

Greg Clark: The overall population of the UK is growing, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It is important that our immigration system is set in a sensible way that recognises the needs of the economy and the needs of our society, and that is the approach being taken. I talked about grand challenges. Let me turn to another important aspect of the industrial strategy, which is, candidly, to address areas of historic relative weakness in the UK economy. I talked about our strengths, but it is well known to every Member of this House that for many years now our productivity performance has not been as good as that of some of our competitors, and since the financial crisis it has been slower to recover. In recent quarters we have seen an acceleration of productivity growth, but I think everyone would recognise that it is the responsibility of this House and those of us in government to act on the foundations of productivity, so that we can maximise the productive capacity of the economy. A big part of the consultation was to consider what we can do to drive up our productivity performance.

There are five areas in which clear commitments and progress are required across the whole economy—indeed, across society, to go back to the comments made by the
right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). This is not simply, if at all, in the gift of the Business Department. It requires a whole-country commitment to investing in the foundations of productivity. We have set out our plans and ideas on research and development, as I mentioned earlier. As new technologies are developed, the skills required by the workforce to make use of them clearly need to change as well. It is no good doing one if we do not do the other, so the skills element of the strategy is very important. It is important to recognise the different needs of different places, as I mentioned in response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

We want to make sure that our business environment is not only competitive and open, but recognises the need to ensure that when companies start up—we have a great record of start-ups—they can attract the funding they need to ensure that when companies start up—we have the full benefit of the opportunities set out in the industrial strategy, which highlights and commits us to a long-term programme of upgrading not just investment—although that is important—but the prestige attached to technical qualifications in this country, and to emphasising the importance of that. There is, for example, nearly half a billion pounds of investment in teaching maths, digital and technical education.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State has not mentioned the principal foundation of productivity: the workers of Great Britain. Obviously, investment in those workers is absolutely key to making sure that they see that their own investment in their work and productivity will lead to substantive benefits for them and their families. The response to the joint inquiry by the Work and Pensions and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committees into the Taylor review on modern employment practices kicks a lot of the action into the long grass and into consultation. Will the Minister please admit today that workers are the foundation of productivity and that they need the Government to commit to solid action?

Greg Clark: It is not a question of admitting to it—I want to boast of it. When I talk about our strengths and talents, those are the strengths of the people of the United Kingdom as workers, researchers and leaders of local economies. The prosperity of our economy is founded on our workforce. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to emphasise the importance of investment in people. I have mentioned investment in research and development, but it is important for her to reflect that much of that is about investment in people, making sure that we have research funding and opportunities for researchers so that we have brilliant individuals as well as physical infrastructure.

When it comes to investment in skills and the workforce generally, the hon. Lady is absolutely right. I have mentioned the importance of skills training. One thing that we and Members from across the UK know is that there are shortages in many parts of the country, particularly in engineering and technology skills. That is before we have the full benefit of the opportunities set out in the industrial strategy, which highlights and commits us to a long-term programme of upgrading not just investment—although that is important—but the prestige attached to technical qualifications in this country, and to emphasising the importance of that. There is, for example, nearly half a billion pounds of investment in teaching maths, digital and technical education.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady mentioned the Matthew Taylor review, because it is exactly the right kind of strategic approach that we should take. We know that new technology is changing the world of work and that it poses challenges to established ways of working. Rather than simply ignoring that and not addressing those changes, in commissioning Matthew Taylor to review the emerging economy we equipped ourselves with some very important reforms that Taylor himself advised we should consult carefully on. That consultation came from a review commissioned by the Government, who absolutely have the intention to deliver on its recommendations. The consultation is the way to proceed with legislation and regulation.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State refers to the prestige of an industrial qualification as a device to attract the most capable people into industry and manufacturing. Does he agree that it is also important for manufacturing to show in a more open way exactly what the manufacturing environment is like now? Far too many people see manufacturing in the style of dirty old factories such as those that existed a generation ago. The manufacturing landscape has changed, but I do not think that we have managed to get that message across to our young people to encourage the brightest and the best to make it a career destination.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is sometimes not known and cannot be seen what modern manufacturing is about. I had the great privilege and pleasure of visiting the Big Bang Fair at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham a few weeks ago, which does precisely what he advises. The excitement among the young people there, seeing the possibilities available, was palpable. It does a great job.

I know that you are rightly interested in other Members being able to contribute, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will make some progress and give colleagues the chance to speak. Along with the measures in the Taylor review, it is very important, when new technologies require different skills from the existing workforce, that we back industry in providing the training that is needed. In that regard, the national retraining scheme being developed in conjunction with employers and trade unions, focusing initially on construction and digital skills, is a very important commitment. It is also vital that we upgrade our infrastructure, whether physical infrastructure or the broadband and mobile connections on which many new businesses depend, and again important commitments have been made in that regard.

When it comes to places, the leadership being given to many of our great cities by elected Mayors, not least those elected last year, must be combined with the ability, powers and resources necessary for them to make a difference to their areas. One of our commitments was a fund to enable local leaders better to connect not just city centres but the networks and clusters of smaller towns around our cities. An early example was the decision by Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, to use the investment available through the industrial strategy to fund a metro extension to Brierley Hill and Wednesbury, which connects two important parts of the west midlands to Birmingham and the wider area.

On the business environment, we know that there is a problem of composition. We have some highly productive, highly performing businesses as well as what the Bank
of England has identified as a long tail of less productive businesses, and transmitting the lessons from the best to the others is an important part of the work that we need to do.

I will conclude by saying a word about the importance of particular sectors. We have talked about the north-east and Teesside, the west midlands and other parts of the country. We know that the clusters of excellence in those areas can be very important not only in driving productivity but in attracting new investment and becoming the location of new businesses.

Alex Cunningham: One of those clusters is, of course, the chemical industry. People in that industry are extremely anxious about the possibility that the EU regulation concerning the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals might go when we leave the EU. Will the Secretary of State update the House on where we are with negotiations on those regulations to ensure a common working platform for chemicals after we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: I would incur your displeasure, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I went into the European negotiations. Suffice it to say that if the hon. Gentleman reads the Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech, he will see a reference to chemicals. We take the advice of the Chemical Industries Association, which I meet regularly, into those negotiations so that we can continue to trade successfully in that very important sector.

I want to say a word about sector deals. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East mentioned, we know of the success of long-standing arrangements whereby major manufacturers, supply chains and the Government can work together—for example, in the automotive sector and the aerospace sector. These important institutions have taken a lead and boosted jobs and prosperity. In the industrial strategy consultation, therefore, we asked whether we should offer and engage in more sector deals with sectors that have not benefited from those arrangements. We asked business whether that proposal had merit, and the answer was an emphatic yes. These deals are about the Government working with sectors, but also about the sectors working with each other, in exactly the way that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

We have made significant progress. In December, I launched the life sciences sector deal with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. This deal for the long term is already attracting immediate investment, including from MSD, which is supporting nearly 1,000 jobs in the UK.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The Secretary of State is talking about the long term, which is very important. For a company such as Airbus, the relationship with its suppliers, which is not a short-term relationship but a long-term one, is also very important. It is because such a relationship is so important that there are fears about how long Melrose will actually invest in GKN and keep hold of that company.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of long-term relationships. I have said that I cannot make an appraisal of that particular bid, since I have a decision to make, but it is on the record that I have requested and obtained commitments from the bidder to investment in research and development, and indeed to the continued ownership of that aerospace business. I hope he will therefore recognise that I regard commitments to the long term as important.

I have mentioned the life sciences sector deal. We launched the automotive sector deal in January, and I launched the creative industries sector deal with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport just last month. We have in the pipeline a number of other sectors where great progress has been made, and we expect to make more announcements soon.

I hope it is evident that in the industrial strategy—whether looking to the future, harnessing our resources to make sure that we capitalise on our existing strengths, or looking objectively and candidly at areas in which we need to do better and in which we need to invest for the foundations of future productivity—the approach we have taken is to set out a strategy for the long term to which all parts of the United Kingdom can contribute.

We are not the only country in the world to recognise that a technological revolution is taking place. Wherever I travel I find similar concerns, and similar appraisals of the future are being undertaken by other countries. Our industrial strategy has already, in the few months since it was published, attracted widespread attention and respect around the world. We have already translated it into several languages because of demand, so any colleagues travelling around the world who want copies of it can approach my office for a translation in most languages, and we will have other translations made according to demand.

Our industrial strategy is a calling card for the future of the United Kingdom economy, and I hope Members on both sides of the House realise that in pulling together our strengths and opportunities through it, we have a chance to tell the world, as well as our fellow countrymen and women, that this country has a great future ahead of it, just as we have had a very successful past. I commend the motion to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Opposition, let me say that it will be obvious that a great many Members—I have indications from more than 20 people—wish to speak this afternoon, and there is limited time. I therefore give a warning now, so that colleagues who wish to speak can tailor their notes accordingly, that there will be a time limit of six minutes to start with, but that is likely to be reduced later. That provides plenty of warning, but the time limit does not of course apply to Rebecca Long Bailey.

4.19 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): According to the Government’s own declaration, the industrial strategy sets out their plan to create an economy that will boost productivity and earning power throughout the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State has just presented a very rosy picture of his Department’s industrial strategy, but I am afraid those spectacles he is wearing may be a little bit rose-tinted.
The key questions that must be asked today are whether the strategy is working and whether it addresses the huge problems that our economy is facing. The first of those problems is productivity. I agree with the Secretary of State’s comments about investing in the foundations of productivity, but we have just seen the productivity figures for 2017, and they are not good. Two negative quarters were followed by two positive quarters of growth. The two quarters of growth were caused by GDP growth slowing, but hours worked slowing even further. In other words, productivity has increased through the worst possible means. Even incorporating the 2017 figures, the productivity growth that has taken place over the 10 years since the crash has been the worst since 1820, just after the Napoleonic wars.

The second problem is GDP stagnation. For the 60 years preceding the financial crash, rising GDP meant broadly rising living standards. When GDP rose, unemployment came down and wages went up. However, over the course of 2017, UK GDP growth was weaker than GDP growth in any other G7 nation, standing at 1.4% compared to a G7 average of 2.4%. The figures were 2.9% in Germany and 2.5% in France. The situation is not forecast to improve: yesterday the International Monetary Fund forecast that we would be the slowest in the G7 bar Italy over the next two years, and the OECD predicts that we will grow more slowly than France, Germany and the United States in both 2018 and 2019. Worse still, among major advanced economies since the crash, Britain is the only one to have grown slightly while real wages have fallen.

The third problem is wage stagnation. In real terms, average weekly earnings are lower now than they were in 2007. 10 years ago. Working people, particularly those on low to middle incomes, have suffered the worst decade for a generation in terms of living standards. That is unprecedented since at least the end of the second world war. The quality of work is also an issue, as we have heard from some of my hon. Friends. The Secretary of State lauded employment figures in his opening remarks, but he must acknowledge that insecure employment is rife. According to the TUC, there are 3.2 million people in insecure work—about one in 10—and the number has risen sharply over the last half-decade, by 27%.

The Government tried to paper over those bleak realities with rhetoric in their recent response to the Taylor review, but I am not as optimistic or as excited as my hon. Friends. The opening remarks, but he must acknowledge that insecure employment is rife. According to the TUC, there are 3.2 million people in insecure work—about one in 10—and the number has risen sharply over the last half-decade, by 27%.

The fourth problem is uncertainty. Britain is facing an uncertain future—we are about to leave the European Union, and businesses are craving a deal that will put the economy and jobs first, with as much access to Europe as possible—but Europe aside, parts of our economic framework do not encourage certainty. Our takeover regime leaves many companies deeply uncertain about their future and prey to predatory and hostile takeovers. We have already heard about GKN today. Under our takeover laws, that fantastic manufacturing company was bought up by Melrose. It was clear that our takeover regime needed more teeth and more clarity, but I must add that even in that case the Government had grounds to intervene on matters of defence and still failed to act. As the Financial Times suggested recently, the failure to equip our takeover regime adequately may be partly why a great company such as Unilever decided to make its legal home the Netherlands. How many other companies will follow?

The fifth and final problem is inequality. Sadly, the UK is one of the most unequal countries in Europe in terms of household income. As the Resolution Foundation recently revealed, inequality is projected to increase after 2016-17. On some measures, it is projected to rise to record highs by 2023. Furthermore, there are clear inequalities between our regions and nations. The Institute for Public Policy Research Commission on Economic Justice has found that Britain is the most regionally imbalanced country in Europe.

All these problems are not just abstract, general issues; they have recently manifested themselves in concrete examples—a barometer of the health and efficacy of the Government’s industrial strategy going forward. We started this year with the insolvenly of Carillion, but that is not an isolated example. Our retail sector shows signs of strain: Toys R Us has collapsed; Maplin has gone into administration; New Look is fighting to avoid it; and Carpetright is planning a company voluntary arrangement. Workers have also felt the pain of a stalling economy: in the last week alone, literally thousands of workers have been threatened with job losses at Jaguar Land Rover and Shop Direct, yet we have received no statement whatsoever from the Government on what they are doing to protect those jobs, so perhaps the Minister will outline in his summing-up speech the action he is taking.

Ruth George: I met many businesses in my constituency last week. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that several of them are already having to move trade to EU countries because they are worried about the cost of a visa system when they cannot guarantee that they will hang on to the staff they pay for, the ending of preferential tariffs at the EU rate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady is not making a speech; she is also taking away from the time for other Members.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend made some pertinent points and I will talk about skills shortly, and the extreme worry that many of our business leaders across the country have voiced about both Brexit and the quality and adequacy of the supply we have currently in the UK.

Returning to the problems that are a barometer of the issues in our economy, will the Minister update us in his summing up on the Government’s rabbit-in-the-headlights approach to the risks currently faced by our steel industry as a result of recent discussions and the global crisis of overcapacity and dumping? This Government have been in power for eight years—the best part of a decade—and they must own these problems if they are to make any progress; they must own the fact that they have not solved the five problems I outlined earlier, and that instead they have festered.

The Secretary of State and I are in clear agreement on the need for an effective industrial strategy. I applauded the Government for adopting to some extent Labour’s
mission-orientated policy approach and the Secretary of State outlined the challenges again today, but I am afraid that this is where the consensus ends. As I set out late last year, the detail and investment proposed in the industrial strategy White Paper simply did not match the surrounding rhetoric and fell far short of what was needed truly to boost our economy. Indeed, a Government source was recently quoted as saying:

“It’s all perfectly worthy, who could oppose any of it? But there is no money, and even if there was, no one has a decent idea of what to do with it.”

So for the benefit of the House let us look briefly at a few key snippets again.

The Secretary of State touched on innovation. Raising total R&D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027 is certainly better than where we were, but the UK has been below the OECD average of 2.4% of GDP for years, and we are way behind world leaders who spend over 3% such as Japan, South Korea, Finland and Sweden. Why are we simply aiming for average? It must also be noted that the R&D investment of many of our regions and nations is also well below average. Over half of all research funding goes to the south-east, for example.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I just cannot contain my anger: settle for average? We have some of the best universities on the planet in this country and investment by this Government in some of the most world-leading, cutting-edge technology. I visited Birmingham university and saw its work on quantum computing; it is absolutely world-leading. We are not average at all, and it is so dismissive of this country to say we would settle for average; we are excellent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not making a speech either, but I think the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) has got his point.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very passionately, but I do not think he has really listened to what I have been saying. We are certainly—[Interruption.] Please! If Government Members would listen rather than chunter, they might actually learn something.

We are far from average, as these comments from the Commission on Economic Justice illustrate quite articulately:

“We have vast ingenuity and creativity among our people, where enterprise and industry have deep roots going back to the Industrial Revolution. Many of the most important scientific discoveries in human history have taken place in Britain, advancing not only this country but also the entirety of humanity.”

We are far from average—I agree with the comments that the hon. Gentleman made in a, shall we say, quite haphazard and incoherent way—so why should we have to trail behind the world and settle for mediocrity from this Government in terms of investment in research and development?

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress, if I may, then the hon. Lady can make further interventions.

In relation to skills, we were promised about £500 million of investment. That is frankly pitiful and does not even begin to repair the damage done to the adult skills budget between 2010 and 2015, when over £1.15 billion was cut. With research by PwC finding that 77% of CEOs worry that skills shortages could impair their company’s growth, and with the CBI stating that 69% of businesses are not confident about filling their high-skilled jobs, the Government’s actions have done little to show that they are creating a workforce truly ready for our industrial renaissance.

On infrastructure investment, we were promised £31 billion of investment through the national productivity investment fund. Again, that is below the levels seen in other leading industrial nations. As TUC analysis shows, the sums promised will simply increase investment to just 2.9% of GDP, whereas the average spend on investment by the leading industrial nations in the OECD is 3.5%. It is also clear that the Government have made no attempt to halt the skewing of infrastructure spending towards London, which is due to get more transport spending over the next five years than the rest of England put together.

That brings me to local industrial policy. Labour has been clear on the need for a national industrial strategy, but we are also clear about the need to be regionally powerful and distinctive, with the resources to match, and to build on the already world-class universities and businesses in our regions and nations. Since last November, the Labour party has been convening roundtables in every region and nation of the UK to discuss what businesses in those regions need from an industrial strategy. Alarmingly, in one region I heard that the responsibility for formulating a local industrial strategy had simply landed on the desk of the local enterprise partnership’s chief executive, with no additional resources. Could the Minister confirm whether there is a team in his Department working on local industrial strategy or whether that is simply now the responsibility of LEPs? Last month, the Local Government Chronicle argued that the Government should put more resources into agreeing a local industrial strategy if they did not want to risk concentrating their efforts on improving the economy in just a handful of areas.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), I wonder whether the hon. Lady would like to visit the west midlands and meet the Conservative Mayor of that devolved authority, who has most certainly come together with a local industrial strategy. There are resources there, backed by this Government and their friends on these Benches, and that is making a real difference in our region. I would be happy to host the hon. Lady and enable her to speak to those successful businesses that are backing our Conservative Mayor.

Rebecca Long Bailey rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I just remind people that we have a lot of speakers in this debate. Short interventions, please.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, which are rather illuminating. I wonder whether she could share with the House how her
region managed to secure those additional resources, so that we could let our colleagues know about it. That simply does not seem to be the case right across Britain.

Now, there was also a clear failure in business support. The Government’s proposals recognised that we need both public and private investment. Similarly, the Labour party has pledged to mobilise £250 billion of lending through a national investment bank and a network of regional development banks. However, the Government’s proposals fall far short of that. I said in the House last year that sector deals, a £2.5 billion investment fund incubated in the British Business Bank and yet another review into encouraging SME growth were simply not good enough. There was a clear failure to recognise the impediments that many businesses face when attempting to access finance and, indeed, there was a failure to protect businesses more generally.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that we lost a lot of support after 2010 when Business Link was shut and the regional development agencies were closed down? Business support has gone backwards. We need to take it forwards, but we have lost eight years.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree. Unfortunately, what I see as I travel around Britain is a bit of a postcode lottery in business support, and the Government need to address that urgently.

As I said, the Government failed to recognise the impediments facing many businesses and to outline any more general protections. That could not have been displayed more clearly than in the Government’s handling of the Carillion scandal, where key requests by business organisations to mandate 30-day payment to suppliers and instigate the use of project bank accounts were effectively ignored. The Government simply looked on as Carillion and other big players like it abused the businesses that they contracted with and passed on financial liability and risk down the supply chain. Labour pledged to mandate 30-day prompt payment and the use of project bank accounts for all Government projects, and I will be grateful if the Minister will do the same today when summing up.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly points to the failures around the collapse of Carillion, which was a disaster for the many thousands of people who worked for it. The other organisations that failed were the regulators, so does she agree that we need a root-and-branch think about how we regulate the private sector, particularly when organisations are delivering public services at vast cost to the public purse?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree again.

Another issue that has been brought to my attention relates to sector deals. I understand that sectors are ready with proposals for such deals, but there is no clear structure or process in place for them to follow. For example, the rail industry has had a proposal for a sector deal ready since October, and the plan would deliver transformation across rail over the next 20 years, including new approaches that will cut the cost of digital signalling, addressing capacity issues and reliability. Perhaps the Minister will explain to the House what the delay is. How many proposals for sector deals has he received and how many have been agreed? Perhaps he will also commit to setting out in clear guidance, accessible to all businesses, how to go about pitching for a sector deal? Finally, will he update us on the implementation of the “Made Smarter” review? It was effectively ready to go, but I am sad to say that it received only a few cursory lines in the Government’s industrial strategy White Paper.

In short, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you have gleaned from my comments, the Government’s industrial strategy, as drafted, is inadequate. While they now recognise the importance of an industrial strategy—well done—they are not prepared to use the full policy levers at their disposal to achieve it.

James Heappey: Following the shadow Secretary of State’s consultations with businesses around the country, will she name just one that agrees with Labour’s plans for nationalisation?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I would not want to put on the record in public the names of any specific companies without their consent, but there has been resounding support for Labour’s approach to the industrial strategy, because we are prepared to invest in our country’s future and to provide the support that businesses deserve. I am afraid that I hear time and again from businesses that the Conservative party simply does not listen anymore.

Several hon. Members rose—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will make some progress as I am coming to the end of my comments.

One of the key responsibilities of any Government is to deliver the best quality of life to every single person in Britain, and this Government have failed to do that. Labour knows that key to that responsibility is the delivery of a truly prosperous, ambitious and locally focused industrial strategy. We see a fourth industrial revolution that, with bold and focused Government investment and support, presents an opportunity for Britain to harness the power of technological and scientific innovation to achieve higher productivity and high-paid, high-skilled jobs in an employment landscape that values and protects workers.

We also see the need for an economic model that deals with the big issues of our time and the need to build an economy around missions so that we not only lead the world economically in these areas but deliver real social and economic benefits to our people. We recognise that industrial strategy must be a true collaboration between business, the Government and society, not a wild west that picks winners and losers, that pits region against region and that leaves businesses and workers to fend for themselves in a dog-eat-dog economy in which only the largest and most powerful survive.

That is the economy that Labour Members are intent on building, but sadly, it is not the economy that the Government are building. Although I am fiercely adamant that industrial strategy should not be political, from what I have seen so far from this Government, until we get a Labour Government we will not see an industrial strategy.
4.40 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to be called in this important debate. I thought that I was coming here to speak about industrial strategy, but having listened to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I realise we are having just another general debate on the economy in which we hear the same old Labour rants, gloom-filled prophecies and denunciations of Government policy.

Industrial strategy is one of the most interesting areas of policy and government, so it is frankly disappointing to see the Labour party using it purely as a political football, with its spokesman giving a ranting speech that, in my many years in this House, I have heard far too often—it was very dispiriting. I am sorry to have to introduce my short speech in this way, but her speech was a real missed opportunity.

It is exciting that, for the first time in a long while, we actually have an industrial strategy. The House will remember that there was no such thing under the previous Labour Administration. There was no coherent, focused strategy between 1997 and 2010, and it was exciting when the Government made their announcement last year.

On the reach of the industrial strategy, it is right to start with research and development, which is central to our forward progress. It was remarkable that the Lady opposite did not once use the phrase “research and development”, as far as I remember, although I will check Hansard tomorrow. It is was surprising in such a debate that we did not hear anything about research and development from the Opposition.

Research and development is clearly a big part of the Government’s strategy, and there is a £4.7 billion fund for such investment. We are also trying to create a more favourable environment. From where I stand, corporation tax cuts, about which we have been very consistent over the past eight years, have been an important lever—the Lady opposite talked about levers.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Forgive me. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has picked me up on that.

It is right that we look at these measures in the round. Reductions in corporation tax from 28% towards 18% have been of huge benefit in trying to create a culture of entrepreneurship and in trying to create growth.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government’s Red Book at the 2017 spring Budget predicted that cuts to corporation tax would cost the UK Treasury £24 billion. How does that equate to growth?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman talks about predictions, but let us look at the past. We have cut corporation tax in every single year since 2010, but revenues from that tax have gone up. That shows exactly that the Government’s strategy is right.

Let us consider ideas about investment in our people and their education. When I go around schools in my constituency, I am struck by the fact that everyone is talking about STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths. These subjects are being fostered and encouraged by the Government. The message is very much going out, right through the educational establishment and across schools, and it is very encouraging that that is happening. In my constituency, a number of schools are looking in particular to increase STEM participation among female students, which is very exciting. All these things are part of an industrial strategy. All these things will make the country more prosperous and more productive—they will drive future productivity growth. The Government are to be commended for taking an unusually medium to long-term view of the UK economy. Far too often in this House, we sling insults, with lots of abuse and all that, and we are very focused on the short term. It is exciting that in this industrial strategy we can think in terms of the medium and longer term.

On that note, infrastructure spending is very dear to my heart, as the Member for Spelthorne. Heathrow—the “H” word—is something that this Parliament will have to decide on, hopefully in the next few months, but certainly in the next couple of years. I have always been clear about my support for the third runway—or rather, I should say, the expansion of Heathrow. That is vital to drive forward the economy, productivity growth and prosperity, so we will have to tackle that.

On the broad range of infrastructure issues, investment in human capital with regard to STEM subjects, and research and development—

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I absolutely welcome the increased investment in research and development to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but does he agree that aiming to get to the OECD average in 10 years is not exactly ambitious for this country?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There are a huge number of ambitious initiatives in the industrial strategy. We are very good in this House—Opposition Members certainly are—at running the country down and pointing out shortfalls. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) pointed out, we have some of the best universities in the world, and we have the best talent, as the Secretary of State mentioned. The trick, and the ambition, is to try to marry some of that talent with commercial productivity, and that is what the Government are trying to do. That is an exciting development. When we look at world-beating innovation and scientific research, we see that this country is right at the top of any list. We should celebrate that and try to improve on it, and I fully accept the remarks that have been made about that.

I am delighted that we are debating this issue because, as far as I can recall, it has been a very long time since we have talked about industrial strategy, certainly in this House. We are putting to bed a lot of the ghosts of the 1970s. I know that the Labour party does not necessarily want me to talk about the 1970s, but they were a disastrous era, when the so-called industrial strategy collapsed into a slightly absurd game of trying to pick winners and of backing industries that were totally failing. It is a real relief to hear a plan from the Secretary of State that moves a way from some of those old ideas. Anyone who thinks we will drive innovation, R&D and talent by nationalising vast swathes of the British economy—anyone who thinks that is a viable
option—deserves some sort of break or respite, because they are clearly not thinking particularly straight. I do not think it is right to confront this country with threats of nationalisation and confiscatory taxation. I do not think that helps the investment climate, and it is not a good form of industrial strategy. I am delighted that we are discussing this, and I look forward to contributions from Opposition Members that will be made in a more constructive spirit than the speech we heard just a few minutes ago.

4.49 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I always enjoy listening to the Secretary of State; I find him a courteous and well-mannered person who tries to put forward a positive view at all times. I find the same to be the case when I work with his team.

This long-awaited industrial strategy is welcome—it is good to see something—but it lacks the substance that we should see in a document that would make a meaningful difference for people, and it misses the mark on fairness and ambition. I hope to delight the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Quarteng), because along with my criticisms, of which I have many, I am going to try to be constructive and suggest some points that the Secretary of State might want to consider.

On inclusive growth, the Scottish National party has long argued that ideologically-driven measures not only are harmful to society, but actively hinder business development, growth and investment. Inclusive growth must be at the heart of any economic strategy, yet the Government continue their obsession with a failing austerity dogma, and nothing in the industrial strategy signals a change of direction. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has forecast that austerity could last until the mid-2020s, meaning that Scottish businesses, households and public services could ultimately face 15 years of austerity measures—and that amid the harsh realities of a hard Tory Brexit. The UK is facing the biggest increase in inequality since the 1980s, the worst wage stagnation in 70 years, which the IFS described as “dreadful”, and a huge increase in child poverty as a direct effect of tax and benefit reforms.

In the context of Brexit, the Global Future study was released just today. After looking into all four options available to the Prime Minister, it established that, in the long term, the amount available for spending on public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the public services will fall. Under the so-called Norway option, there would be £262 million less a week. Under the Canada model, there would be £877 million less per week. For the NHS, there would be £1.25 billion less per week. For the
should be a wake-up call that urgent action should be
taken to secure a thriving future for this dynamic sector.
Of course, during that period, we have also seen the
near decimation of the solar industry.

Scotland is proudly in the vanguard for the development
of renewable energy projects and investment. The SNP
Scottish Government have set out ambitious targets for
a transition to a low-carbon economy. By contrast, the
UK Government’s erratic energy approach and the
UK’s decision to leave the European Union have created
uncertainty in the sector. The UK Government have
responsibility for the damaging effects that we have seen.

James Heappey rose—

Drew Hendry: No, I will not give way. I did say earlier
that I would limit the number of interventions. I have a
lot to say on this subject, and I am wary about people
taking too much time early in the debate.

Carbon capture and storage technology should play
a leading role in tackling climate change, yet the UK
Government have been complicit in stifling investment
to develop this technology, as well as showing a lack of
interest in developing and protecting jobs in Scotland.
We wholly condemn the decision to cancel the CCS
competition, which left Peterhead betrayed, resulting in
a damaged relationship between the Government and
industry as well as a negative legacy on investment and
consumer confidence.

We have heard warm words about new investment in
CCS, and I welcome that, but what I say constructively
to the Secretary of State is that one 10th of the previous
required investment will not cut it in terms of making
the difference that needs to be made. Sustainable energy
has been a success story for Scotland in recent years,
and the Scottish Government have set out an ambitious
strategy for renewable investment with the powers at
their disposal. We firmly believe that supporting long-term
energy security and environmental protection should be
a key priority for any responsible Government. A robust
and sustainable strategy for energy security would not
only assist the creation of a low-carbon future, but
boost productivity, which has largely flattened in the
UK for far too long.

Scotland’s oil and gas industry still has a prosperous
future ahead of it, but support is needed to maximise
the longevity and success of this dynamic industry. The
industrial strategy has failed to mention any new
developments in the oil and gas sector. Although I
understand that work is ongoing to develop a sector
deal, we remain in the dark about what this might look
like. Furthermore, Brexit again poses a risk to the
development of this vital sector. The Oil and Gas
Institute at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen has
said that the departure from the EU bloc is likely to cost
the North sea oil and gas supply chain another £200 million
a year in tariffs and export taxes. It is time for the
Secretary of State to show the same level of support for
the oil and gas sector that has been mooted for the
automotive and aviation sectors.

The UK Government have ploughed ahead with
costly and ineffective investments in nuclear energy
projects such as Hinkley Point C at the expense of the
rest of the industry. The UK Government must halt the
agenda of unexpected, cherry-picked and damaging
announcements and policies in favour of making this a
thorough industrial strategy for the supply and demand
of energy.

I know that I will please the hon. Member for Spelthorne
by saying that the UK Government must now invest
more in science and in research and development. More
than 50,000 international students study in Scotland,
which is home to 19 educational institutions. The Scottish
National party is incredibly proud of Scotland’s world-class
university and higher education sector, and will support
the necessary steps to ensure that it remains open;
outward-looking and inclusive, yet the industrial strategy
offers no assurances that this relationship will be protected.
I again ask the Secretary of State to make his Government
take the opportunity to do this.

Science, and research and development, have the
potential to thrive further in Scotland. For example, the
life sciences sector in Scotland could be worth £8 billion
a year by 2025, according to industry groups. Although
we welcome the sector deal for the life sciences, it is
particularly worrying that it was agreed without any
consultation with the SNP Government. That must not
be replicated in any other sector deals.

On trade and inward investment, being a member of
the EU means that Scotland’s businesses are operating
within the world’s largest trading area of 500 million
potential customers. The EU single market is eight
times bigger than the UK’s alone. Moreover, trade with
EU countries is becoming more important for Scotland.
Since 2007, Scottish exports to the EU have grown by
more than 25% to more than £12 billion in 2015.
Although some steps are welcome, including the creation
of an inward investment strategy, the mechanisms offered
to overcome the challenges do not go far enough to
alleviate the threat posed by the loss of EU single
market membership and the trading partners that come
with it. The Government must stop their reliance on
rhetoric about trade and investment needs, take action
to acknowledge the industry’s concerns and work
constructively with the Scottish Government to maximise
inward investment as part of a genuinely co-operative
approach.

Members of the SNP have a shared goal: to make
Scotland the best place to live, work and do business.
Although the UK Government have overall responsibility
for the economy, we will use all the powers that we can
in Scotland to try to achieve this. The SNP has had a
plan with trade and investment, manufacturing, innovation
and employment at its heart for a number of years, and
the recent enterprise and skills review aligns its agencies
and resources behind those plans.

Since 2007, the Scottish Government's central purpose
has been to create a more successful country through
increasing sustainable economic growth. That remains
our ambition and is at the core of our single economic
strategy, which was published in 2015. The strategy sets
out the overarching economic approach of the Scottish
Government and is backed by a series of policies to
boost economic performance. We are supporting business
and growing Scotland’s economy by focusing on investment,
internationalisation, innovation and inclusive growth;
building on the successes of our enterprise and skills
agencies; and developing a system of support for Scottish
businesses and the economy.
An overarching strategic board is now in place that will maximise the impact of the collective investment that we make in enterprise and skills development, and it will create the conditions for delivering inclusive growth. We have also created a new enterprise agency in the south of Scotland with an interim economic partnership in place, backed with £10 million of investment. We have appointed Benny Higgins to lead the work to establish a Scottish national investment bank to support investment growth, among many other measures.

I have a lot more to say, but I am going to cut my speech short to aid progress. On fairness, we have put in place progressive social policies in Scotland. With the cost of living rising, our commitment to our social contract with the people of Scotland is more important than ever and vital for economic prosperity for all. Conservative Members have referred to the changes to income tax. Indeed, this will make Scotland the fairest-taxed part of the UK, with the majority of taxpayers paying less than elsewhere in the UK. Compared with last year, everyone earning less than £33,000 will pay less tax in Scotland. By choosing a fairer path on taxation, we will protect Scotland’s cherished public services.

Given that the cost of living is rising, we will deliver a minimum 3% pay rise for public servants earning less than £36,500—75% of public sector workers—while those earning more than £36,500 will receive a 2% rise, and a cash cap will be put on increases for those earning more than £80,000. There is new investment to ensure that Scotland is the best place to do business and invest. We are investing an extra £100 million to deliver the best business rates package in the UK, increasing investment in business research and development by 70% and making a £4 billion investment in vital infrastructure—and doing much more to build a fairer Scotland.

Finally, I have some asks for the Secretary of State. Will he take on board Scotland’s concerns about Brexit and its industrial strategy? The risks are real, as he knows, and they threaten the economy and people’s incomes. With his overarching responsibility for the success or failure of the UK nations’ economies, will he acknowledge that Scotland’s economy, like those of the other nations of the UK, is unique, and will he engage in a meaningful way with the Scottish Government on the industrial strategy so that we can maximise the benefits for all and support some of the key sectors that I have outlined? Does he recognise that we need inclusive growth to prosper and will he ask the Government to put an end to austerity policies that are damaging the lives of thousands of families across all the nations of the UK?

5.7 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I am grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate, which is important for our country, for my constituency, and, indeed, for Cumbria. I thank the Secretary of State for his very positive comments, his clear pride in our country and his pioneering ambitions, which I share.

The fourth industrial revolution will indeed bring much transformation, particularly in the green energy sector. I was pleased to hear reference to development and routes to market. The industrial strategy, the nuclear sector deal proposal and the northern powerhouse strategy all support the case that in future this country will require much more electricity for power, heating, lighting, and, increasingly, electric vehicles. The Government’s Gen III nuclear new-build programme at Hinkley Point C, Wylfa, Moorside, Sizewell C and Bradwell will only just meet the anticipated electric vehicle requirements of 18 GW of generation. By 2030, the total capacity required of the UK network could rise to over 150 GW, and with over 20% of our electricity currently provided by ageing, soon-to-be-decommissioned reactors, new-build on a grand scale is essential.

I absolutely agree that we need an energy mix. Last year, records were broken, with 15% of UK electricity provided by wind turbines. Nearly a quarter of all investment in European wind turbines took place in the UK. However, renewable energy, by its very nature, is intermittent. Renewable energy has lower energy density, requiring more sites to meet a given level of demand, and the plant sites are highly dependent on location. Therefore, we welcome the Government’s recent investment to boost nuclear fusion research at Culham in Oxfordshire with an additional £86 million to set up the technology platform at the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority’s science centre. I also welcome the £56 million investment in research and development funding for new advanced modular reactor technologies, along with the launch of the next phase of the nuclear innovation programme, which is to include ambitious plans for reactor design and safety engineering, security and advanced fuels, helping to bring down the cost of new nuclear.

The UK nuclear new-build economy is worth around £75 billion. Globally, the nuclear new-build economy is worth around £1.2 trillion by 2035. To give that some context, it is a heck of a lot of money. I do not want to give Members a maths lesson, but if we were to spend £1 million every day, it would take 3,285 years—indeed, to the year 5303—to spend that amount of money. To capitalise on that huge global economy, our industry and Government must collaborate. I commend the nuclear sector deal proposal, which refers to the need for financial and policy support to bring down the cost of new nuclear, to create the pipeline of projects, including large-scale generation plants and small and advanced modular reactors and to reuse existing nuclear licensed sites.

The nuclear industry in Copeland has provided highly skilled jobs, electricity and worldwide recognition of excellence for more than 70 years. Being the first in the world to generate electricity comes with the early skills and knowledge in how to decommission—a key market for the UK, with vast potential across Europe and beyond. I see great potential for improved collaboration between civil nuclear and nuclear defence, and there can be no better area than the western coast of Cumbria for that collaboration to happen.

The legacy challenges being met at Sellafield, the low-level waste repository and the ground-breaking research and development taking place every day in the National Nuclear Laboratory, the Dalton Nuclear Institute and the 70-something nuclear supply chain companies in my Copeland constituency alone are world-leading. I have had the great privilege of visiting all those companies, which employ the 27,000 nuclear workers in Cumbria—around 40% of the country’s entire nuclear workforce.

Those skills and the products are being developed to deal with the incredible challenges in difficult working environments, but they are not realising their true value.
to this country and to UK plc. We are not yet delivering our industrial strategy potential. Virtual reality technology, robotic vehicles and amphibious robotic vehicles are being developed in my constituency and used across our armed forces and in many highly regulated environments. I want the pioneering spirit and ability to reverse-engineer complex systems to be further developed, with better support for companies to retain their intellectual property and explore export opportunities. We are anticipating Moorside and confirmation of the successor submarine programme, Dreadnought, to be built by BAE in my neighbouring constituency to the south, in Barrow.

John Woodcock: It is even better to be able to work with the hon. Lady in three dimensions than it was to work with her two-dimensional cut-out last month. Does she agree that, if the industrial strategy for Cumbria is to work properly, we have to see the south and the west as one centre of global nuclear excellence and that the previous years of civil nuclear and military nuclear submarine programmes operating separately must be put behind us?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I could not agree more. He is absolutely right that there is so much more we can do to ensure that our civil nuclear and nuclear defence collaborate, which will benefit our skills agenda and meet recruitment challenges, particularly in the defence sector. I thank him for his comments.

We also have the National College for Nuclear to the north, in the neighbouring constituency of the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman). There is enormous potential for financial and policy support to develop the existing centre of nuclear excellence. I know that in Copeland, we can power the northern powerhouse and deliver the industrial strategy with Government support and collaboration. Thank you once again, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

5.14 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this industrial strategy for two reasons in particular. First, it recognises that business productivity is vital for growth, competitiveness, our standard of living and the funding of our public services. Secondly, it acknowledges that the hidden hand of free-market competition is inadequate to ensure that market forces will deliver resources in a way that will both maximise our economic potential and meet our social needs.

I am less convinced that the strategy fully grasps and incorporates the challenges that come from recognising that our taxation policies, public spending priorities and regulation are all vital to our productivity. An industrial strategy is vital to ensure that they underpin and help, not hinder, our objective.

I acknowledge that balancing conflicting public priorities with the need to promote our productivity is not always easy. Different Departments have different priorities, but the success or failure of the strategy will ultimately depend on the ability of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to get other Departments to sign up to and promote the strategy’s objectives in their departmental priorities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) raised that issue, and the Secretary of State made reassuring noises, which was good, but I must mention one or two obstacles that have emerged since the strategy’s publication and cause me grave concern.

I represent a constituency that is heavily dependent on the success of the motor industry. Indeed, it has been a great success, with 70% of the cars that are manufactured in Britain—we are almost at record levels—exported abroad, including 56% to Europe. Productivity in that industry is vital to our national productivity and our balance of payments. Leaving aside the industry’s issues around Brexit, the ill-considered and hasty announcement by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the target abolition of diesel engines, however worthy, has caused havoc in the industry. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has aptly called it the demonisation of diesel. Arising from that, Jaguar at Solihull is laying off 1,000 workers and Vauxhall is closing 326 dealerships. That is hardly a ringing endorsement by other Departments of the strategy’s importance.

I fully understand the support for research and development and the extra funding for life sciences, but the strategy fails to recognise that success will depend on recruiting from schools students who take STEM subjects. There is an acute shortage of those, and although the problem is partly cultural, it is also due to the inadequacy of school funding for delivering the necessary courses and equipment.

We have some of the best universities in the world—I am not talking down Britain; they are terrific. However, to maximise their potential, they need to be able to recruit the best brains from all over the world. Unfortunately, as a result of the Home Office visa regime, there is currently a perception that Britain is no longer the best place to come for would-be students from other countries. We are taking a declining proportion of an expanding market. The Windrush scandal has exposed the culture of the Home Office, which does not seem to be signed up to the crucial objective that the strategy and our economy need.

I could mention many other aspects, but in the time available, I will finish by considering another element that I welcome: the independent strategic council—effectively, an Office for Budget Responsibility for the strategy. It is designed to develop and measure success and evaluate strategic performance. It could be crucial, but I emphasise to the Minister that it must not just be a monitoring body. It must be tasked with identifying blockages to performance not just in BEIS but in other Departments as well. How it develops will be a test of the Government’s commitment to the strategy. I suspect it will become more unpopular the more successful it is. It is a challenge, and I wish it well.

5.20 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome this debate and the Government’s commitment to a new industrial strategy. This is a significant opportunity for us to chart a course for UK business, so that it does not merely adapt to global trends but is at the forefront, building new industries and leading global change. This is a broad debate, but the central theme is how the Government can work together with industry to shape a strategy that will develop the entire UK economy. Past Governments’ interaction with industry has not always been successful
in that endeavour, and we are right to be sceptical when the state wants to get too closely involved with business, but this afternoon I would like to confine my remarks to two industries in which close Government involvement and support is not only welcome but vital for their continued success in this country.

In my constituency, just under 8,000 people are employed directly in the defence and nuclear sectors, and several thousand more rely indirectly on BAE Systems’ Warton military aircraft and Springfields nuclear fuels manufacturing sites for their employment. Both facilities can continue to function only due to the sensitive, strategically important nature of those industries, and if the Government are willing and able to provide support.

The UK’s military aircraft sector is worth £10 billion to our economy and provides directly tangible benefits through exports, employment, technological advancement and the development of skills. Furthermore, BAE Systems is capable of delivering a sovereign capability; in other words, the independent design and manufacture of military aircraft. We should and we must build our own military aircraft. I welcome the Government’s intention to launch the combat air strategy. It will look towards a sixth generation of military aircraft, which the Secretary of State for Defence recently announced. That is another demonstration of the Government’s significant commitment to delivery on behalf of those who work in our defence industry.

The Aerospace Growth Partnership, which has brought industry and Government together to tackle barriers to growth, boost exports and grow high-value jobs in the UK, published its aerospace industrial strategy in 2013. It has encouraged UK companies to co-operate more closely in addressing challenges that affect the sector as a whole, such as supply chain competitiveness, R&D and skills development. It contributed to a 30% growth in productivity during the period of the coalition Government, compared with just 3.3% across the rest of the economy. That demonstrates the huge benefits that a successful strategy can have for an industry.

We cannot stop here, however. In my constituency, a future fighter programme is required for BAE Systems to sustain its military aircraft design and development engineering capabilities. Currently, the Typhoon and F-35 programmes do not provide enough work to sustain the business that is crucial for the Fylde’s economy. We simply cannot rely on getting on with what currently exists. We have to develop and devise a strategy to deliver the sixth generation of future fighters. I urge the Government not to put off the key decisions on who should partner the UK in building those aircraft, and I would like to make an appeal to the Minister and to the Secretary of State, whom I have met on a number of occasions on this matter. It is vital that, as we roll out a new generation of nuclear generation capability in the United Kingdom, we retain the sovereign ability to manufacture nuclear fuel in this country. If we rely on importing nuclear fuel, not only does that put an enormous strain on the balance of payments, but at a time when we have the ability to manufacture nuclear fuel for any of the reactors that are currently being proposed for the UK’s new fleet, it would be absurd in the extreme if we were to turn our backs on that capability and instead outsource it overseas. We live in an uncertain world, and I would like to retain that sovereign capability here.

In conclusion—he says, turning to the back page of his speech—although there is much for the Government to consider in this field, the economic value and strategic importance of the skills provided by the defence and nuclear industries mean that they deserve their primary consideration. I commend the significant steps that have been taken towards setting out the plans that the Government have for both, but we need a concrete proposal for delivering a sixth-generation fighter aircraft that guarantees long-term sustainable employment in the UK, and indeed across Lancashire and the north-west. We need deals to guarantee that nuclear fuel is manufactured in the UK, and we need to deliver them now if we are to safeguard and grow these sectors and to sustain and then create jobs for the generations to come.

5.25 pm Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I am very pleased to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to see that an industrial strategy for the country is at last back on the political agenda, although I have to say, without being unkind to the Tories, that we need a Labour Government prepared to make the right kind of interventions to make sure that it works.

The truth is that Britain has suffered from a long and disastrous period of deindustrialisation, which accelerated from the late 1970s and has left the country in a perilous economic state. We import too much, make too little and have suffered from a growing and now gigantic trade deficit primarily with the rest of the EU, and with Germany in particular. The industry that we have left is good—much of it is, anyway—and it has to be good to survive, but even then, our productivity levels are often too low and investment has been too little.

I am delighted that Peugeot has just announced plans to manufacture a new van at the Vauxhall plant in Luton, and we have to hope that this is a first swallow in a new industrial spring. I have put the case to motor manufacturing representatives that the recent depreciation of sterling relative to the euro should provide a sound basis for expanding supply chains in the UK manufacturing sector. That is true for other sectors, too. I was pleased that the head of Peugeot suggested just such an intervention at the time of the takeover of General Motors Europe, which included Vauxhall.

However, let me get back to the general case that Britain’s manufacturing base has been seriously eroded in the last decades and that we need desperately to rebuild the sector on all fronts. We have lost out massively in trade, and in manufacturing trade in particular. The figures are stark, and I shall quote just a few to make my point. The UK current account deficit in 2016 was £111.3 billion, or 5.8% of GDP. We in the UK are paying out to other nations the net figure of nearly...
£2,000 per person every year. The goods trade deficit in 2017 was even larger, at £138 billion. The UK’s overall trade deficit was £33.7 billion, but was a staggering £80 billion just with the EU. That was balanced only partially by our trade surplus of £39 billion with non-EU countries. At the core of this problem is the loss of much of our manufacturing capacity.

In 2017, the UK’s manufacturing trade deficit totalled £98 billion, £79 billion of which was with the EU and some £19 billion or so with the rest of the world. That disastrous yawning chasm in trade contrasts markedly with the performance of another major European economy—namely, Germany. In 2014, Germany had a current account surplus of $280 billion, contrasting with Britain’s current account deficit of $152 billion. We import four times more motor vehicle products from Germany than we export to it, which is just a simple illustration of the grotesque imbalance between our two countries.

Britain’s balance of payments deficit has been getting dramatically worse in recent years. In the crisis year of 2008, the deficit was £58 billion, but it rose to £113.6 billion in 2017. That is simply not sustainable and has to be addressed by Government action. A re-creation of our historical industrial strength has to be the key factor in rebuilding our economy for long-term sustainable prosperity. Central to that strategy must be a benign macroeconomic environment, and an essential component of that must be an appropriate parity for sterling—an exchange rate that helps our domestic manufacturers and restrains manufactured imports. We must not price our goods out of foreign markets, above all the EU.

Britain’s economy has been dogged by sterling overvaluation for many decades, and it has chronically damaged our competitiveness. Devaluations and depreciations have relieved the economic straitjacket from time to time—in 1931, 1949, 1965 and, most significantly, after the disastrous collapse of the exchange rate mechanism in 1992. A big depreciation after the 2008 crisis saved the UK from complete catastrophe, but the pound-euro exchange rate crept up again in 2016, causing more economic damage. The post-referendum depreciation has helped our manufacturers, but the balance of trade is still in dire straits.

Britain’s primary exchange rate problem is with the euro—not just sterling’s overvaluation but the serious undervaluation of the euro. In my view the euro is, in reality, the Deutschmark in disguise—a Deutschmark with weaker economies bolted on to it, holding down its value and giving Germany an unjustified competitive advantage both against other eurozone economies and against Britain. Britain’s uncompetitive exchange rate has been our economic Achilles heel for a very long time. An appropriate exchange rate, sustained for the long term, is vital for a new industrial strategy to be successful and for a revival of Britain’s greatly diminished manufacturing sector. It is an essential component of many modern industrial strategies, but not a sufficient condition for success.

Finally, I suggest to Ministers and the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, that we need to re-establish Neddy—the National Economic Development Council—in which I was personally involved when I worked at the TUC in the 1970s. The disastrous collapse of industry took place after Labour’s Government. It was in 1979 to 1983 that we saw a fifth of manufacturing disappear—a crime for which the Tories must always bear their guilt. Neddy brought together Government representatives, business representatives, employers and trade unions in a forum for manufacturing, ensuring that its vital interests were advanced to the benefit of the country and the future prosperity of all its people. Neddy should be reinvented and recreated, but it should be made much stronger.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am reducing the time limit to five minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am reducing the time limit to five minutes.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is good that we have an industrial strategy. It is not the command economy of past industrial strategies but an opportunity to put together a coherent plan to develop and support the industries that will underpin this country’s economy in the future, boost productivity and raise the skills needed.

In that sense, we should be very excited about what the Government have done. The four grand challenges within the strategy—artificial intelligence, clean growth, dealing with an ageing society and the concept of future mobility—are essential ingredients of that future economy, but of course each does not stand alone; all entwine with one another to deliver something that is quite exciting, not just from an industrial and economic perspective, but from a social perspective and in terms of how our communities and the future economy will operate.

Within that are the sector deals. It is right that the Government are seeking to reinforce the success of current industries that have done well for the UK, such as defence and aerospace and nuclear, and looking to use these sector deals to incubate our future economy too. To be clear, in putting together this industrial strategy, focusing on the areas as it does and in looking over the horizon—while not, I suspect, trying to pick winners but trying to understand what is likely to be the bedrock of a future economy—the Government must use the industrial strategy and everything around it to facilitate disruption as much as they can. I say that because, again and again, we see that the new businesses that really change the way we live, drive down costs for consumers and drive up customer service are the ones that have come in and disrupted old and lazy industries. These industries, often underpinned by exciting advances in automation, artificial intelligence and tech, are exactly the things we have the opportunity, through good policy making in the next few years, to unleash to the benefit of UK consumers.

If I may make a political point, such an approach is in stark contrast to the rather retrograde measures proposed by the Opposition, such as a return to nationalisation, as well as their outright fear of automation, suspicion of artificial intelligence and desire to regulate almost to the point of obsolescence the gig economy that underpins so many of the businesses particularly popular with the millennial age group. It is right that Conservative Members should champion this approach.

The way in which we will really unlock all those things is by recognising that the internet of things is a very exciting proposition for our nation’s economy. It will create smart homes, smart businesses and smart communities as the vehicles through which all disruptive
businesses will undoubtedly succeed. There is a catch, because we need to lead on regulating for the data challenges that come with an internet-of-things economy, with data points all over the place bringing huge amounts of very personal data into the possession of private companies. From there, self-learning AI algorithms will be able to discern things about the way in which we live our lives that are really very intimate, and we need to protect consumers from that. However, that should not stop us being hugely excited about the opportunity for this future economy, and we should use the industrial strategy to let it off its leash.

Our colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should really look at the fact that the very many different funds they have brilliantly brought forward to address so many of the challenges for our future economy are all stand-alone ones. My final point is that I would very much like us to start to designate test towns in which we could trial such things at scale. When we are looking at the future of mobility, we will learn most only when we have, at scale, automated on-demand transport. When we are looking at how to support an ageing society, we will be able to do so only if we can see, at scale, how CivTech will actually support people in old age to live in their own homes for longer, with the savings that that will deliver to local health services. On clean growth, it is only when we can see, at scale, the advantages of a digitised, decentralised energy system—with storage, interconnected electric vehicles and demand-side response—that we will really understand such opportunities. I therefore hope that the Minister will look at the opportunity for test towns.

5.37 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I want to concentrate on one particular aspect of the Government’s industrial strategy, which is what seems to be their limited work to deliver carbon capture and storage projects, with the thousands of new jobs CCS could create and the hundreds of thousands it could protect.

Yesterday, I took part in a roundtable event hosted by the Institute for Public Policy Research on northern energy industry, where I spoke about the northern energy taskforce and its recommendations on expanding low-carbon energy. The recommendations are ambitious, realistic, comprehensive and achievable, but they are also essential. The north has a huge advantage when it comes to expanding low-carbon generation: hydrogen production, in which Teesside is the biggest producer in the country; the development of energy storage; the opportunity to develop smart grids to support our industry and communities better; and, of course, carbon capture and storage.

I chair the all-party group on carbon capture and storage, and I know that both parliamentarians and people from industry have been very disappointed and frustrated at the lack of comprehensive action on this issue. Two years ago, the Government cancelled the CCS competition to establish one or two projects at the Humber and in Scotland. Since then, we have been trying to play catch-up, and while there have been encouraging words from the Government about possible investment, every moment of delay is a continued failure. Delays are also giving key industries such as chemicals, steel, cement and oil refining, and it would enable low-carbon fossil fuels to continue to provide a clean, flexible source of electricity.

I was a little encouraged when the Government published their clean growth strategy in October last year, which includes the intention to develop a new approach to carbon capture and storage, but I am concerned about its ambition of deploying CCS at scale during the 2030s, subject to cost reduction. I am afraid we need much more than ambition when it comes to this issue; we need robust plans that deliver our capability and need. I am afraid that the 2030s will be far too late—long after other countries have steamed ahead of us and taken the opportunity.

I am proud to represent a Teesside constituency, and it is deeply frustrating for me to see the potential that we have to be a key CCS site while the Government talk a good talk but appear slow to real action. The Teesside Collective is based in my area, and one of its main projects is decarbonisation. The collective is industry-led. Those industries know what they are talking about, and they know what they can achieve given the right environment. Teesside’s concentration of industrial emitters and proximity to potential storage sites under the North sea means that the area is industrially and geographically suited to be the starting place for large-scale industrial decarbonisation in the United Kingdom. We also have the potential for a large-scale CCS-ready power station, which would add huge value to any project in the area.

While I trust that I will always be Teesside-focused, it is important for us also to focus on developing CCS in other countries and regions, such as Scotland, Yorkshire and Humber, the north-west and Wales. A number of potential projects are already being considered, and the Government need to create a framework in which they can be successfully delivered.

CCS is also an essential part of the lowest-cost route to achieving the UK’s climate change targets. The Committee on Climate Change has said that the Government should not even be considering any scenario to meet the 2050 target that does not include CCS. If we are not to be left behind, we need the first CCS projects to begin operating in the 2020s. While the £100 million to support that work is welcome, the Government will need to do much more to ensure its success. The development of low-carbon industrial clusters would constitute a major upgrade to UK infrastructure for a decarbonised economy, supporting regional growth at a time when the outlook appears shaky at best.

Sadly, by the time we see the report from the Cost Challenge Taskforce we shall be three years behind where we should have been. The time is now. I believe that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth who visited Teesside recently, does “get” CCS, but we need her to bang on the doors of the Treasury and come up with the money that is needed to push these matters further forward.

It is vital for the deployment pathway to set out a strong and clear approach to CCS that will enable the first projects to begin operating in the 2020s—and that
is 10 years earlier than the Government appear to be planning. Our industries need to know that the Government are on their side and are prepared to work in partnership and share the financial risk as CCS is developed.

5.42 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It was a pleasure to hear the Secretary of State, in his opening remarks, speak of the importance of a strategy to help businesses to create quality, well-paid, sustainable jobs. In any walk of life, we need a roadmap to tell us how to get somewhere. That can be achieved through a strategy that involves both playing to our strengths and attending to our weaknesses. The Secretary of State was very frank about the weaknesses that we face, one of which is the issue of productivity. I want to focus on the five foundations for improving productivity: ideas and innovation, people, infrastructure, the right business environment, and the right places.

Companies and organisations are developing those themes at Ansty Park, in the east of my constituency. The site has been visited by the Secretary of State himself, and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), will recall doing so as well. It came into its own with the development of the Manufacturing Technology Centre, one of the first Catapult centres. I am disappointed not to have heard any acknowledgement from Opposition Members of the role of those centres. The centre will develop ideas, and will enable us to turn discoveries—and we have been great at discoveries—into commercial products. It is changing the landscape of manufacturing. When I first visited it just after my election in 2010, it was a building site; now it has 65 industrial members working in new technologies.

We will also exploit innovation and ideas at the High Temperature Research Centre at Ansty Park, which is the result of a collaboration between Rolls-Royce and the University of Birmingham and a £60 million investment. It measures 62,000 square feet, and provides a unique casting, design, simulation and advanced manufacturing research facility focusing on aerospace.

A newcomer to the site is the London Electric Vehicle Company’s factory, where an investment of £250 million has been dedicated to the construction of the electric taxis that are now on the streets of London. It will provide the clean growth that the industrial strategy is intended to achieve, and it will be supported by the £400 million investment in charging infrastructure. The London EV Company’s new factory at Ansty has been a real success story.

Over the road from the London Electric Vehicle Company is Fanuc, manufacturer of the widest range of robots in the world, and if we want to increase our productivity through investment we will do so through this new industrial landscape. Robots have applications from micro-electronics assembly to the forging of precision aerofoils for jet engines.

We will also create our industrial growth and development through working on our people. The MTC has a state-of-the-art Lloyds bank training centre, opened in 2015 by the former Business Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), and was set up to address the skills gap in UK engineering. Between 2015 and 2020, 1,000 apprentices will be trained in the latest technology.

Importantly, the MTC also engages with the community to support young people into engineering and STEM subjects. A year or two ago, I was with 30 local schoolgirls from Bilton School in my constituency who received the chance to have a hands-on training challenge at the centre.

The site continues to develop. AVL is due to open a new test and engineering centre this spring. It will be operating state-of-the-art testbeds for advanced powertrains, including hybrid and battery electric vehicles. If that is not cutting-edge, advanced technology, I do not know what is.

The site will be added to again very shortly by Meggitt, which has recently been given planning consent by Rugby Borough Council. It is important to recognise the role local authorities can play in achieving objectives: a proactive local authority responsive to new development can achieve these things. Meggitt is developing a £130-million international aerospace and defence engineering centre to serve as a hub for the next generation of world-class innovation in aerospace thermal management technology. That will consolidate Meggitt’s presence in the business and provide a further 1,000 jobs in the area.

I am proud of what is happening in my constituency. It exemplifies what we mean by an industrial strategy, providing an environment for both new and well-established companies to help make the UK a more attractive place to start and grow a business, with a stimulus provided by our link to the first-class research and development opportunities at the Manufacturing Technology Centre.

5.47 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is rich in talent, but is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. It is, however, blessed by the industrial belt that stretches along the M6, at the heart of which is the giant Jaguar plant. Back in 2010, I was involved with the new management brought in by Tata to turn around the plant from closure. It has gone from strength to strength since and has doubled in size. Just up the Chester Road from the Jaguar plant is GKN—Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds—a 259-year-old company which, on the back of the success of Jaguar, has gone from 500 to 800 employees. It is at the heart of a motor manufacturing cluster in the midlands—a world-class success story that is in part built on foundations that we laid in government with the establishment of the Automotive Council.

However welcome some of the things said today about industrial strategy are, developments in relation to both Jaguar Land Rover and GKN potentially make a mockery of that talk. The Secretary of State is a good man with whom I have worked over the years, such as on the Heseltine initiative in 2012 and on securing investment for the new low-emission engine plant in Wolverhampton in 2012-13, but the simple reality is that Jaguar Land Rover is facing mounting problems with the combination of uncertainty over Brexit on the one hand and the grotesque mishandling of the transition from diesel on the other.
We have gone down from 3,000 workers in the Jag to 2,200, with no production for six weeks, and now 1,000 are being laid off at Solihull, with 360 workers being transferred from the Jag over to Solihull. Little wonder that when the workers were briefed on Monday, they were described to me as being “numb.” So, too, were the GKN workers when I was with them in the Driveline plant on that bleak day of 29 March with the takeover by Melrose. It was a rerun of what happened over Cadbury. I led the battle against the Kraft takeover of Cadbury, when a debt-laden American multinational took over a successful and profitable British icon because 31% of the shares were bought by hedge funds.

Exactly the same thing happened over GKN. We had hoped, after Cadbury, that progress would be made on a new corporate takeover regime. We had discussions with the Government at the time about freezing the share register at the time of a bid, for example, and about a proposal for shareholders needing to have held shares for six months before they could vote. We discussed a whole range of potential mechanisms, including a public interest test, but little progress was made and GKN was ultimately left open to a predator, Melrose, as vultures such as Elliott—described as the world’s most ruthless hedge fund—circled. They were utterly cynical in their approach. They were there for a matter of weeks in a company with a 259-year-old history, and their aim was simply to make a quick buck on the back of that corporate takeover. Theirs was a fleeting interest, and it was fundamentally wrong.

I welcome some of the contents of the industrial strategy, but I hope that the Government will listen to the wise words of the shadow Secretary of State about going yet further, crucially on Jaguar Land Rover and on the lessons of GKN. On Jaguar Land Rover, the transition to electric has been called a just transition, but I hope that the Government will use the takeover by Melrose. It was a rerun of what happened over Cadbury. I led the battle against the Kraft takeover of Cadbury, when a debt-laden American multinational took over a successful and profitable British icon because 31% of the shares were bought by hedge funds.

5.52 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this important debate. The industrial strategy is an important document that contains crucial objectives relating to skills and young people. The importance of the skills agenda is particularly demonstrated in my own area, where the offshore renewables sector is playing a major role in the area’s economic expansion. Indeed, the Government have referred to the Humber estuary as the “energy estuary”. We have a number of important training facilities, such as the CATCH facility in Stallingham, which was set up as a joint operation funded by the Government, local authorities and industry. The Secretary of State himself has visited the Grimsby Institute, where he launched a previous skills initiative.

Leaving the European Union provides us with many opportunities, but we need to invest in research and development, and we also desperately need to invest in our infrastructure. I am pleased to say that the Government have taken that matter particularly seriously.

A crucial element in the document is regional growth, and I know that the Secretary of State is particularly committed to that. He has visited the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area on a number of occasions, and I know that he is familiar with the problems and the opportunities that exist there. He will, I am sure, have taken note of the importance of the seafood processing industry in the area, as well as the offshore renewables sector and the chemicals, ports and logistics industries. We also have two of the country’s six oil refineries. Cleethorpes, being the jewel in the crown of the east coast, is very important for tourism. I can see that you are eager to visit it yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker. You would be most welcome, and you would enjoy the best fish and chips in the country.

I am sure that Ministers would be disappointed if I did not mention page 226 of the document, which refers to the Greater Grimsby town deal. In fairness to Governments of both colours, there has been much investment in our cities and city regions over the past 20 years, but that has emphasised the relative decline of some of our smaller towns in the provinces, particularly our coastal communities. To combat that, the local authority, the local enterprise partnership and, crucially, local industry have come together to create the Greater Grimsby project board, which has put forward several important proposals encompassing a town deal that would boost the area tremendously, reducing the differential between our cities and towns. The Prime Minister herself has referred to “left behind” towns, and our coastal communities sadly fall into that category.

As I mentioned, the project board is led by the private sector, but it includes the local enterprise partnership and local authorities. We have put detailed proposals to the Government, and they are grinding their way through the various Departments, but the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is primarily responsible for town deals. Our most recent meeting was with Lord Henley, who has now taken over day-to-day responsibility for the strategy, and I urge the Minister to give us some indication of when we can expect a decision on the deal. At that meeting, it was suggested that we might get a decision by June or July. I suspect that the Minister will not want to give a definite date today, but I urge him to push things forward as quickly as possible.

The industrial strategy clearly presents huge opportunities for areas such as northern Lincolnshire. The shadow
Secretary of State, in fairness to her, did acknowledge that even a future Labour Government would not go about picking winners, but it was rather depressing to hear the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) turning the clock back to the days of the Neddy—I think there were even “Little Neddies”—with prices and income falls and the winters of discontent. All that could come again if, sadly, the Labour party comes to power.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I remember the 1970s very well, but it was between 1979 and 1983 that we saw a collapse. We had a Tory Government who were determined to introduce the new free market world, which saw British industry almost disappear.

**Martin Vickers:** The hon. Gentleman may or may not be correct in his analysis, but the reason why we had a Conservative Government in 1979 was the collapse of the economy during the late 1970s. There had to be a big shakeout and an acknowledgement of the failed policies of the ’60s and ’70s, so he should reflect on the fact that this industrial strategy is about the future and how we can become a global trading nation in the post-Brexit economy.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will acknowledge my point about the town deal, which is the main point of my contribution.

5.58 pm

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The British economy can best be described by the saying all that glitters is not gold. At first glance, things appear relatively rosy with modest growth, unemployment down and moderately stable consumer confidence. However, if we scratch just below the surface, a deeply troubling picture emerges, and it is a story of a productivity crisis, precipitous personal debt, a dangerous overreliance on financial services and a gaping chasm between London and the rest of the country.

I was therefore pleasantly surprised when the Prime Minister announced, in that fateful speech on the steps of 10 Downing Street, her intention to develop an industrial strategy. Wherever we look in the world, the successful countries are the ones with a Government who have been an active partner of business, using their scale, and convening capability and financial firepower, to create long-term platforms for national success. If we are to succeed as a country, we need a Labour vision of government. We need a Government who enable people to succeed as a country, we need a Labour vision of successful industrial strategy that supports our foundation industries and puts the foundational building blocks in place for the manufacturing base, our Government are instead intent on focusing on going into the stratosphere of space research and life sciences.

Research from Sheffield Hallam’s centre for regional economic and social research shows that the focus of the Government’s industrial strategy challenge fund is on sectors that disproportionately benefit London and the south-east. By focusing R&D on an exceptionally narrow range of sectors—healthcare and medicine, robotics and artificial intelligence, batteries, self-driving vehicles and space tech—we will end up only really benefiting the so-called golden triangle of London, Oxford and Cambridge. That is a blatant and outrageous abdication of the Government’s responsibility for the entire economy, not just for those sectors that may have certain pockets of political support.

Exhibit A in the Government’s failing strategy is its approach to the steel industry. The town I represent is the hub of our steel industry, and the Port Talbot steelworks is the beating heart of my community in Aberavon. Last September—almost eight months ago—the Government received the steel sector deal, a comprehensive plan for how we can turn the British steel industry from one that is surviving into one that is thriving. The plan would involve an additional £1.5 billion of investment over the next five years, increasing production by 40%, creating 2,000 more jobs, training 200 more apprentices a year and increasing investment in R&D. The plan has the support of companies and unions, but it has sat on a shelf, gathering dust, for eight months.

I implore the Secretary of State to confirm today when the steel sector deal will be approved, and I urge him to stop treating us like children or idiots. If the Government are giving up on the sector deal, and on the steel industry, Ministers should come clean today and say that from the Dispatch Box.

A successful industrial strategy cannot do everything for everyone, but it must do something for everyone. As things stand, this industrial strategy fails that test. If the Government really want a broad-based industrial strategy, they have to start with a broad-based manufacturing renaissance, and that starts with delivering a sector deal for the steel industry.

6.3 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I welcome today’s debate because the UK Government’s industrial strategy is hugely significant and could be transformational for all parts of the
United Kingdom. It is fair to say that the industrial strategy has been welcomed by a huge variety of organisations, including organisations that are not common bedfellows. The CBI is positive about the strategy and the TUC calls it “an important step forward.”

There is cross-sector acknowledgement that the industrial strategy is a serious piece of work that is genuinely trying to identify and address the challenges that our economy will face in the next few years. It is the role of Government to support and develop industry and to pursue economic growth, and I am broadly in favour of the non-interventionist but highly engaged approach. With this industrial strategy, we have gone right back to basic principles, and the UK Government have identified five foundations that are essential for a successful economy. These five foundations show how in Scotland the industrial strategy will need to be implemented by both the UK and Scottish Governments. Devolved government has control over significant parts of the five foundations, including skills, transport and housing. I am pleased that the UK Government understand that point and have repeatedly acknowledged that it is vital to work with the devolved Administrations to implement the industrial strategy. I hope that the Scottish Government, note that Scottish National party Members are currently absent from the Chamber—are able to accept this commitment at face value and work constructively with their counterparts here at Westminster.

I would like to focus my remarks on what has been identified as the fifth foundation: places. I think we all accept that, to have a productive economy, we need prosperous communities, but what does that mean in practice for the United Kingdom? The industrial strategy identifies four challenges that need to be addressed to put the UK at the forefront of industries of the future. These are understandably forward-looking, but I do think it omits a current challenge: the dominance of London in the UK’s economic output. I would like to make it clear that the success of our nation’s capital is something of which we should all be proud. London is a truly global city, an economic powerhouse and a cultural masterpiece. Its contribution to the UK goes well beyond the fact that it accounts for 22% of our GDP. We will not drive our economy forward by holding London back, but it remains the case that London dominates our economy in a way that is almost unique.

That matters because it has resulted in an imbalance in our nation’s economy. The domination of London has created a self-perpetuating cycle where new investment flocks to the city because that is where everyone else is. This has created wealth and economic growth, but it has also been centred on the one city.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland has benefited from IT and digital tech industries to such an extent that our region is equal in this to London in the delivery of jobs and opportunities.

**John Lamont:** The hon. Gentleman makes the point well.

As a Scottish MP, I think London’s domination has to change, not because I think Scotland looked enviously at London, but because rebalancing our economy and spreading power across all parts of the United Kingdom strengthens our bond in that Union. The Conservative manifesto last year pointed out:

“For our civil service and major cultural bodies to claim to be UK institutions, they need to represent and be present across our whole United Kingdom.”

Let us push ahead with the proposal to use Brexit as a catalyst to create more civil servant jobs outside London. As we are talking about the industrial strategy, why not, for example, base the Industrial Strategy Council outside London? Let us focus on bringing the economy outside London up to speed. The city deals for Scotland, including the proposed Borderlands growth deal in my area, are part of this, but we need to do more. The industrial strategy represents an opportunity to drive forward the economy of the UK as a whole, and I hope that Scotland’s two Governments can work together with this common aim.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Mr Speaker: A four-minute limit now applies. Of course Members are free to interrupt each other if they wish, but it will, to put it bluntly, screw up somebody’s chances, and that would be a pity.

6.8 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State, in his opening remarks, made several mentions of UK success in terms of Nobel prize winners, so I just want to remind the House that Kilmarnock Academy, in my constituency, is one of the few schools in the UK that has educated two Nobel prize winners.

I welcome the publication of the industrial strategy and the fact that the original consultation document recognised some of the failings in UK industry, particularly on productivity. However, the strategy has a glaring omission regarding the challenges—Brexit. The industrial strategy seems to pretend that Brexit is not happening, even though the UK Government’s own analysis shows it will have an impact on the UK economy. We need to know what is going to happen to R&D collaboration and to R&D funding, and we need to take action to mitigate any impact.

We also need to know what is going to happen to other funding streams, such as European regional development fund moneys. In my constituency, industrial engineering units are constructed with the aid of the ERDF moneys. What is going to plug that gap in future? What are the UK Government going to do to provide that assistance to the areas that need that development money? I welcome the industrial strategy’s principles, including the sector deals, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, the Scottish Government need to be involved and properly consulted on them. They were not consulted on the advanced life sciences sector deal. If they were properly consulted, I am sure we would already have an oil and gas sector deal.

Let us look at what the UK Government have done in recent years to support the oil and gas industry. In the spring 2016 Budget, they reduced the supplementary charge to 10%. That was welcome, but the £1 billion that that cost the Treasury was only a third of the inheritance tax giveaway to millionaires. That shows the Government’s real priorities. In the spring 2017 Budget, there was a paragraph promising another discussion paper. We are still awaiting the appointment of an oil and gas ambassador. In the November 2017 Budget, the transferable tax history mechanism was a welcome measure
for the oil and gas industry, but it is predicted to bring an extra £70 million into the Treasury, so it is hardly a concession; it is actually a positive move. Actions are always stronger than words, and so far the UK Government have failed to provide the broad shoulders that we were told about. In the same period, they pulled £1.5 billion from the carbon capture and storage scheme in Peterhead.

Another innovative and possibly world-leading energy project is the proposed renewable energy plant at Grangemouth to replace the existing end-of-life gas turbine station. The new proposals include biomass, which means the project needs access to renewable heat incentive funding and contract for difference funding. Right now, however, the UK Government are seeking to cap the RHI funding available to any scheme at 250 GWh, which would make the project completely unviable. I urge the Secretary of State to do everything he can to make sure that the project goes ahead.

The industrial strategy rightly highlights offshore wind development via the Catapult, which is welcome. With onshore wind currently at £57.50 per MWh, we clearly need to continue in this direction, because that provides much better value for money than Hinkley, at £92.50 per MWh. I repeat the plea for onshore wind projects to be allowed to bid in future CfD auctions. That would reinvigorate the industry and provide a boost to engineering and fabrication companies throughout the UK.

Another sector deal that I welcome is the one for the construction industry, which will provide high-paid jobs, but, as I highlighted earlier, the £24 billion giveaway in the UK. A boost to engineering and fabrication companies throughout the UK.

Increasingly, advanced and technical ceramics are being used throughout the global economy. We all know about tiles, crockery and household ornaments, but ceramics are also used in thermal barrier ceramic coatings for jet engines, in ceramic armour, and even on the space shuttle. They are used in semiconductors for electronics and in healthcare and many other industries. Our industrial strategy must ensure that it is global Britain that harnesses the power of the 21st century advanced ceramics manufacturing industry. A British, authentically place-based research centre for ceramics, focused on Stoke-on-Trent, will be a magnet for exceptional research, design and talent.

A sector deal for ceramics can realise the potential for enhanced skills, education, apprenticeships and training. This will keep UK ceramics internationally competitive as a world leader in products and technology and a driver of British exports. Although the world of ceramics defines Stoke-on-Trent—we are the Potters after all—we have a wide range of vibrant industries to encourage and support. Our local economy is more diverse than ever before. As I said at the beginning of my speech, logistics and bespoke electronics are part of our economy, as are industries ranging from retail to advanced technical engineering through to bespoke digital security. I totally agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) said about the potential of modular nuclear reactors. I hope that they can be at least partly manufactured at Goodwin International in Stoke South.

The industrial strategy needs to have an eye on the skills needed for these industries to emerge, grow and flourish—not just academic or technical qualifications, but personal skills such as innovation, enterprise, flexibility, and resilience. This is all about making our communities, our city and our country more productive and more prosperous and ensuring that everybody is able to access these opportunities to live up to their full potential.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. This is an exciting time for British business, particularly the UK ceramics, advanced manufacturing, digital and logistics industries that do so much to create jobs and prosperity in Stoke-on-Trent.

I am delighted to have visited several businesses in the city over the Easter recess: Don-Bur, which makes some of the most technologically advanced trailers for lorries; Michelin, which is leading the way with retreads for tyres; and Midway Manufacturing, which specialises in bespoke electronics and, I am pleased to say, has expanded and just relocated to Longton in my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent is on the up, and it is businesses like those that are driving the resurgence of our great city—as, indeed, they are driving economic growth throughout the country, underpinned by the internationally competitive tax and regulation framework delivered by this Government.

Stoke-on-Trent is increasingly seen as an attractive place for businesses to locate and invest. From my recent Adjournment debate, the Minister will know about my personal ambition to see Stoke-on-Trent’s ceramics economy grow to an annual £1 billion in gross value added. Now is the time for the Government to help to underpin and realise that growth by building a sector deal for the ceramics industry into our modern industrial strategy. I am committed to the creation of a national research centre—indeed, a dedicated international institute for ceramics—in the authentic world capital of ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Although it is easy to adopt a declinist outlook about Scotland's long-term industrial trajectory over the past century, it is important that we do not view the loss of the once iconic staple industries of shipbuilding, steel and coal, which had their genesis in the first industrial revolution, as part of a terminal decline of our manufacturing capability. Indeed, it is a sector that we urgently need to reposition at the heart of our economic future to maximise our country's productive potential.

Currently, Scotland's productivity ranks in the third quartile of OECD countries, and although productivity growth has been better than the UK average since 2009, the rate of productivity growth in Scotland lags behind many of our competitors. To catch up, Scotland must expedite a significant increase in that rate. Achieving the required growth would be truly transformational. Increasing Scotland's productivity to the level of the top quartile of OECD countries would grow GDP by almost £45 billion—an increase of 30%—and annual average wages could be more than £6,500 higher. That would be an increase of 25%, which is a huge prize.
It is in Scottish manufacturing that we can find the prime mover towards any significant realisation of that opportunity for enhanced productivity. The firms in that sector continue disproportionately to drive innovation, investment and international exports.

On some measures, Scotland's innovation performance is improving. However, performance still significantly lags behind many other countries on key innovation measures. Despite some signs of improvement, Scotland's research and development performance continues to be below that of the UK and most OECD countries. Although business enterprise R&D increased by 45% to £905 million per annum between 2010 and 2014, which was faster than the OECD and UK average, Scotland's performance is near the bottom of the third quartile of OECD countries. To reach the top quartile, Scottish R&D investment would need to be 200% higher—an increase of £1.8 billion. The need to close that gap is critical. Although 2,790 businesses in Scotland invested in R&D in 2014—an increase of 23% since 2012—R&D remains heavily concentrated, with just 10 businesses accounting for 45% of the total investment in R&D in Scotland. Almost 70% of R&D investment is by non-Scottish-owned businesses.

Labour plans to support the growth of Scottish engineering and manufacturing in a number of ways. It would create a national investment bank that would see £20 billion of capital structured in Scotland for industrial strategy and investment. The SNP has recently announced the creation of a Scottish investment bank, but it will be capitalised to the tune of a mere £322 million. If the SNP is so inspired by our policies, it might as well do it properly and ensure that the Scottish investment bank is appropriately and properly scaled, so that funding is made available in this vital area.

Labour policy to set up a national transformation fund, which would see £40 billion of capital investment in Scotland, in areas such as infrastructure and house building, creating jobs and boosting the economy. In total, Labour policy in Scotland would see £70 billion of investment in industry in Scotland. That is the scale that is needed—it needs to be to the tune of billions of pounds of investment, not just millions of pounds.

The country stands on the cusp of a great disruptive opportunity with a new industrial revolution emerging. It is therefore imperative that the nation's industrial base is encouraged to adopt the characteristics required to advance growth by being more innovative and international, while investing adequately in the most advanced plant and processes. These are not alien ideas: they are some of the very same ones that originally drove Scotland's capacity to lead the world in industrial development through the 19th century.

We must seize the opportunity to issue a clarion call to reindustrialise Scotland. The country does have one distinct advantage over most others, in that it has done most of this already, albeit quite some time ago, although it may have failed to learn the most challenging lessons about its weaknesses as well as its many strengths. The trick now is to learn from both and do it all over again.

6.19 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): This debate is about the future, so I want to talk about the 19th century. To set the scene, new technologies are sweeping away centuries-old techniques, placing whole professions at the risk of extinction. The year is 1841, and a royal commission is publishing its report on the condition of handloom weavers.

Back then, 100,000 handloom weavers had lost their jobs in just 10 years thanks, in part, to the new powerloom. The remaining 300,000 were living in increasingly appalling conditions. Today, Parliament has the same duty to cab drivers, lorry drivers and, increasingly, to white-collar professionals such as accountants and lawyers. We would do well to look at what our predecessors found.

The commissioners proposed a number of immediate solutions, not least some reform of the corn laws. But they were more interesting when they considered the Luddite case to tax power-looms so that the less well paid hand weavers could be protected. The commissioners concluded that

"if we were insane enough to legislate against power-looms... the consequence would be not to raise the wages of the hand-loom weaver, but to depress those of the power-loom weaver to his level."

Likewise, they concluded that taxing foreign cloth would not help much either. They backed the new technology, realising that investing in it would put the UK at a greater advantage.

The commissioners found again and again that the solutions were measures that would improve the general quality of life and embrace technology, not protect vested interests. If only the RMT would read their report, we might already have driverless trains.

Time and again, the evidence showed that the workers who resisted change and clung on to a diminishing industry were those who then suffered most. The work done by Matthew Taylor in this regard is in the same vein. Crucially, the commissioners wrote bluntly that

"aversion to change... prevails in proportion as education is deficient."

In short, constituents then and now resisted a brighter future because they thought, quite wrongly, that it was worse than a diminishing standard of living by clinging to old ways. This Parliament, as the Victorians did, has a duty to excite our constituents about the prospects of technological advancement just as much as it has to guard against the perils that modern technology brings—for instance, in the misuse of our data.

The approach that the commissioners suggested was in part to make reforms, such as to the corn laws, but they also realised that the revolution was coming for all industries, just as the internet will affect all industries now. Our Victorian predecessors were brave enough to embrace that reality, and we should be, too. The 1841 report, for instance, refers to a school of design that had recently been set up, because it was human capital that was most valuable. Machines were rubbish at creativity, but humans were brilliant at it. Similarly, the commissioners sought to protect copyright and improve workers’ rights, just as we do in this industrial strategy.

There is much more to say about the 1841 report and, frankly, I had written a much longer speech. There was by necessity a local approach to our industrial strategy in the 19th century. If I may end with one plea, it is that today we consider devolving responsibilities for skills to local areas so that we, too, can cater to our local areas and industries. It is by being local that we may be truly
international in our ambitions and successes. It is by not repeating the mistakes of the past—whether protectionism or clinging on to old technologies—that Britain can truly make the most of its potential.

6.23 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to speak briefly in this debate on a topic that is so important to our country and economy. I welcome the industrial strategy, which highlights the fact that the Government appreciate the need to be an engine for change. That is more important now than ever before, with Brexit, the technological revolution and the changing nature of the labour market.

The industrial strategy sets out five foundations of economic policy, but perhaps the most important foundation is people. People are the backbone of the economy and business and the inventors and engineers of technology. We need a flexible workforce in today's economy and tomorrow's, so we need to ensure that the labour market has the correct skills to be flexible and progress our economy.

Currently, though, we have a skills gap, as Members in all parts of the House have recognised. I am passionate about tackling the skills gap in Wiltshire and the UK, having called it “the ticking time bomb” previously in this place. In fact, research from the Open University has found that the skills shortage means that there is a cost to UK business of more than £2 billion a year in higher salaries, recruitment costs and temporary staffing. The skills gap is particularly stark in the STEM and engineering sector. According to EngineeringUK, about 1.3 million workers are required each year to replace the ageing workforce and those leaving the sector. That is particularly pertinent in Wiltshire, which is a hub of engineering, design and technology. Every year, I hold my own festival of engineering. Last year, more than 3,000 students attended, and I hope to do it again this year in the Year of Engineering.

I welcome the investment of an additional £406 million in maths, digital and technical education, which will help to address the shortages in the STEM sector, but I believe that T-levels will prove the key to tackling the skills gap. The UK currently ranks 16th out of 20 OECD countries for the proportion of people with technical qualifications across STEM areas, whereas T-levels will provide a qualification that is academically regarded as well as being backed by industry. It will be relevant, applicable and without stigma. For too long, the technical pathway has been littered with confusion and with various different routes.

I also welcome the ability for us to foster a flexible workforce through the creation of a national retraining scheme by the end of the Parliament, including a £64 million investment in digital and construction retraining. In essence, the beneficiaries of all this will be people. It will help to create highly skilled and better-paid jobs for the next generation, improving living standards across the country.

A core mission of the industrial strategy is to tackle our productivity lag. That is a real problem, and the industrial strategy provides us with real solutions. It is a huge opportunity. The national productivity investment fund will provide an additional £31 billion of investment over six years, which will enable us to seize this opportunity, rather than talking down our country and our economy, as Opposition Members have done today.

This is a long-term strategy. It is not a theory but an action plan, involving more than £460 billion of projects currently sitting in the infrastructure and construction pipeline. Most importantly, it will tackle the skills gap and the productivity lag that for too long have impeded our economic growth.

6.27 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): We are in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution—a time of huge technological, demographic and environmental change—and the decisions we make now are crucial to our future. I welcome the focus brought by this industrial strategy, and particularly its focus on innovation. I am proud to serve on the Science and Technology Committee. It is science and research that delivers the innovation that drives a modern economy, and we are a world leader in science and research. Four of our universities are in the world's top 10, one in six of the world's top research papers are written here, and we have more Nobel prize winners than any other country other than the US.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. Countries such as India and China are accelerating their investment and they want to woo our best scientists. That is why it is absolutely right that this Government are investing more in science and technology than any other Government in the past 40 years. Scientific innovation is not just about money—it is about people, too. World-class science needs world-class people. I am pleased that this industrial strategy establishes the Rutherford fund to help recruit researchers, doubles the number of tier 1 visas and gives a commitment to make it easier for world-class researchers to settle here. However, the devil is in the detail. We need a visa system that makes mobility easy for scientists. I thank the Secretary of State for the answer he gave on that earlier.

Research is changing. It is not just done by one scientist in one lab working alone; it is delivered through networks of collaboration. This industrial strategy points out that our closest relationships and collaborations are with EU member states. Britain has led the EU framework programmes, and I worked with Ministers to lead the latest one. More British scientists participate in them, and more hold European Research Council grants, than those from any other country. It is in our national interest to continue to participate. Ministers have confirmed that if the next framework is materially the same as the last one, Britain would like to continue. I ask them to make that point more positive by saying that we will continue to participate unless it is materially different.

We need to ensure that the best ideas are not just generated here but also developed and manufactured here. That is why I welcome the sector by sector focus in the strategy, and I would like to concentrate on some of those sectors.

Our space sector has trebled in size, and the jobs in it are highly skilled and highly productive. The Space Industry Act 2018 means that next-generation smaller, smarter satellites will not only be developed here but launched here. Space assets are key to our communications and our security. We are the only G7 country that

[Matt Warman]
does not have its own earth imagery assets. We have paid for the Galileo satellites, and Britain needs to benefit from that.

We are a world leader in life sciences. We are home to the Wellcome Genome Campus. It was a British Prime Minister who led the visionary 100,000 Genomes Project, and it is absolutely right that life sciences are at the heart of the industrial sector. We need to ensure that drugs are not just delivered and developed here but used here, and our Select Committee has done some very good work on how we can ensure that those revolutionary genomic drugs get delivered into the NHS.

Data is the lifeblood of the digital revolution, and we cannot separate digital from other sectors of the economy. The scandal of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica reminds us of the need for clear rules. It is great that the general data protection regulation is becoming the global standard and that this Government are delivering it into British law through the Data Protection Bill. The strategy also points to the need for legislation to be flexible, which I welcome.

6.31 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I warmly welcome this debate and the Government’s industrial strategy. It has been proved time and again that the best way to secure prosperity for millions of people around the world is through free enterprise and free markets, and that sits comfortably alongside the modern industrial strategy laid out by the Government. The challenges of globalisation affect us all, and taking a long-term view will tackle the underlying issues and enhance our economy more broadly.

I wish to focus my comments on my local area and a local approach. My constituency is on the outskirts of the country’s second city, Birmingham. Birmingham is a large city that has suffered from a productivity gap with the rest of the country. It has overcome decades of bad press and has a legacy image problem. I bet that if I asked anyone in the Chamber—except the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—whether they have been to Birmingham, they would say that they have been for a meeting, been through it on the train or driven through Spaghetti Junction but they do not know much about Birmingham. It is a fabulous city, and I am proud of it. It is much better than Manchester, but this is not the time to go into that, because I want to talk about Redditch, which has its own challenges and has to carve out its own identity.

Redditch is on the outskirts of Birmingham. It is a new town, built to accommodate the overflow from Birmingham’s factories. We have a proud history of manufacturing needles, fishing hooks and parts for military aircraft, which were important in our country’s history. But what will the future hold for the people of Redditch? They wish to be proud of Redditch for what it can do in the future, not just what it has done in the past. That is why it is great to have a framework to tackle structural issues. It is not a world-class region like Oxford, Cambridge or London, so it needs some help to secure its future.

I would like to make some suggestions to the Secretary of State. If Grimsby can have a town deal, why can Redditch not? I have lobbied Treasury Ministers for that, and I would like to see that idea taken forward. We look close to home, to the Worcestershire town of Kidderminster and its ambitious and successful ReWyre project led by Conservative councillors, and see no reason why we could not adopt a similar model to unlock the potential of Redditch.

I would like to see the devolution deal in the West Midlands combined authority unlock further potential in our region. It is successfully steered by a Conservative Mayor, and I believe that Redditch can harness that growth. I would also like to see a free enterprise zone or a free port, similar to what we see in Teesport. I understand that there is no reason why a landlocked area could not be a free port.

I will finish my remarks by focusing on skills, which are the single most important factor. We need to see reform of skills funding. The apprenticeship levy needs further reform, and we need further devolution and more freedom for those outside the traditional employment relationship to take charge of their own learning, to ensure lifelong learning for every person working in our country. Skills lie at the heart of the economic transformation needed in our area. They are a crucial aspect of rebalancing the economy and creating growth all around the country. To that end, I welcome the Government’s focus in the industrial strategy on sector-specific deals and their commitment to listen to the full range of voices when developing local and sector-based deals so that firms of all sizes and sectors can buy into the strategy for years to come.

If people can live and work in Redditch, which has a great quality of life, environment and cultural offer, why would they move to the overcrowded and expensive south-east? Redditch is affordable and a clean, green town. We accept that people migrate around the country, but let us work towards the goal of enhancing all areas to make the best use of our country’s natural talent and resources. I believe that the industrial strategy will achieve just that.

6.35 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I begin by referencing page 236 of the industrial strategy White Paper, which specifically mentions the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. I look forward to hearing—shortly, I hope—about the heads of agreement that have been reached with the Scottish Government and local authorities so that the deal can be brought to life.

The subject is fascinating and I am sorry that there is so little time to talk about the industrial strategy. I want to concentrate on one aspect that I think is critical to its execution. We cannot overestimate the role of the UK universities sector in the successful execution of any industrial strategy worthy of the name. It remains a jewel in the UK’s reputational crown. British universities are among the very best and people across the world aspire to attend them, such is the reputation of the quality of the education on offer.

Building close links between the universities and business is vital. Those links are the springboard for invention, innovation and new business creation. As a member of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I visited the University of Sheffield Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, where the partnership between the university and Boeing has attracted the engagement of dozens of other business across the sector, solving problems and driving increases in productivity. That is a model for high-level collaboration...
between universities, academics and industry to enable the delivery of the industrial strategy. Sheffield has become a centre of excellence in design, machining, casting, welding, composites and so much more. It was inspiring to see how all that is being achieved. It gave a vision of what can be done when we put our minds to it.

We need to leverage the international excellence of UK universities to make the UK a global hub for ideation, invention, discovery, innovation and commercialisation.

Stirling University is the second largest employer in my constituency and we have welcomed some 2,600 overseas students who pay between £15,000 and £17,000 a year. Stirling University is therefore, to my mind, one of our great exporters. The Higher Education Policy Institute estimates that there is a £52 million net positive impact on Stirling from those students.

I recently visited the INTO international student facility at Stirling University where I met several of the international students. It came as no surprise to me that they had chosen to make Stirling their home because, 36 years ago, I did the same. However, I only came from Forfar, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is not here, would doubtless attest, is still part of the United Kingdom.

We seem to make it too difficult for students to come here. We make people jump through hoops and undertake expensive and extensive screening and other requirements that very few other countries do. We are losing our market share in an expanding global market. The UK’s reputation as a university destination choice is not what it should be. Chinese students are going to Canada, the United States and Australia rather than here. Those countries have targets to attract international students, and we can learn from that.

Time is against me. My appeal to the Government is: make it easier for students. It is time for students to be welcomed here and to develop the new skills and new industries that very few other countries do. We are losing our reputation as a university destination choice is not what it should be. Chinese students are going to Canada, the United States and Australia rather than here. Those countries have targets to attract international students, and we can learn from that.

I also agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) that we should embrace change. We have an opportunity, over the next 10 to 20 years, to make our country into an even better place; to grow the jobs we know we can have and to develop the new skills and new industries we know are coming. We should embrace them rather than be scared of them. What a contrast those fine speeches were compared to the dystopian and very unbalanced vision from the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) about how this country will fall away. I can see how that could happen only under a Labour Government.

I welcome the Government defining some of our key challenges over the next 10 to 20 years: growth, artificial intelligence, meeting the needs of an ageing population, and mobility. I want to focus on mobility. We have heard today about a potential sector deal for the rail industry, which I would welcome wholeheartedly. My area has an historic link to railways and rail manufacturing. My county is the home of Bombardier, although it is not in my particular constituency, which builds a significant number of trains around the country. What a difference the last few years have made, from a company in an industry that may have been struggling to having a really good order book that shows the renaissance of our railways. When I walk out from the station in my town tomorrow, I will see the statue of George Stephenson. He lived just a few miles away from my part of the world and it was his son who developed the Rocket. My part of the world is steeped in history.

When the Secretary of State considers a sector deal for the rail industry, which I endorse wholeheartedly and hope will come forward, I hope there is an opportunity for a cluster in the east midlands, just like the other clusters and sector deals we have talked about and the wonderful work going on in the automotive sector. There is an opportunity for the east midlands to build on Bombardier in Derby, build on the academy that has been put forward in Northampton, build on the news about additional train manufacturing in Lincolnshire and build on all the other opportunities we will have in the future. As part of the industrial strategy and the Government’s mission to build on and improve economic growth and economic development, and the opportunities we have as a country, I hope we can have a sector deal for rail and a cluster that is supported in the fastest growing region outside London and the south-east, which is the east midlands.

6.42 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This has been a timely, well-attended and generally well-informed debate. Members on both sides of the House have come together to call for an industrial strategy that brings good jobs to every region in our post-Brexit world. I listened with considerable respect to the contributions made by the hon. Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsley), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the hon. Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack
Breton), my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and the hon. Members for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (D分流), for Cheltenham (Michelle Donelan), for Chesham and Amersham (Vicky Ford), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley).

Given the Secretary of State’s predecessor’s refusal to utter the words “industrial” and “strategy” in sequence, the current Secretary of State’s rhetoric is to be welcomed. But it is just that—rhetoric from a Government forced to accept the reality facing working people. The White Paper, while lengthy—it was generously padded out to 256 pages with glossy pictures and large type—did little to turn that rhetoric into reality. To take just one example, my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State pointed out that the Government’s target of spending 2.4% of GDP on research and development by 2027 is inadequate. By contrast, Labour would raise investment in R&D to 3% by 2030, ensuring that the UK has the greatest proportion of high-skilled jobs in the OECD as a consequence. My hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon and for Glasgow North East called for just such an economy.

The Government’s strategy is not only under-resourced but sectoral, favouring sectors and areas that are already well organised and can push to the front of the queue. As Sheffield Hallam University researchers found last year, the Government’s pledges would have an impact on only 10% of our manufacturing base and only 1% of the whole economy. Many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire, considered the implications of this disparity for their constituencies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North implied, this is not so much about picking winners as rewarding those who have already won.

Let me take one example: Cambridge, a city that has contributed so much to the country’s innovation economy. With a population of 285,000, it has as many private R&D jobs as the whole of the north, which has 50 times more people. This must not be an either/or. We need an industrial strategy that maintains our current centres of excellence, while ensuring that other areas can grow successful innovation-intensive economies as we move outside the European Union. Unlike the Government, we are not just focusing on headline-grabbing tech trends. We are committed to putting innovation at the heart of the lowest-paid and least productive sectors, for example by creating a retail catapult to support the 2.8 million people in our retail sector.

The Government’s industrial strategy has no strategy to it and it has nothing to say about the fundamental workings of our economy. As the world-leading economist Mariana Mazzucato argues in her new book, “The Value of Everything”, at the heart of capitalism’s fundamental failure is the two faces of financialisation. The first is the way in which the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy. Instead of investing in companies that produce stuff, finance is financing finance. Why would someone lend money for a manufacturing plant that can take years to yield a return and cannot easily be sold on when they could bet on some options hedged with other options and virtually guarantee a return in a few weeks? With so much financial engineering demanding investment, real engineering does not stand a chance.

The second is the financialisation of the real economy. With industry driven by short-term returns, this results in less reinvestment of profits and rising burdens of debt, which in a virtuous circle makes industry even more driven by short-term considerations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington emphasised, the sale of GKN to Melrose demonstrated that this Government are not prepared to step into defend our long-term economic industrial assets when they are under threat. Every time, short-term interest takes precedence.

We need a real industrial strategy that lays out a vision for the high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity economy that we want to build. As well as the two existing missions that my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State laid out earlier, our industrial strategy is based on a platform of strong horizontal policies—from our national education service making lifelong learning free at the point of use, to our £250 billion national transformation fund to deliver much-needed infrastructure improvements across our country and our diversity charter challenges to ensure that businesses draw on a wide range of talents.

Our approach is positive and practical. It speaks to the student who is anxious about their future, the single mum working two minimum wage jobs and the Redcar steelworker wanting a job to be proud of. It addresses the crisis in productivity, skills and wages that keeps us poorer, even with unemployment relatively low. The Secretary of State has already borrowed from our approach to an industrial strategy on more than one occasion—imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—and I urge him to do so again for the good of our economic future.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): We have had a really excellent debate today, as I think all right hon. and hon. Members would agree. One of the most important challenges facing this or any Government is seeing that the industrial sector—basically our economy—can develop in partnership with the Government.

In my brief career as an A-level economics student in the late ’70s, I visited a regional Nddy in Newcastle. We also went to London—it was the first time I had been to London, although not the last—to see how they worked. It seemed to me, at that time, to be civil servants and Ministers deciding which companies to pick. That is not what we are doing. This is a groundbreaking partnership involving the Government and industry working together. In my time at the Department, I have seen it involve hundreds of companies in a real way.

Norman Lamb: The Minister will be aware of the small business research initiative and the report, commissioned by the Government and prepared by David Connell, that was published last November. It is a really good report, but there has been no Government response. Will he or the Secretary of State be willing to meet me, in my role as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, to discuss the report?

Richard Harrington: Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I would be delighted to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss that important matter.
As I was saying, I have seen many companies involved in this industrial strategy. It is much more than the same few companies that are used to lobbying the Government from the centre. That is one of the great achievements. The shadow Secretary of State and shadow Minister made partisan speeches—the former rather more than the latter, I might say—and I could spend a long time rebutting them, but time does not allow. I must, however, respond to a few of their points. The shadow Secretary of State said there was no guidance for sector deals. It is all in the White Paper—there are six of them—and I am very happy to send her a copy. In fact, she can choose from one of the many languages that it is printed in. I will send her one of each.

The shadow Secretary of State said there was not enough research and development and that this was all hot air, but actually it lays a pathway for the biggest increase for 40 years. There is an extra £7 billion of research and development funding to 2022. After the 2.4% target, we are aiming for 3% and to be world class. She also mentioned, as did several of her colleagues, the issue of steel. We have had regular meetings with the managements of all the steel companies. I have visited two steel companies in the last week. Moreover, everyone in the Government, from the Prime Minister down, has been involved with the situation regarding President Trump and the United States. As for the sector deals, we are regularly talking about them with unions and companies alike. So this is not, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), and the recent announcement not to support it.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I hope the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, but I do not have time to give way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned a town deal for Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and I heard him speak very eloquently about it. There has been a meeting, and it is an absolute priority for us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) mentioned an aerospace growth partnership. This shows, as he knows, the benefits of a strategy that involves business and the Government working together. That is an intelligent way to channel money from business and from the Government together, which really summarises what the whole industrial strategy is about.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am very sorry, but there is not time to give way.

Following an Adjournment debate held by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), I have met representatives of the ceramics industry and we are making progress—thanks to his efforts and those of other Members of Parliament, as well as the efforts of Laura Cohen and Kevin Oakes. We understand the ceramics business and we hope to be able to progress matters with them.

I thought at first that my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) was living in the 1840s, but the only person I know who does that is the Leader of the Opposition and he is not in the Chamber this afternoon. My hon. Friend showed us very eloquently that the lessons of the 1840s and the Government’s responsibility to harness developing technology go absolutely to the centre of the industrial strategy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) talked about the skills gap in Wiltshire—another important aspect of the industrial strategy—and mentioned a retraining scheme, which is about people and places. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mentioned many sectors in Chelmsford. She showed that she had really read the industrial strategy and seen what it means in her constituency, and she is continuing to support it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said that Birmingham is better than Manchester. I cannot comment on that, although I would say that neither of them is as good as Watford, but you would expect me to say that. Mr Speaker. Seriously, she continues to argue for a town deal for Redditch, and I am very happy to meet her to discuss the idea of a free port.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is absolutely right to say that the University of Stirling is a jewel. Our universities are jewels, but the industrial strategy is helping them to work together with business and the commercial world, as I saw only two weeks ago when I helped to launch a new science hub at the University of Hertfordshire.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: As hon. Members will know, I usually do my absolute best to take interventions, but I cannot do so on this occasion.

The attitudes we have demonstrated are based on fact, not fantasy. This industrial strategy is absolutely real, as well as imaginative, rounded and ambitious. We have had such attitudes for centuries—this goes back to the point about 1841—but this is the way in which the
relationship between the Government and business will evolve. Those attitudes are a source of strength, just as our world-leading universities, businesses and workers are a source of strength. I believe that such attitudes are unique to the United Kingdom and, in combination, they are an asset that no other country can match in the same way.

The industrial strategy builds on our existing strengths and addresses any weaknesses. There is a wealth of potential in this country, and it is our duty to see it realised. It is my contention, and that of the Government, that our industrial strategy, which is available in as many languages as people want, will help this potential to be realised and will build an economy that is—I think this is the expression, which you may have heard before, Mr Speaker—fit for the future. I am very proud of it, and it is my job, and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to see it delivered in the weeks, months and years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Industrial Strategy.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We are coming to motion 5. Does the hon. Gentleman have to make his point of order now—if he does, I will hear it—or is he anticipating events?

Mr Bone: I am anticipating events. We will see what happens.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman always has a keen sense of what is about to follow, which, colleagues—I merely remind you; you will be keenly aware of it—is motion 5. I call the Whip to move.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Not moved.

Mr Bone: I beg to move, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman is a signatory to the motion and therefore he is entitled to move it.

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRS (TERM LIMITS)

Resolved.

That this House approves the Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, Term limits for select committee chairs in the 2017 Parliament, HC 816; and accordingly that for the remainder of the present Parliament Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees) shall be read as if the word ‘ten’ were substituted for the word ‘eight’ in the text of that Order.—(Mr Bone.)

PETITION

Park Rangers in Wrexham County Borough Council

7 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I rise to present the petition of residents in Cefn Mawr in Clwyd South. First, let me say a special thank you to the tireless campaigners of Cefn branch Labour party, who have collected many signatures to save our wonderful park rangers service and protect the beautiful Ty Mawr country park.

The petition of residents of Cefn Mawr in Clwyd South, Declares that nature parks are an important part of our environmental heritage; further that they provide an area in which residents and visitors can enjoy nature and open spaces and play a vital role in the conservation and protection of nature; and further that local country parks including Ty Mawr Country Park, Nant Mill Country Park and Alyn Waters Country Park are well used by the community and attract visitors to the area, therefore helping to support the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge Wrexham County Borough Council to reverse their decision to reduce funding for Park Rangers, whose role is vital to the continued existence of unspoilt country parks in Clwyd South constituency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Thameslink Upgrades

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

7.2 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to discuss this issue and for meeting me to discuss it previously. I also thank the Secretary of State for the numerous conversations about it that we have had in recent weeks. I have been forced to initiate this debate to ensure that Harpenden commuters get the good service that they deserve and pay good money for, rather than facing years of disruption and a worse service.

Lest I forget to mention the other half of my constituency, let me say at the outset that I am very aware of concern about the changes in the timetable for trains travelling from Hitchin station—in the north of my constituency—as well as those travelling from Harpenden. I will correspond with the Minister on that in due course and in further detail, but it will not constitute the main thrust of my remarks this evening.

I am sure that the desired outcome for Thameslink is, eventually, a greatly improved service throughout the network, but the immediate negative impact on commuters in Harpenden for the next two years is unacceptable to my constituents and to me. The key issue is a loss of services during peak morning and evening hours. Thameslink deems the peak morning period to be between 7 am and 9.59 am, which has led to much disagreement between Harpenden commuters—and myself—and the operator. Regardless of what Thameslink calls the “peak”, most commuters from Harpenden travel to work between the hours of 6.30 am and 8.30 am, and between these times Harpenden will see a net loss in service of two fast trains. These fast trains are only partly compensated for by lengthening some trains from eight to 12 carriages, and Thameslink putting on extra trains after 9 am to meet its peak-time requirements is not going to help anybody trying to get to work on time in London. In practical terms, the overall loss is eight carriages in that key two-hour slot, which represents a loss of capacity for over 1,100 people, who will mostly have to stand.

Not only is the current demand from Harpenden station to London extremely high, but in addition there will be an increased number of passengers on the train before it gets to Harpenden station, as East Midlands Trains is reducing the number of trains stopping at Bedford, so many thousands of effectively new commuters will also be using these services. To sum up, Harpenden is getting a reduction in service and an increase in passengers—and I am not even getting into the general growth of Harpenden as a town over the next couple of years—making the commute not merely inconvenient but, for many, unbearable.

Let us compare this situation with that for St Albans, a town not far from Harpenden. Commuters from St Albans will be gaining fast trains during peak hours, as well as slow trains, and a net increase of 44 carriages. To put that in context, that is six times the number that Harpenden is losing. I am fully aware that St Albans has doubled the footfall of Harpenden, but it would be clear to any objective observer that a considered approach by Thameslink and Network Rail should not lead to such a discrepancy.

I am a realist—as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker; you know me—and I recognise that changes will always need to be made to train timetables, but consultation for changes is, and should always be, key, not just because people deserve the chance to have their say on changes that can significantly affect their working lives and their lives more generally, but because it gives a chance to inform local people how proposed changes can be improved for all concerned.

There was an embarrassing lack of consultation on these changes. The Minister has admitted that there was never going to be a consultation because it would be “disingenuous” to consult as there were no “genuine options”. That is not good enough for a timetable change of this scale. I have had several meetings over the past few weeks with experts on these matters, with expertise from the technical—it took me a while to understand what they were talking about, but I got there—to the bureaucratic and organisational. Some of those experts live in Harpenden but others live outside. They said to me that alternative choices could have been made that impact on Harpenden, and the entire line more broadly, much less and much more evenly.

In addition to hearing the Minister’s response on the lack of consultation, I would like to know what measures Thameslink intends to take to monitor the impact of the timetable changes that will be introduced in May over the coming months, to reassess them in the autumn and offer a clear timescale on when customers can finally expect to see improvements. What commitment is there to listen to and, more importantly, act on feedback from customers following the introduction of the proposed timetable changes?

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He will understand that the changes for his commuters from Harpenden and mine from Luton are a direct result of East Midlands trains being taken out in the peak in the mornings and the running of fast services to replace that. He is right to say that speed is of the essence, and making sure this situation is not prolonged for three years or so is something on which the Minister should focus.

Bim Afolami: The hon. Gentleman is well informed on these issues and is generally well informed when he speaks in the House. The focus of my remarks is Harpenden, but I agree that this affects many colleagues on both sides of the House, and I urge the Minister to bear all these specific concerns in mind.

It is a term of the franchise agreement between Thameslink and the Department for Transport that if there is a “material adverse impact” on passengers because of changes, there must be a 12-week consultation period. Before the debate, I asked the Minister and the Secretary of State several times whether they agreed that these changes did in fact represent a material adverse impact. I also asked them how, if they disagreed, they would characterise the changes.

I want to make this point clear to the House. The impact of these timetable changes goes beyond just changing what time people arrive at work or at home. A key issue that has been raised with me time and again is the impact on working parents, especially working mothers. Working parents have particularly tight windows for...
getting into work and getting home. I know, as the parent to two small boys, Zach and Sam, and as the husband of a working mother, that organising childcare around this programme is a hugely important factor in any working parent’s day. It is therefore unacceptable for Thameslink’s changes to cause so much disruption to so many people.

Let me describe the impact of these changes on my constituents. I shall use as examples two people who have emailed me about this matter. The first constituent states:

“I am a mother of three school age children and am recovering from breast cancer. In the recent months, I have chosen to catch a semi fast service, 0718, to be able to get a seat to minimise the stress and impact on my health. This service will no longer stop at Harpenden. I will have to catch an earlier train on which there is unlikely to be seats due both to the reduction in trains and the fact that Thameslink will have thousands of extra customers a day due to East Midland Trains reducing the services stopping at Bedford and Luton. I am concerned about the impact on my health, my ability to get to work on time and on the time I can spend with my children.”

The second constituent has said:

“I fear for my wife who has to drop our son at nursery at 0730 and therefore has no option but to travel at an already busy time. I can’t see anything other than a negative impact for her on what is already a far from ideal journey given the current numbers of people using those services, lack of space and seats. The return journey may be considerably worse than today and the reduction in services could potentially make it difficult to get back to the nursery on time, particularly when there are problems with track or trains.”

Those are just two examples, but similar concerns have been repeated again and again by worried parents and by people across Harpenden of all ages and circumstances who commute to London for work.

I accept—and I am sure the Minister will agree—that dealing with Britain’s train network is a real challenge for the Department, for Network Rail and for the Ministers and senior civil servants involved. Overcrowding on the network is nothing new, with rail passenger journeys more than doubling in the last 20 years. St Pancras is a key destination for Harpenden commuters, and at that station alone, more than 36,000 passengers arrive during the morning peak, with another 30,000 going to Blackfriars station, which has the worst overcrowding in London. Passenger numbers on the trains from Harpenden have grown year on year, with the service now bursting at the seams, as any Harpenden commuter who gets on the train at peak time will tell us.

The use of Thameslink has grown faster than was expected when the programme began. The predicted yearly increase in passenger numbers was between 0.5% and 1% over the lifetime of the Thameslink programme. However, Thameslink now carries 40% more passengers than it did seven years ago. The Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a proud member, has reported on Thameslink’s problems and recently found that the knock-on effect of issues along the entire Thameslink network means that the number of trains reaching their destination within five minutes of their scheduled time has fallen from 91.4% to 83%.

It is important to make the point that the growth in passenger numbers is an indication of the success of the service. Harpenden would not be such a desirable place to live if the service was not, broadly speaking, a good one. However, with that passenger growth comes the immense challenge of managing it appropriately and keeping costs down for passengers, and I am afraid that Thameslink appears to be falling on both counts.

Bearing in mind the extent of overcrowding and the increasingly stretched service that I have described, Harpenden commuters into London currently pay just over £3,800 a year for an annual ticket, and well over £4,000 if a tube travelcard is included, which most commuters need. By comparison, a season ticket from Woking—I have nothing against Woking: they are very nice people—which is a similar distance from London, is £400 cheaper. Basildon—again, a wonderful place with nice people—to London is £1,000 cheaper for a similar distance. My point is that Harpenden commuters are paying their fair share. They are travelling the same distance for more money and face a real disruption to services without any compensation.

All the issues—the timetable changes, delayed services and overcrowding—have caused huge concern for my constituents and have resulted in me raising questions repeatedly with both the Secretary of State and the Minister. In respect of the upcoming changes, due to come into force on 21 May after at least two years, there are some key questions that need to be addressed that have so far gone unanswered.

First, when was the decision made to make changes to East Midlands trains that would impact Harpenden? At what stage were changes to Harpenden’s services considered and decided upon? Secondly, will the Minister explain why Harpenden is experiencing a loss in services during peak morning and evening times, while St Albans, as I have described, is experiencing a big increase, especially considering the increased footfall from Bedford through Harpenden?

Thirdly, given the increase in passenger numbers combined with a reduction in frequency and capacity of service, what will be the impact on Harpenden commuters of Bedford passengers travelling on Thameslink services during peak times? How many more passengers will be on the London trains arriving in Harpenden in the morning as a result of the timetable changes?

Fourthly, by Govia Thameslink Railway’s own admittance, some of the proposed improvements that will come into effect at the end of 2018 are at the mercy of engineering works further down the line in Kent. What is the risk realistically that those works will not be completed in time, therefore extending even further the problems that Harpenden commuters are facing? Fifthly, there is huge concern about the lack of consultation with local people, despite the material adverse impact to services of timetable changes. To add insult to injury, Thameslink still claims that the service will not be significantly impacted. Does the Minister agree that there will be a material adverse change and that there should have been a consultation? If he does not, how does he view the changes? Finally, and most importantly, when will Harpenden commuters get the service they deserve and have been promised for so long?

I have not come to the Chamber just to complain. There are proposed solutions available that could be implemented as soon as May, despite the insistence from senior officials at GTR that they are not workable. I put several suggestions to GTR officials when we met a few weeks ago, yet there has been no consultation to discuss the alternatives. One suggestion is that five trains from Bedford to London should stop at Harpenden...
in addition to stopping at St Albans, which would add between three and four minutes to the journey, I understand that there are complexities in getting all the trains to London at a reasonable time, bearing in mind the extra three or four minutes, but the experts to whom I have spoken do not believe that they are insurmountable. Another simpler solution that would increase capacity, although it would not solve the issue of train frequency, would be for the Minister to declassify all first-class carriages during peak times. That would give some much-needed relief to passengers on what will be an increasingly overcrowded service.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Harpenden Thameslink Commuters Group, notably Emily Ketchin, for its tireless campaigning and lobbying. Harpenden councillors have not been far behind, particularly Mary Maynard and Teresa Heritage, and I thank them for helping me to understand how much the changes have affected Harpenden residents.

There will be those, not in this Chamber now but outside, who do not think timetable changes or impacts on commuters are really that important, but I believe that that is of critical importance, and not just to the individual passengers, as I have set out. If we want to keep London and the south-east as the most dynamic regional economy in Europe, people need to be able to get to work on time, not packed like cattle, at a reasonable price. Importantly, when major changes are made to their service—such changes must happen from time to time—passengers should be consulted and treated like adults and paying customers.

I know that the Minister wants to do his best for Harpenden commuters. I also know that he is a highly intelligent and thoughtful man, as the whole House will appreciate. I ask him to consider carefully the concerns of Harpenden commuters that I have expressed in this debate, to give them hope that the future will be better with an improved, not reduced, service, and to strengthen their damaged faith in our rail transport network.

7.20 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** I congratulate my hon. Friend. The Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) on securing this debate, which follows on from our conversations in meetings we held on 22 March.

I begin with the specific issue of the changes to the timetable. Harpenden is on the midland main line, which runs from London to Nottingham and Sheffield and, as Members know, is undergoing its largest upgrade since it was built in the 19th century. The upgrade is necessary and urgent, as the number of passenger journeys taken on Britain’s rail network has doubled in the past 20 years. As part of the upgrade, a fourth track is being built north of Bedford to Kettering and will provide space for an additional train path from December 2020. Unfortunately, to allow the works to take place, some difficult decisions have had to be taken.

East Midlands Trains fast peak-time services will not call at Bedford or Luton from May 2018 to December 2020. Instead, displaced East Midlands Trains passengers from Bedford and Luton will be able to travel on fast Thameslink services, which will not stop at Harpenden. In answer to my hon. Friend’s first question, the decision was made in November 2017, once the industry had exhausted all alternative options.

Obviously, I completely understand the concerns of commuters from my hon. Friend’s constituency. However, steps have been taken so that, despite the unavoidable loss of two fast peak services, overall the capacity from Harpenden in the morning will be roughly the same as today, with only four fewer carriages across the entire three-hour morning peak. There will be an increase in capacity during the evening peak, with an additional 20 carriages bringing an additional 1,242 seats. In addition, it is expected that most Bedford commuters will opt to take the fast Thameslink services, rather than those that stop at Harpenden. It is possible that that will reduce, rather than increase, crowding on Harpenden services.

My hon. Friend raises the issue of St Albans City station, which requires a capacity increase because, as he acknowledges, it carries twice as many passengers as Harpenden and already has issues of its own with crowding on platforms. On the potential for engineering works in Kent to delay the improvements to Harpenden, these are minor works and are currently on schedule to be completed on time. There is minimal risk to passengers from Harpenden.

From December 2018, an additional service will be scheduled in both the morning and evening peaks, and two trains will be lengthened from eight to 12 carriages. That will provide a capacity increase in both peaks. From December 2020, when the upgrade to the midland main line is complete, Thameslink will reinstate the fast services that have been withdrawn and will add four more 12-car peak services at Harpenden, resulting in an additional two fast 12-car trains per hour compared with the May timetable. That will provide a substantially improved service for Harpenden commuters.

I apologise again to my hon. Friend as the full benefits of the Thameslink programme will be delayed for commuters from his constituency. In the context of the major engineering works necessary to bring the midland main line into the 21st century, this was the best available solution. We should also not lose sight of the many benefits the Thameslink programme will bring to passengers from Harpenden and the wider Thameslink network: new trains; more reliable journeys; and a substantial increase in capacity from 2020.

My hon. Friend mentioned the problems with consultation, which, again, we have discussed extensively in our previous meetings. I would like to emphasise that ahead of this timetable change Thameslink has carried out one of the largest and, in some ways, most effective consultations we have ever seen on the railways. In fact, as a result of these consultations, Thameslink has made hundreds of changes to its plans.

**Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con):** May I endorse what the Minister has just said, in that we see a net benefit in my constituency from the changes to the timetable and I have encountered constituents who are very impressed with changes that have been made as a result of the consultation? However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), one station, in particular, in my constituency is losing services during that critical peak time, when people need to get into London to work. In addition to dealing with the questions he has been asked, will the Minister assure the House
that this issue will continue to be kept under review and we will be able to look at it again when we see the full import of the timetable and its impact on our commuters?

Joseph Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to our attention the issues faced by his constituents, particularly at Balcombe station. There will be further opportunities to lobby for changes to the timetable at the next iteration; May’s is obviously set in stone, but there will always be a December timetable and subsequent timetables, so these things are not set in stone. This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the network has ever seen and, understandably, not everything is going to satisfy everybody at every moment in time.

Mr Shuker: I am extremely grateful to hear that from the Minister. Of course, it is a rolling series of timetable changes over the next three years, at six-monthly intervals. Members in this House will be extremely grateful to hear the Minister’s willingness to keep a close eye on things at each of those timetable changes, rather than necessarily relying on the plan as it currently stands to go for two and a half years.

Joseph Johnson: This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the system has ever undertaken, and as I have said, it will not have satisfied everybody in its first iteration. However, December is coming along in not too lengthy a period of time, and hon. Members are always welcome to put suggestions to the Department and to their operators for consideration.

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House of Commons

Thursday 19 April 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rail Fares

1. Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to simplify rail fares.

Joseph Johnson: I can indeed confirm that the Department has taken on additional resource specifically to address the anomalies within the Govia Thameslink Railway fare structure. As the hon. Gentleman said, there will be a review in order to simplify the structure, with particular reference to complications on that route. We are working with GTR to achieve this as rapidly as we can.

2. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What his policy is on the operation of passenger services on the west coast main line after the completion of High Speed 2; and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): As my hon. Friend knows, once High Speed 2 comes into operation it will move the express trains off the existing west coast main line and on to the new route. That will provide a great opportunity to improve services to intermediate stops such as Lichfield that do not have a good enough service at the moment.

Michael Fabricant: I am slightly reassured by that answer. The Secretary of State talks about moving express trains off the west coast main line, but of course we currently have a very good Pendolino service and the slower West Midlands trains. Several hundred of my constituents commute to London every single day. What assurance can the Secretary of State give them that the Pendolinos will be replaced with equally fast trains when they come to the end of their life cycle?

Chris Grayling: The Pendolinos have many years to go, and I have no doubt that they will be replaced by a high-quality fast train in the future. My hon. Friend will have stood on the platform at Lichfield station and seen trains to Liverpool, Manchester and Scotland zooming past at high speed. The new plans will provide an opportunity for more trains to stop at Lichfield.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows well that I believe that HS2 is a vanity project that will never come to fruition. He knows that my constituents in the booming town of Huddersfield, which he visited recently, have access to the west coast line and the east coast line, but most of all they want a good trans-Pennine connection everywhere.

Chris Grayling: Absolutely, which is why I have already announced that the £2.9 billion upgrade of the trans-Pennine line will begin this time next year, as the start of a transformation that is vital to the north. In the coming months we will also see the arrival of the first of a complete new set of trains across the north of England that will transform passengers’ experience.

3. Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am grateful for the Minister’s letter of this week, saying that his Department is taking on extra resource to simplify the fare structure on the Brighton main line. Will he reassure passengers in the area that that simplification will involve the rounding down of fares, not just rounding up? Will he also tell passengers when they can expect the review to complete?

Joseph Johnson: Simplification of ticketing and ease of understanding for passengers is extremely important, as is ensuring that passengers have access to the fares that are right for them. It is important that train operating companies look carefully at their ticketing arrangements to ensure that that is the case.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is simpler necessarily cheaper? Because if there is a choice...

Joseph Johnson: Simplier may be cheaper, and there may also be circumstances in which it leads to cost increases. It is important that we achieve a system that is comprehensible, in which passengers do not have to struggle for hours to work out which ticket is the right one for them. Following the 2016 fares and ticketing action plan, we introduced advance tickets for sale on the day of travel that benefit hundreds of thousands of passengers.

Mr Speaker: I think we will take that as a no.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, by 31 December 2018, almost all passengers will have the choice of a smart ticket, making buying a ticket easier and giving passengers much greater choice.
enough. We need certainty now. If he will not commit to upgrading the west coast main line north of Crewe, will he look into procuring trains that can tilt and travel on the high-speed network?

**Chris Grayling:** The new classic-compatible trains and the arrival of HS2 up to the north-west of England will of course mean more speedy journey times to Scotland. I know the hon. Gentleman’s party’s view. We want to see further improvements through the 2020s to the west coast main line north of Crewe to ensure that we improve journey times. We want the best possible journey times across the whole network, and will continue to work for that.

**HS2: Chesterfield Canal Land Purchase**

3. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What information his Department holds on plans by HS2 Ltd to purchase land close to Chesterfield canal; and if he will make a statement. [904811]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** HS2 Ltd will bring forward a draft environmental statement for phase 2b later this year, which will provide greater detail on the land requirements for the construction, maintenance and operation of phase 2b of HS2 and proposed mitigation. This will then be consulted on, and HS2 Ltd will continue to seek the input of landowners, local communities and stakeholders as the design of the railway is developed.

**Toby Perkins:** HS2 is an incredibly important regeneration project, but so is Chesterfield canal, which has had five years of blight, being unable to make applications because of the uncertainty around HS2. Near the maintenance depot that is proposed for Staveley, there is a piece of land currently owned by Network Rail that needs to pass over to HS2. May I encourage the Minister to ask HS2 to get on with taking over ownership of that land so that Chesterfield canal can finally put forward plans to apply for new funding and reduce that blight?

**Ms Ghani:** Let me assure the hon. Gentleman that HS2 Ltd is working with Chesterfield Canal Trust and is committed to finding a solution. HS2 Ltd will be more than happy to meet him to discuss the Staveley design proposals and the interface with Chesterfield canal. I also assure him, however, that Chesterfield Canal Trust has recently publicly said that it is pleased with the recent commitment from HS2 Ltd and is now more confident that a solution will be found.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): Two HS2 lines go through Derbyshire—the one that goes through Newton and the other that is now apparently going to create difficulties on Chesterfield canal. We have heard reference to the question of the real cost of HS2, as it changes quite often. What is the latest cost, taking into account those two railway tracks through Derbyshire?

**Ms Ghani:** As I said, Chesterfield Canal Trust is working with HS2 Ltd and is happy with the relationship they have and the potential outcome regarding the canal area. The hon. Gentleman has reservations about, and has consistently raised, the cost of HS2, but it is on budget and on time. We must not forget that once HS2 is up and running, it will be the backbone of this country, bringing along with it 100,000 jobs.

**Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab):** The Secretary of State is supporting the sale of Network Rail’s property assets. The Federation of Small Businesses says that this will put small companies out of business because the new private owner will rapidly rack up rents, which will restrict key developments in places such as Chesterfield. Does he not see that the sell-off will lose the railway valuable and vitally important income?

**Mr Speaker:** Minister.

**Hon. Members:** Come on!

**Ms Ghani:** I apologise hugely, Mr Speaker—I had a momentary lapse. I have no idea how to respond. Forgive me—I will take some direction from you.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us hear it again.

**Andy McDonald:** The Secretary of State is supporting the sale of Network Rail’s property assets. The Federation of Small Businesses says that this will put small companies out of business because the new private owner will rapidly rack up rents, which will restrict key developments in places such as Chesterfield. Does he not see that the sell-off will lose the railway valuable and vitally important income?

**Ms Ghani:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for repeating himself. The Secretary of State met the FSB yesterday and discussions on negotiations are ongoing.

**Andy McDonald:** In 2015, the DFT accepted Sir Peter Hendy’s plan to sell £1.8 billion of Network Rail property. These assets are now worth only £1 billion but generate £90 million of revenue each year. How can the Secretary of State still argue that this sell-off of the family silver makes sense? Is it not clear that his plan will cost Network Rail and British taxpayers dearly?

**Ms Ghani:** The Secretary of State will continue to realise assets when he can. We will then reinvest them in the railway network.

**Regional Spending**

4. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the equity of transport spending between regions. [904812]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** Transport investment decisions are made based on a rigorous and fair appraisal process that ensures that spending goes where it is needed and delivers greatest value for money. Recent analysis by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority suggests that, in contrast to the five years leading up to 2010, planned central Government transport capital spending per head between 2017-18 and 2020-21 is expected to be higher in the north than in the south. That includes, as the hon. Lady will be pleased to learn, £337 million for new Tyne and Wear Metro rolling stock in her constituency.

**Chi Onwurah:** Since 2010, transport spending in London has been more than twice that in the whole of the north, and the Government’s own northern powerhouse says that underinvestment stops us exploiting strengths in manufacturing, energy, health and digital, which could transform the lives of my constituents. The Minister’s
own Transport for the North says that it will cost £27 billion to transform the north’s economy by taking advantage of those strengths: will he commit to funding it?

Joseph Johnson: We are undertaking unprecedented investment in the north of England—£13 billion, which is the largest in Government history. Of course, we want to do more to ensure that we are building proper transport links and growing the northern powerhouse, which is why we have created Transport for the North and put it on a statutory footing. Over the recess, I was delighted to attend its very first board meeting as a statutory body.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Instead of applying Barnett, why does the Minister not support his Department’s recommendation of £4.2 billion of funding for Scotland?

Joseph Johnson: Scotland will receive significantly greater resources in the next control period between 2019 and 2024 than it has in any period in this country’s history.

Shipley: Eastern Bypass

5. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If his Department will fund an eastern bypass for Shipley.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Top o’ the morning to you, Mr Speaker. The Government have allocated significant resources to west Yorkshire for local transport schemes, including £781 million over 30 years from local growth funding and other sources, but Bradford Council has not yet brought forward that scheme for funding. Our consultation on the major roads network, which could provide another funding route for such schemes, has recently closed. We will respond to the consultation in due course.

Philip Davies: May I place on record my thanks to the Secretary of State for the interest he has shown in developing a Shipley eastern bypass, especially when he visited the area last year? That was in sharp contrast to Bradford Council, which has shown zero interest in developing such a bypass, despite it being much needed by local residents. The council has not even come up with the costs of development that the Secretary of State for the interest he has shown in developing a Shipley eastern bypass, especially when he visited the area last year? That was in sharp contrast to Bradford Council, which has shown zero interest in developing such a bypass, despite it being much needed by local residents. The council has not even come up with the costs of development that the Secretary of State has to reduce the number of people affected by aircraft noise near Heathrow airport.

Joseph Johnson: We are undertaking unprecedented investment in the north of England—£13 billion, which is the largest in Government history. Of course, we want to do more to ensure that we are building proper transport links and growing the northern powerhouse, which is why we have created Transport for the North and put it on a statutory footing. Over the recess, I was delighted to attend its very first board meeting as a statutory body.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government set noise controls at Heathrow airport, including total noise limits and aircraft movement limits for night flights. These controls, in conjunction with stricter aircraft noise standards negotiated by the UK at the international level, have resulted in a long-term reduction in the number of people affected by aircraft noise near the airport.

Ruth Cadbury: A freedom of information request revealed Government analysis that expects nearly a million households to face increased daytime noise if Heathrow is allowed to build a third runway. Will the Secretary of State visit my constituents, tens of thousands of whom will face significantly worse noise if the third runway goes ahead, and for whom no amount of noise insulation will be acceptable?

Chris Grayling: I have been in the hon. Lady’s constituency on many occasions and heard the noise there, and I am very pleased that, over the last 20 years, we have seen a steady reduction in aircraft noise. That is expected to continue as a new generation of aircraft appear in greater numbers. The projections show that, as we enter the 2030s with that change in aircraft fleet, we do not expect an overall noise impact on people around the airport. Nor do we expect an increase in the number of people within the 54 dB bracket, precisely because a new generation of lower-noise aircraft—they will also be lower-emission and lower-fuel consuming aircraft—will mean a quieter airport generally.

Adam Afriyie: The aviation national policy statement states that about 93,000 more people will be significantly affected by noise if the third runway goes ahead, yet Civil Aviation Authority figures indicate that more than 2 million people will be affected. Will the Government acknowledge that vast disparity in numbers, and will they update the aviation national policy statement?

Chris Grayling: Before the aviation national policy statement is brought to the House, it will be updated off the back of work done by the Transport Committee and the public consultations that have taken place—it will be a refreshed document when it comes before the House. The impact of noise on residents around Heathrow depends on an assessment of the rate of arrival of that new generation of aircraft. As we get into the 2030s, we expect no overall increase in the number of people in the 54 dB noise barrier because of the arrival of those new aircraft. There may be a short period in the mid-2020s when there is a small increase, depending on the airport’s rate of growth and the development of the aircraft fleet, but any such increase will be a short-term one.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): When will we get a new train service between Reading and Heathrow? That will help to reduce noise and get Welsh travellers to the airport.

Chris Grayling: Western rail access to Heathrow is part of our plans for control period 6, and I expect construction to start between 2019 and 2024. The hon.
Gentleman will be aware that I recently invited the private sector to bring forward proposals for southern access as well, as part of a land and surface access package that will bring substantial increases to the capacity of rail links to Heathrow airport.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): These problems are not unique to Heathrow; they also affect areas around Gatwick, which has a lower level of ambient noise. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that any further lessons learned about how we reduce noise at Heathrow can be applied more generally?

Chris Grayling: They can be, and the point I did not make in my response to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) is that we are in the process of modernising the use of airspace in this country. I hope and believe that that will allow us to manage much more carefully respite for airports, and flight paths into and out of airports, and to do the best we can to minimise the impact of aviation on communities. There can be no situation where there is no impact, but I want us to do our best to ensure that that impact is as carefully managed and minimised as possible.

Electric Vehicles: Public Charging Points

7. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What steps is he taking to increase the number of public charging points for electric vehicles at commercial and industrial centres. [904816]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The UK is building one of the best global ChargePoint networks. Our new £400 million ChargePoint infrastructure investment fund will see thousands more charge points installed nationwide. We already provide grants to install charging stations in workplaces, homes and residential streets, and for buses and taxis. Through the Go Ultra Low city scheme, Bath—the hon. Lady’s constituency—and other cities are installing publicly accessible charging hubs. Also, the new Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill will encourage large fuel retailers to install charge points on their premises.

Wera Hobhouse: In Bath, the council is considering introducing a clean air zone, focusing particularly on older, more polluting vehicles, but that will disproportionately disadvantage the less well-off, who are more likely to own older vehicles. Will the Government consider a scrappage scheme for old vehicles to encourage the uptake of electric vehicles without disadvantage the less well-off in our city?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, we have recently made a new £11 million investment in hydrogen charging, so she is absolutely right that we take a technology-neutral view and that we seek to encourage different forms of technology wherever available. I will certainly talk to officials about what information we can place in the Library, but I think much of it is already in the public domain.

Leaving the EU: Aviation Industry

8. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the aviation industry after the UK leaves the EU. [904817]

9. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the aviation industry after the UK leaves the EU. [904828]

23. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the aviation industry after the UK leaves the EU. [904833]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I meet my right hon. Friends and Cabinet colleagues on a regular basis to discuss the UK’s exit from the EU. Ministers and officials across Departments are working closely to consider carefully the implications for the aviation sector after we leave the EU.

Carol Monaghan: Last month we heard that the first formal talks on a post-Brexit open skies deal with the US were cut short after US negotiators offered an inferior deal to the one we currently enjoy, so when does the Secretary of State plan to return to the negotiating table, and will he do so with a sense of reality about the impact that hard Brexit is having on the aviation industry?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady should not believe everything she reads in the papers. The discussions taking place between my Department and our counterparts in the United States have been cordial and have been going well. There are no issues that would act as an impediment towards a sensible post-Brexit agreement between the two countries.
Chris Grayling: Clearly, airline ownership is more complex as part of the European Union than it was in the pre-EU days, but nobody is seriously suggesting that we are not going to continue with the same kind of transatlantic partnerships we have at the moment. British Airways and American Airlines, for example, operate in lockstep with each other. We will progress in due time towards a sensible agreement that continues the extremely prosperous, important and successful transatlantic aviation routes.

Peter Grant: We have less than a year to sort this out. Already people who are attempting to book foreign holidays for next Easter, less than a year from now, are finding that they are having to accept a clause in the contract that waives any right to compensation if their holiday is cancelled because of problems with the lack of an open skies agreement. Is the Secretary of State trying to tell us that those reports from reputable travel agents are myths that we should not believe? Is it not a fact that the travel industry and the aviation industry understand how serious this problem is becoming and the Government, in their complacency, do not?

Chris Grayling: That is not accurate at all, as the hon. Gentleman will find if he listens to the chief executives of the International Airlines Group, EasyJet or a number of other airlines. I have had no airline, bar one, come to my desk and suggest that they are concerned about the situation. I think we know which the one is, and no other airline believes there is any likelihood of any impediment to aviation next year. Indeed, there will not be. Can you imagine, Mr Speaker, a situation where the Spanish, Italian, Portuguese or Greek Governments did not want holidaymakers to arrive from the United Kingdom in 2019? I have spoken to my counterparts and they snort with derision at the idea that the planes will not fly.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Snorting with derision may be the response the Secretary of State has had, but people in my constituency who work in the aviation industry are really concerned about how we are going to function outwith the European Aviation Safety Agency. Will he please tell us a bit more about how we are going to function outwith the EASA?

Chris Grayling: The Civil Aviation Authority is making all preparations necessary if it needs to return to operating as a body in the form that it used to be in. However, it is the Government’s policy and our intent to remain part of EASA. There is no reason not to: countries inside and outside the European Union are part of it, and we supply a substantial proportion of its expertise. The leadership of EASA wants us to stay, and I am confident that, as we get through the process of negotiation, that is where we will end up.

Rail Freight

9. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What plans he has to increase the proportion of freight carried by rail. [R]  [904818]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): In September 2016, the Government published a rail freight strategy setting out a vision for how the freight industry can grow. During control period 5, the Department is investing £235 million to improve the capacity of the network. Further funding for investment in the network will be available in control period 6.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister for his answer, but is the reality not that only a small proportion of freight in Britain is carried by rail, and that it has been declining? By contrast, a third of all freight in Germany is transported by rail, and in the US the figure is 50%. To achieve a substantial modal shift in freight from road to rail, is it not essential to introduce a much bigger programme—a major programme—of investment in rail freight capacity starting very soon?

Joseph Johnson: We share the hon. Gentleman’s ambition to support modal shift. The Government are always interested in hearing about ambitious schemes that would encourage that. As he will know, we recently launched a call for ideas for market-led proposals that will enhance the railway, and I encourage him to take part in that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Residents in north Oxford are gravely concerned about the increase in rail freight and particularly the possibility of the line being used to construct HS2. Children are already shaken out of their beds in the middle of the night because of freight trains. Will the Minister consent to meet me to discuss the concerns and, critically, the solutions, which include monitoring and speed reductions for the trains?

Joseph Johnson: I obviously sympathise with the hon. Lady’s local residents. The Government are committed to getting freight off our roads and on to rail to realise the environmental and economic benefits of rail freight. However, the Department does not specify the level of freight services on the network, as that is a commercial matter for the freight operating companies and is a function of market demand. The Oxford area is essentially at capacity during the day, although the Oxford corridor capacity improvement scheme will deliver two additional freight train paths an hour in each direction. It is anticipated that rail will support the movement of construction materials for HS2, but it is not possible at this stage to determine where the freight services will operate. The maximum permissible speed that freight trains can travel at over sections of the network is a matter for Network Rail as the infrastructure manager.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What plans he has to increase the proportion of freight carried by rail. [R]  [904819]
The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The Secretary of State’s ambition is for bi-modes to begin operating on the midland main line from 2021. No firm decision has yet been taken on rail services in the next east midlands franchise, which, as the hon. Gentleman will know, starts in August 2019.

Mr Betts: In the written statement that the Secretary of State made on 20 July, he promised, when cancelling electrification of the midland main line, “a brand new fleet of bi-mode...trains from 2022”.—[Official Report, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 72WS.]

We seem to have gained a year somehow. The National Audit Office then said in a report from 29 March:

“In the case of Midland Main Line, bi-mode trains with the required speed and acceleration did not exist when the Secretary of State made his decision”,

and that the Department had informed him of that. I ask the Secretary of State or the Minister why the Secretary of State promised in his written statement to deliver bi-modal trains, which he knew not merely did not exist but had not even been developed. That is the situation. Why, at the time, did he not give the House the full facts instead of leading us to believe something that possibly was not true and was corrected only when the NAO produced its report?

Joseph Johnson: Bi-mode trains capable of running at more than 120 mph in diesel mode are now in use on the Great Western main line. Bi-modes will soon be delivering better journeys on the east coast main line and transpennine routes as well.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am sorry, but that answer simply will not do. In relation to the midland main line, the NAO report reveals that at the time when the decision was made, the Secretary of State knew that bi-mode trains had “a poorer investment case” than electrification and would be worse polluters—actually, 25 times worse for carbon emissions. He also knew that the rolling stock required for that line—this is the crucial point in relation to the Minister’s response—would not exist, yet none of that information was in his statement to the House cancelling electrification. Does the Minister not accept that those were serious omissions?

Joseph Johnson: On the contrary, equivalent trains to the ones that will be in service were already operational. As I have just said, bi-mode trains that are capable of running at more than 120 mph in diesel mode are already now in use on the Great Western main line.

Great Western Main Line: Electrification

12. Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What discussions has he had with the Prime Minister on the cancellation of the electrification of the Great Western main line between Cardiff and Swansea.

[904821]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Prime Minister and I discussed Cardiff to Swansea at the time, and reached the view that spending hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money and causing massive disruption to passengers to enable the same trains to travel on the same route at the same speed to the same timetable as they do today was not actually a sensible thing to do.

Jonathan Edwards: We know from press reports issued during the Easter break that the Prime Minister personally made the decision to renege on an election promise to electrify the main line to Swansea on the basis of cost. Is not the reality that the British Government do not consider the west of my country worthy of investment?

Chris Grayling: We made the decisions about electrification on the midland main line and the line between Cardiff and Swansea on the simple basis that spending hundreds of millions or billions of pounds to achieve the same journey times in the same trains was not sensible. The trains on the Great Western route are already in operation, delivering services to people in Swansea, for whom it is a great and important investment. Trains on the midland main line require the addition of one engine to provide a little bit of extra acceleration, but they already exist, and will be great for that line as well. So let us hear none of this nonsense from Opposition Members. In fact, during the years when they were in government, this was their policy: they believed that what was important was capacity and delivery, not electrification, and I agreed with them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Facts matter. In a written statement on 20 July last year, the Secretary of State said that with bi-mode trains it would be possible to “achieve the same significant improvements to journeys”.—[Official Report, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 72WS.]

However, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), it is clear from National Audit Office reports that that statement cannot be correct.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Wrong question.

Rachael Maskell: No, this was about the Cardiff to Swansea route as well.

Why did the Secretary of State give those assurances?

Chris Grayling: Let us be clear. I stand by every word that I said then. We will deliver smart new trains and improved journey times for passengers on the midland main line, as we are currently doing and will continue to do on the Great Western main line, and as we will do on the east coast main line and the transpennine route. [Interruption] As I have said, we will also deliver new trains providing better services for passengers on the midland main line. The only difference made by £1 billion of spending would be a one-minute saving in the journey time, and that is not good value for taxpayers’ money.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that this is such an important matter, surely we should have a point of order on it.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman will know on the strength of his nearly 39 years of experience in the
House, the effect of a point of order during exchanges on a question is to cause all further exchanges on it immediately to cease. Fortunately for the hon. Gentleman, he does not risk becoming hugely unpopular as a result of his attempted point of order, for the simple reason that no one else was standing and seeking to catch my eye—other than the hon. Gentleman with his rather bogus, albeit enjoyable, point of order.

**Rail Reform**

13. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What his policy is on rail reform.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** The Secretary of State’s strategic vision for rail was published in November 2017, and sets out our key reforms. Better teamwork between franchise operators and Network Rail will make the railway more responsive to customers’ needs and move power closer to local areas.

**Luke Hall:** South Gloucestershire Council is pushing ahead with its plans to deliver a vital half-hourly train link from Yate to Bristol. Will my hon. Friend explain how his rail policies will help to achieve that, and will he consider visiting Yate so that he can see at first hand how important the upgrade is to our local community?

**Joseph Johnson:** Improving connectivity around our great cities, including Bristol, is exactly the kind of scheme that our reforms are designed to deliver. The Government will continue to work closely with local partners to deliver the MetroWest scheme in the Bristol area. We are also examining the potential for the new MetroWest services to be extended beyond their currently planned termini.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Tarmac’s Dunbar cement plant in East Lothian transports substantial amounts of its product down the east coast main line to London to fuel the construction industry here. What steps is the Minister taking, as part of his plan, to facilitate better engagement between passengers, rail freight users and Network Rail commuters?

**Joseph Johnson:** That is an important subject, which we hope the new east coast partnership will help to address.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I know the whole House will want to join me in congratulating the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on his engagement to Ann-Louise Whittaker, and may I say to the hon. Gentleman that, notwithstanding the fact that he is a very young man to be planning to rush into matrimony, we all wish him and Ann-Louise a very happy wedding on Friday 27 July?

**Robert Neill:** That is very kind, Mr Speaker; Ann-Louise and I are very grateful to you.
measure that allows services to arrive up to five minutes late at end destination will be replaced by timed to three, or T3, and that measure will be used for the services along this route.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Like my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), I wish the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) all the best.

After years of disruption due to the London Bridge rebuild, passengers discovered last week that Greenwich line evening services will not be of the frequency previously advertised after May because, according to Southeastern, it does not have enough drivers. Can Ministers do anything about this frankly risible situation?

Joseph Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that concern to my attention, and I will discuss it with Southeastern.

Fitness to Drive

15. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effectiveness of medical requirements for holding a driving licence in ensuring that drivers are fit to drive.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The current driver licensing arrangements take into account the risks that an individual poses to road safety and are designed to be fair and proportionate to all drivers who remain fit and competent to drive, regardless of age. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency keeps all its medical driver licensing policy and processes under review.

Kevin Foster: The Minister will be aware that the current system of car driving licence renewal includes no requirement at all for independent medical evidence to ensure that a driver’s health or eyesight meet the legal requirements. Does he agree that this self-certification process is inadequate and open to abuse, and will he agree to review it?

Jesse Norman: There is no evidence—certainly none that we are aware of or that has been brought to our attention—to suggest that requiring independent medical evidence in relation to a driver’s health or eyesight would lead to an improvement in road safety. The current process is balanced and proportionate and focuses resources on drivers who need medical investigation. These drivers—in fact, all drivers—are legally obliged to notify the DVLA if they develop a medical condition that could affect their ability to drive safely. Where a driver has failed to do so, the DVLA will investigate notifications from concerned friends, relatives, the police or medical professionals.

Dualling of the A45: Stanwick to Thrapston

16. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to conduct an environmental study of the dualling of the A45 between Stanwick and Thrapston.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The road investment strategy announced the Government’s intention to develop a scheme to upgrade the A45 between Stanwick and Thrapston to a full dual carriageway. The scheme is at an early stage of development and a preliminary environmental study will be carried out as part of this development work.

Tom Pursglove: This dualling is something that I have campaigned particularly hard for. It has the overwhelming support of local people and would do much to improve the strategically important link between the A14 and the M1. The environmental study is key to progress, so will the Minister join me in pushing for that work to be carried out as soon as possible?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend has been a tireless and energetic campaigner on this issue, as on so many others, and I can assure him that the environmental study will be one of the first items to be completed under the options assessment work.

HS2: Extension to Scotland

17. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of extending High Speed 2 to Scotland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): From the day phase 1 opens, HS2 trains will run directly to Scotland, with journey times of less than four hours between London and Glasgow. When the full Y network opens, HS2 will serve both Glasgow and Edinburgh in three hours 40 minutes to London. The Department for Transport is working closely with Transport Scotland and Network Rail to look at further options that might have a good business case, working towards the UK and Scottish Governments’ shared ultimate ambition of a three-hour journey time between London and Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: Will the Minister guarantee that, once HS2 is fully constructed, the journey time between Glasgow and Manchester will not be any longer than it is currently?

Ms Ghani: We have no reason to expect increases in journey times between Glasgow and Manchester as a result of HS2.

Rail Sleeper Services: Scotland to England

18. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support the provision of sleeper rail services between Scotland and England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In his autumn statement of 2011, the Chancellor announced a commitment to contribute £50 million towards the cost of improving and upgrading the Caledonian sleeper service, including rolling stock and infrastructure improvements. We understand that new rolling stock will start to be introduced in the autumn. Under the devolved arrangements relating to the railways in Scotland, the Caledonian sleeper service is the responsibility of the Scottish Government and operates under a franchise procured by Scottish Ministers.
Jamie Stone: The northern sleeper service is good for the environment, stress-free, fun and actually rather romantic. Does the Minister agree that further development would do much to boost tourism in the highlands and in my constituency?

Ms Ghani: We do like romance, and the new trains will offer improved facilities, comfort, hospitality and security for passengers. Passengers’ experience will be enhanced, supported by improved ticketing, booking channels and information, station improvements and support for post-travel arrangements. Staying on the theme of romance, I know that the hon. Gentleman has a particular interest in disability and access, for which these trains will be suitable, as he has a close family member with disability issues.

Mr Speaker: That sounds like a very agreeable adventure to me. I must obviously add it to my bucket list.

HS2: Phase 2b

20. Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What steps he has taken to implement phase 2b of High Speed 2. [904829]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In November 2016, the Government confirmed the majority of the HS2 phase 2b route and launched a consultation on seven route refinements. The Government made a decision on the phase 2b route in July 2017. To deposit the phase 2b hybrid Bill in 2019, HS2 Ltd is developing designs for the working draft environmental statement. The Government have provided funding for growth strategies to HS2 places, enabling the plans to be HS2-ready.

Graham Stringer: Can the Minister assure the House that the hybrid Bill for HS2 phase 2b will take precedence over Crossrail 2?

Ms Ghani: Consideration of the hybrid Bill will take place when it is due to take place in Parliament. It is interesting to note that we have had a lot of support from Members across the House; it would be nice for that support to be reflected when the Bill comes to the House, with all Members voting to support it rather than abstaining.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): We seem to have a lot of jobs created by HS2 in the midlands. How many have been created so far?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a passionate campaigner for the midlands and any opportunity I have to talk proudly about Birmingham in particular, is welcome. Over its course, HS2 will create 100,000 jobs. It is important to note that the majority of those jobs will be created outside London, so opportunities will be vast along the line.

Channel Fixed Link

21. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and with his French counterpart on constructing a fixed link across the Channel. [904831]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The Secretary of State and I have periodic discussions with our counterparts in our partner countries on a range of issues.

Patrick Grady: Well, can the Minister tell us, then, whether, as the question says, those discussions have included the concept of a new fixed link? The Foreign Secretary seems to think that it is a very good idea, but I am not clear whether anyone else in the Government or the Cabinet does.

Joseph Johnson: This is certainly an idea worth exploring. I repeat that this is a view shared not just in this Government but in the French Government. The hon. Gentleman will recall that at the conclusion of the highly successful Anglo-French summit it was agreed that there would be a committee of wise people, a comité des sages, established to consider reviving the tradition of UK-French collaboration on a range of matters, including infrastructure projects.

Mr Speaker: Well, I would call the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) if he were here, but he isn’t, so I won’t.

Topical Questions

T1. [904834] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We spend a lot of time talking about planes, trains and automobiles in these sessions, but we do not spend much time talking about ships. I want to pay tribute to all those involved in the talks that took place in London last week, particularly those from my Department. They paved the way for an historic agreement in the maritime sector on cutting carbon emissions from shipping. It is a really important step forward and I commend all those involved.

Maggie Throup: Will the Secretary of State visit Long Eaton as a matter of urgency to visit those property owners directly affected by HS2, some of whom are facing the prospect of being tens of thousands of pounds out of pocket? Will he reaffirm his commitment to the House today that no one will lose out as a result of HS2?

Chris Grayling: I know that we have particular issues with some of the properties in Long Eaton, particularly the railway cottages. I have worked and will continue to work closely with my hon. Friend to ensure that HS2 does the right thing by those people.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On “Question Time”, the Secretary of State intimated that, post Brexit, trucks will not be checked and will move freely through the border, as happens in Canada and the US. I have an official document that confirms that all lorries are stopped on the US-Canada border. Will he apologise for giving out duff information, do his homework and tell the House what the concrete plans will be post Brexit?
Chris Grayling: As I have said before—I say it again today—there will not be physical checks that require every lorry to be stopped at Dover. It is not physically possible to do it, and in today’s world of trusted trader systems and electronic processing of customs information, there is no need for that to happen. I would also say that we are confident that we will deliver, as is our intention, a sensible free trade agreement with the European Union that will make all this an irrelevant discussion.

T5. [904839] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Following the delays to electrification, Arriva has announced a new timetable downgrading the service between my constituency of Southport and south Manchester, which will have significant consequences for Southport’s residents and its local economy. What reassurances can my right hon. Friend provide to my constituents and rail passengers along that line who are now having to make difficult choices about where they live and work as a result of this downgrading?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend knows that I have been to Southport and talked to some of those affected. As a result of those recent discussions, we have been able to put back in two extra services to Manchester Piccadilly. Of course, the original franchise plan was for the services to go to Manchester Victoria, but I have listened carefully to what has been said. Timetable changes cannot happen quickly and easily, but I will do my best to work with my constituents and rail passengers along that line who are now having to make difficult choices about where they live and work as a result of this downgrading?

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): With free bus travel for the under-25s estimated at £1.4 billion a year, why is the Minister opposing a scheme that could cost up to 13 million young people, saving them up to £1,000 each a year, at a time when they face significant financial hardship due to tuition fees and the high cost of living?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): This was an intriguing policy proposed by Labour at the Budget, and the figures did not seem to add up. At one point Labour was saying it would cost just over £1 billion, but it looks like it might cost closer to £13 billion. The hon. Gentleman needs to go back to school and add up his figures. We already provide over £1 billion-worth of concessionary travel to older people and to those with disabilities, and perhaps we could take Labour’s proposal more seriously if the figures added up.

T6. [904840] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Is the Department doing anything to monitor the effective spending of the additional money being given to councils to fix potholes, including the £262,000 that was given to Walsall Council?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): That is a great question. As my hon. Friend will know, the pothole action fund is part of a £6 billion fund we are spending on local highways between 2015 and 2021, including £105 million for highways maintenance in the West Midlands combined authority, which includes Walsall. We ask that highways authorities provide a statement on their websites on how they utilise the pothole action fund money they have been allocated and, of course, we review and assess how that money is spent. We are always looking for, and seeking to incentivise, best practice.

T2. [904835] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol City Council is considering five different options for clean air zones. Air pollution is estimated to kill 300 people a year in the city. What is the Minister doing to help councils to deliver on tackling air pollution?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, we have spent more money than any Government have ever spent in this country on tackling air quality issues. We are working very closely with local authorities, including Bristol, to do that. Something like £400 million is already in prospect to support local authorities in this regard, and we look forward to seeing further action by Bristol and other local authorities to support it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I was alarmed to learn that Govia Thameslink Railway is planning to cut Great Northern services at Oakleigh Park station in the morning peak. GTR has promised me it will restore the services when new rolling stock is introduced this year. Will the Minister work with me to hold it to that promise?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I would be delighted to work with my right hon. Friend to address the issue she raises.

T3. [904836] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Volunteer drivers in Wrexham, through wonderful charities like Dynamic and Chariotts, are very concerned about the impact of possible regulatory change, which may affect their ability to provide a vital service. Can the Minister reassure me that the position of volunteer drivers will not be affected by new changes?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman notes, we are in the process of seeking to apply EU law as it applies to community transport. We have launched a review to explore several specific workarounds that address the concerns that community transport operators may have.
We look forward to the completion of that review, and we will be publishing our own thoughts as a result, based on the substantial input we have gathered.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The bioethanol industry and the farming community that supplies it are looking for some certainty about the introduction of E10. Is the Minister able to give a clear steer as to when they can expect that certainty and whether the Government will be giving support?

**Jesse Norman**: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have taken a very important forward position by introducing the renewable transport fuel obligation. We are looking closely at E10, and at international precedents and examples as to how enhanced ethanol fuels have been brought into play. It is important to respect market dynamics, so this is a slightly tricky issue, on which we are spending some time and consideration.

**Ms Ghan**: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I am glad he has brought it to my attention and I am more than happy to have a meeting with him to discuss it further.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Yesterday, my hon. Friend—my very good friend—the Minister of State responded to an Adjournment debate on impacts of the timetable changes of the Thameslink programme. He said that Members were welcome to suggest changes where there had been negative impacts. May I suggest to him that the reduction in services from Orpington to Victoria via Bromley South is precisely such a negative change, which should be looked at urgently?

**Joseph Johnson**: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, that matter is close to my heart and I will be paying extraordinary attention to it in the coming months.

**T.** [904837] **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): There is mounting concern on the Clyde that an active programme is being undertaken by Peel Ports, which owns both the Clydeport authority and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, to plough billions of pounds of investment into Merseyside at the expense of the Clyde, stifling investment in the Clyde’s port facilities. Will the Minister undertake an immediate investigation into anti-competitive practices in both of the UK’s two main west coast ports, as this is unacceptable?

**Ms Ghan**: We have been reviewing our accessibility plan within the Department and will be reviewing how we deal with shared spaces. The hon. Gentleman knows that I used to chair the all-party group on eye health and visual impairment, which has huge concerns about shared spaces. We will be making a statement on this shortly. We want to make sure that all of our spaces, especially those around transport infrastructure, are accessible for people with all disabilities.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Reopening Middlewich railway station to passengers is a matter of crucial importance to many of my constituents. What progress is being made on developing the business case for that?

**Joseph Johnson**: I know there is strong local support for improvements to the rail network in Cheshire. I am pleased to confirm that the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership is in the process of establishing a working group with local authority partners and Network Rail to examine the feasibility of reopening the mid-Cheshire link railway line, including Middlewich station, in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and that the Department has offered to provide advice.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): A few weeks ago, we had the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the free bus pass scheme for pensioners, which is a hugely popular policy. What efforts did the Department make to mark that anniversary? What assurances can the Minister give pensioners about the future of the scheme?

**Ms Ghan**: The bus pass scheme tends to be reviewed every five years, and what we have been able to do is ensure that that review does not take place every five years and that the concessionary bus pass remains in place for as long as is needed.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Secretary of State has long taken a personal interest in the Boston bypass. Will he join me in commending the excellent campaign being run by my local paper, the *Boston Standard*, which is gathering evidence from local hauliers, in particular? Does he agree that it bolsters an already compelling case for an application to be made to his bypass fund for this road in due course?

**Chris Grayling**: As my hon. Friend knows, I have visited the proposed site of the Boston bypass on more than one occasion over the years. I know that a vigorous campaign has been run by his local paper, local activists and himself. You will know, Mr Speaker, that we will shortly be bringing forward the next stage of our proposals for what I have dubbed the “bypass fund”, and there will be opportunities to build bypasses in the not-too-distant future.

**T9.** [904843] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Evidence shows that regulating bus services can improve the service and boost passenger numbers, so why are this Government siding with bus companies, rather than bus passengers, by refusing councils the powers to take back control of local buses?

**Ms Ghan**: I am a bit confused as to where the hon. Gentleman read that, because we have not refused any authorities. We are trying to help local authorities to manage their bus services and work with bus operators to deliver the best service that they think is needed at local level. The decision is best made locally. On top of that, we have spent £250 million to support bus services in England via the bus service operators grant, and £40 million of that goes towards supporting concessionary travel at a local level.
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is a renowned blue-sky thinker, so does he imagine that any time soon, or even some day in the future, people will be able to get on an HS2 train in Manchester or Glasgow and go non-stop to the European continent?

Chris Grayling: For a moment, I thought my hon. Friend was going to ask me whether people would be able to get on an HS2 train in Manchester and travel to Lichfield. Of course, it always depends on the market. When the first trains started to operate through the channel tunnel, a fleet of trains was bought to provide links from the north of England through to the continent, but the market was never there—although one never says never.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Hussey family and I are grateful for the Minister’s support following Freddie’s tragic death in 2014, and we will welcome him to Bristol next week for a trailer safety summit. On Tuesday, the other place agreed to improve trailer safety measures; is the Minister willing to share his view of their lordships’ decision?

Jesse Norman: I have greatly enjoyed the chance to work with the hon. Lady on the issues that she describes, and I am very much looking forward to attending her trailer safety summit next week. The Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill will come to this House in due course, so we will then have a chance to look at what their lordships have said.
Points of Order

10.36 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We discussed in Transport questions the cancellation of line electrification throughout the country. The Secretary of State said in the recess last summer that the bi-mode alternatives could achieve the same significant improvements to journeys. The National Audit Office, on which we rely—it is not Opposition Members saying this—has said that “bi-mode trains with the required speed and acceleration” to meet the timetable “did not exist”.

The Secretary of State has had the opportunity today to correct the position. The two statements are mutually exclusive and he cannot maintain that position. It is important that Ministers of the Crown come to the Dispatch Box and say things that are grounded in fact. There is a danger, however inadvertent, that the House has been misled about these trains’ ability to deliver, as my hon. Friends have pointed out repeatedly, yet the Secretary of State will not take the opportunity to clarify the position. I seek your advice as to how that clarification might be achieved, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is now poised, like a panther ready to pounce, so the hon. Gentleman may have secured, if not pre-empted, at any rate, early gratification, in that the Secretary of State is marching towards the Dispatch Box.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is self-evident that last January, when we discussed these issues, the trains that will run on the midland main line had not been ordered and therefore did not exist. As things stand today—as things stood last summer and last April—there are already 120 mph-plus bi-mode trains operating on the Great Western main line. I have manufacturers beating a path to my door to build the trains for the midland main line; of course they are going to run.

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the shadow Secretary of State is that he has made his point with force and alacrity, it is on the record, and the Secretary of State has responded in a similar vein. This dispute—it is a genuine dispute about what the facts are—can and doubtless will continue, but by means other than the point of order procedure. I hope that honour is served.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Just as I am about to proceed to the next business, I see leaping to his feet, with his characteristic energy and suppleness, the young representative from Stone, Sir William Cash.

Sir William Cash: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you regard the outrageous abuse and intimidation that has been levelled against the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and others as sufficient evidence of a contempt of the House? Page 262 of “Erskine May” states that it is a contempt of the House to molest and intimidate MPs by abusive language outside or inside the precincts of the House. Is there a prima facie case for contempt in the circumstances that I have described, with this completely and totally outrageous behaviour by members of the public towards those Members?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which I treat extremely seriously. I do so partly because of the content and partly in deference to his renowned parliamentarianism. The short answer is that there could be such a case. The particulars would have to be studied and it would be imprudent, and therefore inappropriate, for me to seek to venture a judgment here and now. However, as he will know, if there is an allegation of contempt to be made, it should properly be made in writing to me and I will then reflect on it, taking such professional advice as I think I need, but I thank him for raising this point of order, which I know he does out of a concern to protect the rights of Members in all parts of the House. Any Member could be similarly affected, and he has done a public service. Knowing his dogged tenacity and his insistence on following through, I imagine that his letter will be winging its way to me ere long.
Business of the House

10.41 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include:

Monday 23 April—Second Reading of the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill followed by motion relating to a statutory instrument on the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

Tuesday 24 April—Remaining stages of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords] followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill.

Wednesday 25 April—Opposition day (9th allotted day). There will be a debate on schools followed by a debate on social care. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion. Followed by debate on a motion on section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993.

Thursday 26 April—Debate on a motion on customs and borders followed by debate on a motion on plastic bottles and coffee cups. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 27 April—Private Members’ Bills

The provisional business for the week commencing 30 April will include:

Monday 30 April—Remaining stages of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords].

This has been a key week for Parliament. The Prime Minister took part in more than nine hours of debate on Syria, and with the Report stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill under way in the other place, we continue to shape our future outside the European Union. Members across both Houses have held Government to account, scrutinised decisions and debated matters of national and global importance, putting the vital role of Parliament beyond any doubt.

It has been our privilege to host the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting this week, and I have personally enjoyed the opportunity to meet delegates from around the world. I want to thank them for the generosity of time and spirit that they have shown.

Finally, we send our best wishes to another place with which we have strong ties: Israel marks the 70th anniversary of its independence day today. This week’s hugely important debate on anti-Semitism has shown that we must continue to uphold the British tradition of freedom of religion. To all those celebrating, I wish them a very happy day.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I also thank her for Monday’s motion relating to the statutory instrument on higher education, Tuesday’s motion to approve the money resolution—my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) will be delighted, because the business was cancelled again earlier this week—and for our Opposition day.

This seems a bit churlish, but we do need to have the Report stage of the Data Protection Bill, we are still waiting for the nurses bursaries statutory instrument and the Criminal Legal Aid (Remuneration) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 need to be revoked and relaid, because we are running out of time.

I, too, welcome the Commonwealth Heads of Government here to the 25th summit. They will know that a speech given to the Conservative association in Birmingham 50 years ago by a former Member of the House, Enoch Powell, was in response to immigration from the Commonwealth and the proposed Race Relations Bill. I remember my parents being alarmed at the speech—broadcasting it again was unnecessary—but they and other visible minorities were somewhat reassured by the stance of the then Prime Minister, the great reforming Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who, despite those inflammatory words, passed the Race Relations Act 1968.

It was chilling, therefore, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Totton and Eling (Mr Lammy) had to ask for—and was granted it by you, Mr Speaker—an urgent question on the unjust treatment of British citizens who came from Commonwealth countries; I and 134 other Members across the House signed the letter to the Prime Minister. The Home Secretary said it was wrong and appalling, but came to the House only in response to the UQ. British citizens now in their 60s and 70s are losing the right to work, rent property, receive their pensions and access their bank accounts and vital healthcare, and some have even been deported. These cases can be dealt with immediately.

The presumption should be that those people are here legally, not illegally. The destruction or shredding of landing cards is a distraction. It is only as a result of 2014 Government policy that evidence is required, and landing cards are only one form of such evidence; there are others, including tax returns, national insurance numbers and NHS numbers. Can we, therefore, have a statement next week so that the Home Secretary can tell the House what she appeared not to know earlier this week—how many people are affected, how many have been deported, how many are in detention centres? My right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary met a woman in Yarl’s Wood whose parents were both British citizens. Why do we not know these figures? The Home Office has no direction—it is Rudderless. The Secretary of State and Ministers have to direct what a Department does. That is why the series was called “Yes, Minister”—because Ministers have the civil servants who respond. That is why the series was called “Yes, Minister”—because Ministers have the civil servants who respond to what they want.

I want to highlight another injustice—that affecting students in receipt of disabled students’ allowances. With changes to DSA, a £200 up-front fee was applied across the board and not means-tested, which has resulted in a nearly 30% reduction in the number of students taking up vital equipment that could help them to work independently. Some 20% of students at the Royal Agricultural University are in receipt of DSA. We need their skills, so we need them to qualify, particularly because, as the Leader of the House said, we are leaving the EU. Can we have a debate, therefore, so that the Government can look again at removing that £200 up-front fee?

The Backbench Business Committee, not the Government, agreed to a debate on customs and borders. Opposition analysis shows that 44% of Brexit legislation...
is still to be introduced: Bills on immigration, fisheries, and the withdrawal agreement and implementation. Last June, the Prime Minister said that this Parliament would have a busy legislative Session, but the Government have passed only four Bills since the last Queen’s Speech and not a single piece of Brexit legislation. Given that 11 Bills will have to go through the House before the end of the transition period, will the Leader of the House publish a timetable or a grid like that produced by the Institute for Government, and will she confirm whether the EU withdrawal Bill—which is being considered by the other place, where Members have agreed they want to be in a customs union—will come before this House in the week commencing 21 May?

I know that the Government do not like to come to Parliament, but I was a bit saddened to read in The House magazine—we like The House magazine, particularly when we are in it, although in my case that is not very often—an article on restoration and renewal. The right approach would have been to make that statement to this Chamber, given that so many Members on both sides took part in the debate and were concerned about it. I know that some decisions are already in train, and it would have been appropriate to come to the House.

I recently had to take part in a rally in opposition to the English Defence League. For the very first time, it was allowed to assemble right next to our peace and unity rally near St Paul’s at the Crossing in Walsall. I now have to write three letters to ascertain who was responsible for that decision—and there were breaches of the peace. In the evening, I heard the testimony of Janine Webber, a child of the holocaust. She told us that her grandmother, father and mother were murdered, and she said that when they took her brother away, she wondered why they let her go. She would have been saddened by what happened, but proud at the debate—at the dignity of all our colleagues who took part and at how they have opposed anti-Semitism. I hope that the time comes when we judge each other not on the colour of our skin, not on our religion and not on our gender, but just on who we are.

Finally, on a slightly happier note, I wish the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), a very happy birthday on Saturday—a birthday he shares with Her Majesty.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Every year.

Valerie Vaz: Every year. I wish Her Majesty a happy birthday, and we thank her for her service to the country and to the Commonwealth.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in wishing the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee and Her Majesty very happy birthdays for Saturday. I take it that the hon. Gentleman is slightly younger than Her Majesty, but I am sure he would not venture to suggest by how much.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of a fee, which I am sorry to say I am not aware of. If I may, I will investigate and come back to her. She asked when the EU withdrawal Bill will come back. As she knows, there are no programme motions, so their lordships will send it back to us in due course. Of course, we will consider all attempts to improve legislation, as we always do, and we will respond in due course to amendments that have been passed in the other place.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of the restoration and renewal of the Palace. I am sorry if she thinks there was some sort of statement. In fact, the article in The House magazine was merely an attempt to keep Members’ interest in the subject. I am, of course, delighted to talk to her about progress at any time. As soon as there is substantive progress—for example, once we have recruited the internal and external members for the shadow sponsor body—there will be the opportunity to debate that in this place.

Finally, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s constituent, Janine Webber. It sounds as if that was harrowing testimony, and I am sure all of us in the House absolutely support the hon. Lady’s view that we should consider each other for who we are, not for where we come from or what we believe in.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend about two statutory instruments that were laid just before Easter, which are designed to abolish Christchurch Borough Council against its will? Will she assure me that neither of those instruments will abolish Christchurch Borough Council against its will?

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the Windrush generation, which the hon. Lady raised, I can only again apologise. These individuals are British; they have absolutely every right to be here. What has happened is incredibly regrettable. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have apologised without reservation, and I do so again today. The Home Office is determined to put this right in short order, and that is what it is absolutely focused on doing.

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Finally, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s constituent, Janine Webber. It sounds as if that was harrowing testimony, and I am sure all of us in the House absolutely support the hon. Lady’s view that we should consider each other for who we are, not for where we come from or what we believe in.
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a serious matter, although it is not something of which I am aware right now. If he allows me, I will certainly look into it and write to him.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I also extend birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns). I always tell him that he is the finest Chair of the Backbench Business Committee that we have. I wish all London marathon participants from the House all the best on Sunday. A record 18 MPs will be running, including two Scottish National party Members of Parliament—Lightspeed Linden and Supermac Stuart McDonald—who will be running for charity.

Regardless of what the Leader of the House says, this has not been one of her finest weeks in the job. The structuring of parliamentary business at the beginning of this week was an utter shambles. I do not know what she was thinking in trying to discuss the Syrian air strikes in a debate under Standing Order No. 24; she is in charge of the business, for goodness’ sake. It is ridiculous that I am having to tell her that she could have tabled a motion on Syrian air strikes at any time. I ask her once again: will she now table a proper, amendable motion with a full day’s debate on the situation in Syria?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the order of business this week. Mr Speaker, I know that you shared the desire of all Members across the House to see urgent debates on the subject. The Prime Minister herself applied for such a debate, on the grounds that the only practical way to change the order of business on a given day is through an urgent debate request.

Mr Speaker was pleased to grant an urgent debate to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). All hon. Members, including Conservatives, were pleased to stand in support of that. As the Prime Minister said, she was determined to be held accountable for her actions by the House. There was no question about it. At the same time, she also made it very clear that it was vital that she took action in such a way as would protect our armed forces, secrecy around the limited nature of the targets and secrecy around the extent of the operation, in order for that operation to be effective.

Following the Prime Minister’s action, which was entirely within the conventions of the House, she came to the House—facilitated in no small part by Mr Speaker himself—and made a three-and-a-quarter-hour statement, answering 140 individual questions. She then took part in a debate, answering 27 individual interventions from right hon. and hon. Members. She also took part in a further urgent debate the following day. It is simply unfair and ungenerous to suggest that anybody in this place was seeking to avoid accountability. The Prime Minister was absolutely clear about her intentions.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Coming into the House on Monday, I encountered, by chance, on the wireless an interview with the mother of a young boy murdered with a knife. In calling for tougher sentences and more stop-and-search, that mother chillingly declared that politicians did not care because their children were not at risk. I know, as you do, Mr Speaker, that people across this House do care. So, will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on knife crime and the culture, which is gaining hold in our cities and elsewhere, that not only allows but celebrates the carrying and use of knives?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point that hon. Members across the House have previously raised. He is exactly right to point out that we have seen an increase in the appalling use of knives in fights, particularly among younger people, the causes of which are very complicated: the increased use of county lines, drug use and so on are partly responsible.

I assure hon. Members that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is determined to take early action. We have had a number of discussions about what more can be done. In March, she launched a national knife crime media campaign across all channels, including billboards, to try to take young people away from this awful scourge. We are doing a great deal more intervention work in hospital A&Es, trying to appeal to those who have already experienced some sort of knife attack. We are awarding significant sums to community funds and to community groups who are tackling gangs and knife crime. My right hon. Friend has also launched the serious violence strategy. We will be bringing forward an offensive weapons Bill to try to limit access to and use of knives.
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I have to say to the Leader of the House that I followed Her Majesty by some 31 years, so I am not just behind her, but despite my tender age, Tyne and Wear fire service has advised no candles on the cake this year.

I am glad to see from today’s Order Paper that the Backbench Business Committee is to get reinforcements in the shape of the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). I am very glad that we have now got back our full complement. However, even with eight members and a quorum of four, it is sometimes difficult to get that quorum when members have been called away to Statutory Instrument Committees and so on. Could we please look at this again? It seems rather unfortunate to have a quorum of four for a Committee of eight.

I am afraid that it looks as though De La Rue has thrown in the towel on the production of UK passports in Britain. I would like a statement from the Home Secretary about exactly where and how our passports will be produced post-2020. De La Rue has done an awful lot of work in looking at the bids being put in by Gemalto in Paris. It seems to De La Rue—and to me, I think—that it is very likely, with the costs that have been provided, that post-2020 our passports will be produced, or mainly produced, in eastern Europe or in the far east. It is not a satisfactory situation, post-Brexit, for the UK—an independent nation, proud of itself—to have its passports produced far, far away.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying the issue of age. He would admit to being a young whippersnapper by comparison, I am sure.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about the quorum. I have taken soundings, as I said I would. The concerns are about whether a quorum below four is truly evidence of cross-party decision making. If he were to write to me, I could perhaps liaise with the Procedure Committee, which might be persuaded to look into this from a more formal point of view. I do understand the practical points he raises, but he will, I am sure, equally appreciate that, to be truly cross-party, four is a pretty small number of people to have in the decision-making process.

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that De La Rue prints passports, security documents and money for countries right across the world. The UK, as we seek to leave the EU, will be a global champion for free trade, and so this cannot be one-sided. We need to accept that, just as our brilliant UK businesses generate income and profits from overseas, so other businesses must be able to compete in the UK market.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a truly harrowing case and I am sure that all Members send their deepest sympathy to the family of the victim. I am happy to take up the lack of response with the Ministry of Justice and, if he wants to write to me, I know you, Mr Speaker, will be happy to look into this if he wants to write to me. I know you have also asked him to raise it with you, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend will appreciate that the investigation by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee into fake news may look at these issues, and he will also be aware that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is looking carefully at an internet safety strategy for keeping young people safe online, and at seeking further ways to stamp out the sort of horrific abuse that has been described in the Chamber this week.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In January 2013, Kevin Doherty was found guilty of the manslaughter of his partner Jane Harrison. It had taken 18 years to bring him to justice, and he is still to disclose the location of Jane’s body to her family. In January this year he was granted a transfer to an open prison without reference to the Harrison family. How is that just or fair? I have written to the Ministry of Justice without success four times seeking a meeting with the appropriate Minister. Perhaps only a debate on the treatment of the families of victims will elicit any justice for the Harrison family.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important constituency point. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate. I also draw his attention to the fact that Ministers from the Department will answer oral questions on 30 April—he may wish to raise the issue directly with them.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I join the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) in pressing the Leader of the House to have an urgent debate and a continuing report from the Home Secretary on the serious violence strategy she has announced. The young and the middle-aged in London and across the country are being stabbed and becoming the victims of violent crime. We are seeing huge increases in violent crime. This is an emergency for the Government and the House should discuss it regularly. Local communities, including Nottingham Forest Football Club and Notts County Football Club, are coming together to try to tackle and stand up against this increase in violent
crime, but we need the Government to report regularly to Parliament on what they are doing to tackle this scourge.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We must do everything we can. I have tried to set out how, through the serious violence strategy, the Government are seeking to provide funding for community efforts, and to use a national media campaign to take young people away from this seemingly attractive lifestyle of joining a gang and being involved in this appalling violence. We are working with young people who have already been stabbed and are in hospital, and trying to turn them away from that lifestyle before it is too late. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that more could be done, and I recommend that he seeks a Backbench Business Committee debate so that all Members can share their thoughts on the subject.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Understandable changes to the parliamentary timetable this week precluded the opportunity to debate the hugely important banking scandals, and the effect that they had on thousands of business people around the country. Will my right hon. Friend find Government time to debate that important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree that that is an important issue. The loss of livelihoods following the financial crisis was a devastating blow for many people. I will certainly take my hon. Friend’s request away and see whether it can be accommodated.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make available Government time for a debate to be led by the Prime Minister, in which she could explain that a logical consequence of her hostile immigration environment is the hurt caused which she could explain that a logical consequence of the Windrush citizens, and the creation of citizens of nowhere? She could also provide a guarantee that no EU citizens in the UK who are applying for settled status will not be faced with threats of deportation if their indefinite leave to remain papers no longer exist.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have both apologised unreservedly and made clear their commitment to putting this right. There is no question but that the Windrush generation are British and deserve to have all the same rights as citizens. He raises an important point about EU citizens, and I regret anybody seeking to cause a lack of confidence and destabilise the feelings of EU citizens—[Interruption.] No, I am sorry. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, Ministers from the Dispatch Box and I have all been absolutely clear: EU citizens who have come to the UK, made their lives here and contributed to the United Kingdom, are welcome here, and their rights will be protected. It is not the same situation at all.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As the new chair of the all-party furniture industry group, may I make an early plea to my right hon. Friend for a debate in Government time to highlight the significant contribution that the furniture industry makes to the UK economy? May I urge her to exploit the unique skills of our British furniture manufacturers when we commence work on the restoration of this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new position. I am a big fan of that industry—my mother and stepfather had a furniture shop when I was growing up. The furniture industry is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, and in 2017 alone it contributed nearly £3.9 billion to the UK economy, employing more than 90,000 workers. I assure my hon. Friend that the restoration and renewal programme will consider how the UK furniture sector can benefit from the restoration of our grade I listed palace.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I hope Members across the House share my anger with the multinational waste management company FCC Environment. It is refusing to grant all its workers the basic right of sick pay; despite one of those workers suffering from cancer, despite workers offering to give up their annual bonuses to help cover the cost, and despite the fact that all the management team receive sick pay. May we have a debate in Government time on whether any public contracts should be given to companies that do not offer something as basic as sick pay for all their workers?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a worrying situation. She will be aware that the Government’s Taylor review has raised all issues of the rights of workers and the way they are treated, and the Government will bring forward measures to ensure that any public procurement takes into account the importance of the rights of workers. I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise this specific case directly with Ministers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It has been a strange old week for Parliament: money resolutions not provided and blocking a private Member’s Bill; a Government motion signed by the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader not moved by the Government; and a Standing Order emergency application from the Government to destroy their own business. The real Whitehall farce of the week, however, was when the Leader of the Opposition had an emergency debate. Government Members were called back from everywhere to vote against the motion and the Leader of the Opposition got all his Members to vote against the motion. The Government voted for the Corbyn motion and Labour MPs voted against it. It was carried by a massive majority and not a single Labour MP supported it. Leader of the House, that is a nonsense! We have to change this and the simple way to do it is to have a business of the House committee. May we have a debate in Government time on this matter?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a real mish-mash of issues. On private Members’ Bills, he will be aware that a money resolution is being brought forward in due course as soon as we can do so. On Select Committee term limits, he, and I am sure you, Mr Speaker, would agree it is perfectly orderly for a Member whose name is on a motion to bring it forward. As another person whose name was on that motion, I am pleased that it...
has now been passed, giving Select Committee term limits of 10 years rather than eight years during this Parliament.

My hon. Friend also raises urgent debates. I have gone into some detail on the importance of the Government being held to account as early as possible on Monday. The practical way to do that is through an urgent debate, which you, Mr Speaker, were pleased to give. I do not think my hon. Friend has raised a succession of arguments for reform. To be very clear, a Committee of the whole House would not be able to deal with some of the many necessary changes to business.

Mr Bone: Yes it would.

Andrea Leadsom: The reality of trying to call a committee in short order to deal with very fast moving situations makes it entirely impractical. Having looked carefully at this issue, the Government have decided that it would not be a workable solution.

Mr Speaker: I should just say to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), and for the benefit of other Members, without in any way dissenting from anything that the Leader has just said, that it is perfectly open to Members, without in any way dissenting from anything that the Leader has just said, that it is perfectly open to the House to amend Standing Order No. 24, of which there is some uncertainty and often incomprehension. It could be amended to allow for the tabling of substantive motions in circumstances of emergency, which could also be amendable and on which the House could vote. If there are Members who are interested in that line of inquiry, they could usefully raise it with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), but it is a matter for Members.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a lighter note, the sun is shining and it is obvious it is now spring. I always feel it is spring when the London marathon takes place. So many people run the marathon—not me, thank goodness—to raise money for charities, particularly heart and cancer charities. May we, from across the House, congratulate them all?

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), are calling for a debate on local democracy. Local democracy is fundamental to this country. We are all part of local democracy and products of it. May we have an urgent debate on local democracy? There is a big decline in social and community networks in our towns and cities, because, due to cuts to their budgets, local authorities are no longer able to support them.

Andrea Leadsom: First of all, I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the 18 Members of Parliament and the thousands of others taking part in the London marathon, in particular Mo Farah, whom a number of us will be cheering on.

The hon. Gentleman asks for a debate on local democracy. A Westminster Hall debate or a Backbench Business debate can always be sought to share issues and ideas on local democracy. I draw his attention to departmental questions on 30 April, when he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I recently visited ILKE Homes, which is developing a factory near Knaresborough for the off-site pre-manufacture of homes. Other comparable initiatives are taking place across the country. This is an exciting development for the housing sector, as it will deliver houses quicker, with improved environmental benefits and at a cheaper cost. I was certainly impressed by what I saw at ILKE, so please could we have a debate about new methods of construction in the infrastructure and housing sectors, so that we can highlight the emerging benefits?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really good point. The idea of manufactured housing can certainly contribute to the Government’s principal domestic priority, which is to ensure that everybody has the chance to have their own home. It is encouraging to see companies such as ILKE Homes using modern methods of construction. Throughout 2017, we saw continued growth in modern methods of construction across all sectors, and the Government’s home building fund is providing support for those methods. We should encourage all businesses looking at this to continue to do so.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Nearly 7,000 jobs and our steel industry rely on the contract for three new ships to support our aircraft carriers. The Government must get behind our shipbuilding and steel industry, so can we have a statement on defence procurement?

Andrea Leadsom: We are all very proud of our shipbuilding sector, which is in a good position and has had some huge successes with our new shipbuilding programme. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the Government’s commitment not just to provide a decent, home-grown future plan for new ships, but to seek to win orders from overseas as well. If he wants to seek a specific debate on shipbuilding, I recommend that he asks for an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Can we have a debate on the work of the Council of Europe, hopefully on an annual basis? As we leave the EU, it becomes the most important organisation in Europe of which we are still a member, and yesterday there was cross-party agreement to such a debate.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a really interesting suggestion, and I am certainly happy to take it away and look at it.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I echo the calls from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for us to have a debate on youth violence and the Government’s serious violence strategy. It might be helpful if I remind the Leader of the House of her comments on 29 March. On the strategy being published, she said:

“If it will be very important, when the strategy comes forward, for the House to have a chance to debate it.”—[Official Report, 29 March 2018, Vol. 638, c. 957.]

If she is worried about what the Home Secretary might think about this, when she was asked about this on 16 April, she said:

“I will take that very good question to the Leader of the House. I would relish such a debate.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 24.]

When are we going to have that debate on the serious violence strategy?
Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, because she raises this issue frequently in the Chamber and I know that she is absolutely committed to doing everything that she can to eradicate this appalling increase in knife crime. I have already mentioned the steps that the Government are taking. I hear what she says about having a debate, and I will certainly take that away and see what can be done.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Agricultural machinery rings, such as Ringlink in my constituency—I have visited Ringlink, which has in excess of 2,700 members—play a vital and yet undervalued part in running a modern agricultural business by matching a shortage of machinery and labour on some farms with a surplus on other farms. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate in Government time on the vital part played in rural economies by businesses such as Ringlink and other machinery rings across the country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. Collaboration between farmers can bring real economic benefits and help them to benefit from economies of scale, to share knowledge and share machinery, and of course, to jointly market their produce. Ringlink is a great example of a collaborative organisation that has managed to evolve in response to changing industry needs. The Government are keen to support that type of work in the agriculture sector, so in February this year we announced a £10 million collaboration fund to bring together those who are interested in greater co-operation.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The day before a recess, I am reliably informed, is known as “take the trash out day” in Government circles. Before this year’s Easter recess, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published its long-awaited review of the future of S4C. I am sure that the British Government would want to avoid the impression that they would refer to my country’s primary asset in such derogatory terms. May we have a debate in Government time, or at least an oral statement, on this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me first reassure the hon. Gentleman that the reason there is often a flurry of activity on the day before recesses is that, far from it being “take the trash out day”, the purpose is to ensure that the House is still sitting when important announcements are made so that they are not left until the House is in recess, which is precisely the opposite of what he has said. Let me also reassure him about the Welsh broadcasting channel: it is absolutely vital, and he may well want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can talk directly to Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about what more we can do.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The disappointing profits results issued by Debenhams today follow hot on the heels of the difficulties that high street names such as Maplin, New Look and Toys R Us are experiencing. May we have a debate on what the Government can do to help high street retailers, especially those in small towns such as Shipley, Bingley and Baildon, which are having a very difficult time? Could we discuss in particular how we can help them to compete against online retailers by, for instance, doing something about business rates, so that the bricks-and-mortar retailers that are so needed and so welcome on our high streets can continue to thrive rather than struggling, as I am afraid they are at the moment?

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday morning the Prime Minister welcomed Narendra Modi to No. 10 Downing Street, and yesterday evening I joined right hon. and hon. Members to attend events in Central Hall, where Modi subjected himself to two and a half hours of detailed questioning.

At the same time, a quite disgraceful event was taking place in Parliament Square, where the Indian national flag, which had been raised to celebrate the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, was burned. Meanwhile, some disgraceful billboards were going around London comparing our good friend Narendra Modi to Hitler. I am all for free speech, but that seems to transcend free speech. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary about what will be done to prevent such actions from taking place in the future?
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made a shocking announcement, and if he wants to write to me giving details of what he saw or heard, I shall be happy to take it up with the Home Secretary on his behalf.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The data protection legislation currently going through the House is a welcome update to our legislative framework, but may we have an urgent statement from the relevant Minister on the unintended consequences that this legislation might have for MPs being able to communicate with their constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman might be aware that a number of Members have raised this issue with me in recent days. Both the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Information Commissioner’s Office are putting out further advice for MPs. My own parliamentary staff undertook the first round of training, and found it much too generic: there was not enough detail about the consequences for pre-existing data we hold on constituents who have contacted us before, and so on. So there is now a huge effort under way to ensure that MPs get the advice they need so that they can be absolutely clear about the impact this has on their relationship with their constituents. To be clear, it is vital that our relationship with—our ability to communicate with, about and on behalf of—our constituents is not impaired in any way.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): In the first two months of this year, there were 413 domestic burglaries in the London borough of Bromley, some 32% up, and 38 of them were in the Chislehurst ward alone. They are largely carried out by organised gangs of criminals, almost invariably armed and willing to threaten, and sometimes use, violence. It is not unique to Bromley, either, or to other parts of London. Many of my constituents regard this as a crime of violence and think that, frankly, all domestic burglaries should be treated as crimes of violence because of the invasion of someone’s home, family and privacy. May we have a debate in Government time on having a joined-up strategy for tackling this through both police priorities and the sentencing framework?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about my hon. Friend’s experiences in his constituency, and of course any form of burglary, particularly when violence is threatened, is very frightening and harrowing for the victims. I encourage him to seek either a Backbench Business Committee debate or an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his particular concerns directly with Ministers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the light of the decision of the Scottish Government, followed by the Welsh Government, to put the healthcare and dignity of women first by allowing abortion tablets to be taken at home, may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for England Health explaining why English women still have to attend an abortion clinic to get those medically prescribed tablets, and why we are still making the harrowing stories we hear of women who have miscarried on the way home from those clinics in public toilets or on public transport happen in England?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, and I encourage her to raise it at Health questions, but if she would prefer to write to me, I can take it up with the Department on her behalf.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The issue of potholes is understandably troubling my constituents in Corby and east Northamptonshire, and I am delighted that Northamptonshire is to get an extra £1.6 million of Government funding to help with repairs, but Ministers must keep the resources under constant review, so may we have a statement on that next week?

Andrea Leadsom: I confess to having a great interest in my hon. Friend’s pothole problem since his constituency is just up the road from mine, and very often the journey there goes through both of our constituencies. Potholes are a disastrous problem, and it is at this time of year, after the long winter and when the roads are in a particularly bad state, that the potholes start getting repaired. Certainly in my area I am seeing some improvements, and I hope all hon. Members are in theirs, too. My hon. Friend raises an important point that affects all of us, and it is a perfect example of something the Backbench Business Committee might look at.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I recently had lunch at the Old Bailey with judges, and they told me that virtually every other trial they are handling at present involves knife crime, gang crime and teenagers. I then sat in and witnessed the trial of four teenagers who were convicted of murdering another teenager. That is such a tragic waste of life, so I just want to add my voice to those of the other MPs who have spoken about this matter. The House really does need to debate it, and I hope the Leader of the House will give it parliamentary time.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I think she is about the sixth hon. Member to raise this issue, and I will certainly go away and look at it carefully.

Martin Vickers ( Cleethorpes) (Con): There is traffic chaos in north-east Lincolnshire due to the number of temporary traffic lights. Some have been installed for essential roadworks, but the council is failing to co-ordinate these operations. May we have a debate on how local authorities deal with these situations? Motorists are frustrated, traders are becoming increasingly angry and we need action.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great spokesman for his constituency, and I can well imagine the frustration caused by poorly co-ordinated roadworks and permanently “temporary” traffic lights, which are very frustrating for motorists. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or to write to Ministers on the specifics in his constituency.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May we have a debate to mark the 25th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in Eltham? It was a seminal moment for race relations in our country, and it should be recognised in some way by the House. Such a debate would give us an opportunity to distance ourselves from the remarks
made by Mr Mellish, the former detective, on last night’s documentary, in which he accused Stephen Lawrence’s mother of having a gimmick in not smiling. She was a bereaved mother who had lost her son in the most tragic circumstances, and she was let down by the Metropolitan police, which was found to be institutionally racist. Mr Mellish was a fine example of that last night, and we should be given the opportunity to distance ourselves from individuals such as him.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says. We all have our own recollection of the appalling night on which Stephen Lawrence was murdered, of the bravery of both his parents in their own ways in the subsequent years, and of the lessons learned by the police forces. Our current Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has shown her commitment to stamping out any form of racism, which is vital for all of us, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that Stephen Lawrence’s appalling death must never be forgotten.

**Mr Speaker:** Pursuant to the hon. Gentleman’s inquiry and to what the Leader of the House has said, I believe I am right in saying that there is to be a commemorative service at St Martin-in-the-Fields next Monday to mark the 25th anniversary of that appalling murder. I think I am also right in saying that our admirable Chaplain, Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin, will be preaching at the service. I hope colleagues will agree that that is singularly appropriate.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Mr Speaker, at the last business questions, you stated that you expected the Government to make an announcement in the House of Commons about the awarding of the mechanised infantry vehicle contract. In fact, that announcement was made during the recess, on Easter Saturday—a time, I would suggest, deliberately designed to minimise publicity and avoid scrutiny. May we have a debate in Government time in this House as soon as possible on that important £2 billion contract?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I reiterate my commitment to ensuring that Parliament is the place where as many announcements as possible are made. I also draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the fact that we will have Defence questions on Monday, so he will have an opportunity to raise his concern directly at that point.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): The Leader of the House will recall that I recently raised in business questions the problem of addiction, including compulsive gambling. One of the most dangerously addictive forms of gambling is online gambling, and she might have seen that one of the German Länder has recently legislated to prevent online gambling in that area. Will she urge her Government colleagues to look at that German initiative in addressing the scourge of gambling addiction?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this point. Addictive online gambling is absolutely destroying lives, and the loss of income and vital family money is appalling. If he would like to write to me separately, I can take the matter up with Ministers on his behalf.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate on community sport and active lifestyles, such as those promoted by local bowling clubs? I had the pleasure of attending Kelvindale bowling club in my constituency for the opening of the season, and I am proudly wearing its tie today. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing all the best to that club, to clubs across the country, and indeed to the Scotland team, all of whom came home from the Commonwealth games with one kind of medal or another?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am always delighted to congratulate those involved in all sporting efforts, including the bowling team that the hon. Gentleman mentions, and, of course, I congratulate Scotland and all parts of the United Kingdom on an excellent Commonwealth games.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Every weekend, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children make their weekly pilgrimage to watch their football team. In the top two tiers of English football, they can only do so sitting down. This is unsafe, as it is not universally observed, and it is bad for the atmosphere. It is time to permit safe standing, as they do in Scotland and other parts of Europe. May we have a debate on this matter in Government time?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are arguments for and against standing and sitting in football stadiums and we have our own horrendous examples of unfortunate and appalling circumstances involving standing. I am sure that he will appreciate that it is not an easy issue to decide one way or the other. I encourage him to take the matter up directly with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and see what progress it is making.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): On the subject of the London marathon, not only is my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) running but so is my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman). This will make them the first husband and wife team from the House of Commons to run the London marathon—

**Valerie Vaz:** She’ll win.

**Kevin Brennan:** She may indeed.

I confess that I do not read the impact assessment for every Bill placed before the House, and the Leader of the House has mentioned a large number of Bills, but I was surprised to read in the *Daily Mail* this morning a quote from the Home Office on the Bill that became the Immigration Act 2014 that said that Ministers would not have been required to sign off the impact assessment. Is it the case that under this Government Ministers will introduce Bills into the business of the House of Commons without knowing what their impact is?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I did not read the article in the *Daily Mail* that the hon. Gentleman mentions. My understanding, having been a Minister for some four years, is that Ministers sign off on impact assessments, but whether there are some that they do not sign off I am genuinely not aware, so I will write to him.
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have an urgent statement from the Government urging people to get behind London marathon runners this weekend, of which I am one? Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the work of Glasgow EastEnd Community Carers and encourage generous Glaswegians to get right behind me and donate—and will she possibly donate herself?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is now known as Legs Linden—is that it? I encourage him to go for it; we are proud of him and all colleagues taking part in the London marathon, particularly for such a great cause. I encourage the hon. Gentleman’s charity in all it does to try to help people.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On Monday, I had great pleasure in attending Channel 4’s announcement of the biggest restructuring of the channel in its 35-year history, with the “4 all the UK” programme to disperse its headquarters out of London to different cities around the UK. I have every confidence that my city of Glasgow, with its excellent strengths in broadcast media, production and education in media, will have a good strong chance of securing one of those headquarters facilities. Will the Leader of the House consider calling a debate so that MPs from across the UK can advocate for their constituencies to be the home of the Channel 4 headquarters?

Andrea Leadsom: I am certainly glad that the hon. Gentleman has made that early pitch for Glasgow. I am sure that plenty of people will have heard it and I am sure that all hon. Members will find their own way of putting their pitch forward so that their cities can take part in Channel 4’s dispersion arrangements.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I associate myself with the question asked by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) about the loss of the Backbench Business Committee-sponsored debate on the banks on Tuesday, for very important reasons. Many thousands of our constituents are waiting for the debate. They are waiting to hear answers to questions that they have raised over many years. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House indicated if the Government might be able to facilitate three hours, ideally on a Tuesday, for the debate to take place.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), I apologise for the circumstances that led to the Backbench Business Committee deciding not to hold that debate and further apologise for the fact that that was the second time it happened. I absolutely recognise the importance of the debate. We need to have it and, as I said to my hon. Friend, I will take it away and see whether we can offer Government time while appreciating, as I know hon. Members do, that there is a premium on legislative priorities.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Following a freedom of information request from the GMB union, shipbuilders in Scotland have learned that the Government are putting out the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships to international tender. That is despite the fact that the Government do not have to do so, despite the fact that they could secure almost 7,000 jobs here and despite the fact they could generate millions of pounds for the Exchequer. May we have an urgent statement, not leaving it to Defence questions on Monday, so that the Defence Secretary can give a proper explanation of himself?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of that freedom of information request, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise it at Defence questions—it is only on Monday, so it is not too long to wait—so he can raise it directly with the Secretary of State.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May we have a debate on the “really hostile environment” the Prime Minister has created for migrants to the UK? Almost half of my constituents were born outside the UK. Many face harassment by the Home Office, and 40% of my EU citizens report negative experiences following the Brexit vote. It is not only the Windrush generation but more recent migrants who are suffering victimisation and discrimination by this Government.

Andrea Leadsom: This country is incredibly welcoming to immigrants. We have one of the broadest ranges of people coming to this country from across the world to make their life here. This country is, in fact, very welcoming to immigrants. The Prime Minister herself has carried out the first ever race disparity audit to look at the areas where integration has been more difficult and to take action in those areas. I simply do not recognise what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the Government’s policy.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Claims helplines are supposed to be free phone numbers. In answer to a written parliamentary question, the Department for Work and Pensions confirmed that the employment and support allowance helpline became a free phone number on 7 December, but the most prominent number available online is an 0843 number, which is chargeable. Last month one of my constituents was charged £72 over a month for the free phone number on 7 December, but the most prominent number available online is an 0843 number, which is chargeable. Last month one of my constituents was charged £72 over the month for phone calls made to that number. Will the Leader of the House make a statement outlining what the Government will do to make sure that only free phone numbers are used and that information on those numbers is widely available online? Does she agree that my constituent should get a refund from the DWP?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. If he writes to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, I am sure she will respond. If he wants to do that through me, I am happy to take it up with my right hon. Friend on his behalf.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituents, Mr and Mrs Dodd, face losing their home next month as a result of a personal guarantee they signed with Goldcrest Distribution Ltd. The case highlights the lack of safeguards for individuals who sign such agreements and the unreasonable way that finance companies pursue such debts. An offer to repay nearly double the loan amount was rejected, and the debt continues to increase at a rate of over £300 a day, thanks to interest rates at which even Wonga would blush. Please can we have a debate on more protection for individuals in these circumstances?
Andrea Leadsom: That is a particularly awful story. Having been City Minister some time ago, I have heard similar stories of the appalling way that some individuals are treated by finance companies. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue, and I encourage him to write to the Financial Conduct Authority to see whether it can take action on behalf of his constituents.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Despite this horrendous heatwave, I am still looking forward to joining 17 colleagues on both sides of the House in trying to complete the marathon on Sunday. I will be raising money for Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland. On that note, may we have a debate in Government time on why they continue to resist calls from the Food Standards Agency, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and others for the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid? It has been shown in other countries that fortification can significantly reduce the number of pregnancies affected by neural tube defects, including spina bifida.

Andrea Leadsom: I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman. An impressive set of colleagues are taking part in the marathon. Let us hope it is just cool enough for them all to finish.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for raising money for Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland, which is a vital charity. He has campaigned on this subject for some time, and I encourage him to continue raising this issue with Ministers.

Private Rented Sector

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Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me time, on behalf of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, to speak to the House today about our fourth report of this Session, which is on the private rented sector. The report concentrated on: the quality of accommodation; the balance of power between tenants and landlords; the legislative framework; and enforcement.

This Committee last considered the private rented sector in a report in 2013, following which the Government carried forward many of our suggestions, including a reformed approach to selective licensing, the mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation and a new regulatory model for letting agents. We hope the Government will take forward many of our recommendations this time, too.

The private rented sector has doubled in size in the past 15 years. There are now 4.7 million households in the sector, including 1.8 million families with children, which represents 20% of all households. Statistics show that most housing in the sector is adequate, although Shelter told us that 53% of tenants had experienced at least one problem with conditions or repair in the past year. Although the overall proportion of inadequate properties in the sector has fallen, the absolute number has increased, and a significant minority of private rented accommodation continues to be shockingly inadequate. The English housing survey shows that approximately 800,000 private rented homes in England have at least one category 1 hazard, such as excess cold, mould or exposed wiring. In our online forum, we heard directly from tenants about the poor conditions they had suffered. One submission said:

"We live in a house full of mould and damp with four young children...We have ...faulty electrics and water comes through the living room window when it rains...the whole family keeps getting ill from it."

We wanted to know about the power relationship between landlords and tenants: are tenants, especially those at the lower end of the market, able to complain and get their problems attended to? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Citizens Advice told us that 44% of tenants said that a fear of eviction would stop them from negotiating with their landlord over disrepair. Shelter and Citizens Advice told us that they often reminded tenants about the risks of making complaints. We heard that 14% of tenants felt that they had been penalised for complaining, and more than 200,000 reported having been abused, threatened or harassed by a landlord. We found that there is a clear power imbalance, and we called on the Government to consider extending protections which they rightly introduced in the Deregulation Act 2015. We also agree with the Government that a specialist housing court would provide a more accessible route to redress for tenants and urge them to issue more detailed proposals as soon as possible.
We looked at the overall legislative framework. The Residential Landlords Association told us there were 140 Acts of Parliament and more than 400 regulations affecting landlords in the sector. Our 2013 report called for that to be consolidated and made simpler. Since then, we have had the Housing and Planning Act 2016, the Consumer Rights Act 2015, the Deregulation Act 2015 and many others, so the situation is even more complicated. Therefore, we recommend again that the Law Commission undertakes a review of the legislation and provides guidance as to whether a new approach would bring more clarity for tenants, landlords and local authorities.

We focused on the housing health and safety rating system, and heard that there is a lack of understanding about how it works among landlords and tenants, and inconsistent application by local authorities. We called on the Government to immediately update the guidance on the rating system and eventually to introduce a more straightforward set of quality standards that everyone can understand.

We heard near unanimous support for the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). We, too, offer our support for this Bill, but we want to make sure that vulnerable tenants at the lower end of the market are able to make use of these powers. We have therefore called for free and easily accessible technical and legal advice to support tenants. As it is likely tenants will seek this advice from local authorities, it is vital that they are suitably resourced to provide this additional service.

Most local authorities told us they were satisfied generally with the powers they have. However, powers can be meaningless if they are not actually used, and a freedom of information request showed that six out of 10 councils had not prosecuted a single landlord in 2016. One council, Newham, was responsible for 50% of all prosecutions across the country—why is that? Clearly, the level of protection being offered to vulnerable tenants in many councils is not adequate. The reasons we heard were: the legislation is over-complicated, as I have mentioned; local authorities have insufficient resources; and some local authorities simply lack the political will.

On resources, the Local Government Association has identified a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2019-20. The Chartered Institute of Housing showed that local authority spending on enforcement has reduced by a fifth over a six-year period. The Government have rightly introduced civil penalties of up to £30,000 and allowed local authorities to keep that money, and they brought in rent repayment orders—both were recommendations in the Committee’s previous report. Local authorities need further funding, and we hope the Government will work with them to try to achieve that.

Concerns were expressed that local authorities could not always cover the full cost of prosecutions, which might deter them from prosecuting some cases. The Minister said that local authorities’ duty was to prosecute regardless, but, being cash-strapped, they will often take the cost into account when they make decisions. We believe that courts should require offenders to pay costs that reflect the actual costs to local authorities of enforcement actions.

As part of our inquiry, we went to Newham to look at the enforcement activity there. I saw a garden shed configured to accommodate not one, but two households. We heard of about 25 people being accommodated in a small three-bedroom house. People were living in a walk-in freezer. A family was living in a chipboard construction in a garden, with a fridge and a washing machine powered by a wire from the kitchen. These are shocking conditions, and the fines and civil penalties should be increased.

However, the very worst landlords, whose business model relies on the exploitation of vulnerable tenants, can make hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. To them, a civil penalty of £30,000, however large an amount that is, is merely a business expense. To deal with the worst of the criminal landlords, we call for local authorities to have the power to take action to secure the confiscation of properties from landlords who commit the very worst offences, and to break their business model, which relies on the exploitation of vulnerable tenants.

Aside from the adequacy of resources or the severity of penalties, variations in enforcement between councils indicate that some local authorities have placed a higher priority on standards than others. We have called for authorities to publish their enforcement strategies and for a national benchmarking scheme, so that residents can compare enforcement between authorities. Ultimately, we believe that the disparity can be addressed only through political leadership.

In recognition of the particular interests of some Members, we supported the findings of the all-party group on carbon monoxide, which has called for landlords to install carbon monoxide alarms in the rooms of private rented properties that contain any fuel-burning appliance. We also supported the call for the Government to implement mandatory five-yearly checks on electrical installations in private rented property—an issue on which the Government have been consulting.

Finally, we looked into selective landlord licensing schemes. Since April 2015, local authorities have had to seek approval from the Government for selective schemes that would cover more than 20% of their area or more than 20% of privately rented homes in it. We heard that decision making was too slow, lacked transparency and was over-bureaucratic. Even local authorities that had decided against implementing a scheme felt that the decision should rest at local level.

In our view, decisions to implement such schemes should be made locally, where there is greater understanding of local needs and politicians are directly accountable to their electorates. We recommend that the Government remove the 20% cap; however, the Secretary of State should retain a power to require local authorities to reconsider a decision to implement a scheme that does not meet the strict criteria already set out by the Government.

As the private rented sector continues to expand and people remain in the sector for far longer, the Government need to address the clear power imbalance between tenants and landlords, and to ensure that local authorities have the resources they need to enforce the even stronger laws that we are recommending, to protect the most vulnerable tenants living in the worst conditions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is good to see my friend the Chair of the Select Committee back in his place after his medical treatment. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I agree absolutely with every point made in the
report. In respect of retaliatory evictions, does he agree that one issue that must be resolved is assured shorthold tenancies of six months, which are the norm for the private sector? If we extended those to three-year tenancies, that would strike a better balance between tenants and landlords.

**Mr Betts:** I absolutely agree. In our previous report—my friend, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), was also a member of the Committee at the time—we called for longer-term tenancies and greater certainty and security. We recognise what the Government have done under the Deregulation Act 2015 in terms of protection against retaliatory evictions, but the problem in the current market is that if a tenant does not formally complain in writing to the local authority, and the local authority then does not get enforcement action, there is actually no protection. We also recognise that the new legislation coming in, such as the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend, the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), could leave the tenant open to retaliatory eviction, and in that legislation there is no protection from it. That is why we say that we should look again at that particular issue.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is very good to see my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, back in his place. I am a member of the Committee and it was a pleasure to work with other members of the Committee on this report, with which I agree wholeheartedly.

A family with very small children living in poor-quality rented accommodation in my constituency were recently evicted after they complained that the ceiling in the bathroom had collapsed over the bath shortly after they had finished bathing their children. I have no doubt that the next tenant is now living in that property, and that it is the taxpayer who is lining that landlord’s pockets by paying the rent. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is entirely appropriate for this report to make the recommendation that, in such despicable circumstances, the state should have the power to remove such properties from those landlords so that they can be returned to good use for families who need high-quality accommodation? Will he join me in calling on the Minister to progress that recommendation?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend for her best wishes. May I also thank her and the hon. Member for Harrow East for the work that they did on the Select Committee while I was off in March?

Absolutely. We heard that many landlords do an excellent job. There are some who do not do it quite as well as others, and there are some who are basically criminals—the word “rogue” is used, but they are basically criminals. They are exploiting both the tenant and the taxpayer. In those extreme circumstances, the ultimate power of not merely banning them from operating as a landlord, but taking that property off them, is something we hope the Government will seriously consider.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Chair of the Select Committee back to his place.

I recused myself from the Select Committee inquiry because of my own Member’s interests, to which, of course, the House can refer. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) references longer tenancies, but does the Chair of the Select Committee accept that those should be introduced on a voluntary basis for fear otherwise of driving landlords out of the sector, thereby potentially reducing supply to this very, very important sector?

**Mr Betts:** We did not particularly consider that in this report. In our previous report, we said that Shelter had produced a good model, and that we encouraged the sector to look at it. We must make landlords more aware of what is on offer. Sometimes, there is a feeling that some letting agents encourage the delivery of shorter-term tenancies because—guess what?—they make money every time the tenancy is renewed. The Government are dealing with that element in terms of tenants paying those fees, but landlords should get a bit wise to this, because I think many would actually favour longer tenancies. Let us get the information out there and encourage it.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Last night, I attended a housing assembly at a West London Citizens meeting. Some 300 people from churches, schools and community organisations were present. One of the demands on our council candidates was for there to be greater landlord licensing and a charter of tenants’ rights. What did the Committee’s report say on that? From my recollection, when these subjects came up in the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, some Government Members said that they would lead to too much red tape; I think many of them derive income from that source. What does my hon. Friend have to say on that?

**Mr Betts:** There are two issues there. We have talked about the power imbalance, and action can be taken particularly on retaliatory eviction and retaliatory rent increases to try to rebalance the power. We have also asked the Government to use social media to make more information available to tenants, rather than just using the written form. On licensing, what we are saying is that, essentially, this should be a local decision within the current criteria. I hear landlords say, “It costs us,” but what I say is that the landlords’ concern over selective licensing is not because of the fee that they pay, but because Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs might suddenly realise that they are raking in an income and they might suddenly have to start paying tax on it. That is something we should welcome in terms of public resources—getting in more tax as a result of these schemes.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is good to see my hon. Friend back in his place. He rightly highlighted the contribution that the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), can make to tackling the really appalling conditions in the private sector. The Government are supporting the Bill—at the third time of asking—but it is still not being allowed into Committee. Will he use
his and his Committee’s considerable weight to ensure that the Bill does indeed pass, because we absolutely need its powers?

**Mr Betts:** I will certainly do everything I can. That was the view of the Committee, and of the House on the Bill’s Second Reading, which I was here for. The Bill has unanimous support, so I hope there will be no obstacles to it. We did identify two issues, however, around making the Bill work. One was to ensure protection from retaliatory eviction when tenants complain—we thought that important—and the second was access to proper legal and technical advice, which many tenants will need to take on their landlord. We also said that a reformed housing court would make such legal approaches by tenants or anyone else much easier to deal with, and asked the Government to give urgent consideration to that as well.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Excellent. It is good to welcome the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) back to his place.

**Backbench Business**

**Surgical Mesh**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** We now come to the Backbench debate on surgical mesh, in which Emma Hardy is to move the motion. As is the custom, she has around 15 minutes. I am sure there could be a little leeway, but Members should be aware we have an important debate to follow.

12.6 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House commends the recent announcement of a retrospective audit into surgical mesh for pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence; notes that vaginal mesh has been banned in other jurisdictions such as New Zealand; further notes that NICE guidance recommends against the use of surgical mesh for pelvic organ prolapse and that no NICE recommendations have been made for stress urinary incontinence; notes that Sheffield University recently announced the development of a new mesh material; and calls on the Government to suspend prolapse and incontinence mesh operations while the audit is being carried out, to bring forward the NICE guidelines for mesh in stress related urinary incontinence from 2019 to 2018, and to commit to a full public inquiry into mesh if the audit suggests that this is the best course of action.

I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate to take place and to the fantastic work done by the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh implants, of which I am a vice chair, and which is led by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). I also thank the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for their support in bringing forward this debate, as well as the amazing Kath Sansom and the campaign group Sling the Mesh—many of the women up in the Gallery have done so much to bring this to public attention. It is for the members of this group and everybody else affected by this scandal that I rise to speak today.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend as alarmed as I am—she clearly is—that today and tomorrow women will be having operations that might well cause them complications in the future? Does she agree that these operations should be stopped until we find out the truth?

**Emma Hardy:** I absolutely agree. One of the main points I wish to make is the urgent need to suspend the use of mesh.

The issue of surgical mesh was brought to my attention by a constituent of mine called Angie, an incredibly brave woman who used to be very fit and healthy, but who, after having incontinence following the birth of her twins and a hysterectomy, was advised to have this mesh operation. She is now unable to work, in constant pain and suffering, cannot take part in sports and has problems sleeping. I remember listening to what she said to me and feeling horrified that this had happened to her. As I have learned, she is most definitely not alone. One story that moved me came in by email this week. The lady who emailed wrote:
“I started noticing that something wasn’t right with me the second day after I was discharged after the operation. It started with my legs—they were extremely stiff and cold, especially my feet, I couldn’t warm them in any way. I rang the hospital, but it didn’t ring an alarm bell to them. Then after a few days, I started having a very bad stomach ache, nausea, headache, chest pain, something happened to my vision, out of the blue, I became very tired and weak, slightly dizzy. I started noticing that I couldn’t focus and think clearly, my scars didn’t heal well and suddenly after a month my biggest scar started producing very smelly discharge.

I requested an appointment with a GP. I was already complaining that something wasn’t right with me. Everything started after the operation… When my health and all symptoms got worse 12 weeks since the operation, I was told that my fatigue is because I have a 2 year old… Now, it’s been 14 months since my operation—I am extremely dizzy and have very poor balance. I can’t feel the ground with my legs. I’m extremely nauseous, I have bad stomach ache, migraines, breathing problems and chest pain. I’m numb. I have vision fog and very painful, sore eyes. My body can’t recognize the temperature. Either I’m too cold or I’m about to faint from the heat. I started having very bad side effects to antibiotics, supplements or even herbal teas. Before the operation, I had no side effects at all. In 8 months, I lost 12% of my total weight and now I’m 8 and a half stone and still losing weight. This mesh wipes my iron out from the system. My fertility is gone.”

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that one of the most worrying things, and part of the seriousness, is that the people facing decades of pain, suffering and loss of amenity are relatively young?

**Emma Hardy:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is completely right, because mesh was given to lots of young women following childbirth—many women were still in their 30s—and it has left them feeling disabled.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am delighted the hon. Lady has this debate. Does she agree that, as well as young women, lots of males are caught in this sorry and ghastly trap? I have personally heard some terrible tales from my constituency, although I will not go into them just now.

**Emma Hardy:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and moving speech. May I include testimony from my constituent, Adele Yemm, from Chiswick? There was a catalogue of errors with her case. She had only mild incontinence, and physiotherapy would have sorted it out. There were issues about consent—she was denied that. She had a full implant fitted. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is the biggest medical scandal since thalidomide?

**Emma Hardy:** I completely agree that this is an absolute scandal.

During the debate in October, I asked the Government to do four things: to commit to a full, retrospective and mandatory audit of all interventions and, if the data proves it necessary, a full public inquiry; to suspend prolapse and incontinence mesh operations while the audit is carried out; to bring forward the NICE guidelines for mesh in relation to stress-related urinary incontinence from 2019 to 2018; and to commit to raising awareness for mesh in relation to stress-related urinary incontinence for men and women.

In December, NICE issued new guidance, ruling that the evidence for the long-term effectiveness of the treatment for pelvic organ prolapse is “inadequate in quality and quantity”.

The NHS is not compelled to act on these guidelines, but that would amount to a de facto ban.

In January, the Government caved in to demands for a national audit of surgical mesh, which reported on Tuesday. The audit is not perfect. For example, it looks only at NHS hospital figures and misses off private patients and out-patients; does not include men; does not include ventral rectopexy mesh sufferers; does not cover visits to GPs; and does not indicate how many times someone has to visit their GP before being referred for out-patient treatment. However, it seems broadly to agree with what we have been saying all along: that the Government’s claim that only 1% to 3% of women suffered serious complications is just not accurate.

*Mark Tami:* My hon. Friend mentioned women feeling that they were alone, which is one of the main problems. I have spoken to a lot of people who were told that there was not a problem and that they were perhaps the only ones experiencing a problem. People were on a host of painkillers and were not told that others had experienced the same and that it was a much wider problem.

**Emma Hardy:** Part of the scandal is how many women were treated when they went back to their doctors. The fantastic work of groups such as Sling the Mesh has brought so many women together, and shown them that they are not alone and that many others have suffered.

The number of subsequent gynaecology out-patient appointments per 100 women having the mesh insertion procedure is 79. There are 43 out-patient appointments per 100 for rehabilitation, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. The figures show that the number of women having the procedure has fallen during the last nine years by 48%, which says an awful lot about what doctors think.

These women were injured. These women were ignored. These women are the victims of a scandal.
Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on this important debate. She is right to call this a scandal. A constituent of mine now has a colostomy bag and severe internal pain and probably cannot give birth safely in future. She is 24. She makes the point that ventral rectopexy mesh procedures are not included in the audit, apparently because there is no code for surgeons to enter. May I join the hon. Lady in pressing the Minister to go back and include that in the audit so that my constituent’s suffering can be recorded?

Emma Hardy: I absolutely agree, and I hope that will be included in future.

Analysis conducted by Carl Heneghan, professor of evidence-based medicine at the University of Oxford and clinical adviser to the APPG on surgical mesh implants, reveals that the 100,516 women who have undergone mesh surgery in England since 2008 have required follow-up treatment in 993,035 out-patient appointments. He has calculated the total cost to the NHS for all incontinence and out-patient appointments to be £245 million. His analysis of the trend in out-patient appointments also shows that more are required by women as each year passes after their surgery, which is completely the opposite of what you would expect after a successful surgery.

The data shows that the number of operations using mesh has halved over the last decade, which shows that doctors and patients are voting with their feet and telling the world that they do not want to use mesh.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Hardy: I will have to continue.

In February came the welcome announcement of the Cumberlege review of how the NHS addresses concerns about vaginal mesh devices and how patients have been treated when raising those concerns. However, I remain deeply concerned that mesh has not yet been completely suspended and that it remains possible for doctors to declare any grants, inducements or scholarships that they receive from the industry.

Mr Seely: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Hardy: I am sorry, but I have to continue.

It seems that our campaign must continue. We must ask again for renewed commitments from the Government to address these problems. Again, I ask the Government to commit to three things. First, we need a full and unequivocal suspension of mesh implant operations. Secondly, I ask them to bring forward the NICE guidelines for stress-related urinary incontinence from 2019 to 2018. Thirdly—that is a new one—will they please offer pelvic floor physiotherapy to all new mums as standard on the NHS, as happens in France, to help to restore the core after birth?

I end my speech with exactly the same words I used to conclude my remarks in Westminster Hall. Mesh implants have affected thousands of people all over the country. For some, the consequences of their operation will be life-changing and devastating. A Government commitment to taking these actions will not undo the suffering and pain that these women have endured, but would go a long way to making sure that nothing like this happens again.

This is the second time that I have spoken these words. Let us hope that justice is done before I have to speak them a third time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The time limit for speeches is eight minutes.

12.21 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I pay tribute to the many women, including those in my constituency, who have come forward to discuss deeply personal and painful accounts of serious complications following mesh surgery, sometimes with life-changing and lifelong consequences for them and their families. I also thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) who, as always, has set out the background to the issue so eloquently. She has been such a campaigner on behalf of victims, and I really thank her for what she is doing. I will not repeat much of the background that she set out, but I will highlight a few points to which I hope the Minister will respond in her closing remarks.
[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

As we have heard, NHS Digital has published a review of patients who have undergone urogynaecological procedures for prolapse or stress urinary incontinence, including those where mesh, tape or equivalents were used. However, as the hon. Lady pointed out, the review does not cover all procedures, nor does it include the men who have been affected. We know that 100,516 women underwent these procedures between 2008 and 2016, of which 27,016 cases involved mesh for prolapse. Although the numbers are falling, I am afraid that this is just a snapshot.

Mr Seely: I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on calling this important debate. Are the figures accurate? I have been told that some of the figures do not include people who are treated abroad and come here having developed complications, or people who have been to private clinics. The numbers that we have may therefore not be accurate, perhaps underestimating the true total.

Dr Wollaston: I was about to come to that very point. Crucially, many of the women I have met have been treated in the private sector. In this House, we should be concerned about all our constituents, not only those who are treated in the NHS. Of course, it is the NHS that often then bears the burden of managing complications, but we must have a much more accurate picture.

I support the call from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and from the British Society of Urogynaecology for mandatory prospective data collection, using the BSU’s database. That is a well-established method of collecting outcome data. Retrospective snapshots are no substitute for collecting data as we go forward or, most importantly, for being able to track it in the long term. Although the majority of complications that happen after 30 days happen in the first year, many of the women I have met developed complications far later than that. I particularly want to emphasise to the Minister how important it is that we have access to shared databases not just here in the UK, but across Europe. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government will require all mesh procedures for prolapse or stress urinary incontinence, but for other medical devices. Just because we have access to the widest possible population base and clear device tracking.

That brings me to the wider point about Brexit that is highlighted in the report of the Select Committee on Health on the implications of Brexit for medicines, devices and substances of human origin: the issue of access to clinical trials. It is encouraging that the Government have stated that they wish to remain a part of the European Medicines Agency or to have associate membership, but there are all sorts of aspects to forward clinical research on which it is essential that the Government campaign. They must campaign not just to maintain regulatory alignment and harmonisation, but to ensure that we can remain part of all research mechanisms and mechanisms for ensuring that we have the earliest possible awareness of any complications—not just from drugs but, as this situation has shown, from medical devices. I hope that the Minister will further outline the Government’s intention in that regard.

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend will remember that I spoke about my constituents in Letchworth during the debate in Westminster Hall. I am delighted that the audit has been done, but another constituent from Letchworth has been in touch with me since then. She has had ventral mesh rectopexy surgery and posterior mesh rectopexy surgery, which I understand are subsets of the mesh cases. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we were to look at a smaller group of people such as her across Europe, we would actually get quite a good picture of what is happening, given that we would be looking at data across a bigger area?

Dr Wollaston: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right, and his point applies not only to medical devices. When it comes to relatively rare conditions, we need to look at the widest possible population base in order to detect any complications. It is also important to use the widest possible population base when detecting rare complications. I thank him for highlighting that.

If we are to have informed consent for women, it has to be based on high-quality, balanced and evidence-based information, and that has been lacking. We also need to be clear that if a medical device is altered in any way, it must be part of a clinical trial. That was entirely lacking in this situation. The types of device, including the size and thickness, were changed without anyone properly recording or following up on those changes. That has to be the key lesson for the future.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an extremely important point. Does she agree that the issue here is that all one effectively has to prove for a follow-on device is its equivalence with the original device? There is therefore a fundamental flaw in how we license devices versus the far more rigorous way in which, for example, we license molecules.

Dr Wollaston: I absolutely agree. It strikes me that there has been a kind of wild west out there, with representatives saying, “Why don’t you try this one? This is probably going to be better”, without organisations setting up clinical trials from the start so that we could compare different devices, and without women giving properly informed consent that a different kind of device would be used. Lessons have to be learned not just for mesh surgery, but for other medical devices. Just because something sounds like it might be better, it does not mean to say that there will not be serious complications. Those complications may also happen at a late stage.

We need databases such as EUDAMED so that we have access to the widest possible population base and clear device tracking.

Mark Tami: Does the hon. Lady agree that many women were told that this was like a miracle cure—a very quick fix—and were not given all the facts about it?

Dr Wollaston: I do agree.

As I say, informed consent is essential, and that was lacking in very many cases. There are cavalier attitudes and assumptions that medical devices are somehow safer than medicines, but we know that that is simply not the case. We have to rigorously make sure that devices are all part of clinical trials, with long-term follow-up and tracking. Perhaps the Minister could
update us on how we are getting on with the barcoding of devices, which clearly makes them over time. One of the tragedies is that many women are completely unaware that they have even had mesh inserted at all. That, again, has to be a lesson that we learn for the future about accurate documentation.

I hope that the Minister will comment on whether there are plans to introduce compensation for victims. As I said, many of the women I have met have had profound, life-changing injuries, and many are entitled to compensation.

Dr Huq: The hon. Lady mentions the physical injuries and physical pain, but does she agree that these women have also had great emotional pain and psychological suffering? Many are suicidal. The Minister would be well advised to introduce, within a future action plan, counselling services of some kind for these sufferers.

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. Yes, absolutely: the scars have been profound not only in physical terms but in the impact on how people feel about themselves. There is a great impact not only on them but on their families and their relationships.

On access to services, while we all welcome a tertiary service being set up for victims of urogynaecological mesh, there is concern about current waiting times for those who wish to have a referral to a tertiary centre, and about access to investigations, which need to be timely. When women come forward to report deeply personal and distressing experiences, it is important that they can be seen as rapidly as possible. I hope that the Minister will comment on that.

12.32 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing today’s debate. This is the first occasion on which we have debated this issue on the Floor of the House—in the main Chamber—and it is a very important moment in the campaign.

I thank and congratulate all the women who have been campaigning on this issue, long before it was made such a salient issue in the media, and now in Parliament. From a personal perspective, I very much thank my own constituent, Carolyn Churchill, who came to see me about this issue several years ago and revealed to me the scale of the suffering and trauma—that she had experienced as a result of having mesh implanted. We campaigned to have her mesh removed, and that has been life-changing for her. I am delighted to see her with us today in the Gallery.

It would be easy to be extremely angry and passionate about this, but I do not want to do that today, nor do I want to list the many life-changing, debilitating ways in which people have been affected. I am sure that many other Members will speak about that. I want to speak a little more dispassionately about how we have got to where we are, the history of mesh, and some of the wider lessons. While this is a tragedy for individuals, it is clear, as the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) highlighted, that it also speaks to deep, substantive issues not just about mesh but about licensing, monitoring and the diffusion of devices into the health marketplace more generally.

So what is the history of mesh? Mesh was introduced in the 1970s, and withdrawn because it was not felt to be an effective way of addressing issues and because many doctors felt that there were too many side effects associated with it. Like many devices, it was then improved marginally, and it was reintroduced in the late ’90s and early 2000s. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle said, it was marketed incredibly aggressively among doctors because it was perceived as being quick and easy—day case keyhole surgery as opposed to much more invasive, difficult and costly means of treating stress-related urinary incontinence, in particular, through colposuspension and autologous sling, using individuals’ own tissue to raise the bladder to deal with incontinence.

One understands why, in that set of circumstances where mesh was seen as safe and effective, doctors picked it up in huge numbers. In 2008–09, 14,000 women had an implant—the high point, as it were, of the usage of mesh. As my hon. Friend said, we have seen a general decline in usage over a period. Throughout that period, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the royal colleges and Ministers in this place and elsewhere have said, in effect, that it is safe, with side effects in only 1% to 3% of patients—perhaps 3% to 5%, they have conceded on occasion, but still relatively small numbers and arguably, they say, within the bounds of acceptability for surgery.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that had doctors not sold mesh aggressively to women, many women may not have chosen it as a way of solving their problems and may not have had the problems and complications they have now?

Owen Smith: Yes. The long and the short of it is that this has become such a widespread problem because of doctors felt that there were too many side effects associated with it. If we had been more research about how easy it is to remove, because it is actually very difficult and only a few surgeons will undertake that work?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The whole point of mesh is that it is designed to induce scar tissue in order to fuse the mesh with the muscle, and therefore trying to excise the mesh is incredibly difficult. That is
why there are partial removals and some women are left with pieces of mesh inside them, even after surgery. Those sorts of complications are clearly very worrying. They ought to have been explained properly to women, but obviously were not, in very many cases.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I thank him for his work. Will he go back to what he said a few moments ago about the idea of it being acceptable that 1% to 3% of cases might go wrong? It might be acceptable if we are dealing with a small overall total, but when we are dealing with over 100,000 cases, we are saying that it is acceptable for 1,000 to 3,000 people to suffer devastating, life-changing injuries as a result of this procedure. Surely that is anything but acceptable.

Owen Smith: It absolutely is not acceptable. I hope that the Minister is not going to repeat what other Ministers have said in written statements and in this place, which is that 1% to 3% is the sort of failure rate, or complication rate, that one would expect with all sorts of surgery. The reality is that the numbers are far greater than that—far, far greater—as the audit this week shows. I will come on to address that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that some hospitals are still advertising low failure rates, particularly for tape? That disguises the issue, particularly when they refer to failure rates in the first year and do not talk about long-term studies.

Owen Smith: Yes. We have heard that many women have this undertaken in private clinics—perhaps half of them, although we do not know how many that means. Those clinics advertise success rates very widely; we can find it all over the internet. The fact that this is described as mesh, sling, tape or ways to uplift the bladder obfuscates what we are really talking about and makes it difficult for women—and indeed, I suspect, occasionally doctors—to know the nature of what they are dealing with. What has emerged, as evidence has come through, is that there are greater problems than was appreciated. That is why, given that mesh was originally licensed to treat stress-related urinary incontinence and then extended to pelvic organ prolapse, we should be deeply concerned. Mesh is already effectively banned in our country for pelvic organ prolapse—that happened just last year. It is now to be used in research only, which is tantamount to a ban. That is happening in countries all over the world—just last year New Zealand effectively banned mesh for both SU1 and POP, although I gather it may lift the ban in future. This is a worldwide problem.

We have had the audit results this week. Let us be clear that we only had an audit because of the great campaigning by Sling the Mesh, the APPG and other bodies. We asked Ministers directly to conduct it, they were good enough to do so, and I am pleased they have.

The results show that far from there being just a 1% to 3% occurrence of serious complications, there is a 4% rate for complete removal of mesh. Five hundred and fifty out of the 14,000 women who were given mesh in 2008, the first year of the study, have had it removed at some point in the last decade. That is not rates of complications such as pain or sexual dysfunction: the mesh is so problematic that women have had to go back under the knife to have it cut out.

As for the complications, which the audit has tried to measure by looking at the volume of outpatient appointments, the 100,000 women who had mesh inserted have needed almost 1 million outpatient appointments. They have gone to their GP to say they have a problem and been referred to a consultant for an outpatient appointment, whether for pain management, residual gynaecological problems or some other problem—trauma, in some instances. That must be indicative of the scale of the problem and the cost to the NHS, as illustrated by the work done for the APPG by Carl Heneghan. Some £250 million may have been spent in a decade to sort out the problems.

Mesh is a much bigger problem than has been appreciated by the clinical community, which has been incredibly defensive in dealing with it. The community must be much more open and honest about it. We have to address the issues of licensing; it cannot be enough for follow-on devices to only have to prove equivalence, or for a registry to be run simply by the royal colleges, which have been resistant in the past to having a registry. We should have a standardised process to put a registry in place to follow patients. Crucially, NICE must also get its act together. Why have we waited three years for NICE to bring forward new guidelines? It is still saying that that will not happen until next year—it needs to be done this year. This issue needs to be dealt with tomorrow.

12.42 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I echo the comments of many hon. Members and express my deep concern for all women who have experienced debilitating and sometimes severe pain and discomfort following the use of vaginal mesh. In all our considerations of the use of such devices, their health, safety and wellbeing must be our first concern.

I welcome the Government’s recent announcements of Baroness Cumberlege’s review of the use of vaginal mesh and two other areas of medical safety—the use of valproate and Primodos. I was in the Chamber when the Secretary of State for Health announced that review on 21 February and I could tell from the tone of his announcement, not just the content, that he personally cares very greatly about the women affected by this issue. He wants to ensure that lessons are learned wherever possible, so that care can improve to ensure that each woman gets the treatment that is right for her—the best that can be provided for her as an individual. I am sure that the Minister shares that view.

The Secretary of State said:

“It is an essential principle of patient safety that the regulatory environment gives sufficient voice to legitimate concerns reported by patients, families and campaigners, works alongside them and responds in a rapid, open and compassionate way to resolve issues when these are raised.”—[Official Report, 21 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 166.]

Ministers want to ensure that we do better in future where necessary, and to ensure that patient voices are brought to the table. I support the review and I want to ensure that justice is done for all women who have concerns about the use of vaginal mesh. We need to ensure that we maintain public confidence.
Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On the hon. Lady’s comments about justice being done, I have been approached by two constituents who have been greatly affected by vaginal mesh. One of them is unable to work. She has to be lifted up to walk as she cannot stand by herself, so she needs carers. Does the hon. Lady agree that in many cases it is not only justice that is needed, but compensation? As the Chair of the Health Committee said, we need to start looking at compensation for some women. My constituent is in her early 50s and can no longer work.

Fiona Bruce: That is something that I have said not only about this issue, but about the use of valproate. It is important that we pay close attention to the experiences and difficulties that patients have endured. We need to be more open to learning what we can from their experiences, making changes where necessary and—as the hon. Gentleman says—examining where compensation should be sought for them.

Baroness Cumberlege has been instructed to look comprehensively at the whole issue. The Government want to listen. We have all seen examples in which people have appeared to listen to concerns, nodded their heads and then gone away and done nothing. That is not what is happening here. I believe that the Secretary of State and Ministers not only want to listen carefully to concerns on this issue, but stand ready to act appropriately. For that reason, I think the proposal in the motion for a full public inquiry is inappropriate at this stage. We need to give time for Baroness Cumberlege to report. We need to urge that be done urgently, and we need to ask Ministers questions.

I have some questions of my own for the Minister. What is the timescale for the review and what progress has been made already? Does the Minister agree that introducing an outright ban would be inappropriate before the review? Can she assure the House that the new NICE guidelines which recommend against first use of the surgical mesh to treat pelvic organ prolapse are being carefully followed throughout the NHS? Is it correct that in the vast majority of instances the use of surgical mesh has proven to be an effective intervention that has enabled many women to live happily and independently after surgery? I believe that some 1,500 women receive vaginal mesh implants each year and the majority respond well. If that is correct, it is important to balance that against the distressing individual cases that we have heard about today. I also understand that the high rate of success for the use of surgical mesh to treat hernias suggests that an outright ban would be rash at this stage, and certainly premature before the Cumberlege review reports.

What information can the Minister provide on the recent development of a new material for surgical mesh implants? What more information do we have about how that is expected to reduce discomfort because of its greater likeness to human tissue? Can the Minister update the House on what progress is being made to improve GPs’ awareness of SUI and POP and how best to treat those conditions, so that women are given the most appropriate treatment for their circumstances? Will the Cumberlege review take into account international research on this issue? We have heard some mention of it today, but I understand that no other jurisdiction has imposed an outright ban on the use of mesh.

In conclusion, the Secretary of State has made it clear that we are building on substantial work from over the past few years—the Cumberlege report comes on the back of a lot of other work, and I hope the Minister will confirm that that will all be taken into account. I ask Members to await that report before we make any final decision. Professor Keith Willett brought forward the 2017 Mesh Oversight Group report, which followed the Mesh Working Group interim report in 2015. He said that “there has been significant progress since this work began. Information available to women and clinicians is now better and more consistent, data recording has been improved, including of complications, and women can now be referred to multi-disciplinary teams of health professionals with the experience necessary to advise women who are experiencing complications from mesh surgery on their treatment options.”

John Wilkinson, Director of Devices at the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, stated:

“We continue to see that evidence supports the use of these devices in the UK for treatment of the distressing conditions of incontinence and organ prolapse in appropriate circumstances.”

We must ensure through this review that every circumstance in which these devices are used is appropriate, and that the women involved feel confident of that.

12.51 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee. I took part in a powerful debate on the issue in Westminster Hall, and I am delighted that time has now been made available on the Floor of the House. I commend all those involved with the Sling the Mesh campaign and the all-party group, and I commend the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for the leadership he has shown. This issue is finally getting the attention that it deserves. Like most Members, it was brought to my attention by a constituent who has been affected first hand, and I wish to reflect on some of the experiences and points that she shared with me, as well as considering broader policy issues on which I hope the Minister will respond.

Other Members have already mentioned ventral mesh rectopexy, which has not been included in the UK Government’s proposed audit. Sling the Mesh’s campaign research shows that 7% of its members have been affected by that specific procedure, and there is a certain amount of disappointment that it does not seem to have been included. As the Minister might know, I have written to the Secretary of State about that concern, and asked the Government to think again, particularly given the number of people affected and the devastating effect that this has had on their lives.

I also raised concerns about the need for a hospital episodes code to be allocated to that procedure. Without one, it is difficult to keep track of the number of people affected, and we have already heard about the problems arising from the lack of information about the exact number of people affected by the procedure and the mesh more generally.

There are also concerns that some recent National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines might have been rushed through, partly in response to
media attention, which only adds to the argument for a full and comprehensive audit that includes all types of mesh procedure.

The health service is devolved in Scotland, where there is a slightly different situation. In 2014, the Scottish Government requested a suspension in the use of medical mesh by the NHS in Scotland pending safety investigations, and in 2015 the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport, Shona Robison, apologised to women who had been left in severe pain by such operations. Between 2009 and 2016, the number of women receiving mesh surgery in Scotland fell from 2,267 to just 135.

An independent review published in March last year in Scotland made eight recommendations, notably that surgical mesh implants should be used only after all other appropriate alternatives have been exhausted, and—crucially—only when women have given their fully informed consent. Scotland’s chief medical officer accepted the recommendations of that report in full, and has been clear that the requested suspension in the use of mesh implants should remain in place until she is satisfied that all recommendations have been implemented. That means that all women in Scotland who want treatment for urinary incontinence or pelvic organ prolapse should be offered the full range of options available, and they should be fully informed of the benefits and risks associated with those procedures.

Regulation of these devices is reserved, however, and operates at UK-wide level, which is why calls for a UK-wide national clinical audit and database for recording device identifiers are so important. Scottish Government officials are working with UK colleagues to consider the possibility of an automated implant registry, which would allow unique device identifiers to be entered on the patient’s electronic record. As the Minister will know, the now Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has written to the Health Secretary to suggest a UK-wide woman’s health summit. That would allow the NHS, and relevant decision makers across the United Kingdom, to work constructively on a range of issues.

I wish to raise other aspects of regulation, and particularly EU regulation on medical devices 2017/745. That will change mesh implants for long-term or permanent use from a class IIB to a class III device, meaning that they are generally regarded as high risk. The regulations will not take full effect until 2020, which is after the Government’s preferred date for Brexit. How will important EU regulations that monitor the use of devices across EU territories be implemented or reflected in UK law and regulation after Brexit? It is important that standards are maintained to the highest possible level.

Campaigners such as my constituent are concerned about the current process of what could be called post-market vigilance, and whether some of the devices are subject to testing that is rigorous enough before they are rolled out to the market. There is a genuine concern that device manufacturers have a profit motive to develop their devices and get them on the market as quickly as possible, although equally, they have a fear of litigation, which is why better and stronger regulation from the start is key.

The risks associated with surgical mesh implants were tragically misunderstood and underestimated by healthcare providers and professionals who provided the treatment, and by patients whose lives have been so badly affected by chronic and debilitating pain. I welcome the conclusions and recommendations of the Scottish and English reviews of this procedure, which must ensure that surgical mesh implants are used only after all other appropriate alternatives have been exhausted and—crucially—only when women have given their fully informed consent.

I hope that Ministers will be willing to work with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations and consider a UK-wide summit on the issue and women’s health more generally. I will finish as I started by paying tribute to my constituent and all campaigners for their bravery and courage in ensuring that this issue has been brought to our attention. It is them we must thank for the small and belated progress that has already been made, and for them we must continue to hope for more and faster progress in future.

12.57 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I start by saying that I think the steps taken in Scotland, as described by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), sound extremely sensible as interim measures until final decisions can be taken. I echo the thanks due to the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), their associates in the all-party group, and Sling the Mesh campaigners. I also thank my three constituents, Emma, Eileen and Helen, who have all shared with me their harrowing experiences of the procedure.

There is no doubt that when vaginal mesh procedures go wrong, the results can be truly catastrophic. A letter from the Minister states clearly that “women have suffered atrocious and debilitating complications” from these implants. Her counterpart in the Upper House, Lord O’Shaughnessy, has conceded this:

“While these treatments can be effective, in a small minority of cases meshes can cause serious long-term injury and disability, and prevent or reduce the ability of affected women to work.”

According to a letter from the Health Secretary to parliamentary colleagues in February:

“Clinical experts here and abroad agree that, when used appropriately, many women gain benefit from this intervention, and hence a full ban is not the right answer.”

I find it difficult to follow that logic. There might be an acceptable argument if we were talking about a procedure in which the numbers of interventions were in the hundreds, but, as I said in an intervention and as the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) endorsed, we are talking here about over 100,000 people. When we are talking about over 100,000 people, if even the Government’s low figures of 1% to 3% going badly wrong are right, that is still 1,000 to 3,000 people. I have been given, by my constituent Emma, a leaflet from Sling the Mesh that says that its estimate is that at least 15% of people are seriously and badly affected. On that scale, we are talking about over 15,000 people being seriously damaged by this procedure.

Owen Smith: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his kind remarks. Would he be surprised to learn that the chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, speaking alongside the Health Secretary
in a Facebook Live broadcast just a few months ago, said that she thought the serious complication rate was between 15% and 20%. I have written to her asking where she got those numbers, although as far as I am aware she has not replied to me, because that is at odds with all the previous comments by Ministers and officials.

**Dr Lewis:** Indeed. I would be surprised at that, because if that is what Dame Sally believes she ought to be making different recommendations.

I have been given a particular study, which is described as the largest study of surgical mesh insertions for stress urinary incontinence. Over 92,000 women were surveyed in this particular examination, including all NHS patients in England over an eight-year period. The conclusion states:

“We estimate that 9.8% of patients undergoing surgical mesh insertion for SUI experienced a complication peri-procedurally within 30 days or within five years of the initial mesh insertion procedure. This is likely a lower estimate of the true incidence.”

I reiterate my point about acceptable and unacceptable percentages. When we are talking about these very large numbers, even relatively low percentages make the procedure too risky to be used in anything other than last-resort circumstances similar to those described by the hon. Member for Glasgow North.

In the past decade, my constituent Emma has undergone X-ray-guided injections, ultrasound scans, MRI scans, in-patient stays, tests galore, more and more scans, and, eventually, a biopsy. She has been refused referral to a mesh specialist centre. It seems highly likely that she should never have been given a mesh implant in the first place after the trauma of such a difficult birth, which leads me to the next point about inadequate warnings. I understand from my constituents that they were given little warning, and in many cases no warning at all, about the potential dangers.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very important points. However, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who said she felt the control of the very people who have let her down.

She is desperate to be referred to one of the few doctors who specialise in mesh removal. She suffers from truly terrible bowel problems, some no doubt caused by the side effects of the painkillers and the sleep aids she has to take. Consequently, she suffers from depression, loss of confidence and lack of self-esteem. She further writes:

“I feel let down by professionals who were supposed to treat me to the best of their ability. There has been information about the adverse effects of mesh around for years, yet these doctors are indifferent treatment and a refusal to admit fault or to refer her to an out-of-area specialist in mesh removal.”

She writes:

“I do not want anyone from the hospital coming near me ever again. I have lost complete faith in them. I have been lied to and told repeatedly it was my body rejecting the mesh; but, unbelievably, they kept putting more in.”

She suffers from truly terrible bowel problems, some no doubt caused by the side effects of the painkillers and the sleep aids she has to take. Consequently, she suffers from depression, loss of confidence and lack of self-esteem. She further writes:

“I want these devices out of my body.”

Who can blame her?

Let me conclude by quoting, from an article in The Daily Telegraph of 23 October last year, a lady who suffered for eight years:

“I just wish I had never, ever had it done. I would rather have coped with that very minor problem of stress incontinence than this. If I had known even one of the possible risks of the surgery there is no way I would have had it done. I am furious that I was never told that this could happen.”

1.8 pm

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this debate, which is of paramount importance. I have listened to the contributions from Members on both sides of the House. I was struck by the comments made by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who said she felt that we could not say now that the use of surgical mesh should be suspended. I have been brought up to think that if it has four legs, eats grass, produces milk and moos, it is not a fish. If we are hearing from the women who have had the mesh implants that they are not working, that they have destroyed their lives and that
they have debilitating painful consequences, why on earth would we try to justify not suspending the use of this mesh? It is horrendous.

On 21 March, I asked the Prime Minister about surgical mesh. She advised in her letter of 28 March that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency review concludes that the benefits of vaginal mesh implants outweigh the risks. How can this be? How can it be that people who have gone in for a day’s surgery and come out thinking, “My life’s going to be better—I can rock climb, mountain bike and run with my kids,” find that they cannot move and are in constant pain? Some constituents who have contacted me are reduced to being in wheelchairs. How can we possibly say that the benefits outweigh the risks? It is horrendous.

Furthermore, according to both the NHS and the MHRA, the risk of vaginal mesh complications after an implant is stated as being between 1% and 3%. However, as other Members have mentioned, a recent study for Nature Research found that 9.8% of people suffered complications within five years of surgery. The Sling the Mesh Facebook page has over 6,000 members. The numbers do not add up: more people are suffering from the mesh complication than are credited in the statistics.

Even former surgeons such as Dr Peter Jones have declared that they would not take the risk of using mesh. A survey by Sling the Mesh found that over 60% of patients are suffering from anxiety and depression. I therefore urge the Minister not to risk more women having their lives blighted. We have heard that mesh can shrink, degrade and twist in a woman’s body—I put that to the Prime Minister in my question—and we now know that women have been left in permanent pain, unable to walk and unable to work because of the procedure.

I would argue that, due to the limited remit of the audit in the Government’s “Retrospective Review of Surgery for Vaginal Prolapse and Stress Urinary Incontinence using Tape or Mesh”, many women have been missed, which is why the stats do not stack up. Women who for years have gone back and forth to their GP for pain relief or antibiotics and have then become resistant to the antibiotics, women who have been treated in the last 12 months, and women who have not yet been referred have been overlooked. An urgent public inquiry must be undertaken into the number of women adversely affected and why the safety of so many has been disregarded.

We have heard about Kath Sansom, the founder of the Sling the Mesh UK campaign, who is in the Public Gallery. She said that she “lost hope for the future” when she underwent the surgery. She ran a poll of 500 women, and 83% said that they had not been fully informed of the risks. People have the right to make an informed choice and the right to receive the information and understand the implications of undertaking the procedure.

Furthermore, 70% reported having lost their sex lives and that they are still facing adverse events as late as 18 years after the procedure. These events include debilitating pain in the groin, pelvis and legs, as well as infection and inflammation. People are basically not able to conduct their usual business, such as playing with their children or going mountain biking, as I mentioned, and it is not fair. Most women in Kath’s support group added that they do not feel there is any aftercare following the implant procedure. That ties into the availability of information and the ability to make an informed choice.

Despite the recommendations from the NHS England report, less than 27% of clinicians have reported on these adverse events. Private hospitals are not audited for adverse events. Worse still, doctors who have been struck off by the General Medical Council are still able to work in these institutions. That is unacceptable.

Under the US Physician Payments Sunshine Act 2010, manufacturers must submit annual data on payment and transfers of value made to covered recipients. Several studies have been carried out by organisations with shares in mesh manufacturers. Similar legislation designed to increase the transparency of financial relationships between physicians, teaching hospitals and manufacturers of drugs, medical devices and biologics is required in this country. We need to understand what the kickback is. If someone is being asked the question, “Do you think mesh is good?” and have investments in mesh, why would they say no? We need to be more transparent and understand what these women are going through.

These sequential calamities must each be understood and corrected so that they are not repeated. Those who have suffered and faced complications must be referred via their GP to a specialist unit with multidisciplinary teams of professionals who can listen—not just hear what they are saying, but listen and understand what they are going through—advise and support them, and ensure that no more patients are harmed. I urge the Government to suspend the use of surgical mesh and tape for all procedures.

1.16 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate. Although we went in front of the Backbench Business Committee together, the truth is that she did most of the work. I am hugely grateful for what she has done in this space. Having set herself a very high bar with the way in which she opened the Westminster Hall debate in October, I can safely say that mesh-injured women in Scotland will be incredibly grateful for the support that she has shown them through her remarks today.

In the six months since that debate, there have been a number of important developments both internationally and domestically. There have been landmark announcements in Australia and New Zealand, as other hon. Members have mentioned. While the UK Government have so far not chosen to take similar action here, I will certainly continue my efforts with the all-party group on surgical mesh implants to persuade them that banning mesh is the right thing to do, particularly now that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has issued guidance that favours an effective ban in practice.

There was a Public Petitions Committee debate in the Scottish Parliament just before Christmas—as I set out at our previous Westminster Hall debate, the Scottish Mesh Survivors group was left with very little option but to continue its fight through the Scottish Parliament.
Public Petitions Committee following a hugely disappointing report from an independent review group established by the Scottish Government. A further review exercise is currently progressing in Scotland. However, it will not re-evaluate the conclusions of the independent review—it will assess only the merits of the process by which those conclusions were reached, so it has the potential to undermine that flawed exercise even further.

At this stage, I pay tribute to the three amigos in the Scottish Parliament: my Conservative colleague Jackson Carlaw, Labour’s Neil Findlay, and the Scottish National party’s Alex Neil, the former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. All three immediately recognised that there was a serious issue to be investigated and continue to champion mesh-injured women across Scotland, such as my constituents Elaine Holmes and Lorna Farrell.

One of the big difficulties is that it has been very hard to get media uptake, particularly in Holyrood with the male-dominated press lobby. They found it a bit icy and did not want to write about it, so I pay tribute to Marion Scott, a journalist who has been absolutely dogged in her determination to highlight this issue, and to the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who has gone out of his way to make sure that it gets pushed up in the media across the rest of the UK, giving it exposure that it would have otherwise been very difficult to achieve.

In February, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care outlined a number of important measures to review mesh and investigate what had gone wrong. It is fair to say that a lot of the campaign groups found the overall package slightly underwhelming, but it is vital that their input into the process is given the utmost attention. Of course, this week the retrospective audit was published.

As has been said, it is right that the Health Minister, Lord O’Shaughnessy, has instructed the chief medical officer in England to respond to the findings with some urgency following engagement with the medical authorities and, importantly, with the patient groups representing women whose lives have been wrecked by mesh. Too often when there have been statements, guidance and responses, the views and experiences of these women have been completely ignored. They have been talked about as though they are not there. Their experiences have been undermined and dampened down, so if patient groups are to have any faith in the UK Government, it is important that patient voices are front and centre of the process.

I was particularly pleased when the Secretary of State announced to the House that £1.1 million would be provided for the establishment of a comprehensive mesh database. That is a positive development, and mesh-injured women in Scotland have reacted warmly to it, but they have also made it clear that, if the authorities are to gain a true picture of the suffering that mesh can cause, it must be accompanied by a requirement for mandatory reporting of all mesh procedures. Crucially, as a number of others have said, that must encompass not just NHS but private procedures, because many of the women concerned were treated privately. If mandatory reporting is not already envisaged, I urge the Department to explore that possibility.

The setting up of a database in Scotland was one of the six points included in the petition that Scottish Mesh Survivors brought to the Scottish Parliament in 2014 and 2017. It is fair to say that progress has been pitiful, and it was therefore welcome that the Secretary of State made clear that he was open to the idea of a UK-wide database and to working closely with the devolved Administrations with the aim of establishing a clear UK-wide picture. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), I wrote to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport about the database, and was pleased when she confirmed that her officials had been liaising with colleagues at Westminster and the other devolved Administrations. Perhaps the Minister will explain exactly how those communications will proceed.

In view of the failure in Scotland to proceed with a database in the four years since the survivors’ petition was first brought to Holyrood, Scottish involvement in the issue of a UK-wide database—

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the discussion in Scotland was about the need for the database to be UK-wide? We have talked about EU registration. The bigger a population, the sooner a problem is noticed. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is UK-wide. It is not a question of small databases. The Scottish Government were not obstructing the proposal. The profession felt that the database needed to be UK-wide, and needed to feed into the MHRA.

Paul Masterton: I certainly agree that a UK-wide database will be far more effective and beneficial in providing a true representation of the story of the mesh-injured women, but the hon. Lady must accept that the women in Scotland have found the response of the Scottish Government—and, in particular, that of the current Cabinet Secretary—fairly poor.

A lot has happened in the past six months, both at home and abroad. Some progress has been made, and important steps have been taken, but we have much further to go. Members of Parliament are often asked, “What do you want to achieve in this place? What tangible thing do you want to walk away from here and say that you have done?” Securing justice for mesh-injured women is right up there at the top of the list. Let me simply say to those watching at home and those in the Public Gallery that the fight goes on.

1.23 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Let me begin by adding my voice to those of other Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing and introducing a debate on this important issue.

I agree with much of what has been said by Members on both sides of the House. It is good to hear such similar views expressed about the need to think about what action should be taken to help women who are suffering some horrendous conditions as a result of this procedure. Unfortunately I did not have an opportunity to take part in the Westminster Hall debate, so I have found the many speeches that I have heard today very informative. Some, indeed, have been very technical. Questions have been asked, and the answers will be useful to us because we shall be able to convey them to our constituents. I also welcome the specific recommendations that have been made, particularly by
the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle. There seems to be a difference of opinion on whether mesh operations should be suspended while the audit and other matters are being resolved. I think that many of us are somewhat confused about why the risk should have been considered acceptable.

Like, I suspect, many other Members, I first heard of the issue when I was contacted by a number of constituents via social media. I subsequently met some of them face to face. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) described the specific circumstances of some of his constituents, and my experience has been very similar. I have sat and listened to many women describe what they have suffered. Theirs is a strong, powerful story of pain, and of the incredible impact on their lives, their families, their marriages and their relationships.

Hearing such stories, we must ask ourselves how such pain, risk and suffering can be justified by the cases in which the procedure does work. I know that many of us are appalled when we hear of the experiences of the numerous women whose lives have been blighted by these procedures.

A number of issues have been raised, and I do not want to reiterate what has already been said. Instead, I shall focus on two elements that I do not think have been dealt with in any detail. First, we need to ensure that all the women affected are identified and fully supported, and benefit from the highest-quality care and intervention that can be provided at this stage. That, for me, is a priority, which involves two important considerations. One is the question of where we are right now—what these women are suffering right now, and what we can do to help them to try to find resolution. That journey will require the highest levels of expertise and support.

As we have heard, many of the medical interventions involved are complicated, and, given their previous experience of medical procedures, many women are understandably deeply apprehensive and worried about undergoing further necessary procedures. The right experience and qualifications, and a wrap-around support service, are critical not only to securing the best medical outcomes but to building confidence among the many women who have been let down by interventions in the past. I empathise with women who know that they will have to undergo even more medical procedures, even after having such horrific experiences and suffering the consequences of the previous interventions.

There is also the question of the suspension of mesh operations. I have written to the authorities in Northern Ireland and to the Secretary of State requesting a suspension pending the outcome of the audit and the review. In circumstances such as this, I am always very aware that many of us here are not doctors. We are not members of the medical profession. We are told—this has featured in the responses to my correspondence—that even Departments and their civil servants must and do listen to the medical professionals. It is important for NICE to move more quickly, though, because its recommendations will be crucial for frontline care, advice and the pathways that are followed for women who present with the issues that have led to this procedure.

Secondly—this has been discussed at some length today—there are the critical questions of why this happened and why it was not picked up earlier. I welcomed the Secretary of State’s announcement of a review, because it will cover some of those issues, but we need to understand how we have reached this position. I have spoken to constituents, and to members of the lobby from across Northern Ireland, and their common experience is that they were not taken seriously enough at all stages. Complaints made to medical professionals about complications were often dismissed, even when the women were in extreme and chronic pain. The database has been referred to. There should have been a database at an earlier stage so that the information could be located. I fully support a UK-wide database, because, as has been said, it would be the best way of gaining a wider sense of what is happening.

It is worrying that hundreds and thousands of women across the United Kingdom were individually presenting with complications from these procedures, yet nobody joined up the dots until a very late stage. I am glad that that is now happening—I am glad there is a review—but many women have had to suffer for too many years without the dots being joined and action being taken.

It is not acceptable that women presenting with problems were told by some GPs or other medical practitioners that perhaps it was just women’s problems—that these were the types of complications that generally arise in issues associated with the menopause. The problems were dismissed, and women felt dismissed and that their issues were not being taken seriously. That is wrong and unacceptable.

We hear a lot at the moment in Northern Ireland—I am sure it is the same across the United Kingdom—about patient-focused care and the patient-focused experience in the health service. Yet in all the stories I have heard about this issue, there is the common experience of people not being taken seriously and not having a patient-focused experience. That must be addressed urgently.

I look forward to the outcome of the review, and to some of the actions being discussed such as the audit and the setting up of the database, but it is important that we identify not only what went wrong, but clear actions to take to stop it happening again. We must learn from the mistakes of the past and make sure that actions are identified and that we progress.

Finally, I thank the advocates who have done a huge amount of work to raise awareness of this issue across the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland.

1.31 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank and congratulate the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Pontypool (Owen Smith), as is customary and also entirely justified on this occasion. This issue must be kept in the public eye.

One of the great privileges of being an MP is being able to give people a voice—to represent people in our constituencies who have been wronged, often in terrible circumstances through no fault of their own. In this case, for me that person is here today in the Gallery: Jacqui Cheetham. I am delighted to be able to represent her story, and her words are far more powerful than mine could ever be. When she visited me at my surgery what came across was the scale of the problem and also
its traumatic consequences given the relatively minor condition that Jacqui suffered from before the operation took place.

I would like to use Jacqui's words rather than my own, because, as I have said, they are far more powerful than mine could ever be. She explained that she had two surgeries using mesh, in 2005 and 2006:

"Within a few days of surgery I had severe pain in my groin and bladder. I was referred back to York Hospital on many occasions. The surgeon said he could find nothing wrong with me and eventually recommended I saw a psychiatrist, as he believed it was all in my head. As a teenager I had a history of mental health problems when my parents went through a nasty divorce. I was left to bring up my younger sister and take my main, secondary school exams. I simply could not cope but because this is on my medical records, even though the mesh operation was many years later they still referred back to that time and thought this must also be psychological. My GP spoke up for me and told them I was not depressed and demanded they find a solution. Eventually I was given a MRI scan and the mesh was found sticking into my bladder. I was then operated on to partially remove the mesh. After the operation, the surgeon described the pain of the mesh sticking as being like barbed wire as the raw edges of the material had hardened. It's intended that your body should mould itself into it and removal would be like extracting it from concrete..."

Since 2006 I have lived my life in constant pain. I take concentrated Oramorph and wear...Buprenorphine patches. I also take codeine for 'break-through' pain.

I was a fit young mother in my late 30s when I had this done, suffering mild incontinence. My ambition was to run the London Marathon and I found the incontinence merely a nuisance. How I wish I could go back to those days! I would never have had this operation, had I known this possible outcome. I was not warned of any such dangers.

I now cannot walk far. I can't stand or sit for extended periods of time. I struggle with simple tasks that require my concentration. Both my drugs and my pain affect my sleep. I am now 50, though I feel much older.

Quite simply, this operation has ruined my life and has had a massive impact on my family. My children are now grown-up but they were young at that time and I was unable to be a proper mum to them; unable to run and play with them as a parent should. There seems to be a misconception that the mesh which causes the greatest problems is "prolapse mesh" but this simply is not the case. All mesh can cause problems."

I know that the ministerial team is very concerned about, and aware of, these issues, in part due to the fine work of parliamentarians. Ministers rightly point out that no healthcare system in the world has yet banned this treatment, and they set about the review in February 2018, which has provided much of the information that we now have to address these points.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) pointed out, the scale of the problem is becoming clearer, but I do not believe we understand the true scale yet. The recent Guardian report said that out of 100,000 operations there were 6,000 removals, so there is an issue with at least 6%, and that is just the ones that have been removed, so we know the scale is greater than is currently acknowledged.

Something needs to be done now. It is heart-warming that the people who come to our surgeries to tell their stories want most of all to prevent this from happening to others, and we must pay credit to the people from the Sling the Mesh campaign for what they have done to benefit others as well as trying to redress some of the difficulties they experience themselves.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle raised the issue of physiotherapy, and she is absolutely right: prevention is better than cure. She mentioned that this problem has cost the healthcare system £245 million; it would be a true economy, not a false economy, to implement what she suggests as a simple first step for new mothers.

We also need to get to the bottom of the issue by having a true audit, including of, for example, private patients, to make sure we know the true scale of the problem: I support those calls. It must also be sensible when there are alternatives to look at a suspension of this treatment today. Burch colposuspension and autologous sling are alternative treatments, and it makes sense to me and certainly my constituent to suspend this treatment and look at other treatments in the meantime while we find an alternative. Perhaps the new Sheffield University treatment will prove effective, but, as the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee said, it needs to go through a clinical trial rather than women effectively being used as human guinea pigs. I support the extension of that until clinical trials can show that we have a solution without the traumatic consequences that affected so many women.

1.39 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate and on the power of work that she has done on behalf of the women affected by mesh. I also pay tribute to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh implants, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), for his work. I declare an interest as a member and vice-chair of the group. In the run-up to this debate, I have been contacted by many constituents whose lives have been devastated by mesh. Because of the sensitivity of the topic and the embarrassment that many women feel, it is a major step for them to come forward and speak so bravely about their experiences.

For these women, what started as a slight leakage of urine and an embarrassing discomfort has escalated into life-changing disabilities, and I want to use this speech as an opportunity to raise some of their cases.

My constituent, Karen, underwent a hysterectomy in 2008. The following year, she suffered a significant prolapse and was given a pelvic organ mesh. After that procedure, she began to suffer from severe incontinence, which affected her ability to work. She mentioned this to the consultant, who said that there was a simple procedure that would help. She had that procedure, but was given no further information about the risks and possible complications. In 2011, she started to experience severe pain and was referred to a new consultant, who told her that the pain had nothing to do with her implant. She finally had the implant removed in 2013, but has been left severely disabled and now has to use a wheelchair when she travels long distances. This has been a real problem for her because, she says, people talk to the person who is with her, rather than to her. She therefore feels as though she has been dehumanised as a result of this as well. Had Karen been told what the mesh procedures entailed, she would never have agreed to have the implant. She and a group of survivors in Scotland have set up a Facebook group. It started with 17 women, but it now has more than 500 members.
Another constituent, Jean, had her implant inserted in 2006, but she realised from day one that it had not worked and that she was still incontinent. She says:

“The full side effects of having polypropylene plastic TVT-O are as yet unknown. What is known is removal is complicated and carries its own risks, due to the fact that the mesh implanted in the woman’s pelvic region is designed to be permanent. In cases where a surgeon does a partial removal and leaves the rest then the long term result can be further degradation and an acceleration of mesh debris into the body. To remove the Monarc sling that I have, a surgeon has to cut through many structures including bone and muscle, and is known to be nearly impossible to remove safely without further damage.”

In fact, one consultant has described mesh removal as being like trying to remove warm chewing gum from someone's hair.

At the most drastic end of the scale, some women now face losing their organs as a result of this procedure. This has happened to Claire, a mum of three, who says:

“I had a mesh implant in September 2011 for stress incontinence. I woke with excruciating pain and struggled to walk. I had the mesh removed in July 2015 but unfortunately the damage I suffered is severe. I am now disabled for life. I use crutches for short distance, wheelchair for longer. My nerves are severely damaged, I have autoimmune issues, foreign body reactions, currently use anal irrigation system for my bowel as it can’t work on its own. Next for me is to have my bladder and bowel removed. Mesh products are simply not fit for use in the human body. These procedures need to be stopped now.”

Cathleen, from Benbecula, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), has said:

“The Government is currently banning the use of plastic because of damage to the environment, destroying sea life and leaching into the food chain. Why on earth place such plastics into the human body when I like many others have suffered mesh erosion as my body rejected the polypropylene?”

The issue that is raised repeatedly in all these cases is the lack of information given to patients. Some were told that the procedure was simple; others were told that a little piece of tape or a sling would be inserted. None was told about side effects or complications. Most were not offered non-mesh procedures, which might cost slightly more in the short term but which would have massive savings in the long term because these women would not need to live on benefits, having had to give up work, with all the other problems that that entails.

In Scotland, the suspension of mesh has been welcomed, but because the regulation of such devices is still a reserved issue, we need the MHRA to stop recommending the use of mesh before it can be banned outright. Medical devices do not go through the same rigorous level of testing as drugs, and the effects are often not experienced immediately. This is why it is so important to carry out an audit of the women who have had the procedure. I welcome the review of surgical devices announced by the Government, as well as the announcement that they will conduct a full registry of all mesh procedures. However, it should be noted that the number of women affected may well be far higher than estimated. Many women who experience problems are told that their issues are not mesh-related. Are those women's problems being captured in the current mesh figures?
When she emailed me, she said:

“My life has changed so much since having this device inserted in me in 2011. I can no longer work due to pain, fatigue, not able to sit or stand for long. The mesh eroded through my vaginal wall, which 7 weeks later had to have part removal. I have no intimate relationship with my husband, due to the mesh damaging me… I have gone from a very busy and socially active life, to being a depressed lady.”

That sums up the impact that the issue has on her. Although her work was done at a local private hospital, I also asked my local Torbay Hospital—the main NHS hospital serving my constituency—for details of the approach it adopted.

Given the age demographics of Torbay, I had expected slightly more cases to be raised with me. Those that have been raised involve people who have been treated at a particular private hospital. Given that this is a wider issue, I do not think that it is constructive to bring the name of the hospital into the debate, but it is interesting to note that that is where these queries come from.

I was pleased to get a detailed response from Julian Barrington, the consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology at the hospital, giving me some of the figures for the work he has done. I am pleased to note that the failure rates reported back on some of his cases have been a lot lower than some of the averages, but in his letter he makes the point that none of the patients in Torbay has been treated with Ethicon meshes, over which most of the concerns and complications have arisen. His other comment is welcome: given some of the issues being raised, since October 2017 he has suspended all vaginal surgery using synthetic mesh until the results of the NICE recommendations are published and until professional medical bodies make a decision.

Owen Smith: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly interesting point. Does he agree that it is inexplicable that NICE continues to say that it cannot produce its new guidance until the spring of 2019, when we and the medical fraternity have been asking for it for the past two years?

Kevin Foster: I think that the comments make it clear that medical practitioners are waiting to hear what the guidance is and would like it as soon as possible. As politicians in this Chamber, we should not necessarily look to say what the NICE guidance should be and should not put pressure on NICE to come up with particular outcomes, but NICE should look to resolve this uncertainty.

I welcome the pre-emptive approach that my local hospital has taken, but that then leads to a debate about whether other practitioners are continuing and whether my hospital is taking the right approach—I believe it is, and I suspect that Opposition Members who have been involved with this issue believe that it is, too. It is clear that guidance needs to be produced as quickly as it sensibly can be to allow hospital clinicians dealing with patients day to day to know that they are making the right decisions. I welcome the fact that my hospital has made a pre-emptive decision, but agree with the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) that it makes sense for NICE to try to resolve the issue as quickly as possible and provide clarity.

It would be interesting to hear from the Minister whether it is becoming common practice in the NHS for individual hospitals and surgeons to adopt the approach taken by Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust. Is it more common or does it involve only a small number of hospitals? Is there an emerging body of medical opinion on this matter? Although I might welcome what Torbay Hospital has done, if individual hospitals effectively start forming their own policy that will raise questions in other locations.

Given the concerns raised with me, I welcomed the review announced in February 2018. I can remember being in the Chamber to listen to the Secretary of State’s statement on this and a range of issues affecting women’s health, as well as on whether some of the processes we have in place are as strong as they are in other areas. To reflect on the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), given the issue, many of those affected are reticent about making a noise. I sought direct permission from my constituent to mention her name and condition in the Chamber, but one wonders whether there are a number of people who do not want to make a noise about this—through embarrassment, to put it bluntly—which makes it different from concerns about other treatments.

I would also be interested to hear from the Minister what liaison is taking place between the UK Government and the Governments of New Zealand and Australia, who have adopted an approach that is similar to my hospital’s. What impact is that having? I have not had complaints from people about not being able to have a procedure for a particular problem while this treatment is suspended, and that tells me that the hospital’s decision has not had a negative effect. I would be interested to know the experience of clinicians in other jurisdictions that are incredibly similar to ours, particularly those from New Zealand.

Reading the motion, I can understand the call for a public inquiry. My only reticence is that such inquiries can become lawyer-fests. I would much rather we were dealing with the situation now, and getting guidance to clinicians in place quickly. We could decide at a later date, perhaps, whether such an examination of what happened would be appropriate. For me, the priority is to get action towards a resolution and for those women and men who have been affected to find medical solutions that can deal with their existing, ongoing pain.

I welcome the debate. It is good to have had contributions at such a level. I am pleased to note the approach my local trust has taken, and I would be interested to see whether that trend is emerging across the NHS and, if it is, what impact it is having on statistics for those who are negatively affected. Does it have any impact at all on waiting times for a particular treatment? If it does not, the pre-emptive approach would seem to be right clinically, in dealing with the problems we have heard about today and in preventing more people from being affected.

I hope that today’s debate will also give hope to those who are suffering that their plight has not been ignored—it is not something that has been talked about quietly somewhere else because of any perceived embarrassment. I hope that lessons will be implemented that prevent others from having to go down the same path as my brave constituent, Mrs Jelfs. I know that her priority in
The Government’s retrospective review of surgery for vaginal prolapse and stress urinary incontinence using tape or mesh is a welcome start to finding out how many women have been affected, but the scope of the review is too narrow and there is a real fear that women will be missed. Why cannot women from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland be included in the review, and what about men affected by surgical mesh?

I call on the Government to ban mesh implants immediately and to widen the scope of their retrospective review. NICE should bring forward its review and the Government should introduce pelvic floor physiotherapy on the NHS as standard for all new mothers. We need to find out what has gone wrong, and why. The victims of the mesh scandal have suffered enough. We need action now.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the APPG and to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I also pay tribute to the women who have campaigned. If they had not campaigned, the issue would not be at this point today.

As a surgeon for more than 30 years, I have to start by pointing out that there is no such thing as risk-free surgery. There will never be an operation about which it could be said there is not a 1% complication rate. When I looked at complications and talked about risks, I used to write them down on the consent form so that I went through every single one with patients. We talk about the complications that are minor and common, and we warn patients: “This will probably happen, but it’s minor.” The complications that are life threatening or quality of life threatening, even if they are rare, should be up there in block capitals so that women know.

We, as surgeons, have a duty to minimise risk and to inform the patient so that, as has been discussed, decent and informed consent can be given. The problem of this saga is that a lot of the surgeons were not informed. If a surgeon is doing 30, 20 or 15 mesh implants a year and they become aware of a problem only in two or three years’ time, it does not register in their brain as being common. We also know that many of these cases really presented only years later, so that feedback loop—“Oh my God, we have a problem!”—was not there. That is why so much of this is to do with regulation, reporting and, inevitably, the yellow card.

Gordon Marsden: Obviously, the hon. Lady has enormous personal experience of surgery and of this area. Does she agree that one of the other possible problems for some surgeons, although I hope not many, is that in this country we have historically been very bad at explaining risk-benefit analysis to patients? If people are being offered an operation for a condition that is not necessarily life-threatening, the judgment in a risk-benefit analysis is very different from that for something far more serious.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. In fact, there are studies showing how difficult it is even to explain risk, let alone risk-benefit, to patients. Certainly in the cancer field, in which I spent so much time, patients will go through really appalling treatments even if there is only a relatively small chance of cure. As a clinician, it is difficult to explain a lot of this.
Sufficient information has not been given to the medics, and therefore clearly not to the patients. We have heard this described as a “minor, straightforward procedure”.

Owen Smith: Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the problem is that mesh was marketed so widely as being a quick fix? Previously, far more expert urogyneacological surgeons would have undertaken what was far more difficult and invasive surgery—colposuspension or autologous sling. When it went to day-case surgery and, effectively, keyhole surgery, a much wider range of less expert surgeons was suddenly involved.

Dr Whitford: I would echo that. We should always be a little suspicious whenever an impression is given that an operation is easy and quick. We hear talk within the medical system of the problems of specialisation and how, actually, we need to go back to having more generalists. The depth of knowledge on breast cancer now would make it impossible for a general surgeon, who might also be doing upper gastrointestinal and lower gastrointestinal surgery, to keep up with that knowledge. That is why we will always need specialists. The danger is when something is thought to be trivial and straightforward.

Although it has been mentioned that the two problems—pelvic organ prolapse and stress incontinence, and particularly the latter—are very minor, there is a broad range. There will be patients for whom the condition is incredibly distressing and who simply cannot leave the house because of their incontinence. We should not put everyone in the same basket.

As has been mentioned, the traditional repair for prolapse would have been colposuspension, which lifts the womb and then buttresses the muscular tissues of the pelvis. The surgeons thought that by adding mesh to muscle that is clearly weakened—that is why prolapse happens in the first place—they would make the muscle stronger.

There was a perception that the results of colposuspension were poor, and a big American paper in 1997 suggested that prolapse occurred in 29% of women. As a surgeon, that seems like catastrophic failure, but, reading the small print of that paper, two thirds of those women were hugely obese and one third had bronchitis and were coughing all the time. There was also a high rate of smoking. It was not the average range of women with prolapse; it was actually a particularly high-risk group. Unfortunately, the paper seems to have dominated the profession’s perception for years.

The problem right across this is that not enough trial work and research were done at the beginning and that the follow-up was far too short. What we have seen is that the mesh problems emerge only after time goes on. There was a Cochrane review in 2007 looking at multiple smaller studies, and it showed no benefit from the use of mesh in prolapse. Since then, we have seen a slow decrease in the use of mesh, but the recent review shows that 2,500 women with prolapse in England had mesh put in last year. That means the issue is still happening.

A 2011 EU study showed no benefit from mesh in prolapse even for recurrence, and one of the few prospective studies, in which the data is collected as time goes on, also shows no benefit. That prospective study was published in 2016, so the information has not been available for decades, and it found that the mesh complication rate at two years is 12%. That is at two years, so the rate can only go up. The Scottish review of 20 years of data from 1997 to 2016 shows only a 4% recurrence of prolapse after the traditional repair. Mesh is no better at avoiding recurrence.

Colposuspension has surgical complications: a surgeon might damage something; a surgeon might injure the bowel or bladder, which is much more common; or a patient might get a wound infection. Those complications fade as time goes by whereas, as has been reported in the Chamber today, the mesh complications do not occur early, but occur as time goes on. In Scotland, after the review, the advice is absolutely clear: mesh should not be used in cases of prolapse as a routine first procedure.

We have heard about stress incontinence and the option of physiotherapy has been talked about. That option should have been used much earlier; there should have been trials of it. As has been said, this is about getting to women in the post-childbirth period so that we have the chance of strengthening their pelvic muscles. The initial repair for stress incontinence was the tension-free vaginal tape, which developed in the late 1990s. A randomised controlled trial was carried out in 2002, with the one-year follow-up report finding only a 1% complication rate and finding that the patients had less pain, and that they recovered more quickly and went home more quickly. This seemed like a great solution, which is part of why the surgeons were so convinced by it: it seemed quick and easy. They were talking about a keyhole approach and the way we deal with gallbladder and other procedures.

The problem that has gone on since has been talked about. We have had the morphing of one tape into another, and one material and so on changing, with little other research having been done and little follow-up. When that trial did follow up its patients, it found that at 10 years the mesh complication rate was 5%. Because the focus was on not injuring the bladder, we find in clinical terms that that has been the focus of the clinicians, because that is what they knew from colposuspension. The idea that two, three, four or five years later people would develop mesh complications was something the clinicians were not expecting and certainly not looking out for.

The incidence of bladder injury for the retropubic tension-free tape was about 10%, which is why the transobturator developed. Someone who has seen an X-ray or a pelvis skeleton will know that the front of the pelvis is made of two struts, so that we are not so heavy that we cannot actually stand up, and the obturator is that hole. The idea was to keep away from the bladder and therefore reduce bladder injuries, and indeed this did that.

Bladder injuries were reduced from 10% to 1%, so, again, everybody was putting themselves on the back. But what happens is the spikes—the trocars—used to put these things in are going through muscle and close to nerves, and are coming out in the groin; they are coming near the muscles that allow people to pull their weights together. That is where lots of the side effects and complications have come, and there was definitely a huge upswing and surge in these complications after the obturator tape became the common approach. We also
had such slow recognition of what was happening. Many of us women in here, particularly us women of a certain age, will recognise that old story of women simply being dismissed, patted on the head and patronised. An odd quirk of regulation is that the Federal Drug Administration’s regulation 510(k) allows any similar devices to pass through in a very simple fashion and they are not re-examined. Class I is low risk, and initially these tapes were all classed as class I, which means no research had to be done. They are now class III, which means a randomised controlled trial is required, and we see that Johnson & Johnson, and others, are withdrawing; they are stopping making these things because they would have to go back to carry out trials. The problem is that the tape and the trocars might have looked similar, but when the move was made from tension-free retropubic to a transobturator tape, we were talking about a totally different operation, and there was simply no evidence to show that this was either similar or better.

If something has been passed by the FDA, it tends to get passed in Europe, and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency tends also to accept it without doing anything else. The European CE mark is only a mark of the quality of production; it does not imply anything about research. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned, there is a plan to develop the EU medical devices regulation system from 2020, but, unfortunately, the UK will not be part of that, unless there is a specific negotiation.

The problems began to be recognised in 2012, because of the campaigners, their persistence and their speaking out. In 2014, the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, Alex Neil, advised all health boards in Scotland to suspend meshes until there was some degree of clarity. It might have been stimulated by that, but certainly at the same time the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration started to look at its products, immediately de-licensing a third, reviewing a third and, initially, keeping a third as standard. But last November it de-registered all prolapse meshes, so these materials are simply not available in Australia.

The Scottish independent review was set up from 2014 to 2017, and its advice was unequivocal: there should be no routine use of mesh for prolapse, and as regards incontinence, if mesh was being used, registration was made mandatory. There has been discussion about where this registration will occur. Obviously, the colleges have been developing a registration, but we need to know about everyone who had a mesh in. This could be done through scanning the barcode off the mesh and registering it in the notes—that is the obvious way to do it. Having had to review all the case sheets of breast reconstructions after the PIP—Poly Implant Prothèse—silicone implants scandal, I know that it is really important that if something is being left permanently in a patient, we know how to recall it and who had that done.

As has been mentioned, we had the NHS England review and a paper was produced last year, using hospital episode statistics. That showed a 9.8% complication rate at five years. Again, we can expect that to climb. The review published on Tuesday showed that about a third of the 72,000 patients who were treated for prolapse were treated by mesh; that is between 2008 and 2017, and we see a fall over time, so the rate might be higher during the earlier period between 2000 and 2008.

We have seen a 13% drop over that time in prolapse meshes, but, as I say, in prolapse they have utterly no benefit and therefore there can be only loss, so it is hard to justify why so many patients in England are still having prolapse meshes. Some 100,000 women have had mesh incontinence tapes, and this has decreased by 48%, meaning that the overall decrease in the use of mesh over that period is about 32% in England. Since the Scottish inquiry, the reduction in the use of mesh has been 94%—and that is continuing.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle mentioned Dr Wael Agur, whom I am lucky enough to have as our local gynaecologist. I have been able to meet him and get information with him. The only places that are using incontinence meshes are the two specialist units in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In Scotland, a consent process has been developed, which is now being looked at by the colleges so that it can be rolled out, and, obviously, we are talking about usage in tiny numbers here.

Even though registration is mandatory, none of the other health boards is doing this, so it is not expected that Scotland will have many patients registered. What Dr Wael Agur and other colleagues are using is a small piece of rectus sheath, which is the tough tissue we have in front of our muscles. Those who are lucky enough to have a small pack—I do not see many in here—will find that that is very strong tissue. [Interruption.] We do not ask anyone to show them, please. Only about 6 cm of this is required. So we are using the patient’s own tissue and we will be back to an autologous repair, where there might be complications, wound infections and failures, but we would not see this progressive problem.

So what went wrong? Not enough research was carried out and, categorically, there was not enough follow-up. The survey that was reported on Tuesday now gives NHS England a denominator of how many patients have had mesh, but I am sorry to say that just using hospital episode statistics does not give a numerator as to how many women have problems, so I suggest a survey of all those patients or a review is necessary, in order to know how many, even within the NHS, have got these problems.

In addition, as we have heard, there was poor information on which people could base their consent; as I say, the clinicians did not know, because no detailed trials were being done of these new techniques and certainly there was no decent audit. Women were being dismissed and patronised. The regulatory system was far too complacent, simply taking things from the FDA all the way to the MHRA and not looking at changes in technique. The audit was very poor, with a recent survey showing that only 27% of patients who had had meshes were registered.

Finally, the yellow card system failed, yet again. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned the other scandals associated with sodium valproate and Primodos. Unless patients are aware of the yellow card system and unless GPs and doctors have it literally in the front of their brains, people will not send a yellow card until they are sure that the drug or the mesh caused the problem. For any new drug, for any new technology that is being implanted, and for any baby born to a mother on medication, there should be a yellow card,
because the whole point of the yellow card system is that someone centrally is able to notice. That is why we need more of these yellow cards. There is clearly a problem, so we need better registration and reporting, so that we do not have to have another similar debate in future.

2.20 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this important debate and for her passionate speech. Like me, she has been shocked and horrified by the stories we have heard from men and women who have had their lives turned upside down because of surgical mesh. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who spoke with such passion and knowledge. He was campaigning with the all-party group on surgical mesh implants long before I even came across it, and I am grateful for his contribution and continued leadership.

I thank all Members who have spoken in this excellent debate: the hon. Members for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady); the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis); my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya); the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster); and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) spoke for the Scottish National party with such knowledge, and it was a privilege to be in the Chamber to hear her speech. I thank them all for their thoughtful contributions, and I thank their constituents who have allowed their experiences to be shared with us today. It has been distressing to hear their stories and I sympathise with anyone affected by surgical mesh.

Finally, I thank Kath Sansom, who leads the Sling the Mesh campaign, and who I now know is watching from the Gallery, for all her hard work in uniting the women affected by vaginal mesh implants and raising awareness of the tragic impact that they have had on so many lives. I thank everyone who is part of that campaign for everything that they do to raise awareness and support women.

After the Westminster Hall debate in October last year, and the media coverage that followed, more women came forward as victims when they realised that the mesh was causing their additional health problems. I am very sorry to say that my 73-year-old mam was one of them. She likes to watch my debates and speeches, as do all our mam’s, I am sure. When she was at mine one Saturday, while I made lunch, I sat her down to watch some of the speeches that I had made that week. There she was with my iPad: I put on the Westminster Hall debate, it started to play, and I said, “I’m so pleased you haven’t had anything like this done.”

You see, Madam Deputy Speaker, over the past four to five years my mam has been back and forward to the doctors with loads of health issues, from IBS to constant urinary infections, and from stabbing pains in her groin to pain walking and trouble sleeping because of pain and twitching in her legs—and more. It has been never-ending. She said, “I’ve turned 70 and I’m falling to pieces.” She has had cameras everywhere, which is not always pleasant and can be very uncomfortable, but all to no avail. No diagnosis or solution has ever been found. With that background knowledge, the House can imagine my horror when she said, “Oh, no, I just had some tape put in to stop the leaking when I coughed and sneezed!” I had no idea that she had had that done.

As the hon. Member for Torbay said, sometimes women—even your mam—do not like to talk about these things. When I asked her why she had never mentioned it, she said, “Oh, it was quick—I was in and out on the same day. And you’re always so busy, so I just didn’t mention it.” It had not even occurred to her that there could be a connection between what she had been going through for the past four or five years and this procedure that she had had done five years earlier.

As the House can imagine, I went into panic mode, because although we are talking about mesh today, surgeons use many different names for it—tape, ribbon and sling are the more patient-friendly ones. I am also told that they now like to use the phrase “Don’t worry—it’s not the mesh that they talk about in the media.” Surgeons must be absolutely clear with their patients what treatment they are about to receive and address any concerns that they might have, instead of talking about the success of the majority or dismissing those concerns outright.

After the sudden realisation, all my mam’s symptoms over the years suddenly began to make sense and could be attributed directly to the mesh. I am pleased to say that, thanks to the help of the fabulous Kath Sansom, my mam is now armed with all the facts and arguments to take to her GP and surgeon. She has done that and is on the long road to getting reversal surgery, if that is the best option for her. She has also had to come to terms with the fact that she may never be the same again, with the associated guilt that she agreed to the procedure. She trusted the medical profession to do her no harm.

My mam is lucky at the moment, compared with some of the other cases we have heard about today, which she recognises. A Sling the Mesh survey found that more than 78% of patients have pain when walking and sitting; 69% of women have pain that prevented intercourse; more than 60% of patients suffer with anxiety and depression because of the mesh and the symptoms that it causes; and almost 54% suffer with nerve damage. I have seen the piles of medication and medical equipment that some women have to use on a daily basis to try to live a life with a bit of dignity. Before the mesh, these were fit, healthy and, in some cases, young women, as we have heard. Now they need assistance to do simple things such as tie their shoe laces, pick up their children, or even use the toilet. Some have lost their sex lives, their marriage or their job. This is a tragedy for these women and their families. The effects of mesh have been so unbearable that, I am sad to say, some women have tried to end their own lives. No diagnosis or solution has ever been found. Innovative and effective treatments should not do this to patients, and the Government must not stand idly by while women suffer in pain like this. The Opposition continually urge NHS England and NICE to act immediately to update the guidance before 2019—as we have all said—and to suspend the use of vaginal mesh.

The Government’s “Retrospective Review for Vaginal Prolapse and Stress Urinary Incontinence using Tape or Mesh”, published just two days ago, is a first step in
understanding the sheer scale of the number of women affected by this scandal. Unfortunately, the effects of mesh are hidden within the document—it takes a bit of a numbers expert to be able to work their way through it. So hidden and complex is the review that, on Tuesday, the Minister in the other place announced that he was giving his expert a month to work it out. I will be waiting with bated breath for that analysis.

It is clear that the review fails to show up all the women who have been treated with mesh in the UK. It shows only the number of women treated in England on the NHS, meaning that patients treated in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and patients treated privately in England, were not included. The audit does not include the sheer number of women who have gone back and forward to their GP for pain relief or antibiotics but who have not yet been referred to a consultant, or even those women who have not yet even made the connection and considered that mesh could be the problem, as was the case with my mum. Why were those women missed out? What is the Minister doing to ensure that their concerns are heard and that they are counted in the numbers?

When the audit was announced, I called for a suspension of the use of mesh while it was carried out. As the hon. Members for Totnes and for Glasgow North West and others have mentioned in their contributions, medical devices do not undergo any clinical trials or rigorous evaluation in this country. If ever there were a case to prove that that needs to change, it is surgical mesh.

As I have said, and as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West mentioned, if this were a car, an aircraft or even a washing machine or a dryer that was malfunctioning and causing life-changing harm in 10% to 15% of cases, its use would be stopped and the product recalled immediately while the problem was investigated. It would not even need to be as high as that, or even the 1% to 3% that was referred to—just a handful of incidents triggers a recall.

The suspension did not happen, so will the Minister please tell the House in her response how many women have had a mesh implant while the audit took place? Does she know how many women since March 2017 have been treated with a mesh implant or had mesh removed, as the audit went up to only March 2017—a year ago? These newly mesh-implanted women may not necessarily realise that the mesh is to blame, but they will not have any symptoms now, or if they do they will not put their trust in the medical establishment to look after them and to make them well, and they have come out with the most debilitating, life-changing injuries. In many cases, these were very young women. It is very clear from the clinical guidance on these products that they should not be used as a first intervention, and should be used only in very extreme cases. We are to be very concerned about the extent to which this has been adopted.

It is great that the evidence shows that the use of this product is less than it was. Clearly, as the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) pointed out, there was a spike in the use of the product, and that use was not always appropriate. That highlights the need for proper understanding of the risk of any medicine or product, and underlines the need for very mature and sensible conversations between medical professionals and their patients so that people understand the risks of treatments, as opposed to understanding just the benefits. Most of all, it illustrates the need for informed consent on the part of the patient. I have been horrified in this debate to hear how many women did not understand the treatment that they were getting. That is clearly unacceptable.

In that spirit, I want to continue this dialogue. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) pointed out, women are often sent a way and told that, “It’s women’s problems.” Women are often patted on the head by members of the medical establishment. None of us women in this place is a shrinking violet, but we have also fallen victim to that behaviour, which is just not acceptable. We need to do more to change the culture of our health service and the way in which medical professionals interact with women. If we do not, the outcome is exactly the experience to which those ladies who are sitting in the Public Gallery can attest. I am very grateful to them for sharing their experiences. Sharing our very intimate and distressing personal details is not the most comfortable thing in the world, but the work they have all done in sharing their experiences attests. I am very grateful to them for sharing their experiences.

According to NHS data, 10% of people who have had hernia mesh fitted go back to their clinician at some point after their surgery. The former surgeon Peter Jones says that the risks of using hernia mesh are so bad that he himself would not take the risk. Will the Minister respond to the concerns of patients who have been harmed by surgical mesh and elaborate specifically on what the Government are doing to review the harm caused by all surgical mesh—not just vaginal mesh?

Let me repeat my calls to the Government once again: the use of surgical mesh must be suspended and NICE must bring forward its review. A simple, quick and cheap operation has turned far too many patients’ lives upside down. We must stop playing Russian roulette with these patients’ lives. It really is time to sling the mesh.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I add my thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate. She approached this issue with her characteristic passion and forthrightness and gave me a number of challenges—again. I am pleased that she acknowledged that, since we last debated this, there has been progress. It is in that spirit that we need to continue this dialogue not just to address the issues, but to make sure that we do the right thing by those women who have been harmed by the use of vaginal mesh.

Ultimately, the tragedy of this case is that women have put their trust in the medical establishment to look after them and to make them well, and they have come out with the most debilitating, life-changing injuries. In many cases, these were very young women. It is very clear from the clinical guidance on these products that they should not be used as a first intervention, and should be used only in very extreme cases. We are to be very concerned about the extent to which this has been adopted.

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experiences has raised awareness and put the issue on the agenda. It has also made us more vigilant about protecting our own health when we are faced with problems. I thank them all.

Although there may be some specific points on which we differ, it is clear that we all share a determination to address the issues that have been raised. Clearly, a number of women have experienced extreme suffering, and it is important that the NHS does its best to make life better for those women and gives them the treatment that they need. I say to Members that if there is any evidence that women are not getting the treatment that they should be getting following a complex mesh procedure, please raise that with me and bring it to my attention and I will take action accordingly.

Gordon Marsden: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. She is acknowledging the depth of disquiet, suffering and pain, but she will also be aware from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and indeed from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who spoke from the Front Bench, that there have been persistent calls for NICE to speed up the process. I ask the Minister a very specific question: what conversations has she had with her officials and NICE as to why they cannot bring this forward? Is it a question of a lack of appropriate aggregate evidence; is it a question of their own internal priorities; or is it a question of resources?

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is actually an issue of rigorous process. We need to make sure that NICE guidance has clinical integrity. The guidance to which the hon. Gentleman refers comes at the end of a longer process of other guidance that is going through the system. None the less, that intelligence is shared throughout—it is an entirely consultative process. The issues that we need to settle are all part of the public debate. Essentially, the publication of the NICE guidance comes at the end of that. The important thing is that everyone knows the issues and that we are very clear about the context in which this is an appropriate treatment. The guidance is very clear: this treatment should not be offered as a routine first intervention.

Owen Smith: I am not sure that that answer is correct, in as much as we know that there is no new clinical evidence to be produced in this area; there are no outstanding trials. Therefore, there is no reasonable reason why NICE cannot bring forward that guidance, and it certainly does not make sense for it to wait another year.

Finally, was the Minister surprised when the chief medical officer, who was sitting next to the Secretary of State, said on Facebook Live that she thought that the rate of complication in respect of mesh was between 15% and 20%—a stark difference from all previous estimates by Ministers or officials?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Let me emphasise that it is the robustness of the process that is at issue here. The guidance will be published for consultation later this year, and completed next year. There is a robust process for doing so.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the CMO suggested that there was a 15% to 20% complication rate, but I understand that she has written to him explaining that she misquoted the statistics and that the situation is more complex. That is one reason why the retrospective audit is so important. We now have a body of evidence that we can properly analyse, and as has been mentioned, my noble Friend Lord O'Shaughnessy has tasked the CMO with properly analysing the audit published this week so that we might more quickly draw conclusions.

Owen Smith: That is very interesting. I do not believe I have received a letter from the chief medical officer explaining that she got the statistics wrong. May I press the Minister to make sure that when the CMO looks at the register she offers a proper narrative analysis of what the numbers mean? We still have contested analyses of whether they show a bigger problem than we thought or whether it is the same. I think it shows a much bigger problem, but we need to understand the numbers.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. It is crucial that we address the matter transparently—that is very much the spirit in which I want to take this forward.

Dr Julian Lewis: Before those interventions, the Minister said that if people are still not getting adequate treatment, it should be brought to her attention. As I mentioned, I have been contacted by constituents saying they felt trapped because the people who did the procedures were refusing to refer them elsewhere for a second opinion and for possible help from the very small number of people who specialise in the rectification and reversal of these procedures. What advice can she give my constituents about how to break out of this restriction on being referred to people in whom they can have more confidence?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend’s representations on behalf of his constituents, and they filled me with alarm, because we have given a clear indication on this point and have established 18 specialist centres to deal with the consequences of mesh. There is, therefore, no excuse for patients who require further intervention not being properly referred. Perhaps he and I could take this up offline to make sure his constituents get the support they deserve.

I want to put this in the context of our broader emphasis on patient safety. We have learned, through difficult experience, that there is never one measure or magic bullet to suddenly transform services for patients; it is about sensible dialogue between patients, clinicians and sometimes politicians—sometimes we can have a role in catalysing the debate. We all need to pull together to tackle all aspects of the issue. In some respects it is about the actual product—the vaginal mesh—but it is also about clinical practice and behaviour, as we have talked about. The most important thing, however, is the need to listen to patients, who, in this context, are of course women. We have to make sure that we listen to women when concerns are raised so that we can properly tackle those concerns as they arise. As I have said before, I am concerned about informed consent for patients, but the issues go much further, and generally we could do much to improve the performance of the NHS by placing a greater emphasis on that.
We need to consider the whole issue of clinical advice. We know that this product should not be routinely offered as a first intervention, yet clearly it is. I am horrified to hear of women in their 20s and 30s being treated with this product, when clearly it is not intended for them. It is obviously easy for me to make a superficial judgment on that without knowing about the particular cases, but on the face of it, it seems quite wrong.

The issue has been raised of what is an acceptable level of risk. I do not like to think about that in terms of percentages, because the acceptable level of risk will differ from patient to patient. If we are talking about some new mums, the level of risk clearly would not be outweighed by the benefits, but if we are looking at women suffering from horrendous conditions of incontinence, that is a very different debate. Again, we need to think about the broader issues. It all comes down to making sure that the guidance is properly applied and that clinicians who are recommending the use of mesh are properly making that assessment in discussion with their patients.

There has been a demand for a public inquiry. We have introduced the Cumberlege review, which is designed to make sure that we properly assess the interests of patients going forward. I know that many patients have felt that their views have been ignored. Baroness Cumberlege is very keen to hear directly from individual patients about their experience, and will be going round the country to do exactly that.

I could say much more, but I must conclude so that we can move on to the next debate. I will write to hon. Members, who I thank for contributing to the debate, to address some of their other points. We are determined to do our best for women who have been badly treated in having this procedure.

2.45 pm

Emma Hardy: I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate, and I welcome the continued dialogue between the all-party group and the Department of Health. It was interesting to hear for the first time that the Department recognises that it is not just the process but the product about which there are serious concerns. I also welcome what appears to be an admission that NICE is introducing draft guidelines this year—is that correct?

Jackie Doyle-Price indicated assent.

Emma Hardy: That is excellent. That is one of the things we called for. One thing that has come out more and more is that there needs to be informed consent. People need to know a lot more about the risks. All the risks need to be written down in front of someone in block capitals so that they know exactly what they are letting themselves in for.

I press again, as I did at the beginning of my speech, for all new mothers to be offered pelvic floor physiotherapy, as happens in France. As the Minister has just said, it is unacceptable that a new mother with a small, relatively minor inconvenience should be offered something that could result in permanent, life-changing disability. I urge the Minister to look into that as well.

I very much welcome the fact that we will have the draft NICE guidelines next year. As we have spent a lot of this debate talking about our mums and what they say to us, I will quote my mum. She always said, “Where there’s a will there’s a way”. If there is a way of bringing forward those NICE guidelines, let us make it happen, because if there is a determination across the House to make it happen, I am sure that the Department can find a way to do it and end this misery for so many women.

I end by thanking again all the fantastic women up there in the Gallery right now watching this debate. We are only talking about this now because of your bravery in coming forward and speaking out, and I thank each and every single one of you. We cannot undo the suffering you have experienced, but by speaking out and being so incredibly brave, you will stop women in the future going through what you have gone through. I and every Member who has spoken today thank you.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady and everybody who has joined us today. I hope that they have felt uplifted by the debate.

We now come, colleagues, to the Back-Bench motion on cancer treatment. [Interuption.] Apparently, before we move on I should put the question on the debate on surgical mesh. I thank the specialist Clerk for his help and for rescuing me. We will now be entirely orderly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House commends the recent announcement of a retrospective audit into surgical mesh for pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence; notes that vaginal mesh has been banned in other jurisdictions such as New Zealand; further notes that NICE guidance recommends against the use of surgical mesh for pelvic organ prolapse and that no NICE recommendations have been made for stress urinary incontinence; notes that Sheffield University recently announced the development of a new mesh material; and calls on the Government to suspend prolapse and incontinence mesh operations while the audit is being carried out, to bring forward the NICE guidelines for mesh in stress related urinary incontinence from 2019 to 2018, and to commit to a full public inquiry into mesh if the audit suggests that this is the best course of action.
Cancer Treatment

Mr Speaker: Just before I ask the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to open the debate, it is my honour, privilege and joy to welcome Baroness Jowell—Tessa Jowell—together with David, Matthew, Jess and others to the Under-Gallery, in what will be an extremely powerful and, I hope, constructive debate. Can I say to you, Tessa—and I say it on behalf, I am sure, of all colleagues—that I hope you will feel fortified and inspired by the warm embrace of parliamentary love which you are about to experience? It is now my pleasure to call Sarah Jones to open the debate.

2.49 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House pays tribute to the work of Baroness Tessa Jowell in her campaign to help people with brain tumours to live better lives for longer; recognises the Government’s increased funding for research; and calls on the Government to increase the sharing of health data and promote greater use of adaptive clinical trials.

May I start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, after what has been a very busy week, for being here today in the Chair? I know you have two interests here today. One, obviously, is your friendship with Tessa, but there is also your interest in brain tumours, having set up the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours. We are all extremely grateful that you are here.

I also thank the co-sponsors of the debate, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson)—unfortunately, she cannot be here today—and all the Members who helped us secure the debate. I also thank all those who have gone before us in the all-party parliamentary group—people who have spoken many times in this place with greater knowledge than I on brain tumours and cancers. I also thank the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), for being here today—it means a lot to us all.

This is a really important debate about cancer. My father died of cancer—of mesothelioma—last June, three days after I was elected to this place. No one here is not touched by cancer. However, I want to start by talking about Tessa and to tell Members a story about her.

To say that Tessa is determined in the face of adversity is a major understatement. In early 2001, she had a thought: that we should bid for the Olympic and Paralympic games. Now, if hon. Members remember, we had the Millennium Dome, we had had Wembley stadium, we were 10th, I think, in the medals table in 2000, and we had been even worse the time before. We had quite a low opinion of ourselves in terms of our ability to construct and in terms of sport.

However, Tessa read everything there was to read, and she convinced herself that it was a good idea. She then set about convincing everybody else. She was faced by a Cabinet and a public who had no faith in this idea at all. She went round every single member of the Cabinet, one by one, and personally persuaded them that this was a good idea. She turned the entire Cabinet to her view.

She then threw herself into the bid, making sure that every single diaspora community and every sports group felt that this was exactly what we should be doing. She went to the Mongolians’ national day archery demonstration; she went to the Indian craft and shooting competition. She supported community groups all over the country. She would go and talk to a group of children about how they would directly benefit, and then she would dash across the country and deliver a wordy lecture to a load of economists about the evidence base for sporting-led regeneration.

In the midst of this mayhem, she would go on holiday, but not like the rest of us would go on holiday. She would take herself off to Mumbai, where she volunteered for a charity that taught sport and life skills to children who were homeless in the slums of Mumbai. She was offered a hotel room, but she slept in a tent. Two weeks later, she would come back, after spending every day in the boiling heat helping other people, and she would feel refreshed and do round 2 of the Olympics, and we all remember what an absolutely glorious time that was, how proud of our country we were and what an achievement it was.

Now, Tessa has a new course, which has been brought about by her personal experience of a brain tumour. She has thrown herself into the campaign for people to live longer lives with cancer with exactly the same relentless optimism and total bloody doggedness as she did with the Olympics. When faced with this woman who walks through walls, never gives up and always gets what she wants, we could almost feel sorry for cancer.

Last May, Tessa was diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour, called GBM, or glioblastoma. This type of cancer, like many brain cancers, is very aggressive and very difficult to treat. Life expectancy for patients is very poor and has not improved in decades. Some 60% of people diagnosed will die within one year, and yet only 2% of the funding for research goes to study brain tumours.

In January, Tessa led a very moving debate in the House of Lords, which I am sure we all watched. She talked bravely and openly about the reality of life with a brain tumour, but she talked of hope; she talked of hope for cancer patients across the world—hope that the revolution we need is close at hand, and hope that we can live well together with cancer. I am sure that that debate had a big impact on us all—people across the country and colleagues across both sides of the House. Today’s motion recognises the tireless work that Tessa has done on this so far. It calls on the Government to improve the use of patient data to drive forward medical advances, and to promote greater use of adaptive clinical trials.

There are lots of reasons for the absence of breakthroughs in brain cancer treatment. Of course, it is partly down to resources but, as Tessa has said, it is not just about money. We need to radically transform the way in which we develop new treatments, two aspects of which I want to mention today: clinical trials and data sharing.

There is a long history of failure in traditional clinical trials for brain tumours and no vital drugs have been developed for 50 years. The proportion of brain cancer patients taking part in a clinical trial is less than half the average across all cancers. Some 97% of brain cancer...
patients want to share their data to help to accelerate research, yet we still do not have a proper national brain tumour registry.

After her Lords debate, Tessa led an expert roundtable that brought together senior figures from the Government, NHS, industry and research. It was a powerful meeting that set out the key priorities and the innovations that we need. The event helped to secure some really important wins for brain tumour patients, including commitments from NHS England to include people who had been treated for brain cancer in the roll-out of the cancer quality of life metric. Public Health England agreed to work with brain tumour charities to explore greater access to data. The event also coincided with the announcement of £45 million of research funding into brain tumours, supported by both Cancer Research UK and the Department of Health. It is a testament to Tessa that she can invoke such love and respect from colleagues of all sides and still be at the forefront of this process. Only this week she was in the Department of Health at the first meeting of the steering group that is looking into this, chaired by Lord O'Shaughnessy. But there is still a long way to go.

The Government are currently considering a raft of recommendations around these issues. I have two specific asks. First, this situation can only change through a global community working together collaboratively. This international movement exists; there are people who want to do this. We just need the structures in place and the barriers removed.

Secondly, we need a clear and conscious shift to new, more innovative models of treatment and care. We need a culture of research within the NHS, with wider access to adaptive clinical trials. The Cambridge model at Addenbrooke’s Hospital has seen patient involvement in research grow to 80%. That should not be the exception; it should be the norm.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is outlining a powerful call to action—and one that I know we will all hear.

It is knowing Tessa, having worked for her on the Olympics and since being her friend—she helped me get to this place and gave me massive support—that brought me to the issue we are debating today. There is something uniquely pervasive about cancer. But perhaps it is precisely because it is so pervasive that there is hope, because the battle is personal to so many people. That is why I am confident that, with the good beginning that the Government have made, real progress will be made today and beyond.

I know that the debate we are about to have will be difficult. People will be talking about their personal experience and the lives of their constituents. I know the debate will be comradely, because that is what Tessa would want—she always believes the best in people and never assumes the worst. I know that some of what we say will be hard. This will be an emotional debate, but one rooted in determination: for Tessa; for my dad; for Jack.

3.1 pm

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the House to debate these important issues this afternoon. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), who introduced the debate in such a powerful and effective way.

I do not think that anyone who watched Baroness Tessa Jowell’s speech could have been anything but moved by her powerful and poignant words. I know it moved me, having got to know, like and respect Tessa over many years for her work in Government and in the House, and for the way she is able to bring people together from across politics with a very constructive, focused and tenacious approach just to get things done.

The timing of Tessa’s speech also touched a particular chord with me, coming as it did just a week or so after my own surgery to remove a tumour from my lung. It was a brave, humbling and inspiring speech in equal measure, with her very personal description of her experience and the lives of her constituents. I know that some people will be concerned that she had come across before. In fact, brain tumours are the single biggest cause of cancer death among children. Some 7,000 children and young people are currently living with the disease. Jack’s experience is not unique. Almost half of patients with brain tumours are diagnosed by emergency admission, compared with only 10% of cancers overall.

Jack and his family are strong, and they are doing everything they can to give him the best possible time in the time that they have. He was a mascot for Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park in March. Claire has other surprises planned, but I do not want to say what they are in case Jack is listening. Jack’s family have worked with the Brain Tumour Charity to spread the message that tumours exist; that people need to know more; and that we need to improve funding, data sharing, and developing new treatments. Claire’s message to this place is that her son cannot die in vain. That is a powerful call to action—and one that I know we will all hear.

It is knowing Tessa, having worked for her on the Olympics and since being her friend—she helped me get to this place and gave me massive support—that brought me to the issue we are debating today. There is something uniquely pervasive about cancer. But perhaps it is precisely because it is so pervasive that there is hope, because the battle is personal to so many people. That is why I am confident that, with the good beginning that the Government have made, real progress will be made today and beyond.

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But fundamentally, what shone through in Tessa’s words was a profound message of hope—hope for the future; hope in the face of her own physical adversity—and her unceasing passion to secure positive change for the benefit of others. So many debates in this House or in the Lords, while passionate and important, can sometimes appear sterile, perhaps a little arcane, with discussions of statistics, policy or implementation of points of law. Tessa’s speech cut through all that to focus on the human condition: the life well led, what gives it meaning and purpose, and the overriding power of human kindness, compassion and love.

Tessa’s campaign has already made a difference. I warmly welcome the positive response from the Government by the Prime Minister, the Health Secretary and Members across Government to make change happen.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt) rose—

James Brokenshire: Perhaps I can give way to the Health Secretary on that point.

Mr Hunt: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. I wonder whether, on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, I could follow the shadow Health Secretary in commending Tessa’s campaigning. Most people come to this place hoping to leave a legacy, but she has left not just one legacy, but two—her amazing achievements with London 2012 and her amazing campaigning on cancer. It is our privilege to take part in this debate and our duty to act on what she says.

James Brokenshire: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for underlining what can and will come out of this debate, which is continued momentum and a sense of purpose to bring about real change. Like the debate in the House of Lords, today’s debate should be a day not for political difference, but for how, together, we can all play our part in securing positive change to ensure that we use the best science to help beat cancer, and to offer the best support to those living with or beyond the disease.

After nearly eight years as the Member of Parliament for Old Bexley and Sidcup, this is my first opportunity to address the House from the Back Benches. While this is most certainly not a maiden speech, I hope colleagues will understand if I place some of my comments in a very local context. A few weeks ago, I was contacted by Lisa and Matt Taylor, the parents of young Olivia Taylor. In January, when Olivia was 17 months old, she was diagnosed with a large slow-growing glioma tumour, which is located at the centre of her brain. By February, Olivia had lost her sight and many other cognitive functions.

Olivia is no longer able to know whether it is night or day, impacting on sleeping patterns not just for her, but for the rest of the family. Because of its location, sadly the tumour is inoperable, and Olivia is receiving chemotherapy to keep the tumour stable and to help retain as much of her quality of life as possible. She is a very brave little girl and clearly surrounded by so much love.

As a parent, I find that a heart-breaking story, and the family face an incredible strain in meeting Olivia’s immediate needs and those that lie ahead. Despite all this, I have been struck by their hugely positive outlook in ensuring that Olivia has happy memories and that she has access to all the right support. They have launched a campaign with the hashtag #KeepOliviaSmiling to help to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of brain tumours in children and the need for early diagnosis.

Brain tumours are the biggest cause of preventable or treatable blindness in children and the family believe that if the signs of Olivia’s tumour had been spotted sooner, her sight might have been saved. The campaign is also intended to help raise funds to support future treatment for Olivia, which might not be available in the UK. The family have highlighted to me the need for better join-up between hospitals on available treatments, accessibility to international trials and the need for greater research in childhood brain tumours, which can develop in different ways from adult tumours.

I warmly welcome the additional £45 million investment in brain tumour research, which has been committed by the Government in conjunction with Cancer Research UK. I hope that in winding up the debate the Minister will be able to commit to ensuring that part of that funding is used to advance our understanding of, and deliver new treatments specifically for, brain tumours in children. Making a difference in individual cases such as Olivia’s is precisely what today’s debate is all about. I hope that, in some way, today we too can help to keep Olivia smiling.

There is no doubt that the science and analysis of cancer are advancing rapidly. Increasing amounts of patient data are being generated, as well as much greater recognition of the ways cancer develops and the individual mutations that can cause one tumour to behave in a completely different way from another. The challenge, as we heard from the hon. Member for Croydon Central, is co-ordinating the data in a consistent way that leads to more effective treatments and therapies.

One example of that is genetic analysis to help predict a cancer’s evolutionary path. I commend Cancer Research UK for its support of the innovative and significant work to examine the genetic make-up of individual tumours. I recently gave permission for a sample of my own tumour to form part of this molecular research. I hope that in some small way that might add to our understanding of the disease.

Such work is clearly leading to much clearer analysis not just of the nature of individual cancers, but of treatments and immunotherapies that are more likely to be effective for the patient. Rather than talking generally about cancer in a particular organ, we are increasingly able to talk about the nature of a specific tumour for that individual. That is a potential game changer, but it also raises new challenges and potential restrictions that must be overcome if we are to make the necessary progress.

I believe that the UK can be a world leader in this new era of precision medicine, driving forward innovative research to deliver new treatment options, but that will take time, when time for many is a precious commodity. That is why the use of adaptive clinical trials remains important. Yes, there are existing routes for new drug treatments to be made available, such as the early access to medicines scheme, and the cancer drugs fund, but we should be prepared to be more radical.

I pay tribute to the work of the incredible people in our NHS who deliver the care and compassion that Tessa Jowell rightly highlighted. They are amazing, and
having received significant NHS treatment and support over recent months, I know just how special they are. I also want to recognise the huge impact that charities such as Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Support, the Brain Tumour Charity, and the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation have on the lives of thousands of people.

We need to do more as part of the broader cancer strategy, and I will return to a number of topics on another occasion, but we should be positive about what we can achieve, the difference that can be made and the outcomes that can be secured if we work together. In connection with that, some of Tessa Jowell’s own words from her speech in the House of Lords bear repeating:

“I hope that this debate will give hope to other cancer patients like me, so that we can live well together with cancer—not just dying of it—all of us, for longer.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

That inspiring message is one that we should all take to heart.

3.12 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on securing this important debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it time. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who so powerfully shared his own experience of cancer and cancer treatment.

I pay tribute to my friend and predecessor as MP for Dulwich and West Norwood, Baroness Tessa Jowell of Brixton, who has inspired this debate. When I was selected as the Labour party candidate for the 2015 election after Tessa had announced that she was stepping down, four words seemed to come instantly to everyone’s lips as I went around the constituency speaking to people: “big shoes to fill”. They certainly were.

As a constituency MP, Tessa helped and supported countless individuals and families facing the most difficult of circumstances with compassion and tenacity. My strong memory of my first experiences of doorstep campaigning in the constituency is of how many people offered, unprompted, their gratitude that Tessa had helped them, often going above and beyond the call of duty. More than that, Tessa worked to deliver lasting change for our communities in Dulwich and West Norwood, by campaigning to secure investment to deliver not one, not two, but five brilliant new schools in the constituency. As a Labour Minister, she established the Sure Start programme, which was the fruit of her lifelong passion for supporting parents and babies to address disadvantage early and to enable every child to thrive. Sure Start centres made a difference across the country, including in Dulwich and West Norwood, where they are still highly valued by parents and carers. Through sheer inspirational determination, Tessa also delivered the greatest celebration of London and Londoners that we have ever known—the 2012 Olympics.

Across everything she did as our MP, Tessa established a clear and principled way of doing politics, based on listening to, engaging with and responding to the concerns of local residents; identifying and working on the issues that matter to all of us and that bring people together; using the currency of personal stories, compassion and kindness rather than trading in statistics and cheap political shots; and, most of all, seeking to empower people and to tackle disadvantage and adversity head-on. It is therefore no surprise to Tessa’s many friends in Parliament, in Dulwich and West Norwood, across London and beyond that she is now using the very difficult personal circumstances of her brain tumour diagnosis to work to make a difference for other people in the same circumstances. It is no surprise, but it is remarkable in a situation where many of us would be focused only on our immediate loved ones, and it is extremely brave.

My own family knows the pain of brain tumour diagnosis. In 1983, at the age of 66, just a year after he had retired from his career as a bus driver and spent his life savings on a small house with an indoor toilet and a garden where he could grow his beloved dahlias, my grandfather George Hayes died from a brain tumour. Seven years later, in a situation so statistically rare that doctors had to be persuaded to take her symptoms seriously, my grandmother, George’s wife Olive, also passed away from a brain tumour, at the age of 71. We know as a family the fear and anxiety that such a serious diagnosis brings, the hopelessness of finding that there is very little that can be done, and the pain of watching loved ones deteriorate and lose capacity at the hands of such a cruel disease.

My first thought when I learned the horrible news of Tessa’s diagnosis was of grandparents George and Olive, and my second thought was that the treatment and prognosis for brain tumours must be much better now than it was then. I looked up the statistics, and was shocked to find that, although brain tumour survival rates have doubled since the 1970s, it is only from 6% to 14% compared with a 10-year survival rate of 50% across all types of cancer in the UK. Brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer, yet just 1% of the national spend on cancer research has been allocated to brain tumour research. As a consequence of this lack of funding, there is a shortage of drugs, and patient participation in clinical trials for brain tumour patients is extremely low—just 6.4% of adults compared with 61.4% for leukaemia. The survival rates for brain tumour patients after one year are less than 40%; after five years, less than 20%; and after 10 years, just 14%. Time is short for patients and their families.

Tessa has rightly called for more funding for research into treating brain tumours, but she has importantly also called for a more flexible approach to participation in adaptive trials. Such trials allow patients who have a diagnosis that without a breakthrough treatment will certainly be terminal to add new drugs to their treatment plan, or to switch between new medications in a trial rather than having to wait sequentially for each trial to conclude. They are really important. It is also important that better ways are found to share the data from brain tumour patients in order that it can be used for research. This is what most brain tumour patients want, and it is what most members of the public would want, faced with an illness that cannot be cured. Our experience and our data should be used to try to improve the prognosis for others in future.
Tessa has also called for improvements in the way that treatment is provided to brain tumour patients and the wider environment of care. There is still too much variation across the country in diagnosis, referral-to-treatment times, access to specialists and clinical trials, and palliative care for those who need it. We have in this country exemplary services in all of these areas, but they are not available to every patient. That must change. Everyone with brain tumour symptoms should be diagnosed as early as possible; be referred to a specialist centre with access to the most up-to-date surgical techniques and drug therapies; and have access to the very best support services, including counselling as well as physio and occupational therapy. If and when the time sadly comes, everyone should have access to the gold standard of palliative care, which exists in some parts of the country but which is currently not available everywhere.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s engagement with Tessa’s campaign for better research, access to clinical trials, treatment and care, along with the work of the brain tumour Task And Finish Group, Brain Tumour Research and others, but we must make change happen. It is our commitment, Tessa, and my promise on behalf of all those who love you in Dulwich and West Norwood that, collectively, we will take on your campaign, and that your vision of people living better lives for longer with cancer, and with brain tumours in particular, will become a reality.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It may have to be reduced, but we will start with a limit on Back-Bench speeches of six minutes each. I call George Freeman.

3.20 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)? She spoke with great passion and authority.

Thirty years ago this month, my father developed a cough and two months later he was dead from throat cancer. Being a man of that generation and age, he had never taken his health too seriously. He had never been for a check-up and had never received the care and treatment that would now follow, so what I say today is partly for dad. Eighteen months ago, I heard from a childhood friend of mine, Charlie Williams, that he had been diagnosed with the same form of brain tumour that Tessa has. Last week, Charlie posted on Facebook that he did not expect to see the next year out, so this is for Charlie.

I want to start by paying tribute to you, Tessa, for what you said in that remarkable speech. You spoke for us all, and to us all, and you spoke to the patients of this country not only with your condition, but with every other form of cancer—the patients I had a career working with who want us to make a difference for them. They want warm words, yes, and there were no words warmer than yours, Tessa, but they want us to turn the warm words into action. I believe that is the spirit in which we gather in this Chamber today, so this speech, Tessa, is for you.

Having come to this House after a career in medical research, it was my great privilege to be asked to lead, on behalf of the Government, a brain tumour research debate in Westminster Hall two years ago. I say this without a shred of criticism of my officials, who were simply doing their job, but the speech that I was given to read out said, as diligent speeches written by officials so often do, “There is no problem here. Move along. Everything is in good shape. Money is limited.” I read it with great respect, but I also listened to my colleagues with great respect, because unlike officials, we are sent to represent the people who put us here. As Tessa spoke for us all, I think it is our duty to speak always for the people who send us here.

I surprised my officials that day by announcing, as Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences, that we would indeed create a taskforce to look into brain tumour research, never thinking that 18 months later my great friend the Secretary of State would announce £45 million of extra funding, in addition to the extra funding that he has recently announced on prostate cancer. That is a sign that, if we listen and speak on behalf of the people who put us here, we can make a difference, which is what Tessa wants us to do on her behalf and on behalf of all those people who send us here and the many patients around the country who are more impatient than anybody.

As you and patient colleagues know, Mr Speaker, I had a career in medical research. I want to highlight three important parts of this debate, the first of which is the new models of research that are coming—I was involved in my professional career in developing them. Secondly, I want to highlight the importance of patient voice in that model, and thirdly the importance of bold reforms to accelerate access to new treatments for our NHS patients.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) referred to precision medicine. The truth is that the life sciences sector that I joined 25 years ago is undergoing a profound transformation. The sector that I learned about was basically in the business of making blockbuster medicines that work for everybody. It would start with a theoretical drug target and, after 15 years, $2 billion on average and an 80% failure rate, drugs would be developed and eventually brought through regulation to the all-too-patient patients who were waiting for the approval.

In the new model, based on the genomic information that we have and phenotypic hospital records, we are able to look at a population and know which are likely to respond to the drug and which are not. We can start with the patients that we know are likely either to respond or to receive the disease, which means that we can start with the patient. With patient consent, we are able to start with their tissues, their genetics and their hospital records, and we are able not to end with a patient waiting patiently for the system to authorise a medicine, but with patients volunteering up-front to be part of that research.

It has been my privilege in my professional as well as my political career to work with inspired NHS clinicians around the country who have been leading this model. I pay tribute to the work of Cancer Research UK as an organisation, but also to Harpal Kumar, whose leadership of that organisation has been transformational.
We should be inspired by the fact that breast cancer is now 95% curable. We are within living, touching distance of cancer being a preventable disease or a treatable disease. More than 800,000 people are now living and working with cancer: it is not the death sentence that is used to be. We are in the midst of the most phenomenal revolution led by cancer. We should applaud those involved and learn the lessons of how they have managed to do it, largely through genomics and informatics.

I will share with the House a story that illustrates where the value in the new model lies. During my last project before I came to Parliament, I was working with an NHS clinician who, at the end of the meeting, pointed to a shelf in his office and asked me, “Do you think there is any value in that?” I said, “What is it?” He said, “It is all the data from a £25 million study of 250,000 women at risk of gynaecological cancer, funded by the Medical Research Council and Cancer Research UK.” I said, “What have you got?” He said, “All the blood samples, all the genetic samples, and their patient records.” “That should be the Ageing Biomarker company,” I said. “We should form a company around that asset, because it will help us to identify ageing biomarkers.”

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): May I place on record at this point the work that my hon. Friend has done to get us to this point? He is very modest in not saying too much about it himself—although he mentioned the Westminster Hall debate and the way in which he went out on a limb in response to it—but his understanding of the business and this fight has taken us a long way towards where we are today. I hope he can now conclude his speech as he needs to.

George Freeman: That is very kind. I take the hint from my hon. Friend. Friend.

The assets that we have in our health system are phenomenal assets to drive this research model, and I think it is our challenge to release them, but in order to do so, we need patient consent. However interventionist we are as Ministers, we as a system will not and cannot release data on tissues and genetics without patient voice. This research model requires us to empower patients and the charities that speak to and for them. I would like us to think about setting up disease portals in which patients can slide the consent bar on their phones, share their records, and help the charities to drive research.

Finally, we need to accelerate the uptake of innovative medicines in the system, which is what the accelerated access reform that I put together with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was all about. I dream of—I think we are within touching distance—a model in this country enabling the NHS to use its genomics and data to drive research. If we reform NICE to drive accelerated access, we give Tessa and the people for whom she spoke the legacy that they really want. We will make this country the leader not just of research, but of accelerated uptake of new treatments.

3.27 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on securing this important debate, and on making what I thought was a remarkable speech. I remember her telling me, days after her election, about the loss of her father. It was such a keenly felt loss, but I know how proud he must have felt to see his daughter enter this place—I think he hung on to see that happen. Had he heard her speech—and perhaps he did—I think that it would justify every ounce of his pride in her.

I will start by paying tribute to Tessa Jowell, if I may. She was one of the Members of Parliament representing the London borough of Lambeth when I was first leader of the opposition and then leader of the council. She was a fantastic, supportive local MP. Despite her serious, significant roles in Government, she was always available to talk to me about my role and the community that we both cherished and loved and for which we wanted to do our best. She became my mentor, and she became my friend.

Tessa was always thinking about how we could do more to help people, particularly the most vulnerable. We worked together to open schools and Sure Start centres. I particularly remember that in the mid-noughties, when there was that terrible spike in violent youth crime and knife crime—similar to what we are seeing now—in Tessa’s beloved Brixton, where she had started her career as a social worker, she took me to see a community-led project called Exit on the Moorlands estate, one of the most deprived inner-city estates in the country, where there was a horrifically high level of youth engagement in violence. Young people knew by name others who had been killed, including friends.

Tessa took me to see that project, which had been set up by the community. It was supported by youth workers and the police, but with the community in charge, and it was making a dramatic difference to the life chances of those young people by getting them out of danger—getting them out of gangs and steering them back on to a safer path that was giving them back the future that should have been theirs as a birthright. Tessa took me to see that project not just because she wanted the council’s support for it, but because she was teaching me an important lesson: it was not my job as a politician to find the answers for people; it was my job as a politician to help people find the answers for themselves, because they would be better answers. I have brought that lesson with me into Parliament: like many of us, I would not be here if it were not for Tessa, and Tessa taught me that people-based politics.

That same compassion, empathy and drive to support and help people is what has led Tessa to turn this great personal challenge in her own life today into a way to bring about change to help others. For that reason, as well as many others, I am very proud to stand here today and support Tessa’s campaign.

As we have been hearing, brain tumour research is underfunded and undervalued compared with other types of cancer research, despite the fact that it kills more people under the age of 40 than any other type of cancer and is the biggest killer of children of any kind of cancer. So we need to match the progress made in survival rates for other forms of cancer, such as leukaemia and breast cancer, by focusing much more on brain tumour cancer and what we can do as a country and a society to help people who find themselves living with that form of cancer.
Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): May I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the courage and bravery of our friend, Baroness Tessa Jowell, and particularly her significant decision to make her medical data available? Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the low level of participation in clinical trials, if we are to achieve much better results for patients, the Government and all of us must do much more to encourage participation in these trials in all of our local areas and in our national politics?

Mr Reed: I thank my right hon. Friend for that well-timed intervention. We absolutely need to boost participation in clinical trials. Only 6.4% of adults with this particular form of cancer take part in those trials, whereas over 61% of people with leukaemia participate, so there is a clear need for a major increase in the numbers participating in these trials if we are to get the data we need to learn. I join my right hon. Friend, too, in congratulating Baroness Jowell on her historic decision to become the first patient to consent to share her data fully and openly, in order to speed up the discovery of new cures and ways to help other people; she is an example to so many people in so many ways, but here again we need to learn from Tessa’s example, because that is how we will help to find a cure for this terrible form of cancer.

I say to Ministers, who will be responsible for regulation as well as funding, that it is important that regulation is not drawn so tightly that it does not allow for innovation and for new treatments to be developed. We must be open to doing things in different ways and to learning from failure as well as success; we cannot regulate against failure, but we can always learn from it so that we can improve.

We must increase the funding going into the kind of research that will find a cure for this form of cancer and put it on a par with other, perhaps more high-profile, forms of cancer that have attracted levels of funding that are making a bigger difference. In that respect, I put my name on record in welcoming and congratulating the Government on the increase in funding of £45 million—I believe that is the figure—announced since the very moving debate, which many of us attended in the House of Lords, led by Tessa Jowell.

Tessa has been a fighter all her life and now she is in the fight of her life, but how typical it is that she has turned it into a fight to allow others to live well, live better and live longer. Every one of us in this Chamber, and many others beyond, are proud to stand with Tessa today. I would like to say this to her, if I may: Tessa, you have all our love and all our respect. Please keep going and keep being the inspiration to all of us that you have always been.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

3.35 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): In the short time that I have to speak in this debate, I should like to focus on two areas. I want to talk about the important progress that needs to be made in the drive to fight prostate cancer and also, briefly, about the need for more attention to be given to the link between alcohol consumption and several cancers. First, let me say that I appreciate the fact that the Government are committed to improving the cancer services offered by the NHS, and to making the UK a world leader in cancer research, diagnosis, treatment and care. Many innovations have been introduced, including the cancer drugs fund and the implementation of the independent cancer taskforce’s strategy. Cancer survival rates are now at a record high, and our access to the world’s leading cancer drugs continues to improve. However, there is always more to do, and that is certainly the case with regard to prostate cancer.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in men in the UK. It affects one in 10 men, so barely a family in the land will be unaffected. Indeed, my own grandfather died of it. More than 40,000 men were diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2016, and just over 10,000 men die of it each year. It is relatively rare in men under 50, but it gets more common as men get older, and the average age of diagnosis is between 70 and 74, which is often too late. It has been recognised that earlier diagnosis is the key. The Prime Minister and Health Ministers have considered what more can be done on prostate cancer, and they are looking at a range of options for further activity and taking expert advice. It is clear that the strongest chance of health gain lies in more research—particularly research that focuses on early diagnosis—tied together with innovative new treatments and care for men with prostate cancer.

I am pleased that, just a few days ago, the Prime Minister announced a very welcome £75 million plan to launch new research into prostate cancer. This will build on the already strong portfolio of prostate cancer research being done, and on the considerable investment that is already being put in. I know that the Department of Health and Social Care works closely with Cancer Research UK, Prostate Cancer UK, the Medical Research Council and others via the National Cancer Research Institute, which is a strategic partnership of the major UK funders of cancer research, and that the spending by that partnership on prostate cancer increased from £17 million in 2011-12 to £26 million in 2015-16.

As I say, more needs to be done, and the Government have indeed announced that substantially more will be done to help the thousands of men affected by this disease every year get treated earlier and faster. More than 40,000 patients will be recruited into prostate cancer studies over the next five years. Those studies will include trial testing, keyhole surgery, different types of radiotherapy, high-intensity focused ultrasound and cryotherapy. Other studies are seeking to identify predisposing hereditary genes, which could help to identify men at high risk, and this will include focusing on men with a family history of prostate cancer and also on black men, one in four of whom will develop the disease. Work will continue on supportive interventions, including exercise and dietary advice, and on the one-stop cancer shops being piloted in 10 areas to catch cancer early and speed up diagnosis, particularly for those suffering with less obvious symptoms. I appreciate the Secretary of State’s announcement that these plans will refocus the Government’s efforts to develop new treatments in this field.

I now want to touch on the link between alcohol and cancer. Over recent years the Government have exhibited admirable leadership by introducing a range of tobacco control legislation, helping people to reduce smoking, and they are now doing similar work to tackle obesity. Those are both high cancer triggers, and I applaud the Government for that work. Perhaps less recognised is the fact that alcohol can also be a cause of cancer.
As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm, I believe that this issue needs more attention from the Government, in the same way as they have looked at smoking and obesity. Indeed, consuming too much alcohol can increase the risk of at least seven types of cancer: bowel; breast; laryngeal, or cancer of the voicebox; liver; mouth; oesophageal, or cancer of the foodpipe; and pharyngeal, or cancer of the upper throat. Without being conscious about how much we drink, there is a risk that many people are drinking in a way that causes those cancers and that is preventable.

I ask the Government to do more to encourage people to drink responsibly to reduce cancer risks, as well as many other health risks. One way would be for the Government to help people better understand what 14 units a week, the amount in the chief medical officer’s guidelines, really means. I also ask the Government to meet me and the all-party group to discuss improving the labelling of low-alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks. That would do much to help change habits, promote responsible drinking and prevent cancer and other health risks that can come from drinking even slightly above the chief medical officer’s guidelines.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for being present in the Chamber today. I know that you take the Chair most Thursdays, but I choose to interpret your presence today as a testament to Tessa. He is not in his place at the moment, but it is worth recognising that the Secretary of State was present not just during today’s debate but in the debate in the Lords. That was recognised by many of us and very much appreciated.

I want to start by talking about my mum, Joanna Kyle, later Murrell. In 2011, my mum presented to doctors with severe back pain, for which she was given medication but no further tests. In the 18 months that followed that visit, she went to doctors and clinicians and to hospital no more than a dozen times with the back pain, which never went away and only got worse. She was sent for numerous tests on her back, but on her final visit to the GP, when her husband said, “Please run more tests because the pain is not going away,” the GP simply replied, “Why on earth would I do that?” A week later, my mum collapsed. She was taken to hospital and diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Within a month, she had died. Her mother had lung cancer, my mum had been a smoker earlier in her life—one would have thought that those were the sort of things that would have been picked up much earlier.

At the point at which my mum was diagnosed, she had only a 21% chance of living a year. If she had been diagnosed at the point at which she first presented to the doctors, in all statistical likelihood she would have seen me, her son, enter the House of Commons. There would have been a very good chance that she would have been here today or, most likely, outside enjoying the weather at her house in Devon.

My mum was not a complainer. She did not push herself forward, and she did not complain, thrust or make sure she got all the attention she needed. This is a good link from my mum to Tessa. Many people who do not know the relationship I have with Tessa might not see the link between my mother and Tessa, but for me it seems very logical. Tessa has always played a very strong and maternal role in my life, always—always—pushing me forward. For me, the link is an easy one. Tessa, too, is not a complainer, but my God she is a doer. She has always got things done and it is easy to pay tribute to her not just for her stellar career and achieving the Olympics but for her wonderful family. These debates in Parliament are the best testament to her, because amid the anguish of living with cancer, Tessa’s first instinct is to make life better for others.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that although we pay tribute to the incredible bravery and determination of Baroness Tessa Jowell, we also need to pay tribute to the amazing work of Cancer Research UK, which has an impact not just in our country but around the world?

Peter Kyle: Of course I do. My hon. Friend makes an important point. Tessa, too, has been linking with many organisations, bringing them together and focusing attention on them but, just because that is so typically Tessa, it does not make it any less remarkable.

For brain cancer to be tackled, three things must happen. We need to sort out funding, innovation and the use of data, and I will speak about the data. The working group set up by the Department of Health and Social Care said that brain tumour patients would like “their health data to be used for research to speed up development of new treatments. Regulators should respect these wishes.”

Lord Freyberg said in the debate in the other place that Britain has a “globally unique research asset” in the NHS. We have cradle-to-grave records covering millions of people, and examples from those records could revolutionise care and research. Those records need to be much better utilised.

That is the data at the very top, but we now see in America how Apple is revolutionising the use of health data down to the individual. Last month a dozen healthcare providers in the US partnered with Apple to provide health records directly on to patients’ phones via an app. The information is presented in a way that incentivises healthy choices and empowers patients not only to make the right choices but to have a more natural relationship with their health and health information, and with the professionals who provide it. With our NHS, we have infinitely more potential than any other country on earth to revolutionise health research and the way we manage and maintain our own health. We need far more ambition to realise that.

I end with another quick word about Tessa, because I would not be here if not for strong women like Tessa pushing me forward way before I came to this place and way before I got into politics. In all those situations I knew Tessa and felt her guiding hand gently pushing me forward. She gave me the kind of mentorship that people need. I have articulated to her many times that it has always been a source of regret that we were never able to sit on these Benches together, because I believe hers is the sort of mentorship from which somebody like me would really benefit as they enter this place.

Tessa, to be here today in the same Chamber as you, and to be sharing these green Benches with you for these few moments, is something I will remember for the rest of my life.
My mother’s case highlighted one other thing, which we have seen in other cases: once a doctor has concerns, it is important that we can get the tests done quickly to identify exactly what is wrong. With my mother, it was unexplained anaemia and stomach pain that finally triggered the test to be done, but it can be all sorts of complaints. The hon. Member for Hove gave the example of something being wrong but we cannot quite pin down what. I know the ACE—accelerate, co-ordinate, evaluate—centres are being created, and I am interested to hear the Minister’s comments about how he thinks they can be expanded and developed. Where a GP has a concern with a patient—where something seems to be not quite right but they cannot put their finger on exactly what aspect of cancer it might be or whether it is cancer—we need the ability to get the tests done and a diagnosis made quickly, which then means treatment can start.

It is absolutely right to say that cancer is not the death sentence it once was and it is not taboo to talk about it, as it once was. The only thing my mum hated was when anyone called it “The big C”. She said, “Oh, for goodness’ sake, if you are calling it ‘The big C’ you might as well say what it is. What a load of nonsense!” That was her reaction: she wanted us to call it cancer because that is what it is. She used to say, “Look, I’ve got bowel cancer. It is not bowel with the big C. It is bowel cancer.” That was very much her view. For some people, that description helps but for her it gave the idea of not being up front about what it is and this was about being able to get treatment. So I hope something good can come out of her experience.

Thankfully, more people are surviving cancer than used to be the case, but this sort of debate is so important. I say that, first, because it brings this up and it is about sharing personal experience. No one is immune from cancer. I know my family history and I know that in my mid-50s there are some tests I need to have. My mum was worried that I might have her genetic condition and so be more liable to get this, but I just said to her, “Well, if it is, the one thing we can guarantee is that I am going to be one of the monitored people in western Europe for that particular condition. Don’t be embarrassed about it, mum.” This was certainly an informative experience for me, and I do hope we can do more. I hope that the result of this debate is that more people can be helped and we can get the death rates down even further.
with brain cancer. The figures on research funding, and the availability of effective drugs and treatment, speak for themselves, and I will not repeat them, as I know time is short.

Last year, I lost two people close to me to cancer. One was my father-in-law, Nigel Ballantyne. I hesitate to say what I am about to say, as I have questioned whether my own grief has skewed my perceptions of the care that he received. I do not think it has. I also hesitate because I wonder whether today is the appropriate time to raise these issues, but I have concluded that Tessa would not want me to pull any punches.

My father-in-law was told that he had lung cancer when he was on his own, in a hospital bed, with only his mobile phone for company. There were complicating circumstances, but there were no excuses. He had struggled to get an appointment to see his own GP and had been passed from pillar to post for months—a situation admittedly not made better by the usual reticence of a 76-year-old man not wanting to cause a fuss, and his understandable desire to go on that holiday that he had been looking forward to. Having said that, the delay in his diagnosis and the way his diagnosis was delivered were unacceptable. He died six days before the general election last year.

Five months later, a good friend died at home after a long struggle. His wife speaks of how she had to fight tooth and nail to get palliative care support in place on the night he died. She described to me a ward that lacked sufficient nursing staff to administer injections without her physical help.

When the national cancer strategy talks about placing patient experience on a par with clinical outcomes and quality of life, it rings a bit hollow to me. I do not want to sound overly bleak, as I know that there are many wonderful examples of good care with positive outcomes, but we do need to be honest. We need to ask ourselves tough questions about how patients are treated on all steps of the care pathway.

Those living with cancer also need more support. Last Friday, my constituent, Amanda Mahoney, whose breast cancer has recurred four times in seven years, came to my advice surgery to ask me to campaign alongside her to change the face of cancer. She said:

“We’re not all bald, we’re not all having chemo. I don’t want to be told ‘sit on a park bench and wait till it gets you.’”

She wants to continue doing the job she loves—she is an outreach worker with autistic children—but her recurring experience has been employer after employer who does not know what to do and a benefits system that seems to make things harder, not easier.

This issue is not going away. This debate is the product of Tessa’s campaigning. She has been able to do what she does best—make her contribution by making those in power sit up and listen. She has been able to continue her working life. Others should be able to do the same, if that is what they want, and employers should be supported to make that happen.

There is so much more that needs to be said, but in the time available it is impossible to do this subject justice, so I will touch on just one other issue, which I know is also close to Tessa’s heart: our impending departure from the EU, which includes our probable departure from the European Medicines Agency and Euratom. Promises were made about extra cash for the NHS after Brexit, but, in stark contrast, Brexit has potentially huge negative implications for cancer research and treatment. We need urgent answers.

The continued ability of British cancer sufferers to participate in pan-European clinical trials is critical, especially for those with rarer cancers. We must ensure that we have a reliable supply of medical isotopes for diagnostics and treatments—that supply is at risk as we leave Euratom. We must not become a second-tier country for access to the newest and the best medicines. The next generation of immunotherapies holds great potential. We cannot willingly put ourselves at the back of the queue.

There are not yet answers to those questions, nor are there answers to the chronic NHS staffing crisis, which is exacerbated by Brexit, yet we are 11 months from leaving. We need a global, cross-border approach to research. We need to be a country that is open to talent and ideas from around the world. We need a properly resourced, adequately staffed NHS that is capable of embracing innovation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Heidi Alexander: I am drawing my remarks to a close.

It saddens me that we seem a long way from that aspiration, but if we are to honour the work of people such as Tessa and the memory of people such as my father-in-law, it has to be worth fighting for.

3.59 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander). I join other colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and say that it has been a real privilege to take part in this debate. She has achieved something that we often talk about, but today’s debate has highlighted it, and that is that we really do have more in common. Absolutely everybody in this Chamber will have experienced cancer or its effects at some time in their life. We are all touched by it; it has its own dark logic that spares nobody.

In my research on the debate, I was struck by the fact that cancer has been around since 4600 BC. That was highlighted in the excellent book “The Emperor of All Maladies”, written by oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee. He wrote the book to help his patients understand what they were fighting. This disease lived in silence until 440 BC when Herodotus recorded a slave removing a tumour from the breast of her mistress. We do not know whether she was successful, but, clearly, things have moved on considerably since then. However, what has not changed is the devastation, pain and suffering caused by cancer.

I find myself in the presence of someone who has been talked about so much—Dame Tessa Jowell. It is a real honour that she was the one to spark this debate, and I and my colleagues pay tribute to her for the fantastic work that she has done. I hope that we will see some real progress.

Brain tumours have touched my life as well. My son’s classmate, Joseph Foote, lost his life in August 2007. His father went on to found a brain tumour charity, which
raised £2 million. He was a real inspiration in our local community. Every single year, as my son gets older and has his birthday, we are aware of the hole in his classroom. When I got involved with the efforts to raise money, I was surprised, like the hon. Member for Croydon Central was, to learn that, of all the cancers, breast cancer was the most common killer of children—I did not know that. The charity has now been merged with the Brain Tumour Charity, and it continues to work really hard.

Of course, there are many other charities. I am delighted that I have been able to support Breast Cancer Now as an ambassador. I will not speak at length about the charity, but it welcomed the launch of the cancer drugs fund in 2016. I thank the charity for the excellent brief that it provided today, and ask whether the Minister will set out the terms of reference for that cancer drugs fund review. We understand that it is under way, and the charity has asked how patient organisations will be involved.

Let me turn to my local hospital, the Alex, part of the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which I have mentioned many times in this Chamber. I continue to work closely with the trust. With regard to cancer, I am concerned that our statistics are falling short of a number of key national targets. The trust is still in special measures. It has, unfortunately, let down many of my constituents in the past with long waiting times. That is not good enough, but new leadership is in place. It is beginning to make a real difference in turning around the situation, and that is down to the efforts of the incredibly hard-working frontline staff, and I pay tribute to them.

I have visited the cancer ward at the Alex and seen the chemotherapy that is going on there. I have seen at first hand the care and compassion that the staff display, and I know that it makes a real difference to the people of Redditch at that time in their life.

On cancer statistics, the trust is failing to meet some national targets. There are signs of improvement, which I welcome, but I have a question to put to the Minister and also to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who told me when I was first elected that our trust was one of the trusts he was most concerned about. I call on him to make sure that he continues to keep it at the top of his list, and continues to keep it in his focus, because we want it turned around not just for cancer treatment, but for all the treatments that take place there.

There are some good-news stories for the trust. We have seen some new investment in the form of a new testing service, which has been introduced just recently. Breast cancer patients are benefitting from drastically reduced waiting times, thanks to a test now carried out in the labs at Worcestershire Royal. This has cut the time doctors have to wait before deciding what treatment to give patients from three weeks down to two days.

Tests used to be sent to Birmingham, which meant long waits and added cost, and doing them in-house has massively reduced the time taken to produce the results. That means that doctors can decide the best course of treatment as quickly as possible. In particular, this improves the prognosis for patients with certain types of breast cancer. I hope people begin to see that things are slowly improving, but we must never let the trust slide back again, because my constituents deserve world-class services in cancer and in all other health services.

We all know how important it is that cancer treatment starts early, which is why I welcome today's contributions. Facing a cancer diagnosis and not knowing how long one has to live must be the worst experience that can happen to a human being. As those brave souls fighting cancer know better than us, it is not about counting the days; it is about making every day count—it seems that Baroness Tessa Jowell is definitely doing that. I am pleased the Government are unwavering in their commitment to the resilience of the human spirit and have made cancer their compassionate priority.

4.5 pm

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Seb Coe described her as “Mary Poppins in stilettos”. The Guardian called her “the ultimate loyalist” and many times rehashed the image of tiny Tessa Jowell throwing herself dramatically under a bus—presumably a London bus. Alan Johnson said she had

“all the warmth in the world but a core of absolute steel”.

The Evening Standard said:

“If you cut her veins, you would probably find the River Thames running through them.”

Google Maps decided to get involved and made her a London landmark, placing her between Big Ben and Westminster Hall—most apt, I think.

For me, Tessa Jowell, whom I worked for once, will always epitomise the best of my city, London. She has long been a professional and personal hero of mine. At one point, we were both Camden councillors, although she has achieved a lot more in her life than I ever will. As all Members have already mentioned in this powerful debate, it was Tessa who was fundamental to bringing the Olympics to London; it was Tessa who constantly talked about how we had to go all out to win and about how big prizes were never won by playing it safe; it was Tessa who said the Olympics would teach us Londoners to be resilient and to celebrate our diversity; and it was Tessa who told us the Olympics would show us the extent of our ambition. How right she was.

In the same spirit that Tessa has talked about her medical condition—the cancer that resulted in her having two seizures in a cab, about which she has spoken so powerfully—and with the same resilience, she has said she will use her experience to make life better for others and improve and lengthen the life of cancer victims. She has shown the same ambition in talking about using innovative cancer treatments that do not currently exist in the UK.

Tessa has inspired me to suggest that we in the House work together to launch an initiative similar to Dementia Friends. For those who do not know, Dementia Friends is an Alzheimer's Society initiative that offers extensive information sessions so that people can learn about dementia and what they can do to help. The sessions play a crucial role beyond recognising just the signs of dementia, not least because the way dementia affects people varies hugely. I know we already have brilliant organisations such Cancer Research UK and care organisations such as Macmillan, but the role of a cancer friends initiative would be different. It would be more about understanding the medical condition, building resilience through networks and creating cancer friendly communities. Formalising such a body could support many thousands.
Having worked with Tessa, I know she has a strong support network, like no one else, of friends and family, but not everyone has that, as she will be aware from our conversations about loneliness—an important subject put on the map by my late friend, Jo Cox. Tessa would be the first to agree that because not everyone has these networks at their fingertips, it is necessary to consider launching a cancer friends initiative. Such an initiative could also bring profound benefits for those searching for stem cell donors.

I want to mention a constituent of mine, Lara, who has been very brave in the face of adversity. She had a similar condition, but was unable to find a stem cell donor because of her black, Asian and minority ethnic background. If people look into the figures, they will realise that only 60% of patients receive the best match, but if they are from a BAME background, that drops to 20%.

I raised the case of my amazing constituent Lara at Prime Minister’s questions, and I talked about the spit drive we had at the O2 Centre in my constituency. Lara actually managed to find a match and is undergoing treatment because of the network that came around her and the community in my constituency that helped her. A cancer friends initiative could certainly help to spread the word.

I want to talk about Hampstead and Kilburn—I think Tessa would approve of me bringing in my constituency, because she happened to mention her constituency every five minutes when we worked together. My constituency is blessed with some of the finest oncologists in the world. The Royal Free Hospital, which everyone will know about, is a European centre of excellence and is celebrating the 20th anniversary of its neuroendocrine tumour unit. It has grown from having 30 patients to having more than 1,800, and it will soon be joined by the Pears Institute, which will be one of the five leading centres of its kind across the globe, bringing clinicians together to research revolutionary new cancer treatments. Hospitals such as the Royal Free have benefited enormously from Tessa’s work in Camden, where she started out, but, as we know, her work has touched the whole country.

In 2015, Tessa gave a memorial lecture to mark 10 years since the 7/7 attacks. She said:

“This city, this country, these people are a model of resilience… Resilience is rooted in optimism. Behind the strength to stand firm lies the feeling that tomorrow will be better than today… Resilience relies on a commitment to our way of life but also the feeling that life can improve. Progress is not an illusion even in the darkest of hours.”

Tessa was talking about British people, but her words are a perfect testament to the character she has shown in fighting, even after she left these green Benches and was elevated to the red Benches. A model of resilience, a model of optimism, a model of a politician—our Tessa Jowell.

4.11 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I rise today to talk about some very special people with an Ilford North connection. Perhaps even more impressive than crossing the party political divide in this debate, Tessa Jowell crosses an even greater political divide in London—
to such an extent that every time I call him back, without fail his first words are always, “Thanks for calling. I know you must be busy.” I am nowhere near as busy as Scott is, as a father trying to look after and care for his family on top of everything else that they are dealing with. This is why I address my remarks to Ministers.

I thank successive Ministers—most recently Lord O’Shaughnessy—for engaging with Kaleigh’s case, but they will understand the family’s frustration. After three meetings with the Department of Health, two online petition campaigns and a huge fundraising effort to pay for Kaleigh’s treatment, they do not feel that things are really moving forwards. As Scott says:

“How is the UK government going to help Kaleigh now? Not in the future, but now? Without funding we have no treatment. Overnight we have been forced to become an expert on DIPG, a carer, a fundraiser, a counsellor, an adviser, a leader, a beggar. But ultimately we need help from our government to take the burden off us so that we can focus on Kaleigh.”

There are just a few things that I want to say to Ministers in the short time I have left. We need to become a global leader in tackling DIPG, which has already taken over 200,000 children. We can do this through research, spearheading clinical trials and ensuring earlier access to treatment. We need to do more to ensure financial support to access experimental treatment. I understand the ethical dilemmas, particularly where experimental treatment is concerned, but we have to place greater trust in patients and parents who are willing to take risks.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I am sure that everyone in the House is paying rapt attention to my hon. Friend’s explanation of Kaleigh’s care and determination, and that of her family. Will he conclude the story and tell us what is going on at the moment?

Wes Streeting: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for that additional time.

If Ministers cannot fund treatment, let us at least look at funding the flights, accommodation and all the additional costs that families face. It was remarkable listening to the comparison between what Tessa has been through and what Kaleigh’s family have been through in this respect. We need better care plans, advice and guidance. Scott has to do it all himself, to such an extent that he has become an adviser to families around the world on top of looking after his own children. We need to do a lot more to ensure consistency.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is coming up with some practical suggestions and creative ways of supporting such families. Does he agree that it is important that the NHS thinks sensitively and creatively about how it can support aftercare once Kaleigh and her family come home?

Wes Streeting: That is absolutely right. I pay tribute to Great Ormond Street Hospital and other great NHS services that have supported the family.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said when she opened the debate, we have all been affected by cancer in some way. The worst experience of my life was losing my nan to cancer when I was aged 10. It is a great source of regret to me that I do not still have that great left-wing firebrand who occupied County Hall when Mrs Thatcher decided to shut it down, and allegedly threw a brick at the trucks as they rolled into Wapping. Some of that has rubbed off on me.

I hope that, in looking at what we can practically do to support families, Ministers have heard the powerful contributions made today. I want to say to Kaleigh’s family, to Tessa, and to other families who have been affected by childhood brain tumours that their strength, their courage and their resilience, but most remarkably of all, their enormous generosity of spirit in seeking to help others while they go through an enormous struggle themselves should be an example to us all. Tessa, that is the example that we are following today, and we are determined to make sure that our country gets this right for you.

4.20 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I cannot compete with some of the wonderful speeches that have been made today. My research would be perfunctory by comparison with some of the things that Members of the House have told us. I will leave this debate knowing so much more about brain cancer than I did when I arrived.

My purpose in speaking is simply to say to Tessa: we are with you. You know, Mr Speaker, that politics is a rough old trade, and sometimes you fall out with people—people you think the most of. I just wanted to be here to say to Tessa that whatever the arguments or disagreements, it counts for nothing by comparison with my admiration and my determination to do anything I can to support her in her campaign.

Joan Ryan: Let me grab this opportunity to say something, because I am sure that Tessa can see that she has got these three women here—me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). We entered this House in 1997 and joined Tessa Jowell on the Government Benches, and we served with her through three terms of the Labour Government. She gave us such fantastic support. I just wanted to leave a rounded picture of Tessa in this very serious debate. I bet she is really a little bit embarrassed at all the praise, but she deserves it. She is such a strong supporter of women coming into this place and getting them through the process to get here. She also has a very ready but very kind wit that we witnessed much of when she was at the Dispatch Box.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my right hon. Friend—my very best right hon. Friend in this House—and Members can see so many reasons why that is.

Sometimes we fall out, and perhaps we fall out harder on our own side than we do with parties on the other side. Tessa is extraordinary in her example, as are so many people, particularly in the NHS. At 7 o’clock tonight, I will be holding a reception in the Jubilee Room of the House of Commons for the winter heroes from Epsom and St Heller University Hospitals NHS Trust to say thanks to them. If anybody wishes to join us, there will be a glass of wine and a packet of crisps for them. Thanks to the NHS, thank you to Tessa, and thanks to everybody for their brilliant speeches today.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any debate, but especially one on cancer. First, as others have done, I congratulate Baroness Tessa Jowell. I see her not in stilettos but as a real soldier and a real warrior. I thank her for her courage and determination. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for setting the scene. To pick out one speaker in particular, with no disrespect to anyone else, I thank the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) for his contribution. What a joy it is to see him back in the Chamber again making a valuable contribution, as he always does.

This is always a tough kind of debate to speak in, for a number of reasons. We rightly all use the statistics and numbers that are so informative, but tend to gloss over the pain felt by the families and loved ones. We rightly talk about how far we have come in terms of greater life expectancy, yet those families who watch this debate with an empty chair beside them cannot share the victory. We are rightly bombarded with requests from charities and families asking us to highlight their particular issue that needs to be addressed. We want to do that, yet we do not have the time to discuss all that needs to be discussed. We rightly discuss value for money in funding research, yet which one of us is comfortable in putting a price on the cost of the quality of life for someone, and which one of us is happy to dictate a cut-off age when someone is too old to be treated or given innovative new drugs? We all seek to do what is right and to do our best, but it can never be enough when it comes to a debate like this. My father is a three-time cancer survivor. He did not die because of cancer—he died three years ago of natural causes. His survival from cancer was down to the good work of the NHS, the skill of the surgeon and the nurses—and it took all of our prayers.

I highlighted in my own press release background information from Brain Tumour Research, which was probably in the paper today. I recently had a photo with a lovely lady called Phyllis Scott, with whom I have had a great friendship over the years, in aid of raising awareness of brain tumours—I know that that is close to the Minister’s heart. I wore my country sports hat for the purposes of the photograph, and today I am wearing my MP hat to look at the issue of brain tumours.

Brain tumours reduce life expectancy by, on average, 20 years—the highest of any cancer. The statistics are well known. In Northern Ireland, 344 people were diagnosed in the last year. Some 60% of people diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour will have a very short life in this world. The figures are shocking, but when we meet someone like Phyllis Scott, the human face is very clear. Some 62% of children who survive a brain tumour will be left with a life-altering, long-term disability. Brain tumours are the biggest cause of preventable or treatable blindness in children, as the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup pointed out. Some 91% of adults said that their brain tumour affected their emotional and mental health. Those are the key figures—many of those diagnosed with brain tumours have tremendous issues.

I love the hard-hitting new Cancer Research advert that shows an older couple in bed together as a stark reminder that the issue is not simply surviving, but living it with a husband or wife and children. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about being a breast cancer champion. I am one too, and I very much wanted to do that. The number of people diagnosed in the UK went up by 17% between 2006 and 2016. Some 95% of women will survive one year and more than 80% survive five years or more. None the less, every year around 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still die from breast cancer.

I have asked the Minister about the drugs fund many times, and so many other hon. Members have mentioned it that it would be remiss of me not to do so. The threshold is £30,000, and the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) mentioned putting a price on the drugs that help a young child survive. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has now endorsed the NICE recommendations on Kadcyla, Ibrance, Kisqali and Perjeta, as a result of the flexibility shown by NICE, tough negotiation by NHS England and a willingness to compromise on price by the pharmaceutical industry. However, this flexibility, negotiation and compromise can lead to long delays in decisions. I urge the Minister to consider how we could best provide access to drugs more quickly and urgently to increase the quality time that people have to spend with their loved ones.

I want to put on record my thanks to Cancer Research, Macmillan, Marie Curie and others that make the difference to the quality of life that those who suffer from cancer experience. We must push forward and keep doing all we can, and know in the end that we gave all we had to fight this disease that affects our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, grandchildren, even the person we buy our paper from—all the people we meet every day. Cancer is a blight on society, but if we continue to fight on, someday we will be able to say that we have won, and cancer has lost.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I am really glad to join friends this afternoon to pay tribute to Tessa’s work. I remember from the last Labour Government how, with Tessa and others, we kept our sanity even when the difficulties were on our own side—things never change. We were accused of plotting at our dining club, but the only plots were about who would cook the next meal. What I remember is the laughter and joy of those soirées at each other’s homes.

Tessa was our first Public Health Minister, and I am so proud and glad that I am also part of that illustrious band. I am sure that she and her family would agree that Labour was best when it was at its boldest, and we have a chance to be bold by supporting Tessa’s initiative here today.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party, and to acknowledge speeches by the hon. Members for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for Croydon North (Mr Reed), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Hove (Peter Kyle), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and by the right hon. Members for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire).
As a new Member of the House this has been a very strange week for me, and it is the first time that I have felt quite a lot of emotions. Sometimes the public watch these debates and see Members of Parliament slinging mud at each other across the Chamber, but no one could help but be moved by some of the incredibly personal speeches that have been made today, and that reminds those watching that we are all human beings after all. People have shared deeply personal stories, and it has been a real privilege to sit through this debate.

Like other Members, I pay tribute to Baroness Jowell for her bravery and for the moving speech that she made in the Lords. I know that when we watched that speech most of us were moved to tears, and I am glad she is here today. I also wish to acknowledge the late Dr Mo Mowlam. I was disappointed that she was airbrushed out of much of the media coverage of the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, because as an outsider looking in, I cannot help feeling that that agreement would not have been achieved without her. I am currently reading her book, and I cannot help but be moved by the effort that she put into Northern Ireland, and she did all that while going through an illness as well.

As an MP from Scotland, I want to offer a bit of experience from north of the border about our cancer strategies, and describe the commitment and improvement that we want for children and young people with cancer—I will return to that point. There is no doubt that we face many challenges, not just in Scotland but across the UK, when it comes to cancer. One problem we need to grapple with is obesity, which is the second highest cause of cancer. We must be as bold about diet and obesity as we have been about tobacco and alcohol, and everyone should consider that. That is definitely a challenge for me—my colleagues are not here, but they know that I do not have the best diet in the world, and diet and food choices are a real challenge when combating obesity.

We must also channel some focus on to free school meals and the choices made by children. Sometimes we think that cancer is just bad luck or something that comes to people, but there are things we can do to try to avoid it. For example, we know that advertising junk food harms people and puts pressure on the NHS, other public services and our economy. There is clear evidence of the need to curb the marketing of food and drink that is high in fat, salt and sugar. A large number of 11 to 18-year-olds have seen television adverts for those foods, and nearly half of those surveyed had made a purchase based on the marketing they had seen in previous days. We should consider banning such adverts during programmes for children and those under 16, because if we are serious about tackling obesity and reducing the prevalence of conditions such as type 2 diabetes, we must make it as easy as possible for young people to eat healthily and have a good diet. That means seriously reconsidering the marketing of unhealthy food and drink, and reducing exposure to such advertising on TV.

Before I conclude I want briefly to consider cancer and young people. We know from CLIC Sargent that around 4,000 children and young people are diagnosed with cancer every year in the UK. Every day, 11 children and young people hear the news that they have cancer, and every week 10 children and young people die from cancer in the UK. Cancer is the most common fatal disease for teenagers and young adults in the UK.

CLIC Sargent’s 2016 research found that young cancer patients often had a long and difficult route to diagnosis, which they felt had a detrimental impact on their treatment and experience.

Cancer costs families in many ways, including financially, as parents report an average additional expense of £600 for every month that their child is on treatment—the hon. Member for Ilford North touched on that. Some of the expenses are travel, extra food, energy bills and car-related costs, including parking. Families are travelling an average of 440 miles a month to access treatment for their children. At this juncture, I want to commend the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who has been an assiduous campaigner in calling on the Government to scrap hospital car parking charges in England—they do not affect us in Scotland—for young cancer patients and their families.

We have had a good and very moving debate, and I am sure we will return to this subject again, hopefully with more progress. I close by thanking the hon. Member for Croydon Central for giving us the opportunity to discuss this hugely important topic. Above all, I want to thank the noble Baroness Jowell for joining us here today. We are all the richer for having her with us.

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the shadow Minister, I would like to emphasise that I would like the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to be able to briefly wind up the debate no later than 4.57 pm. Members can do the arithmetic for themselves.

4.35 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to be speaking in this debate on behalf of the Opposition. Indeed, I am speaking in this Chamber for the second time today. Both debates have been on very important issues.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for securing the debate, and for her very moving and emotional speech. I also want to thank the other hon. Members who have spoken in this excellent debate: the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), my hon. Friends the Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who moved us all to tears, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for Gildersome East (Philip Kaye), who all made excellent contributions. Members throughout the House have been visibly moved by the moving testimonies we have heard.

As has been said, no one in the House or in the country escapes being touched at some time in their life by cancer. I lost my mother-in-law to breast cancer 21 years ago. That was one of the reasons why I joined the all-party group on breast cancer and work with it to
Report, House of Lords, included wearing a superhero mask and a cape—I do challenging MPs and peers to be a “teal hero”. This time, the all-party group hosted a drop-in photo call, it was Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. For the first Observant Members may have noticed that there is the group to raise awareness in Parliament of breast to my fellow officers for continuing their hard work in still vice-chair of that all-party group, and I pay tribute Dorset and North Poole, Dame Annette Brooke. I am cancer, along with the former hon. Member for Mid Minister and I co-chaired the all-party group on breast do work together when it comes to tackling cancer. The co-chairing two cancer all-party groups that we can and really look forward to joining her a little later with her determination. I wish her all the love in the world, and I Culture, Media and Sport. Even since her diagnosis, heard in detail, she secured as Secretary of State for aftermath of, the 2012 London Olympics, which, as we over the years, especially in the run-up to, and in the being changed.

Tessa’s optimism and ambition have affected us all over the years, especially in the run-up to, and in the aftermath of, the 2012 London Olympics, which, as we heard in detail, she secured as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Even since her diagnosis, Tessa continues to inspire us all with her hard work and determination. I wish her all the love in the world, and I really look forward to joining her a little later with her friends and family for a get-together.

As Tessa said in the other place:

“Today...is not about politics but about patients”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1169.]

I know from my work over many years chairing or co-chairing two cancer all-party groups that we can and do work together when it comes to tackling cancer. The Minister and I co-chaired the all-party group on breast cancer, along with the former hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, Dame Annette Brooke. I am still vice-chair of that all-party group, and I pay tribute to my fellow officers for continuing their hard work in the group to raise awareness in Parliament of breast cancer.

I also chair the all-party group on ovarian cancer. Observant Members may have noticed that there is always some cancer campaign going on, and last month it was Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. For the first time, the all-party group hosted a drop-in photo call, challenging MPs and peers to be a “teal hero”. This included wearing a superhero mask and a cape—I do not know whether the Minister came along and managed to get caught—to raise awareness among our constituents of the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer. I am sad to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who lost his mum to ovarian cancer when he was a teenager, came along and, complete with a superhero pose, pipped me to the post for “best picture”. I hope that colleagues will join me again next year—I will be looking out for the Minister. Although it was fun, it was for a very important purpose: to raise awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer.

Finally in this regard, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for his sterling work as chair of the all-party group on cancer, which regularly unites all the cancer charities and all-party groups in debates and in work throughout the year, and most notably at the Britain Against Cancer conference every December. All-party groups and the many other cancer groups are the perfect example of how cancer is not about politics. I believe that we have seen that exemplified in its best form in the House today, and that in future we can put our politics aside for Tessa and for all cancer patients and truly fight cancer together.

Around 11,400 people were diagnosed with a brain or related tumour in 2015 in the UK. That includes the approximately 470 children under the age of 15 who are diagnosed with a brain or related tumour in Britain each year. I also commend HeadSmart for the work that it does to raise awareness of the symptoms of brain tumours in children. Brain tumours are the largest single cause of death from cancer in adults under the age of 40, and the most common type of solid tumour in children.

There are, of course, challenges to brain tumour research that limit progress in developing innovative treatments. As we have heard, brain tumour research in the UK has been grossly underfunded, with just 1% of the national spend on cancer research being allocated to this devastating disease. That is why the recent announcement that £45 million would be invested in brain tumour research was so very welcome. I hope that some of the funding will be used to create opportunities for collaboration so that research and data can be shared around the world, because there are real and concerning gaps in the research workforce, both at a senior level and in the number of junior researchers entering the field.

There is also insufficient infrastructure for brain research, and the research community is fragmented, with no clear hubs of excellence and limited opportunities for collaboration. We need to address those challenges for the sake of patients and their families so that we can improve the lives of those living with a brain tumour. One way to do that is to ensure that all brain tumour patients are invited to participate in clinical trials, which can lead to significant improvements in survival and quality of life for future patients diagnosed with a brain tumour. However, despite the clear correlation between greater research and improved outcomes, only 3% of people with a brain tumour take part in a clinical trial. That compares with 7% across all cancers, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that brain tumour patients are entered into clinical trials?

In June 2017, the Brain Tumour Charity conducted a survey that found that 97% of those with a brain tumour said that they would be happy to share their medical data to help to accelerate research. As we have heard,
Tessa has made the historic decision to be the first patient to consent to sharing her data in the hope that her cancer journey can contribute to new cures that alleviate future suffering. Let me again take the opportunity to commend her for her selflessness. I know that where she leads, others will naturally follow.

For Tessa, the Olympic legacy and Sure Start are just two of many legacies to be proud of, but I think that this legacy will be even greater in its reach and importance. For that, we once again thank you, Tessa.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): On one of the hottest days for a long time, and certainly the hottest day of the year so far, being inside the House of Commons and listening to some of the speeches that have been made has been an absolute privilege. It has been an experience that I, as a Minister—let alone as a Member of Parliament—will remember for a long time.

Let me first thank the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for securing the debate. I thought she spoke brilliantly, and set the tone for the last two-and-a-bit hours. But we should not beat around the bush: we are all here primarily because of one person. That person is, of course, Baroness Jowell, who is present, sharing the Chamber with us, and whose strength and grace in the face of her illness have done so much to raise public awareness of the challenges of diagnosing and treating brain cancer. I do not have a long history of knowing the Baroness—in fact, I met her for the first time on Monday—but I am already well aware of her strength of character and her determination to make a difference in this latest campaign.

Like all Members, and especially, I suppose, as the current Minister responsible for cancer issues, I was captivated by the speech that Tessa made in the other place about her latest battle. Our debate today has been emotive and constructive, and I am grateful to the many Members who have had the opportunity to pay a similarly worthy tribute to Tessa’s bravery and determination in the House of Commons. For me—and many Members have said the same—perhaps the most memorable line of the Baroness’s speech in the other place was this:

“In the end, what gives a life meaning is not only how it is lived, but how it draws to a close.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

She is giving that line great meaning.

As has been mentioned many times, Tessa also referred in her speech to the importance of living with cancer—living longer with cancer, but living with cancer. As one who was motivated to go into this business in the House by fighting and losing far too many battles against cancer, I would say that, for all of us who are diagnosed with cancer, we are never just our cancer. Tessa is not just her cancer, and she is not just the cancer campaigner that she is now. She is still a mum, and she is still a wife. You spoke at the start, Mr Speaker, about the love. There has been one hell of a love bomb here today. When I have been able to, I have looked over at the Under Gallery, and I have certainly seen some love there this afternoon. It has been incredible and very moving to see it.

I think that what made that line in the speech in the other place so remarkable is that Baroness Jowell has given so much to our country, from being my predecessor as the first ever public health Minister to giving the country one of its greatest cultural events in London 2012. Through her enthusiasm and courage, she is driving people in the country and around the world to confront not just one of oncology’s most difficult challenges, but one of medicine’s most difficult challenges. We should not underestimate what a difficult challenge brain cancer is.

Let me say on behalf of the Government that we will do everything possible to meet the challenge. Those who know me as the cancer Minister know that I am impatient and determined—as is the Secretary of State—to do well, to do better, and then to do better again in fighting the big C, or cancer, or whatever we choose to call it. I say that not out of arrogance or ministerial bluster—I write my own speeches—but because I believe that this challenge is one that we can overcome. I was truly inspired when meeting the Baroness for the first time on Monday at the inaugural meeting of the UK brain tumour steering group, so ably chaired by my colleague Lord O’Shaughnessy, who I know has already become a firm friend of hers. So in my brief remarks I shall focus on three areas where we will do more, and which sum up pretty much what every Member covered in their speeches.

The first area is research. On 22 February, just a month after the Baroness’s powerful speech, Department of Health and Social Care Ministers met Tessa and representatives from the Eliminate Cancer Initiative at the Cabinet Office to try to find solutions to improving outcomes for people fighting brain tumours. That very day the Department's task and finish working group into brain cancer research published its report on brain cancer research in the UK, setting out how to increase the level and impact of research into brain tumours going forward. The group was set up in 2016 and was chaired by the Department’s chief scientific adviser Professor Chris Whitty. It brought together clinicians, charities, patients and officials to discuss how, working with our research funding partners—key in this—we can address the need to increase the level and impact of research into brain tumours.

To back the report, as all Members will know, the Government and Cancer Research UK together announced an investment of £45 million over the next five years to turbocharge research in this area. This will begin—but only begin—to make up for the historical lack of research in this field and further strengthen a number of our existing centres of excellence in places such as Cambridge and the Institute of Cancer Research here in London.

The National Institute for Health Research spent £137 million on cancer research in 2016-17, the largest investment in any disease area. However, according to Brain Tumour Research, even though brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer, as has been said, just 1% of the national spend by all cancer research funders on cancer research has been allocated to brain cancers. That is why—as everyone has said today—we want to move quickly on beginning further research, and I am pleased to say that the NIHR began inviting applications for the new funding this Monday. We urge researchers to apply, and help us generate the breakthroughs that could give hope to the thousands of people diagnosed with brain cancer every year in our country.
My second point is on data sharing. We know that, due to the rarity of many types of brain tumours, it is vital that we use patient data more effectively—the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) spoke very well about that—ensuring that it is shared safely, securely and lawfully not only between the NHS, charities and academia, but between like-minded countries internationally. The UK has a proud history as a proponent of open data and data sharing, and I give my Government’s commitment to work with the Eliminate Cancer Initiative and partners nationally and internationally to make this a reality on brain tumours. The ECI made the point at our meeting on Monday that patients’ data must be given for the common good, not the almighty shilling; I know that Tessa shares that sentiment. Tessa’s daughter, Jess—who is also here today and whom I met on Monday—said that we support and advocate the sharing of data not as an end in itself, but as a vital means through which to improve patient care and develop new treatments; she is of course a chip off the old block and absolutely right.

Baroness Jowell exemplifies the ambition we have, and we will carry it forward. In the Houses of Parliament today, Tessa will launch the global universal cancer’s databank, and has committed to be the first donor to that databank, which we hope can catalyse the sharing of data across the world and save the lives of many. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be pleased to be there.

Thirdly, and most importantly, I want to touch on patient engagement. We must ensure that patients are at the centre and heart of our work on brain tumours, so we will build on the existing work to develop a clear timeline and plan for reducing the time to diagnosis for brain tumours, which is as important in this cancer as in all others. We will also implement new models of patient care, such as the Cambridge model, and the national roll-out of innovative new tools such as the 5-ALA ‘Pink Drink’, which is very important. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently developing a new clinical guideline on brain tumours, which includes the use of 5-ALA, with publication expected in July. We will also redouble the Department’s efforts to ensure there are appropriate and ethical frameworks to allow patient access to experimental medicines, and allow for the re-purposing of drugs and the acceleration of the development of new patient-focused adaptive clinical trials, which is so important.

Many Members have spoken so well in this debate. I will not list them all, but it was a pleasure to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) back in his place, making his first speech from the Back Benches in a long time. I worked closely with him when he was in the Northern Ireland Office; he is one of the nicest guys in Parliament and he spoke brilliantly about #KeepOliviaSmiling—and it was good to see my right hon. Friend smiling again. He talked about ring-fencing money in the NIHR for brain tumour research for children. The level of research spend in a particular area, such as child-specific tumours, depends on the number and scale of successful funding applications. He will be aware of our joint announcement in February, which included the opening of Cancer Research U.K.’s new children’s brain tumour centre of excellence at the University of Cambridge. Maybe he will go along and have a look at that at some point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke well about prostate cancer, and I was proud that we were able to make that announcement last week. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke about the ACE programme. I have said before that I do not easily get excited at the Dispatch Box, but I am genuinely excited about these new ACE multidisciplinary diagnostic centres. When people present to their GP with vague symptoms, these centres will provide a chance for them to get in and get an answer—a diagnosis or an all-clear—quickly. I visited one of the ACE centres, at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford, in February this year. The enthusiasm that I heard from the clinicians and patients there gave me real hope, and hope is a key word in today’s debate.

I should like to conclude by once again thanking everyone who has made such positive contributions to what has been a really memorable debate. I recognise that we are only at the start of our journey to beat brain tumours, but now is the time for patients, the NHS, charities and industry to come together—as we in this House have done today—both nationally and internationally and to redouble our efforts. The funding we have committed for additional vital research, and our ongoing work to look at every aspect of diagnosis, treatment and care, will help us to deliver ever more positive treatment outcomes for people with brain tumours, but we have a long way to go. This is of course happening alongside our system-wide transformation of cancer services in England through the cancer strategy, which we have debated at length here many times.

Baroness Jowell has been the catalyst for this rapid activity on brain tumours, and it is incumbent on us all to continue to work closely together over the coming months and years to build on this legacy. She is here today, and I know that she will be watching us closely. As Theodore Roosevelt once said, now is the time for “painful effort…grim energy and resolute courage” to beat this terrible disease. And, as I always conclude: for team cancer, the fight goes on.

4.57 pm

Sarah Jones: I should like to thank everyone who has spoken so eloquently and movingly today. I cannot name everyone in the time remaining, but I often stand in awe of the Members of this House, and no more so than today. We have had quite a harrowing week in this place, and it has sometimes been quite dark and difficult. There has been a lot of shouting. However, we have closed the week by talking about human kindness, compassion, love and hope. That is what a drop of Tessa magic does for this place. When I saw Tessa just before the debate, she said that this was not about her or about us, and that she wanted to do it to see what comes next and what we should do. I hope—and I have faith—that the Government will prove that Tessa’s model of collaboration is more effective than the model of confrontation that we have unfortunately seen so much of this week.

I have here a note from Tessa that I would like to read out. This is odd, because she is just over there, and she could say this herself, but I shall read out a little bit of what she wanted me to say today:

“Living with cancer has taught me so much. I have been so lucky to be surrounded by such love from my family, friends and fellow cancer patients. And today, hearing so many of you talk...
about your own fights, reminds me why I love this Palace of Westminster and the people who work here. It was a brilliant Member of this House, who spent far too short a time here, who said 'we have far more in common than that which divides us', and today shows how much we can do when we all put our shoulders to the wheel. It was the honour of my life to be one of you, and I shall cheer on from the sidelines as you keep fighting the good fight. So remember our battle cry: living with, not dying of, cancer. For more people, for longer. Thank you.”

Mr Speaker: In rounding off these proceedings, before we move to the Adjournment, perhaps I can thank warmly and from the bottom of my heart the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for securing the debate, for what she said in opening it and for the manner in which she did so. I think I speak for everybody in thanking all participants in the debate, both those who made speeches and those who intervened with great piquancy and significance—I say that looking directly at the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and, in his absence, thinking of the shadow Secretary of State. Their presence meant an enormous amount.

At the outset of the debate, I asserted with absolute confidence that Tessa was about to witness and experience real parliamentary love—the embrace of parliamentary love. I hope that the warmth of that embrace of parliamentary love has been manifest to her. She cannot have been in any way disappointed by it. Tessa, you are the standing testament to the indomitability of the human spirit and we have heard about that from people who know you so well in so many aspects of your life. I am quite certain, although I do not know it from personal experience—I can see it from the impact on those around you—that it is true of you as a wife and as a mother. It is assuredly true of you as a distinguished Member of Parliament—the Member, for so long, for the people of Dulwich and West Norwood. I thought that what your successor said about the affection and esteem in which you continue to be held there was worth everything.

It was most certainly true of you as a Government Minister, the details of which have been lovingly recalled to the Chamber this afternoon. Of course, we all know of the significance of what you did on the Olympics and, if I may say so, the significance of what you did by way of Sure Start and early years opportunity. When I briefly did a little work in a support capacity on speech and language services a decade ago, I trogged around the country—what a privilege it was—and visited huge numbers of such settings. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the work you did and the translation from conception to execution transformed the lives of some of the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens. That is part of your amazing public service legacy.

As somebody who is living with cancer you have shone a light on a cruel curse and the need for collaborative, resourced and unflagging devotion to the effort to tackle that curse. The hon. Member for Croydon Central, quoting your letter, said that you loved this place. I hope that it is blindingly obvious to you, Tessa, that we love you—[Applause.] These breaches of parliamentary protocol are becoming more commonplace, but I think that this week we can rejoice in them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House pays tribute to the work of Baroness Tessa Jowell in her campaign to help people with brain tumours to live better lives for longer; recognises the Government’s increased funding for research; and calls on the Government to increase the sharing of health data and promote greater use of adaptive clinical trials.
Fire Safety Remedial Work: Leaseholder Liability

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

5.4 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured this important debate. The issue of liability for fire safety remedial work is of great concern to many Battersea residents, as it is to people in many parts of the country, and for good reason. The horror of the Grenfell fire made it clear, if greater clarity were needed, that there should be no complacency on fire safety.

While we await the final publication of the Hackitt review, which is investigating the fire safety regulatory system and identifying who is responsible for failures and what system is needed, the interim report stated that the regulatory system, at present, is “not fit for purpose.” I fear that is the result of successive Governments not treating fire safety with the appropriate importance.

Of the 158 social housing blocks with unsafe cladding, just seven have had the cladding fully replaced. One of the blocks waiting for work to begin is Castlemaine Tower in my Battersea constituency. Its residents have known for 10 months that their building, like Grenfell, has unsafe cladding. No data is available on the progress on privately owned blocks, and Wandsworth Council has not published the number of blocks that have the aluminium composite material cladding that has been deemed unsafe. Given the number of blocks in Battersea, it is imperative the council publish that information. I have requested the information from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The Government must get their act together and ensure that fire safety work is carried out, but to do that they need to resolve, as a matter of urgency, questions on what work needs to be done, who needs to do it and who should pay for it. It is the Government’s responsibility to resolve those questions and, so long as they do not do so, the risk of another tragedy is prolonged.

Here we arrive at the crucial question of leaseholder liability. I welcome members of the Sesame Apartments residents association to the Public Gallery. They have come to Westminster desperate to hear reassurance from the Government. They are leaseholders of an apartment block in Battersea that was completed just four years ago and that last year was found not to meet fire safety standards after a fire in the block damaged multiple apartments, revealing that compartmentalisation had failed.

Worryingly, the fire occurred while a “stay put” policy was in place. Subsequent testing found that the cladding was defective and in need of replacement. In the light of the fire safety failures, the “stay put” policy was changed to immediate evacuation, and a waking watch system was put in place as a temporary solution.

As we know, such fire safety failures need proper rectification, and that work needs to be paid for. The waking watch and fire alarm system are anticipated to cost approximately £700,000, which is more than £8,500 per flat. Replacing the cladding is expected to cost around £2 million, which is £25,000 per flat. In total, the cost per flat is estimated at between £30,000 and £40,000.

After a tribunal ruled last month that leaseholders of Cityscape in Croydon would be held liable for replacing defective cladding, the residents of Sesame Apartments fear the entirety of those eye-watering costs will fall on their shoulders, which cannot be right. They cannot be held liable for these costs. These are hard-working people who scrimped and saved to buy their flats.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She mentions Cityscape in Croydon North where the leaseholders have a similar problem to the residents she represents. When the issue has previously been raised in the Chamber, the Government have pointed the finger and said that the insurers of the builders, freeholders and managing agents should be bearing the cost of removing and replacing that cladding, but no legal obligation has ever been found on any of them.

The Government are leaving leaseholders hanging with unaffordable debt and living in homes that have become unsellable—homes that they fear are not safe to live in. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should act now to get the cladding removed from every building where it exists? They can sort out the legalities afterwards. The only body in a position to act now to keep people safe is the Government. Why do they keep refusing to do it?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for making that valid point, which I will certainly be addressing. He is spot on in saying that the Government are the only people who can respond to this issue and deal with the problems that our leaseholders face.

So many of these people are first-time buyers, and many are living in shared ownership properties. They do not have tens of thousands of pounds to pay for the work that needs to be done, and they have done nothing wrong. They bought their flats in good faith and they are in no way responsible for the fire safety failures. To date, the Government have seemingly agreed, saying that, morally, leaseholders should not be held liable for these costs. But my constituents need those words to be backed up by action. For as long as that does not happen, the leaseholders will be beset by fear. After all, how would we feel if we were told that our home did not meet fire safety standards, that we might be asked to pay £40,000 to rectify that and that our largest financial asset, our home, was now a huge liability? That is the situation that residents of Sesame Apartments find themselves in.

I have heard from a teacher who lives in the block and who had hoped to move in order to start a family, but is now weighed down by this liability, unable to sell and trapped in her home. I have heard from a resident, who spoke to me about the heartbreak of the money they had saved for IVF—in vitro fertilisation—treatment now needing to be set aside for fire safety work. I have heard from another whose pride in getting a foot on the housing ladder was crushed when they were told that, just by owning 25% of a shared ownership property, they are now potentially liable for 100% of the costs. Every resident I have spoken to tells me of the stress and fear caused by this liability hanging over their head.

The same is true of leaseholders across the country. Why are leaseholders being put through this ordeal? The Hackitt review is identifying who was responsible
for fire safety failures, but this is causing anguish. The review might conclude that the Government are responsible, because fire safety regulations are not fit for purpose. It might conclude that the building inspection regime is responsible, because some local authorities have privatised inspections, leading to a serious decline in standards. Or it might conclude that developers are responsible, because they have been cutting costs to maximise their profits. It might conclude any of or indeed all those things, but what it will categorically not conclude is that leaseholders are responsible—of course it won’t.

These are working people who have had no say over the regulations, or over the design or the building of the property, yet it seems that, legally, they are going to be held responsible for these life-shattering costs. As anyone would, they are attempting to contest that, but they tell me how powerless they feel in that process.

We are talking about a small community of hard-working people, but they are confronted by a web of opaque freeholders, management companies, insurers and unresponsive developers, none of whom wants to take responsibility. The residents do not have armies of lawyers at their disposal. It is a David and Goliath situation, and the law is not working for these people. But it not just about that, as for the corporations involved their profit lines are at stake, whereas for the residents it is their homes and their lives. There is a real concern that if this is allowed to run its course and the Government do not intervene, the working people will be paying for failures that are not of their own making—that is unacceptable.

The Government seem to recognise that, because they have already said on multiple occasions that they acknowledge that it is morally wrong for leaseholders to be held liable for these costs, but those must not be empty words. The Government have the power to intervene and make this right, and it is their responsibility to make this right. They need to do more than just encouraging freeholders not to pass on these costs. They need to do more than support the Leasehold Advisory Service. They need to step up to the plate and intervene on behalf of leaseholders.

There are actions that the Government could take. They could, and should, properly look to see whether the developers or the freeholders that profited from cost-cutting and lax regulations are liable for the costs, or they could cover the costs themselves, which is what the residents I have spoken to believe should happen.

If the Government refuse to do that, the least they could do, as suggested by one of the Sesame Apartments residents, is provide loans to cover the costs, thereby allowing fire safety remedial work to begin immediately. The loans could be attached to the freehold and stretched over the 100-year duration of the leasehold, with repayment instalments reflecting that. That would ensure that if leaseholders were held liable, the additional yearly service charge would be close to negligible. It would achieve the key requirements of any intervention: first, it would allow remedial work to begin as soon as possible, thereby minimising the risk and fear of fire; and, secondly, it would allow leaseholders to get on with their lives and not be weighed down by an unaffordable debt. I urge the Government to take action to achieve those goals.

I conclude with two straightforward questions for the Minister. First, it might become clear from the courts that leaseholders are legally liable for the costs. If that happened, does she think it would be acceptable? Put otherwise, does she think that residents should be held legally responsible for the costs of fire safety work, even though she knows that residents are in no way at fault?

Secondly, if leaseholders are found to be liable, what do the Government propose to do for those leaseholders who cannot afford the remedial work? I am asking, in essence, whose side the Government are on—David’s or Goliath’s. I thank the Sesame Apartments residents for coming today. I thank the Minister for being present, and I will be listening with interest to what the Minister has to say.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for speaking so passionately about the situation in which some of her constituents find themselves. I thank all Members for their contributions. I recognise that the recent fire in Sporle Court will mean that fire safety is at the forefront of people’s minds in Battersea, although we understand that on that occasion there were no injuries.

Let me begin by making it clear in the widest sense that the Government are committed to promoting fairness and transparency for leaseholders in England. To that end, on 21 December 2017, we announced a package of measures to tackle abuses and unfair practices in the leasehold market. That includes introducing legislation to prohibit the development of new build leasehold houses other than in exceptional circumstances, and restricting ground rents in newly established leases of flats to zero financial value. We are working with the Law Commission to support existing leaseholders, including by making buying a freehold or extending a lease easier, faster, fairer and cheaper. With that context in mind, it is hugely important that leaseholders, like any other residents, are kept safe in their homes.

The fire at Grenfell Tower was a terrible tragedy. The Government are determined to learn the lessons and take all necessary steps to ensure that nothing like it can ever happen again. I wish to set out some of the steps that the Government have taken since the tragedy. The Department’s building safety programme, set up immediately after the fire, is working hard to ensure that all high-rise residential buildings are safe from the threat of fire, and that residents feel safe in them. 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. Following the panel’s recommendations, the Government provided advice to building owners on the interim measures that they should put in place to ensure the safety of their residents. We swiftly identified social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding. All the affected social sector buildings that we have identified have these measures in place.

Mr Reed: The Minister will recall the lethal fire at Lakanal House in 2009. In 2013, the coroner who investigated that tragedy urged the Government to change the fire safety regulations that govern the use of cladding—specifically, approved document B. The Government failed to amend that regulation in 2013 and now, five years later, they have still failed to amend it. The criticism was that it was unclear what kind of cladding could and could not be put on a building. For that reason,
flam mable cladding exists on hundreds of blocks today. Will the Minister explain why the Government have done nothing in the nine years since Lakanal House?

Mrs Wheeler: The important thing is that the Hackitt review has already released interim recommendations, which we have accepted. We await the review to report later this summer. That will be the answer going forward.

All the social housing blocks and affected social sector buildings that we swiftly identified had the measures in place. In parallel, we tested different combinations of cladding and insulation to see which of them met the building regulations guidance. We published consolidated advice in September, confirming the results of the tests with advice for building owners. We have also been working with building owners and industry to support remediation work.

At the same time, the Government asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent review of building regulations and fire safety to ensure that buildings are safe in future. We are taking forward all of the recommendations for Government contained in the interim report, and look forward to the publication of her final report shortly.

We believe we have identified all affected social housing blocks and public buildings. With regard to private sector buildings, the Government have made the testing facility at the Building Research Establishment available free of charge, and we continue to urge all building owners to submit samples for testing if they think that they may have unsafe cladding. In addition, the Secretary of State wrote to all local authorities in August asking them to identify privately owned buildings with potentially unsafe cladding in their area in line with their statutory duties.

Marsha De Cordova: On that point, my local authority, Wandsworth Council, has still not published any information around those private blocks that could potentially have flammable cladding. Will the Minister take it on herself to continue to press the council to get on with the job and publish the information? She made the recommendations last summer.

Mrs Wheeler: I hear what the hon. Lady says. We have close contacts with Wandsworth Council.

In addition, the Secretary of State wrote to all local authorities in August asking them to identify privately owned buildings with potentially unsafe cladding. These measures will help local authorities to take enforcement action to ensure that hazards in residential buildings in their areas are remediated as quickly as possible. I am confident that these steps will strengthen local authorities’ hands when carrying out this work. I can assure hon. Members that, as soon as we are notified of buildings with potentially unsafe cladding, we work with local authorities and the National Fire Chiefs Council to ensure that interim measures are put in place.

The Government have been clear that remediation should be done as quickly as possible, but it should also be done properly. Let us be clear: the remediation of buildings with ACM cladding is a complex process, involving major construction work which needs to be planned, consulted on and carried out carefully. Rushing any phase of the remediation process could jeopardise the safety of residents. I am encouraged that remediation has started on 103 affected social sector buildings and that, of those, seven have finished remediation work. There is clearly a long way to go, but that is significant progress.

I understand that funding is a concern for Wandsworth Council. In the social sector, all the local authorities and housing associations that we have spoken to have indicated that they have no plans to pass on the costs of essential remediation work to individual flat owners within their buildings. We will consider financial flexibilities for local authorities that are concerned about funding essential fire safety works to the buildings that they own.

In the private sector, we continue to urge those with responsibility to follow the lead from the social sector and not attempt to pass on costs. They can do that by meeting costs themselves or looking at alternative routes such as insurance claims, particularly warranties, or legal action.

Mr Reed: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I am going to finish.

We are aware of cases in Battersea where freeholders are seeking to do just that.

Mr Reed: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, thank you.

Where building owners are seeking to pass on remediation costs to leaseholders, it is important that leaseholders can access specialist advice to understand their rights. We have provided additional funding to the Leasehold Advisory Service—LEASE—which provides independent, free, initial advice to leaseholders to ensure that they are aware of their rights and are supported to understand the terms of their leases. LEASE continues to provide valuable support to affected leaseholders around the country. On 15 March, the Secretary of State announced an industry roundtable on the barriers to the remediation of buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding.

Mr Reed: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I will not.

I hope that the points I have made have reassured—
Mr Reed: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I will not, sir.

I hope that the points I have made have reassured hon. Members just how seriously we are treating the building safety issues that the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower brought to light, and our commitment to supporting leaseholders and all residents throughout this process.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the whole House would want to join me in sending their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge our warmest congratulations on the birth of their son.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Defence Industry

1. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support the UK defence industry.

[904859]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I would very much like to associate the Government with your comments and warm wishes, Mr Speaker.

I am sure that the whole House will also wish to join me in offering our sincere condolences to the family and friends of Sergeant Matt Tonroe, who died while on operations on 29 March. He served his country with great distinction, and his service will never be forgotten.

The strategic defence and security review created a national security objective to promote our prosperity, and we are committed to supporting a thriving and internationally competitive defence sector. We have published our national shipbuilding strategy and refreshed the defence industrial policy, and work is under way to develop a combat air strategy. Exports are central to our approach, and British industry, working with the Government, is looking at how we can exploit opportunities.

Julie Elliott: The defence industry supports over 100,000 jobs directly in the UK, and many more indirectly. Will the Secretary of State put in place some meaningful measures to consider economic and employment practices when making contract decisions?

Gavin Williamson: I would be very happy to look at those options. I hate to correct the hon. Lady, but actually a quarter of a million people are working in the defence industry, supporting not just the UK, but exports as well. I encourage her to have a dialogue with my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is doing a piece of policy work on how we can work more closely with industry in promoting prosperity.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): While it is of course quite right that the Government should do everything that they can to support the British defence industry, the truth of the matter is that it is an international business. In our area of the south-west, Boeing, Airbus and Leonardo—all foreign-owned—are the main employers and contributors. The F-35, which is a fantastic aeroplane, is made in America, but 15% of the total value of that plane comes into Britain, enabling us to buy the planes ourselves.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the international nature of our defence industry. We have to be looking more and more at how we can develop partnerships with international businesses and, when we are looking at procurement decisions, how we can deliver not just best value for the MOD, but the very best for jobs here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Treasury about the awarding of contracts? The Treasury takes the view that the lowest price is the best way forward but, in many cases, money will come back to the Treasury straightaway in tax and national insurance contributions, so should not that be taken into account when we award contracts?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman raises a very thoughtful point about how we approach the whole defence procurement argument with regard to the real benefits to UK plc. We should start to look at this. There are different approaches in various countries, and Germany’s approach is quite different from the United Kingdom’s. We need to think about what lessons we could learn as a Government and what approaches we can adopt.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): While we are developing new armoured vehicles, ships and planes, what progress is being made on exporting those platforms overseas?

Gavin Williamson: One of the Department’s key aims and priorities is to promote prosperity for the whole United Kingdom, and a key element of that is exports. In the past 10 years, we have seen over £70 billion of exports. We have had the recent, very positive news of Qatar signing up to £5 billion for the Typhoon. Good progress is being made with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and further progress is being made with Belgium. We are in very detailed discussions with the Australian Government over Type 26 frigates, and we hope that we may be able to make some progress on persuading them to consider buying those in future.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Mr Speaker, let me join you in congratulating the Countess and Earl of Strathearn on the birth of a healthy child, especially today, on the feast day of George, the patron of England.

Will the Secretary of State join me and Scottish National party Members in welcoming NATO allies to Scotland for Exercise Joint Warrior? Beyond the all-too-rare sight of complex warships in Scottish waters, does he agree that this is a suitable time to remind ourselves of the centrality of the north Atlantic to the security of these islands? Will he reassure all hon. Members that that centrality will be reflected in the modernising defence review?
Gavin Williamson: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is nothing unusual about British warships being all around the coast of the United Kingdom. Of course, we are very proud of the naval base at Clyde and the central role that it plays in our nuclear deterrence. We are conscious of the increasing threat that Russia poses in the north Atlantic, which is why we have been making investment, including in Poseidon aircraft and with the announcement of £132 million to be spent at RAF Lossiemouth. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) was able to join me at Lossiemouth just the other week to highlight that important investment.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. May I also associate SNP Members with his earlier comments about Sergeant Tonroe?

One of the ships in the Clyde—actually in Glasgow—last week was Her Danish Majesty’s ship Niels Juel which, like all frontline support ships of the Danish royal navy, was designed and built in Denmark. When small northern European countries of 5 million people can design and build all their naval support vessels at home, it is astonishing that this Government cannot—or maybe will not—do the same. Will the Secretary of State address the crucial issues of national security and taxpayer value that underline last week’s plea from shipbuilding unions?

Gavin Williamson: At the moment, the Prince of Wales is under construction at Rosyth—that is a major investment—and our commitment to the eight Type 26 frigates is also to be celebrated. Just the other week, I was at Govan to see the major investment that we are making there. I thought the hon. Gentleman would celebrate that investment in Scottish shipbuilding, rather than trying to detract from it.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I associate the loyal Opposition with your comments regarding the royal birth? We extend our condolences to the family of Sergeant Matt Tonroe.

Within the next few weeks, the Government will have to make the final decision on how to handle the order for the fleet solid support ships. Given that that huge contract could be worth 6,700 jobs for British shipyards, with huge benefits for the supply chain, does the Secretary of State accept that there is a very strong case for awarding the contract to British shipyards?

Gavin Williamson: I thank Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition for their comments.

We have one of the greatest commitments to shipbuilding in this country, and we see that in terms of not only the Type 26, but the Type 31e. There is a great opportunity for shipyards right across the United Kingdom to take part in these contracts, and we will look at every stage at how we can do the very best for jobs and opportunities.

CBRN Capability

2. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to invest in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence capability.

12. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to invest in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence capability.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Department regularly looks at CBRN capability as part of the annual financial planning round. The Ministry of Defence will consider its overall CBRN capability as part of the modernising defence programme.

Mrs Latham: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Will he update the House on the continuing contribution of MOD personnel now that the urgent response to the Russian chemical attack in Salisbury has moved into the recovery and clean-up stage? Can he confirm that our armed forces have everything that they need to continue to keep all our constituents safe from such attacks in the future?

Gavin Williamson: Very much so. It is pleasing to be able to report the progress that Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey and Sergei and Yulia Skripal have made since that attack. Let us not forget the important role that the Ministry of Defence and our armed forces played in assisting the police with their investigations. More than 170 armed forces personnel were involved and, due to our unique capabilities, 192 British service personnel will be involved in the clean-up operation in Salisbury.

Jeremy Quin: I am aware from constituency work locally for Thales that the UK has invested in a state-of-the-art biological surveillance system. Given the horrific nerve-agent attack on British soil, will the Secretary of State confirm that there are sufficient resources in his Department to deal with such attacks, whether they are at home or, indeed, against our forces overseas?

Gavin Williamson: I can confirm that that is the case. We are stepping up our investment and putting a substantial amount into our capabilities and facilities at Porton Down, which will ensure that we continue to preserve our world-leading position and expertise in this field.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Maclean.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

Mr Speaker: I am sorry—Rachael Maskell; I beg your pardon. I do not wish to confuse York and Redditch, and I apologise to the hon. Lady. I feel that I know her very well, and I should not have made that mistake. I call Rachael Maskell.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

May I ask the Government how they work with the UN Security Council and organisations such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to identify stockpiles of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons across the globe, and what steps they have taken to achieve de-escalation?

Gavin Williamson: We have always worked incredibly closely with those organisations, and it is a shame that nations such as Russia have not always had such a positive and collaborative relationship with them. We share our expertise and knowledge with them, and we have been incredibly open with them to make sure that
they have a clear understanding of the threats and dangers that this country faces as a result of Russia’s hostile act.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): We need to invest in our defence capabilities against changing and emerging threats in warfare, including the unchecked use of lethal autonomous weapons. Has the Secretary of State seen last week’s House of Lords report on artificial intelligence, which concludes that the UK’s definition of lethal autonomous weapons is “clearly out of step with the definitions used by most other governments”.

That makes it harder to reach an agreement on regulation, so will he commit to reading that report and revising the definition?

**Gavin Williamson**: As has been pointed out, there is currently no defined international agreement, and that is something towards which we need to work rapidly. I am very committed to trying to reach that agreement at the earliest possible stage.

**Veterns**

3. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with military charities on improving support for veterans throughout the UK.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood)**: As we mark 100 years since the end of world war one, it is appropriate once again to underline our appreciation of the charities that support the armed forces community. You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that many household names such as the Royal British Legion, Blesma, Combat Stress and SSAFA were formed around that time to look after the thousands of injured returning to Britain. I meet and engage with charities weekly, as does the Secretary of State, who last week visited Tedworth House, the excellent recovery centre run by Help for Heroes.

**Alan Mak**: The Royal British Legion plays a key role in supporting our veterans, including on Armed Forces Day, when we celebrate their role across the country. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the Royal British Legion on its work, and will he visit the Havant branch when his diary allows?

**Mr Ellwood**: How could I refuse such an invitation? I should be delighted to do so. May I underline my hon. Friend’s support for Armed Forces Day? I hope all hon. Members will consider what they can do in their area for that important event.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): May I associate my party with the wonderful news shared by Baron and Baroness Corickfergus?

The Minister should know that the Defence Committee is looking at the support available for serving and former personnel. Does he recognise the geographical difficulties and legacy of security concerns that affect veterans who live in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Ellwood**: When I had the pleasure of attending the Defence Committee, I was able to discuss those matters. I also had the pleasure of visiting Belfast, where the hon. Gentleman will know that I took a look at what support needs to be provided and furthered to deal with the particular situation there. I hope that that will be ongoing, and that the Secretary of State or I can visit in the near future.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the Ministry of Defence to give more support to Care After Combat, the excellent charity that goes into prisons and helps people who have been much affected by combat?

**Mr Ellwood**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the importance of working with those who are in prison. COBSEO, the confederation that looks after all the armed forces charities, is bringing together clusters of support in the justice sector. I met those charities, and we are seeing what more we can do to provide support for people who are in prison.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Government’s disgraceful treatment of the Windrush generation has caused deep anxiety and distress to those who have emigrated from Commonwealth countries and served in our armed forces. It cannot be right that veterans who fought for this country are now frightened that they could be deported due to the callous immigration policy that the Prime Minister has spearheaded, so will the Minister outline what concrete action the Ministry of Defence is taking to help to rectify this scandalous state of affairs?

**Mr Ellwood**: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting observation. The Government have apologised, and will continue to apologise, to those affected by the current situation. A taskforce has been set up in the Home Office to deal with it and, as I said at the weekend, we apologise for what we have done. I hope that previous successive Governments will do the same, because it was a collective effort whereby bureaucracy got in the way and did not look after those people, who are very much Britons and should be allowed to continue to live here. If any veterans are affected, I would be more than delighted to look into the situation and make sure that we underline our support for those people, who are very much British citizens.

**Russian Military Activity**

4. **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of recent Russian military activity.

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson)**: Russian military activity has been more assertive over the last few years. Russia has pursued a 10-year programme of military modernisation that has bolstered its armed forces. We recognise the importance of responding with allies and partners, and that has been the strength in our united action following the Salisbury attack. We are enhancing our deterrence and defence policies, especially through NATO, to prevent Russian aggression.

**Gillian Keegan**: The National Cyber Security Centre describes Russia as “our most capable hostile adversary in cyberspace” and recently released a joint technical alert with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security about malicious cyber-activity carried out by the Russian Government. Will my right hon. Friend give an update on the progress
he has made to improve our active cyber-defence to protect Government networks, industry and individuals from high-volume cyber-attacks?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct to highlight that increasing threat. The Government have committed to spending £1.9 billion to ensure that our defences are in the best possible place. As the nature of warfare starts to change, and as the threats increase, we have to be realistic about the fact that the two realms of cyber and conventional forces will increasingly start to merge. We should not just think about the importance of defending ourselves in terms of cyber-security; it is also about conventional forces.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Russian submarines are increasingly aggressive, so is the contract for Astute boat 7 signed and is the Secretary of State alive to the need to accelerate future capability research so that we can get back on top in this arena?

Gavin Williamson: I very much hope to be able to update the House and the hon. Gentleman in the not-too-distant future. We are very conscious of the importance of our deterrence, which is absolutely pivotal for keeping this country safe, and our submarines in the north Atlantic are absolutely central to that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When the threat from Russia receded at the end of the cold war, we understandably cut our defence budget to 3% of gross domestic product. Given events—from Salisbury to Syria—demonstrating that, sadly, that threat is now reappearing, should we not seek to get back to that sort of level of defence expenditure, and will the Secretary of State lay that pertinent fact in front of the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend tries to tempt me. We have to be realistic about the fact that the threat picture is changing. It has escalated considerably since 2010—even from 2015—and we have to make sure that we have the right capabilities. That is why we are carrying out the modernising defence programme: to deliver the right types of capabilities for our armed forces to deal with the increasing threat that we face. We have to be realistic about the challenges—those posed by Russia are far greater than the challenges that were presented as an insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan—and how we get the right mix of military equipment and capability to deal with that increased threat.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State cannot be accused of excluding from his answers any consideration that might in any way, at any time, to any degree, be considered material, for which we are immensely grateful. However, there is a premium on time, because we have a lot of questions to get through.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Given the increased activity of Russian submarines in our waters and our reliance on allies for maritime patrol support, will the Secretary of State now admit that it was a gross mistake to cut our maritime patrol aircraft in 2010 without a planned replacement, leaving us without that capability for nearly a decade?

Gavin Williamson: I suppose, having spent time in the Whip’s Office, that the freedom to get on the Floor is a shock and we become too verbose.

I do not accept that it was a mistake and I am proud that we are investing so much in the new Poseidon aircraft to make sure that we have the new, exciting capability that will be able to support our forces in the north Atlantic.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is uncaged, and there is much to be said for that.

Nia Griffith: I remain concerned that the Government have not learnt the lessons of the past when it comes to cutting capabilities, leaving serious gaps in our defences only to have to replace them further down the line. Will the Secretary of State confirm today that the modernising defence programme will not cut our Albion class amphibious warships before their out-of-service dates of 2033 and 2034?

Gavin Williamson: There are many right hon. and hon. Opposition Members who care incredibly passionately about our armed forces and will do all they can to support them: I know that the hon. Lady is very much one of them. But when we talk about the risks and threats that are posed to our armed forces, I sometimes think that we should be worried about the Leader of the Opposition a little more than anything else.

In the modernising defence programme we are looking at all our capabilities and how we ensure that we are able to adapt to the increasing challenges and threats, but I will not prejudge that programme. We will look at the evidence and the information that comes from the public and the wider defence community.

Recruitment: Capita

5. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions he has had with the service chiefs on armed forces personnel working with Capita to improve recruitment. [904863]

14. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What discussions he has had with the service chiefs on armed forces personnel working with Capita to improve recruitment. [904872]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I discuss armed forces recruitment regularly with the principal personnel officers of each service and with the Chief of the General Staff. Implementation of the recruitment improvement plan is a priority and I am monitoring it very closely.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How will the Minister recruit and train sufficient engineers?

Mark Lancaster: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. This is precisely why, in the Royal Navy, for example, we have associations with technical colleges. In my own corps, the Royal Engineers, we have a tremendous offer, in which young recruits are enrolled as apprentices and trained not only as infantry soldiers but in specialist engineering trade skills, such as brick laying, electrical and carpentry.
Mary Robinson: A constituent of mine, Mr Lamb, served in the Army for 43 years, the last 13 being spent in recruitment. Contract changes meant that in January this year he was discharged 72 days before his 60th birthday and his planned retirement date. He tells me that, despite senior officers seeking to find him employment, the date was fixed and he lost 72 days of his pension. Will the Minister look carefully at how Capita is fulfilling its contract so that recruitment personnel are not disadvantaged?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is a champion for her constituents. As she knows, I wrote to her on 26 March regarding this matter. I would be delighted to meet her again if she has any further questions she wishes to raise with me.

In general terms, we work closely with Capita. I have mentioned before at the Dispatch Box how we are looking at moving to a more regional recruiting mechanism and ensuring that we have young role models.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) on asking this question on the day Capita has announced a loss of half a billion pounds. That comes as no surprise when we look at the mess it is making of the recruitment project, which is not a channel for recruitment but a logjam. There are huge delays, with many people losing interest in the meantime. Will the Minister admit that the contract has failed and that it is time to bring it back in-house?

Mark Lancaster: I do not accept that. I have looked at this incredibly carefully. I have met the chief executive of Capita on several occasions and we continue to work very closely with Capita, which is investing large amounts of money. There have been challenges—there is no doubt about that—with the introduction of the new defence recruiting system. The manual workarounds have not worked, but I have seen at first hand how most of those issues have been addressed and I am confident that, in future months, we will move forward with this contract.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does the Minister think that decisions such as moving the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers HQ from the proud military town of Wrexham to yet another base in the M4 corridor incentivises recruitment in places such as north Wales, or puts people off?

Mark Lancaster: It is important that, through the Army 2020 review, we begin to bring units together because that gives greater stability. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents is that it is not only the REME that they can join in the armed forces.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Capita’s performance on Army recruiting has been distinctly sub-optimal, such that throughout the Army it is now almost universally known by the unfortunate nickname of “Crapita.” Given the company’s half-a-billion pound loss this morning, given that it has debts of £1.7 billion, and given that it is rumoured to be preparing a £700 million rights issue, what assurance can the Minister give the House that we have a plan B in place in case it were unfortunately to go the way of CarillionAmey?

Mark Lancaster: May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend, not least for his report, “Filling the Ranks”? It has made a major contribution to addressing some of the issues that we have faced over recruitment, some of which are way beyond the realms of any contract with Capita and are a result of the changing dynamics of the British population. But I accept his broader point that there have been challenges within this contract. If he is asking me if I am confident that we have a business continuity plan in case things go absolutely awry, which I do not think they will, then yes.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that the armed forces used to have a reputation for having the best trainers in our country? They were admired everywhere. Is he also aware that the number of people coming to our armed forces with the highly specific engineering skills that we need—my father was a Royal Engineer—is dire at the moment? We need recruitment, and we need it now.

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman builds on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). We have a number of schemes in place, such as partnerships with technical colleges and ensuring that all new recruits are enrolled on apprenticeships. There are few careers where someone can start with minimal qualifications and leave with a level 6 apprenticeship—that is degree level—in engineering. I am very proud that the armed forces continue to offer that opportunity to our young people.

Type 26 Frigates

6. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What is the timetable for the commissioning of the new Type 26 frigates?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): The Secretary of State for Defence visited the Clyde last Thursday to witness the completion of the first Type 26 units. This unit will form part of the first ship, HMS Glasgow, which is due to be accepted by the summer of 2025. The Royal Navy will then train and prepare her and she will enter service in 2027. HMS Cardiff, HMS Belfast and the remaining five ships will then follow.

Paul Blomfield: The Minister will know that Sheffield companies have been key to the Royal Navy’s supply chain since we provided the tools to build wooden battleships such as HMS Victory. He will also know that there have been three HMS Sheffields, serving with distinction from the Arctic to the Mediterranean in the second world war, but the last was decommissioned in 2003. Does he agree that it would now be right to recognise the city’s contribution to the Navy by naming one of the Type 26 frigates, “HMS Sheffield”?

Guto Bebb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Indeed, he has written on this issue to the Secretary of State. The process by which ships are named is understood by the hon. Gentleman, and I agree entirely that the city
of Sheffield has every right to be considered as a potential city to be named after in terms of the Type 26s, but the process will be followed as per the usual manner.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The Minister will be aware that, on Monday, after much talk between Plymouth and Portsmouth, I launched a campaign to have the Type 26s port based in Plymouth. Will he meet me and a leadership team from Plymouth to outline why this key city in the nation’s crown deserves to have the ships port based there?

Guto Bebb: I would of course be more than delighted to meet my hon. Friend and a delegation from Plymouth. I was very pleased to visit Plymouth and was very impressed with what I saw—for example, the work on the refurbishment of the Type 23—so it would be a pleasure to meet that delegation from the great city of Plymouth.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Given that the Type 26s are currently being built by the greatest shipbuilders in the world, at the Govan shipyard, will the Minister also confirm the timetable for the Type 31 frigate and whether that will be built in Govan, too?

Guto Bebb: The Type 31 process is well under way. We are pleased with the number of consortia that have shown an interest in the Type 31, and I hope that the Clyde shipbuilders will be putting in a very good price, which will ensure that the Type 31 will be delivered on time and on schedule.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): If we are to have an HMS Sheffield, we must certainly have an HMS Goole, because we are, after all, a port. More importantly, with Australia and Canada both likely to make decisions on the Type 26 this year—in the coming weeks or months—does my hon. Friend agree that getting those contracts will ensure we have sea-to-sea interoperability? Does he also agree that having four of the “Five Eyes” powers on the same platform—New Zealand might also get it—would send a powerful message?

Guto Bebb: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The Type 26 presents us with an important opportunity for partnership working with Australia, Canada and perhaps New Zealand. The campaign in Australia has been strong, positive and upbeat, and I sincerely hope it will be successful.

Future Accommodation Model

7. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to develop the future accommodation model.

23. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to develop the future accommodation model.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As the House will be aware, we are developing new accommodation options for service personnel. The programme is called the future accommodation model and we hope to run a pilot towards the end of the year.

Judith Cummins: There are serious problems in the private rented sector surrounding affordability, quality and security of tenure. Does the Minister share my concern that splitting our forces communities by pushing service families into the private rented sector risks reducing their quality of accommodation and life, as well as impacting on retention and recruitment rates?

Mr Ellwood: I must correct the hon. Lady: nobody will be forced to do anything, but the option will be available to them. We are providing more choice for our armed forces personnel, who can choose to stay on the base, rent or indeed get on the housing ladder and purchase a property. Of course, house prices vary up and down the country, so we need to make sure that there is a process to ensure a subsidised capability so that nobody is left out of pocket. However, there is a choice; nobody will be forced into any of this accommodation.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Service families in Woolwich are understandably anxious about what the future accommodation model might mean for them, but the immediate concern for many is the poor service they regularly receive from Carillion/Ameay. What are Ministers doing here and now to improve the quality of the subcontracted maintenance and repairs service?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman’s question gives me licence to clarify the longevity of what is happening at Woolwich. He will be aware that there is a proposal to close the base itself by 2028 and that the Royal Anglians will move, as will the Royal Horse Artillery. There is time between now and then, however, and we need to make sure we look after our armed forces personnel. He will also be aware that we have had problems with the Carillion/Ameay deal—the previous Defence Secretary called the company in to say that things were not up to par—but we are working to ensure that the contracts are met.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that most young people in the armed forces want not to rent but to buy, and can he say what more can be done to support the Forces Help to Buy scheme, which appears to be quite successful?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Help to Buy scheme is a critical part of the programme we are rolling out. The pilot scheme will begin at the end of the year. The feedback from the armed forces federations is that it will give armed forces personnel and their families the choice they are calling for.

Leaving the EU: Defence and Military Aerospace Industry

8. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the effect on the defence and military aerospace industry of the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): The Ministry of Defence is working closely with the defence industry to understand the implications
and opportunities presented by the UK’s departure from the European Union. Through our future partnership with the European Union, we want to explore how our industries can continue working together to deliver the capabilities that we need. It is, however, worth noting that current major European collaborative capability projects, such as Typhoon, are managed bilaterally or with groups of partners rather than through the EU.

Mr Bailey: Last month, we heard that the UK could no longer participate in the Galileo satellite programme post Brexit. That is a huge blow for our industry as a whole and our defence capabilities in particular. Will the Minister tell us exactly what he is doing about it?

Guto Bebb: I agree that the issue of Galileo is concerning. We have made representations at the highest level to both the European Union and the French Government. We believe that this is an important issue and that the UK’s contribution to the Galileo programme is significant. I think the hon. Gentleman will agree, however, that the European Commission’s comment that the UK would be a security risk is simply unacceptable.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial that any synergies in terms of industrial strategy across military expenditure should be concentrated on NATO, where there is a plethora of different weapons systems and pieces of equipment? It is much more important to concentrate on the fact that Britain is remaining a key player in the NATO alliance.

Guto Bebb: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that NATO is the mainstay of our defence capabilities, and I also agree that the relationship with NATO partners is significant and important for the future. From an industrial capability perspective, however, I think that the Prime Minister made a clear commitment to our willingness to work with our European partners in the future, and I hope that they will demonstrate the same good will in return.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Protecting our sovereign military aerospace capability is very important. However, the Typhoon orders will last only until 2026; we have no new orders for the Hawk until the Qatar deal comes through; and Taranis is being kept in a big hangar and we do not really know what is happening with it. What is the position of our UK aerospace defence industries? The lead time is at least 10 years. What discussions has the Minister had about the sixth-generation strike fighter, for example?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman will be reassured to know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will meet the Qatari Defence Minister later this afternoon to discuss the Typhoon and Hawk orders. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the long time that it takes to develop new capabilities. We launched the combat air strategy so that we would have an idea of how we should proceed. The United Kingdom has a huge capability in this sphere and we need to build on it.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The United Kingdom’s defence expenditure accounts for about 20% of total EU defence expenditure. What is being done to encourage our allies to up their defence spending?

Guto Bebb: I entirely agree with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. I think it is fair to say that when Ministers—including me—meet our opposite numbers from the European Union, they stress the need for other EU countries that are in NATO to fulfil the 2% obligation. It is interesting to note that some of the Baltic states, for example, are very clear about their commitment, but we need some of the larger players in Europe to fulfil their obligations as well.

Departmental Funding

9. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the adequacy of funding for his Department.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on funding for his Department.

17. Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the adequacy of funding for his Department.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have regular discussions with the Chancellor and, as the Prime Minister announced last month, the Ministry of Defence will benefit from an extra £800 million in the current financial year, including £600 million for the Dreadnought submarine programme. The Government are committed to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, and the defence budget will rise by at least 0.5% above inflation in every year of this Parliament. The modernising defence programme will ensure that our armed forces have the right processes and capabilities to address evolving threats.

Bambos Charalambous: In a recent report, the Defence Committee said: “We seriously doubt the MOD’s ability to generate the efficiencies required to deliver the equipment plan.” How can we have confidence in the Government’s ability to deliver, even with an enhanced budget, when the modernising defence programme is seemingly focused on efficiencies and the budget is already over-reliant on projected savings?

Gavin Williamson: Part of the reason behind the modernising defence programme is to look at how we can drive efficiencies out of the system, ensure that we deliver on the commitments we need to make, and see how to respond to the changing threat environment. That is why we took the decision to take defence out of the national security capability review, as we recognised that we need flexibility in the system to deal with the changing threat picture.

Mr Fysh: One way to ensure that we have enough money to spend on defence is to take full account of British industry’s opportunities and contribution when making procurement decisions. End-to-end helicopter
manufacturing in the south-west is a strategic asset supporting more than 10,000 jobs and £700 million-worth of exports. Will the Secretary of State discuss with me developing a specific defence industrial strategy for helicopters?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate on this issue and a defender of jobs in his constituency. We are committed to spending more than £3 billion with Leonardo over the next 10 years, but I would be very happy to meet him to discuss how we can develop our strategy. It is about not just manned rotary but unmanned rotary. What are the options and opportunities that we can exploit to ensure that our world-leading industry continues to hold that top spot?

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful for the progress that the Secretary of State is making in securing additional funding for defence. As these discussions continue, will he reassure the House that the needs of our enhanced forward presence in Estonia will be taken into consideration and that they will receive the fire power and protection they need?

Gavin Williamson: I can assure my hon. Friend of that. I recently visited our enhanced forward presence in Estonia and it is pleasing to be able to announce that we will be adding to that presence, with more Wildcats stationed there to support operations. An additional 70 personnel will join them.

Eleanor Smith: The National Audit Office found that the MOD had not included £9.6 billion of forecast cost in the 2017 equipment plan, including the cost of buying the Type 31e frigates. Does the Secretary of State think that that kind of mismanagement is likely to help his discussions with the Chancellor about additional funding?

Gavin Williamson: Our armed forces are looking closely at everything we have committed towards investing in. With a changing threat environment, we are looking at how we can do things more efficiently, at how we can make our money go further and at what we will need to deal with those increasing threats. I am confident that we can put a strong argument to the whole of Government on the importance of defence to our nation’s security.

Social Mobility

10. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What plans he has to use membership of the armed forces to promote social mobility. [904689]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The armed forces aim to attract talent from the widest possible base from across the UK. The skills, education, training and experience, as well as enhanced reverence for our country, enable recruits to progress as far as their aptitude will take them, regardless of their socio-economic background, educational status or ethnicity.

Stephen McPartland: We know that in many of our cities at the moment young people feel trapped and that their only life choice is which gang to join. Will my right hon. Friend explain what the armed forces will do to help reach into those communities and help those young people transform their life chances?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I recall that as a platoon commander I got to know my soldiers very well and they came from a variety of backgrounds, some very tough. They were forever grateful for the sense of purpose and the second chance—the new direction—that the armed forces provide. Whether someone is born with a silver spoon in their mouth or has a penchant for pinching them, they will be treated with the same discourteous irreverence by the sergeant major when they arrive on the parade square and will be knocked into something of which both the armed forces and the nation can be proud.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When a young person leaves school, perhaps in a deprived area, and joins the armed forces and makes a success of that career, what encouragement is given to them to go back to that school and say, “I was at this school—I know where you smoke the fags behind the bike sheds—and you too can make a success of a career like mine”?

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue. We are looking at ways of encouraging and rewarding those who go back to their peer groups to say, “I have benefited from the armed forces.” Let us not forget that those who sign up to wear the uniform are not only of benefit and service to the armed forces themselves; they take away with them the transitional skills of leadership, determination, grit, tenacity and teamwork that can be transferred into society as a whole. Everybody benefits from a life in the armed forces.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I must call the hon. Gentleman, because I think he comes from the wing of the Conservative party that went to state school, pays mortgages and buys its own furniture.

Simon Hoare: Thank you, Mr Speaker; we are definitely in the EPNS family.

I welcome everything that my right hon. Friend has said from the Dispatch Box. Following up on what the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, rather than just using those who have been in the military, what opportunities are there to use active champions who are currently serving in our armed forces to take that message of social mobility into schools and colleges in areas that really need to hear it and would benefit from hearing it?

Mr Speaker: Well done, young Hoare!

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We are looking to improve recruitment and retention, and one aspect of that is the cadetship programme, which is growing every year. The programme invites those who already have a connection in the armed forces to go back to tell the communities where they started how they have benefited from their service in uniform.

Departmental Staff: Wages and Conditions

11. Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve wages and conditions for staff in his Department who are on low pay. [904869]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Ministry of Defence strives to attract the brightest and best from across the country, and whether they are in uniform as part of the civil service or serving in our armed forces, they deserve to have fulfilling jobs that are fairly rewarded.

Catherine West: In response to a recent parliamentary question, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions informed me that cleaners in her Whitehall Department were being paid the London living wage. However, when I asked the same question of the Secretary of State for Defence, I was referred to an earlier answer in which his Ministers admitted that they did not know how much MOD cleaners were being paid. Will the Minister take this opportunity to clarify why he does not know the salary levels of the low-paid staff in his Department, and will he pledge not only to find out but to ensure that all the cleaners in his Whitehall Department are paid the London living wage?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady asks a detailed but important question. There are 3,000 staff who are paid the national minimum wage, and I will certainly look into the details regarding the cleaners, because there seems to be a discrepancy in the answers she has been given. I will resolve to sort that out for her.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Cyber-security experts at GCHQ in my constituency are at the frontline of our nation’s defences as never before, and although they did not join up for the money, their skills are much in demand in the private sector. Does my right hon. Friend agree that paying our cyber-experts fairly has never been more important to national security?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which we are looking at in case we require transferable skills from other units. There are two approaches: we can either grow the skill set from the start, or we can outsource and look to working with other companies. When it comes to cyber-security, it is important that we have the talent to allow us to ensure that our cyber offensive and our cyber defensive are very strong. To that end, we need to ensure that we pay people the correct salaries.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues need not worry. Their questions will be reached, but the Chair has to react to the development of events, to which I and some colleagues are privy and others are not. If you are not already confused, you will now be.

Baltic States: NATO

16. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to provide military support to NATO allies in the Baltic states.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Don’t worry, Mr Speaker; I will endeavour to speak very slowly, for a change, and maybe at length.

We have a strong and enduring defence relationship with our allies in the Baltic states. Since April last year, UK forces have been deployed in Estonia as part of NATO’s enhanced forward presence. The UK acts as the framework station in Estonia, leading a defensive but combat-capable multinational battle group to deter aggression. The UK also contributes to the US-led enhanced forward presence battle group in Poland.

David Hanson: This might be an opportunity to give a lecture on Estonian, Lithuanian and Polish relations with the UK—while keeping you happy in your Chair, Mr Speaker. In the meantime, I very much welcome what the Secretary of State has said about the increased support to the Baltic states. Will the Minister also look at the possibility of giving training and support to members of the Baltic states’ armed forces in the UK? He will be aware that a recent parliamentary question revealed the fact that no one from Lithuania, Latvia or Poland had attended the MOD’s highest profile UK-based courses. Is that not something that we should try to rectify?

Mark Lancaster: I would be delighted to look at that. Indeed, I am sure that the House will be delighted to know that the one request I received from just about every nation when I was travelling in east Africa last week was for further places on UK training courses—our Royal College of Defence Studies, our advanced command and staff course, our higher command and staff course, or even at Sandhurst. Places on such courses are incredibly valued by overseas nations. Unfortunately, demand exceeds supply, but I will look carefully at what more we can do to support our Baltic colleagues.

Armed Forces: Capacity

18. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the size of the UK armed forces.

24. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the size of the UK armed forces.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We are committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces. The services are meeting all their current commitments, keeping the country and its interests safe.

Liz Twist: According to a recent National Audit Office report, at the current rate of recruitment the RAF estimates that it will be another 20 years before it has enough pilots. What urgent steps is the Minister taking to rectify that?

Mark Lancaster: I do not recognise those figures. We have just done a review of the pilot training scheme and will shorten and simplify the process, which has not changed much in the past 30 years. Owing to successes in selling our aircraft overseas, some of our pilot training system is occupied by overseas pilots, so we need to look carefully at how to find a balance to ensure that, with the limited capacity available, we can continue to train all the pilots we need.

Gill Furniss: A recent NAO report found a 26% shortfall in the staffing of intelligence analysis in the armed forces, but those specialists are crucial to our national security and to our fight against cyber-crime. Given the
threats of information warfare from a variety of disparate groups—from terrorist organisations to states such as Russia—does the Minister agree that we cannot keep our country safe on the cheap?

Mark Lancaster: We are certainly not keeping our country safe on the cheap, which is why we have committed to spending more than 2% of GDP, and our defence budget will continue to rise from £36 billion this year. However, I agree with the hon. Lady that we need to find innovative solutions when it comes to recruiting cyber-specialists, which is precisely why we are now doing that in the reserves. We have changed the rules about who can join and their backgrounds, which has proven to be a tremendous success.

Wildlife Poaching

20. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the training that it provides to African rangers in tackling wildlife poaching.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Last year, the Department deployed the British Army to Malawi for four months to run counter-poaching training in support of the Foreign Secretary’s aim to combat the illegal wildlife trade. It is a role that plays to the strengths of our young commanders and soldiers, who are experts in fieldcraft, tactics and intelligence fusion. It is a testament to the quality of their training of the rangers that arrests in Liwonde, Malawi, have increased by 50%.

John Mann: With our ivory trade ban and our summit this autumn, what an opportunity we have not only to assist the work in Africa, but to give some of our armed forces real experience in training and, potentially, the use of drones. Could we not expand this training opportunity alongside this autumn’s summit?

Mark Lancaster: After the success of the pilot project, which has been funded for three years, I am delighted to report that we will indeed be doing exactly that and will be expanding the programme to two more wildlife parks in Malawi. That sits exactly within the priorities of Her Majesty’s Government’s Africa strategy, which runs across three Departments.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Has the Minister also had discussions with the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, where huge numbers of elephants have been lost over the past 20 years, particularly in the Selous game reserve? If he has not had such discussions, perhaps they could be offered to the United Republic of Tanzania.

Mark Lancaster: Indeed, poaching is responsible for the deaths of approximately 20,000 elephants every year, which is why I am delighted that the pilot project seems to have made such a positive impact over the past year. As I have already mentioned, we will be looking to expand the project as part of the Government’s Africa strategy.

Gavin Williamson: Official development assistance, or aid, exists to support the welfare or economic development of recipient countries. As such, military activity can be reported as aid only in certain very limited circumstances, as defined by the OECD. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defence budget assumes £5 million a year—0.01% of the budget—for activity that may be counted as aid.

Patrick Grady: Thank you for getting through the Order Paper, Mr Speaker. Can the Secretary of State confirm that none of the money spent financing the recent military action in Syria will be in any way counted towards the aid budget?

Gavin Williamson: I can confirm that is the case. Sometimes with a certain element of sadness, much of what the Ministry of Defence and our armed forces do cannot be counted towards aid expenditure. Our peacekeeping in South Sudan and our hurricane relief operation in the Caribbean alone come to £100 million-worth of expenditure. None of that can be counted as humanitarian aid and support, which I think all of us in this House would agree it most certainly is.

Topical Questions

T1. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I would like to thank all our armed forces who played a leading role in the recent targeted strike to degrade and deter the Syrian regime’s ability to use chemical weapons. Their skill and professionalism, alongside our US and French allies, is second to none.

Robert Courts: For reasons of development time and capability, the combat air strategy cannot come soon enough. Will Ministers please confirm that the modernising defence review will include consideration of potential national partners so that the export consequences, as well as the workshare ramifications of potential partnering with the United States, Europe or an eastern partner, can be assessed, and assessed in good time?

Gavin Williamson: I am afraid that I probably will not be able to give my hon. Friend quite the answer he wants, as we probably will not be looking at that as part of the modernising defence programme but, as part of our combat air strategy, we are looking at how we can develop those alliances. We may have to start looking further afield and not just to our traditional European
allies. There is a world market out there—how can we develop new relationships with different countries and develop our future sixth-generation combat aircraft with them?

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the welfare of armed forces personnel and their families is still a core responsibility of his Department?

Gavin Williamson: Yes, I can.

Nia Griffith: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Taking that as a yes, how is it that more than half a million pounds of LIBOR funds has been spent by the MOD in support of armed forces welfare, when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—the Minister for defence people—has said categorically that “LIBOR funding should not be used to fund Departmental core responsibilities”?

Is it not time for the Secretary of State to admit that it was a serious misjudgment to use LIBOR funds in such a scandalous way? When will his Department be paying back that money?

Gavin Williamson: I am sure the hon. Lady is very well aware that the Ministry of Defence does not actually administer LIBOR funding—that is the Treasury. So much of the LIBOR funding has made such a difference, not just to those who have ceased to serve in our armed forces but to those who continue to serve. We are very grateful for the positive impact of that funding on so many of our services.1

T3. [904887] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Minister inform the House of how the new veterans gateway is rolling out the provision of support to those calling the helpline, now that it has been running for a year?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I pay tribute to the large number of charities that support our military sector and our armed forces community. There are more than 400 charities and it can be unclear where individual personnel should turn. The gateway has been fundamental in providing help to individuals who are unsure of where to turn for support. I am delighted that I will be visiting the gateway in the next couple of months.

T2. [904885] John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Given the historical and continuing defence ties between the United Kingdom and Korea, will Ministers do all they can to encourage the remarkable peace process that is gathering pace and the aim of ridding the entire peninsula of nuclear weapons?

Gavin Williamson: We continue to work closely with our allies, not just South Korea, but Japan and the United States, in trying to bring about a peaceful solution to the challenges on the Korean peninsula. We are also proud that we have HMS Sutherland conducting operations in the theatre and supporting all our aims to get a peaceful resolution to the challenges we face in Korea.

T8. [904893] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): In addition to the 20,000 MOD personnel in Scotland and the £1.6 billion spent by the Department with Scottish industries, supporting 10,500 private sector jobs, we have had the Secretary of State cutting turf at RAF Lossiemouth. Will he confirm that the new Poseidon submarine hunters will play a vital strategic role for the UK and NATO alliance?

Gavin Williamson: It goes to show our commitment to and investment in Scotland, which I know my hon. Friend and his colleagues on our Benches have been championing continuously. We have not only the investment in the Poseidon aircraft, but the welcome news that another Typhoon squadron will also be based at Lossiemouth going forward.

T4. [904888] Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): All of us in this Chamber, across all parties, respect those who are willing to put their life on the line for our nation. I had a meeting a week or so ago with a homeless former veteran who had come down from the north of England to Eastbourne. Clearly, this man had served our country for many, many years and, sadly, he also had mental health issues. My office and I are trying to support him as best we can. I want to ask the Secretary of State, first, whether there is something within the MOD and the armed services that allows people in this situation to go directly for support. Secondly, is this tracked in any way, so that the MOD would know these individuals and their issues?

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Gentleman, with all courtesy and friendliness, that I was about to offer him an Adjournment debate on the matter—until I realised he had just conducted it.

Mr Ellwood: The support for veterans does not just come from the MOD; it comes from a wide variety of Departments across Whitehall. That is one reason why we have set up the veterans board, which is chaired by the Defence Secretary and brings together the other representatives—the Secretaries of State from those Departments. Clearly, we need local councils to do more to recognise the homelessness issue and the housing issue, to make sure that those who have served are not disadvantaged because of their service.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): On 1 July 1918, 134 workers, mainly canary girls, were killed in a terrible explosion at the national shell-filling factory in Chilwell, in my constituency. Will the Minister please ensure that the Defence Infrastructure Organisation makes good the memorial at the Chetwynd barracks in good time for the centenary commemorations, which the community very much wants to support?

Mr Ellwood: It is appropriate for the whole House to pay tribute to all those who supported the war effort, including the canary girls. They were known as that because putting together the munitions turned their hands, and indeed their complexions, rather yellow. It is important that we pay that tribute, and I will certainly endeavour to look into where the memorial is and get back to my right hon. Friend.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Although ships are no longer built in the north-east, many companies in the engineering supply chain are

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based there. What steps will the Government take to ensure that work comes to the north-east in future defence contracts?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. One example we can offer is the current Boxer programme, which is at the assessment phase. Currently, we expect more than 60% of that to be onshore and going to the UK, but there are opportunities to increase that further. I have already had discussions with several companies based in the north-east on that very project.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Following on from what has been said earlier about the cadet force, does the Minister agree that the cadets are a great introduction to military life, because as well as giving children positive role models, they help to promote social mobility? Will he update the House on what steps the Department is taking to encourage the participation of state schools in the cadet movement?

Gavin Williamson: What our cadets do is extraordinary, right across the country, and we have had a roll-out of 500 new cadet units this year. This is about the ability to promote social mobility and giving youngsters an opportunity to really succeed in life—that is what our armed forces do. The cadet units are a brilliant way of giving young people the opportunity to get a taste of military life and they provide those role models. The question we need to be asking is: can we be doing more to inspire young people in our schools? I think the answer to that is a most certain yes.

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Mr Speaker: I thank my colleagues who have campaigned so hard to highlight the fact that 70% of service personnel based in Scotland will be worse off as a result of the Scottish Government’s “Nat tax”, which they are placing on our brave service personnel. We hope to be able to report back on the conclusions to that in the next six weeks. We do not want anyone who serves in our armed forces to be worse off as a result of the taxes being placed on them by the SNP.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State had a chance to review the misguided policy of his predecessor to close the Dale barracks in Chester, which has only recently been refurbished and enjoys high satisfaction rates among the soldiers stationed there and their families?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a tough rationalisation programme going on. The MOD owns 2% of the UK, which is more land than we need, and there is a requirement for us to build housing on it as well. We are having to take some very tough decisions in certain areas that hon. Members will be concerned about. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his case one-to-one.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: If it turns out to be a genuine point of order, I would have to imagine, albeit wrongly in this case, that it was a leap year, but we will have a go, if it flows directly, as I am advised, from Defence questions and is in no sense a cheeky continuation of existing argument, but is a genuine search for a ruling from the Chair on a procedural matter.

Wayne David: I can say that I have never been cheeky in my life, Sir. At the last Defence questions, the Minister of State was unable to answer my question about why the Type 31 frigates were not included in the MOD’s equipment plan. The Minister promised that I would receive a written answer. Six weeks later, I have still not received an answer. Mr Speaker, can you advise me what on earth I have to do to get a reply from the Government?

Mr Speaker: That is plainly unsatisfactory. No Member should have to wait six weeks for a reply. As colleagues of any experience in the House will know, the Leader of the House takes particular responsibility for chasing Ministers to ensure that replies are timely and preferably substantive. If the hon. Gentleman received an assurance on the Floor of the House that he would receive such a reply and all these weeks later he has not, that is completely unsatisfactory. I sense that he knows that he has probably found his own salvation by raising the matter on the Floor of the Chamber this afternoon in a way that will not go entirely unnoticed.
Voter ID Pilots

3.44 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the Government’s policy on voter ID pilots taking place at the local government elections on 3 May.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The British public deserve to have confidence in our democracy. There is clearly the potential for electoral fraud in our system and that undermines confidence and promotes perceptions of vulnerability. When fraud is committed in elections, it is not a victimless crime; people’s votes are stolen or someone is elected who should not have been elected.

Earlier this year, the Government announced that they would be conducting pilots for voter identification at the local elections in May this year in line with our manifesto commitment to legislate to ensure that a form of ID must be presented before voting. Voter ID is part of the Government’s commitment to improve the security and the resilience of the electoral system that underpins our democracy and will promote greater confidence in our democratic processes.

In making these changes, we will bring our electoral system in line with others such as that in Northern Ireland or Canada, which operate successful programmes, and recognise that there is an increasing expectation that someone’s vote should be protected and carefully guarded. We already ask that people prove who they are in order to claim benefits, to rent a car or even to collect a parcel from the Post Office, so this is a proportionate and reasonable approach. Democracy is precious and it is right to take that more robust approach to protect the integrity of the electoral process.

The independent Electoral Commission has, since 2014, pushed for the introduction of ID to strengthen the system, and it has welcomed the voter ID pilots as a positive first step towards implementing its own recommendation that an accessible, proportionate voter identification scheme should be introduced in Great Britain. In a recent report for Democratic Audit UK, academic Stuart Wilks-Heeg stated that, after the scheme was introduced in Northern Ireland, there was no evidence to suggest a fall in turnout, but that there was plenty of evidence that fraud declined sharply.

Indeed, it was the previous Labour Government who introduced photo ID at polling stations across Northern Ireland in 2003, and, as I have said, it has not affected turnout there, and it has helped to prevent election fraud. The Labour Minister at the time said:

“The measures will tackle electoral abuse effectively without disadvantaging honest voters”,

ensuring that

“no one is disfranchised”.—[Official Report, 10 July 2001; Vol. 371, c. 740.]

The opportunity to pilot voter ID in May 2018 was offered to all local authorities in Great Britain, and five—Woking, Gosport, Bromley, Wavford and Swindon—have committed to do so. Proxy voters in Peterborough will also be required to show ID before they can vote on 3 May 2018. I personally have taken the opportunity to speak to each local authority about the design of their pilots and the methods that they have applied to ensure that their electors are aware of voter identification and that each elector’s needs are understood. Local authorities will notify every eligible voter by including information of the ID requirement on their poll card.

No one will need to buy ID documents to be able to vote, and the ID requirements will not be limited to a passport or driving licence. In these pilots, voters can use a wide variety of ID, from marriage certificates and passports to bus passes and bank cards, depending on where they live. If voters do not have the required ID, local authorities are providing alternative or replacement methods to ensure that no one is disenfranchised. Everybody eligible to vote will have the chance to do so.

These pilots will help to identify the best way of implementing voter ID, and we look forward to each authority’s findings. I have responded to the recent letter from the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and I will make a copy of it available in the Library of both Houses. All local authorities involved have completed equality impact assessments, and the Electoral Commission will be independently evaluating the pilots, with results published this summer.

We want to ensure that our elections are as accessible as possible, and that there are no barriers to democratic participation. We have recognised that, for example, people with a disability face different issues when registering and voting. We have run a call for evidence to hear directly about their experiences to enhance the Government’s understanding, so that we can help those people to register and cast their vote. We have also recently made it easier for survivors of domestic abuse to register to vote anonymously for fear of revealing their address to an ex-partner, as there were fears that that was preventing survivors from registering to vote.

The aim of the pilots is to protect voting rights, and it comes in the context of protecting and improving our democracy. Pilots are important in order to find out what works best. Electoral fraud is unacceptable on any level, and its impact on voters can be significant. It takes away an elector’s right to vote as they wish—whether through intimidation, bribery or impersonating someone in order to cast their vote. The Cabinet Office, in partnership with the Electoral Commission and Crimestoppers, launched the “Your vote is yours alone” campaign only last month to encourage people to report electoral fraud if they see it.

I am passionate about protecting our electoral system. The impact of electoral fraud is real and it is criminal. It steals something precious from a person and undermines the entire system for everyone. I do not want to see our democracy dumbed down; it is rather a shame that the Labour party appears to.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Minister, who allocated herself twice the amount of time available. I generously indulged her in that, but some latitude must now also apply to the shadow Minister.

Cat Smith: Thank you for those comments, Mr Speaker, and for granting this urgent question.

The Minister talked widely about the system in Northern Ireland, but the Electoral Commission recommended that, as in Northern Ireland, these trials include measures such as free voter ID cards, which have not been rolled
out by this Government. That means that the trials taking place in the English local government elections are very different from what is already occurring in Northern Ireland; it is a false comparison.

It was revealed yesterday that the Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the Cabinet Office raising serious concerns about the Government pilots. The commission warned that ID requirements will have a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority communities, older people, trans people—who may not have ID in the right gender or name—and people with disabilities, and that some voters will be disenfranchised as a result. Will the Minister confirm that the measures being piloted in May do not violate article 1 of the European convention on human rights? What assessment has she made to support this position?

The Windrush scandal has demonstrated that it is difficult for some communities to provide official papers. This could prevent legitimate voters from taking part in our democratic process, which we all value. It is the same hostile environment all over again, shutting our fellow citizens out of public life. Have the Government conducted an assessment of whether any of the Windrush generation will be denied their right to vote on 3 May?

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Government failed to carry out adequate equality impact assessments. This echoes the same concerns raised by a coalition of more than 40 leading charities and academics earlier this year that called on the Cabinet Office to abandon the pilots. How can the Government justify their position given this widespread condemnation?

Let us be in no doubt that electoral fraud is a serious crime, and it is vital that the police have the resources they need to bring about prosecutions. However, the Equality and Human Rights Commission raised a valid concern that there was only one conviction for electoral fraud involving impersonation, following the 45 million votes cast last year. That is one vote out of the 45 million votes cast. What steps will the Government take to ensure that the pilot schemes are proportionate to the level of electoral fraud, and that they are not using a sledgehammer to crack a nut?

We cannot allow this Government to pilot discriminatory measures that could disenfranchise legitimate voters who already face a multitude of barriers to democratic engagement. I urge the Minister to abandon the Government’s plans for trialling voter ID on 3 May.

Chloe Smith: As I set out very fully—I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make my remarks in full—I have answered the EHRC very carefully and laid that answer in the Libraries of both Houses so that people can read the full background to these pilots and the parliamentary process that they have gone through. I can confirm that it is my belief that this policy does not violate the first article of the ECHR and that these are not discriminatory measures.

The hon. Lady asked me about the Windrush scandal. It was revealed yesterday that the Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the Cabinet Office raising serious concerns about the Government pilots. They are very different from what is already occurring in Northern Ireland; it is a false comparison. This Government are using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The Scottish National Party fully accepts that electoral fraud is unacceptable, but it is also infinitesimally small, and those who are perpetrating such things are already being brought to justice.

The Electoral Commission’s figures indicate that 3.5 million people in the UK—7.5% of the electorate—do not have any form of photo ID. Are the Government going to pay for them to have photo ID? If not, this is a barrier that is being put in the way of people exercising their democratic rights. Just at the end of last month, the Government put up the fees for passports to £85 per person for a paper passport and £75.50 for an online passport, further putting the price of getting these voter ID documents beyond the reach of most ordinary working people.
In the case of right to rent, all those who analysed this Government policy said that it would increase discrimination, and that has been found to be so. Those with protected characteristics, particularly ethnic minorities, have found it harder to rent, and the policy is discriminatory. Will the Minister pay due attention to the findings of the pilots, and will she bring them before this House for full discussion and full scrutiny before she moves this forward any further?

Chloe Smith: I fear the hon. Lady did not catch the part of my opening remarks where I made it clear that passports and driving licences are not the only type of identification being asked for in these pilots, and nobody will need to purchase ID documents to be able to vote. Indeed, the authorities in question are using a range of ID, some of which is photographic and some of which is the kind of routine identification someone would use to be able to pick up a parcel from the post office or indeed, as I saw this morning when some constituents came into this place, to sit in the Gallery and participate in democracy here.

The key point is that these pilots are doing something that people regard as proportionate and reasonable by using routine identification that we already use in everyday life. Indeed, we would use ID to apply for benefits and to do a range of other things under Government services. We would, of course, also use ID to register to vote in the first place. This is only another part of the same voting process for which we already ask people to prove who they are.

The hon. Lady asked me whether I would bring the pilot results back to the House. I can confirm that I will be keen to ensure that the House is updated on the progress of the pilots, and I will be considering them in terms of my ministerial responsibility. As I said, the Electoral Commission is conducting its own independent evaluation of the pilots and will publish that this summer.

My final point is that the independent Electoral Commission supports the introduction of ID to strengthen the system. The Electoral Commission thinks that it is important to have a proportionate voter ID scheme such as I have described to protect our voting system’s integrity. The hon. Lady seems to be overlooking that rather important supporter.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): If I buy an item and am out when it is delivered, I have to go down to the Royal Mail sorting office with photo ID to collect that item. Why is it so unreasonable that I have to prove who I am to exercise my democratic right—something money cannot buy?

Chloe Smith: That is precisely right. We are talking about a precious and intangible thing: the right to vote as we think fit and the right to enjoy confidence in the democratic system. That is what these pilots are about. My hon. Friend allows me to repeat the point that I would very much like to go out to citizens of the pilot areas. If anyone is concerned that they might not have the ID that is being spoken about, they should speak to the local authority, which will organise alternative arrangements. That is the crucial point—nobody who is eligible to vote will miss the chance to do so.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister is making a pretty poor job of defending the indefensible. Is it not the case that what she is setting out today is not only a huge hammer to crack a nut but actually, in disguise, a blatant attempt at voter suppression, by making it very difficult indeed for those who already have difficulties to vote? Many of those people come to visit me in my advice surgery because they cannot prove their identity to access benefits; she now wants to take their democratic rights off them.

Chloe Smith: We are talking about people who are already eligible to vote then being able to confirm who they are when they come to do so. I am concerned that I have just heard from the hon. Lady that she does not even stand by the previous Labour Government’s decision to do this in Northern Ireland, which has not damaged turnout and has reduced the impact of fraud. Why does she stand against reducing electoral fraud?

Mr Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Bromley is one of the pilot areas. My hon. Friend the Minister might like to know that in every single case where a person has contacted the local authority to ask if they have the requisite ID, they have had it, and certificates have not been necessary; that Bromley residents will have had five mailings, which is more than any ever before at a local election, and there has been specific targeting of older people through 500 community organisations and more; and that not one person I have spoken to on the doorstep has had any difficulty with the system, and many welcome it. Does she accept that this is a wholly bogus attempt by the Opposition to discredit an entirely sensible pilot?

Chloe Smith: It is incredibly important that electors hear that reassurance from their Member of Parliament, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend has been able to put that on the record. I can confirm that Bromley is offering the choice of photographic and non-photographic identification, and electors can also apply for a certificate of identity, free of charge, from the local authority. That is the crucial point. Every elector who is eligible can secure alternative arrangements should they need them. What we are hearing from the Opposition is a self-interested argument. Instead of doing voters down they should talk our democracy up.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister apply the same criteria to postal voters and postal voting?

Chloe Smith: I can confirm that in addition to the five pilots that we are primarily discussing there are three pilots to strengthen postal and proxy voting processes, and I am equally supportive of those.

Mr David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford): The Minister has done a really good job in explaining the pilots and taking no notice of the scaremongering from the Opposition. Will she confirm that she remains absolutely committed to increasing the participation of traditionally under-represented groups in our electoral system?

Chloe Smith: I certainly will. I mentioned earlier the case of people who have been obliged to register to vote anonymously. It is extremely important that we come together in a cross-party manner in the House, as we did for anonymous voting, so that we can help people to
register to vote in a way that secures their safety. We are talking about a way to improve the voting system overall and protect people from a type of crime—electoral fraud. It is incredibly important that we look at all citizens’ interests in having a system in which they can be confident.

Wera Hobhouse: May I first congratulate the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on the birth of their third child?

Will the councils taking part in the pilot register and publish the number of people who are turned away because they do not have the correct identification, and will they identify in that number how many are legally entitled to vote?

Chloe Smith: I would certainly expect the authorities to have the capability to be aware of such data. As I have laid out, the Electoral Commission will conduct a full evaluation and I have no doubt that we will make sure that we can assess a range of data. I was a little concerned to hear one of the hon. Lady’s colleagues on television yesterday saying that the Liberal Democrats would accept a low level of electoral fraud. I am very concerned to hear Opposition parties in the House say that it is okay to have a certain level of crime and that they would not support sensible, proportionate measures that will protect the voting system for everyone.

Justin Tomlinson: The fantastic elections team in Swindon is proud to have been selected for one of the pilots. Despite all the heckling and scaremongering from the Opposition, not all hope is lost for the Labour party, as only last week, the North Swindon Labour party used exactly the same voter ID scheme for the selection of my latest parliamentary opponent.

Chloe Smith: I think that that is a lesson in doing what you say and saying what you do.

Stewart Hosie: In her opening statement, the Minister spoke about potential electoral fraud. In her first answer, she spoke about perceptions of fraud. The measures are wholly disproportionate to deal with perception and potential, because any obstacle will drive people off the register. As her Government say that they support frictionless trade, why does she not abandon the proposal and continue to support frictionless democracy?

Chloe Smith: We are doing something that other parts of the world already do very successfully. I have named Canada and mentioned Northern Ireland. We are talking about something that is entirely proportionate and reasonable, and that produces successful elections in trusted democracies. The real issue is that people should be able to have confidence in the system, as I said earlier. It has been hard to have confidence in the system in the past, given examples such as the electoral fraud in Tower Hamlets, which was extensive and of grave concern to many people. We are looking at measures that will help people in places like Tower Hamlets and around the entire country have greater confidence in their voting system.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans): I feel I am living in a parallel universe where it is somehow discriminatory to introduce the pilots now but not in Northern Ireland in 2003. I heard about the five leaflets informing voters. What was done to ensure that those who do not have English as a first language were made aware of the need to find voter ID?

Chloe Smith: That is an excellent question. As I said earlier, each local authority conducting the pilots has been sure to communicate to voters in the way that will work best. That supports why we are doing this as local pilots: because returning officers in given areas know their electorates best. I have confidence that each pilot authority has communicated locally and the use of other languages will have been taken into account where required.

Paula Sherriff: We have heard countless stories about voter fraud in 2017, so does my hon. Friend agree that, far from showing the issue to be small scale, as Opposition Members seem to be suggesting, the fact that there has been only one conviction shows just how difficult it is to enforce a law when there is no identification requirement at polling stations?

Chloe Smith: People voting twice is not what this policy is about. I wish that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on the Front Bench knew their policies better.

Ben Bradley: We have heard countless stories about voter fraud in 2017, so does my hon. Friend agree that, far from showing the issue to be small scale, as Opposition Members seem to be suggesting, the fact that there has been only one conviction shows just how difficult it is to enforce a law when there is no identification requirement at polling stations?

Chloe Smith: It is right to make that broader point. We want a democracy in which everybody can have confidence. Voting twice in one election is absolutely illegal. It is, indeed, an example of an electoral crime; there are other examples as well, including bribery and impersonation. We need to make sure that everybody can have confidence in their system and, crucially, that those who would be victims of such a crime are protected from it. The idea that we should simply allow a crime to happen until it reaches a certain level is ludicrous.

Ellie Reeves: Bromley, the borough in which I live and which I represent, is taking part in the voter ID pilot in May, and its own equality impact assessment has drawn particular attention to the impact on voters with protected characteristics, mainly older people and trans people. I listened to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and I have to say that we get a very different picture when talking to Bromley residents in Penge and Crystal Palace. With only one convicted case of electoral fraud following the 2017 election, why do the Government continue to insist on imposing these disenfranchising changes on Bromley voters?

Chloe Smith: I really want to address this idea of one prosecution. Members making that point are overlooking the larger examples, such as Tower Hamlets, which I have already mentioned and which are the kind of thing that gives rise to a lack of confidence in our system. I do
not think that local residents would expect to hear from Members of Parliament that their system should not be protected. I would prefer to hear, ringing out from this Chamber today, that the people of Bromley, Gosport, Swindon, Watford, Woking and the three areas doing postal and proxy improvements can have confidence in their system. They should speak to their local authorities if they feel that they may not have the ID spoken of, because they will not be disenfranchised, arrangements will be made and the local authority will ensure that they have the chance to cast their vote.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I note the alacrity with which the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) springs to his feet, which is all the more remarkable in light of his achievement in running the marathon yesterday. I take this opportunity to congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who undertook that mission so successfully for their respective charities. I call the hon. Gentleman.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I have to say that it is a bit of a struggle today.

Most voters would think that these pilots are fair and reasonable, and want confidence in the result. Does the Electoral Commission think the same?

Chloe Smith: The Electoral Commission has been calling for this change since 2014. The Government are responding to that call for change by introducing policies that ask voters to produce a proportionate and reasonable form of identification, such as they would do for other routine activities in daily life. We think that is the right thing to do and we are pleased to be able to work alongside the Electoral Commission and Crimestoppers, as I mentioned, to combat electoral fraud.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have a very robust electoral system in this country, and the Minister is insulting highly competent electoral registration officers by purporting to solve a problem that does not exist. The 38% turnout in the last local elections in Hammersmith ranged from 13% in deprived areas to 50% in prosperous areas. Why does she not do something to increase turnout, especially in deprived areas, rather than trying to suppress it?

Chloe Smith: This policy is in no way about suppressing votes. It is a huge shame that any voters listening to this debate today will hear one side of the House talking their prospects down and saying that they are somehow unable to produce the kind of ID that we routinely produce in everyday life. The five co-operating local authorities have come forward to run the pilots because they can best serve their citizens by doing so and providing alternative arrangements.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Has the Minister had the same experience on the doorstep as I have, with voters who have mislaid their polling cards finding it hard to believe that they can turn up to vote without any form of identification?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I have had that experience, and I would be surprised if many Members had not heard that from voters. The widespread assumption among voters is that ID is needed already. What we are doing is bringing Great Britain’s electoral system into line with other parts of the world, including Northern Ireland—inside the UK, of course—and Canada, which already run such a system successfully with turnout remaining up and evidence of fraud down.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentions Canada, but in the last general election my constituency had the lowest turnout in the UK, and that is combined with a low registration rate. If this policy is rolled out at a general election, how on earth will it help my constituents, many of whom are already at the margins of society? We need to engage them and bring them back into participating in our democracy. How will this approach help when evidence from the United States suggests that it suppresses votes?

Chloe Smith: That is quite wrong. The evidence does not suggest that this suppresses votes. The evidence says that turnout has remained up. I quoted the evidence in the Northern Ireland example, and I have cited how it has reduced electoral fraud while not damaging turnout. Let us have the debate on the evidence.

The hon. Gentleman asks how I can help his constituents. I suggest that we need to work together to ensure that more register to vote. To be fair to him, he has given both parts of the voting process—low registration rates and turnout rates—and the key is to ensure that we have higher registration rates. That is why the Government have set out a full democratic engagement plan, to drive registration rates up across all the groups in our society who register least. I am following through on that and I am passionate about doing so. Today we are talking about the policy that ensures that, once registered, those people have the confidence in the system to go and vote to complete the process.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The many thousands of eastern European voters in my constituency are too little registered and turnout again is low. However, when we on the doorstep were encouraging them to register, one of them asked me, “What do I need to bring with me to vote?” and when I told her that she needed literally nothing, she asked me, “Do you value your democracy so little?” Is it not an extraordinary situation that it is harder to collect a parcel than it is to vote?

Chloe Smith: That powerful anecdote entirely speaks for itself. We are seeking to strengthen our democracy and give it the kind of value that it deserves.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Just 45% of 18-year-olds are on the electoral register, so will the Government ensure that schools and further education colleges give details of students approaching voting age to electoral registration officers?

Chloe Smith: I think the hon. Gentleman is making an argument for what is known as automatic registration—in other words, that a person is placed on the register without their consent, necessarily. I support instead the system of individual electoral registration. It is important that people can individually register to vote and take responsibility for their own vote. Indeed, the introduction of IER has helped with another concern about our electoral system—that prior to its introduction,
the head of a household could simply register everyone in a household without their consent. I do not think that is very good for some of the groups that we might be debating today. We all need to work together to encourage young people to register to vote and to make sure that they are aware of how they need to go about doing that. I am looking forward to doing more of that kind of work this year—the suffrage centenary year—including through a national democracy week, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman joins me, too.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that no matter what part of British society someone identifies with, their interest in having confidence in the electoral system—our democratic system—is equal, so the Opposition should stop using this issue to create artificial divisions?

Chloe Smith: That is right. I am disappointed that the Opposition seem to have come here today to argue that this is a divisive idea. It is them who are being divisive when they say that citizens might not be able to use a proportionate and very reasonable system that we already use in everyday life to collect a parcel and to apply for benefits or various other Government services through someone showing who they are to be eligible to register to vote. All that together means that we should talk up our system, rather than talk people down.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Is it not the case that if the Government were serious about tackling the public’s poor faith in the democratic process, they would be better served by stopping Cabinet Ministers making ludicrous electoral claims, such as saying that there would be £350 million a week extra to be spent on the NHS post-Brexit, instead of disenfranchising 7.5% of the electorate?

Chloe Smith: This is not in any way about disenfranchisement; it is about eligible voters being able to continue to cast their votes. That is the very definition of enfranchisement.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): There is a risk that we are running down the Canadian experience—the last time I looked at Canada, it was a modern, vibrant democracy. What have we learned from its experience? I believe that it uses a similar system.

Chloe Smith: What we have learnt from the other systems around the world that use identification is that that maintains a successful democracy. To give the Northern Ireland example again, the system has reduced electoral fraud and maintained turnout. Again, as my hon. Friend points out, we see this in countries such as Canada—proud partners in the Commonwealth and greatly respected by many Members across this House—and it is sad that in coming here today to talk down British democracy, others are also having a pop at those countries.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the problem is not with people voting more than once but with people not voting at all? What is she doing to increase voter participation?

Chloe Smith: As I mentioned earlier, the Government are delivering on a suite of plans to increase registration rates among the least registered in our society. I have already given the example of domestic abuse survivors, and I will give the example again of those with disabilities, in respect of whom we have made adjustments and heard evidence about how we can go further. We also have plans to assist frequent home movers, overseas voters and those in the age groups that are least likely to vote—that touches on the point made by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who has since left the Chamber. We need to do a range of things to improve, protect and open up our democracy. This narrow policy today is one of the ways we are protecting our democracy. I would be delighted were the Opposition to find it in themselves to abandon their own narrow self-interest, which they have demonstrated in coming here today and by having their councillors write to local newspapers and say this is all about those most likely to vote Labour, and instead come together with us to improve our electoral system.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As somebody who was unsuccessful in a parliamentary election by 37 votes, I take the security of the ballot extremely seriously, as do my constituents. There has been a lot of concern in recent months about threats and undue influence in the democratic process in this country and in polls in other democracies. Does the Minister think that at this time the electorate are looking for a more secure ballot, as would be achieved through voter ID?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely right. Others in this place have been arguing for some time that we ought to be doing this, and I again give the example of the Electoral Commission, which has been calling for it since 2014. It is important that we all come together at a time when it feels like there is concern or a lack of trust on all sides. We need to come together as a country, trust and take pride in our elections and take simple, reasonable and proportionate measures such as this to save people from being the victims of electoral fraud and to increase confidence in the overall system.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Since the age of 18, I have participated in 16 elections, and on each occasion I have been required to produce photographic identification without any fear of disfranchisement or discrimination—even for elections to this place, under exactly the same system used for Labour Members. The Minister is right to proceed with the pilot, but, having formerly been a Minister in the Northern Ireland Office and responsible for the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland, will she look very carefully at the free provision of photographic electoral cards, which are available to all in Northern Ireland and should follow from this pilot scheme in England?

Chloe Smith: I am really pleased to hear from a voice with evidence and experience in this debate—that has been a little missing from some contributions. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s reflection, which is based on personal experience, and note that all the authorities involved in the pilots are producing some form of alternative ID already. That is the baseline for the pilots. Nobody who is eligible to vote will be prevented from doing so, because the authorities are providing that as a
backstop measure, should it be needed. That gives us plenty of food for thought for how the pilot may be taken forward, if appropriate.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As the lessons of these welcome pilots are learned, may I encourage my hon. Friend also to consider reviewing, refreshing and reissuing the guidance provided for that activity which is permitted immediately outside a polling station and for some activities that take place within?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend reminds us of some of the electoral malpractice that has happened in this country. I can give the example again of Tower Hamlets, where some of the things he refers to have been seen. [Interruption.] Opposition Members ask, “Anywhere else?” Do they think that what happened in Tower Hamlets was okay? Do they think it was fine and that we should just move on without taking measures? Do they not agree with the kind of measures proposed by Sir Eric Pickles in his review of electoral law—to answer my hon. Friend’s question—and that we should take forward ways to improve and protect our voting system?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Conservatives are obsessed with electoral fraud and students potentially voting twice, but the Electoral Commission estimates that there were only 28 cases of fraud in 2017. A much more fundamental issue is the behaviour of the main UK parties. In 2015, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats were all fined by the Electoral Commission for submitting wrong election spending returns. The commission says that fines are no longer fit for purpose. The same behaviour was repeated in 2017, and the Conservatives have been shielding the Democratic Unionist party over the dodgy 2016 donations. When will the Government act in relation to the behaviour of the main UK parties?

Chloe Smith: I think I can safely say that that question was not to do with voter ID pilots.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it not sensible, before rolling out any policy nationally, to test it at a local level first?

Chloe Smith: I think that that is right. We should recognise that we are piloting these approaches, and I look forward to learning from the local authorities involved what has worked in their areas and what lessons it might hold for any further moves.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Recently, the Electoral Commission told the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I serve, that of postal votes put into a ballot box, more than 1,000 would be deemed abnormal. What measures are in place to prevent such behaviour? Obviously postal votes are for posting, not for putting in the box on the day.

Chloe Smith: As my hon. Friend knows, it is legitimate to take a postal vote to a polling station on the day, but I understand that he has recently found unusual evidence of the extent to which that may have been happening. I know that what is in his mind is how much verification can have taken place of the high numbers of such postal votes, and I encourage him to go on trying to find out exactly what seems to have happened in his area.

As I have said throughout this afternoon’s exchanges, it is extremely important for us all to have confidence in our electoral system. That means that we must be able to test ways of improving our protection in the system, which will in turn mean that fewer people become victims of electoral crime. I record my thanks not only to the five authorities that are conducting the ID trials, but to the three that are testing ways of improving the postal and proxy voting processes.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement and her commitment to combating fraud. Contrary to Labour Members’ assertions, is it not the case that this will not deter people who are entitled to vote from doing so and will not reduce turnout, but that what it will do is reduce and deter electoral fraud?

Chloe Smith: That is precisely what the pilots are intended to do. They are intended to test, in a proportionate and reasonable way, practices that already take place throughout the world and have continued to support thriving and flourishing democracies.
Windrush

4.33 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, many people came to this country from around the Commonwealth to make their lives here and to help rebuild Britain after the war. All Members will have seen the recent heartbreaking stories of individuals who have been in the country for decades struggling to navigate an immigration system in a way that they should never, ever have had to.

These people worked here for decades. In many cases, they helped to establish the national health service. They paid their taxes and enriched our culture. They are British in all but legal status, and this should never have been allowed to happen. Both the Prime Minister and I have apologised to those affected and I am personally committed to resolving this situation with urgency and purpose.

Of course, an apology is just the first step we need to take to put right the wrong these people have suffered, but before I get on to the steps we will be taking I want to explain how this situation has arisen. The Immigration Act 1971 provided that those here before it came into force should be treated as having been given indefinite leave to enter or remain in the UK, as well as retaining a right of abode for certain Commonwealth citizens. Although the Empire Windrush docked in the port of Tilbury in 1948, it is therefore everyone that arrived in the UK before 1973 who was given settlement rights.

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First, I will waive the citizenship fee for anyone in the Windrush generation who wishes to apply for citizenship. This is a tangible offer to put right the wrong these people have suffered. Secondly, I will waive the requirement to carry out a knowledge of language and life in the UK test—[Interruption.]—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Amber Rudd: Thirdly, the children of the Windrush generation who are in the UK are in most cases British citizens. However, where that is not the case and they need to apply for naturalisation, I shall waive the fee. Fourthly, I will ensure that those who made their lives here but have now retired to their country of origin can come back to the UK. Again, I will waive the cost of any fees associated with the process and will work with our embassies and high commissions to make sure people can easily access this offer. In effect, that means that anyone from the Windrush generation who now wants to become a British citizen will be able to do so, and that builds on the steps that I have already taken.

On 16 April, I established a taskforce in my Department to make immediate arrangements to help those who needed it. This included setting up a helpline to get in touch with the Home Office. Let me be quite clear that this helpline and the information shared will not be used to remove people from the country. Its purpose is to help and support.

We have successfully resolved nine cases so far and made 84 appointments to issue documents. My officials are helping those concerned to prove their residence and they are taking a proactive and generous approach so that people can easily establish their rights. We do not need to see definitive documentary proof of date of entry or of continuous residence. That is why the debate about registration slips and landing cards is misleading. Instead, the caseworker will make a judgment based on all the circumstances of the case and on the balance of probabilities.

Previously, the burden of proof on some of the Windrush generation to evidence their legal rights was too much on the individual. Now we are working with this group in a much more proactive and personal way in order to help them. We were too slow to realise that there was a group of people who needed to be treated differently, and the system was too bureaucratic when these people were in touch.

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The Home Office is a great Department of State—[Interruption.]—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Amber Rudd: It works tirelessly to protect us. It takes millions of decisions each year that profoundly affect peoples’ lives, and for the most part it gets these right.
But recent events have shown that we need to give a human face to how we work and exercise greater judgment, where and when it is justified. That is why I will be establishing a new customer contact centre, so that anyone who is struggling to navigate the many different immigration routes can speak to a person and get appropriate advice. This will be staffed by experienced caseworkers who will offer expert advice and identify a systemic problem much more quickly in the future. I will also be putting in place 50 senior caseworkers across the country to ensure that, where more junior members of staff are unsure about a decision, they can speak to someone with experience to ensure that discretion is properly exercised.

There has also been much concern about whether the Home Office has wrongly deported anyone from the Windrush generation. The Immigration Act 1971 provides protection for members of this group if they have lived here for more than five years and if they arrived in the country before 1973. I am now checking all Home Office records going back to 2002 to verify that no one has been deported in breach of this policy. This is a complex piece of work that involves manually checking thousands of records. So far, 4,200 records have been reviewed out of nearly 8,000 that date back to 2002, and no cases have been identified that breach the protection granted under the 1971 Act. This is an ongoing piece of work and I want to be absolutely certain of the facts before I draw any conclusions. I will ensure that the House is informed of any updates, and I intend to have this data independently audited once my Department has completed its work, to ensure transparency.

It was never the intention that the Windrush generation should be disadvantaged by measures put in place to tackle illegal migration. I am putting additional safeguards in place to ensure that this will no longer happen, regardless of whether they have documentation or not. As well as ensuring that the Home Office does not target action against someone who is part of the Windrush generation, I will also put in place greater protection for landlords, employers and others conducting checks in order to ensure that we are not denying work, housing, benefits and services to this group. These measures will be kept carefully under review, and I do not rule out further changes if they are needed.

Now I will turn to the issue of compensation. As I said earlier, an apology is just the first step we need to take to put right these wrongs. The next and most important task is to get those affected the documents that they need. But we also do need to address the issue of compensation. Each individual case is painful to hear, but it is so much more painful, and often harrowing, for the people involved. These are not numbers, but people with families, responsibilities and homes—I appreciate that. The state has let these people down, with travel documents denied, exclusions from returning to the UK, benefits cut and even threats of removal—this, to a group of people who came to help build this country; people who should be thanked.

This has happened for some time. I will put this right and where people have suffered loss, they will be compensated. The Home Office will be setting up a new scheme to deliver this which will be run by an independent person. I will set out further details around its scope and how people will be able to access it in the coming weeks.

I am also aware that some of the individual cases that have come to light recently relate not to the Windrush generation but to people who came to the UK after 1 January 1973. These people should have documentation to confirm their right to be here, but I recognise that some will face similar issues in documenting their rights after spending so many years in this country. Given that people who have been here for more than 20 years will usually go on a 10-year route to settlement, I am ensuring that people who arrived after 1973, but before 1988, can also access the Windrush taskforce, so they can get the support and assistance needed to establish their claim to be here legally. I will consider further, in the light of the cases that come forward, whether any policy changes are needed to deal fairly with these cases.

I have set out urgent measures to help the Windrush generation document their rights, how this Government intend to offer them greater rights than they currently enjoy, how we will compensate people for the hardship they have endured and the steps I will take to ensure this never happens again. None of that can undo the pain already endured, but I hope that it demonstrates the Government’s commitment to put these wrongs right going forward.

4.45 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. Many people, both in this House and outside, think that the events involving the Windrush generation are one of the biggest scandals in the administration of home affairs for a very long time. The Home Secretary said that the situation “should never have been allowed to happen”, but she is the Home Secretary and she allowed it to happen. These cases cannot come as a surprise to her because many of my Opposition colleagues have been pursuing individual cases for some time. She is behaving as though it is a shock to her that her officials are implementing regulations in the way that she intended them to be implemented. The Home Secretary must understand that the buck ultimately stops with her.

Ministerial maladministration sometimes occurs because officials act in error; and sometimes it is a question of unforeseen circumstances, but the problem with the plight of the Windrush generation is that it was foreseeable and it was foreseen. People inside the Department and Members of this House have tried to draw the Government’s attention to it. The key was the Immigration Act 2014, which removed protections for Commonwealth citizens, who had up until then been exempt from deportation. I spoke about that and explained the situation to Ministers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) voted against it, and the current leader of the Labour party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), voted against it, but Ministers paid no attention.

Four years ago, an internal Home Office memo found that the “hostile environment” could make it harder for foreign nationals to find homes and could provoke widespread discrimination. Furthermore, the then Tory Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government said:

“The costs and risks considerably outweigh the benefits.”
[Ms Diane Abbott]

Let me repeat those costs for the benefit of the Home Secretary: patriotic Commonwealth citizens treated like liars; benefits cut; healthcare denied; jobs lost; and people evicted from their housing. Whether they were deported, refused re-entry or detained, these people were separated from family and friends in breach of their human rights. This was a system where people who had come here, very often as young children, were required to show four pieces of original documentation for each year they were supposedly in this country. Who could have believed that that was a sustainable or fair situation?

As I said, the situation we are in is not a surprise to Ministers or their officials because Member after Member has written to the Home Office to try to draw its attention to these cases.

There are elements of the Home Secretary’s statement that I welcome. I welcome the waiving of the citizenship fee; I welcome the waiving of the requirement to carry out the knowledge of language and life in the UK test—some of these people, having been in the UK all their life, would almost certainly pass that test with flying colours. I welcome the waiving of the naturalisation fee for children and, in particular, I welcome allowing people who have retired from this country to return, with the cost of their fees waived.

The Home Secretary talks about the problems of legislation, but she is not suggesting changes in legislation. It would be easy, for instance, to restore the protections for Commonwealth citizens that existed prior to 2014. There is no detail on compensation, but she will understand that Opposition Members will be pursuing the point. It is important that the compensation is not a token sum but properly reflects the actual costs and the damage to family life caused by this policy.

I am glad that Ministers have thought better of their early position of refusing to provide data on deportations. They told my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) in January that providing information on deportations and detention would “require a manual check of individual records which could only be done at disproportionate cost.”

I am glad that the Home Secretary has thought better of that position and is now undertaking a manual check of deportations, but what about people in detention? I visited Yarl’s Wood and met women in exactly this position and am asking the Home Secretary to produce the figures on those members of the Windrush generation who are in detention.

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Lady challenged me on some of the comments I made earlier. I just want to be clear again, if I may, that this group of people should have had their legal status formally given to them a long time ago. She may have missed a day of work. This is a generation with unparalleled commitment to this country, unparalleled pride in being British and unparalleled commitment to hard work and to contributing to society, and it is shameful that this Government have treated that generation in this way.

Amber Rudd: I am pleased to hear there are some areas on which the right hon. Lady and I agree. On this side of the House, as on the other side of the House, our appreciation of the value of these citizens, our admiration for the work they have done here and our respect for them remain undimmed. We are absolutely committed to that. I am pleased, too, that she has welcomed the substantial nature of the changes I have put in place to address the urgent problem of now: the fact that this cohort of people need to have their documentation put in place.

The right hon. Lady challenged me on some of the comments I made earlier. I just want to be clear again, if I may, that this group of people should have had their legal status formally given to them a long time ago. She will have seen, as I did, that some of the references of the individuals who have been so heartbreakingly let down were made before 2010; they happened when people tried to travel—[Interruption.] She may have voted against some of those provisions, but this has not just happened overnight. Unfortunately, the fact is that this group of people, whose proper, formal legal status should have been put in place any time from 1973, fell foul of that, bit by bit, more and more, as Government after Government took different and more formal steps to make sure that we protect people from illegal migration. There is legal migration and there is illegal migration, and the group we are talking about were part of legal migration. The steps I am putting in place now are going to make sure that they have the formal status that they should have had a long, long time ago.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already given a heartfelt apology, which was exactly the right thing to do, but will she please outline again the steps she is taking to make sure that a situation such as this never happens again?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. One question that comes back again, which the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington
The hon. and learned Lady asked about EU citizens. We have prepared a new form of identification that will be simple and easy to use and that anticipates the sort of problem that occurred in this case. All EU citizens will be able to have their own identification, so the more than 3 million people who will be eligible, as well as those who come during the implementation period, will be able to access that and have secure identification, which will be so important. I want to make sure that we can reassure those EU citizens that they are welcome and can stay and that this case has absolutely no bearing on what would happen to them.

I also reassure the hon. and learned Lady, and the rest of the House, that most other European countries have some form of registration system for other EU citizens. We do not have that in this country, but most EU citizens are familiar with the requirement to register in order to be part of the community and to enjoy the sort of rights that we do.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): The whole House will have heard my right hon. Friend’s whole-hearted apology for this very regrettable incident, which quite clearly should have been dealt with a very long time ago. Does she agree that what most affects the interests of immigrants and residents of this country is that the system should work really well? Will she assure me that, in future and following Brexit, people will have the confidence in our immigration system to allow a full and generous regime, to the benefit of all?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend, and he is right. I recognise the importance of restoring confidence in the system. My Department makes over 3 million decisions a year on visas; 2.7 million are allowed. This is a substantial system, most of it operates quickly, effectively and efficiently, and I will oversee a system with European Union registration that is as quick and effective.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Home Secretary will appreciate that everybody in the Caribbean is there because Britain and other European countries brought them from Africa to the Caribbean. That is the whole point of the Caribbean region. I and others are in this country because our parents were born under the British empire. When she says that people can apply for citizenship if they want it, does she understand that former citizenship was theirs all along? We, as West Indian and Caribbean, have given so much, over so many hundreds of years.

I welcome, of course, what the Home Secretary has said today, but I remind her that many others were also born under the empire. They are from countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda. Many of these people have temporary leave to remain or indefinite leave to remain. It is unfair; they were born under empire; many have been here for generations. So in her review and in looking closely at policy, will she look particularly at all those Commonwealth people? If the Commonwealth is to mean anything, it is to mean common wealth.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, honestly, for the work that he has done on this issue. I welcome that he has brought such clarity and passion and so much to this. It is important to me that he accepts that and works with us on a satisfactory response. I do understand the citizenship point, which is why I tried to
[Amber Rudd]

make a distinction in my statement between the legal status and the way that people understand their neighbours. As Home Secretary, I must engage with the legal status, and the steps that I have taken address exactly that point. It is in fact that legal status, and the steps to it, that have so put off some people from applying for it. I hope that we will be able to address that. The Windrush generation have brought this to our attention, but the steps that I have set out today will affect all citizens from the Commonwealth within that timeline.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and particularly for her tone in dealing with this very difficult situation. I also welcome her announcement that a team is being set up to ensure that the Windrush generation can evidence their right to access services. Will she provide detail on how quickly cases are being processed?

Amber Rudd: I was in Croydon today to see for myself the members of the taskforce and to talk to them about the speed at which this matter is being addressed. Although I made a statement last week that said that, from the point of getting information, we hope to deliver the outcome within two weeks, I am reassured that most of the cases—small numbers for now—are being turned round very quickly indeed. The approach that I have asked for, which is for the people who are working on this taskforce to lean in and to assist with the problem, has absolutely been acted on.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Of course the Home Office should be waiving citizenship fees and providing compensation for Windrush families, but I have been contacted today by someone from Kenya who says that they were turned away from the helpline because they were not part of the Windrush. There are many other people who came as here children with their families who are still having their legal rights denied.

The Home Secretary is also not addressing the wider problems. The Home Affairs Committee has warned repeatedly about failures and errors in decision making, about people being pursued who are legally here and about the fact that half of appeals, not just in Windrush cases, are being upheld because the Home Office is getting things wrong. There is a real and widespread concern that there is a culture of disbelief in the Home Office and that changes to the burden of proof have been created by the Government’s net migration target and the desire to get as many people to leave as possible. Will she remove all of that concern by saying now that she will get rid of the net migration target, as the Select Committee has advised?

Amber Rudd: Let me answer the first part of the right hon. Lady’s question. On engagement with high commissions internationally, that is exactly what I am doing. I recognise that it has not been completed yet, but I have met, for instance, the high commissioners from all the Caribbean countries to find out how we can work more closely with them. UK Visas and Immigration has offices internationally, and I will make sure that they all have the information that they need so that we can ensure that citizens who are in different former Commonwealth countries can engage satisfactorily with us.

The vast majority of children who were born here to people of the Windrush generation will have birth certificates and will be eligible, but we have a system in place to make sure that they are assisted as well. I encourage any MPs who have constituents who fall into that group to phone the taskforce as well.

The right hon. Lady asks me to talk more widely about net migration targets, but I will resist that at the moment. The key thing here—[Interruption.] Even though some Opposition Members would like to broaden this, the key thing is to make the careful distinction between legal and illegal. This has gone wrong where people who should be legal have not been treated as such, and that is why I am putting it right.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and also thank the Prime Minister for her apology, but may I make the point that my constituents in Kettering, while recognising the value of the Windrush generation 100%, want the Government to crack down as hard as they can on illegal immigration? Will she assure me that she will not take her eye off the ball when it comes to tackling illegal immigration to this country?

Amber Rudd: I agree that we must make this distinction and have a robust approach to illegal migration, which does not help people. I have met victims of slavery who have been trafficked here illegally. I do not want to have an environment where illegal migration flourishes. I remember that Labour once had some rather nice red mugs made that said “controlling migration” on the side, so I am sure that Labour Members would support us ensuring that illegal migration is attacked and treated completely differently.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): According to the Migration Observatory, up to 50,000 people are too scared and anxious to clarify their own status for fear of being stripped of their rights, detained or deported. After the manner in which they have been treated, does the Home Secretary appreciate their scepticism? Will she re-introduce the provision that exempted those from the Windrush generation and which her Government removed in 2014, and legislate for any other assurances that have been made to the Windrush generation?

Amber Rudd: Let me address the two points raised by the hon. Lady: the 2014 issue and the matter of wider engagement with the community. I have taken advice on this. The exemption was removed in 2014 because it was not necessary. The people who arrived pre-1973 already had that right. [Interruption.] Before the Opposition take this any further, I ask them to have a look at the legal advice. The exemption was taken out in 2014 because it was not necessary; those people had rights under the 1971 legislation. It was the information to confirm it that was needed. That particular provision did nothing to solve the problem. The hon. Lady’s second point was about communication and ensuring that we give people the confidence to come forward. I want that to happen, so we are going to engage more with non-governmental organisations, citizens advice bureaux and groups that engage much more proactively with the target community. The high commissioners over here have been advising us how to do that. I will ensure that we go out and
proactively find the people in that community who need our support so that we can get them the rights that they deserve.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary for her statement and her actions, as well as for her openness and honesty, and the apology that she and the Prime Minister have given. But we are still not being honest in this place. The Labour party did not vote against the Immigration Act 2014. [Interruption. I know that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) did because she has told us. We all know what she has done, but her party's position was to abstain. Let us now have an open and honest acceptance of this point. What other conclusion can we come to but that we would have these problems with the Windrush people, when we have a whole media who stoke up and prey on the prejudices, fears and concerns of many of our constituents? This is the natural consequence. Both our parties have a position that we will not support membership of the single market, for no other reason than that we do not believe in the free movement of people. We are not being honest.

However, Mr Speaker, you do not want speeches; you want questions. Perhaps we should have that debate, though. My question to the Home Secretary is this: will she now ensure that there is a change of culture among her officials so that they now see people as people, not numbers?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend makes such an important point. This is absolutely about a change of culture, which I will be trying to ensure trickles down the Department. Let me be quite clear that I am not blaming anybody else. I am saying that I want to ensure that there is more time, focus and resources so that there can be more engagement with individuals, rather than just numbers.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary confirm that compensation will be paid for loss of income, loss of benefits, legal fees, Home Office application fees, air fares, emotional distress and any other costs that have arisen from this debacle?

Amber Rudd: I can confirm that we are setting up a compensation scheme, and I will be consulting on what shape it should take, what it should cover, and how long it should be for. No doubt the hon. Lady will want to participate in that. It is too early for me to give any more detail because I want to get it right on behalf of the Government, but I can assure her that there will be an opportunity to let me know what she thinks.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): This is just a brief question, Mr Speaker, and not a speech. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the members of the Windrush generation, who have done so much for this country—we are indebted to them—will now be able to become British citizens at no extra cost?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend on that. I share his view about how much the Windrush citizens have done—and continue to do in so many cases—for this country, and there will be no extra cost.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I was one of the 18 Members of Parliament who voted against the “hostile environment” Immigration Bill back in 2014. It was a nasty, pernicious Bill that gave legislative ballast to the issues that we are dealing with today. Those of us who spoke out against that Bill warned of its consequences, and yet, for some inexplicable reason, Labour failed to oppose it. What other Home Office initiatives does the “hostile environment” culture inform, and how far does it reach within the Secretary of State’s Department? Given what has been discovered on her watch and what has been unleashed, does she not really think that the honourable thing for her to do is to consider her position and to resign?

Amber Rudd: The reason why the compliant environment is important—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman may be aware that that is the phrase, for good reason, that the Government use to show that what we are doing is promoting compliance with UK law, but in a way that tries to protect individuals and is sympathetic. I want to make sure that we are not a country that allows illegal migration to flourish. If that happens, more people will be trafficked here, more people will be abused, and more people will be forced to work in really terrible conditions. It is an important, valid part of what this Government are doing. As for my position, I want to put this right. I believe that I can do that, and I hope that I will win the confidence of the House when I achieve it.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reconfirm that she will be putting in place a communications strategy that ensures that the welcome changes that she has made are broadly known, and soon?

Amber Rudd: That is exactly what I hope to do. I will make sure that we pick the sorts of communication and the sorts of engagement with people that are more likely to win confidence among people in the community who have not wanted to come forward. High commissioners have been giving me certain amounts of advice, and publications have been coming forward with advice. I am absolutely committed to making sure that people grow in confidence regarding their engagement with the Home Office. I think that the most effective way of people gaining the confidence I want them to have, and coming forward to the Home Office for a swift resolution to their status, is by being heard from other people that this is the case. Only last Thursday, two people got their papers and said they were going to go out and attend the event mentioned by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), where they said they were going to speak and show their commitment and enthusiasm for the fact that they had got their papers. They also said that they would be telling their family members and friends that this was a proactively personal and helpful engagement.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The history of empire and Commonwealth runs deeply through the docks communities of Cardiff South and Penarth. The impact of the contributions of generations of Africans, Caribbean people, Somalis, Yemenis, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis runs throughout my communities for everyone to see. Does the Home Secretary accept that the “hostile environment”
policy has affected not just the Windrush generation but generations of people from other communities? A constituent of mine was wrongly deported to Somalia even though he was a British citizen, and this was addressed only after documents were provided by my office. Will the Home Secretary commit to offering compensation and support to all those beyond the Windrush generation who have also been affected by her Department’s “hostile environment” policy?

Amber Rudd: I would gently say to the hon. Gentleman that there are two separate approaches—one to legal people and one to illegal people. The purpose of the compliant environment is to make sure that illegal people do not flourish here. Legal people—those we are talking about today, like the Windrush cohort—should have their documents put in place. They will be able to apply to be British citizens under the law, even though everyone considers them as British citizens as part of their communities. In terms of the particular case he raises, he had better write to my office with specific details and I will look into it.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Any attempt to lay any of this at the door of the current Home Secretary is plainly absurd and ridiculous. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there were examples going on and there was still a problem as early as 2000 to 2005, under a Labour Government?

Amber Rudd: I want to thank my right hon. Friend for his comment but also say that I do take responsibility for this, and I want to be the person to put it right. He is right—those of us who have seen the cases recently know—that there are plenty of examples of people who were not able to return when they went to Caribbean countries where their parents had lived from pre-2010. This is not something that has just suddenly appeared; this has been going on a long time. This cohort should have been dealt with a long time ago, and then we would not be in this position, but this Government will put it right.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Let us hope that this is a wake-up call for culture and practice in the Home Office, because as the MP with one of the biggest immigration caseloads in the region, I have to say to the Home Secretary that that culture and practice have changed markedly over the last two or three years. She is right to say that judgment is part of that problem, but in that context, can she reassure me that the Home Office is not dismantling our arrangements to make sure that illegal migration does not flourish. I do not believe that the right hon. Gentleman or his constituencies would want us to do that. What we have is a situation where we have legal migration and illegal migration, and where there is illegal migration I believe that our constituents and our country expect us to enforce that. As for the individual case he raised, I cannot give immigration advice across the Floor of the House, and I advise him to write to me for further information.

Amber Rudd: We are not dismantling our arrangements to make sure that illegal migration does not flourish. I do not believe that the right hon. Gentleman or his constituencies would want us to do that. What we have is a situation where we have legal migration and illegal migration, and where there is illegal migration I believe that our constituents and our country expect us to enforce that. As for the individual case he raised, I cannot give immigration advice across the Floor of the House, and I advise him to write to me for further information.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Last week, the Home Secretary said that I should tell my constituents that they could trust the Home Office. I have arranged a community meeting this Saturday, and Home Office officials have been helpful, for which I am grateful. However, the Home Secretary leads a Department in which there is a culture of disbelief. I hold her, not her staff, responsible. How will she change that culture so that people in Bristol West can truly trust the Home Office, which I want them to be able to do?

Amber Rudd: I have spoken to my staff, and I am aware that they are going to assist the hon. Lady in Bristol West. As the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) mentioned, I hope that the hon.
Lady will notice a difference in Home Office assistance going forward. Bristol West will have the benefit not only of the arrangement that she has put in place but of staff going to attend to provide support in that analysis. I hope that that will be appreciated by the people who need it in her constituency.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is of course right that we listen to and compensate the people of the Windrush generation who made a peerless contribution, and who have clearly been put in a very difficult situation. Should we not also listen to people such as the Prime Minister of Jamaica who, after the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last week, said that he was confident that justice would be done?

**Amber Rudd**: That is a fair point. I am aware that many of the people who are leading the countries concerned are relieved and content that the Government have put in place the right measures. I recognise that we need to do more to convince individuals in MPs’ constituencies that that is taking place. This morning, for instance, I met another high commissioner who went out of their way to say how pleased they were with the new arrangements that have been put in place.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Ah, a choice between two distinguished chess players who are related. I call Maria Eagle.

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is clear that the Home Secretary has used the phrase, “compliant environment”, more frequently than she has used the phrase, “hostile environment”, but whether it is compliance or hostility, does she accept that that policy has led to this debacle? She mentioned people who came after 1973 but before 1988. Will it still be her policy that those people have to produce four original pieces of evidence for every year they have been here to get the status that is theirs by right?

**Amber Rudd**: No, it is not that policy. To be fair, I was in Croydon today talking to some of the caseworkers, and I challenged them on whether they would expect that before we put in these arrangements, and they said no, they would not. It has not been the case that people with this sort of evidence have been expected to produce that in the past. I hope that that message will go out loud and clear to the hon. Lady’s constituents and others: they do not need that sort of information and, yes, for the ’73 to ’88 cohort, they, too, will be able to access this new service, which will help to link in with other Government Departments to assist with swifter resolution.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary, particularly her personal commitment to resolving the issue and the steps that she has put in place. Does she not agree that it is sensible in principle that checks should be made on people seeking homes, jobs and healthcare?

**Amber Rudd**: Of course, those checks should be put in place—my hon. Friend is absolutely right. They were put in place by Labour in 2008, and other checks were put in place even earlier than that. It is the case in most European countries that if someone goes for a job or rents a property, they have to show evidence. The purpose of the accelerated, swift process is to make sure that the people who are so valued by this country have the evidence that they need.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituent, Suzanne Kavaz, was four months old when she arrived from Cyprus in 1959. Cyprus was in the British empire until independence in 1960. Her application for a passport has been in limbo for 18 months, and she has lost work because of a lack of identity evidence, even though she had a passport in the past. When does a “hostile environment”, combined with implicit tolerance of austerity-workload fatigue and a culture of concealment, become textbook institutional racism?

**Amber Rudd**: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has chosen to interpret the problem in that way. I cannot comment on her individual case, but I simply advise her to ask her constituent—or she can do it herself—to contact my office so that we can make sure that the right steps are put in place and, if appropriate, she does not have to wait any longer.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Last week my right hon. Friend set out the expectation that all cases would be resolved within a fortnight. Will she update the House on progress, and does she anticipate that that timescale will hold?

**Amber Rudd**: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I was in Croydon this morning to make sure that I could have full confidence in the timetable set out and that we have sufficient people on the casework team to turn it around as swiftly as our expectations. That remains the case. The number of calls coming in and the number of face-to-face interviews taking place are manageable. I hope that that will remain the case, but I will not stop putting resources in to ensure that this group are properly addressed and get the first-class service I want them to have.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is estimated that 50,000 people—a relatively small number—are caught in this indignity, incompetence and “It’ll be all right on the night” policy. None of them have presented themselves at my surgery because they have instructed solicitors, so will the Home Secretary commit to reimburse in full the legal fees incurred by those people? Will she also ensure that none of the much larger group of 3 million EU citizens—13,000 of them in Ealing Central and Acton alone—suffer the same demeaning treatment of being denied services or, worse still, receiving a knock at the door from deportation, as has happened to the Windrush generation?

**Amber Rudd**: I can reassure the hon. Lady. On the issue of EU citizens. We have put in place a thorough, simple, effective system, which will go live later this year. We have extensively tested it with EU citizen groups and I have a team over at the European Parliament this week, engaging with European parliamentarians to make sure that it is right. It has been prepared in a way that will be very straightforward to use and it anticipates the need that was not anticipated in the case of the Windrush cohort.
On the compensation for which the hon. Lady asks, as I have said, we are launching the compensation scheme, but I need to consult on it first, appoint someone independently and make sure that it addresses the issues she raises. On the actual applications being made now to the taskforce, while I was there this morning I listened in to some calls and the way in which the callers are engaging with the border people helping them has been very constructive. They do not need to have lawyers: in this process we have put in place, there will be no need for lawyers to engage.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is astonishing that, faced with one of the largest scandals we have seen in the way in which a specific group of British citizens have been treated by the Home Secretary’s Department, she has not seen fit to take proper responsibility and resign. Will she tell us, in the light of her failure to resign, what on earth is her concept of ministerial responsibility?

Amber Rudd: It is my committed intent to make sure that I put this right. I believe that the measures that I have set out today will address that, but I will make sure that it remains a priority. That, I believe, is what people would expect of me as a Minister.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): May I pick up on just one of the policies brought in by this Government as part of their compliant, hostile environment, namely the right to rent, the measure forcing landlords to check the immigration status of tenants? The former Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, actually advised the Home Office back in 2013 that those landlords “who are already rogues will not obey the law—and will make...money...by increasing rents/compromising on health and safety for tenants who cannot complain.”

Was it not clear then that that policy would never work, and should it not be scrapped now, along with the “hostile environment”?

Amber Rudd: The legislation to which the hon. Gentleman refers is in the Immigration Act 2014 and it is, of course, the case that Labour did not oppose it. We did a consultation on the back of some of the comments on it. A substantial consultation was done in the midlands, and as a result of that we had the confidence to go ahead with it.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This is what happens when we have a national debate and a Government mentality that always sees migration in negative terms as something to be feared and resisted. Any Government have the right to take measures against illegal immigration, but the point is that the Windrush generation were not illegal. They came here legally, they worked here legally and they have stayed here legally. What more can the Home Secretary do not only to address the legitimate grievances of the Windrush generation, but to prevent this from being repeated with legal migration from elsewhere, be it the sub-continent or the European Union?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He is right that we need to make sure that systems are put in place so that, should this happen again, the Home Office spots that sooner than it did in this case. I recognise the fact that that needs to be done by a more personal approach, which I set out in my statement. I will also make sure that we put in systems that look at some of the group results. Sometimes what we have is a situation in which individual caseworkers see one thing and the consequences are not being compiled and reported on. I recognise the point he makes, but I believe that we are putting in place points to address it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As a new Member of Parliament representing a constituency with one of the highest immigrant populations in Scotland, I have had the eye-opening experience of constituents coming to my office in tears because they are in terrible situations, with the Home Office essentially playing God with their lives and tormenting them for years in many cases. Is not that a repudiation of the Prime Minister’s calls to deport first and hear appeals later? That is at the heart of the Home Office’s toxic “hostile environment” policy and its latest manifestation. Will the Home Secretary take responsibility for the fact that she has disenfranchised British citizens through the changes to the Immigration Act 2014? These people do not need to produce paperwork: they are British citizens. When will she show some moral courage and resign because of the toxic legacy of this Home Office policy?

Amber Rudd: I simply do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s interpretation of how the Home Office approaches immigration. Plenty of people who have tier 1 or tier 2 visas tell us that the UK visa application system is faster than any they have seen before. Many elements of our immigration system support business and are swift and effective, and we should all be proud of them.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A constituent with no papers was made to battle and spend thousands of pounds on legal advice before obtaining a biometric residency permit, but is now being told by potential employers and public bodies that they will not accept it. What is the Home Secretary doing to ensure that public bodies and employers know what to do in relation to ID requirements?

Amber Rudd: One of the missives that I have sent out already as a result of this is instructions to the type of organisations that would otherwise lead on assessing landlords and businesses to make sure that they take a more proactive approach to investigations. We have also told them that they will not face penalties where this group are concerned, so we have tried to lessen their sense of urgency about getting it right. It is important to make sure that we have a system in place where employers cannot employ illegal migrants otherwise they will face fines, but because of this particular situation we have given out particular instructions. As long as employers have done some due diligence, they should not treat these people harshly.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What message has the Home Secretary for my constituent, Nikita Wiggins, whom I saw in my surgery this morning? She came to the UK from Barbados 35 years ago aged three, with an indefinite leave stamp in her passport. Even though she was recently made to take a habitual residency test by the Department for Work and Pensions, she cannot
take up a very good new job because the Home Office no longer recognises passport stamps for these purposes. This situation goes way beyond the Windrush cases and into every corner of every people's lives. It is a product of eight years of institutionalised bullying and discrimination by the Home Secretary's Department and her Prime Minister.

**Amber Rudd:** I would caution the hon. Gentleman not to use his constituent to make such a political point about the past eight years. If he wants me to look at his constituent, who sounds to me like she falls within the 1973 to 1998 cohort, I urge him to send the information through to me.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Since last week, I have heard of constituents who have been forced to apply for indefinite leave to remain when it is not clear that they needed to; who have applied for spouse visas when it is not clear that that was appropriate; and who have had to go to court to make the case for their right to live and work here. Some have had legal advice—sometimes poor-quality legal advice—and some have not been able to afford it. In addition to the measures that the Home Secretary has announced today, will she also look again at the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 and the detrimental effect that that is having, when people cannot get good-quality, professional, legal immigration advice?

**Amber Rudd:** I recognise the concern that the hon. Lady has raised. The measures that I have put in place today will not require people to get legal advice. I believe that the new taskforce I have put in place has an approach to individuals that will enable them to have confidence that the process will work much better for them than having a lawyer. In one case that I was engaged with today, I was talking to some of the caseworkers and they described how somebody had asked their son or daughter to call up to create that first distance, and then they had taken confidence and were able to address it. This is a system I have put in place where people can have confidence in addressing and dealing with it and in getting a fast resolution.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): I met a gentleman on Friday—a constituent, originally from the Caribbean, who has been here for 50 years—and in recent times, he has had to spend thousands of pounds unnecessarily to re-prove his right to remain here. I know that the Home Secretary has announced that there will be a consultation into process, but on behalf of my constituent and many others, when will he get his money back?

**Amber Rudd:** That is a very fair question. We are going to put in place a compensation scheme. I am going to consult on it first. I would like it to act with urgency and pace, and be able to engage with people such as the hon. Gentleman's constituent as soon as possible. He must allow me a little time to do that, but I share his need for urgency.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): If I write to the Home Secretary about my constituent, Mr Everton George Perries, who has been here since 1974, will she actually answer? I am not sure that she knows what is going on in her Department. I wrote to her on 4 August last year about a case in which one of my constituents was the subject of domestic violence from somebody who should be deported. I wrote to remind her in February this year that she had not answered that letter, and I finally got an answer to it in April, in what was essentially an urgent case. Has her Department not taken its eye seriously off the ball in relation to the real cases of illegal immigration? Is it not surprising to her that in that reply, the official said to me:

“From July last year we saw an unprecedented level of intake in Members' written correspondence about immigration matters”?

That is hardly a surprise. Why is it such a surprise to the Home Secretary?

**Amber Rudd:** I see that the hon. Gentleman is making a general point about the Home Office. I am always interested in hearing the points that colleagues choose to make, but today I want to focus on the outcomes that I am putting in place for this particular cohort, who need to have their rights put in place.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What discussion has the Home Secretary had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the denial of social security support for some of these people? I appreciate that the Home Secretary has said that she is setting up a compensation fund, but could we have more clarity that they will also be compensated for denial of pensions, social security support for disabled people and so on? And will she finally publish the internal 2014 impact assessment that predicted these effects?

**Amber Rudd:** I have already put in place instructions to be sent to jobcentres to ensure that they also have an awareness of this cohort, so that when they might have been considering stopping people's benefits because they do not have the papers, that is changed. I will engage with the Department for Work and Pensions on the wider issue. On the retrospective element, that is the sort of thing that I would want the independent person in charge of the compensation to look carefully at.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Two years ago in this place, I raised the case of my constituent who arrived 50 years ago as a child on his parents' British passports. He did have all the documentation, but he has been put through three and a half years of hell. He has finally been granted settled status but has lost over £50,000 through loss of earnings and legal fees, and he is still not entitled to a British passport. How will the Home Secretary compensate him for the devastating impact on his mental health, and when can he expect to receive his British passport?

**Amber Rudd:** First let me say how sorry I am about the situation the hon. Lady's constituent has found himself in and thank her for the work she has done for him. I suggest she engages with him to show him that we have now set up the hotline so that he can get his citizenship regularised, if that is what he is still in need of. On the timing of compensation, as I have just said, I will be setting up a compensation scheme and making sure it has independent oversight. When we have that information, I look forward to letting her know.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): Our casework is a litmus test of the impact of Government policy, and my casework in the last week has shown family members
denied access to weddings and funerals because of arbitrary decisions by the Secretary of State’s Department; international students who are victims of the TOEIC—test of English for international communication—scandal facing deportation on the flimsiest of grounds and at an extortionate cost to the taxpayer; and, finally, victims of domestic violence with British children facing deportation for no other reason than that the mothers cannot produce evidence from the fathers who beat them. This is totally unacceptable. Windrush is the tip of the iceberg of an immigration policy that is unfair, unjust and incompetently delivered. That is what the Home Secretary ought to be taking responsibility for, and the best thing she could do by way of an apology to the Windrush generation is to ensure that they and future generations of migrants have a job or go to hospital, they need to show who they have a job or go to hospital, they need to show who they are. It is the right thing to do to protect people from too much illegal migration.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman has referred to some really tragic situations, and if he sends me the details, I will look carefully at them and make sure they are addressed. I hope that the measures I am putting in place will allow the sort of personal contact that will enable such individuals to get a more personal engagement and a faster and perhaps more satisfactory response when needed.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The University of Oxford has estimated that about 120,000 undocumented individuals who either were born here or grew up here face a Windrush situation of their own. Why does the Home Office make it so horrendously complicated and eye-wateringly expensive for them to regularise their stay here?

Amber Rudd: There is a lot of misinformation about what documents are required and when. As a consequence of the assessments we have done since 2014 and 2016, the documents required are now easier for people to access than passports, which not everyone has, as the hon. Gentleman says. It is not unusual, however, for a country to have legislation that tries to combat illegal migration by saying that if someone wants to rent a flat, have a job or go to hospital, they need to show who they are. It is the right thing to do to protect people from too much illegal migration.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I have been contacted by lawyers representing constituents of mine who are members of the Windrush generation who have been phoning the new helpline the Home Office has established, and they report that the helpline is outsourced to a private contractor. They also represent constituents who are so fearful of the Home Office that they do not want to disclose all their details in that first contact but want to seek advice anonymously before proceeding. They are told by the helpline, however, that they cannot do that. When a lawyer queried this, he was told: “should the department find they did not have a right to Citizenship...then...they could look at other possibilities”. Does she understand the depth of the lack of trust in her Department among members of the Windrush generation, will she assure the House that no enforcement action will be taken on the basis of phone calls to the helpline, and will she say what she is doing to rebuild the trust and confidence of people who are so fearful that they do not even want to give their names to her Department?

Amber Rudd: I am sorry to hear that example. I can say, having today met the caseworkers operating the taskforce, that their intent when they say “Look at other possibilities” is to look at other possibilities to help. I ask her to convey that to her constituents, because it is their genuine endeavour. I made that point in my statement as well: there is no question of removing people. I know it is a fear, but it is not happening, and I urge her to communicate that back to her constituents and the lawyers. I should add that when I initially called—immediately—to have the taskforce and phone line set up, it was a phone line at a call centre for about 24 hours, possibly longer; it is now properly run and staffed by the Home Office and by professionals, as one would expect.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): In 2015 my constituent Paulette Wilson, a 62-year-old grandmother who came to the UK from Jamaica 50 years ago, was sent a letter by the Home Office out of the blue—to her dismay—telling her that there was no evidence of her lawful entry into the country, and no evidence of her right to remain. Two years later, she was detained at Yarl’s Wood and threatened with deportation to a country where she had no surviving family, and where she had not been since the age of 10. I want to know why it has taken the detention of my constituent, and other cases raised by Members on both sides of the House, for the Government to get a grip on this issue and whether my constituent will be fully compensated for loss of income, loss of benefits, and the inhumane way in which she was treated.

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Lady’s indignation about the way in which her constituent was treated. Her first application, which was rejected, was made in 2003. I am pleased that she has now received her documentation, which was sent to her in December. I agree that this sounds like the sort of case that would be eligible for compensation. However, I must allow the compensation scheme to be set up and the necessary consultation to take place, so that the scheme is right and people can gain access to it in a way that is fair.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Gloria Fletcher wept as she told me that, having lived here for 50 years and worked every single day of her working life, she had lost her job when her work was transferred to another company because she could not prove that she was British. She and her husband Derek are now struggling to pay the mortgage. The Home Secretary says that the state let them down. No, it did not; the Prime Minister let them down. The Home Secretary let them down. Will they both stop trying to blame their civil servants, and start taking responsibility for the pain that they have caused?

Amber Rudd: Let me say for the avoidance of doubt that I do take responsibility. It is because I take responsibility that I want to put this right, and I will make sure that my office does so.
Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Last week, the Home Secretary announced the establishment of a Windrush taskforce consisting of 50 staff. In less than a week, its remit appears to have been expanded to cover the entire Commonwealth. That not only demonstrates the mess that the Home Office is in, but potentially makes less than one member of staff responsible for each Commonwealth member state. How many staff members will the task force now have, and how many countries is it expected to cover?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman, because I talked to members of the taskforce this morning, that there are currently 20 staff members, and that they are managing their casework and calls. I can also reassure him, and other Members, that they are leaning in and finding the people who are appearing in our media.

Let me take this opportunity to thank not only the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for the good work that he did, but the various media outlets which relentlessly exposed the situation of which these individuals had been on the receiving end. It is their extraordinary work that has led to this sea change in the protection of the Windrush cohort, and the changes that will be made in the future.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): We have heard the Home Secretary try to gloss over this crisis—a crisis that she and her predecessor, the Prime Minister, created—but is not the truth that the scale of the Home Office response is likely to fall far short of what is needed? Does the Home Secretary not understand the scale of the issue, or is she simply unable to manage her Department?

Amber Rudd: I am sorry to hear that from the hon. Gentleman. If he had been listening to what I have been saying, he would know that there is no glossing. There is a clear plan, and there is a clear commitment. I will take any opportunity that is presented to come back and tell the House what progress has been made, because it matters to me personally, and it matters to the Government, to put this right so that the people who have done so much for our country are looked after and respected as they should be.

Points of Order

5.54 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It concerns a question posed by the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) during Prime Minister’s Question Time last week. I ask for your advice and guidance on this matter. On that occasion, the hon. Gentleman asked the Prime Minister:

“Does she believe that the honourable thing would be for the new incumbent of that seat to resign and fight a free and honest by-election?”—[Official Report, 18 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 322.]

I have many issues with that statement, Mr Speaker, and I look to you for guidance on what steps I can take to defend myself against these slurs. I was not informed that the hon. Gentleman would be mentioning me in the Chamber, and I was not present to defend myself when the comments were made. As a direct result of the accusatory tone of the question, I have now been a victim of online abuse through Twitter and via e-mail. My honour and reputation have been called into question by the comments that have been made.

I have never condoned, and would never condone, the spreading of lies and untruths about a political opponent or any other person, and nor would anyone on my team. I worked extremely hard to win the election fair and square, and I will not allow anyone to imply anything different.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, and for her courtesy of giving me notice of it. I think I am right in saying that, by e-mail, she alerted the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) of her intention to raise this matter.

Mr Speaker: I fear that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay may have inadvertently misled the House during Defence Questions earlier today when he said that

“the Ministry of Defence does not actually administer LIBOR funding—that is the Treasury.”
On 14 March, in a written answer, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans stated categorically:

“Armed Forces related LIBOR grants, including bespoke funds such as the Armed Forces Covenant Fund and Aged Veterans Fund, are committed by HM Treasury and administered by the MOD.”

This really matters, because there is concern about the possibility that LIBOR funds have been mis-spent by the Ministry of Defence, and the Secretary of State cannot simply pass the buck. Will you please advise me, Mr Speaker, on how the record might be put straight?

Mr Speaker: If the Secretary of State believes that he has erred—and, of course, to err is human, so there is no shame in it—it is up to him to correct the record. Each and every Member is responsible for the veracity of what he or she says in this place, and, indeed, for correcting that which is wrong. It would be perfectly possible, if the Secretary of State accepts that he has made a mistake, for him to put the record straight via a correction in the Official Report, known to us, and to some outside this place, as Hansard. I think I can say with some confidence that the gravamen of the hon. Lady’s point of order will communicate itself to the Secretary of State ere long, and we must await developments.

Richard Burgon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to express my concern about the Government’s failure to provide time for a debate and vote on the Criminal Legal Aid (Remuneration) (Amendment) Regulations 2018. The measure has caused widespread concern throughout the legal sector, with barristers taking unprecedented industrial action and refusing to take on legal aid work, which has left some defendants without legal representation. A motion praying against the statutory instrument was laid on 22 March on behalf of the Opposition. The shadow Leader of the House then raised the matter during Business Questions on 29 March, and again on 19 April, but no time has provided for a meaningful vote. I understand that under the procedure, the instrument can be annulled only if such a motion is agreed by the House within 40 days of the regulations being laid. That period has now expired.

May I ask you, Mr Speaker, to confirm that we have taken the necessary steps to secure a vote according to the conventions of the House, and that a prayer from the official Opposition should be accommodated with a debate on a motion for annulment, for which my hon. Friend made a point of order about a similar situation, and after your intervention the Government agreed to revoke and re-lay the regulations phasing out the NHS bursary for nursing students. Would it therefore be your advice that the Government should revoke and re-lay this regulation, Mr Speaker? Can you also advise whether there are any other steps that my hon. Friends and I could take to secure a debate and vote on this legislation? Otherwise, we seem to be in a position whereby the Government can simply make it impossible for regulations to be annulled by refusing to allocate time.

Mr Speaker: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his point of order. This is a regrettable state of affairs. Very few things in this place are without precedent, and I certainly would not suggest that this situation is. Indeed, he has just referred to a recent example for which there was a corrective remedy available that the Government accepted. I am not sure that even this situation, if uncorrected, would be unprecedented, but what I can say with some confidence is that such a circumstance is unusual and, indeed, in terms of the smooth running of the House and the existence of a basic atmosphere of trust between the usual channels, it is unhealthy for such situations to occur and for people to feel the need to raise them in this way. I am not cavilling at the hon. Gentleman’s doing so, but it is a pity that this situation has arisen.

I can confirm that, as the hon. Gentleman suggested—he is not in error in this—that the praying time for these regulations has now expired. He and his colleagues will therefore need to table a motion to revoke the regulations in place of their prayer and press the Government through the usual channels for the necessary time to debate the matter. If the motion to revoke were agreed by this House, it would not have direct statutory effect in the way that a prayer would have done. It would be a matter for decision by the Government when or whether to bring forward amending regulations.

Finally, in answer to the hon. Gentleman’s inquiry whether there were any more steps available to him, I think I can say no. He has, by taking the action he has done, exhausted the avenues open to him. I say that in a neutral, or indeed positive, sense. He has pursued such options as are available to him and I think he has now to await the Government’s response. Knowing his terrier-like pertinacity, I feel sure that if he does not enjoy satisfaction this is not the last we will have heard of the matter. If there are no further points of order, and the appetite has been satisfied at least for today, we can now proceed.
Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill

[Relevant document: Sixth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. Pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Non-Domestic (Property in Common Occupation) Bill, HC 943.]

Second Reading

6.3 pm

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second Time.

The Bill takes forward two important measures to promote fairness derived from the autumn Budget: fairness for hard-pressed businesses that face an unjustified tax hike because of the so-called staircase tax; and fairness for the families, young people and many others who see properties lying empty while they struggle to find somewhere to live. On the first issue, we are determined to support the occupiers of business premises in multiple occupation and to ensure that they do not face unfair penalties. For more than 50 years, businesses that operated in adjoining units or rooms accessed from a common corridor staircase received one rates bill. That applied, for example, if a business occupied three consecutive floors in an office block or if a business occupied two rooms separated, let us say, only by a wall.

The rule was widely understood and accepted among all ratepayers, rating professionals and the Valuation Office Agency. No one was looking to change that approach. However, as a consequence of a Supreme Court decision in 2015 concerning an office block occupied by the accountancy firm Mazars, the situation was put in some doubt. After considering the Supreme Court judgment, the Valuation Office Agency concluded that it had to change its long-standing practice. As a result, each unit of property accessed from common parts has to have its own rating assessment, regardless of whether the properties are adjoining or associated with the same business. So, for an office block housing more than one business, each floor will now typically need to have its own rating assessment, even if successive floors are occupied by the same business.

We are not criticising the Supreme Court for reaching that judgment or the Valuation Office Agency for changing its practice as a result, but we have monitored the impact of the changes and it is clear that they have had troubling and damaging implications for ratepayers. First, moving from rating assessments that cover several floors in an office block or if a business occupied three consecutive floors to rating assessments that cover individual floors has increased some rateable values. That is why we have decided to restore the previous practice of the Valuation Office Agency under clause 1. This will again see adjoining properties that are part of the same business receiving one rating assessment and paying one rates bill. We have decided to do this retrospectively. It is important that we get the process right, so we carried out a technical consultation on draft provisions over eight weeks after Christmas, supported by workshops held by my officials with the ratings sector. Indeed, there were meetings with expert valuation surveyors, too.

The Minister for Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), answered detailed questions from the Chair of the Select Committee. I am pleased to say that a good response to the consultation has helped us to improve some of the draft provisions. We published a summary of those responses and an explanation of the improvements on the Ministry’s website. I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation on behalf of my Department and the Valuation Office Agency for the help we received from the Rating Surveyors’ Association, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation in this work. It is probably worth mentioning that the Federation of Small Businesses supports the measure, too. As a result of this work, I am confident that the provisions we are introducing in clause 1 are technically sound and meet the Government’s aims, and that they will be welcomed not just by ratepayers but by everyone who wants to see British businesses thriving, especially small businesses and those on our precious high streets.

We are also determined to deliver a fairer deal for the many people who want and need decent, secure and affordable homes. We are streaming every sinew to build more homes. Last year, we saw 217,000 new homes delivered, the highest number in all but one of the past 30 years.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am a strong supporter of what the Minister is trying to do but, on the question of a more penal tax on empty properties, will he assure me that, if a property is empty pending permission for subdivision or improvement to get it into a better state so that it can be enjoyed as a home, there will be some flexibility so that people are not being taxed while they are trying to do that work?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is precisely why we have a minimum period of two years, to ensure that we strike the right balance and encourage the use of existing resources in our housing stock without penalising those who want...
to get their housing stock on to the market but are taking a bit of time to do so, for whatever reason—perhaps because of renovations or the challenges of the local market.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) rose—

Dominic Raab: I will give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: I want to return to the issue of the staircase tax, which the Committee looked at when we examined the draft Bill. We were generally content with the objectives of the tax, which the Committee looked at when we examined the Bill. We did tell local authorities about this in the draft Bill. We were generally content with the objectives and policy goals, but we raised a particular issue to which we have not yet had a satisfactory answer. It relates to the Government’s commitment that local authorities would be compensated for any financial costs incurred due to this measure. That was what the Government said they would do when they announced that they were bringing in this legislation but, since then, all we have had from them is, effectively, a nil. It seems that they are going to do nothing whatever about this, even though they accept that there could be an impact on individual authorities. We do not know what that impact will be because the Government have not given us their workings on this, but can the Minister at least give us an indication that he is prepared to look at this again and give us his assessment of the impact on individual authorities? Will he give us an indication that he is prepared to do something about this?

Dominic Raab: The Chair of the Select Committee makes an important point. We clarified the situation for local authorities after the Budget and we have written to them. I do not think it would be right to compensate local authorities for what would effectively be an inadvertent windfall resulting from a judicial determination. From the point of view of Government policy, that was not something we wanted to see, and we have moved as swiftly and reasonably as we can to correct this.

Mr Betts: We accept that the legislation takes the position back to what people thought it was before the court decision. In the meantime, however, we have had the court decision and local authorities will have done their estimates based on that decision, so the Government are effectively changing local authorities’ financial positions from what they thought they would be a few months ago. Given that the Government initially said they were going to compensate local authorities, why have they gone back on that commitment?

Dominic Raab: We did tell local authorities about this as soon as was reasonably possible and, as I mentioned in my previous answer to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think it is right for local authorities to gain from an inadvertent windfall at the expense of small businesses in our local communities.

I shall return to the second aspect of the Bill: council tax on empty dwellings. We are straining every sinew to build the homes that this country needs but, at the same time, we must make the best use of our existing housing stock, and that is what the second clause of the Bill is designed to achieve. It sets out an adjustment to the council tax empty homes premium, which will help to deliver on that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In coalition, the Liberal Democrats allocated more than £200 million to the empty homes programmes. However, in 2015, under the Conservative Government, that funding was completely cut. Is it not important to reinstate that money in order to bring empty properties back into use as affordable homes?

Dominic Raab: Of course, that was a period of coalition government. In our judgment, that method does not provide the best value for money, which explains why we are taking the approach that we are taking in this Bill.

Doubling the council tax on empty dwellings is just part of a range of measures that we are taking to fix the housing market, but it is an important step. The average house price in England is currently almost eight times the average income, compared with four times the average income in 1999. Families in their early thirties are as likely as their parents to own their own home, and the same challenge faces private renters, whose housing costs now typically account for just over a third of their spending. This Government are committed to turning that around by taking action on all fronts. Fundamentally, that must mean making more homes available by building and delivering more homes, but we are also committed to making better use of the stock that we already have, including by supporting local authorities to use their stock efficiently and ensuring that they are doing all they can to bring homes that have remained empty for an extended period back into use.

Councils already have some powers and incentives in this area. In 2010, we inherited a situation in which council tax discounts were applied to all empty homes. That was not right because 300,000 properties were left empty while many hard-working families were struggling to find homes. Owners of long-term empty homes should be incentivised to bring them back into use and that was why in 2013 we enabled councils to charge the full rate of council tax on empty properties. We have also put in place powers for local authorities to charge a council tax premium of up to 50% on homes that had been vacant for two years or more.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In Walsall, we have seen a 40% reduction in the number of long-term empty properties since 2010. Does my hon. Friend anticipate the measures in the Bill helping us to tackle that still further?

Dominic Raab: The progress that has been made in my hon. Friend’s constituency is hugely welcome. If we look at the behavioural change across the board as a result of previous measures, we can see that 90% of councils have taken up the powers to apply the premium and that all but three of those councils are charging it at the maximum level of 50%. This has resulted in a 9% fall in the number of properties subject to a premium in those areas using the premium every year since the power was introduced.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, measures have been taken in relation to accommodation above shops that is not being used for commercial purposes. The Minister has referred to rates relief for shops, and there is also a way of doing that in relation to the space above the shops in order to provide accommodation. Has he given any consideration to that possibility?
Dominic Raab: I am not quite sure what means the hon. Gentleman has in mind for achieving that, but perhaps we can thrash that out in more detail in Committee. Of course we will always remain open to adopting the right balance.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Bill and its measures to give councils the tools they need to ensure that we drive down the number of empty properties. Will the Minister also use this opportunity to ensure that those who own second homes are contributing their fair share through council tax, and that they are not able to sidestep that by opting to pay business rates and then claiming eligibility for small business rate relief? If we are to achieve our goals on decent, affordable homes, it is important that everybody should pay their fair share.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The situation to which she refers is slightly different from that of vacant homes, but I would say that we need to balance the economic impact of any measures in that area with the underlying public policy imperative that she has rightly referred to. We have also made changes on holiday homes in the context of council tax and stamp duty. We will keep the point she raises under due consideration and I have also discussed it with the Minister for Local Government.

In addition, our new homes bonus scheme provides a financial reward for councils that bring empty homes back into use, so this involves a carrot as well as a stick. This has generated £7 billion in new homes bonus payments to local authorities since 2011. Since these measures took effect, the number of properties left empty in England for six months or longer has fallen by a third since 2010, from 300,000 to just over 200,000. So these measures can work and they can deliver changes in behaviour.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I wholeheartedly support these announcements. Only this weekend, I was talking to some very angry residents who have had to live for decades next door to empty properties owned by one individual who does not wish to bring his houses back on to the market. This is blighting residents’ housing in those neighbourhoods and there are even rats escaping from the abandoned houses. I wholeheartedly support any measure to protect the existing residents.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point and I suspect that that situation is reflected much more broadly, both regionally and nationally.

Based on our experience as of today, we will go further in the Bill by doubling the premium’s maximum level to 100% and by allowing councils to charge double the rate of council tax on homes standing empty for two years or more. We are trying to strike the right balance between respecting the legitimate interests of those who own property with the overriding imperative in my Ministry to make the best use of existing housing stock, to ensure that we provide the homes that people in this country need.

Of course, given the demand for housing, we cannot just leave properties lying empty for years and the Bill will provide a positive incentive to avoid that. If vacant homes lay empty for too long, not only is that a waste of a much-needed resource, but they can become a blight on the local community, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) said, whether through squatters, vandalism or other forms of antisocial behaviour. Different areas will have different housing needs and different numbers of long-term empty homes, and the legislation will respect the fact that local authorities know their communities and their areas best, which is why we will keep the premium as a discretionary discount, allowing councils to decide whether it is appropriate for their communities and enabling them to set the level of premium that should be charged.

We understand that local authorities will want to reflect carefully on the local housing market in deciding whether to issue a determination when, for example, a homeowner is struggling to rent out or sell a property in a challenging market, which was a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) earlier. For that reason, we published guidance in 2013 to remind local authorities to consider the reasons why a property may lie empty in particular circumstances. The guidance makes it clear that the premium should not be used to penalise owners of homes that are genuinely on the market for rent or sale. I should also say that the Bill will not bring any extra properties within the scope of a premium; it simply applies to those properties that might already have been affected by a higher premium.

In taking these measures to help to secure homes and to lift an unreasonable burden on business, the Government are delivering on our commitments to support the enterprise economy and to build a fairer society, backing small businesses and backing working families who dream of getting on to the housing ladder. I commend the Bill to the House.
[Jim McMahon]

will be affected or about those that will be picking up the tab as a result of the reforms. It has therefore been difficult to give the measures adequate scrutiny at this stage, so we hope to explore some of them in Committee.

Some wider issues also need consideration. The Federation of Small Businesses has illustrated the problems facing smaller firms that necessarily operate in large premises but do not qualify for small business rate relief. For example, childcare providers require space by the nature of their activity, but that takes them above the small business rate relief threshold. Far more also needs to be done to protect the high street, and town and city centres. Business rates are a significant cost and can be the difference between surviving or failing. We recognise that a taxation system cannot sit in isolation and must support the Government’s broader policy objectives, and we have seen some of the largest corporations get away without paying their fair share of tax while premises—the property-based businesses that are the lifeblood or foundation of many of our communities and are essential for town centres to thrive—are taxed through business rates before they even earn a single penny.

Turning to clause 2, we welcome the move to bring long-term empty properties back into use by incentivising the owners of such homes to act, but we are also keen to tackle the shortage of available housing in some areas. It has been Labour policy for some time now—the Government’s policy falls short of this—to see 300% council tax charged under the measures that are being put forward today. There are currently 200,000 empty properties in England, and we have seen homelessness increase steadily over the past eight years. As we speak, 120,000 children have nowhere to call home. They are staying with friends and family, and many of them do not have a bedroom of their own. Meanwhile, the evidence of rough sleeping and homelessness is plain to see in towns and cities up and down the land. Councils, particularly in London, which has the highest concentration of empty properties, are battling to meet their statutory housing duties due to increasing demand, rising unaffordability and the effects of eight years of Government cuts to local authority revenues. It is absolutely right that owners of empty properties pay a premium if their property is suitable to let but they fail to do so. However, any move must form part of a wider strategy to bring empty homes back into use, including positive, proactive support to get homes back on the market.

We welcome the Government’s acknowledgement of some of the faults in the system and their move towards adopting Labour’s policy on empty homes, but they could of course have gone further. Housing is one of the most pressing issues facing this country, and eight in 10 people think the Government ought to do more to address the housing crisis. We know that, which is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has launched a Green Paper on affordable housing—a framework to change the country’s approach to affordable housing—as part of a new national mission to solve the country’s housing crisis. From planning to funding right through to delivery, we need a comprehensive, joined-up strategy to tackle the housing crisis.

The Conservative-chaired Local Government Association—I declare an interest as one of its vice-presidents—agrees that there is more to be done. It would like the Government to go further and give councils greater power to borrow, to build and to deliver the homes that we need—not on a case-by-case basis, but by trusting local authorities to understand their areas and to get homes built quickly.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like me, my hon. Friend has experience of local government, and he will know that if the Government are serious about dealing with this country’s housing crisis, they would free local government to build social housing on a major scale. That would determine the Government’s level of commitment. So far, however, they have not shown that commitment. There are families in my constituency in Coventry who cannot get accommodation, which is a terrible situation for people to find themselves in.

Jim McMahon: Absolutely. In some areas, the housing crisis was a significant factor in why people voted to leave the European Union. People do not feel confident about this country’s future, and housing is a vital part of that. If people do not have the security of a home or a secure tenure, they will rightly be nervous about what the future may bring, so the Government need to do much, much more. However, the idea that they can command and control from Whitehall and expect every community to benefit has been disproven time after time. As my hon. Friend pointed out, we should empower local government to get on. Councils know their areas. They have the local partnerships and know the sites. They have planning departments that need greater support. If they were given the resources, they could do far more, but this must be about giving them independence and freedom, not making them wait for the Government to offer crumbs from the table, which is how many councils feel.

Justin Tomlinson: I agree with much of that principle, but that is what local plans are for, and we have cross-party support in my patch of Swindon. This Government are empowering local communities to shape future development if they choose to engage with the opportunities.

Jim McMahon: I accept that point, but we also need to accept that local plans are limited in that, by and large—of course they do more than this—they are about land supply to support the number of housing units that will be built. They do not discuss the mixture of tenure or go into detail about the funding plan that will support the proposals. A local authority could identify, based on its population and demographics, that it needs a certain proportion of affordable or social housing, for example, but there will be no funding plan to deliver on that. A local plan could sit on a shelf for 10 years, but if the council’s ability to borrow is curtailed, it cannot lay the bricks to build social housing. Like the hon. Gentleman, I know my local area and the council knows the area too, but it is constantly under the cosh of funding cuts. It does not have the capacity and it needs it to be freed up.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend is generous in allowing me to intervene again. If the Government really believe in local democracy and want to encourage a property-owning democracy, they should do what used to be done. Local authorities used to give out mortgages and build houses for sale, and they used to build social housing. That is how to do it if the Government really mean to tackle the problem, and that is what they are not doing.
Jim McMahon: That is a fair point and, bringing it back to the Bill, we will see the rigour that local authorities apply to understanding what clause 1 means for their base funding requirements and what clause 2 means for how much money can be generated to support bringing more rental homes back into use. We know local government will deliver because, time after time, it has really stepped up and done what is asked of it.

Finally, the Bill feeds into the wider debate about the viability of local government finance. Issues such as the staircase tax have raised important points, but we need to move away from the uncertainty and the reliance on favourable Government decisions to fund local services. Any new responsibilities must be backed up with the resources to guarantee that councils can meet their statutory duties.

By the end of the decade, local government will be facing a funding gap of £5 billion which, time after time, the Chancellor seems to be wilfully ignoring. I understand that Ministers have been trying to get an audience with him, but they have failed. The consequence is that our councils often face financial uncertainty.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), my boss, says, you cannot empower local government if you impoverish it.

6.31 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

As I said last week, it is a pleasure to see the Chair of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), back in his place for this debate. During his absence, the Committee has had to deal with many of the issues we are discussing tonight. I thank my hon. Friends on the Front Bench for coming before the Committee to update us on the Government’s proposals and to give us a chance to comment before the Bill came before the House.

In many ways, that is something from which all Departments could learn. Using Select Committees to do pre-legislative scrutiny is a good way of making sure we get legislation as close to correct as possible before it is presented to the House, rather than requiring the House to develop it further. My Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 went through the same process, so it is clear that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is leading the way in government, and we should congratulate it on doing so. However, I will outline some criticisms of the proposals, because there are some concerns.

The staircase tax came as a bolt out of the blue to some 30,000 small businesses in this country. We cannot criticise Supreme Court rulings, but this one was a massive shock to small businesses across the country that have paid their business rates for many years—there was a settled position. The Supreme Court ruling ended that, and I will pay particular attention to what has happened across the country in the past couple of years as a direct result.

My constituent Anthony Broza is the chief executive of Wienerworld, the UK’s leading independent music publisher and distributor. Given that his company is competing against Amazon and other such companies, the staircase tax has a direct impact on his business. He is my constituent—he lives in my constituency—but he runs his business out of an office just across the border in the London Borough of Brent, and therefore the levying authority is Brent Council.

Mr Broza owns an office block that I think is on four floors. He uses the ground floor for distribution and to allow the public to come to see his goods and services, and he uses the fourth floor for administration purposes.

He quickly realised that he would not need the other floors so, rather than keeping them empty, he not unreasonably rented them out to other businesses. The floors are connected by a common staircase, hence the staircase tax.

Mr Broza runs a small business and, because he was getting small business rates relief, his rates were effectively zero. Suddenly, after returning from a good holiday, he received a 22-page document from the Valuation Office Agency and no less than nine rates bills from the London Borough of Brent demanding payment within five months. As might be imagined, it came as a bit of a shock to put it mildly. The sole reason for the shock is that the offices are split over different levels, and they have been that way for many years.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that such shocks can deter the very entrepreneurial spirit we need to ensure that the small business economy thrives under this Government?

Bob Blackman: Mr Broza’s view is that he might have to close his business as a direct result of this completely unreasonable demand and, as I have said, his is one of 30,000 businesses in that position.

Obviously, the various different charges levied on Mr Broza covered a number of years going back to 2015-16 and 2016-17. The 2017-18 rates bill was even more aggressive, because it took account of an increase in rateable value and the loss of transitional relief and business rates relief. He was placed in a position in which he was suddenly presented with a bill for £8,344.59 in one go, to be paid within the year, when he had previously been paying the princely rates of about £370 a month on one property and only £50 a month on the other. He was clearly encountering a draconian position.

When Mr Broza came to see me, I was shocked that he was being placed in that dreadful position. Clearly, overall, the Government were going to gain from this Supreme Court decision. Whether it is local government or national Government, overall the taxpayer was going to gain some £3,040.95 in one hit that was completely unbudgeted for.

Worse still for Mr Broza, he had budgeted that his business rates bill for the 2017-18 tax year would be zero. Of course, he was then told that he would have to pay £5,365.07 within five months of receiving the bill. I took up this case with the Chancellor, and I am pleased to say that the Chancellor saw the right way to proceed: small businesses in such a situation that have acted in a perfectly reasonable and lawful way should not be penalised by suddenly being hit with a dreadful windfall tax.

However, we have a number of problems still to resolve. I welcome the Bill, under which businesses such as Wienerworld will be returned to their previous position.
However, the current position is that the London Borough of Brent, and other councils across the country, are still levying these punitive tax rates and demanding payment. So businesses are having either to find money out of their revenue to pay local authorities—to keep paying the business rates as they are—or to borrow the money in the hope and expectation that it will be returned to them. Either way, this seems unsatisfactory, given that the Government have made it clear they are going to correct the position for those businesses.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case on behalf of his constituent. Does he agree that quite a lot of these things illuminate the disconnect between decision making and policy making, and an understanding of how the business world, particularly the small, local business world, works? If there was better knowledge and understanding of that, some of these cases, to which he has rightly been drawing the House’s attention, would not arise.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, Government policy should always be driven in an evidence-based way and be sympathetic, particularly to small businesses, which are the lifeblood of our economy. However, we are dealing with a Supreme Court ruling here, as opposed to Government policy. I am pleased that the Government are trying to put it right, which is how this should work. The advice being given by officials from the Department is less than helpful in its current guise, because the correspondence we have had from the Department says that it cannot do anything until the law is corrected. That means that businesses are still being charged these business rates while the law is being changed. One thing the Government need to look at is finding a way of ensuring that people are not having to pay huge sums only for the valuations to be redone and for them to claim the money back, together with interest—there is also the bureaucracy to consider. Businesses just want to get on with their business, rather than sorting out the mess that has been created with their business rates.

The attitude of the London Borough of Brent to Winderworld— I suspect this is shared by all local authorities across this country—is, “This is the decision. You are due to pay this money. You must pay it or else we will distraint against you to get that money off you.” That means small businesses in this country will go under as a result, and that is the concern. Obviously, the Government are moving as fast as they can to correct this position, but guidance needs to be given by the Department to local authorities on businesses that are suffering financial hardship as a direct result of a decision that was nothing to do with them, is not Government policy and needs to be corrected.

This is a problem in many parts of London, and it has been drawn to my attention that one area that will suffer heavily is Tower Hamlets, which has a number of businesses in respect of which the staircase tax is operational. This is one area where I have criticisms on this issue. Once the Bill becomes an Act and the law is corrected, the businesses will apply for revaluation. As I understand it, their revaluation will go back to 2010 if they so wish—it will probably go back at least to 2015. They will then get a revised bill, and probably a return of money and of interest, which is going to come from the local authority. I noted the Minister’s comment in reply to the Chair of the Select Committee that the position would be that local authorities have experienced a windfall. They have, but many local authorities are now going to have to repay that money once the law is changed back again and they have used that money. It is not money that they were not expecting, because they have had a judgment, and they have used this money in their budget. If the Government now say, “You’ve got to repay the money but we are not going to compensate you for that repayment”, that is a windfall to the Government—

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the whole debate. Madam Deputy Speaker—I have been chairing a Bill Committee. What my hon. Friend is saying is worrying me, because a problem of this nature may arise in Southend and we are running a fine budget. Has he quantified, by area, how much money is involved? Finances are already troublesome in terms of local councils trying to deliver the best services locally.

Bob Blackman: All local authorities across the country which have had to issue these revised bills over a three-year period on business rates will be looking right now at what the bottom line is for them. The worrying factor about the way the Bill is being introduced is that the repayment is not automatic; each business that may have been affected will have to apply for revaluation. They will then be revalued and finally a bill will be decided, for potentially a three-year period, together with interest. Some businesses may not gain anything, but some will gain a substantial amount of money, with interest, and the local authorities will have to repay that. The current position, as I understand it—we need to press our Front Benchers on this issue—is that local authorities repaying that money would not have had this money if this judgment had not been made. However, they have applied that money to their budgets and they will have to find the money from within their budgets as one-off, windfall damage to their bottom line. That is unfair on the local authorities concerned. They have not taken the decision—this was not a decision any local authority took—so they should not be financially penalised as a result of this. I hope we can move to a position whereby the Department will agree to compensate all local authorities that are out of pocket as a direct result of these decisions, once we have got to a conclusion.

Mr Betts: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he did in scrutinising this legislation in my absence, and I agree with the point he is making now. Would it not be a lot more convincing from the Government when they say they are not going to compensate because the likely effect is small overall if they were to release to us their detailed calculations, which presumably they have done, about the impact on individual authorities?

Bob Blackman: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for raising that issue. We are talking about 30,000 businesses, many of which will be concentrated in particular areas. We know that there will be a hit for some local authorities, which could be considerable. Hon. Members from across the House will not necessarily be aware of the potential hit for local authorities as a result.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend will know—if he does not, I will tell him—that I spent seven years doing the finance portfolio on a district council. When a local
authority suffers from a flood, there is a Department-run fund they can make a bid to in order to cover the costs they have incurred due to those exceptional circumstances. Might that be an avenue for those local authorities? Might they be able to make such a bid in order to fill this black hole created in their local finances, which was not of their fault and which was unable to be predicted in their budgeting process?

**Bob Blackman:** Clearly, the Government and the Department have figures they can use to evaluate which local authorities are most affected in this way. It may well be that a threshold should be imposed, whereby if only a relatively small amount of money is involved a local authority could not claim it back. However, if a substantial sum is involved, as could happen in many of these cases, we should get to a position where the local authority is returned to where it should have been in terms of the expectation in its budget. My hon. Friend may know that I was in charge of the London Borough of Brent’s finances for many years, so I know the way the finances of that local authority work extremely well. The reality is that this will create a hole in Brent council’s budget, and I do not see why Brent should suffer as a result.

Let me turn to the empty homes premium. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) asked in an intervention how we can ensure that local authorities can encourage empty homes to come back into operation, but without unfairly penalising those homeowners who are refurbishing their homes or converting them for other purposes, thereby making them temporarily empty for an extended period. We do not want those people to suffer any damage or be charged any financial premiums, but at the same time we do not want unscrupulous homeowners or landlords to keep a property empty, only to do some work when the local authority investigates, just to demonstrate that they are doing something, but still keeping the property empty for longer.

**Michelle Donelan:** Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why the two-year period is a fair benchmark and why the 2013 guidelines on assessing why a home is empty are important in protecting people?

**Bob Blackman:** Clearly, different local authorities have interpreted the rules in different ways. One of the concerns is that owners should not be penalised for refurbishing properties and bringing them back into use, but it must be genuine refurbishment, rather than people artificially refurbishing properties and keeping them empty. That is a very difficult test, and it must be left to local discretion, rather than trying to formulate a detailed law that will not necessarily provide the answer, but will allow learned lawyers to gain from trying to interpret it.

**James Duddridge rose—**

**Bob Blackman:** I see my hon. Friend twitching.

**James Duddridge:** My hon. Friend anticipates me, because at one stage he said there was perhaps no requirement to change the law, and I was about to leap to my feet. The reason I hesitated was that I was going to support him in any amendment he might table to look at not only existing residential property during that period, but shops above flats. In Southend High Street there are many properties that many years ago—more than two years ago—used to be residential properties, and it is not in the interests of the freeholders or leaseholders on the ground floor to open up those spaces. In Southend that is blocking 800 to 1,000 units, yet it was always the intention of the Victorian architects that they should be occupied. If my hon. Friend tables any amendments, I would be more than happy to add my name if they extend the Bill to cover those important points.

**Bob Blackman:** I hesitate to get into a battle about tabling amendments to the Bill, because we want the Government to reflect on tonight’s debate. We want incentives to bring forward housing and ensure that it is not kept unoccupied unnecessarily for an unreasonable length of time. Flats above shops are an example of the many properties that we can bring back into use. Many are disused or used for storage. Often, they were intended for the owner of the shop to have a residence and to run his or her retail outlet down below, but they moved away from that type of operation many years ago.

**Eddie Hughes:** Has my hon. Friend seen examples, as I have in my constituency, of accommodation above shops being left empty for a considerable period, thereby lowering the tone of the area and leading to antisocial behaviour and an unfortunate downward spiral in the general feeling of the community?

**Bob Blackman:** Clearly, we want our town centres and shopping areas to be revitalised through people living in them and going to them. If people live in the flats above shops, that brings life to the area 24 hours a day, rather than for maybe 12 hours a day, and that must be to our advantage.

**Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con):** Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) about empty shops, I am aware of a house in Huddersfield, where I grew up, that was empty for literally decades on end. It was not just a waste of space and precious land; it was a huge eyesore that dragged down property prices all around. It was deeply ugly and people wanted shot of it. Does my hon. Friend agree that bringing those kinds of properties back into use is the first place we should go to, rather than necessarily building on greenfield sites?

**Bob Blackman:** I am sure that colleagues across the House could come up with example after example of empty homes that could have been brought back into use many years ago. Some should possibly have been demolished and replaced—I have those in my constituency—but the sad reality is that we still have far too many empty homes that should be brought back into use. Those that are derelict and have not been used for literally decades are the first that we should penalise and look to bring back into operation.

Let me end by asking Ministers to look sympathetically at how we can compensate local authorities for the loss of revenue—we have suggested a means by which that could be done—how we can get guidance to local authorities so that they do not penalise small businesses because we are correcting the law in the interim, and how we can get to a position whereby some sensible role.
decisions can be taken as quickly as possible and small businesses that face difficulties meeting their finances are given help and advice, rather than being closed down by banks and other operations that may wish to penalise them in that way. If we can do those things, this will be a good Bill.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is being characteristically generous with his time. Does he agree that as all of us, as parliamentarians across the House, work with our local authorities to seek imaginative ways to address the shortage of housing, we need to be absolutely certain that those buildings that could readily be converted from retail to residential use, or in which the residential element could be extended, are not saddled with debts, burdens, judgments or whatever, which could preclude the successful delivery of that opportunity to increase the housing stock in sustainable locations in our town and city centres?

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend draws the House’s attention to another unintended consequence of the decision to implement the staircase tax, which could preclude people who may wish to bring a retail unit into operation as a housing unit, which is something we should all welcome. That demonstrates that we have an opportunity across the House for improvement in both these areas.

Finally, I hope that we can look sympathetically at introducing the empty homes premium in a way that does not penalise those who are improving properties, but does penalise those who are deliberately keeping them empty for no good reason, so that we bring homes back into use and they are used properly, as we would all like.

6.58 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). It is obviously a particularly great pleasure to speak on St George’s day and as we in this House celebrate the birth of a new member of the royal family, so today’s speech will certainly be memorable for me. And boy have we got some exciting stuff to discuss today!

If I remember correctly, clause 2 amends section 11 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992. It is perhaps not particularly sexy, but I hope that it will be effective—and boy does it need to be effective. At the moment, we have approximately 200,000 empty properties. In fact, if I remember correctly from the briefing, it is 205,593 empty properties. I do not know who comes up with these statistics, but I think that they should be slightly vaguer, which has avoided 100,000 extra homes being built. Many people in green-belt areas will welcome that change.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend will be aware that the number of empty homes—more than 200,000 of them—is down from nearly 300,000 in 2010, so there has been a huge improvement. We have 100,000 more homes for families as a result of the changes that we have already made, which has avoided 100,000 extra homes being built. Many people in green-belt areas will welcome that change.

Does he agree that the progress that we have already made on empty homes will be further boosted by the measures that we are discussing today?

Eddie Hughes: I agree entirely. When we talk, as we frequently do, about the housing crisis in this country, we can see that there are many elements to it. Of course, it is incredibly laudable that this Government have an ambition, which I am sure they will achieve, to build 300,000 houses per year, but it is also incredibly important that we make the best use of our existing housing stock.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about the housing crisis in this country, but does he agree that we would better solve the housing crisis if we abolished the right to buy?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful intervention given the fact that yesterday, only 24 hours ago, he ran 26.2 miles, and look at the man we see before us this evening—not a break of sweat on him. Clearly, he is not just an incredible athlete, but a gifted intellectual, and I acknowledge what he says, but completely disagree with him.

As I was saying, we have moved from 300,000 empty properties down to 200,000 empty properties, and that is, in no small part, owing to the fact that we previously introduced this council tax premium.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am aware that the issues in Walsall North might not be the same as those in Cornwall, but I do appreciate and share the view that we have a mutual interest in making sure that these vacant properties are brought back into use. Does my hon. Friend think that his local authority, like mine, will appreciate these changes?

Eddie Hughes: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Friend, not least because this Government, being the free-thinking Government they are, are not imposing this duty on councils, but giving them the opportunity to apply this measure should they choose to do so, so they will have the opportunity to increase the premium from 50% to 100%. No doubt, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are thinking, “What might they do with that extra money?” I personally suggest that they use that extra money for services for their local constituents in order to drive down bills, increase efficiency and make sure that they either optimise their use of council tax, or possibly decrease their council tax in order to ensure that hard-working families benefit from the change to the law.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that as many councils, including my own, are reviewing and updating their local plans to make sure that we have the housing that we need for the future, this would be a good opportunity to analyse and evaluate whether the council tax premium could be used, accelerated and deployed efficaciously to ensure that we have the right housing in local areas such as mine?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend makes an important point, not least because he uses the word “efficaciously” so skillfully. I hope that Walsall adopts that very approach, because, since 2010, we have seen a 40% decrease in the number of empty properties, owing in no small part to the actions of this Government.
Mary Robinson (Chaddle) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for his eloquent and wide-ranging speech. Does he agree about what is at the heart of this matter? He talks about Walsall, but in my constituency, in Chaddle and Chaddle Hulme and the surrounding districts, we also want to see some regeneration of our centres. We want to see people going into the centres, living there, and opening up businesses that can thrive. We want the district centres to look appealing and attractive and have people living and shopping there and utilising them.

Eddie Hughes: I am simply amazed. My hon. Friend is blessed either with psychic ability or intuition. That is the very point that I was about to move on to. In Beechdale, one of the wards in my constituency—

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend seems to be saying something very nice and flattering to anybody who intervenes on him. As I have not had anything nice and flattering said to me today, I just thought that I would give him the opportunity to do so.

Eddie Hughes: All I can say is that I have been in the House for less than a year and I hope that, over the passage of time, I will develop the insight and eloquence of my hon. Friend. Unfortunately for the moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, you have to put up with this stuttering Brummmie trying to work his way through his speech, and taking yet another intervention.

Neil O’Brien: I am not in search of flattery. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as bringing empty residential properties back into use, it is strategically important to bring into use buildings that are not currently registered as residential properties? Is he aware that the number of conversions and change-of-use properties has increased from 17,000 in 2010 to 43,000 last year—from 12% of all new supply to 20%? As well as turning old houses back into homes that people are occupying, it is also important, as part of the same strategy, that we go further and liberalise change of use.

Eddie Hughes: Were it not for the fact that I am speaking totally extemporaneously, I would have thought that my hon. Friend had read my speech, but, as I have already pointed out, in order to do so they would have had to read my mind. I will indeed be coming on to that very point subsequently, in talking about the excellent period that I spent working for YMCA Birmingham.

For the moment, Members will no doubt remember that I was about to talk about Beechdale, and we should return there immediately. Beechdale housing area, which was built in the ’50s and ’60s in my constituency, has Stephenson Square, a row of shops, and, above the shops, 10 flats that had remained unoccupied for 10 years. Beechdale Community Housing group took the opportunity to refurbish those flats, creating nine self-contained properties that could then be let to members of the local community. However, one flat has been retained for the use of the House to Home project, facilitated by the amazing Jemma Betts, who works for Beechdale Community Housing. Her role is to ensure that, when people move into those newly refurbished, previously vacant properties, they can be helped to sustain their tenancies. Of course it is our objective to bring empty homes back into use, but they must be used by people who can maintain the tenancy for a protracted period. It is difficult for some people who have had previously chaotic lives to develop the skills to enable them to sustain that tenancy. Jemma’s work is to help them understand how they can, for a reasonable price, furnish that property, access rent statements online and therefore maintain that tenancy.

What is also important about this particular area is the fact that there are shops beneath the flats that have been brought back into use. I am thinking particularly of Rob Mullett Butchers, which I thoroughly recommend that you visit, Madam Deputy Speaker, if ever you are in Beechdale, or W.E. Whitty’s grocery, which has been run by—[Interruption.] I am embarrassed. It has been run by Jane and Phil for a number of years. As I mentioned in an earlier intervention, Phil recently said to me, “When you bring properties back into use, particularly those properties that are above shops, you regenerate the entire area. People are living there 24 hours a day and they are making use of the shops.” This has caused a general lowering in the incidence of antisocial behaviour in the area. But it is not just that. Jemma has also taken the opportunity to create a community garden to the rear of the flats now that they have been brought back into use, having been vacant for 10 years. This facility allows children the opportunity to learn how to grow vegetables.

Neil O’Brien: I am lucky to represent Market Harborough, which has seen the fastest growth in the number of new shops anywhere in the east midlands, but many retail centres are suffering from the growth of the internet. In future, this country will probably have more retail space with potential homes above than it needs. Does my hon. Friend agree that local government must play a strong role in helping to consolidate those retail centres into housing, so that they can become vibrant places where people want to hang around?

Eddie Hughes: I agree entirely. We are seeing a shift in the profile of our town centres. Of course, many people are keen to shop online these days, so there are some empty properties. Unfortunately, there is a particular example of empty shop units in Walsall, where the Labour-led council has decided to spend £13 million buying a shopping centre with empty units and a leaking roof. I hope that the vociferous campaigning of local Conservatives will ensure that we take back control of the council.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Empty shopping units are not really covered by the Bill. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman realises that the legislation is about residential properties and he will be coming to that.

Eddie Hughes: Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker; I was merely responding to my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), who suggested that there might be a change-of-use opportunity for empty commercial properties. Hon. Members will no doubt remember that when the Government provided £100 million of funding through their empty homes programme, they were not only targeting empty residential properties but allowing organisations to have the facility for a change of use from commercial to residential. I was just about to come to an example of that.
Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether you have ever been to watch Aston Villa play football in Birmingham. I would suggest that you do not come at the moment: we are hoping for promotion, but it can be a bit hit and miss. Anyway, YMCA Birmingham took the opportunity of taking over Harry Watton House in Aston, which was previously a social care building that had been used for residential purposes occasionally, but was left empty for a considerable time. YMCA Birmingham took the opportunity of approximately £450,000 of Government funding to convert that building back into use as 33 self-contained flats. YMCA Birmingham has been in existence since 1849 and currently offers 300 units of accommodation for young, previously homeless people; bringing empty properties back into use has to be the best use of that Government money.

Neil O’Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for his patience. There are currently around 400 empty properties in the Harborough district, and there are also occasionally homeless people in the district. All my constituents would want those homes brought back into use so that we can tackle the problem of homelessness that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, although there are occasional cases where people who appear to be homeless are not open to the good will and hospitality of neighbouring organisations. YMCA Birmingham was given £1 million to create new residential accommodation at its Erdington site, which was only about 20 or 30 metres away from a Tesco store. Some people used to turn up and beg outside that store, which was very bad for the credibility of the YMCA as an organisation seeking to home homeless people. Despite our best efforts, they would never be removed and come into our accommodation.

Let me return to the matter of how empty homes can be brought back into use. There is a block of flats on Henrietta Street in Birmingham that was owned by somebody who failed to develop it over a sustained period of time, but thanks to money through the empty homes programme—YMCA Birmingham was allocated a total of £890,000—we were able to bring those flats back into use. The block is now excellent accommodation for young people in Birmingham, on the edge of the Jewellery Quarter, which is quite a prestigious address these days. The units of accommodation are relatively small at approximately 25 to 30 square metres, so they are perhaps not palatial.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue of empty properties—commercial and residential—exists not just in certain parts of the country, but all over the country? It is a particular problem in my constituency, which is actually quite rural.

Eddie Hughes: As I mentioned previously, there were 300,000 empty properties, so they were clearly spread broadly across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will forgive me a small indulgence, I just want to mention some research. I would not normally refer to Lib Dem research but, according to a Guardian article in January this year, 11,000 properties in this country have been vacant for more than 10 years. Incredible! I can see the look on your face, Madam Deputy Speaker. Another 23,000 properties have been empty for five years. What are we doing as a society? How can we talk about this housing crisis when we have 11,000 properties that have been vacant for more than 10 years?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman is making a very entertaining speech. Does he agree that there are so many thousands of empty homes because councils do not have the funds to bring these empty properties back into use? We need funds for councils to make that happen, but the money that was allocated under the coalition Government has been cut.

Eddie Hughes: I am not sure that the hon. Lady has shown attention to the entirety of my speech. I have mentioned many millions of pounds that this Government have given to address the issue of empty homes.

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): Surely one of the huge benefits of the empty homes premium is that it will mean that councils have more money, thereby reducing the burden on hard-pressed council tax payers. I also want to stress that one hon. Member for North Dorset is more than this House can take, never mind another, so I caution my hon. Friend about wanting to emulate certain people in this House too much.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. It is important to remember that the Bill will give councils the flexibility to apply that council tax premium, which is currently at 50% and can be increased up to 100%. But I would imagine that some constituents might want to challenge councils that do not take the opportunity to apply the full 100% because, as he said, it will give them the opportunity to bring in more income. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, councils will then have money that might facilitate their bringing those 11,000 empty properties back into use.

Michelle Donelan: The bulk of empty properties are actually privately owned. A key reason behind that is that people are trying to increase the monetary value of the home by sitting on it, and avoiding the hassle and potential pitfalls that could happen if they rented it out. It is that issue, not council-owned properties, that we are trying to target with this Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend brings me to a point that I had neglected to cover so far: the flexibility that is allowed because we absolutely do not want to penalise people who have genuine reasons for having a property empty for an extended period. Those people should fear nothing from this Bill. My understanding—I may be incorrect; if so, I am sure that hon. Members will correct me—is that the Bill would not apply, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were serving in our armed forces overseas and your property was therefore left empty for an extended period. Similarly, should you unfortunately need to go into hospital or respite care, leaving your property vacant for a two-year period, there would be the flexibility to ensure that this measure was not applied.

John Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree, though, that quite a few of these empty homes are owned by the public sector, which may not respond to this incentive?
If only my council had lots of empty homes, it would be much easier, but it does not, and we are under enormous pressure. Does he agree that where that is the case, we need something else as well in order to end the scandal of empty public-owned housing?

Eddie Hughes: This is dangerously close to becoming a debate with great interaction. I look forward to more comments from my right hon. Friend, because my understanding is that there was previously a tool that allowed compulsory purchase of properties that had been left empty for an extended period. Some might think that this Government would not apply such rules, which perhaps seem draconian.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): My hon. Friend is making an impassioned, powerful and thoughtful speech. In October 2010, there were about 300,000 homes that had been empty for a long time. That number has come down to about 200,000. That is good progress, but does he agree that more needs to be done?

Eddie Hughes: I think that there are stats available for everybody in the Chamber. Perhaps they could celebrate, as I have, not only St George’s day, and not only the birth of a new member of the royal family, but a 40% decrease in the number of empty properties in Walsall. Those are, I suggest, three very good reasons for a party, or possibly another bank holiday—for St George’s day, I mean. I am not for one minute suggesting that we have a bank holiday just because the people of Walsall have reduced the number of empty homes by 40%.

Neil O’Brien: Much of the debate about empty homes assumes that the greater part of the problem is in the capital. While we must of course use measures like those in this Bill to bring more homes back into use in the capital, is my hon. Friend aware that the greatest proportions of empty homes are actually in the north, particularly the north-east? About 0.5% of homes in London are empty, whereas about 1.5% are empty in the north-east, where, I must say, we have largely Labour councils.

Eddie Hughes: One of the difficulties that I had when I first came to the House was recalibrating with regard to the intellectual ability of those with whom I spend time. My hon. Friend was, I believe, a policy adviser at No. 10, and he appears to know everything. I defer entirely to his encyclopaedic knowledge of housing issues, and I agree entirely with his point. When I sit in meetings, I have found that because so many people are focused on housing problems in London and the south-east, they sometimes fail to see that there could be any empty properties outside London. To be honest, I am not entirely sure they care about the rest of the country. It is a pleasure to be joined in the new 2017 intake by somebody with the gifts and abilities of my hon. Friend. As I say, he made a very important point.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I am greatly enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech. I can confirm that in my area we are struggling with properties that are empty. It causes a problem all over the country. One of the positive aspects of this Bill is that it forms a consequence of bringing properties back into use would be less pressure on developing our open spaces. People in Harrogate and Knaresborough are perfectly comfortable with the idea that we need to build more properties, but they are also concerned about the loss of open space. Having higher-density use of existing property goes some way towards protecting the green spaces that we all seek to protect.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point.

Let me borrow a slightly amended phrase from Shelter, which said, “The housing crisis isn’t about homes—it’s about people.” I agree with that principle completely. When people see that there is an increase in demand for property and know that properties in their neighbourhood have been left vacant for a long time, they are probably scratching their heads and thinking, “This Government are so progressive and so able in so many areas—why are they not tackling this issue?” Well, today they are.

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend talks about the individual. The property of an individual who fell on hard times might become run-down because they had run out of money. Does he think that at a later stage the Government might consider investing money to bring back into use vacant properties that have fallen into disrepair?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend has suggested an innovative solution to some elements of the housing crisis. However, we should bear it in mind that there is flexibility with regard to the application of the enhanced rate. Whereas councils can currently apply a premium of 50%, clause 2, which amends section 11 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, introduces the flexibility for them to apply a premium of between 50% and 100%. That flexibility with regard to the interpretation and application of this law will allow some scope to cover the sorts of cases that he mentioned.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that it also offers councils the flexibility not to charge any premium at all? Because this is done on a case-by-case basis, if there is a particular circumstance where somebody has fallen on hard times, is struggling to renovate their property and has just cause to vacate it, the council can assess that. That is why it is so important that local councils can make these decisions and that this Government are supporting localism.

Eddie Hughes: That is the brilliance of the drafting of this Bill. Clearly, whoever was associated with that in any way, shape or form was insightful, intuitive and gifted. I am hoping that the Minister was involved in some way with the drafting of the Bill and will remember the praise that I have heaped on the people who were involved.

Neil O’Brien: While I share the passion of everyone in this House who is keen to see empty properties brought back into use, does my hon. Friend agree that this measure, which is effectively a tax and incentives-based measure, takes the right approach, as opposed to a more dirigiste one? Although the empty homes development orders brought in by the Labour Government were a good thing, they led to only about 40 homes in England being taken into possession. Does he agree that we need a tax and incentives-based approach rather than trying to take people’s property off them?
Eddie Hughes: I am not sure whether you noticed, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I think that my hon. Friend might have tried to sneak in a French word, or possibly a Latin one, just to prove how clever he is and to completely wrong-foot me. But I am having none of it: I am going to ignore that part and just agree with the point that he made. Clearly, whatever legislation we introduce, it is important that it is efficacious. I think we heard that word earlier; it is not one I use frequently.

Simon Hoare: If there were a prize for modesty, my hon. Friend would be declared the victor ludorum.

Eddie Hughes: See, Madam Deputy Speaker, I told you—I have had to totally recalibrate with regard to the intellectual approach of other Members. We certainly do not use much Latin around the table in my house. It may not have been Latin, who knows? It is probably important that I return to the Bill.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): May I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the need to deal with empty homes in rural areas? I refer particularly to my constituency, of which two thirds is in the Lake District national park. Empty homes are a blight on our society. They have a negative impact on rural schools and businesses, which is why it is so important to see empty homes being put to good use and filled with people in rural villages.

Eddie Hughes: It is fascinating how much we can learn in this Chamber. I have been walking in my hon. Friend’s constituency and have often thought how beautiful the properties and the scenery are. I cannot imagine that anybody would want to leave a property there vacant for any period, let alone an extended period of more than two years, such that it would cause elements of the Bill to be triggered. When we come to the Chamber, we get the opportunity to hear from Members representing constituencies across the country, and that is what makes this institution so great.

I can obviously only speak on behalf of and with regard to the good people of Walsall North, Willenhall and Bloxwich, so it is great to hear stories from around the country. The point is that if people are prepared to leave properties vacant in beautiful constituencies such as this, she could have been paying an awful lot more tax, she is already paying a lot, and without measures such as this, she could have been paying an awful lot more.

Michelle Donelan: I thank my hon. Friend for his very valid point and I completely agree. We all have sympathy with the case he outlines and have heard many similar examples throughout our constituencies. This is not just about existing businesses; it is also about people who are looking to get into business—the entrepreneurs and business owners of tomorrow, who will look at this tax and think the risk is too high.

Scott Mann: I appreciate that my hon. Friend represents a rural constituency similar to mine that is made up of many similar examples throughout our constituencies. She is laying out a futuristic vision of businesses cobbling together under the same roof. If this part of the Bill were not implemented, all those businesses would be charged retrospectively under a different format. The Bill is supporting our rural economy.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. It is true that the Bill will particularly help new models of business. It is also important that the Bill will have retrospective effect. Businesses that have been affected can have the amount owed to them recalculated and backdated.

Alan Mak: Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Valuation Office Agency’s commitment to prioritise and fast-track reviews and recalculations, particularly for small businesses, if the Bill is passed, as I hope it will be? Will she also join me in urging the Minister to ensure that that happens, to help our small businesses across the country, including in my constituency?
Michelle Donelan: Yes. I completely agree. The point was made earlier that it is so important for these businesses to get back the money they are owed as soon as possible, so that they can continue to flourish. These changes will also reinstate small business rate relief for ratepayers who no longer meet the conditions for the relief as a direct result of the VOA's change in practice, and they can apply for that themselves. What will be really important in how successful the Bill proves to be is how much we spread the message out to the local business community about their option to ask for a recalculation and get this money back.

Mary Robinson: My hon. Friend is making such an important point, and it goes to the heart of what these small businesses are doing in our high streets and district centres. We want to support high street shops, which face such tough competition at the moment, and do anything we can to help them, give them the reassurance they need and enable them to keep more of their hard-earned cash, because we know that, without those shops being successful, we will not have the bubbling and vivacious high streets that we need.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. My constituency has four market towns and our high streets have suffered. The Bill sends a message out to local high street business owners and all small businesses that this Government are behind them, supporting them, and recognise that they are the backbone of our economy.

Neil O'Brien: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a good example of the Government addressing some of the most egregious problems with the business rates system, and that it is a further improvement following the revaluation, which has seen 5% cuts in the business rate bills of shops in the east midlands?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. As I said before, the Bill is righting a few wrongs.

Last Friday in my constituency, I met the regional director for the south-west of the Federation of Small Businesses, who estimates that, while the staircase tax has affected around 30,000 businesses, it has actually impacted around 80,000 properties. Sometimes we think too much about the number of businesses and do not think about the number of properties affected. These properties and businesses have been unfairly and illogically punished for sharing facilities such as communal staircases, corridors or even car parking with another business. In fact, Mike Cherry, the chairman of the FSB, said last September that some small business owners were knocking holes in their walls or trying to put staircases on the outside of their premises to try to get around these rules. That is a bizarre and ludicrous situation that we cannot tolerate any longer, so I am delighted that the Bill will rectify it and that we are sorting out a sensible solution.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has made some valuable points about how the Bill will improve the business environment for entrepreneurs. She particularly highlighted start-up businesses. Does she agree that a group that will benefit is those who are seeking to scale up their businesses through extra space to cope with their expansion and business growth? They will now be more energised and empowered to seek that extra space and grow their businesses.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. The Bill is also about providing more business confidence and more confidence for entrepreneurs who want to grow their business and develop it, rather than the opposite. It is important to reiterate that small business is the lifeblood of our economy.

Neil O'Brien: Harborough is a place of small businesses and does not have one dominant employer. There is a lot of demand for large buildings which are broken up into much smaller office spaces. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be much more difficult if we did not address the problems with the staircase tax that we are addressing and the absurdities that she has pointed out?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree and I thank my hon. Friend for another interesting and to-the-point intervention.

My constituency, as I have said, has four market towns—Chippenham, Corsham, Melksham and Bradford on Avon—and the staircase tax has affected each one of them, as well as our villages. It has impacted on high streets. It is important to remember that there are office spaces above shops and that members of staff go out for lunch in the high street. If they are impacted, there are job losses and if there is no extra recruitment round, those people will not be out for their lunch in the high street. The tax has also affected some of our shops. Our high streets are suffering up and down the country, so we should do everything we possibly can to promote and support them to avoid having dormitory towns.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. I share her concern on that point. I think Members on both sides of the House are worried about the future of retail in the high street. The key point is that, on every aspect where such taxes are unfair—business rates in many ways are arbitrary and levied on companies without necessarily a reference to their profitability—we have to show that we are listening and making the system fairer.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree and this is one example showing that the Government are listening and that there is a dialogue with businesses and business groups, which have been instrumental in discussing with the Government the formulation of the Bill. That is essential and we need to foster business confidence, especially with Brexit. Only the other week, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury pointed out that we have the highest internet penetration of the retail market in Europe, so this is a particular problem for the UK.

Trudy Harrison: Does my hon. Friend agree that this will be of particular interest and help to start-up businesses? They often initially occupy a small part of a building as an embryonic enterprise, but as they grow the measure will support them too?

Michelle Donelan: That is an excellent point, which has been a bit neglected in this debate. Start-ups and microbusinesses will benefit in particular from the Bill.

Clause 2 is another measure the Government are implementing to right a wrong. It is about helping to increase our housing stock. As we all know, we have a severe housing shortage in this country, yet thousands of homes are left empty, which is ludicrous.
[Michelle Donelan]

The Bill will give local authorities the power to charge a 100% council tax premium on empty properties, rather than just the existing 50%. The charge is for homes that have been unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for two years or more. The number of homes that have been vacant for over six months in Chippenham has fallen by 12% since 2010, so one might ask whether the measure is necessary. It is, because we still have 1.16 million households on the social housing list and there is a housing problem, so it is important that we take measures such as this today. Further increasing the premium will, I strongly believe, incentivise owners to sell or rent their properties. I strongly believe that.

I also stress that this is only one action. We must not be under any illusion that the Bill will, in any circumstances, fix our broken housing market—it will not—but the solution has multiple parts and this is one of those answers and one of the measures that the Government are taking.

Alan Mak: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—she is being very generous. Some of the funds raised by the premium could be used to reduce the council tax imposed on hard-pressed council tax payers, or could be invested in new social housing to help people who do not have a home. Does she agree that those are just two ways that the funds raised could be used to help to correct imbalances in our housing market, both in the south-east, where I am from, and in the midlands, where she is from?

Michelle Donelan: I agree. It is a two-point strategy: it is about the money that is raised and incentivising people to stop leaving those homes empty.

The point about exemptions has been made by other Members, but it is important to labour it, because I do not want my Chippenham constituents to be unduly concerned or worried that they might be penalised by the policy. They will not because it has exemptions for people in the military, for carers and for people who are going into hospital which are designed to help them. If a home is left empty because of probate, the people concerned will be protected. This is not an arbitrary measure—it is smart and fair.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is listing some sensible exemptions. Does she agree that it is important that we remain localists and do not impose the measure on every council? We should give them the power to make the decision for themselves.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree and I will come on to deal with that point.

I want to reiterate the point that empty homes attract squatters, which can result in vandalism and antisocial behaviour. That helps to bring down areas and can be upsetting for local residents. Residents often come to my surgery asking, “Why is that property still empty and what can we do about it?” Today, we have an example of what we can do about it, with a measure to incentivise people to use those empty homes.

Scott Mann: I am interested in the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak) made about local authorities ring-fencing some of the money for better use. We have a big problem in the south-west with affordability. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) agree that local authorities could consider ring-fencing some of this money so that we can deliver affordable houses for people who live and work in her constituency and in mine?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. The housing crisis is one of the biggest challenges that we face in this country, so it is right that local authorities would look to ring-fence funds. I am sure that a number of them appreciate the fact that this is a key issue for their residents and will prioritise this. They are best placed to understand their residents and to make decisions based on the local area, because every area is different.

I want to stress the point that locally people are sitting on properties, waiting for their value to go up. They do not want to rent them out because of the hassle, inconvenience or stress that that can cause. That is a problem because, if they are not selling them, those properties are left empty while people are waiting to get a property. That situation cannot continue. However, I think that the two-year period is fair.

Trudy Harrison: It is simply not fair for homeowners living next door to these properties, whose houses have been affected by damp and other problems resulting from those properties not being properly maintained. That devalues their homes, on which they have spent time and money. They have renovated them, but their pride and joy is being damaged by empty properties next door.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. I have said that these properties are more susceptible to vandalism and there is antisocial behaviour around them. It is uncomfortable for neighbours and people in those communities.

The two-year period is fair. It allows homeowners sufficient opportunity to sell the property, rent it out or complete major renovations that might be required. The Bill is an example of the Government supporting localism because local authorities, as has been mentioned by many hon. Members, will still make the decision on whether to apply the premium and the exact rate that is to be charged. They can review the empty housing stock and the housing supply and demand locally, and make an informed decision. That is an example of this Government trusting local authorities.

I am confident that the majority will continue to use that power. In fact, 2017-18 figures show that 291 of the 326 local authorities chose to apply the empty homes premium. In addition, there is scope for them to assess on a case-by-case basis—for example, where a homeowner is struggling to rent out or sell a property or to do the repairs. This is not a punitive measure, but a fair and measured one. The 2013 guidance will still stand, reminding local authorities to take into account the reasons a property is empty. As I have said, this is about protecting rather than penalising owners of homes. This Government do not want to stop or discourage people from getting into the property market and on to the housing ladder; it wants to encourage and facilitate them. That is the very nature and essence of this Bill.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that we must be careful that this is not abused. We do not want people to find a loophole whereby they tinker with the property as they approach
the two-year marker. I would like to hear the Minister explain how we will address that because it is very difficult to protect those homeowners who are doing the right thing, as opposed to those who are trying to avoid the rules. We need to seriously tackle our housing crisis.

My only ask of the Minister is to review the impact of the increase and to later look at increasing it again. I believe that, to truly incentivise homeowners to rent out or to sell their property, the cost must be quite high, especially in areas of London or other places where the housing market is very high, because people will sit on those houses and their value will go up considerably, month after month, and they can then write off the increase in the empty homes premium if it is not high enough. There is an argument to review it and increase it times five. If someone is doing the right thing and renting the property out, selling it or doing it up in a timely fashion, they will not be punished at all. There is an argument for looking at whether we have gone far enough today and whether in the future we could go further and build on this.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is making her case with great passion on an issue about which so many people care. Will she join me in congratulating the campaign groups that have worked so hard to put it on the agenda, in particular The Big Issue and its “Fill ’Em Up” campaign and Empty Homes?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to recognise the work done by campaign groups and all bodies with a vested interest in the issue. It is not just about urban areas. In fact, Graham Biggs, chief executive of the Rural Services Network, a body representing 143 rural local authorities in England, has said:

“Anything that enables councils to bring empty properties back into use is welcome.”

It is also interesting to discuss this Bill in relation to homelessness. We have an odd situation whereby there are thousands of empty homes in the country but also a dreadful and rising problem of homelessness, although the Government are tackling it. As the chief executive of Shelter has pointed out, addressing the situation is not as simple as swapping or flipping those two elements around, because often homes are in different areas from those with the core homelessness problem.

Alan Mak: Given that my hon. Friend has mentioned homelessness, it is only right that the whole House commends my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for promoting the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) agree that that Act’s powers could be used together with the powers in this Bill to tackle homelessness from many directions?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Mary Robinson: Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). We really need to concentrate on the value that we can put into this market, which can be filled by this Bill, and ensure that people who need those homes are given them in a way that suits them and fulfils their aspirations. The Government have announced £28 million of funding for the Housing First project, some of which will go to a pilot scheme in Manchester. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) agree that it will be interesting to see how the Mayor of Manchester approaches the issue and whether he will use that to fill those homes and to get homeless people into them?

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree that it will be very interesting to watch the actions of the Mayor of Manchester and the impact of his work, and to look at other cities around the country.

Neil O’Brien: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. My point about the mismatch between empty properties and the homeless, but does she agree with me and the estimate by The Big Issue that in some parts of the country there are 10 empty properties for every homeless family, so surely the Bill can play an important role, along with other measures such as Housing First, in addressing the problem of homelessness?

Michelle Donelan: Yes, it will have an impact. It is one of a number of ingredients in a recipe for tackling homelessness, an issue on which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has led considerably and on which I worked with him on the Homelessness Reduction Act. We also have the homelessness taskforce and Housing First. All of those together will help to tackle homelessness.

I want to air caution, however, because Opposition Members have talked frequently about seizing empty properties and giving them to the homeless. That is not a solution. The answer is about incentivising the owners of those empty properties and encouraging them to put them into the housing stock, not seizing them. We are not a Government who want to downgrade or derail property rights; we are a Government who want to promote and protect property rights, and also ensure that we can get that housing stock up and tackle the housing crisis.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On incentivisation, does my hon. Friend agree that, when it comes to unoccupied properties in central London, some investment companies from overseas could just pay an extra amount? Does she think that the time is right to start looking at prohibiting foreign companies from purchasing investment in this country? Perhaps that is a radical step for me as a Conservative, but one wonders whether the time has come at least to have that conversation.

Michelle Donelan: I am a fan of localism and such decision making could be done on a local level, but I am not sure that I would be as radical as my hon. Friend. I think that the answer lies in increasing the premium rate to a point that makes it unaffordable not to sell the property or to rent it out. I would be interested to hear whether the Government will be commissioning any reviews or studies of the implementation of the measure and looking at potentially raising it further in the future, and whether this is the first step.

Bob Blackman: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the issues is the starting point at which any multiples would apply? Obviously, property prices in London would start at £1 million-plus, so multiples of that sum,
as premiums, would be extremely penal and would therefore lead to people thinking twice about leaving a property unoccupied.

Michelle Donelan: I completely agree. That is exactly what we need people to do: we need them to think twice about whether it is a sensible decision for their pocket, and then the issue can be resolved for our country.

Neil O’Brien: Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about the role that corporately owned empty properties might be playing in the problem, does my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) agree that the situation might be more severe than we think, given that previous measures against it, such as the annual tax on enveloped dwellings, brought in by this Government, have raised far more than we expected because there were more of them than we thought?

Michelle Donelan: My hon. Friend makes yet another very interesting point. He has made several interesting points and is very informed and articulate. I thank him for his contribution.

In conclusion, this Bill will be welcomed by my constituents in the Chippenham area, because it seeks to right two ludicrous wrongs. It seeks to support local businesses and to boost our housing stock. It will help our job creators and help to tackle our broken housing market. I urge the Minister to explore further the opportunity of increasing the empty housing premium in the future and I hope that this will act as a first step. I look forward to supporting the Bill tonight.

8 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I wish you a happy St George’s day, Madam Deputy Speaker, on England’s national day. To my dad, if he is listening, I say happy birthday.

So riveting and compelling were the opening speeches from both Front Benchers on this three-clause Bill—one of which is the short title—that the Benches filled and the interventions flowed. I thank the hon. Member. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) who has been right in his approach to the measures in the Bill, especially on the financial penalties for local authorities and the need for due compensation. We can examine that in more detail in Committee. As for the hon. Members for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), all I can say is that their oratorical skills are so fine-tuned that they were able to use more words in their speeches than the Bill itself contains. I congratulate them on their contributions.

Notwithstanding the issues raised in detail by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)—including supporting the high street, tackling empty homes and seeking assurances on the baseline funding in the future—Labour will support the Bill tonight as it tries to iron out the current faults in the system. As my hon. Friend said, there is much more to be done. We would like councils to have more powers in both business support and tackling the housing crisis, but in the very narrow terms of the Bill, the Opposition will not seek to divide the House on Second Reading.

8.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for their constructive comments on the Bill, and I will address some of their specific points shortly. We have had an incredibly interesting and entertaining debate, and one of the more succinct that I have heard in my time at the Dispatch Box. It has been extremely helpful to hear Members’ views today, ahead of further scrutiny of the Bill in Committee. It was great to hear some thoughts on what we can do to make progress on this issue.

The Bill will take forward two specific, short and important measures to promote fairness. It will provide fairness for hard-pressed businesses facing an unjustified tax hike, backdated where necessary. Those businesses have already paid their fair share, and deserve our support rather than being burdened by sudden and unreasonable demands. The Bill will deliver the Government’s goal of supporting those businesses, by restoring accepted and understood practice in the business rates system.

The Bill will also help those seeking a place to call home. It cannot be right that so many in our society are struggling to find somewhere to live while properties lie empty across the country.

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend is aware of the challenges that we face in rural areas, especially in Cornwall, where we welcome the vacant homes premium, but how will local authorities be able to differentiate holiday homes and vacant properties? Some holiday lets are not let for a long period of the year.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and the issue of housing in rural areas was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). He is right to highlight the issue. Legislation makes a distinction between long-term empty homes, which have been unfurnished and unoccupied for two years—those that the Bill seeks to address—and homes that are considered to be second homes, which are at least partially furnished and occupied on occasion.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) will know that the coalition Government ended the presumption of a council tax discount for such second homes and levied a stamp duty surcharge on them. I will return to those measures when I respond to some of the other points raised.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing deserves enormous credit for the energy with which he has approached his new portfolio to make good on the Government’s commitment to fix our broken housing market, and the Bill is a small part of the process of doing that. Since 2010, we have introduced measures, including the £7 billion new homes bonus scheme, that have reduced the number of properties empty in England for six months or longer by a third, as we have heard tonight. But there is more to do, and the Bill will allow councils to levy an additional 50% premium on long-term empty homes, leaving the discretion on that decision with local authorities for all the reasons hon. Members have mentioned.
I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has an incredible experience of local government and brings it to bear on these matters. I join him in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who we were all happy to see back in his place tonight. My hon. Friend raised the issue of pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and I am grateful for his comments. I also put on record my thanks for the work of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee in engaging extensively me with and my officials on the various technical issues raised. In particular, the Committee was right to pick up on the issue of voids and whether the Bill would capture the definition accurately. As my hon. Friend will have seen, the Bill takes into account the question that the Committee raised and we have worked with experts in the sector to tweak the definition. I think that will address the Committee’s concerns.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted the issue of small businesses and cash flow, and urged us to press on as fast as we can. That is what we are trying to do. In response to letters from the Committee questioning the timing of the pre-legislative scrutiny, I said—and I repeat to the House tonight—that that is why we moved as quickly as we did. Instead of the normal process of 12 weeks, we had a slightly shorter process of eight weeks for that scrutiny, so that we could get the Bill on to the statute book as soon as possible and bring some relief to the small businesses facing cash-flow issues.

I turn to the oratorical tour de force from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). He said that the Bill is not sexy, but on the contrary these are the matters that keep local government Ministers, and the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton, up at night. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we are focused on the detail. He was right to highlight to all hon. Members the particular delights of Beechdale, which they will all want to join me in visiting at the earliest opportunity, not least to shop the delights of Rob Mullett Butchers and the grocery store run by Jane and Phil. My hon. Friend also made a broader point about the importance of regenerating our urban centres, which was picked up by my hon. Friend the Members for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I can assure my hon. Friend that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), who has responsibility for high streets, will have listened carefully to everything they said and will use their remarks as he develops policy to benefit our high streets around the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North asked specifically about exemptions. I am pleased to tell him that council tax exemptions are already in place for people living in service accommodation or for those in the armed forces who are serving elsewhere and whose homes are therefore empty. Indeed, there are specific statutory exemptions for properties left empty for a purpose, for example when a person goes into care. There are also discretionary discounts for houses that are empty because of special circumstances such as hardship, fire, flooding, and I hope that addresses Members’ concerns on that point. My hon. Friend also kindly paid tribute to the drafting of the Bill, for which I cannot take enormous credit—I pay tribute to the officials, the ratings agencies and other experts who helped to draft the legislation to make it ready for today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) outlined yet again why she is a strong champion of small business in her constituency and around the country. She talked about entrepreneurship, and it is exactly right that our tax system and our policy supports the entrepreneurs not just of today, but of tomorrow. Supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), she, as ever, made a compelling case for why this Government and this measure will continue to support entrepreneurship across our nation.

I turn to some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton. He asked specifically about the amount that will be raised from this measure. The stats are that 60,898 properties were subject to the measure in the last year, and 291 of 326 local authorities—90%—levied the premium. All but three of those levied the full 50%. That raised about £38.7 million, so an additional 50% would obviously double that. Just so that he has the full picture, if all local authorities used the full premium, that would equate to about £42 million and therefore, in total, £84 million.

Huw Merriman: Does the Minister agree that the true test of this policy will be if council tax amounts actually go down? That will mean that individuals are not behaving in the manner that we just described and will be paying less, thus freeing up the property for those who need it.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point: that should be the long-term test of this policy. It is there to provide an incentive for individuals to bring those homes back into use and indeed, that is what we have seen. Empty properties overall have fallen in the last few years from 300,000 to 200,000, but in areas that are specifically subject to this levy, we have seen a 9% reduction in long-term empty homes since the measure was introduced. Hopefully, we will keep seeing that rate of reduction increase to eliminate as many empty homes as possible. My hon. Friend also raised the topic of foreign ownership. I am pleased to tell him that the Minister for Housing heard what he said and is aware of the issues. In his new portfolio, he is looking into that matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is not in his place, touched on the importance of open spaces. Indeed, the new national planning framework particularly encourages increasing density where possible so that we can do exactly that and preserve our wonderful open spaces. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) made so many excellent and insightful points that I do not have time to review them all, but I join him in paying tribute to the campaign groups that have brought the Bill about.

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend is giving good answers to many of the questions, but there is one outstanding question on the staircase tax. Because individual businesses are going to have to apply for a revaluation, there is a risk that they may end up paying more money if they make an application for revaluation and the rateable value increases. Will he look sympathetically at a view that people should not suffer as a result of applying for
the revaluation? Otherwise, businesses may choose to say, “This will be too dangerous and risky to our cash flow.”

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am pleased to tell him that when businesses that have their valuation changed on the historical 2010 list come to appeal that decision, they will have the choice of seeing whether to take that appeal forward, once the Valuation Office Agency engages with them. If, for whatever reason, it decided that there were some other measure that it needed to change that caused an increase in the valuation, they could then choose not to pursue that matter, so they would not suffer from any increased rating. Of course, the current rating list is dynamic, as he will know. Changes good and bad will be relevant for the life of that list, as is the normal course of business.

Lastly, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton raised the issue of the Government’s broader support for business rates and for business across this country. He will know that the Government stand on the side of small business. The combination of measures announced in the last Budget and subsequently to the tune of £10 billion to help businesses up and down the country facing the revaluation included bringing forward the indexation to CPI; extending the £1,000 pubs discount, which I know many hon. Members across the House welcomed; doubling small business rate relief; and providing a £300 million discretionary fund for local authorities to apply in cases where there was particularly difficulty.

In conclusion, this important Bill will deliver widely supported measures to tackle an unfair and unintended rates increase for certain businesses and support the Government’s efforts to bring empty homes back into use. I appreciate all the comments from hon. Members this evening—no doubt we will return to some of them in Committee—but I am glad that we can all agree that the overall aims of the Bill and the positive impact that it will have for businesses and families seeking to call a place home should be welcomed. I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

**RATING (PROPERTY IN COMMON OCCUPATION) AND COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY DWELLINGS) BILL (PROGRAMME)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)).*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) 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 3 May 2018.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day in 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 two hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(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.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

*Question agreed to.*

**RATING (PROPERTY IN COMMON OCCUPATION) AND COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY DWELLINGS) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52 (1) (a)).*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the payment of sums to the Secretary of State in respect of non-domestic rating, and

(2) the payment of those sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Kelly Tolhurst.)

*Question agreed to.*
Higher Education

8.16 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Consequential, Transitional, Transitory and Saving Provisions) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 245), dated 26 February 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 28 February, be annulled.

I thank the Leader of the House for scheduling this debate, even if slightly belatedly. When the Opposition pray against a statutory instrument, it should be clear that the whole House is entitled to a debate and vote. I hope that Government Whips reflect on that point when considering the point of order made earlier today by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon).

Unfortunately, the Government ignoring criticism until it is too late has been a recurring feature of the development of the Office for Students. Throughout the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, we raised questions and concerns that have remained unanswered. I suspect that even the Minister might privately wish his colleagues had heeded advice about the appointment of Toby Young some time before he eventually resigned. What a shambolic and politicised appointment process, which still hangs over both the Office for Students and the Government today.

The Commissioner for Public Appointments found that the governance code was not followed— itself a breach of the ministerial code. It is now more than a month since I wrote to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary on this point, and I am yet to receive a proper answer. Perhaps the Minister who is here today can at least now clarify his position. He told us at the Dispatch Box:

“The same due diligence was carried out by the same advisers on all the candidates.”—[Official Report, 27 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 698.]

That directly contradicts the conclusion of the commissioner. Perhaps the Minister can now tell us whether he rejects the findings of the independent commissioner, or would he like to correct the record? Can he give the House any update on what the Government are doing to enforce the ministerial code and ensure that this scandal is not repeated?

This is important because the composition of the board remains highly controversial even now. The new Minister has indicated that he might even like the board to be more representative. In a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), he said he would enter a “dialogue with the OfS Chair...to ensure that both student interests and the further education sector” are represented on the board. That point is one that his right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) has also made as Chair of the Education Committee, so can the Minister tell us what progress he has made? Will he also look at a voice for staff, which the University and College Union has called for?

The appointments process has been symptomatic of a Government who have tried to use the Office for Students to pursue a deeply ideological agenda. It is bad enough that the Government embedded their free market approach in the original Act, giving the Office for Students a duty to promote competition.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—indeed that goes to the nub of the issue, which is that there are serious failings in the legislation around the office acting as provider and regulator, and a conflict of interest in the regulations. We have seen that, for example, in the Government’s desperation to promote new private providers. They are already playing fast and loose with the title “university”, handing it out without proper scrutiny or oversight. Every time the title “university” is given to a new provider without ensuring it provides a good education, it not only risks students and the taxpayer being ripped off but potentially damages the integrity and reputation of the whole system. As MillionPlus has made clear, this is of concern not just to the old established institutions but to the newer universities, such as the one my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) just mentioned.

The Government’s Office for Students guidance seems to have abandoned the category of registered provider that was in the original legislation. Will the Minister tell us if new small providers will now be outside the regulation of the Office for Students entirely? With Britain’s exit from the European Union presenting a serious challenge to our world-class higher education providers, these risks cannot be justified, now or ever. The regulations transfer the powers of the Higher Education Funding Council for England to the Office for Students. In taking on the functions of HEFCE, the Office for Students will set and implement its own policy agenda. I hope he will tell us how he plans to address the potential conflicts arising from its regulating a sector in which it is an active participant.

The new Office for Students will not have all of HEFCE’s powers. It cannot, for instance, intervene when providers are in a difficult position—apparently
that is in pursuit of a free market in which providers must be allowed to fail. Can the Minister assure us that the Office for Students has the powers it needs to protect students when they need its protection? Or will it just stand by in the name of ideology? The regulations also pass on powers of the Office for Fair Access. The danger of this move is that it robs the director of fair access of their independence and ability to negotiate directly with universities. Why is he removing from the director final authority to approve or reject access and participation plans?

This comes at a time when widening access could not be more important. The National Union of Students today exposed the cost of living crisis that has left the poorest students facing a poverty premium and the highest costs of access to education. While we have a plan to address the crisis, including by scrapping tuition fees and bringing back maintenance grants, the Government have kicked it into the long grass with their review.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We on the Government Benches agree that it is important that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the chance to go to university, as they are doing in increasing numbers under this Government. Does the hon. Lady agree that if these regulations are annulled, as she seems to be suggesting—I hope it is not the case—it will hamper universities’ ability to drive those access plans, which help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds go to university?

Angela Rayner: As I was outlining, the poorer students today are leaving with the highest levels of debt, and this Government scrapped the maintenance grants that would have helped them. The next Labour Government will reintroduce maintenance grants and scrap tuition fees to make sure that our students can get the education they deserve. I ask the Minister to think again and ensure that everyone, whatever their background, can access education.

This brings us back to a fundamental point. What do the Government believe the role of the new Office for Students should be—an independent regulator, a funding council, a validator of degrees or a body to micromanage universities? How will a university know when it is dealing with the regulator, a funding council or the voice of Government? It is that final point that will be concerning to many universities and students, who worry that, far from acting as a voice for students to the Government—I ask as the Minister chunters away—the Office for Students will be the opposite: the Government demanding a voice on students. For instance, the Minister wants the Office for Students to stop no-platform policies that ban hate groups from student unions. This seems to be a solution in search of a problem. Perhaps he can explain why he believes that he and the board of the Office for Students should use their resources to interfere at this level.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. One of the groups on the NUS’s no-platform policy was Hizb ut-Tahrir. Presumably, if Hizb ut-Tahrir was not on the NUS’s no-platform policy and student unions were not making efforts to stop it speaking, the Government would be attacking student unions for not doing enough to tackle extremism on campuses. Does this not expose the ideological flaws at the heart of the Government’s obsession with what is frankly a debate best reserved for student union meetings, rather than the House of Commons?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes some excellent points, as he did throughout the Committee stage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. It seems ironic that many of the organisations or individuals listed under the NUS’s no-platform policy have been banned by the Government themselves. Is it still the Government’s policy to fine universities for the actions of autonomous student unions? If so, will the Minister explain how high the fines will go?

While the Government are prepared to dictate student union speakers lists, they have shied away from the real issues, such as the soaring pay of vice-chancellors, while staff pay continues to fall in real terms. The Labour party has set out a plan to tackle pay inequality and accountability, but the Minister seems strangely shy about using the sweeping powers of the Office for Students. Instead he has said he is “intensely relaxed” about runaway pay packets.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her generous time. However, it is not true that the Government are shying away from the issue of vice-chancellors’ pay. I have raised it during Prime Minister’s Question Time, and we are working on it in the Education Committee, looking into value for money. The Government commissioned a review of higher education, and the Office for Students will be focusing on value for money as well as choice and transparency. I think we should get our facts straight in this debate rather than misleading the public.

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I pay tribute to the Education Committee for its work in holding the Government to account, but I will believe what she has said when I see action. The Government have taken no action whatsoever against vice-chancellors’ pay. It is all warm words and no action. Will the Office for Students be concerned with the real issues, or simply with scoring cheap political points? [Interruption.]

The simple fact is that the Government have created a regulator in which it is hard for the sector, let alone the rest of us, to have any confidence, and the regulations simply entrench the problem. Today, we cannot turn the clock back and unpick the entire regulatory framework that the Office for Students establishes. That is not what will happen if the motion is passed. Instead, the Government will be forced to think again about the problems that we have raised, and come up with genuine solutions that will create a regulator that has the confidence of those whom it regulates. That is all that I am asking them to do.

8.30 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): As we heard from the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyme (Angela Rayner), the Education Committee has been conducting an inquiry into value for money in higher education, which has included an investigation of the role of the Office for Students.
I support the OfS as the new regulator, and I will support the Government tonight. I have confidence in Sir Michael Barber, especially in the light of his appearance before the Committee. Members on both sides of the House who are present this evening will have heard what he said then. I was pleased to hear him speak so positively about the increase in the number of degree apprenticeships—two of my favourite words in the English language—but I am concerned about the lack of further education representatives on the board. I find it incredibly disappointing that that important part of our education sector is being neglected yet again. Further education and apprenticeships play a vital role in access to higher education for the most disadvantaged and are crucial to building the skills base and productivity of our country, but they are so often excluded from bodies of this kind.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about further education. Does he also recognise that a post-Brexit environment in which we are not absolutely committed to driving up skills in this country is not compatible with a determination to reduce immigration? For that reason as well as all the others, I am surprised that further education is not represented.

Robert Halfon: The right hon. Gentleman has also made an important point. Pre-Brexit or post-Brexit, skills must be the No. 1 priority for our country. We know that about 30% of young people’s jobs will be lost to automation by 2030.

When Sir Michael Barber appeared before the Education Committee on 27 March, we asked him whether he would like to “give consideration to the lack of people with direct experience of FE and apprenticeship backgrounds on the board”.

On 5 April, we received a letter from him, in which he said:

“I recognise and agree with the clear message that was delivered on the importance of representation from the further education sector in our operations.”

He also said that the OfS would “welcome high-quality applications from people with experience of the further education sector when the DfE launch their recruitment campaign for the current ‘ordinary member’ board vacancy.”

Our Committee was so concerned by the process of appointments to the board that we received a private briefing from the Commissioner for Public Appointments, Mr Peter Riddell, which laid bare some of the problems. I would welcome the appointment of a panel of apprentices alongside the OfS student panel to inform the work and ensure that the views of apprentices are properly listened to. Many further education students study for higher degrees and FE will take a leading role in degree apprenticeships. It is not right to say that students are involved only in traditional degrees and traditional higher education. Given the rapidly changing nature of higher education and the increase in the number of degree apprenticeships, it is crucial for the OfS board to be as diverse and representative as possible. The OfS should be leading the whole sector in its approach to embracing different models of higher education.

As I said, I shall support the Government this evening but I urge them to make it a priority to recruit a serious representative from further education, from the Association of Colleges or elsewhere, into the vacant position on the board.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do what it means when we talk about further education. For example, in Coventry there have been 27% cuts to further education budgets. What impact does that have on apprenticeships? More importantly, if we take that further and look at university education, UCU is in dispute with the Coventry University because it cannot get recognition. To come back to the point, it cannot get recognition in further education or in university education.

Robert Halfon: It is true that for a number of years FE funding was neglected. It has been stabilised, and I welcome the £500 million extra announced by the Government for the technical education reforms in a recent Budget, but further education needs a lot more funding. People say that it is the Cinderella sector, but I say that Cinderella became a princess and we should banish the ugly sisters of snobbery and intolerance.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a typically powerful and passionate speech. Does he agree with the small businesses that I met in my constituency last Friday, which say that as they use the new money in the apprenticeship levy for apprenticeships, they encounter problems with getting what they want out of FE colleges? Does he agree that, for that reason, it is very important that we have representation for them in this new body so that employers can also get what they want out of the new system?

Robert Halfon: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that one day FE colleges will lead the vast majority of apprentice training in our country. It is good to have some private providers, but further education has an incredibly important role. That is my whole point: skills and apprenticeships should be at the heart of the Office for Students. I sometimes think that the powers that be have a traditionalist approach to higher education and everything has to be about traditional university degrees. They forget further education, skills and apprenticeships.

I congratulate the Minister on his new role. I know that he is a very thoughtful Minister and has been travelling up and down the country; Sam on tour, as I have seen on Twitter. I urge him to take this seriously—Sir Michael Barber is open to it—and put an FE representative on the board, and ensure that we have an apprentice panel too.

8.37 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who spoke with such knowledge and sense. He talked about the importance of apprenticeships and skills. Throughout this debate and the education debate in general, we should be talking more about positive destinations. It is hard to promote apprenticeships as leading to great job opportunities if we are constantly talking about higher education. We need to promote them, too, so it is good to hear his thoughts on that.

During the passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill, the Scottish National party tabled amendments to ensure that the new research body, UK Research and Innovation, would include appropriate membership from the devolved nations and that the membership and strategy of UKRI took proper account
of their policies and priorities. On Third Reading, the SNP voted against the Bill because of our concerns about a number of elements: tuition fee rises, the marketisation of the higher education sector and the dismantling of the research structure. They could have serious consequences for Scotland’s sector, given that our priorities might not be recognised, which could have an impact on our world-renowned image and reputation. Our MPs also voted to change the make-up of the Office for Students to ensure proper student representation was allowed on the board. It was disappointing that that did not happen.

We were also assured that UKRI would include somebody who had knowledge of the devolved nations. At the moment, we have that in Professor Sir Ian Diamond from the University of Aberdeen, but the problem is that there is no guarantee that that person will remain there and that the devolved nations will continue to have representation as we did not manage to get a guarantee in the Act. There is a serious chance that this could have a negative impact on Scotland’s higher education sector.

The UK Government said they would introduce a Bill that would include measures set out in Sir Paul Nurse’s review of the UK research councils. He noted: “there is a need to solicit and respond to distinct research priorities and evidence requirements identified by the devolved administrations” and that “it is essential that the Research Councils should play a strong role in...shaping research priorities and promoting the distinctive requirements of UK research, including in association with the devolved administrations.”

However, the Act and the formation of UK Research and Innovation do not meet the overarching principles in the Nurse report, because the governance of UKRI is accountable only to the UK Government, with principally English interests. Any piece of legislation that threatens Scotland’s research priorities and has the potential to damage the research funding that Scotland receives should be amended. We remain concerned that UKRI will encompass both cross-UK and England-only responsibilities, and that it will not necessarily take account of the devolved nations.

Abolishing the Director for Fair Access to Higher Education sends out a worrying message. In Scotland, the Scottish National party has long championed widening access, passing legislation to ensure access to higher education for those from the most deprived backgrounds. This Government need to look at what the Scottish Government are doing to widen access. The latest UCAS statistics show that a higher proportion of those from the least deprived areas who apply are successfully securing places at UK universities.

Given the problems that we have seen with the Office for Students, perhaps the UK Government should seek to rethink instead of ploughing on with this unpopular policy. The embarrassing Government U-turn earlier this year over Toby Young’s appointment shows how much of a shambles the management of the OfS has been. How can people have faith in it when it failed on day one? A report by the Commissioner for Public Appointments has sharply criticised the Department for Education and the Office for Students for failing to complete proper due diligence on Toby Young before his appointment as England’s new university regulator in January. The commissioner’s report concludes that the OfS’s board appointments, including Young, showed a “clear disparity” in the treatment of different candidates. It stated that parts of the process “had serious shortcomings in terms of the fairness and transparency”.

It also states that there was a high degree of ministerial interference in Young’s appointment. This calls into question the integrity of the Office for Students from the very outset, and this must be looked into, alongside proper student representation at the OfS.

When we are talking about a commodity as valuable as education, we have to be really careful when we look at the marketisation of this sector. A constituent came to see me recently. He had come from England, although that is actually irrelevant. He had been through a number of private providers and he had spent thousands of pounds on qualifications that were effectively useless. This is the difficulty that we find when we open up higher education to marketisation. We must protect our education sector, and we must protect education as the valuable resource that it is. This Government would do well to look north to Scotland on this.

8.43 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): The simple fact is that universities and students need these regulations to be implemented. I am not sure that the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) mentioned the contents of this statutory instrument once in her remarks. They are transitional. The regulations are entirely sensible and intended to fill the regulatory gap that has been left following the abolition of the Higher Education Funding Council for England earlier this month. They enable the Office for Students and UK Research and Innovation to take on the statutory functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and of the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education between now and July next year, after which the new regulatory system will be functioning.

Given that the hon. Lady spent her opening speech talking about the details of the OfS, it is fairly obvious that Labour Members’ opposition to these proposals has nothing to do with this statutory instrument at all. They have been vocal about their reservations on the OfS, and that is fine, but voting down this measure will not change that. It will simply wreck the regulation of universities for the next 15 months, and it will be the students who suffer as a result. This is about the transition. It is a dry SI about the process; it is not about what we are transitioning to, a decision which has already been taken. Labour’s opposition to this SI is therefore totally misjudged. It is almost as though Labour Members saw the words “higher education” in the title of a piece of legislation and thought, “We can bash the Tories on this subject.”

If the regulations are annulled, students will ultimately lose out. They would no longer have vital protections to address concerns about governance, quality or financial sustainability in their education. They could face increased fees, because it is only these regulations that ensure that a cap on student fees remains in place.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My understanding is that the Office for Students is supposed to protect students’ interests. One of the things that
students are most worried about is that, whereas the Bank of England charges bankers 0.5% on loans, the Student Loans Company will charge them over 6% next year. Does the OFS have the power to cut that interest rate in the interests of students?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but she totally misunderstands this legislation, which is not about the Office for Students or its powers. The Government have launched a review of higher education funding to find out whether what she suggests is something that we can or should do. That will be important going forward, but it is not what this SI is about.

The Opposition have talked repeatedly about standing up for students, continually claiming to be the voice of students and discussing their plans to abolish tuition fees, and yet here they are risking the cap on fees by opposing the regulations. Let us not forget that the Opposition do not have the strongest record on keeping education promises. Before the election, the leader of the Opposition said that he would “deal with” existing student debt. Afterwards, however, he told Andrew Marr that he did not make that commitment, that he would not write the debt off, and that he was unaware of the size of the debt. He made promises without knowing the full facts and ultimately realised that he could not deliver them.

The Opposition talk about tuition fees preventing people from going to university, but the truth is that more disadvantaged 18-year-olds are going to university under this Government than ever before. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were 50% more likely to attend university in 2017 than they were in 2009 under Labour, and our results on this kind of social mobility compare favourably with other countries, such as Scotland where higher education is free.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I was the first person in the family to go to university, and I did not go until I was 40 when I was fighting a general election campaign. Teaching quality was important for mature students like me, so does my hon. Friend agree that the Office for Students will help to improve that?

Ben Bradley: My hon. Friend is exactly right that the legislation will ensure that we have regulation from the Office for Students over the next 15 months instead of a gap between now and the middle of next year.

The irony is that Labour’s position on tuition fees is the least socialist idea that I have ever heard. Labour ignores the figures that I have just shared and says that universities do not take enough students from poorer backgrounds and that they are for the rich. However, despite those assumptions, it proposes raising taxes to fund free university education.

Andrea Jenkyns: Does my hon. Friend agree that it was Labour Members who brought in tuition fees in the first place?

Ben Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. Labour proposes raising taxes for poorer people who do not get the benefit of higher education in order to fund free higher education for rich people. It is the opposite of socialism and the opposite of promoting social mobility. It is another totally illogical giveaway that looks nice on a leaflet but is totally illogical and undeliverable.

Helen Goodman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ben Bradley: I am going to crack on and finish because I am nearly done.

Moving on from fees, without this agreement there is a risk that universities will not receive crucial grant funding. These transitional regulations enable the OFS to allocate £1.3 billion of teaching grants. Without this legislation, there would be no means to give out those grants and no provision to offer access agreements to support disadvantaged students in the next academic year.

I understand that the Opposition have reservations about how the OFS board has been set up and about appointments to it, but this is not the place to raise such issues. Those decisions have already been made, and their actions risk—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard. It is no use everybody shouting at him, because we cannot hear what he is saying.

Ben Bradley: I have one line left, so I am nearly there.

The Opposition’s actions risk creating a regulatory gap in the higher education sector and uncertainty for both students and universities. Ultimately, it is that uncertainty that we are trying to avoid, which is why I am supporting the Government today.

8.49 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): This will be a short speech about why I support the motion of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and why the Office for Students is not fit for purpose.

I am a former student union executive officer and NUS full-time elected officer. The Government are excluding student representation on entirely spurious grounds, so it is not an office for students but an office against students. On 20 March, The Guardian reported that university leaders described the Office for Students as the “Office for State Control,” warning that it would prove disastrous for higher education and is “dangerous for democracy.”

The Government’s power grab is not being challenged by people in the sector, as they fear reprisals from Ministers, so it is for us in the Opposition to speak up for them. An anonymous vice-chancellor said:

“It is a huge problem if we feel we cannot criticise government. A lot of VCs feel that if they speak out they risk being ripped apart by the media. If there is a lack of leadership at UUK that is a massive problem.”

How have the Government managed to create both a culture and an institution akin to the Ministry of Love in George Orwell’s “Nineteen Eighty-Four” in which university vice-chancellors, the leaders of this country’s great institutions of learning and research, cannot speak out? In a modern democracy, that is a shameful indictment of the Government. This chapter, on how the state has treated universities in this country, will live long in the history of infamy. This motion is not only necessary but essential if we are to guard universities’ academic freedom. We must think again about how the Office for Students is constructed.
I understand but strongly disagree with the Government’s need to turn higher education into a complete market economy in which students do not fulfil their desire to learn and grow but are consumers there to fulfil a future economic need. There is a drive for deregulation, the free marketeers’ dream.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that, as one vice-chancellor told me, there is at least a suspicion that we are moving back to the binary divide between the Russell Group and the new universities? That is a worrying development because it will play out in terms of value for money, and it will end up with the Russell Group charging higher fees and new universities having to charge lower fees.

Alex Sobel: I have a 1992 university in my constituency and I am a graduate and former student union officer of a Russell Group university, and I agree with my hon. Friend. The rot will set in when we start to have differential fees, which some of us here opposed at the time.

We need to create an institution that supports our bastions of learning, rather than one that tries to sanitise them. We need to transform how students view their institutions and the Office for Students. We need to view these institutions differently from other actors in the free market—they are not a shop or retail outlet but places where people come to learn and grow.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman is kind in giving way. Is his understanding of the motion the same as mine? If it is approved and the Office for Students is abolished, my understanding is that there will be no fee cap at all on providers, so all providers will be able to raise their fees. There is control on fees at the moment because of the Office for Students. I am very worried about that, but I do not know whether he is.

Alex Sobel: I was here in July when we debated the statutory instrument on the fee cap, so SIs do come to the Floor of the House. The Office for Students needs to operate properly and enshrine academic freedom. That is what we need, and that is what the motion would achieve.

Helen Goodman: A bit of learning and growing by Government Members would be helpful. Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot amend SIs? We can only vote them down, and then the Government must table another one. We did not invent that process for this occasion.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend has been here far longer than me and it is good to know that lots of Members are learning about the statutory instrument process as we speak. I knew we could not amend an SI in the same way as we can amend primary legislation, but I am sure this is not going to be the end on this SI if the motion is defeated tonight. The Government may come back with a better offer, given the opportunity.

In conclusion, I just want to touch on the previous appointment to the regulator. On the marketisation of education, the Government chose to appoint their chief cheerleader in this transformation, Toby Young, a figure so abhorrent to the sector that he barely lasted a week. That is where we are with the governance of the OfS.

Today, we have our opportunity to start the fightback to get ourselves an Office for Students that is fit for purpose and to curb the Government’s enthusiasm for a consumer higher education market. We can start the journey back to universities as places where people want to go to grow and learn, and where people are not simply going to a sausage factory for this Government’s failed policies.
As much as Conservative Members come here this evening to accuse the Labour party of trying to bring down the OFS by dazing to vote against the statutory instrument, they neglect to notice that this SI was not in place yesterday and yet the architecture of the higher education sector has not fallen apart. It is not in place today, yet the higher education sector still seems to manage to function. If they expect us to pass any old rubbish on the basis that we have to pass it or there will be calamity, I have to tell them that, unfortunately for the Conservative party, they did not win a majority at the last election, and they have to get used to winning arguments and to parliamentary scrutiny. Presumably, that is why they bring forward so little legislation; they realise that this House of Commons will not pass any old rubbish.

That brings me to the statutory instrument we are dealing with this evening. The Office for Students is the logical conclusion of a vision of a higher education system in which, as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, the market rules supreme and which seeks to reduce higher education to a commodity for students to purchase as consumers and trade in for future success in the workplace. We were promised that the Office for Students would be this great champion of consumers, but we have seen precious little evidence of that so far.

The tragedy is that the Government managed to find a well-respected chair of the Office for Students, who was the architect of the system and who believes in their vision of a consumer-driven higher education system. The problem for the chair of the Office for Students and its very capable poacher-turned-gamekeeper chief executive is that, because of politicisation by the Government and their sheer incompetence, the Office for Students has been left discredited by the political process that led to the composition of its board. How can they come here with a straight face and defend a process that was condemned by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, who found not only that assurances given to this place were incorrect, but that there was direct political interference by special advisers from 10 Downing Street?

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): The report by the Commissioner for Public Appointments on recruitment to the Office for Students highlighted several concerns about fairness and consistency in the appointment process. Will my hon. Friend comment on how students and universities can be expected to place any trust in that body as a regulator?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, one of the things about the appointments process that has deeply damaged the standing of the OFS in the eyes of students was the insistence by Government political advisers that there should be no representatives from students unions or the National Union of Students on the board. The Government did not say, “We’re going to cast the net wide, and if we find a student who is more capable than an elected officer of the NUS or a students union, we’ll appoint them,” but instead effectively blacklisted the NUS and students unions. As a former president of the NUS, I think that is an absolute disgrace, not least because students who are elected have the confidence of the student body. They present manifestos about the issues that those they represent care about.

If the Government had listened a bit more to what students were saying, perhaps they would not be in the political mess they are in, not just with students but with their parents and grandparents, who are horrified that tuition fees have been trebled, that student grants for the poorest were abolished and that the education maintenance allowance for students in further education was scrapped. The Government have got themselves into a real mess by failing to listen to people who know best about higher education, which is the people who work in it and the people who learn from it. It is a disgrace that there is no NUS representative on the board of the Office for Students.

It is also a disgrace that there is no staff representative from the University and College Union. Recent events, particularly in the pensions dispute, have shown that the lack of effective dialogue between staff representatives and university leaders leads to students being severely disadvantaged, but we have barely heard a peep from the Government about that crisis. They seem to have their heads in the sand. It is deeply regrettable that the Office for Students has been so deeply damaged by politicisation in the run-up to its creation, and the Government should not be surprised that we wish to oppose this statutory instrument.

Finally, let me gently say, without apology or any humility whatsoever, that many of the issues that have confronted the Government, particularly vice-chancellor pay and scrutiny and accountability, would easily have been dealt with had they accepted more amendments from me and my party’s Front Bench during the Higher Education and Research Bill Committee. I warned them that vice-chancellor pay was soaring out of control, and I proposed a modest amendment that would have put student and staff representatives on remuneration committees to better hold vice-chancellors’ pay to account, but that modest proposal was rejected by the Minister’s predecessor. The Government must be regretting that now. I also tabled an amendment that would have required universities to publish the ratios of the highest-paid to the lowest-paid at their institutions, to allow students, staff and the public to better hold them to account. That modest proposal was rejected as well.

As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, the truth is that, when it comes to championing the interests of students and making our higher education sector better, fairer and more equitable, the Government do not listen and do not act. I agree strongly with what the Chair of the Education Committee said about the lack of further education representation. If we are serious about a further and higher education system that is well placed not just to serve the needs of our future economy, but to champion social justice, the Government need to do a damn sight better than they have done with the creation of the Office for Students. They cannot expect an effective Opposition to wade through statutory instruments like this when the work beneath it is so shabby and poor.

9.4 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We are blessed with great universities in this country and I welcome the expansion that we have had in the number of students attending university—50% of school leavers now go to university. That is truly welcome, but—there is obviously a but coming—not all universities are great
and not all courses are great. In fact, only 32% of students say that they consider their university to be value for money. There is too weak a link between the funding of universities and the quality of teaching. Students deserve better and students want better. They want to make a more informed choice about the university that they go to.

Just last week, a sixth form student was doing work experience with me. She was weighing up a choice of two or three universities—one has a better reputation by word of mouth, but another does better in the data of the National Student Survey. She was using that information to make an informed choice, which is a very positive sign that we are providing students with better information about the options and that very important decision—a decision that will have lifelong consequences—on what university to go to.

What we know is that transparency and regulation drive up quality. For a student, that process will help to drive up the quality of what universities offer. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) talked about Ofsted. We know that Ofsted has done that for schools and that the Care Quality Commission has been and is doing that for healthcare. That is where the Office for Students comes in. As a new regulator, it is far more focused on students, on what students need and on the quality of teaching for students. The Labour party should welcome that new regulator. As we have the Minister in his place, may I just say that the new regulator should go even further in what it looks at? It should go beyond looking at the quality of teaching to the wider experience of students and the outcomes for students. I ask him to consider extending its remit to include student wellbeing and mental health.

Although university is an exciting time, it is also an extremely challenging time for students. They are often living away from home for the first time. There are many transitions that they are making and they are taking much greater responsibility for themselves, and it can be a lonely and isolating time. More students are seeking help with their mental health, but not all are getting it. Not even a third of universities have a mental health and well-being strategy. Only 29% even monitor attendance, so they do not know what their students are doing. One sign of a student struggling will be that they are not attending lectures and tutorials.

Kate Green: I am very interested in what the hon. Lady is saying and I have sympathy with it. UA92, which I was talking about a few moments ago, makes great play of its emphasis on developing the character of its students—something that I know not all higher education institutions seek to do. Does she agree that it would be useful for the OfS to think of ways of measuring and evaluating that, too?

Helen Whately: I agree. The OfS should include that in its remit and look at measuring not only quality of teaching, but the outcomes for students and what universities do for students’ wellbeing and mental health. There is work being done on this led by Universities UK and I would very much like for that to be taken up by the OfS.

In conclusion, in addition to the OfS’s very welcome focus on what students need and better quality of teaching, it should also look at the wider experience and outcomes for students.

9.8 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that, as a former Minister, I am concerned about the loss of the Office for Fair Access and about whether access will continue to be an important theme under the new Office for Students. We have a lot to do, particularly on fair access to the Russell Group. The Minister will be aware of the work that I have tried to do, particularly in relation to Oxbridge. I look forward to going to Cambridge later this week to discuss in more detail what it is doing to get young people from the regions, particularly from the north of England, and particularly from poorer backgrounds and ethnic minority backgrounds. I have some faith, of course, in the leadership of Michael Barber and Nicola Dandridge, but it is right to say, as my hon. Friend the shadow Education Secretary indicated, that the Office for Students got off to a very bumpy start indeed with the Toby Young affair.

When the Minister gets to his feet, I hope that he might say something about further education in particular. A lot of Members across the House would say that, if someone has three or four children in this country and only one is academic, Britain is still one of the best places in the world in which to be born. But I do not think that any of us believe that this country has cracked it when it comes to vocational skills; we are a long way off. It is a mistake not to have FE represented in such an important body, which is regulator, funder and has important levers in relation to the provider. I do hope that the Minister will look again at the important role of FE, as has been suggested by the Labour Front-Bench team and the Chair of the Education Committee.

In an age where student satisfaction is everything—that journey began many years ago, when we decided to move towards a regime of fees—it seems paradoxical that the student voice is not as present in this new body as it probably should be. [Interruption.] The Minister nods from a sedentary position that it is. I look forward to him explaining how that is the case. If it is the case, why does he think that students should be afforded less of a status, frankly, than others who sit on the board?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): That point has been raised a number of times during this debate. For the first time, there will be a regulator that will have a student panel and a student representative on the board. I was there for the inaugural meeting and those representatives are doing great work. The suggestion that the student voice is somehow not represented is simply inaccurate.

Mr Lammy: Well, it cannot be entirely inaccurate because the most powerful student voice in the country is, in fact, the National Union of Students, and it is not entirely happy.

Wes Streeting: It was, in fact, the case that the president of the National Union of Students sat around the board table of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, so it is not true to say that what we have now is an improvement. We have a token student on the
about the remit of the OfS with no representative background whatever, and a talking shop that has no real teeth. That is not the same as having a board member.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I seem to remember that when I was a younger, slimmer Minister with responsibility for universities, there was a younger, slimmer Wes Streeting who occupied that very role. With that, I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

9.13 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): When I walked into the Chamber and listened to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), I thought for a moment that I had walked into the wrong debate. Although the Opposition prayed against the Government’s legislation, meaning that we had to have this debate on the Floor of the House, it took quite a long time for me to realise that she was actually speaking to her motion, because nothing that she said was relevant or bore any resemblance to its content. The motion is actually a very serious one that calls for the set of regulations before the House to be annulled, although she said that that was not the case at all.

This legislation should be a piece of good news for the House. For the first time in the age of the student—when students should no longer be grateful for the experience that universities dish out to them, but should have a champion for them—this Government has set up a new regulator to perform that role. But of course the Opposition chose not to recognise that, saying instead that we should annul the legislation.

The first point—I will speak specifically to the SI—is that annuelling this legislation is unviable. It is unviable to continue with the existing legislation. That is because the Higher Education and Research Act—HERA—replaces the previous legislative framework for higher education that was established in 1992, when the sector was smaller and competition was limited. The majority of funding came from direct grants, to which HEFCE attached terms and conditions on providers that want to be on its register, and only registered providers can benefit from their students having access to student support. The OfS is already operational, and there is no going back. HERA has established the new Office for Students, which regulates in a very different way by imposing terms and conditions on providers that want to be on its register, and only registered providers can benefit from their students having access to student support. The OfS is already operational, and there is no going back. HERA has already been abolished, as has the Office for Fair Access. Both ceased to exist on 1 April, and annuelling these regulations does not change that. That ship has already sailed, and neither of these bodies can be resurrected without primary legislation. The OfS has important responsibilities for access and participation and is already pushing higher education providers to make greater progress through their access and participation plans for 2019-20.

Helen Goodman: The Minister and I have corresponded about the impact of the recent strike on students and the fact that universities do not really have a financial incentive to settle the strikes because they get the tuition fees in and save money on the lecturers’ pay. A further question I have about the OfS’s remit is whether it will have the power to order the institutions to pay the students compensation.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady makes a perfect case for the OfS. The reason why the OfS could not have intervened in the recent strikes is that it did not exist statutorily at that point, but were the OfS to be in place, that is exactly the sort of issue it could take on and champion on behalf of students. That is why we have brought this legislation forward.

Let me absolutely clear about the effect on students and providers alike if this motion is carried. First, students’ fees will be uncapped. While the amount of fees that students can be charged is set out in separate legislation, these transitional regulations ensure that
People have been asking questions of the Minister all night, and that they will bring nothing other than chaos and confusion for students and providers alike. Without fee caps, we lose access plans, because it is the incentive of being able to charge students up to the current higher fee cap that drives providers towards agreeing access plans. Without fee caps, that incentive is removed. Many Members in the debate have commented on the importance of access, especially to our elite universities, but a vote to annul these regulations is a vote to remove the key tools currently used to boost access and participation. We need an orderly transition to the new regulator.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman has already had his chance. Establishing a single regulator, which brings together the—— [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. People have been asking questions of the Minister all evening and now they are not listening to his answers.

Mr Gyimah: Madam Deputy Speaker, you make a fine Chair. Establishing a single regulator, which brings together the regulatory functions of HEFCE in relation to teaching in higher education with the statutory remit of the Director of Fair Access, delivers a significant change in ownership of responsibility for widening access and participation. It brings together the powers, duties, expertise and resources under the collective responsibility of the OfS and allows for a smooth and orderly transition.

In conclusion, during the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act, Members across the House debated long and hard the future of higher education. Irrespective of different views about how we finance higher education or how it should be regulated, there will always be an imperative to ensure that students are getting a high-quality experience and positive outcomes from the time and effort they put into their education. This Government firmly believe that giving students real and well-informed choices is the most effective way to achieve that, and that the regulatory system should be designed to support healthy competition on a level playing field.

In attempting to annul these regulations, the Opposition are proving that they have no desire to give students more information, protection, choice or value for their money, and that they will bring nothing other than chaos and confusion for students and providers alike. While I am dismayed that the Opposition prayed against these regulations and did not even utter one sentence about them, I urge the House to vote for this important champion of students.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 211, Noes 291.

Division No. 138

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Alian-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Cadbury, Ruth
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cumnings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Finn, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gildon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoe, Kate
Holllern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy

[Mr Gyimah]
Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Ordered.

That Chris Davies be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Colin Clark be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS

Ordered.

That Lee Rowley be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Julia Lopez be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to note that without any exhortation from me, the sprinkling of Members unaccountably leaving are doing so quietly and a significant number of Members are remaining, which is, as one would hope and expect, so that we can hear the debate on the Adjournment.
Patient Transport Volunteer Drivers

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

9.40 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and all those Members who have remained at this late hour. In a way, my contribution tonight feels not unlike my maiden speech, because it is necessary to frame what I will say with a kind of tour d’horizon, because as Members will understand, the horizons in my constituency are massive. It is the second biggest in the UK—it is truly huge. The sheer distances involved in travelling in the highlands always come as a surprise to people who do not know the area.

As I have said in the Chamber before, a simple hospital appointment for my constituents living on the north coast can involve a return trip of well over 200 miles from the north coast to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. In a part of the world where there is extremely limited rail travel, from Wick and Thurso going down the east coast to Inverness, and where buses are sporadic at best, my constituents have little choice other than to rely on the good old-fashioned motor car—either their own or private cars driven by volunteer drivers.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): My hon. Friend mentions the distances involved. Does he agree that in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, as in many other parts of Scotland, it is not simply the distance, but the fact that the roads make the journey even more difficult? Often we are talking not about dual carriageways, but about roads that are single track, and no more, and extremely difficult to travel on.

Jamie Stone: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. She holidays in Portmahomack and will know, as well as I do, that in winter weather, some of these roads can be absolutely impassable.

I want to read from an email that I was sent by a constituent of mine called Fiona who lives in Durness in north-west Sutherland. She wrote:

“I currently have an 83 year old neighbour who has had a stroke, has memory problems as well as other medical conditions in north-west Sutherland. She wrote:

“the hospital in Inverness—

“and 4 times I have tried (very hard) to arrange a hospital car for him. I have yet to be successful and end up taking him there myself. It is physically impossible for him to make the journey by public transport for his timed appointments even if he was physically fit!”

I think that sums up the nature of the problem in my constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the current trend of closing down small hospitals and creating centres of excellence that are miles away from rural communities makes it difficult for those taking loved ones on long journeys for necessary treatment? People should not be penalised for living in rural areas, such as those in my constituency of Strangford in Northern Ireland.

Jamie Stone: That is absolutely correct. The hon. Gentleman and I have to be careful about straying into devolved areas, but the fact is that the NHS changes that are happening in our constituencies impact on people. We can say it is devolved, but nevertheless, the two of us represent our constituents and are bound to take up their issues, and, as best we can within the rules of devolution, air them in this Chamber.

I mentioned volunteer drivers a minute or two ago, and they are the people I wish to draw to the attention of the House tonight. That is the peg on which I hang my hat, because one has this balancing act between what is devolved and what is reserved to Westminster.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that without proper reimbursement for volunteer patient transport drivers, we are at risk of having a deeply unfair postcode lottery in which people in rural and remote areas lack the access to the healthcare that they are entitled to?

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman makes a sage point, which I will come to shortly. The issue is the taxation regime—it is a UK function, hence it being the peg on which I hang my hat—that applies to these drivers. I shall describe the problem. In 2011, the then Chancellor, George Osborne, set thresholds and payments for volunteer drivers that would not incur additional taxation over and above their PAYE. These rules, which still govern us today, were: a reimbursement of 45p per mile for the first 10,000 miles and of 25p per mile for any additional miles.

I shall work that into a typical example of a volunteer driver in my constituency. In my part of the world, it would be no surprise if a driver did as many as 50,000 miles a year—believe it or not—driving patients to and from their much-needed appointments. As I have said, he or she receives the higher rate of 45p for the first 10,000 miles and then the lower rate of 25p for the following 40,000 miles. As Members will understand, it does not take a financial genius to work out that the reimbursement for these higher mileages represents a net loss for the driver. It is for this reason that for far too long volunteer drivers have badly been packing it in—giving it up. As I say, this is particularly worrying in constituencies such as mine where we have huge issues of distance, inclement weather and so on.

Where a volunteer driver continues to drive and accept this taxation regime, just one 200-mile return trip a week will take them in a year up to the 10,000-mile point.

This was for a long time a big issue for me during my time as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, and every time I raised it in Holyrood with the Scottish Government, they would say—with truth on their side—“We’re sorry but this is a matter for Westminster”. I am here now—some might say by a dreadful accident of the electorate, but there we are—and it is precisely because it is a matter for Westminster that I raised it with the Leader of the House not very long ago. It is also the reason I applied for this debate—and now I have been lucky enough to be chosen to place the issue before Members tonight.

It would be easy for me to say to the Minister, “Will Her Majesty’s Government please go away and think about it?”, but I know from previous ministerial responses that he might well respond, “If the volunteer driver thinks he is losing money on this deal let him always present his books to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and say, ‘You’re being unfair to me’”. But let’s face it: how many volunteer drivers have such a detailed grasp...
of accountancy or the time to do that? It would take up too much of their time or be beyond their capabilities. They just want to get on with helping their friends and neighbours get the medical treatment they need.

I have instead a suggestion for the Treasury—if it chooses to take it apart, so be it, but I will argue my corner. It seems extraordinary that the 10,000-mile threshold and the rate of reimbursement have not been looked at since 2011, when George Osborne put in place the current arrangements; it was seven years ago. If nothing else, surely the time is now right for the matter to be revisited. One way forward would be to raise the threshold to, say, 15,000 miles—or another figure that Her Majesty’s Government might suggest. The beauty of this is that, while it could be argued that other drivers—for instance, employees using their own cars for business, which is governed by the same taxation law—might be tempted, in a bad world, to incur extra mileage to ramp up their income, a simple change in taxation rules to recognise the specific and special role of NHS volunteer drivers would be a safeguard and could easily be written into law.

Sticking to volunteer drivers, some have expressed the fear that increasing the threshold might encourage NHS drivers in urban areas, or perhaps in the home counties of England, to up their mileage to cash in, but there are only so many working hours in a day and one can only drive for so long in a day. As a highlander who has come down to these strangely populated parts of England, I have discovered it can take an awfully long time to travel from A to B, even when the mileage is comparatively short, owing to urban hold-ups and so on.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There are lessons to be learnt from northern Lincolnshire, where Thames Ambulance Service Ltd took over the contract and changed the arrangements for rewarding volunteer drivers, as a result of which the whole contract became very difficult to run. I congratulate the new chief executive on changing the arrangements again, as a result of which volunteer drivers are now coming back. As the hon. Gentleman has said, they make a big contribution to the health service, and they need to be properly remunerated.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which was thoughtful and to the point. Ultimately, however, whether the matter is devolved or reserved, I am left with the problem of trying to help people whom I know and love to reach hospitals and medical centres so that they can be given the treatment that they need.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing a debate on such an important issue. I was concerned to hear about the volunteer drivers who have given up driving for the reasons that he has explained. Does he agree that it is not just their driving that we lose, but the extra service that they provide? The drivers who work for the Speyside community car sharing scheme in Moray do not just drop people off at the doctor’s surgery or the hospital and then pick them up again; they wait for them, and take them back to their homes to ensure that they are safe after what can sometimes be a traumatic experience.

Jamie Stone: That point is incredibly well made. The hypothetical Mrs Mackay who goes to Moray or Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross will know the local people. She will know, when she picks up Mrs Mackenzie, that she may have forgotten to take her heart tablets with her. That is crucial. Local knowledge will also inform her if Mrs Mackenzie has been bereaved, or if there is some difficulty in her family. That makes life so much better.

At the end of the day—and at the end of this day, too—patient transport in my vast and beautiful constituency is exceedingly challenging. I acknowledge that. However, no challenge should be ducked, and I think that sensitive law making can take on some of the nuances. I am bound to say that, in my 11 months in this place, I have been grateful to Her Majesty’s Government for their recognition that I represent a very remote and rural part of Scotland and of the United Kingdom, with a fragile economy. I look forward to the Minister’s reply, and I stake my claim for the future by saying that I should be more than happy to meet him, talk about this problem, and work towards a constructive solution as the days, months and years go by—although I hope that it will not be years.

9.52 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for raising an important issue about which I know that he feels strongly—as do others, which is evidenced by the fact that so many Members have stayed in the Chamber to listen and contribute to the debate. Like me, the hon. Gentleman represents a rural area where the distances that constituents must travel to visit doctors, dentists, opticians and hospitals are considerable; in his case, they are very large indeed, perhaps larger than those in any other constituency. I know that he raised this issue during his time at Holyrood—I have seen the questions that he asked and the answers that he received—and I am glad that he has had the opportunity to raise it again in the House of Commons.

The Government greatly value the significant contribution of members of the public who, as volunteers, support others up and down the country. We recognise that those who provide transport, particularly in rural areas, enable vulnerable people, such as the elderly and those without cars, to have the access to appointments or treatment that would otherwise be very challenging, very expensive, or both. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), it is not simply a question of practicality; it is also a question of the care, the kindness and the company that the volunteers give to others. I have seen that myself when I have volunteered once or twice with my own local voluntary transport scheme in Nottinghamshire.

I pay tribute on behalf of the Government to both the individuals and the voluntary transport schemes. The volunteers who staff many of these schemes make them possible. In my constituency, we benefit from a superb scheme run by Lucy Fountain in Newark, who I have got to know and respect enormously. I believe that, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross says, the Government do and must play a role in ensuring that the schemes continue, that volunteers are respected for the time and commitment they put in, and that they are not at any financial disadvantage.

As a Treasury, we need to consider carefully the barriers standing in the way of people doing this work—I believe that we have done that, but I hope we will continue to do so. Tonight, I am very happy to outline where we
stand and the work we have done in recent years, but I also accept the suggestion of a meeting to take these matters forward.

It is right that the tax system should allow volunteers to be reimbursed for their reasonable expenses and it must be the principle that wherever possible volunteers are not left out of pocket. Organisations are free to reimburse volunteers whatever rate they choose but, to make it easier for volunteer drivers and to create simplicity in how one is reimbursed for the miles driven, the Government allow organisations to make approved mileage allowance payments, or AMAPs. Payments within the AMAPs scheme do not incur a liability to tax, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross explained.

The scheme covers reasonable costs associated with using a private car for business miles or voluntary work and the approved rates, as we have heard, are set at 45p per mile for the first 10,000 miles and 25p thereafter. The reason for the higher rate for the first 10,000 miles has always been to reflect the fixed and variable costs associated with operating a car. No matter how small the number of miles driven, motorists will of course always be liable to pay for insurance, servicing the vehicle and purchasing a new one in due course. In general, that means that when driving a shorter distance the overall cost per mile is higher than when those fixed costs are spread over a greater number of miles. Drivers carrying passengers can also claim an additional 5p per mile per passenger. For volunteer drivers, of course, this is particularly relevant, but it is also designed to incentivise people to take part in drive to work schemes and so on. If a driver is travelling with one passenger, 50p per mile could be paid tax-free for the first 10,000 miles. It should be stressed that 50p is only the maximum outlined by the Government. Many voluntary transport schemes choose, at their discretion, to offer a lower sum. My own in Nottinghamshire offers 42p per mile, so there are questions of variations across the country that are outside the control of the Government.

Volunteers are also afforded one further preferential treatment. Unlike for employees, the reimbursement of a volunteer’s travel expenses covers them from home to the place of voluntary work. When one is travelling from one’s home to pick up a patient in their home, all of that journey is reimbursed. This can be considerable. However hard voluntary transport schemes like my own try to match the patient with the volunteer, the distances in a constituency such as the hon. Gentleman’s can be very large, so that preferential treatment is important.

Seen in the whole, we think that the current rates represent a fair allowance for the vast majority, ensuring that volunteer drivers are not left out of pocket. The system is designed to be simple and clear, as volunteers are required only to record their annual mileage rather than to keep any other motoring records or expenses. As the hon. Gentleman said, such a requirement would be too onerous for volunteers. It has to be said that the vast majority of volunteers do not exceed 10,000 miles of volunteer driving, but I appreciate that regional variations exist.

To take an example from England for context, a QualityWatch report found that only 3% of emergency admissions travelled more than 30 km to a hospital, with an average distance of just under 9 km. Preparing for this debate, I asked my own voluntary transport scheme. It covers a rural area—far less rural than the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but an area where hospitals are 20 to 30 miles away from the principal town. I appreciate that that is only a fraction of the distances he described. The average mileage for a volunteer driver in that rural area was 4,000 miles a year, and the busiest driver last year completed 9,000 miles. I do not want to dismiss those individuals who drive more than 10,000 miles. I am sure there are some, and the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members from the highlands of Scotland have mentioned some of them—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House

Robert Jenrick: As I was saying, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is correct and that there are individuals who travel more than 10,000 miles a year. We have to recognise that, by definition, these are the most active and the most public-spirited members of the public. They are giving up enormous amounts of time; they are almost professional volunteers, given the amount of time they are willing to give up. Their generosity should be provided for and their costs reimbursed wherever possible.

Douglas Ross: We are focusing in this debate on volunteer drivers, but will the Minister also take this opportunity to acknowledge that there are others in our communities who help? For example, Keith Cancer Link, which was established 35 years ago in Moray, raises money to pay for taxis to take people from Keith to Aberdeen and Elgin for their treatments. It is right that we highlight what the drivers do, but we should also highlight what others in our constituencies do to help.

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend. There is a range of schemes across the country, particularly in the rural areas that most of the hon. Members here tonight represent. They include volunteer driver schemes and community bus schemes, as well as schemes run by the whole range of charities supporting hospitals and healthcare across the country.

Returning to the question of those travelling more than 10,000 miles a year, I am pleased to report to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross that there is provision for them, but it is slightly different from what he has outlined this evening. HMRC allows individuals to claim their actual costs if they travel more than 10,000 miles—or indeed any mileage—at the discretion of the individual or the community transport scheme. Those who travel particularly long distances and feel that the rates do not cover their costs should ask their community transport scheme for the actual costs of their motoring. The individual will need to keep records to show that no taxable profit has been made, but there is no need for them to make any declaration to HMRC or to include the information on a tax return unless they make a profit, which presumably they do not.

I would encourage the hon. Gentleman’s constituents to consider asking the organisations they volunteer for to reimburse their actual costs, if they feel that that would more accurately reflect the costs of their motoring.
The organisations might wish to do so, at their discretion, for the small number of volunteers who exceed 10,000 miles. I do not doubt that some individuals will fall into that category, and that in some parts of the country, such as his own, there will be a considerable number. There is an opportunity for them to do this with relatively little burden on themselves. It will certainly not involve the level of reporting that he thought would be required. To ensure that all those who use AMAPs understand their entitlement, HMRC last week published new guidance relating specifically to volunteer drivers, which includes the point that I have just made. We hope that it will provide a useful resource, and I will place a copy of it in the Library of the House.

To conclude, I again thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. I should also like to thank the volunteer drivers across the country who play such a valuable role in many of our communities, particularly in the rural parts of the United Kingdom. I have listened closely to his comments, and to those made by others who have spoken in the debate tonight, and I would be more than happy to continue the conversation in a meeting with him and any other rural Members who would like to join in. As with all taxes, the Treasury keeps the AMAPs system under review, to ensure that it continues to be fit for purpose and to achieve its stated aim. I am happy to do that again, as I am sure the Chancellor will do as we approach the Budget in November.

As I have set out this evening, we believe that the current system is fair and consistent for the majority. For the small number who go the extra mile and who travel more than 10,000 miles, there is that additional system under which they can claim their actual costs with only a relatively low burden to themselves and the organisations they volunteer for. I hope that the guidance published at my request on Friday by HMRC will provide further clarity, and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at it. I am happy to provide it to him. If he has comments or concerns about it, we can discuss them in the conversation that I hope we will have in the coming weeks. I hope this has been helpful, and I look forward to continuing this conversation and to ensuring that volunteer drivers across the country are properly respected and reimbursed for the important contribution that they make.

Question put and agreed to.

10.5 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 24 April 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Court Closures

1. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of court closures on access to justice. [904894]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): We are looking at ways to improve our justice system and to modernise the delivery of justice in many ways, including with technology. In circumstances where 41% of tribunals were used at half their capacity in 2016-17, it is right that we consider whether spending money on the physical estate is the best use of money.

Mohammad Yasin: The Government like to say that they have reallocated court services rather than closed them, but Bedford has lost its magistrates court and employment tribunal court, so the public and lay members must travel more than 30 miles to access justice. Can the Minister reassure me that family court services, which are heard in the highly utilised Shire Hall, will remain in Bedford indefinitely?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is right in relation to the changes taking place in Bedford to a certain extent, but I emphasise that the closure of the tribunal court is nothing to do with any changes being made by the Ministry of Justice or Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service. The tribunal service is closing because the landlord did not extend the lease, and it was a decision of listing, which is a judicial capacity, to move the tribunal court’s hearings elsewhere. Civil cases will be heard in Bedford magistrates court, and until another location is found, it will not close.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Northallerton magistrates court in my constituency is scheduled for closure. Will the Minister consider using that court as a pilot for some of the future technology solutions, to ensure that those are workable in practice, before the closure is implemented?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, as has his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). I have met them both and the police and crime commissioner for the area. It is important to consider the appropriateness of pilots for mobile technology, and we will do so.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Thousands of key court staff were axed, but the Government are now spending tens of millions of pounds more on contracting agency staff. More than 100 courts were sold off, each raising not much more than the average house price. Now the Secretary of State has appointed someone with a slash-and-burn record as the new chair of the HMCTS board, telling the press that Tim Parker’s “expertise will be vital as we deliver our reform and modernisation of the courts”.

To allay concerns that Mr Parker has been appointed for his toughness on cuts, can the Minister outline the specific expertise that Mr Parker has in working in our court system?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes a number of points that I would like to refute, but I will mainly concentrate on two. It is important that where successful people in business put themselves forward for public service, we should welcome them and not put off experienced people from taking up important posts. Mr Parker has been successful in the businesses that he operated and has operated them appropriately, and we welcome him to his post. The hon. Gentleman also talks about cuts to our system. I would like to make it clear that the Ministry of Justice is proposing an extensive reform programme, which will put £1 billion into our courts service.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Benefit applicants in Kettering tell me that they are now having to wait a completely unacceptable 45 weeks for tribunal appeal hearings due to a lack of a suitable location. Will the Minister look into that as a matter of urgency and get that problem fixed?

Lucy Frazer: It is very important that when cases are started, they are heard expeditiously, so that people are not prejudiced and do not have to wait for justice. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about those issues.

Community Sentences

2. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of community sentences on reducing reoffending rates. [904895]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): This is something the Department studied in detail in 2015, and we have conclusive evidence that giving somebody a community sentence rather than a short custodial sentence reduces reoffending over a one-year period.

Carol Monaghan: We have evidence of that in Scotland as well. The Scottish Government’s move towards community payback orders has helped Scotland to achieve its current 18-year low in reoffending. Is the Minister looking to the Scottish Government’s example and considering how they have managed to achieve these figures?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. We have a lot to learn from Scotland, specifically on community sentences, and indeed we will be looking at what more we can do to emphasise
that a custodial sentence in the short term should be a final resort. In reoffending terms, it is often much better for somebody to be given a community sentence.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): In Cornwall, I work closely with Konnect Cornwall, headed up by Ian Curnow, which does a lot of work on behalf of the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions to support ex-offenders and people who are on the way into trouble. What more resources can be made available so that no one is left behind?

Rory Stewart: A lot of this is about identifying those key local providers. The real challenge that we need to overcome, which is true not just for justice but for local councils, is that of making sure that when we work with the third sector we work, not with big national providers, but with small, grassroots local charities.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to the fact that I am a life member of the Magistrates Association. In the all-party parliamentary group on women in the penal system, we recently heard from the Magistrates Association that magistrates are not familiar with the content of community penalties. That makes them reluctant to choose such penalties. The issue, in part, seems to be a lack of funding for training. Will the Minister comment?

Rory Stewart: This is a long-standing issue—it was true even in 2008-09—that consistently, the judiciary and magistrates have expressed concerns about community sentences. We need to do much more to build confidence, but the fact that this has been going on for nearly 10 years shows that it is a very challenging thing to do. Training will be an important part of that.

Prison Officer Recruitment

3. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What progress his Department is making on recruiting 2,500 new prison officers.

6. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What progress his Department is making on recruiting 2,500 new prison officers.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Retaining and recruiting engaged and motivated staff is critical to delivering the solutions to drive improvement across the service. Between the end of October 2016 and the end of March 2018, we have increased prison officer numbers by 3,111 full-time equivalent staff. This is already significantly over our target of 2,500 additional staff by the end of December 2018. Investing in the frontline is vital for safety, rehabilitation and security, which is why we are spending £100 million a year in additional prison officers.1

Craig Tracey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and commend him for the work that he has done on recruitment. Can he confirm when we can expect to see the new officers on the landings?

Mr Gauke: I can tell my hon. Friend that 90% of the 3,111 will be on the landings by the summer, and all will be in place and operational by the end of the year.

Alan Mak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Will he update the House on the progress being made towards the new key worker model and the impact it is having on prison officer recruitment?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. The key worker model is crucial. It will allow prison officers to spend more time, both on a one-to-one basis and with small groups of prisoners, improving staff-prisoner relationships. That can help us reduce both violence and reoffending. Some prisons, such as HMP Liverpool, are already running that scheme, and I look forward to more prisons fully implementing that over the months ahead.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Many of Dartmoor prison’s prison officers live in Plymouth and have told me of their concern that prison officer cuts, inexperienced staff and increasing retirement ages are causing stress and concern. Can the Minister reassure me that there is a proper plan to address staffing and morale in our Prison Service?

Mr Gauke: There is already a proper plan to address that point about staffing. That is why the numbers are going up, and that is the point I am setting out. The numbers are at a five-year high. We are ahead of what we promised in October 2016. I am pleased that we are doing that and we will continue to recruit new prison officers—net new prison officers—into the Prison Service.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What additional training will these new officers be given to deal with the scourge of the availability of drugs in our prisons throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We are refreshing the way that training works for prison officers. It is very important that we deal with the issue of drugs, which has been a real game-changer in its effect on prisons. As we change and refresh our training process, we need to ensure that new prison officers have the skills they need to deal with drugs.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The net increase in the number of prison officers is very welcome, and I particularly welcome the Secretary of State’s reference to a key workers scheme, but does he agree that the mix of the workforce is important? Successful key worker and personal officer schemes will depend on having experienced staff, because they are best able to develop relationships with prisoners and deal with violence, the risk of suicide and other issues. Will a strategy now be put in place for the retention of existing staff, perhaps with incentives to encourage good people to remain in the service?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. We not only recruit new staff, but retain existing staff. We are working closely with those prisons that are failing to retain staff. It is worth pointing out that in 2017 the percentage of prison officers in bands 3 to 5 who left the service was 9.7%—higher than we would like it, but not particularly out of line with other employers. Prison officers do a very valuable job, and we need to recognise that, support them and encourage those who have a lot to offer to continue to serve.

Imran Hussain: I am astonished that the Secretary of State can come here and appear somewhat triumphant. Let us be absolutely clear: this Government cut 7,000 prisoner officers, so there are still 4,000 fewer than there were in 2010. When does he expect prison staff numbers to return to 2010 levels?

Mr Gauke: I suspect that you, Mr Speaker, would stop me if we started a debate on the state of the public finances in 2010 and the difficult decisions that had to be taken as a result of the situation we inherited. The reality is that since October 2016 we have been recruiting more prison officers, we are ahead of what we said we would do and we are continuing to recruit prison officers. That is really important to ensure that prisons operate as they should.

Suicide in Prisons

4. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of suicide in prisons; and what steps he is taking to reduce that level.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Any death from suicide in prison is a tragedy. We have managed to reduce the number of suicides in prison—it nearly halved between 2016 and 2017—and most of that progress is due to a new protocol that identifies the individual needs of prisoners and their times of maximum vulnerability.

Mr Cunningham: How many additional staff who are trained to deal with medical illness have been brought in?

Rory Stewart: Nearly 15,600 of our staff have received additional training—that is the figure produced by my colleague. The ACCT—assessment, care in custody and teamwork—process, which is the new protocol for suicide reduction, focuses on the evidence for when prisoners are most vulnerable, for example their first night in custody, and how to ensure that we deal with them. But we still need to reduce the number of suicides further.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Ninety-three women have died in prisons in England and Wales since the 2007 Corston report. When the new female offender strategy is published, will it focus on community alternatives to prison, especially for the 70% of women who are sentenced to six months or less?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. This is a common theme. We have clear evidence that reducing the use of custodial short sentences and instead diverting people into the community can be good for protecting the public, by reducing reoffending, but it is also very good for mental health and for reducing suicide.

Victims Law

5. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What his policy is on introducing a victims law.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Supporting victims of crime is a priority for the Government and we have made a commitment to publish a victims strategy by this summer. The strategy will set out our cross-Government approach to make fundamental improvements for victims. It will also consider how compliance with the entitlements in the victims code might be improved and better monitored, and how criminal justice agencies responsible for the delivery of entitlements might be better held to account.

Nick Smith: The Minister has promised us a strategy by the summer, but a victims law was offered in the 2015 Conservative manifesto and included in the following Queen’s Speech and reiterated in the 2017 general election. When will this long-promised law finally see the light of day?

Dr Lee: We are considering both legislative and non-legislative measures. If any legislation is required to underpin the victims code, we will bring it forward when parliamentary time allows.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): With respect to victims of domestic abuse, will the Minister consider women who are not eligible for legal aid to help with their divorce after domestic abuse, including women who currently fail the means test due to their having a share in a valuable family home? Will he meet me to discuss the problems that such women face in paying for basic legal advice?

Dr Lee: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the question. Yes, he has a point with regard to the funding of domestic abuse cases from legal aid. My ministerial colleagues are fully aware of this issue, and I am more than happy to meet him.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Mr Speaker, “Why should victims always have to be fighting their corner? That’s why we need a victims’ law.” They are not my words, but the words of the Government’s Victims’ Commissioner. Can we be clear: will she and all the other people who are calling for it get a victims law?

Dr Lee: My intention in the strategy is to outline the legislative requirements needed to underpin the victims code. By definition, that is a victims law.

Leaving the EU: UK Legal System

7. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the UK legal system continues to operate effectively after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on his impressive marathon run at the weekend.

We have agreed an implementation period that will give businesses and individuals legal certainty. We are now concentrating on ensuring that we negotiate the right future for our country, including a deal to ensure that there is mutual enforcement of recognition of judgments in the justice sector.

John Lamont: I thank the Minister for her response. I am very pleased not to have to bob this week, I can tell you, Mr Speaker.
Scotland is proud to have its own ancient and distinct legal system. Brexit will present the most significant challenge to that since the creation of the Scottish Parliament. It is therefore vital that we get it right. Will the Minister reassure me that, at her Department’s heart, it will ensure that Scots law continues to flourish post Brexit, respecting the distinct nature of Scots law and preventing legal confusion and chaos?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is right to identify that Scotland has a distinct legal system that should be respected. It is important that we engage fully with the devolved Administrations to ensure that we get the best and the right deal throughout the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State will be speaking this afternoon to the Scottish Justice Minister and my officials speak regularly with their counterparts in Scotland to ensure that we will get the best deal for the UK.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Given the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, it is important that the Government do not add to the worries of businesses, especially those that would otherwise be in a position to invest and grow. Will the Secretary of State and the uncertainty in the credit market and release the response to part 2 of the soft tissue injury claims process consultation immediately?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady raises an interesting issue that I am happy to look into. More generally, legal certainty is incredibly important, which is why it is so good that we have agreed the implementation period, which gives us a period of certainty.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Has the Minister made any assessment in the Department of the beneficial changes that can follow from our legislative framework here in the UK, once we are finally unencumbered by the EU?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is right that, after we have left the EU, we will be able to determine our laws, which will benefit our country in the way that we decide.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): At the moment, there are two British judges on the European Court of Justice: one from the English legal tradition and one from the Scottish legal tradition. During the transition period, the domestic legal systems of the United Kingdom will continue to be subject to the full force of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, whether in relation to litigation between private individuals or enforcement against the United Kingdom. Why, then, have the UK Government agreed to article 6 of the draft withdrawal agreement?

Lucy Frazer: The judges at the ECJ make a very valuable contribution to our jurisprudence and to the rights of individual citizens. It is worth pointing out that once someone is appointed as a judge of the ECJ, they are not a representative of their country; they are an individual determining cases that come before them, without any partisanship towards their country. Indeed, if we had a British case before the Court, there would be no saying whether it would come before an English judge or any other judge.

Joanna Cherry: One of the things that means the European Court of Justice is not a foreign court is the presence of British judges on it, but article 6 of the draft withdrawal agreement, which appears to have been agreed, provides that there will be no British judges on the Court of Justice during the transition period. Effectively, they are getting the sack at the end of next March, despite the Court’s continued jurisdiction over the United Kingdom. Does the Minister accept that, as a rule of law issue, it is concerning that there will be no Scottish judge and no English judge on the Court of Justice during the transition period, despite the fact that these countries will continue to be subject to the Court of Justice? Will she persuade the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to revisit this issue in the negotiations to come, so that there will be British judges on the Court of Justice during the transition period?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned, once the judges are appointed, they act independently of their country, so if we respect the judgments and the integrity of the other judges who are there already, we should be satisfied that we will get justice.

Service Animals

8. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of creating a specific offence of attacking service animals.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): My hon. Friend, along with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), are campaigning strongly and tirelessly on this issue; I was very pleased to meet them on 17 April. I am not aware of any specific conversations that the Secretary of State has had with his Cabinet colleagues, but the Government are sympathetic to the intention behind the Bill, although we believe that the offence is already caught by other legislation.

Stephen McPartland: Police dog Finn from my constituency was stabbed in his stomach with a 10-inch blade. When the offender tried to stab his handler, police dog Finn jumped up and took another stab wound to his head to save the handler. If the handler had not been given a little scratch to his hand, the offender could not have been sent to prison, because the current legislation does not work. The Service Animals (Offences) Bill, which is promoted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), has its Second Reading this Friday. I am grateful to the Minister for the meeting that she had with me, but will she support the Bill on Friday because it can make progress only with Government support?

Lucy Frazer: I am aware of the case and I was very pleased to discuss it. Police dog Finn did a remarkable thing, and I know that he has been recognised for his work. The Government are looking at the issue.
Lucy Frazer: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Bill is in the hands of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and it will respond.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): May I update my hon. and learned Friend? Some 34 out of the 41 police commissioners in this country support the Service Animals (Offences) Bill, and lawyers up and down the country, including Sarah Dixon, who runs the Finn’s law campaign, have identified a gap in the law. Is it not time that the Government backed my Bill?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for a third opportunity to address this issue and to speak again—this is the third time that I have heard my right hon. and learned Friend express his support for the Bill in the Chamber. As I have said, the Government are looking at this issue, and the matter is primarily for DEFRA.

Mr Speaker: In so far as the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) seeks my advice, and he might not do so, my advice to him, to put it bluntly, is to follow Churchill’s adage: KBO—keep buggering on at all times. Just keep going, man!

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I congratulate hon. Members on their work in this area. As an animal rights campaigner, I think it is simply wrong that criminal damage is the highest charge that can be brought to punish someone who attacks a service animal. What are the Government doing to change the legal oversight, to protect our brave service animals, and to ensure that those who attack and injure service animals are subject to the full weight of the law?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend raises a technical point about the offences that are available. In fact, there are two: criminal damage; and an offence under animal welfare legislation. Both attract a penalty of up to six months and, as she may be aware, DEFRA has identified that it is looking to increase the sentence to five years.

Prisoner Education/Reoffending Rates

9. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that prisoners can obtain education and skills while in prison in order to reduce reoffending rates.

Rory Stewart: It is absolutely right that there is no point having good educational provision if prisoners are not getting to the classrooms. Fundamentally we need to do two things: first, make sure that prisoners are moved reliably and predictably from their cells into the classrooms; and, secondly, make sure that the educational provision in the classrooms is sufficiently attractive for the prisoners to engage.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for being late, Mr Speaker, but I was at the unveiling of the first statue of a woman in Parliament Square.

May we have an evaluation of how far we have got? Some years ago, when I was Chair of the Education Committee, we looked at skills training in prisons, but I do not think that much has happened since then, particularly for people on the special educational needs spectrum, and especially those with autism.

Rory Stewart: There has been a significant improvement in the Ofsted reports, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that people with special educational needs, in particular, and the more than 50% of prisoners who have previously been excluded from school or have literacy challenges remain a big issue for education in prison.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the keys to reducing reoffending rates is ensuring that skilled probation officers have manageable case loads so that they can give enough time and energy to each individual in their care?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. It is particularly important that there can be flexibility so that there can be a higher ratio of probation officers to high-risk cases than for low-risk cases.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is right, of course, that prisoners must turn up, but when I visited Deerbolt prison in my constituency, the governor said that the contractor, Novus, was extremely unreliable. What is the Minister doing to respond to the report by ensuring that as contracts are rolled over, control of them is decentralised to the prison?

Rory Stewart: This is a central issue about which governors get very frustrated. Over the next 12 months, the hon. Lady will discover that we are putting governors in charge of that provision so that they can put pressure on the provider within the prison and ensure that it meets their needs.

Prisoners: Mental Health

10. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve mental health support for prisoners.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We are committed to improving the provision of and access to mental health services for those in the justice system. We continue to roll out the keyworker role across the closed male estate so that all prisoners will have a named officer to provide them with dedicated support during their sentence. As the
Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), said earlier, 14,600 prison staff have now completed at least one module of this training.

Christine Jardine: Figures show that, in March 2017, 75% of prisoners in England and Wales with serious mental health problems experienced significant delays in their transfer to hospital for treatment. Last month, an independent review of mental health assessment reported delays to transfer, with one of the reasons being the delay by the Ministry of Justice in sanctioning transfers. Given the pressure on those suffering poor mental health, surely this is important enough to require swifter action. What steps is the Minister taking to address the problem?

Dr Lee: I became responsible last September for the unit in the Ministry of Justice that authorises the transfer of patients from the criminal justice system into secure accommodation. We have had some internal difficulties, which I inherited, with the staffing of the unit, but things are improving. I get a weekly update on the number of people in the system who need to be transferred. I am under no illusions about the need to expedite those transfers, and I am in weekly contact with the Department of Health and Social Care about the need to assess the capacity at low, medium and high-security levels in the secure accommodation network.

Probation Services: Reoffending Rates

11. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What assessment he has made of reoffending rates since the part-privatisation of probation services. [904904]

18. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of reoffending rates since the part-privatisation of probation services. [904911]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): While the frequency of reoffending—in other words, the number of offences committed by prolific offenders—has risen since 2009, the base rate, or the number of people reoffending, has dropped by two percentage points since the introduction of community rehabilitation contracts.

Vicky Foxcroft: In 2015, the Government commissioned two important reviews: the Dame Sally Coates review of education in prisons, which was mentioned earlier; and the Charlie Taylor review of the youth justice system. Both reviews highlighted basic failures in the current system and made important recommendations. Will the Minister tell me how many of those recommendations have been implemented?

Rory Stewart: My focus has been on the Dame Sally Coates review; youth justice is dealt with by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee). The Dame Sally Coates review is driving the entire education transformation over the next 12 months, particularly in respect of the three indicators that I mentioned earlier, including the assessment of prisoners and coming up with a plan. I shall have to reply in writing to the hon. Lady’s question about exactly how many recommendations have been implemented.

Ruth Cadbury: The joint report of the inspectorates of probation and of prisons stated that if the key functions of community rehabilitation companies “were removed tomorrow...the impact...would be negligible.” So what exactly are we paying for?

Rory Stewart: I must respectfully disagree with that. As I have said, the base rate of reoffending has dropped by two percentage points, which is actually quite significant, as the rate was flat for nearly 40 years before that. It would be very dangerous indeed to remove the community rehabilitation companies, which are looking after 40,000 people who were previously under very short periods of supervision, and nearly 100,000 extra people who would be dangerous to the community if not properly monitored.

Upskirting

12. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What his policy is on creating a specific sexual offence of upskirting. [904905]

22. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What his policy is on creating a specific sexual offence of upskirting. [904918]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I share the outrage at the distress that this intrusive behaviour can cause to victims, and I am determined to ensure that they can be confident that their complaints will be taken seriously. I am sympathetic to calls for a change in the law, and my officials are reviewing the current law to make sure that it is fit for purpose. As part of that work, we are considering the private Member’s Bill that is being promoted by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse).

Gill Furniss: It is appropriate on this day to refer yet again to the statue of Millicent Fawcett, and I shall channel my inner Millicent Fawcett by asking the Secretary of State this question. Nearly 100,000 members of the public have signed a petition calling for upskirting to be made a specific sexual offence, and MPs from all the major parties have signed an early-day motion that makes the same call, so why is the Secretary of State still refusing to act? We really need to ensure that our law reflects that of Scotland, where provisions on upskirting have been incorporated in the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009.

Mr Gauke: Let me also acknowledge the unveiling of the Millicent Fawcett statue.

As I have said, I am sympathetic to the idea of our taking action in this regard. There are instances in which people have been successfully prosecuted for upskirting in the context of outraging public decency, and voyeurism can also apply under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. However, those offences do not necessarily cover every instance of upskirting, which is why there is a strong case for looking at the law and considering whether we need to change it.

Diana Johnson: I, too, am using my inner Millicent Fawcett courage to raise this issue. In Scotland, the offences of upskirting and downblousing are covered by the 2009 Act. Surely the Secretary of State accepts that the same could be done in this country.
Mr Gauke: We are looking very closely at the Scottish legislation and experience. It is true that a very small number of prosecutions have been brought under that legislation. I want to reassure people that successful prosecutions have been brought in England under the existing law, but I think that there is a case for making sure that we have legislation that deals with this offence specifically.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I think that we all receive correspondence about this regularly. As other Members have done, may I encourage the Secretary of State to look at what has been done in Scotland, where we have shown leadership? The House is clear about the need for action—the will is there, so we must act.

Mr Gauke: We are looking very closely at how the Scottish legislation has operated to establish whether, if there is a gap, that represents a way in which we can address the matter.

Prison Capacity: South-west

13. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of prison capacity in the south-west. [904906]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): In Devon and Cornwall, as in my own constituency in Cumbria, the number of offenders is fortunately quite small in absolute terms, which means that provision is at Exeter and Dartmoor.

Scott Mann: The Minister will know that Dartmoor Prison is earmarked for closure, after notice was served on its lease back in 2013. The prison is an asset to the south-west and employs a number of my constituents. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) is also keen and eager for the prison to remain open. Will the Minister review the decision and look at what more can be done to keep that facility open?

Rory Stewart: The decision to close the prison was based on the fact that it was built in 1805 and there are significant maintenance issues, with a great deal of damp and leaking. However, we pay tribute to the governor and the prison officers for running a very good prison regime that is popular with the prisoners, which is one thing that we will have to balance when making the final decision on the prison.

Courts: Physical Access

14. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with HM Courts & Tribunals Service on improving physical access to courts and tribunals for people with disabilities. [904907]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I regularly meet HMCTS to discuss the court estate. It regularly reviews the estate and has monitoring systems in place to ensure that there is appropriate physical access for disabled people and, when appropriate, to identify gaps and make improvements.

Gareth Snell: If there is monitoring, the Minister will be aware that the North Staffordshire combined justice centre, which is where my constituents from Stoke-on-Trent are sent for personal independence payment appeals, has small steps and insufficient parking, and on one occasion a gentleman was asked to remove a piece of life-saving equipment so that it could be scanned by security before he entered the building. Is the Minister willing to meet Pam Bryan and John Beech from the Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle disability network so that we can look at how the site can be made fit for purpose?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is right: I am aware of that. The charity he mentions—the Stoke-on-Trent Area Network for Disability—made a complaint, and HMCTS had a meeting on 5 April to discuss the issue. It is looking at the feasibility of implementing the suggestions that were made, such as putting in place automatic doors, signage and improvements to the waiting area, but I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituents to discuss them.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Access to courts for people with disabilities will not be improved by closing courts. It turns out from the response to a written question I recently tabled that this year no Minister has visited any of the courts that are due for closure. May I implore the Minister to come to Cambridge and talk to people with disabilities to see the impact that the Government’s plans will have?

Lucy Frazer: I am always happy to meet people who use the courts service around the country. We are improving access in a number of ways, including by ensuring not only that we have court buildings, but that disabled people can take advantage of the ability to give evidence by video link so that they do not have to go to a court at all.

Family Justice System

15. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What plans he has to review the family justice system. [904908]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend in March to discuss issues related to the family justice system, which he cares deeply about. It is important that every child has a stable home, and we need to look across the justice system to ensure that it delivers the right outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

Tim Loughton: I was grateful for the meeting with the Minister. Does she agree with Baroness Shackleton that fault-based divorce produces uncertainty that creates an industry for lawyers and a jungle for the layman? Is it not high time for an overhaul of the whole family law system to address that and many other issues to do with couples’ rights before, after and without marriage?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about no-fault divorces, as he has previously. When there is conflict within a family, it is important to reduce
that conflict in the interests of not only the parents but the children. I can confirm that we are looking actively at the issue.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Our family courts are in crisis. The Ministry of Justice’s own figures show that since the removal of legal aid from the family courts, two thirds of litigants represent themselves and have no access to lawyers. They have to deal with the incredibly complex issues that arise in the family courts. Will the Minister confirm whether, as part of the review of the family justice system, the Lord Chancellor will re-establish early legal aid in such cases, which we have promised?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Family justice is important, because issues for children start by having a stable home and a strong family. She will know that, as part of the LASPO reviews, we will be looking at the issues she raises. I should also say that we have an online pilot at the moment relating to divorce, and it has been incredibly successful. It used to be the case that 40% of paper applications for a divorce were sent back owing to incorrect filings. That number is now down to 0.8%.

Domestic Abuse

16. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps is he taking with Cabinet colleagues to provide a more efficient and accountable criminal justice system for victims of domestic abuse.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Since 2010, the Government have made tackling domestic abuse an absolute priority. Last month, the Prime Minister launched the violence against women and girls strategy at No. 10, and following on from that, the family justice system, the Lord Chancellor will re-establish early legal aid in such cases, which we have promised?

Robert Halfon: Safer Places is a remarkable and extraordinary domestic violence charity in my constituency. It has highlighted the problem of the delay between domestic violence incidents being reported and finally getting to court. What is the Government doing to reduce the time between the incidents being reported and getting to court, so that the perpetrators of this evil abuse can be brought to trial more quickly?

Dr Lee: The police response to domestic abuse has improved in recent years, and action has been taken to address the inspector of constabulary’s recommendation that domestic abuse should be a force-wide priority. The police are referring over 19,000 more cases to the Crown Prosecution Service than they were in 2010. In the courts, the listing of cases is a judicial function, and they have a responsibility to ensure that all cases are heard by an appropriate judge with the minimum of delay.

Birmingham Pub Bombings: Legal Aid

17. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): What recent representations has he received on legal aid for families of the victims of the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): We have had a number of representations about this issue, many from the hon. Gentleman himself. I took part in the Westminster Hall debate on the subject, and I was pleased to have the opportunity to hear from him and many other Members. The Secretary of State also met the family of a victim recently. I understand that the recent decisions of the Legal Aid Agency are frustrating for the families, but the hon. Gentleman knows that I am unable to intervene in individual cases.

Richard Burden: As public funding has been made available to the coroner to appeal the judgment of the High Court on the naming of suspects in relation to the Birmingham pub bombings inquests, should not parity of representation be made available to the families of the victims of those bombings, to defend that same High Court judgment? If legal aid is not available to the families, why does the Minister not make funding directly available, following the example of the Hillsborough inquests?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. This is a tragedy for all those concerned. He knows that the families have legal aid in relation to the inquest. Legislation on legal aid for judicial review and for inquests is different.

Prison Plans: Port Talbot

19. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): What plans he has to construct a prison in Port Talbot.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I should like to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his amazingly assiduous campaign. He asked exactly the same question, with exactly the same words, at the last Justice questions, since when I have met him another half dozen times. We have had a good meeting with his constituents, and I am now aware of their individual and general concerns. However, we need prison places in Wales.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) is further evidence of the KBO principle. The Minister said what he said non-pejoratively, but I simply make the innocent and prosaic, but valid, point that repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Stephen Kinnock: Repetition can be a form of flattery, Mr Speaker. I should like to thank the Minister for meeting me and the representatives of the NPT Prison Group for a constructive discussion, and for agreeing to put plans for the Baglan prison on hold. I am sure he will also have noted the decision of the Welsh Government to put all plans on hold pending a strategic review. Can he assure me that all plans for the Baglan prison are well underway?

Rory Stewart: I hope the hon. Gentleman feels that we are engaged in a constructive and positive manner with the Welsh Government in the strategic review?

more than 1,500 prisoners with Welsh addresses are currently being held in English prisons. We need to think about how to provide accommodation for them in Wales, because that is important for reducing reoffending, resettling them in their communities and keeping the links with their families.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Given the overwhelming evidence that smaller local prisons, where family links and the Welsh language can be maintained, are far more effective at reducing reoffending, why is the Secretary of State still proposing super prisons in south Wales when they are known not to work?

Rory Stewart: There are of course reasons why larger modern prisons are favoured, and that is partly about how we can manage things at scale. However, if there are communities in Wales that would like to come forward with proposals for smaller local prisons, I would absolutely agree that there is a strong argument for keeping prisoners closer to their homes.

Prisons: Drug Smuggling

20. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to prevent the smuggling of drugs into prisons.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): We have invested in improving security through the use of body searches and metal-detecting technology in every prison. We are also trialling new X-ray body scanners to reveal more hidden items. We have invested £3 million to establish national and regional intelligence units in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service which, with prisons, probation and law enforcement partners, are building intelligence about the highest-risk offenders.

Giles Watling: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. My local newspaper, Clacton Gazette, recently ran a story about the use of drones to deliver drugs into prisons. Short of shooting the damn things down, what is the Department going to do about that?

Mr Gauke: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his suggestion. We are taking decisive steps to tackle drones bringing contraband into prisons. Under Operation Trenton, Prison Service and police investigators intercept drones and track down the criminals behind them. There have been at least 32 convictions to date, with those sentenced serving in total more than 100 years in prison.

Topical Questions

T1. [904919] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am delighted to announce that we have met and exceeded our October 2016 target of recruiting an additional 2,500 prison officers, with 3,111 full-time equivalent staff joining the prison workforce seven months ahead of schedule, 90% of whom will be on the landings by the summer. Prison officers are some of our finest public servants, and I am happy to see individuals seeking out a career in our Prison Service. Along with the rest of the workforce, those bright new recruits will ensure that prisons are safe and decent, tackle the unacceptable levels of drugs in prisons and cut the rate of reoffending.

Rebecca Pow: Will the Secretary of State outline what steps are being taken to secure employment opportunities for prisoners?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. One of the best ways in which we can reduce reoffending is by increasing employment, which is why we have the New Futures Network coming in. I am keen to focus on ensuring that we provide employment opportunities to prisoners as much as possible.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Windrush scandal is one of the cruelest examples of unaccountable state power targeting the vulnerable, defenceless and innocent that I can remember. Senior figures describe our immigration law as complex and unintelligible to everyone but working specialists, so I was disappointed to hear the Home Secretary say yesterday that people affected by the Windrush scandal will have “no need for lawyers”. I am sure that the Justice Secretary will understand why those words will not do, so will he guarantee today that all those who have been put into this kind of situation will have access to the necessary legal advice to help them when they need it most?

Mr Gauke: The Home Secretary set out a comprehensive plan yesterday for how we will make the process much easier for those who have been affected. For example, those who have retired to another country will be able to obtain British citizenship much more easily to allow them to come here without great difficulties involving visas and so on. The Home Secretary also set out how we are going to put in place arrangements to ensure that there is compensation for those who deserve it.

Richard Burgon: The Government’s reckless approach to our justice system means that criminal barristers have now been forced into co-ordinated action and are refusing to take up legal aid work due to changes to the advocates’ graduated fee scheme. Against all convention, the Government have denied parliamentary time to debate that properly. The Criminal Bar Association made a formal request that the Ministry of Justice delay, withdraw, amend or reconsider the implementation of the statutory instrument. If the Government will not listen to the views of parliamentarians, will they at least listen to barristers, put the new scheme on hold and set about fixing it?

Mr Gauke: On parliamentary time, my understanding is that we are waiting for information from the Labour party. On the substance of the issue, let us remember that reforms to the AGFS were worked out with the Bar Council and the Criminal Bar Association. The reforms are necessary to ensure that legal aid funds are distributed in an appropriate way, and that is why the reforms are being made.

T3. [904921] Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): In the spirit of your advice, Mr Speaker, can the Secretary of State confirm whether or not the Ministry of Justice will object to the Second Reading of the Service Animals (Offences) Bill on Friday?
Mr Gauke: As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) pointed out, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs leads on this matter. The Government continue to look at this issue.

T2. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Another week, another inquest into the death of a prisoner at HMP Nottingham. Three months on from the prison being declared fundamentally unsafe, what update can Ministers give us on the progress of the recovery plan and on the prison’s ongoing safety?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there has been an urgent notification process. We have put a plan in place. I have now visited HMP Nottingham, and I pay tribute to Tom Wheatley, the governor, for the work he is doing. He has a much better care process in place, and he has highly trained staff. We expect to see improvements soon at HMP Nottingham.

T5. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): In Suffolk there is a growing problem in finding justices of the peace to chair family panels, which can be complex work in which experience and local knowledge are vital. Will the Lord Chancellor give consideration to resolving the problem in the short term by extending the retirement age for magistrates?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): My hon. Friend makes an important point about the important role that magistrates play within our legal justice system. The Secretary of State told the House of Lords Constitution Committee that the judicial age in general is being looked at in the round.

T4. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is me again, as I am sure the Minister is delighted to see. The Welsh Government’s strategic review has been mentioned. Can he advise on the timeframe for when he will be meeting his counterpart in the Welsh Government, which specifically on this issue next week. We are setting up a round.

Rory Stewart: I will be meeting the Welsh Secretary specifically on this issue next week. We are setting up a meeting with the Head of the Welsh Government, who of course will be changing, and I would very much like the hon. Gentleman to join that meeting. I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman to join that meeting. I reiterate that, so long as offending rates in Wales remain as they are, although it is laudable that the Welsh Government wish to divert people away from prison, we currently need places for Welsh prisoners.

T7. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): In addition to asking the Minister whether he can confirm to the House that he has no objections to the Service Animals (Offences) Bill, may I ask what action he is taking to ensure that the justice system addresses new, dangerous and increasingly abundant drugs such as fentanyl?

Rory Stewart: Fentanyl is unbelievably dangerous and has contributed to nearly 20,000 deaths a year in the United States. We have underscored through the Crown Prosecution Service guidance for prosecuting people. Fentanyl is a class A drug, but 50 times more powerful than other drugs. People need to understand that even a tiny quantity of this drug is a serious danger to the person producing it, to the person supplying it and, above all, to the public, and must be prosecuted.

T9. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Is the Minister aware of the looming crisis in criminal duty solicitors due to the increasing age profile? Data from the Law Society shows that in five to 10 years there could be insufficient numbers of criminal duty solicitors in many areas. Will the Government take action to address and protect this vital public service?

Lucy Frazer: I am aware of the recent document produced by the Law Society. Of course, it is important that we have professionals at every level, that we have a diverse profession and that we encourage young people to join what is an excellent profession.

T8. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The Government are entitled to feel a little perplexed by the Criminal Bar Association’s hostility to the new graduated fee scheme, given the CBA’s input into that scheme. Be that as it may, will the Minister confirm that the MOJ is prepared to communicate with the CBA to resolve this growing dispute?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is right to say that in putting together this scheme discussions went on for two years with members of the Bar and the MOJ. They were calling for us to implement this scheme, so that it is the scheme we have implemented. We are always willing to talk to members of the CBA and the Bar Council. Since I have been appointed, in the past three months, I have met the chairman of the Bar Council twice and the chair of the CBA twice.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland has just undergone the longest rape trial in its history, resulting in the acquittal of four men. The Department is carrying out a major review of that trial because of subsequent problems flowing from it. Will the Government—the Department—make a submission to that review, particularly looking at whether the accused should not be named until after a verdict is published?

Mr Gauke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. This is a long-standing and very sensitive issue, one my predecessors have looked at closely. We continue to look at it; there are arguments on both sides, and we need to examine the cases carefully before we rush to any judgment on this.

T10. Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that last year a pilot project allowed television cameras into courts to film and broadcast sentencing procedure. Will he say what assessment he has made of that pilot and what plans he now has to extend it further?

Lucy Frazer: I know my right hon. Friend cares deeply about this important matter and he has raised it with me several times. Transparency is very important,
and we are looking at the pilot. I am happy to update him, and I am looking forward to our meeting tomorrow with the Society of Editors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When a person spends time in custody and the CPS then drops the case against them, as opposed to losing a case in court, they are not entitled to compensation, even when they have lost their home and everything. Does the Minister agree that that is a huge injustice? Will she say what she is doing about it?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady raises an interesting issue and I would very much like to discuss it with her.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Nick Hardwick, the former head of the Parole Board, made the case yesterday that it should be required to publish comprehensive explanations for the decisions it takes and that it should make public the names of the people who are making those decisions. May I urge my right hon. Friend to follow that advice as he undertakes his own review?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to point out that I am undertaking my own review of that. The first step is to address the decision of the High Court on the existence of rule 25, which prohibits, in essence, any information being provided on Parole Board decisions. We will do that, but we also need to look more widely at how the Parole Board rules work—that includes the issues of transparency and of how the Parole Board can reconsider cases in particular circumstances.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The troubled Holme House prison in my constituency has had another damning report, this time from the Independent Monitoring Board, which talks of a shortage of staff, a lack of appropriate care for prisoners, a sustained drugs problem, and more violence against staff and between prisoners. Things do not seem to be getting any better. Will the Minister please take an interest in Holme House and ensure it gets the support it needs?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. The central problem in Holme House is, of course, not the age of the building—it is relatively modern—but the drugs. So the first steps we are taking are to get more scanners, sniffer dogs and staff in place. It remains a very serious problem; the connection between the drugs, the violence and the suicide in Holme House is making it a particular area of focus for this Department.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to improve the court experience for victims and for witnesses, because it can be a highly stressful and intimidating environment?

Lucy Frazer: The MOJ is taking a number of steps to improve the position for victims and witnesses: we have introduced the ability to give evidence through video link, so people can give their evidence even before the hearing, which takes the stress out of it; and physically disabled people can give evidence by video link in another location. So we are trying to improve the Courts Service experience for everybody.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Most people know my constituency of Liverpool, Walton as the home of two premier league football clubs, but I think the Minister knows it better for the two prisons: HMP Liverpool, which was built in 1855, and Altcourse, which was built in 1997. Will he update the House on progress in the redevelopment of HMP Liverpool, and does he think that these Victorian prisons can ever be fit for purpose?

Rory Stewart: Unfortunately, as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) implied in his question, the age of a prison is not always the determining factor. We have significant challenges in relatively modern prisons. It is true in Liverpool that Altcourse has been performing better, and it is the newer prison. In Liverpool, we have provided a new multimillion pound fund for the repair of the windows across the estate, and we are looking at improving the conditions right across the estate. Stafford and Dartmoor show that it is possible to run good prisons in older, Victorian buildings.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to the prisons Minister for meeting me recently to discuss the Farmer review, and I welcome his commitment to it. Will he update the House on the implementation of the Farmer review?

Rory Stewart: The Farmer review focused on the importance of families in rehabilitation. Prisoners’ links with families are central to reducing reoffending, and we have very strong evidence that when family links are kept, reoffending reduces. That means better family rooms and more family visits. In certain cases, prisons are having a lot of success piloting interactions between prisoners and, for example, the teachers of their children. All that is central, and the Farmer review is something for which we should be hugely grateful.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): In October last year, the Government announced that they planned to increase the maximum penalty for death by dangerous driving. They also said that they would create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving. Six months on, we have still not seen any action. Will the Minister tell the House just when these vital changes will be implemented?

Mr Gauke: We will be updating the House in due course.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): A year ago, virtually to the day, the legislative provisions of the Prisons and Courts Bill, which are necessary to implement Lord Briggs’s review of civil court structure, were lost in the Dissolution of Parliament. These important reforms are pressing and needed. Can the Secretary of State update us on when the Government intend to reintroduce legislation to enable the reforms to be progressed?

Mr Gauke: What I can say at this point is that I think we need to bring forward a number of aspects of that to help to modernise our court system. I hope to be able to make progress on that in the coming months.
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Next week will be the six-month anniversary of the publication of the report by Bishop James Jones into the experience of the Hillsborough families. The report contains many recommendations that relate to the work of the Ministry of Justice. Will the Secretary of State explain when we will see action from the Government on those recommendations?

Lucy Frazer: The position in relation to inquests and legal aid funding, as the hon. Lady may or may not know, is running alongside our legal aid review. I hope to be able to assure her that those matters are being looked at.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): One of my constituents is fighting for justice, having suffered horrific physical and sexual abuse at Medomsley youth detention centre in the 1970s. Will my hon. Friend please update the House on the likely timescales for compensation and further convictions?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I thank my hon. Friend for the question. The case that he refers to is a tragedy, and I am aware of it. We are in the middle of the independent inquiry into child sex abuse, and the interim report is out this week. Officials from my Department are fully engaged with that, and we are conscious that in some institutions that the Department is responsible for allegations have been made that child abuse has taken place in the past. Once we have a handle on that totally, we can start talking about the possibility of compensation.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): A failure to agree on arrangements in international family law risks leaving a serious gap in the legal framework for proceedings involving children with family connections to the UK. Can the Secretary of State confirm what contingency planning is being undertaken to deal with that risk?

Lucy Frazer: It is really important that as we leave the EU we try to get arrangements similar to those that we have in relation to our cross-border workings through our court system. Family law is one of the important matters that we need to look at. I was very encouraged to see in the EU’s recent guidance that reciprocal arrangements in relation to family are one area that they are particularly interested in.
Yemen

12.39 pm

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for her response.

Last week, the UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, briefed the Security Council on reports of a sizeable military offensive. He said:

“the prospect of intensive military operations in Al-Hodeidah, long heralded, may soon be forthcoming.”

He went on:

“Our concern is that any of these”—

“developments may, in a stroke, take peace off the table.

There have been a number of missile attacks on Riyadh by the Houthis, many of which have been intercepted, but one last weekend resulted in a Saudi casualty. Saudi Arabia has the right to protect its territory and its people from these attacks. However, Hodeidah is one of the two major entry points for aid into Yemen. Any military offensive would cause an already catastrophic situation to deteriorate further. Will the Minister assure the House today that the UK is doing everything it can to prevent such an offensive by the Saudi-led coalition from taking place? Surely, if an attack on Hodeidah goes ahead, the UK would have to suspend arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition.

The UK has been supporting the coalition by providing targeting training for its air force. By the Ministry of Defence’s own figures, 42 potential violations of international humanitarian law by the Saudi-led coalition were recorded in just three months at the beginning of this year, compared with 66 incidents over the whole of the past year. Will the Minister set out what the value of our training is when the rate of civilian casualties is increasing, not decreasing?

Finally, as the Minister rightly says, what Yemen needs is peace and a political settlement. This conflict will not be solved by further violence. May I implore the Government to bring a resolution to the UN Security Council as a matter of urgency? Eight million people in Yemen are on the brink of starvation. Surely the United Kingdom has a responsibility to lead the international community to put peace on the table.

Harriett Baldwin: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing today’s urgent question and finding time to discuss these important issues on the Floor of the House. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to the work of Martin Griffiths. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the UK holds the pen on this matter at the United Nations, and it is really important that Martin Griffiths has been appointed as a United Nations special envoy. As colleagues will know, he brought the debate to the floor at the United Nations last month. The UK strongly backs his work, and his outline of the process that will lead to a political solution and peace in Yemen. In fact, I am glad to have the opportunity to reiterate a point that he made: we urge all parties to the conflict to exercise restraint and continue to facilitate access for essential imports of food, fuel and medical supplies into the country, including through Hodeidah and Saleef ports. I agree that further military action is not the way forward. The way forward towards peace is around the negotiating table.

The hon. Gentleman made some points about the important role that the UK can play in the peace process, in addition to the role as penholder at the United Nations. Clearly our role is also to be a candid friend to those involved in the Saudi-led coalition; to encourage the process of the investigative joint incident assessment team and the publication of its reports, 55 of which have been published so far; to recognise that the UK is not involved in any way in the targeting chain; and to reiterate the importance of the UK having the most rigorous export controls, which involves the observation of international humanitarian law.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is the Minister absolutely convinced that President Hadi is not an impediment to a political settlement?

Harriett Baldwin: I will not fall into the temptation of commenting on any of the individual players concerned. Clearly, President Hadi needs to be involved in the discussions about the way forward. The United Nations
special envoy, after publishing his outline and road map towards peace in Yemen, will need to engage a wide range of counterparties.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for asking the urgent question, and the Minister for responding.

The situation in Yemen is as dire as ever, with millions at risk of famine, the worst cholera outbreak in human history and the alarming prospect that Hodeidah port may soon become a conflict zone. The Houthi political leader, Saleh al-Sammad, was reportedly killed in a bombing last week. What impact does the Minister think that this will have, and what steps is she now taking to reopen dialogue on a ceasefire with the new Houthi leadership and Saudi Arabia?

Last week in this Chamber, the Minister for the Middle East admitted that the level of humanitarian access was not as great as he would wish. Fuel and food imports are not enough and port access remains unpredictable for traders and aid agencies. Just yesterday, appalling images emerged of an airstrike hitting a wedding party. Twenty people were tragically killed and 45 more were wounded. The bride was killed and the groom taken to hospital.

Time and again, the Government imply that this suffering will happen with or without the UK. Well, surely now is the time to make it very clear that Britain will not be complicit. Will the Minister tell us whether the UK Government insisted on full, permanent, humanitarian access in Yemen and an end to the bombing of civilian areas before signing the £100 million aid partnership with Saudi Arabia last month? In the light of the weekend’s appalling airstrike on the wedding party, will the Government now finally suspend their arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, which allow me to reiterate some of the points that I made to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby. Yes, I do think the UK has an important role to play, particularly as the pen-holder at the United Nations. That is why we are strongly backing Martin Griffiths, the new special envoy for the peace process in Yemen. We believe that that is the most constructive route whereby the UK can engage all the participants in this conflict and send a common message to all of them that the way forward is not through bombs or missiles but through peace discussions, and very much in the way that he has outlined in his reports to the United Nations. The UK is proud to support his office and the tools that he needs to help with this.

As the hon. Lady will know, we are very involved with the United Nations’ role in inspecting ships going into Hodeidah port and reassuring participants that they are purely for humanitarian aid. The UK is also playing a role through the United Nations team that is trying to prevent access for the missiles that are being used to shoot from Yemeni territory into Saudi Arabia, risking the lives of civilians within Saudi Arabia as well. I do think that the UK is playing a constructive role in all these matters. That includes the Secretary of State travelling to Riyadh in December to take practical steps in terms of access to the port for humanitarian aid.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Could the Minister describe the mechanism or system by which our aid gets taken from where it arrives in-country to the people who most need it, presumably by convoy? How do we ensure that this aid actually gets to the people towards whom we have targeted it?

Harriett Baldwin: This is an opportunity to pay tribute to all the humanitarian workers in all the conflict areas of the world who very often take such risks in delivering humanitarian assistance to some of the most conflict-affected parts of the world. My hon. Friend will be aware that in all areas where humanitarian aid is delivered, it can sometimes be caught up with different players in the conflict. Obviously we take every kind of precautionary measure through the United Nations to prevent this from happening, but it is still too often shockingly the case that some of this humanitarian assistance gets taken into situations where it is used as part of the conflict. That is one of the very many dangers that we highlight, and it is why we want to ensure that humanitarian workers around the world have safe access to provide their life-saving aid.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Many of us woke up this morning to see the horrific images of yet another airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition that has targeted innocent people, this time a wedding party in northern Yemen killing at least 20 people, including the bride. Of course, this is not new. Shockingly, of the 17,000 airstrikes since the war started, one third have hit non-military targets. The whole House should quite rightly condemn Saudi Arabia and its coalition for targeting innocent people.

Does the Minister agree that the UK Government’s selling 48 fighter jets to Saudi Arabia only last month, bringing total arms sales to £4.6 billion since the beginning of the war, makes the UK complicit in these atrocities and undermines the Government’s international development spend in Yemen? At the very least, will the UK Government commit today to fully and finally halt all arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Will she set out how the UK Government will influence Saudi Arabia to bring about a meaningful political solution to the war in Yemen?

Harriett Baldwin: Clearly, the UK is saying to all sides in this conflict that the way to secure peace is through political dialogue, including on the side of the Houthis, from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, but also through ensuring that international humanitarian law is respected in this conflict. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this matter went to the UK High Court in 2017, and the High Court ruled in favour of the UK’s conclusion that Saudi Arabia does have processes in place to secure respectful compliance with international humanitarian law. He will also be aware of United Nations resolution 2216. We say to all the parties in this conflict that the way forward is not through bombing and missiles; it is through the political process that the United Nations special envoy has set out.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the largest cholera outbreak since records began, but the aid community is also struggling to cope with the largest diphtheria outbreak since 1989, with over 1,000 cases of this highly infectious...
disease. Young children are enduring the brunt of this outbreak: 90% of fatalities are under the age of 15. In an environment where more than half of all health facilities are closed or partially functioning, there has been a surge in child mortality driven by communicable diseases and chronic malnutrition. What more can this country and others do to make sure that medicines and nutrition get to the people who need them?

**Harriett Baldwin:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The UK welcomes the approval by the Yemeni authorities in Aden allowing the import of oral cholera vaccines, which should allow 400,000 doses to be administered in southern Yemen. Discussions on vaccinations in the rest of the country are continuing. The partnership with UNICEF in Yemen is allowing UK aid to be spent on vital immunisations against other outbreaks, including diphtheria, as well as helping to train staff on the ground on how to deal with new cases.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly refers to the outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. The United Kingdom can be rightly proud of its work in that area. He also highlighted that, alongside Saudi Arabia’s legitimate right to defend itself and support the legitimate Government of Yemen, it must, like all parties to the conflict, show restraint in its actions. Can the Minister reaffirm the UK Government’s strong position that what we need is a fully inclusive peace process under way. My understanding is that the right hon. Gentleman has asked. We urge that an inquiry into the tragic events of the weekend, but surely the British Government should now support a fully independent United Nations-led investigation into violations of human rights on both sides in Yemen?

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister acknowledges that Yemen is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, so why are the UK Government via
their arms sales choosing to make that awful situation even worse? How can we have any moral standing on the world stage while we continue to sell arms to the head-chopping, war-mongering Saudi Government? Of course we need to have diplomatic relationships, even with countries we do not agree with, but surely to continue selling arms to a Government who are essentially committing war crimes is beyond the pale, even for our own Government.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady will know that under United Nations resolution 2216, there is a legitimate reason for Saudi Arabia to be concerned about the fact that missiles are being fired on a regular basis into its territory. But she is right that the way forward is for all parties to engage in the political process, and that there is no military solution to the current conflict in Yemen.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the commitment that the Government have already given to humanitarian aid in Yemen, but heavy rains will hit Yemen shortly, and the cholera crisis will get worse, together with the other awful diseases that are a consequence of having not enough water and unsafe water. Can the Minister expand on when extra aid will get there and exactly how it will get to the people who need it? Getting into the right places is extremely difficult.

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right that this is not just about the money. This month’s pledging conference attracted a wide range of people who were prepared to contribute to funding the humanitarian effort, but it is also essential to ensure that the improvement in access does not slip back. We are concerned to maintain the role we have played both through the United Nations and bilaterally in ensuring that humanitarian access is as good as it can be.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The recent ghastly attack on the wedding party is not the first atrocity on civilians. Markets, schools and hospitals have been hit by coalition airstrikes in a civil war that has already claimed 10,000 civilian lives. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, that has created a humanitarian crisis in which a child is dying from a preventable disease every 10 minutes. Can the Minister answer the question put to her by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg): is it not time for the UK as penholder to call for a new United Nations Security Council resolution to ensure unimpeded access to Hodeidah and other ports?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is right to reiterate the important role that the UK can play as penholder, which is why we so strongly support Martin Griffiths’ recent appointment as the UN special envoy on this situation. There was a United Nations Security Council meeting in March on this very subject. He is outlining the way forward in terms of engaging all parties to this conflict in discussions, and that has the wholehearted support of the UK at the United Nations.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the UK’s support for the UN verification and inspection mechanism, which is helping to speed up the inspection of ships delivering vital supplies to Yemen. However, does the Minister agree that that process needs to be speeded up even more if the people of Yemen are to get the supplies they so desperately need?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend raises a very important detail. The UK has great expertise in maritime matters, and we have deployed experts to Djibouti to help with that inspection process. In fact, UK support has helped to increase the proportion of ships that have been physically inspected by almost 10 times, from 8% to 77%.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I press the Minister a little further? She gave a long answer a moment ago to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) about a UN Security Council resolution. Exactly when can we expect to see one?

Harriett Baldwin: The UK led the drafting in March of the United Nations Security Council presidential statement, and as I understand it, that statement, which calls on all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and to facilitate humanitarian access, and emphasises the need for an inclusive political solution, was widely supported.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The fundamental cause of the misery in Yemen is the Iranian-backed Houthi insurgency, which has blighted the lives of tens of millions of people. I have not yet made it to Yemen, but I made it to within a kilometre of the border in Saudi Arabia—a visit I declared in the Register—and there I learned that something like 70,000 rockets and over 50 Scud missiles have been fired from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, and 50,000 people have been evacuated. Saudi Arabia has the right to defend itself. We need to get this in perspective, because although at the moment there is no chance of any kind of political dialogue, I would rather that Hodeidah port was in the hands of the coalition, which would increase the chances of aid getting through to these benighted people, than that it remained in the hands of the Houthi insurgents.

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the perspective of those people who are on the receiving end of missiles fired from within Yemen, and he allows me to reiterate that United Nations resolution 2216 speaks of that. I disagree to some extent with my hon. Friend, in that I do not think that further military conflict is the way forward. We think the way forward is through the political process, backed by the United Nations special envoy.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool is home to many of the Yemeni diaspora in the UK, and the plight of family members who are suffering in Yemen is a constant anxiety and pain to many of my constituents. I have listened closely to the Minister. In the light of the presidential statement from the UN Security Council, may I ask her specifically, as that was at least a month ago, whether she believes that a resolution is now urgently needed to permanently open all naval ports and airports to both humanitarian and commercial traffic, and if so, what is the UK going to do as penholder to achieve that?
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am sure I was not the only person who was struck by the Minister saying that we would be a candid friend to the Saudi-led coalition. With one third of the 16,847 air-strikes hitting non-military targets, surely we have now come to the time for a bit more candour and a bit less friendliness. Continuing to sell arms to Saudi Arabia is like giving more booze to an alcoholic; it is something that no proper, true or candid friend should be doing.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the important role that the UK can play in being able to use the strong relationship that we have with the Saudi-led coalition. With one third of the 16,847 air-strikes hitting non-military targets, surely we have now come to the time for a bit more candour and a bit less friendliness. Continuing to sell arms to Saudi Arabia is like giving more booze to an alcoholic; it is something that no proper, true or candid friend should be doing.

Harriett Baldwin: Among the work that the UK is doing, I particularly highlight the work that we have done through Djibouti, in terms of shipping access to Hodeidah, but it is something that we are monitoring very carefully. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, only about two thirds of the humanitarian assistance that Yemen needed got through in March, and so far in April it seems to be an even lower percentage, so it is something that we are paying very close attention to.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I reiterate that every 10 minutes a child dies from preventable causes in Yemen. Will the Government give priority to the reopening of Sana’a airport, to help alleviate this desperate situation?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the important role that the UK can play in being able to use the strong relationship that we have with the Saudi-led coalition. With one third of the 16,847 air-strikes hitting non-military targets, surely we have now come to the time for a bit more candour and a bit less friendliness. Continuing to sell arms to Saudi Arabia is like giving more booze to an alcoholic; it is something that no proper, true or candid friend should be doing.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for asking this urgent question. I think we all agree that what happened in Hajjah was absolutely shocking. It is not a first, and such killings continue in a war that has seen a lot of individuals killed. There needs to be a clear process of accountability; otherwise, the killing will simply continue. I welcome Martin Griffiths as the new special envoy. He has talked about a peace process, but let us not forget that recently Ismail Ahmed, the outgoing UN special envoy, said that the Houthis had walked away from a peace deal. My question to the Minister is how do we get a peace deal when the Houthis walked away from the Kuwait talks and the Geneva talks and Ismail Ahmed said they walked away from the talks at the back end of 2017? How do we get these people around the peace table?

Harriett Baldwin: As I said, negotiations and the special envoy’s work are ongoing, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for his role and the work that he is doing, but no one should underestimate the difficulty of the task that he has been asked to undertake.
John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): During our visit to Saudi Arabia over the Easter recess, we were able to put the UK’s concerns about the humanitarian catastrophe to the King, and in detail to his Ministers and officials. Will the Minister update the House on the block on the funds that have been deposited by Saudi Arabia in the Central Bank of Yemen, which are much needed? May I also gently say to her that it surely did not aid the cause of peace that she did not mention Iran and its pernicious role in the conflict until she was asked by her Back Benchers?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. It allows me to welcome the fact that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pledged between them some $930 million in humanitarian assistance at the Geneva conference earlier this month. However, as many colleagues have pointed out, it is important that it gets through.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Saudi Arabia has every right to defend itself, but what it is doing in Yemen goes way beyond self-defence. When one of the world’s wealthiest, most heavily armed and most highly trained military machines kills civilians in every one in three attempts, we have to accept that this is no accident; it is deliberate, unrestrained slaughter of civilians. I understand why the Minister cannot publicly criticise arms sales to Saudi Arabia. It is very noticeable that, despite being asked by nearly every Member on the Opposition side of the House, she has not yet personally defended those arms sales. Is that because, in conscience, she knows that they cannot be defended?

Harriett Baldwin: I have said numerous times that the UK maintains rigorous arms export control criteria, and one of those must be that at the time of export there are no concerns that the arms will be used in contravention of international humanitarian law. Again, this is an opportunity for me to emphasise how important it is that the Saudi-led coalition publishes the joint investigative assessment team’s reports, and to welcome the fact that 55 reports have been published so far.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The UK is not meant to sell weapons to countries when there is a clear risk that they will kill innocent civilians or break international humanitarian law. We sell 50% of all our weapons to Saudi Arabia, and 61% of all the killings have been the result of Saudi and coalition airstrikes. What is the Government’s red line on breaking international humanitarian law? When will we stop licensing the killing of innocent civilians?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman might even be a member of one of the Committees involved in this, so he will know exactly what the wording is for our arms exports criteria. We have heard from other colleagues about the missiles that are being fired into Saudi Arabia, and this allows me to reiterate—perhaps in conclusion, Mr Speaker—that a political solution is the only way forward to bring long-term stability to Yemen.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: The Minister was approaching her peroration, but she has not yet completed it; she has one further opportunity to expatiate, because we have a further inquiry, from Mr David Linden.

David Linden: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister talks about the UK being a penholder at the United Nations, but part of the problem is that we give the pen to Saudi Arabia so that it can write us cheques in exchange for arms. I want to ask her this question not as an MP speaking to a Minister, but at a human level. When she sees images of children clinging to their dead parents, does she not realise that it is time to end the arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

Harriett Baldwin: What I can say is that the hon. Gentleman rightly draws to the House’s attention how this conflict is harming the lives of so many, and why it is so important that the UK backs the work of the United Nations special envoy in taking forward the discussions that can lead to a political solution that will bring peace to Yemen.
The public will clearly be deeply concerned that yet another major Government contractor has been in financial distress, following Carillion and earlier service problems with Serco and G4S. Capita is not a construction company, but given that we are dealing with IT services that affect literally millions of people—for example, in relation to tax credits, disability testing and benefits, the congestion charge, the BBC licence fee and Army recruitment—what contingency plans has the Minister put in place since he was informed that the company’s losses are not sustainable? Is there a Crown representative in place? Have new contracts been stopped? Since the new chief executive announced cuts of £175 million a year, to make savings for the new company, how far have these been discussed with the Government, and how far have they a bearing on the provisions of those highly sensitive services? In the light of this development and earlier developments with Carillion, what steps have the Government taken to reform the system of Government procurement, so that we do not have companies low-balling to win contracts that then make losses, and to break up some of the contracts, so that we are not over-dependent on a handful of financially fragile companies?

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I will seek to address them all, but please forgive me if I miss any. I will come back to him in writing if I do.

On the company’s overall position, it is important to understand that what has happened is exactly in line with what was announced back in February, so there is not really a new development. The company’s underlying position, as it has said publicly, is that it has about £1 billion of cash that it can call upon.

The right hon. Gentleman asks whether new contracts had been awarded. Since the statement in February, no new contracts have been announced by central Government. However, I understand that the BBC and authorities in Northern Ireland have announced contracts.

The right hon. Gentleman asks what we are doing to break up the system of Government procurement. I always ask, with every contract that crosses my desk to be authorised, whether we have broken it up into as many small pieces as possible to make it accessible for small businesses. Over the Easter period, I made an announcement to help us meet the very challenging target we have set of 33% of all business going to small and medium-sized enterprises. We set a target of 25% in the last Parliament and met it. I announced a range of measures to help us towards the 33% target. I wrote to all the Government’s key suppliers saying that I wanted them to appoint an SME representative to try to drive business to SMEs. I have required all their subcontracting over the value of £25,000 to be published on the Government’s Contracts Finder. I am consulting on ways to improve prompt payment to make it a condition of business being awarded to strategic suppliers. That is very important to SMEs, and I am looking at ways to give them a right to go over the top of key suppliers to the Government to give them a right of recourse.

I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that both he and I have a proud record from our time working for the coalition Government—he at a much more senior level, running the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. In line with other Governments, we continue
to award contracts to Capita. The House may be interested to know that of the major central Government contracts that have been awarded to Capita, about 20% were awarded under Labour, over half under the coalition Government and 27% under this Government. This issue does not relate to party one over another.

The reason we do it is that we know outsourcing delivers efficiencies. According to one survey, we receive efficiencies of at least 11%. If we get efficiencies of 11%, that means more money to spend on health, more money to spend on education and more money to spend on core services. That is why the Labour Government did it, why the coalition Government in which the right hon. Gentleman served did it and why this Government continue to use outsourcing.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is something of a correction going on throughout the sector, as it adjusts to the effects of the Carillion collapse and to the perhaps over-tight margins that some contracts have imposed on providers? I draw his attention to the fact that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is doing an inquiry into the lessons to be learned from the collapse of Carillion. Personally, I take confidence from the fact that the investors have decided to trust Capita with £700 million more of their capital to secure the long-term future of the company.

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right that what we discovered yesterday was that the rights issue is proceeding exactly as planned. In terms of the overall market, I have tried to be clear that the investors have decided to trust Capita with £700 million more of their capital to secure the long-term future of the company.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question and congratulating the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing it?

Capita is one of the strategic suppliers to the Government, providing services of particular strategic importance, yet, as we heard from its boss today, it had no strategy aside from mucking up the management of the dental register, leaving hundreds of dentists to stand idle; failing to maintain the primary care support service in England, which supervises GP and patient records; and failing on the Army recruitment contract, among many other failings. Members have been highlighting those and other failures to the Government over a period of years and will not be surprised at the latest news. I echo the call from the right hon. Member for Twickenham for the Minister to outline what contingency plans he has put in place to deal with a possible default on any one of those contracts.

The Government claim to be monitoring the situation and have a Crown representative in place, but do they even know what they are monitoring if they are not sure about the number of contracts Capita runs? I and other Members have asked for a list of Government contracts undertaken by Capita and have not been provided with one. Do the Government know how many contracts Capita undertakes across central Government and, indeed, across local government? Will they publish a list of all those contracts?

Will the Minister confirm what improvement plans have been agreed with Capita since its string of profit warnings or yesterday’s refinancing? What quality thresholds will be built into Government contracts to ensure that Capita and other privateers reach an acceptable standard of service delivery, particularly in view of their precarious financial situation?

This latest episode in the saga of outsourcing scandals again shows the public that the Government’s commitment to this practice is nothing more than ideological. Despite the danger to public services, along with the treats to Capita’s staff and subcontractors, the Government will not shift from their view that these giant multinational firms should make huge profits from the public purse, until the point when they fold, taking our public services with them. The Government act as though these firms should be allowed to privatise the profit of the public sector, while nationalising the risk to the British public. We need a change in direction now. Will the Minister use this latest episode involving Capita to finally introduce a presumption in favour of in-house provision of public services?

Oliver Dowden: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman, and he could have done a little better than some of the overblown rhetoric in his contribution. Yesterday’s announcement was entirely in line with market expectations.

The hon. Gentleman asks what is being done in relation to strategy. The strategy has been set out clearly by the new chief executive. It includes a revised divisional structure and executive team to better manage and enhance services and client value, as well as a rights issue, which, as I said, has proceeded as planned and will materially improve the company’s financial stability, thereby reducing its debt, enabling it to invest in core services, allowing it to reduce the pensions deficit, which it has done by £21 million—I hope all Members will welcome that fact—and allowing it to reduce its cost base.

The hon. Gentleman asks what contingency planning the Government are doing. As I have said, we undertake appropriate contingency planning in respect of all our strategic suppliers. I take a close personal interest in that as a Minister, and I know that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office takes a similarly close interest in it.

The hon. Gentleman asks about contracts that have been awarded to Capita, so let me give him the numbers. Of the current major central Government contracts that have been awarded to Capita, nine were awarded under Labour, which is 20%, 24 were awarded under the coalition, which is about 53%, and 12 were awarded under the current Conservative Government, which is about 27%. This is not a party issue: all three formations of government have decided to use outsourcing companies.

To conclude, I had thought that the hon. Gentleman would agree with the words of a previous Labour leader and somebody who many regarded as being, at least in some senses, a successful leader. Gordon Brown, hardly a rabid right-winger, said:
“It simply would not have been possible to build or refurbish such a number of schools and hospitals without using the PFI model.”—[Official Report, 14 November 2007; Vol. 467, c. 665.]

That was a sensible Labour Government who were committed to delivering public services. We do not see such sense from the current Labour party, I am afraid.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): While I agree with the thrust of the Minister’s response, I am afraid I have to tell him that a serious blot on Capita’s record is the Army recruiting contract. Capita does not have much experience in that area and has been underperforming very seriously on the contract for some five years. I told the House in Defence questions yesterday that it is now known universally in the Army as “Crapita”, because of its poor performance on the contract. Will the Minister accept it from me that, although nobody wants to see Capita go bust because of all the jobs that would be lost, equally we cannot have an Army without recruits? Therefore, this is one contract that Capita, honourably, should hand back.

Mr Speaker: I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that his second reference to the rather unfortunate nickname of the company concerned has just caused some merriment among school students in the Public Gallery. They clearly found it very funny, as did I, so the right hon. Gentleman may be a celebrity among those students—not to mention, of course, in his constituency and in many other parts of the country.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friends and I are paid by our constituents to try to characterise this as ideological, but the fact is that Governments of all colours have used outsourcing. Why? Because they know that that can deliver savings. It is just the same as when private companies use outsourcing so that they can focus on their core businesses. The hon. Gentleman asks whether I take a close interest in this—yes, I take a close interest in all our strategic suppliers. On a weekly basis, I receive updates on the position and on the plans that we have, if necessary, in relation to all our strategic suppliers. However, I restate to the House that Capita’s position is not the same as Carillion’s—nor, indeed, are any of the other strategic suppliers in that position.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour party is interested only in the ideological pursuit of renationalisation at any cost? What matters to the public is that they get the best services at the best value to the taxpayer.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises a very important point that is another rebuttal to this idea of ideology. If we want to look at ideology, perhaps the number of PFI contracts signed by a Government would give an indication of that, so let us look at the numbers. How many contracts did Labour sign on average each year? Fifty-five of that, so let us look at the numbers. How many contracts did Labour sign on average each year? Fifty-five at the peak. How many have this Government signed in the past year? One. If this is about an ideological commitment to the use of the private sector, Labour Members should search their souls in relation to their last Government.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister makes great play of the 11% savings from contracting out, but it is no good making savings if core services are not being delivered well. Will he outline how many of the contracts he is concerned about—he has listed them a couple of times—and will he tell us how many contracts he is discussing with Capita with regard to whether their delivery should be reviewed? It is no good spending taxpayers’ money on a private company if it is not delivering the services that it is paid to deliver.

Oliver Dowden: The contracts that each Department agrees with the private sector for the delivery of services are very stringent. Each Department is responsible for ensuring their proper delivery, and if the company is not delivering properly, it will be in breach of the contract and remedies will be available. At the point of re-letting a contract, we look at the overall performance of the company concerned to ensure that it is in a fit state to be able to deliver on its promises. There is a dual responsibility between the individual Departments, which set out the terms, and the Cabinet Office, in which I sit, which has overall responsibility for the supplier market.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Barnet Council has a significant contract with Capita. It also has a business continuity planning framework that monitors liquidity and indebtedness. It reviewed the situation twice last year, and again after the recent profit warning, and the company was shown to be far from reaching the relevant threshold for triggering any action, but in the local elections, the Liberal Democrats are using the issue to scaremonger. I urge the Minister not to take advice or direction from someone who undersold Royal Mail by £1 billion and then called the loss “froth”.

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Tempting though it is, I shall resist the urge to comment on the Royal Mail deal, but I refer him again to the—
[Oliver Dowden]

[Interruption.] When the Department was controlled by the Liberal Democrats, I do not think the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) would have taken kindly to a Conservative special adviser getting too heavily involved.

I refer my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) to statistics that demonstrate that over half of the contracts that were given to Capita were awarded under the coalition Government, in which the Liberal Democrats played a sterling part. If they want to play politics, I refer them to those statistics.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): May I push the Minister on contingency planning because I fear that the Government are being a bit complacent about that issue? Since Carillion went bankrupt, hospitals in Sandwell and Liverpool have been mothballed. What confidence does he honestly have that if Capita were to go the same way as Carillion, its contracts would continue to run and these crucial public services would continue to be delivered? The experience of Carillion is that that is not happening.

Oliver Dowden: I gently disagree with the hon. Lady, who has a great deal of expertise in this area. Public services have continued to be delivered without interruption. There is a specific question about the PFI contracts in respect of those two hospitals, but I reassure her and other hon. Members, who I know take an interest in the matter. We are engaging with NHS Improvement and the Department of Health and Social Care to try to resolve this as quickly as possible and ensure that we have a clear plan for the delivery of the hospitals.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Obviously I support outsourcing in principle, but I am really concerned. If Capita is reviewing the way it operates—it has operated abysmally in various spheres, particularly Army recruiting, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said—are the Government reviewing how they have oversight of these contracts so that we can get more effective feedback and problems can be corrected quicker?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right to raise the issues that we have had with the Army recruitment contract, but what is happening demonstrates that the Government are engaging with these problems. The MOD and Capita have agreed an improvement plan, which seeks to address some of the significant problems that we have. When these problems arise, we are engaging with the companies concerned to try to deliver improvements.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the impact on apprentices who are employed in Capita’s many workplaces? How many individual apprentices may be affected? Which regions of the UK are particularly exposed? What contingency plans are in place to protect potential losses to the apprenticeship programme, and what will be done to stop these failing business practices? I am fed up with having to listen to poor apprentices in other companies who have lost their roles as a result of failing business practices.

Oliver Dowden: I reassure the hon. Lady that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office is taking a very close interest in this and working in respect of all those apprenticeships. At the moment, those apprenticeships are ongoing, but clearly we need to look at how we can manage their future so that young people do not find themselves disadvantaged. I can assure the hon. Lady that this is a top priority for my right hon. Friend.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Minister says there have been problems with Capita, and while Capita and Carillion are different businesses in different situations, they have something in common: the businesses are both big and complex. What steps are the Government taking to involve more small and medium-sized businesses in the delivery of public services?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. It is right on two levels that we have a diverse supply market: first, because the more suppliers we have, the less we are at risk from the loss of any one supplier; and, secondly, because small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy locally and nationally, creating 16 million jobs, and I am determined to ensure they get their fair share of such contracts.

That was why I announced a range of measures over Easter, including providing subcontractors with a right of access to buying authorities in order to report poor practices. It was also why the Prime Minister wrote to every Secretary of State requesting that they appoint an SME champion. I want the message to go out to all SMEs—I spent a lot of time over Easter meeting small businesses and communicating this—that they can bid for and win Government contracts. Go on to Contracts Finder, find them, and bid for them!

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): In my two decades in the House, I have opposed PFI schemes root and branch from the beginning. It seems that the number of PFI agreements has dwindled to virtually zero, so it looks like the Government agree with me now. A number of public authorities are now insourcing and making financial gains as a result. Will the Government encourage that process, which would save public money? Will they also not hand out lucrative public contracts to Capita to help it out of its present circumstances?

Oliver Dowden: I shall resist the suggestions of Front-Bench colleagues; I do not think I will ever convince the hon. Gentleman to cross the Floor, despite his warm words.

We reviewed PFIs and introduced the new private finance 2 contracts, which removed many of the excesses we saw under the last Government. The hon. Gentleman asks about the rewarding of new contracts. Since the statement in January, as I said, no contracts have been awarded to Capita by central Government. Two have been awarded by the wider public sector—by the BBC and Northern Ireland authorities.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend will recall that Capita developed from the public sector in the first place. Does he agree that the use of outsourcing not only controls costs and gives gains to the public, but provides certainty over the standards of service provided to the public? If an outsourced company fails to deliver to those standards, the contract can be recalled and given to an alternative provider.
Oliver Dowden: As ever, my hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely correct. That happens regularly, and it is exactly why private companies all use outsourcing to provide services such as cleaning and site security—because they can use specialist providers and because that delivers savings. He talks about how the Capita model arose. I remind Labour Members who are getting overexcited that Capita was founded by Sir Rod Aldridge, who was a major donor to not the Conservative party, but the Labour party.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments about Army recruitment made by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)? Does not the Minister accept that Capita is only the latest outsourcing company to be in trouble? With some, including probation, hospital and rail companies, having to hand back contracts and the growing crisis in the over-leveraged, offshored care industry, does he not question whether there are not actually deep systemic problems with the Government’s dogma-driven privatisation model?

Oliver Dowden: I simply fail to understand how Labour Members can say that this is dogma-driven when the last Labour Government awarded 55 PFI contracts a year and one was awarded in the last year. Some 20% of the contracts awarded to Capita were awarded by the Labour party. This is not about ideology; it is about what works. Outsourcing delivers savings, which means that we have more to invest in the public sector—more in our schools; more in our hospitals.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I give the Minister an opportunity to repeat and reinforce his message about small businesses and the importance of their getting more involved in the delivery of public services? Will he encourage businesses in my constituency and the wider Dorset region to bid for contracts?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Small businesses should be going out there and bidding for Government contracts. I know that his constituency has much expertise in the aerospace sector, and I announced further measures over Easter to help such small businesses. I wrote to all our strategic suppliers asking that they adhere to the prompt payment code, and I am requiring suppliers on large contracts to provide their subcontracting data. They can be under no illusion that the Government are watching closely to ensure that in terms of contracts from government itself and subcontracting, SMEs get their fair share.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s recognition that Capita is not delivering on its contract for Army recruitment, but rather than Capita simply introducing an improvement plan, would it not be better for the Government to consider bringing contracts back in-house so that Army recruitment is conducted by the Army? That is what the Army wants.

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged, I have answered the question about the Army recruitment contract, and I shall not repeat my answer, but I would say that we are not driven by an ideological approach. If services can be delivered better in-house, of course they can be delivered in-house, but in the majority of cases, for contracts such as cleaning and security, both the private and public sectors have found that they get cheaper services that are just as good quality when they outsource. That is the right decision to make.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Capita employs hundreds of people in my constituency at a place called Preston Brook. What discussions have the Government had with recognised unions, such as the Communication Workers Union, about the job and pension security of those workers?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I can reassure his constituents, as I have done repeatedly at the Dispatch Box today, that yesterday’s announcement was in line with expectations. Capita is not in a similar position to Carillion. I can also reassure them that, as a result of the rights issue yesterday, a further £21 million has been paid down into the pension fund, meaning that their pensions are more secure as a result of the announcement on Monday.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The Minister has spoken several times in glowing terms about the importance of the SME sector. One of the issues that came out of Carillion’s collapse was the deplorable reality that it often did not pay its SMEs their subs for 120 days, and sometimes more. That is the way to destroy the SME sector. Given that this is taxpayers’ money, will he give me a guarantee that that is not happening at Capita and that people are getting paid within a fair and reasonable time?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of prompt payment, and I know that various Select Committees are looking into the Carillion case. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is sitting next to me, and the Chancellor announced in the spring statement a call for evidence on the prompt payment code, which governs such payments. The Government pay about 96% of our contractors within 30 days. As I said, I have written, post Carillion, to all our strategic suppliers to re-emphasise the importance of adhering to the code. We are consulting on how to exclude suppliers if they do not do so.
The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about the takeover bid by Melrose Industries plc for GKN plc. On 29 March, Melrose announced that holders of 52% of GKN shares had accepted its offer, and as of last Friday, the figure had reached 88.5%.

As I informed the House on 27 March, the Enterprise Act 2002 sets out three circumstances in which a takeover can be referred to the Competition and Markets Authority on public interest grounds. They are financial stability, media plurality and national security. Any such reference must take place within four months of the completion of the transaction, and must result from a quasi-judicial decision, made impartially, on the basis of an open mind and solely on the evidence presented. No grounds were advanced for a reference on the grounds of media plurality or financial stability. To inform my decision on national security, I asked for a comprehensive assessment to be made by the Ministry of Defence and other bodies concerned with our national security.

The Secretary of State for Defence has written to advise me that the MOD has completed its detailed analysis and has agreed with Melrose a set of undertakings, specifically: to ensure that the Government are informed in advance of any plans to divest a business, a component of a business, or assets which engage in activities that the Ministry of Defence considers to have national security implications; to ensure that the Government have early visibility of any prospective purchasers, including structures of consortia and persons holding significant influence and control; to prevent the disposal of the relevant business, components of a business or assets without the consent of the Government; to ensure that the Government receive suitable protections from any subsequent purchaser in the event of any future sale of elements of the business; to ensure the continuation of contractual obligations to protect intellectual property and classified information; to ensure the continued maintenance of any capabilities with a national security dimension; and to provide the MOD with powers to inspect information and facilities to ensure the protection of classified information.

Those undertakings are combined with the undertakings that Melrose agreed to make in response to my letter of 26 March, including undertakings not to dispose of the aerospace business for at least five years without the Government’s consent; to maintain a UK stock exchange listing for at least five years; to ensure that the business remains headquartered in the UK; and that a majority of directors are resident in the UK; to ensure that both the aerospace and Driveline divisions retain the rights to the GKN name; and to guarantee that spending on research and development will take place on at least GKN’s previous level, amounting to a minimum of 2.2% of sales for the next five financial years. In important respects, those undertakings go beyond commitments given by the previous management team. Melrose has also agreed to meet my officials and me every six months to provide updates on its ownership of GKN.

On the basis of the commitments given relating to national security, the Ministry of Defence concluded that statutory intervention was not required. That is consistent with the other assessments that I have received. On the basis of the assessments that I have considered and the undertakings that have been entered into, my judgment is that there are not reasonable and proportionate grounds to make a statutory intervention on the grounds of national security.

GKN is a very important business, performing vital work in industries—aerospace and automotive in particular—with an expanding global market in which British innovation and excellence offer great opportunities. This takeover bid has entailed a vigorous debate about which of the two alternative British managements could most credibly reap those opportunities. The shareholders chose—initially by a small majority, and finally more substantially—new management. All UK public companies are subject to that challenge of how they can best be run: it is an essential part of the competitive business environment for which Britain is renowned.

The takeover bid has been important in wider ways. It is the first contested bid in which the new regime of legally binding commitments on future conduct has applied. The commitments that have been made reflect the strong interest of stakeholders—including employees, UK taxpayers, suppliers, and research and development partnerships—in knowing the future intentions of a bidder, provided in a way that is binding. These responsibilities, which broadly reflect those placed on directors of ongoing businesses by section 172 of the Companies Act 2006, are important to ensure that the longer-term and strategic interests of our economy are considered and addressed during takeover bids.

Now that such an ability to make post-offer undertakings has been established, I expect them to be implemented. The new management’s stewardship of these important businesses carries with it important responsibilities for our economy and our country. I look to the management to honour its commitments in both the spirit and the letter, and to create a strong future for GKN, its employees, its suppliers, and the industrial sectors in which it will play a major role.

I gave the House a commitment that I would carry out my legal responsibilities seriously, meticulously and fairly, and that I would keep the House up to date at every phase of these proceedings. I believe that I have done so, and I commend my statement to the House.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement.

There are two issues that I must raise today: the fact that the reported assurances obtained by the Government, both in the letter of 27 March and subsequently, are not sufficient to guarantee the security of the long-term prospects of the company and, indeed, the workforce; and the inadequate capacity of the takeover regime to protect companies outside the very limited grounds of national defence, media plurality and financial stability.

First, as I made clear last month, the assurances obtained by the Government in Melrose’s letter of 27 March were sadly inadequate. Apart from the first five assurances which were post-offer undertakings, what
was in the letter was completely unenforceable. For example, there were no post-offer undertakings on maintaining employment or tax residency, which could easily constitute such undertakings. Indeed, the maintenance of employment is vital to our national security, and the loss of these jobs will cause the diminishment of vital skills that are integral to our defence industry.

Putting aside issues of enforceability, what of the assurances that have been reported since 27 March? The reported veto power that the Secretary of State for Defence has to stop the sale of certain businesses will not. I am afraid, solve the national security problem. Melrose reportedly has a short-term outlook which undermines the long term that is required for defence projects. That is important, and a veto on the sale of certain parts of the business by the Defence Secretary will not help significantly. Sadly, the Government’s failure to address the short-term horizons of Melrose may damage the capability of a business to deliver projects that could last for 10, 15 or 20 years.

Secondly, our takeover regime is inadequate, and the Secretary of State is acutely aware of that. If a takeover falls outside the grounds of national defence, media plurality and national stability, the Secretary of State cannot act, even though the takeover may be harmful for the business, harmful for employees, harmful to research and development, and harmful to supply chains.

Let us take the case of Unilever. Last year it was threatened with a takeover, and there was nothing that the Government could do because the takeover fell outside the three public interest exemptions. Unilever has since commented on the inadequacy of the UK takeover regime, and its recent decision to place its headquarters in the Netherlands was, as reported by the Financial Times, arguably driven by a desire to escape the poor safeguards for takeovers in the UK. Labour Members have called on the Government to broaden the public interest test. The measures that the Government have proposed so far are not good enough. We know that, in GKN’s case, they already had the power to act and did not do so. However, our takeover rules would not have prevented Unilever from being taken over had Kraft been prepared to follow through, because that had nothing to do with any of the three exemptions.

I agree with the Secretary of State that our takeover regime must be open enough to encourage foreign investment, but it must also protect against short-termism and long-term damage to our economy and national security. Arguably, too often it is short-termism that prevails. Only this week we heard reports that the hedge funds that bought GKN shares to make Melrose’s takeover possible are now targeting Melrose, shorting the company on the stock exchange.

What we need from the Secretary of State today was not just a waving through of the deal, but action, both in obtaining concrete assurances from Melrose on the future of GKN and its workforce, and in the form of clear plans to reform and widen our takeover regime to protect British businesses. I fear that the short-term predators already smell their next victim—and it is not just Melrose; it is Britain’s industrial future.

Greg Clark: Right from the outset, the hon. Lady has been unable to advise us of what specific undertakings she thought it was appropriate to obtain. She needs to understand that as this is a quasi-judicial decision, the statement that she made that she would block the bid would disqualify her from making that decision, as the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) knows to his cost.

The evidence presented to me was that this was a British company taking over another British company, that no such takeover has ever been blocked on national security grounds, and that the Ministry of Defence and the other agencies said there was no reason for intervention on those grounds. I have to tell the hon. Lady that the previous directors of GKN themselves said that there was no reason for an intervention on national security grounds. She should reflect on the commitments that the Defence Secretary and I have secured to retain the aerospace division for at least five years, to ensure that the Government have the right to approve any future sale of any defence business or asset, and to invest in research and development to at least the current level. Not once in the past four months has she engaged in a similarly forensic way to set out what she thinks would be appropriate commitments.

The hon. Lady says that the commitments are inadequate, but they have been given as legal deeds and in some cases set out to the Takeover Panel as post-offer undertakings. The truth is that she has had the opportunity to engage with this matter, but having prejudiced her position by saying from the outset that the takeover should be blocked, she has given away the ability to have influence on what the regime should be.

The hon. Lady knows perfectly well what the Government’s powers on takeovers are, because the 2002 Act was passed under a Labour Government and sets out those limited powers, which are the same as in the rest of Europe. The difference between the Government and the Opposition is that when we came into government, we reformed those powers to allow post-offer undertakings to be given, so the situation when Kraft bid for Cadbury and undertakings were reneged upon cannot happen in the current circumstances. We have taken an active approach to ensuring that all stakeholders’ interests are secured, whereas the hon. Lady preferred to float above it all and simply say no before considering the evidence.

We have proceeded responsibly, and she would do the employees of and stakeholders in GKN a service if she engaged more forensically in future.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What are the sanctions if commitments are not honoured?

Greg Clark: Sanctions with regard to undertakings to the Takeover Panel are those for contempt of court, which include everything up to imprisonment.

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

The Secretary of State mentioned holding Melrose to the spirit and letter of its commitments, but traders have been short selling £725 million, or 17%, of Melrose stock, effectively betting against it making a success of GKN. What action will he take if there is any breach of the spirit or letter of the commitments?

The Secretary of State did not cover jobs in his statement. I asked him following a previous statement to what extent he would require assurances to prevent...
assets from being stripped and jobs lost, and not just those in the MOD or national security. What assurances has he had on the financial restructuring involved in the takeover, which will mean more debt and less investment at the core of GKN? How will that situation progress the Government’s industrial strategy, and can he explain how allowing the takeover will protect the skilled jobs that we require and tackle productivity issues?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He will know that one undertaking that has been given is a commitment to at least five years of research and development investment, including participation in the joint industry bodies, which have been a successful part of our arrangements in the aerospace and automotive sectors and are an important part of our industrial strategy. That is a valuable commitment that I would have thought the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and he would welcome.

The previous GKN management criticised the commitment to retain the aerospace business, saying that it should not have been entered into given that the sell-off of GKN’s automotive business had already been agreed to. It constitutes a longer-term commitment than was made during the latter period of the previous ownership.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that in obtaining commitments from a bidder, I have to bear in mind commitments that the incumbent management have or have not made. No commitments had been made on the total number of jobs, and indeed the sale programme involved a majority of the business. One of the features of today’s results announcement was that the debt of the previous business was higher than anticipated, and the plans that the new management have set out include paying it down.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and welcome the undertakings that he has secured.

The future of GKN was determined by speculators who came on to the share register in the final weeks of the bidding process to make a quick profit. Some sort of financial transaction tax would also reduce short-term speculation in companies that leads to their being taken over in this fashion. I urge the Government to look again at the takeover code, particularly for businesses that are so integral to our industrial strategy and have received a lot of taxpayer funding, in this case for the R&D work that GKN has undertaken.

Greg Clark: I am glad that the hon. Lady mentions the R&D work, which is very important. The commitments that have been made on R&D, both to keeping up investment and to participating in R&D partnerships, are extremely important. She and her Business, Enterprise and Industrial Strategy Committee asked for undertakings to be given on that and a number of other issues, and were not satisfied with the undertakings that were offered. I persuaded the company to go further and obtain undertakings relating not only to national security but to R&D and the ownership of businesses, and I hope she will acknowledge that that is valuable.

On the hon. Lady’s point about differential voting rights for shareholders, I mentioned the John Kay report, which her predecessor Committee scrutinised—I think the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) gave evidence backing the report’s judgment. I know that her Committee is correctly interested in keeping our arrangements up to date, and if she and her colleagues want to review these matters, what their predecessors said is a good example of how that can be done.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. Friend on his statement, and on the work he has done on this difficult issue, especially in relation to securing the five-year guarantee for the aerospace business, which is unprecedented for a business such as GKN. Indeed, as he has just said, the last management refused to countenance such an arrangement. I visited the plant in my constituency a week or two ago and, despite some cynical scaremongering by some in the party opposite, the management and workers there are optimistic about the future and looking forward.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. It seems to me that when we establish a regime of post-offer undertakings, it is necessary to be active and to apply ourselves to the undertakings that it is important to secure. It is true that there has never been any commitment to own an important business such as that for more than five years, and I think that this will be valuable and welcomed by the employees in his constituency. I recognise his assiduousness in visiting the plant and talking to his constituents who are employed there.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Further to the excellent intervention from the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), the Select Committee Chair, does the Secretary of State accept that the role of the short-term
investors has been highly destabilising? They acquired 20% of the stock, they forced the takeover through and they are now short-selling. If he is not persuaded of the merits of differential voting, how does he propose to deal with this problem?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman was not persuaded either. He commissioned a report, he had a respected and eminent individual look into this, and he gave evidence to the Select Committee to say that he was not persuaded. I have described some of the circumstances involved. Those who bought shares in the latter stages bought them from people who had decided they did not want to back the existing management. He knows that I take a great interest in ensuring that our regime of corporate governance is the best in the world. The fact that people can invest here with confidence forms an important part of our reputation. We have been successful over many years, and of course if the Select Committee wants to review the experience since the report that he commissioned, it has the ability to do that and I would be very happy to participate.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** The Minister will be aware that the global headquarters of GKN are in Redditch, and that this has been my first priority ever since we heard the news of the takeover. Is he also aware that I spoke to Melrose on Friday, and that it assured me that it has no plans to shut the Redditch office? It believes that many of the jobs will be reabsorbed into the functions of GKN. Does he agree that that is really good news, and contrary to some of the things we have heard in the media? Will he also comment on observations in the media about the Airbus relationship? Again, we have heard that the takeover could have a negative impact in that regard, but that is not what I have heard from Melrose, which thinks that the relationship could continue. Can he comment on that further?

**Greg Clark:** I congratulate and applaud my hon. Friend on being active and engaging with the new management to talk about the important headquarters function in her constituency. She has indeed secured good news from the company in that respect. I understand that the divisional heads of the aerospace and automotive businesses have been reappointed by the new management. Let us bear in mind that the incumbent management’s proposal was, latterly, that the automotive business should be sold, and that it would now be in the process of being sold. Airbus is clearly an important company, and there were some comments ascribed to it, although I do not think that they have been repeated. It will be important for the new management to set out its plans, so that all suppliers can have confidence in those relationships.

**Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab):** Is the Secretary of State aware that short selling has been the decisive factor in this, and that that is a matter of great concern throughout the House? Also, he has rightly been concerned about the reputation of Melrose Industries plc for taking short-term measures. It cuts, closes and sells on at a profit. That is its reputation and, rightly, been concerned about the reputation of Melrose of great concern throughout the House? Also, he has been the decisive factor in this, and that that is a matter of concern.

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman was not persuaded either. He commissioned a report, he had a respected and eminent individual look into this, and he gave evidence to the Select Committee to say that he was not persuaded. I have described some of the circumstances involved. Those who bought shares in the latter stages bought them from people who had decided they did not want to back the existing management. He knows that I take a great interest in ensuring that our regime of corporate governance is the best in the world. The fact that people can invest here with confidence forms an important part of our reputation. We have been successful over many years, and of course if the Select Committee wants to review the experience since the report that he commissioned, it has the ability to do that and I would be very happy to participate.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** The Minister will be aware that the global headquarters of GKN are in Redditch, and that this has been my first priority ever since we heard the news of the takeover. Is he also aware that I spoke to Melrose on Friday, and that it assured me that it has no plans to shut the Redditch office? It believes that many of the jobs will be reabsorbed into the functions of GKN. Does he agree that that is really good news, and contrary to some of the things we have heard in the media? Will he also comment on observations in the media about the Airbus relationship? Again, we have heard that the takeover could have a negative impact in that regard, but that is not what I have heard from Melrose, which thinks that the relationship could continue. Can he comment on that further?

**Greg Clark:** I congratulate and applaud my hon. Friend on being active and engaging with the new management to talk about the important headquarters function in her constituency. She has indeed secured good news from the company in that respect. I understand that the divisional heads of the aerospace and automotive businesses have been reappointed by the new management. Let us bear in mind that the incumbent management’s proposal was, latterly, that the automotive business should be sold, and that it would now be in the process of being sold. Airbus is clearly an important company, and there were some comments ascribed to it, although I do not think that they have been repeated. It will be important for the new management to set out its plans, so that all suppliers can have confidence in those relationships.

**Greg Clark:** That is right, and I would also welcome consideration of these matters. Right from the beginning, I have made a commitment to the House that I would take a considered, comprehensive view and use the powers that I have, and that where I did not have statutory powers, I would say what I expected. When it comes to research and development, to the ownership of assets and, for today’s purposes, to national security, a long-term commitment is required, and it has been important to obtain undertakings in all those areas. I hope that the Committee will take a look at this.

**Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** In his statement, the Secretary of State said: “GKN is a very important business, performing vital work in industries—aerospace and automotive in particular—with an expanding global market in which British innovation and excellence offer great opportunities.”

Does he understand from his regular meetings with Melrose that it is thinking of adapting its business model so that these vital interests can be kept for a longer term than they would otherwise have been? If not, would this British company consider selling first to another British company?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question, because I wrote and said that deliberately. I regard this company, operating in the sector that it does, as having an important long-term role. One of the reasons that there was a vigorous contest for this business
was the recognition that there are immense opportunities involved. It is my purpose as Business Secretary to ensure that we reap those opportunities. That is why I requested what was in effect a change to the previous commitments that this company or any other had made, and I was able to do that on the aerospace side. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), it was clearly not possible to extract another commitment on the automotive business, given that the incumbent management had committed to selling it forthwith. In the spirit of what the right hon. Gentleman has said, I think that he will reflect on what has been obtained for the first time in the UK takeover—namely, a commitment to a much longer-term perspective than had been the case, including the right for the British Government to approve any subsequent purchaser of defence assets—and agree that that is a significant step forward.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to the fact that, in the dark days before I came to this House, I spent several years in the City advising on mergers and acquisitions, and Melrose was one of the companies that I advised several times. Bearing that in mind, while there is of course a narrow range of scenarios in which the Government can intervene on a quasi-judicial basis, as the Secretary of State has already set out, will he confirm whether the Government will always ensure that we have an open globalised economy based on competition, not one in which politicians will capriciously intervene, which would be the approach of the Labour party?

Greg Clark: That is the right approach. The UK’s reputation for being a dependable place to invest and do business is based on clear rules and principles, and we have benefited from that. We make significant investments in the UK economy; we make significant investments in overseas companies, and we hold big assets. That is important to us, and we should be a trading nation, which means that we should be open to investment as we invest in other countries. That is the heart of our approach. However, it is important to keep the regime under review, and where there are long-term interests, such as in research and development, it is right that we have introduced an ability during a takeover bid to extract indications of how a bidder would approach things. That is what we have done in this case.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a bleak day for British industry and British workers when a 259-year-old icon of British engineering excellence falls prey to a hostile takeover thanks to hedge funds moving in to make a quick killing. We will hold Ministers and managers to account for the promises that they have now made. Crucially, does the Secretary of State agree that the time has come for a fundamental review of our corporate takeover regime, because the idea that the British national interest can be sold down by the river by hedge funds moving in to buy 20% of a company is fundamentally wrong?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman talks about employees’ interests, and he has fulminated about the bid for a company that has an important plant in his constituency, but he has not made a single request or proposed a single safeguard to protect those interests. I do not know whether he has met the new management of GKN—I do not think he has—but my hon. Friends the Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) have made the effort and have discussed the important commitments that are being made, and the undertakings that I have secured will contribute to employment stability. The difference between my hon. Friends and the hon. Gentleman is that they have rolled up their sleeves and got involved, whereas he has contented himself with making slogans from the Back Benches.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The aerospace division is the jewel in GKN’s crown and is a vital part of Britain’s defence industrial base, so as a former Ministry of Defence Minister, I particularly welcome the guarantees that have been provided about the future of that part of the company. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about how he has worked closely with the MOD on that? Will he also assure us that the MOD will be a part of the six-monthly reviews?

Greg Clark: I will indeed, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who speaks with considerable authority not just as a former MOD Minister, but as an ex-serviceman. Defence considerations are important, and I work closely with the MOD, which has provided a comprehensive assessment. That is the proper basis on which those with expertise in such matters can say what is required to safeguard national security, and I promised this House that I would abide meticulously by the expert advice that I receive. I am glad that I have had access to that expertise and have made my decision based on it. Of course, when it comes to considering the future opportunities for this company, our engagement through the industrial strategy is as important in the defence sector as it is in the automotive and civil aerospace sectors.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Melrose takeover of GKN was approved by 52% to 48% after 20% of the company had been snapped up by hedge funds. The Secretary of State has heard calls from both sides of the House for those with short-term interests to be excluded from making decisions on takeovers and for the public interest test to be expanded to include questions about research and development. He has rejected those calls today, but he says that he keeps minds under review. What form will his review take, and when does he expect it to report?

Greg Clark: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, I have said to many colleagues in the House that when it comes to shareholdings, every purchaser in the latter stages has bought from a longer-term shareholder, who has in effect expressed a judgment on the company. This Government, previous Governments and this House have looked carefully at the rights of different classes of owners and have concluded that the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion would not be the right reform. However, he knows me well and I will of course consider the assessment of the conduct of this bid, but it would be wrong to mislead him by saying that I have formed a different view. I will take an objective view of the conduct of the bid, as will others in the House. The grounds for intervention
are specified in the Enterprise Act 2002, which reflects the requirements across the European Union that every member state must apply.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The old management was British, the new management is British, and the Secretary of State appears to have secured guarantees from the new management that it will do certain things that the old management had not guaranteed. Does that not imply that those who are working for the new GKN should sleep slightly more soundly in their beds?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend puts it well and succinctly. Any takeover bid will obviously involve some anxiety for employees with long service, but whether or not the bid had succeeded, this was always going to be a period of change for GKN employees. As a result of the commitments that have been given, they can have more certainty about a confident future than would otherwise have been the case.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): In the Secretary of State’s previous statement on this issue I asked two questions: whether the Government would ask Melrose for a commitment to the aerospace division of longer than five years, based on advice both from key customers and other stakeholders; and whether the Government would have a conversation with Airbus about the consequences of a short-term commitment of five years? Will the Secretary of State confirm to the House whether he asked Melrose for a commitment of longer than five years and whether he had a conversation with Airbus? If not, why not?

Greg Clark: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the commitment to five years is the longest that has ever been given and was not something that Melrose was willing to offer. The Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. In fact, the further undertakings that have been entered into on defence matters, which are of course in the aerospace division, go beyond that period.

I mentioned in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) that Airbus’s chief executive has not repeated the reports that were made previously. I have discussed the matter with Melrose and its intention is to develop a relationship that it hopes will prosper in the future.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given that this is the first time that the process has been used, the Secretary of State has rightly focused on the legal undertakings that he has been able to extract from Melrose. Will he speak a bit more widely about the general discussions that he has had about the future role of GKN’s assets in his industrial strategy?

Greg Clark: I have been very clear in my discussions with both sides during the bid. It is important to have equal treatment when taking a quasi-judicial decision. GKN has an important role to play in our industrial strategy in two important sectors. GKN will be part of an aerospace sector round table later this week, and I expect it to live up both to its responsibilities and to the opportunities in this most exciting of sectors.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Takeovers are a good thing where they are likely to enhance value, but it is clear that this highly leveraged takeover by Melrose is likely simply to load GKN with £8 billion of debt. We know what will happen, as we have learned the lessons of history: the company will be broken up and sold off piecemeal to recoup the debt raised by Melrose to create false value.

We have also seen a lukewarm commitment on R&D. GKN’s current R&D is at only half to two thirds that of its main competitors. Why did the Minister not seek a more ambitious undertaking that the takeover will enhance value and increase GKN’s R&D spending target to that of its main international competitors? I echo the sentiments of other Members on the need to amend our shareholder takeover rules to ensure that short-term interests of companies with no industrial knowledge or understanding of companies are not permitted to distort the interest of stakeholders in the long-term value of this company.

Greg Clark: For the first time in British corporate history, we have secured a commitment to spend, as a minimum, what the incumbent is already spending on research and development—that should be welcomed. Obviously, the reports of accounts and the disclosures that will need to be made to the markets will shine a light on the debt, but it is striking that it has been suggested today that £150 million was accounted for by unpaid suppliers’ bills at the end of the last quarter—I gather that is in the filings that have been released today—so I imagine the hon. Gentleman will want to study very closely with a beady eye the reports of accounts as they are published in the months ahead.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I am reminded of the Cadbury experience when it was taken over by Kraft. Undertakings were given about the factory in Bristol, which was sold off almost before the ink was dry on the deal. GKN is a company of national strategic importance not just to defence but to the wider economy and, indeed, to the Government’s much-vaunted industrial strategy. GKN should play a big part in that future.

If GKN were a German company in Germany or a French company in France this kind of speculative takeover would be prevented one way or another. One way to prevent it would be to have substantial stateholdings in such companies, and France, in particular, has done that over many years to make sure French companies remain French. Will the Government not look to France and Germany for the best way forward?

Greg Clark: Kraft’s takeover of Cadbury is exactly why we changed the rules so we can now have binding undertakings that are legally enforceable, unlike the situation that prevailed when the hon. Gentleman was in government. When it comes to the German system, in fact there is a substantial record of German companies being taken over.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Vodafone.

Greg Clark: Yes, Vodafone’s takeover of Mannesmann is a classic case. KUKA, a German robotics company, has been taken over recently, as has Kabel Deutschland. There is a substantial record of takeovers in Germany. We have to operate the same public interest tests. What we have now is an ability to inquire into the intentions
for the medium and long term, and to obtain legally binding commitments on that. I hope the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) would welcome that, because many of his constituents will benefit from it.

Mr Speaker: I greatly enjoyed the Secretary of State’s answer to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), and I hope he will not take offence if I say that the hon. Member for Luton North was not himself in government—he looked rather shocked, nay affronted, by any suggestion that at any time in his career he might have been. The hon. Member for Luton North is a career Back Bencher and is immensely proud of the fact.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Workers at GKN’s Luton plant in my constituency are world leaders in ice protection systems for flight-deck windows and fast-jet canopies, and I believe they will share my dismay that the assurances the Secretary of State has put in place amount to little more than the new management picking up the phone and informing him before it does things that damage our national security and national interest. Is not the reality of the quasi-judicial nature of the decision-making process that he and future Secretaries of State will always veer on the side of caution, rather than face the prospect of being challenged in court when a takeover goes through?

Greg Clark: I am sure it is an unaccountable oversight that the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) has never served in government.

For the constituents of the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker), during the takeover bid, the incumbent management criticised the commitment to hold the aerospace division for five years. Given that a majority of the company was to be sold as part of the incumbent management’s plans, it is fair to observe that it is not clear there would be any greater stability—I put it as mildly as that—if the incumbent management had continued, rather than the new management that shareholders chose to manage the company.

2.45 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) rose—

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). It would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Rebecca Long Bailey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy suggested in response to my earlier comments that I have never said what further undertakings he should have sought from Melrose. I know he cherishes our exchanges—there are many of them, so I forgive him for forgetting one of them—but on 27 March, in response to an update from him, I questioned the absence of numerous undertakings and was very specific about what they were. I would simply like to correct the record, and I accept his apology in advance.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted point of order, which I would prefer to classify as a point of continued debate. I am sure it will be of intense interest across the House, and copies of this particular extract of today’s proceedings will probably be lodged in the Library. More particularly, I rather imagine that she will wish speedily to communicate what she has just said to many, many thousands of people across Salford and Eccles.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark) rose—

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has been prompted to come to the Dispatch Box. Who would dare deny him?

Greg Clark: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I can only regret that I missed the extensive undertakings and the forensic examination by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). It is possibly down to the fact that she had prejudiced her consideration of this matter by saying that Labour would block the takeover, thereby making it completely impossible for her to have any role in it were she in my position as Secretary of State.

Mr Speaker: The shadow Secretary of State and the Secretary of State have now had their little bit of fun, in which, with my characteristic generosity, I have been willing at this early stage to indulge them. I do not think we need to pursue the matter any further for now. Doubtless, they will preserve these little titbits for their children, or possibly for subsequent generations.

Jack Dromey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Indulging in the use of uncharacteristic language, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy suggested that no proposals had been put to him by me and others. Would he like to confirm that I and others met him and made representations to him in detail asking that the bid be called in under section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002, with a particular focus on defence and strategic grounds? Would he therefore like to take the opportunity to correct the record?
Mr Speaker: It is an extraordinarily eccentric impersonation of a point of order not to seek any procedural ruling from me, although the hon. Gentleman is wise not to do so in respect of the contents of the Enterprise Act, but to deploy the ruse of a point of order to whizz past me at an aeronautical pace in pursuit of some debating reply from the Secretary of State. That is very disorderly behaviour, but as the mood of the House is, on the whole, quite an amicable one, let us hear the mellifluous tones of the Secretary of State, I hope for the last time today.

Greg Clark: I have high regard for the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), and what he says is uncharacteristic of him. I am disappointed that the limit of his request is to block the bid, rather than to specify undertakings that could have been made and to engage in greater detail than simply saying, “No. Block it.” It would have been more fruitful on behalf of his constituents if he had delved a bit more into its substance, and I regret his not doing so.

Mr Speaker: I will sturdily resist any temptation to intervene further in that exchange. This private squabble may continue for a little while, albeit with good nature, I hope.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: On the subject of good-natured points of order, I say more in hope than in expectation, I call Mr John Mann.

John Mann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. After a debate on anti-Semitism a week ago today, I have received very many kind remarks from parliamentarians, their staff and, indeed, members of House staff, for which me and my family are very grateful. There is an exception to that: one member of the Press Lobby chose to put out on social media, without any communication whatsoever with me, the suggestion that I had misled Parliament in relation to a criminal act of violence against my wife. May I repeat, on the record, that I have not misled Parliament and that my wife, who was the victim of this crime, has written to the media outlet concerned today clarifying this in some detail? This outrageous commentary has led to a wave of additional abuse against me, against my wife and against my daughter, including a threat of violence from a Labour party member from Sefton that is being referred to the police. Can you confirm my understanding that members of the Press Lobby have a privileged status within here? They have computers, telephones and lists of MPs, and if they are struggling to get hold of anybody they have the ability to wait outside this Chamber after a debate to speak to us. This member of the Press Lobby chose to use none of those things, and I just wanted your confirmation that the Press Lobby has the full ability to contact any of us, should they wish to do so, before putting out such scurrilous material.

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that. Any journalist can contact any Member if said journalist is minded to do so. I think it is as simple as that; I have no responsibility for what has been said, and the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that I do. To be candid, I have no knowledge of which individual or outlet he has in mind. In a way, that is an advantage; he is asking me a straightforward question and I can offer him a straightforward confirmation by way of reply.

Needless to say, I am very sorry to hear about the torrent of abuse that the hon. Gentleman, his wife and his daughter have experienced—that is very sad. Nothing is going to stop the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for more than 30 years, from speaking his mind, and it is right that that should be so. But it is a pity when people feel it necessary not to play the ball but to play the man or the woman, indulging in ad hominem abuse of a frequently loathsome kind, and sometimes of a kind that would be of interest to the police. This is a very worrying development in our democracy, about which I have spoken before, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said and I hope my reply offers him some reassurance.
Unsolicited Calls (Prevention)

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

2.53 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to prevent unsolicited calls; and for connected purposes.

Lest anyone be in any doubt as to the seriousness and importance of this subject, I should inform the House that well over 100 Members kindly offered to co-sponsor such a Bill. This is the first time I have had the privilege of attempting to bring a Bill to the House and I am glad to be able to get this level of support from only a single email.

Receiving unsolicited telephone calls has become an infuriating but inevitable part of our daily lives. Such calls are intrusive, seldom of any use and, in many cases, made with the sole intention of ripping people off. The situation has become normalised and we should not be content with that. It is estimated that some 70 million nuisance calls are made every year: this is a growing problem. A Which? survey estimated that 39% of calls in September 2016 were a nuisance and that the volume of nuisance calls for some was astonishing, with 10% of people receiving more than 60 a month—that works out at two calls per day, on average. Later data shows that Scotland is the worst area in the UK for rogue calls. The most recent figures from Which? show that 71% of Scots believe that receiving cold calls has discouraged them from even picking up their home phone when it rings, with 41% saying they feel intimidated by cold calls. New BT figures claim that every household in the UK receives four nuisance calls a day; as this is across 23 million households in the UK, it would indicate the ridiculous figure of 5 billion nuisance calls a year. Needless to say, those numbers show the extent of a problem that is at least very large.

These calls are intrusive; as people are sitting down with their family enjoying a bit of downtime in front of the television, they get interrupted by a phone call that turns out to be an unwanted waste of time, inconvenient and annoying. In the residential setting, this kind of disruption is never welcome. For businesses, unsolicited calls play havoc with the rhythm of the daily business routine and with the productivity of offices. I heard of one business where if one nuisance call was received by one phone, it could almost be guaranteed that every phone in the office would receive the same call throughout the day. That is distracting for employees, taking up precious time for no productive purpose, and it blocks the line, preventing customers and suppliers from being able to get through on the phone.

I have also heard stories of helplines being clogged up with this kind of call, preventing people who genuinely need help from getting through. It is the equivalent of setting up a trader’s stall outside a hospital accident and emergency entrance that blocks ambulances from getting in. We would not allow this in the physical world, so why should we tolerate it in telephony? For many who are more vulnerable, the people at the end of the phone gather data and try to foist products and services on them, which are usually neither wanted, nor needed. This leads to people getting ripped off by often unethical operators. Laws are already in place against that, but the line is blurry. Although people who phone purporting to be from a company to get access to someone’s computer are breaking the law, the calls where someone phones up to ask questions to build a profile of how vulnerable a person is may not be illegal.

This is a certainly an issue that affects millions of people across the country, one that demands action from us as legislators. We have a duty to ensure that our legislation is effective and gives the authorities the power they need to effect solutions to a huge problem. I am not suggesting for one moment that the Government have been complacent on this issue. Since the publication of the nuisance phone call strategy in 2014, there has been a great deal of Government action on this issue. I know how much work my right hon. Friend the Secretary for State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has undertaken on it, both in his current role and in his previous role as Minister of State. The single most significant element was placing responsibility for all nuisance calls with the Information Commissioner’s Office, creating a single port of call for the regulation of this issue. But more needs to be done, and making directors liable for the actions of their companies when they undertake nuisance calls is an essential part of the next step we should take in this House to tackle this problem. I hope to outline this element of what the Bill will do.

I recognise that much good work is being undertaken on financial services legislation that will outlaw the practice of soliciting insurance claims over the phone, making annoying traffic accident and payment protection insurance calls a thing of the past. Members will know that I am often a critic of the Scottish Government, but they have done much good work in this area. They have spent money on ensuring that people, especially the most vulnerable in our society, are aware of scams, and they have taken proactive steps to ensure that these warning messages get to the people who need to hear them. The Scottish Government estimate that the UK-wide economic harm from scam calls comes to £3 billion; this was in a report published only last month looking at the effectiveness of actions to reduce harm from nuisance calls. The work the Scottish Government have done has shown some results, and it is worth looking at this across the UK.

The private sector has also been hard at work on this issue. The Telephone Preference Service is a great way for people to limit their exposure to nuisance calls. BT has been working very hard to limit these calls. In my constituency, trueCall works with our local trading standards to install call blockers for vulnerable households and has blocked more than 21,000 scam and nuisance calls.

I would like to outline what I envisage the Bill doing. It is effectively divided into three parts, the first of which, as I have said, will make the penalties more robust and widen the way in which they can be applied. One aspect of the problem is that the companies that make nuisance calls are often pop-up companies. They are designed to make money and then go bankrupt, so that if they are caught, they will avoid a fine. That is an abuse of company law, and the Bill would make the directors of such companies personally liable for fines for nuisance calls. That reflects the private Member’s Bill that was introduced by the former member for Edinburgh West and the work of the hon. Member for
North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), to whom I pay tribute for her work on this issue. If directors are personally liable, people will think twice before authorising such activities.

The second part of this Bill will tighten up the definition of a nuisance call. We think we all know what a nuisance call is—it is when someone calls us up and tries to sell us something that we do not really want—but is that, in fact, the definition that we should adhere to? Sometimes we receive calls that we are not expecting from businesses, and they are good. Is it right to say that a nuisance call is simply a call that we do not want? That would effectively end the opinion poll business and all telephone canvassing, and I am not sure whether that would make the Bill more desirable to Members or less. It is clear that the current legal definition is not effective, and the Bill is designed to empower the Government and the regulator to have a more robust definition of nuisance calls.

Finally, I would like to place a general responsibility on unsolicited callers to ensure that the numbers they are dialling are not registered with the Telephone Preference Service. That would ensure that there was no problem when phone numbers were bought and sold. As with any valuable data commodities, it would be the responsibility of both the purchaser and the seller to establish whether a number was a TPS number. It would be possible to fine both parties if they had not performed due diligence on the nature of the numbers that had been traded.

This is an important issue, which has rightly gained a lot of attention from across the House. It has also elicited a lot of conversation with the private sector. I thank Brendan Dick and his team at BT Scotland for providing me with an excellent briefing, as well as Which? and Citizens Advice for the work that they have done in this area. If we can make the situation better for people, we will remove a nuisance and make everyone’s lives a bit easier. At the same time, we will improve business productivity. It is seldom that one finds such widespread agreement on any issue across the House, and therefore I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Stephen Kerr, Kate Hoey, Hugh Gaffney, Rachel Reeves, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Ben Lake, Nigel Dodds, Lady Hermon, Dame Cheryl Gillan, Fiona Bruce and Patricia Gibson present the Bill.

Stephen Kerr accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July, and to be printed (Bill 197).

Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords]


Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 4

Unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc

“(1) The Secretary of State must keep under review whether a prohibition on unsolicited direct marketing in relation to consumer financial products and services other than pensions would be appropriate.

(2) If the Secretary of State considers that such a prohibition would be appropriate, the Secretary of State may make regulations applying regulations made under section (Unsolicited direct marketing: pensions) to other consumer financial products and services (with or without modifications).

(3) In considering whether to make such regulations, the Secretary of State must take into account any advice received from the single financial guidance body under section 3(3)(b)(ii) (consumer protection function: advice on effect on consumers of unsolicited direct marketing).

(4) The regulations may—
(a) make different provision for different purposes;
(b) make different provision for different areas;
(c) make incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitional or saving provision.

(5) Regulations under this section are to be made by statutory instrument.

(6) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.”—(John Glen.)

This new clause would give the Secretary of State the power to make regulations (subject to the affirmative procedure) banning unsolicited direct marketing in relation to consumer financial products and services other than pensions. It would come immediately after NC3

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.3 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clause 9—Unsolicited direct marketing: pensions (No. 2)—

‘(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations prohibiting unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions.

(2) The regulations may—
(a) make provision about when a communication is to be, or is not to be, treated as unsolicited;
(b) make provision for exceptions to the prohibition;
(c) confer functions on the Information Commissioner and on OFCOM (including conferring a discretion);
(d) apply (with or without modifications) provisions of the data protection legislation or the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 (S.I. 2003/2426) (including, in particular, provisions relating to enforcement).

(3) The regulations may—
(a) make different provision for different purposes;
(b) make different provision for different areas;
(c) make incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitional or saving provision.

(4) Regulations under this section are to be made by statutory instrument.

(5) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(6) If before the end of June in any year the Secretary of State has not made regulations under this section (whether or not in that year), the Secretary of State must—

(a) publish a statement, by the end of July in that year, explaining why regulations have not been made and setting a timetable for making the regulations, and

(b) lay the statement before each House of Parliament.

(7) In this section, “OFCOM” means the Office of Communications established by section 1 of the Office of Communications Act 2002.”

This new clause inserts a new power for the Secretary of State to make regulations (subject to the affirmative procedure) banning unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions. If the power is not exercised by June, the Secretary of State must explain to Parliament why not. This new clause would be inserted after Clause 24.

Amendment (a) to new clause 9, in subsection (1), leave out “may” and insert “must”.

Amendment (b) to new clause 9, in subsection (1), after “pensions” insert “and prohibiting the use for commercial purposes of information obtained by means of such direct marketing”.

Amendment (c) to new clause 9, in subsection (2)(c), leave out “and on OFCOM” and insert “, on Ofcom and on the Financial Conduct Authority”.

Amendment (d) to new clause 9, in subsection (2)(d), after “(S.I. 2003/2426)” insert “or the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000”.

New clause 1—High-cost credit: advice to the Financial Conduct Authority—

“(1) In exercising its functions the single financial guidance body must have regard to the effect of high-cost credit card lending on consumer protection and must produce and publish an annual assessment of any consumer detriment.

(2) The assessment under subsection (1) shall in particular consider—

(a) what level of interest and fees constitute a high-cost credit card;

(b) information provided by high-cost credit card providers to customers, and whether such information allows customers to make informed financial decisions;

(c) the impact of high-cost credit lending on levels of personal debt,

as well as any other factors that the single financial guidance body considers relevant.

(3) If the single financial guidance body considers it to be necessary for consumer protection it must advise the Financial Conduct Authority to impose a limit on the cost of specified types of credit.”

This new clause would require the single financial guidance body to consider the effect of high-cost lending using credit cards on consumer protection and produce an annual assessment of any consumer detriment from such high-cost lending.

New clause 2—Specific requirements as to the pensions guidance function: mid life reviews—

“(1) As part of its pensions guidance and money guidance functions, the single financial guidance body must provide targeted information and guidance for members of the public from the age of 50 to help them make decisions on their financial affairs.

(2) In particular, the information and guidance in subsection (1) shall include information and guidance on—

(a) increasing pension contributions in preparation for retirement,

(b) saving money in preparation for retirement, and

(c) career development and the impact of career development on financial matters including preparation for retirement.”

This new clause provides for the single financial guidance body to provide guidance to members of the public over the age of 50 on preparing for retirement. These “mid life reviews” would provide guidance on pensions, savings, and career development.

New clause 6—Regulatory principles to be applied in respect of claims management services—

“(1) The FCA may make recommendations to the Secretary of State on regulatory principles to be applied to claims management services.

(2) The matters on which the FCA may make recommendations include, in relation to claims management services—

(a) the duties of authorised persons to act honestly, fairly and professionally in accordance with the best interests of consumers;

(b) the duties of authorised persons to manage conflicts of interest fairly, both between themselves and their clients, and between clients;

(c) other duties of authorised persons related to a duty of care towards their clients.

(3) If the FCA recommends that regulatory principles be applied to claims management services, the Secretary of State may by regulations impose such principles.

(4) The power to make regulations under subsection (3) is exercisable by statutory instrument; and an instrument containing such regulations is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.

(5) In this section, ‘authorised person’ has the same meaning as in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, and ‘authorised persons’ shall be construed accordingly.”

This new clause would allow the FCA to recommend that the Secretary of State introduces a duty of care which would require claims management services to act with the best interests of the customers in mind.

New clause 7—Assessment of public preparedness for income shocks—

“(1) As part of its strategic function, the single financial guidance body must from time to time publish an assessment of the ability of members of the public to plan for and address sudden reductions in income.

(2) An assessment under this section must consider the impact of the work of the single financial guidance body on the ability of members of the public to plan for and address sudden reductions in income.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay before the House of Commons any assessment conducted under this section as soon as practicable after its completion.”

New clause 8—Ban on unsolicited real-time direct approaches by, on behalf of, or for the benefit of companies carrying out claims management services and a ban on the use by claims management companies of data obtained by such methods—

“(1) The FCA must, as soon as they take responsibility for claims management services, introduce bans on—

(a) unsolicited real-time direct approaches to members of the public carried out by whatever means, digital or otherwise, by, on behalf of, or for the benefit of companies carrying out claims management services or their agents or representatives, and

(a) the use for any purpose of any data by companies carrying out claims management services, their agents or representatives where they cannot demonstrate to the satisfaction of the FCA that this data does not
arise from any unsolicited real-time direct approach to members of the public carried out by whatever means, digital or otherwise.

(2) The FCA must fix the appropriate penalties for breaches of subsection (1)(a) and (b) above.

Amendment 31, in clause 2, page 2, line 17, at end insert—

“including information about the services offered by credit unions.”

This amendment adds to the objectives of the single financial guidance body the requirement to provide information about credit unions.

Amendment 39, page 2, line 23, leave out from “accordingly” to the end of line 24 and insert—

“(da) to ensure the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances, including but not exclusively—

(i) those who suffer long-term sickness or disability,

(ii) carers,

(iii) those on low incomes, and

(iv) recipients of benefits,

are met and that resources are allocated in such a way as to allow specially trained advisers and guidance to be made available to them,”

This amendment would require that specially trained advisers and guidance are made available to people in vulnerable circumstances and would provide an indicative list of what vulnerable circumstances should include.

Amendment 40, page 2, line 36, at end insert—

“(4) The single financial guidance body must ensure it communicates to consumers using its services the difference between—

(a) provision of information,

(b) provision of guidance,

(c) provision of advice.”

This amendment would require the new body to ensure that consumers are made aware of the differences between ‘information’, ‘guidance’ and ‘advice’ so that they can specify what type of services they require from the new body.

Amendment 4, page 3, line 5, in clause 3, at end insert—

“(c) advice to the Financial Conduct Authority on matters relating to high-cost credit”.

Amendment 41, page 3, line 16, at end insert—

“(6A) As part of its money guidance function, the single financial guidance body must make available financial guidance on the use of alternative sources of retirement income, including housing wealth, to enable members of the public to make fully informed decisions about pensions and retirement income.”

This amendment would place a duty on the single financial guidance body to make available guidance on alternative sources of retirement income, such as equity release. This will provide a pathway for members of the public to consider their wider assets, particularly their housing wealth, to make effective decisions about their retirement income.

Government amendment 10, page 3, line 17, leave out subsection (7) and insert—

“(7) The consumer protection function is—

(a) to notify the FCA where, in the exercise of its other functions, the single financial guidance body becomes aware of practices carried out by FCA-regulated persons (within the meaning of section 139A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000) which it considers to be detrimental to consumers, and

(b) to consider the effect of unsolicited direct marketing on consumers of financial products and services, and, in particular—

(i) from time to time publish an assessment of whether unsolicited direct marketing is, or may be, having a detrimental effect on consumers, and

(ii) advise the Secretary of State whether to make regulations under section (Unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc) (unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc).”

This amendment makes changes to the consumer protection function to make it clearer exactly what it entails.

Amendment (a) to amendment 10, in paragraph (b)(i), leave out “from time to time” and insert “at least once every two years”.

Amendment 34, page 3, line 34, at end insert—

“(aa) the capability of members of the public to plan for and address sudden reductions in income,”.

Amendment 1, page 3, line 39, at end insert—

“(11) In carrying out its strategic and other functions the single financial guidance body must make and publish an annual assessment of the level of different types of lending across the United Kingdom by district.

(12) The types of lending covered by the assessment in subsection (11) should include—

(a) high cost short term credit,

(b) hire purchase agreements,

(c) conditional sale agreements,

(d) open ended credit,

(e) other secured lending, and

(f) other unsecured lending.”

This amendment requires the single financial guidance body to carry out an annual assessment of the level of different types of lending in different geographical areas across the United Kingdom.

Government amendment 11.

Amendment 8, in clause 4, page 4, line 2, at end insert—

“(2A) The single financial guidance body must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, advise the Secretary of State on how to most effectively implement bans on—

(a) cold-calling on behalf of, or for the benefit of companies carrying out claims management services or their agents or representatives, and

(b) the commercial use of any data by companies carrying out claims management services, their agents or representatives where they cannot demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State that this data was not obtained by cold-calling.

(2B) In this section ‘claims management services’ has the same meaning as in section 419A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.”

This amendment will require the Secretary of State to specifically ban cold-calling and the commercial use of data from cold-calling by claims management companies, in addition to any bans recommended by the single financial guidance body.

Amendment 9, page 4, line 4, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment will place a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to institute bans on cold-calling on receipt of advice to do so from the single financial guidance body.

Amendment 42, in clause 10, page 7, line 22, at end insert—

“and to whether the standards are proportionate”.

Probing amendment. The SFGB’s standards setting powers also need to be matched with principles of good regulation, ensuring that conditions are proportionate to the benefits they are expected to bring. This would bring the Bill (impacting charities) into line with standards setting and enforcement powers granted to other bodies (impacting firms) such as those granted to the FCA.
Government amendments 12, 43, 25, 44, 26 45 and 46.

Amendment 2, in schedule 3, page 45, line 8, at end insert—

17A (1) Section 165 (regulators’ power to require information: authorised persons etc) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (4) after paragraph (b) insert—

(c) in relation to the exercise by the FCA of the powers conferred by subsections (1) and (3), information and documents reasonably required by the single financial guidance body in connection with the exercise by the body of its functions as set out in section 3 of the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018.”

This amendment extends the FCA’s power to require information from authorised persons to include information required by the single financial guidance body for carrying out its functions.

Government amendments 47, 48, 28 and 29.

John Glen: It is a great pleasure finally—for the third time of asking, I believe—to have the opportunity to start the Bill’s Report stage. I want to make a positive start to proceedings by covering new clauses 4 and 9, which will allow us to protect consumers from harmful cold calls by enabling us to lay before the House regulations to ban pensions cold calling and introduce bans for other forms of cold calling, if we consider it appropriate to do so.

As I have said previously, I want to ban pensions cold calling as soon as possible, given the profoundly damaging impact that pension scams can have on people’s lives. I have listened to the recommendations of the Work and Pensions Committee, which published a report before the turn of the year on preventing pension scams, as well as to the passionate calls that have been made across the House and in the other place to ban pensions cold calling. I am pleased to present new clause 9, which builds on and improves the clause proposed by the Committee. The Government’s new clause has a wide scope, which means that we can ban all pensions-related calls. Crucially, we do not need to wait for advice from the guidance body before we implement a ban, so we can make good on our commitment to ban pensions cold calling quickly. I hope that the fact that I will have to lay a statement before both Houses if we have not laid regulations before Parliament by June will reassure hon. Members on that point.

I turn to new clause 4. It is clear to me that, too often, significant consumer detriment arises because of cold calling. If we find evidence that people are experiencing detriment as a result of cold calling regarding consumer financial products, we will not hesitate to use this power to protect consumers.

I am pleased to be able to confirm the final part of our approach to protect consumers from cold calling by means of amendment 10. The amendment expands and improves on the consumer protection function. It gives the body powers to publish regular assessments of consumer detriment resulting from cold calling, and to advise the Secretary of State on where further bans should be implemented. The change clarifies the consumer protection function and gives the body a clear mandate to support the Government in preventing harm that results from cold calling. In fact, the Bill has been agenda-setting in relation to cold calling. The amendments that we are discussing will give the Government new powers to ban cold calling in some of the areas that are the most pressing when it comes to protecting consumers.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way and commend him for the action that he has taken—I am very supportive of it. He has made a good case for banning cold calling in the pensions industry and some other financial industries. The clear case for doing so has been well made, but why will the Government not go further and ban cold calling outright?

John Glen: I have tried to make it clear that when we are setting up a new body, it is important that we take time to reflect on the evidence and that we take action in consultation with and alongside that body. I acknowledge the widespread concern that exists in other areas, and I think that the action we are taking gets the balance right when it comes to getting the evidence together and moving as quickly as possible when the case has been made.

The amendments that I have outlined are additional to the amendment that was made in Committee to introduce a ban on claims management cold calling, which will cover calls about claims on matters ranging from mis-sold payment protection insurance to holiday sickness and car accidents. That means that calls about PPI, whether we have been in a car accident or whether we were sick on holiday—we are all familiar with such calls—will be banned unless prior consent has been given to receiving them.

Having ensured that we can tackle cold calling effectively, we plan to remove the existing clause 4 by means of amendment 11. Amendments 12, 25, 26, 28, 29, 45 and 46 are minor and consequential to these changes. In particular, amendment 45 commences new clause 9 on Royal Assent to ensure that there is no unnecessary delay in making regulations, and amendments 44, 47 and 48 prepare the Bill for the new data protection legislation.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I wish to address the issues of pensions cold calling in new clause 9, wider cold calling in amendments 8 and 9, and the duty of care in new clause 6.

Let me start by saying what this Bill is about. In Committee, we heard the story of the Port Talbot shift supervisor who broke down and wept uncontrollably when he met the Pensions Advisory Service. He described how he had been conned into going down the wrong path on his pension, losing tens of thousands of pounds as a consequence. The reason why he wept, he said, was that all 20 on his shift followed his lead, and therefore they, like him, now faced a much bleaker future than would otherwise have been the case.

Pension cold calling is a blight on people up and down the UK. As the Minister has said, we all know the feeling of answering the phone to a number that we do not recognise and hearing that familiar phrase, “We believe that you have been in a car accident.” Indeed, I was heading over to one of the Bill Committee sittings when I received such a call, not having had one for some years. Someone said that they understood that I had been in a car accident. I said that, yes, I had been in an accident 38 years ago, and it was because somebody had
run into the back of me. Since then, I have had two subsequent annoying cold calls, yet mine is but a minor problem. The more significant one is the 11 million pensions who are targeted annually by cold calls. Fraudsters are making 250 million calls a year, which is equivalent to eight every second.

As the Minister knows, we have approached the cold-calling element of this Bill on a four-pronged basis: first, banning pensions cold calling; secondly, pushing for a total ban now on cold calling for claims management companies, thereby tackling the scourge of unsolicited claims head on; thirdly, banning the use of information obtained through cold calling; and, fourthly, ensuring that the strongest possible sanctions are put on those who break the ban, which means that they are struck off.

The Government’s commitment to ban pensions cold calling from June is a necessary and wholly welcome step. May I make the point—such points are not often made in the House—that the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury have engaged with us, the wider community and the pensions industry? Their approach has been constructive. Together, we have come a very long way, but I hope that they will go just that little bit further. Our amendments would tighten the provisions around to the Financial Conduct Authority would mean that the ban could be much tighter and more effective.

Although the original clause means that the “introducers” who tend to commit a lot of cold calling in cases such as the British Steel scandal would not be restricted, as they are not covered by the FCA, our amendment would restrict them. The move to ban the use of the information means that those firms which provide financial services and are covered by the FCA will be banned from using the information that the “introducers” gather. This slight shifting of the ban is designed to strengthen it further, as the FCA has much stronger powers than the Information Commissioner’s Office and can strike off members who contravene the rules. We therefore hope that Ministers will reflect further on this.

I now move on to cold calling more widely. A crucial issue on which the Minister has touched is the speed with which we now act. It is not only pensions where cold calling has a negative impact. There are many other industries that have been blighted by cold calling that creates serious consequences for innocent consumers. It is common for claims management companies to try to harvest cases for road traffic accidents and holiday sickness. Unfortunately, and extraordinarily, the UK has become the world leader for holiday sickness claims. The Association of British Travel Agents said that there were about 35,000 claims of holiday sickness in 2016, which represents a 500% rise since 2013. One in five Britons—19%, or around 9.5 million people—has been approached about making a compensation claim for holiday sickness. Statistics from just one tour operator, in July and August, show that there were 750,000 travelling Britons in Scandinavia, 800,000 Germans and 375,000 Scandinavians. The Scandinavians lodged 39 claims for holiday sickness and the Germans filed 114. The Brits put in just under 4,000 claims.

3.15 pm

Data from Jet2 Holidays shows that the longest delay involving a holiday sickness claim was a striking 11 months from the date of alleged illness, while the shortest delay was two months. That equates to an average delay of 5.8 months. Furthermore, 50% of claims were brought more than three months after the person’s return from holiday. As a result, hoteliers in the markets affected are threatening significant price increases.

A total ban on cold calling would be likely to lead to a fall in the harvesting of false holiday sickness claims. Two recent cases that were taken to court show that the practice is not only improper and immoral, but unlawful, with one particular couple from Merseyside receiving a prison sentence. Deborah Briton was sentenced to nine months and her partner Paul Roberts for 15 months, not least because they had advertised what a good holiday they were having only then to be encouraged by a claims management company to submit a false claim when they got back home.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend referred to Jet2, which is headquartered in my constituency and has raised this issue with me on many occasions. It says that these vexatious claims are increasing the cost of flights and holidays for the rest of us. Is it not true that closing this loophole will effectively mean that we can all enjoy a holiday at a much more reasonable price?

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When a reputable company such as Jet2 makes the point that the consequence of this practice might be price increases and a reluctance among some hoteliers to enter into agreements, it is clear that innocent holidaymakers will pay the price.

It is not just travel companies that are suffering due to the large number of cold calls. Around 51 million personal injury-related calls and texts are sent by regulated claims management companies each year. The Association of Personal Injury Lawyers has long called for a ban on personal injury cold calls from CMCs, especially as solicitors themselves are already banned from cold calling. Ironically, only recently, the Justice Secretary said that there would be a “forthcoming ban on cold calling” when discussing personal injury claims. If the Justice Secretary believes that there is a forthcoming ban, why do we not act now and include it in this Bill? As Lord Sharkey said in the other place, the ban is necessary to deal with the “omnipresent” menace of cold calls. Baroness Altmann has said:

“People need protection from this nuisance now. They shouldn’t have to wait still more years for a ban....Direct approaches to people on their mobiles or home phones should have no place in the modern world of business.”

The Government, in the public interest, must accept the amendment to ban cold calls when this Bill passes.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent argument for banning such cold calls. Does he agree that the banning of cold calling by claims management companies for personal injury claims would be a far more effective method of reducing costs for insurance and personal injury than the Government’s proposals, which are currently being considered in the other place, to limit the injury compensation due to innocent victims, as well as to those who are not innocent?
Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are legal consequences for those who make unlawful claims, but there are also business consequences, which in this case knock on to the legal profession and its work. Looking at it from every angle, this is a menace that we need to bring to an end; the question is how soon we can do so.

We hope that the Government will accept our proposals, not least because the Conservative party said at the 2017 general election that it would “consider a ban on companies cold calling people”. This is the Government’s chance to keep at least that manifesto promise while protecting the public at the same time.

It is deeply welcome that the Government have taken the powers to ban cold calling for pensions. They have also indicated their support—indeed, the Minister did so earlier—for a wider ban, which our amendment calls for. We are not calling for a blanket ban, which the Minister believes could impinge on non-contentious issues such as doctor-patient calls. The situation is different when such an established relationship exists.

We are talking about commercial companies that are pursuing a commercial advantage. All claims management companies should be banned from cold calling, so we urge the Government to set out in the Bill that they will stop the scourge of cold calls by claims management companies.

New clause 6—this is the only other provision to which I will speak—would introduce a duty of care by requiring claims management services to act in the best interests of customers, not least those who find themselves in a vulnerable situation. Due to the scope of the Bill, the new clause relates only to claims management services. However, although this change would be important, we believe that a duty of care is required across all financial service providers. Many consumers are forced to deal with financial providers when they are at their most vulnerable. Such people can include those who have been diagnosed with serious illnesses, including cancer.

At present, the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 requires that the FCA must have regard to “the general principle that consumers should take responsibility for their decisions”.

Frankly, that is not good enough.

The Financial Services Consumer Panel told the Lords Financial Exclusion Committee that consumers could reasonably be expected to take responsibility for their decisions only if firms had exercised a duty of care towards them. It suggested that such a duty would oblige financial services providers to avoid conflicts of interest and act in the best interests of their customers. The panel proposed amending the law to require the FCA to make rules on a duty of care, arguing that the introduction of such a duty would lead to a much-needed cultural change in the banking sector and the financial sector more generally.

Let us look at just one example. The charity Macmillan Cancer Support has said that people affected by cancer tell it that they experience barriers to getting the support that they need from the banking sector. By 2020, one in two people will have cancer at some point in their lives. Four in five people with cancer are £570 a month worse off on average as a result of their diagnosis. For example, Christine was first diagnosed with cancer in 2009, but is still feeling the financial effects today. She said:

“The financial fall-out of cancer was huge—I went into my overdraft and had to take out a loan to pay it off. When I found out that my credit rating had suffered, it seemed unfair because I was trying my best to get back into work and to have money coming in…For people like me who want to go on living and working, it’s about having that short-term support and understanding. What would have been great was if I’d been able to have an honest conversation with my bank.”

A specific requirement therefore needs to be explicitly stated to ensure that all financial institutions do their best by the most vulnerable people in society. The strong evidence that has been presented by Macmillan clearly shows that a universal duty of care is required across financial service providers.

In the light of examples in which the principle of treating customers fairly is clearly failing customers, has how the FCA reassured Ministers that the current regulatory provisions are sufficient? Can the Minister provide further details on when the discussion paper to which he referred will be brought forward? I know that he is seized of the problem and wants progress to be made at the next stages. That is crucial and, once again, we want to get on with it, because we need to tackle the real problem that has been identified. What assurances can the Minister give that action will be taken to ensure the timely introduction of the duty of care following the outcome of the FCA’s consultation paper?

We strongly support amendments tabled by a number of hon. Members, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), that would ensure that banks and financial institutions take proper account of local and regional need, and do not let down local people, as is all too often the case now.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I will speak to amendment 41, which is in my name. My amendment is intended to make a point to the Minister, and I am utterly certain that I will get the assurance that I need in order to do nothing more than discuss it now.

I welcome the introduction of a single financial guidance body, as it should result in a simpler, smarter and smoother experience for the user, helping them to make informed financial decisions. However, we ought to use the opportunity of this Bill not only to ensure that we get the guidance bodies all in one place; we also need to recognise the different types of finance or retirement income that need to be signposted. Financial decision making can be complex, often requiring advice and support, particularly during events such as buying a first home, on retirement or following a bereavement.

I tabled this amendment because people ought to consider their finances in the round. In other words, all liquid and illiquid assets—cash and property—should be considered together. My amendment follows the lead of the noble Lady Greenhouse in the other place, asking the Government to ensure that this new guidance body highlights the full range of options available, so that its users get the best possible advice to help them to make informed choices about their finances and their futures.

The report published last month by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee describes equity release as one of the key tools available to those who are predominantly in later life, explaining that people are able to pay for care costs or home improvements to give them the option to stay in the homes in which they have built lives and brought up their families. Equity release
3.30 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a salient point. Given that the range of interest rates for a number of companies that offer equity release is really quite considerable, does he agree that one of the advantages of the advice going through an independent body is that those who are offering better and lower interest rates for consumers are more likely to receive custom?

Crispin Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I agree. He will note the very distinguished role that his predecessor played in the whole business of promoting equity release. It ought to be a really major option given the construction of people’s resources and where they sit on the scale of property ownership in the UK. We need to be clear about how important an asset it is and how important it is to make sure that this industry has the opportunity to give the best possible service to people in their life plans.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he not think, therefore, that there is considerable merit in new clause 2, which promotes the idea of specific guidance for people in mid-life so that they get proper and clear advice on some of the decisions that they may have to make?

Crispin Blunt: I am sure that there is enormous merit in new clause 2, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to make the case further. There is obviously a common theme of making sure that people have the information about all their assets to enable them to make the best possible decision. We must make sure, in setting up the body in this Bill, that we do not have to come back to this later on because, in practice, we are not delivering the best advice to people about all the assets with which they have to plan.

The pensions advice allowance allows people to withdraw £500, tax-free, from their pension pots to pay for financial advice on their retirement, including on housing wealth, but some people will be unwilling or unable to use this facility. It is incumbent on the single financial guidance body to provide free, impartial guidance and to ensure that this encompasses housing wealth. It is likely that any signposting requirement would push consumers towards the Equity Release Council, the industry body for the equity release sector. Members of the Equity Release Council are committed to product standards and consumer safeguards.

With 37,000 customers signing up for equity release products for the first time in 2017, the number of these products has also risen enormously over the last decade—by 225%—and 78 product options with the necessary range of flexibilities are now available. This can only improve and grow as the industry develops. Consumers utilise equity release for various reasons, such as paying off a mortgage, making adaptations to the home, boosting retirement income, or as a means of providing deposits to children and grandchildren to enable them to take their first step on the housing ladder. Equity release can help in meeting some of the challenges in social care and in housing.

We should be more ambitious, ensuring that the new body signposts solutions such as equity release to all those we represent who might really benefit from unlocking the main source of their wealth overall, which will be the equity in their home. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we are going to make a reality of that in practice through the guidance.

Consumers must obtain qualified financial and independent legal advice before they confirm their decision to go ahead and purchase any equity release product. Guarantees include the right to remain in the property for life or until moving into long-term care. Another key safeguard provided by members of the Equity Release Council is the “no negative equity” guarantee, whereby the repayment of the loan is never greater than the value of the home.

A major reason why the single financial guidance body signpost should include housing wealth is the growth in the equity release sector. Homeowners released £3 billion worth of equity in 2017, with 37,000 new customers signing up for equity release products for the first time.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman keeps saying that this is about releasing equity. What people are actually doing is borrowing against the perceived wealth of the property.

Crispin Blunt: They are not borrowing against the perceived wealth of the property—it is the actual wealth of the property. If someone is in a position of planning for their retirement and they do not have an adequate pension pot, and given the scale of the imbalance between people’s assets in property as opposed to the pension provision they have made, it is obvious that, in making the assessments for their retirement, they should consider accessing the wealth they have accrued that is in their home.

With 37,000 customers signing up for equity release products for the first time in 2017, the number of these products has also risen enormously over the last decade—by 225%—and 78 product options with the necessary range of flexibilities are now available. This can only improve and grow as the industry develops. Consumers utilise equity release for various reasons, such as paying off a mortgage, making adaptations to the home, boosting retirement income, or as a means of providing deposits to children and grandchildren to enable them to take their first step on the housing ladder. Equity release can help in meeting some of the challenges in social care and in housing.

We should be more ambitious, ensuring that the new body signposts solutions such as equity release to all those we represent who might really benefit from unlocking the main source of their wealth overall, which will be the equity in their home. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we are going to make a reality of that in practice through the guidance.

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Neil Gray: I rise to speak to amendments 39 and 40, which are in my name. I want to say at the outset that while Scottish National party Members have felt the need to bring back some elements from Committee, we do on the whole welcome and support the Bill. We just want to see some improvements, which we hope will help to protect consumers and those accessing financial products. It is a shame that on the third attempt to consider the Bill we may still not get time to consider the second group of amendments, and in particular the one that has been tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), which we are keen to consider. However, I will proceed as quickly as possible so that we might get to the second group in good time.
First, amendment 39 would require that specially trained advisers and guidance are made available to people in vulnerable circumstances and would provide an indicative list of what “vulnerable circumstances” should include. It is positive that the Government decided to amend the Bill in the House of Lords to include a reference to the needs of vulnerable people within the functions of the new single financial guidance body. However, we feel that the Government should go further.

The amended version of the clause remains a little weak with regard to the inclusion of vulnerable people. Our amendment would make things more explicit and strengthen that objective by providing more detail as to who may fall into this remit, using the term “people in vulnerable circumstances”, which we think is more appropriate. The circumstances illustrated in our amendment can have a significant impact on people’s finances and long-term savings plans.

People in difficult financial circumstances may be more likely to use new pension freedoms, at a cost to their long-term pensions saving. Attractive as the pension freedoms may sound, it is clear that the Government have not put in place adequate safeguards for people who are opting to free up funds, to ensure they will not end up in a desperate financial situation later. Those with less money are more vulnerable to economic shocks in their personal circumstances, as well as being potentially more vulnerable to scammers who give misleading or false advice for a fee, as we heard from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey).

Being a carer or disabled can incur extra lifestyle costs. We want to ensure that the new body is as accessible as possible for all people, regardless of their circumstances. Specially trained advisers and resources must make up part of the new body, so that people can have confidence in its ability to support people in vulnerable circumstances.

The Minister said in Committee that our amendment was too prescriptive, but that does not really stand up. There is plenty in the Bill that is prescriptive and detailed. The new financial guidance body will be looking to the content of the Bill to understand what its objective and remit are. We are simply ensuring that the new body is absolutely clear that catering for those who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances should be a significant part of its remit. The wording of clause 2 makes that sound like an afterthought. That is an important discussion to be had alongside the duty of care, which I will come to later.

Amendment 40 would require the new body to ensure that consumers are made aware of the differences between information, guidance and advice, so that they can specify what type of services they require from it. In Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) tabled an amendment that would require the new financial guidance body to define the meaning of those services. The Minister said that that would potentially duplicate available definitions set out in regulations, but he also seemed to think that we asked for a definition because it would be useful for the body itself. That was not our purpose. Our purpose was to ensure that consumers themselves understand what services they have access to. We are tabling this amendment with tweaked wording to make it clear that we are asking that the new financial guidance body communicates clearly what services it provides people with and what they can access.

Guidance, information and advice are very different things. People expecting advice on what route to take may be disappointed to receive various information only. Likewise, there may be issues around exactly what the body is allowed to advise and to what extent it is able to advise on options available. Through this amendment, we are simply highlighting how important it is to ensure that users understand what they are getting.

Government new clauses 4 and 9 give the Secretary of State power to ban cold calling related to pensions and other consumer financial products. The Government have also tabled amendments to bring forward commencement of those clauses. The SNP and the Scottish Government have campaigned hard on cold calling, so we are pleased to see those provisions in the Bill. It is a positive step that the Government have tabled amendments 45 and 46, which will speed up the process for putting in place the necessary regulations for banning cold calling. It is clear that consumers want action now.

On the Government’s amendments, there is a concern that the Government are treating claims management companies’ cold calling and pensions or financial products cold calling differently. In Committee, the Government introduced clause 34, banning cold calling for CMCs unless the consumer has given their consent. With the two amendments on pensions and financial advice cold calling, the Secretary of State is giving herself a get-out clause, to shirk responsibility for taking action. Cold calling is cold calling. Consumers simply do not want to be bothered by nuisance calls, as we have already heard from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). Creating a complex framework around which providers are allowed to make these calls, on what types of product, under what circumstances, is over-complicating a very simple issue. People just want it to stop.

Will the Secretary of State, or the Minister who responds to the debate, explain why they think the need to ban CMCs’ cold calling is greater than the need to ban pensions or financial products cold calling? Tough action needs to be taken on this; otherwise, we risk creating loopholes that will allow cold callers to continue to operate.

I want to mention the duty of care amendment: new clause 6, tabled by Members on the Labour Front Bench. My colleagues spoke about it in detail on Second Reading, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who sadly cannot be here today to speak on it again. Applying a duty of care to CMCs would be a positive step in ensuring that such companies remain accountable for their actions if they cause harm to consumers.

Ideally, all financial institutions should have the best interests of vulnerable consumers at the heart of their conduct, but we all know that that is not always the case, and the fact that the Financial Conduct Authority has agreed to bring forward a discussion paper on duty of care is really positive. Macmillan has campaigned tirelessly on this issue, and I thank its staff for the briefings that we received ahead of these debates. We hope that the Secretary of State and Ministers will give serious thought to this idea, as well as to our amendment.
on vulnerable persons, which ensures that the single financial guidance body expressly allocates resources for specialist support for people in vulnerable circumstances.

The SNP has long called for and campaigned for action on cold calling. Indeed, it was the subject of a ten-minute rule Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran. We welcome the fact that there is to be progress in this regard, but this area of the Bill is becoming a bit of a guddle. That is why we would obviously prefer to see powers over this area devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so that we could take more robust action, such as was suggested by the Scottish Government’s action plan on nuisance calls. Indeed, the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, Keith Brown, has written to the UK Government many times, asking for them to take a tougher line on nuisance calls.

Nuisance callers blight our society and cause significant distress, particularly to the elderly and vulnerable people. Such harassment is unacceptable and must be stopped. Hopefully, in the time we have available, we will take the opportunity to make some necessary improvements to the Bill.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I shall restrict my observations to pensions cold calling and unsolicited marketing thereon.

Last year, I was pleased to play a part in the scrutiny of the Pension Schemes Act 2017. It was timely legislation to ensure that pension savers were adequately protected as they saved, during the working period of their life, by the regulation of master trusts, which had previously been rather worryingly lightly regulated—insufficiently so, when for many, their pension will be their primary asset in life.

I am pleased that this Bill will bring together the Pensions Advisory Service and Pension Wise into a single financial guidance body, under the control of the FCA. I am further pleased to support the Government’s amendments, especially new clauses 4 and 9. It is right that the new clauses in the name of the Government allow the making of regulations to prevent cold calling and the sending of unsolicited direct marketing materials relating to pension savers. That is further strengthened in Government amendment 10.

At the core of what we shall hear in the House this afternoon is whether “may” should become “must”. That is at the core of an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and Willingdon—amendment (a) to Government new clause 9. There is a case for healthy competition. That usually results in lower charges, and that can be—can be—good for consumers. It would be a draconian measure to ban advertising, to entirely ban direct marketing, because that could be banning choice. It is often good advice for pension savers who have accumulated a pension pot to move to a provider who may provide a better pension, perhaps at a lower cost, with lower charges. That decision now rests with pension providers. If they do not act sensibly, that “may” in Government new clause 9 will, in certain circumstances, become a “will.” That is an important power.

3.45 pm

At the heart of any marketing prohibition lies the well-founded fear of scams. The amount likely to be saved by UK pension savers, each with their own personal defined-contribution pot, massively expanded by the successful roll-out of auto-enrolment, will in time be truly vast. There are currently 9.3 million people enrolled in workplace pensions. Where pension saving was once a rarity, particularly for the low-paid and the under-30s, it is thankfully now becoming the norm. A rough and ready calculation shows that in time the number of people enrolled in workplace pensions could well rise from 9.3 million to 15 million; I am sure that will be the appropriate figure in time. When we consider that from 5 April 2019, the combined employee and employer contributions will be 8%, we see that if that stays steady, using average salaries, and with a working lifetime of, say, 35 years, that will mean a pension pot in this country of over £1 trillion, and that is without investment growth. Of course, investment growth could be dented by the Labour party’s plans for a Robin Hood tax on financial transactions, but that is a debate for another day.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman talks about a total pot in the trillions, but for the vast majority of people, particularly part-time workers, their pot, although better than nothing, will be relatively small. Does he agree that several groups are still excluded from auto-enrolment, and that the Government need to do something to bring them in?

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. There is a wide debate—I have taken part in it—about whether the self-employed are playing a full role in getting pension provision. I think that there are measures that could be taken, perhaps using the national insurance system, to provide them with greater certainty. The primary purpose of the Bill is to ensure greater financial understanding among the general population. They need to know where to turn at the right time. I have confidence that the single financial guidance body will achieve just that.

I close with a suggestion that is probably best directed to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. It has some relevance to the honest proposals put forward by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) on mid-life reviews. Employees, as they work through their working lives, obviously have an employer. Employers are very well aware—possibly more than anybody else—of when an employee is approaching retirement. I am sure that most responsible employers will be keen to help. I recommend that the Secretary of State discuss amendments to the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 to allow employers to pay for advice, outside of any benefit-in-kind tax charge, so that advice can be provided to employees and paid for tax-free. That would extend a benefit-in-kind exemption similar to what we see when advice relating to settlement agreements, or payment for CV writing and recruitment advice upon redundancy, is duly paid for by an employer tax-free.

In my view, the Bill is fit for purpose and I very much support it.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I wish to speak to amendments (b), (c) and (d) to new clause 9, which stand in my name. As the House might know, they arise from the work that the Work and Pensions Committee did on miners’ pensions. For most people, decisions about moving pension capital are made towards the end of their lives, but miners had to decide where they should safely put their pension savings as a result of the change in the ownership of their industry.
Given the warning from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that we may not get on to the second set of amendments, I should mention that I have some amendments in that group to raise with the pensions Minister. Perhaps I may address two points to the Economic Secretary, but first I thank both Ministers for the way they have engaged with the Work and Pensions Committee for our report and in our meetings. We are immensely grateful to them. On some issues, I have joined my Front-Bench spokesmen because we have been pushing the same measures and interests.

I wish to raise two points that I hope the Economic Secretary will say will be added to the Bill. First, not only should cold calling become unlawful, but any information that arises from it should not be used for commercial purposes—that is, in respect of pension savings. Secondly, would it not be sensible to use the opportunity presented by this Bill to add the Financial Conduct Authority to the list of bodies in the Government’s policing arm to counter activities that unlawfully undermine people’s pension savings by trying to persuade them to move their assets in one way or another?

In the interests of getting on to the second set of amendments, I conclude my comments.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, because the issues are of particular interest to me as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee. I want to reflect on some of the evidence the Committee has heard in its inquiry into pension freedoms and choice, as it relates to some of the changes proposed in the Bill.

While I am extremely supportive of the work the Government have done to increase the freedom of our constituents in respect of their pension savings, it has undoubtedly created new challenges that must be addressed. I am pleased that the Bill has been brought forward as an opportunity to address them. The first challenge is advice. It was apparent from our sessions on the British Steel pension fund that those who find themselves needing to switch often struggle to get the advice they need. There were mixed experiences, with some people receiving very good local advice and others receiving very bad advice or none at all.

Mark Tami: On the British Steel pension scheme, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the FCA has been very slow to react, when it was clear in certain locations that there were many problems with the way some people were being advised to get out of the scheme?

Jack Brereton: That issue certainly came up in our evidence. Those who saw our evidence sessions will know that there was quite a significant grilling of the FCA.

Those experiences show that some irrational decisions—often described as “emotional” decisions—were made in the moment. Sadly, those short-term decisions were not the best investment decisions for the longer term. Unfortunately, this vulnerability—the vulnerability of immediacy or a form of panic, one might say—allowed predatory vulture companies to take advantage of an emotionally charged situation, with people reinvesting their pension pots without the full, impartial advice that is needed. Those vultures exploited scheme holders, framing what they were doing as giving impartial advice, when it was nothing of the sort. Many people felt that they were not fully informed of the consequences of the complex investment decisions they were having to make.

The accessibility of free independent advice in such situations has, in some cases, been woefully limited. Moreover, the often perplexing nature of pensions leaves many people making decisions about their investments that are not necessarily in their best interests. Evidence presented to the Select Committee by the Association of British Insurers from the FCA’s “Financial Advice Market Review: Baseline report” suggests that not even one in 10 UK adults—just 6%—had received regulated financial advice. Worryingly, 25% of people who needed advice about their finances did not access it.

There are a number of reasons why our constituents are not accessing the advice they need, but what has been demonstrated is that not enough people are currently accessing the free independent advice that is available. The Association of British Insurers suggested that although 44% of people who are approaching retirement had access to some sort of advice, only 10% used the Pensions Advisory Service and only 7% used Pension Wise. The lack of clear advice combined with confusion about who to trust for independent advice has made it too challenging for those making investment decisions. Not enough people are getting the advice that they need to make properly informed judgments.

Secondly, we also found that very limited numbers of people are making the active decision to shop around and switch providers. Often, the tendency of those changing schemes is to stick to the same provider, so switching—active consumerism—is another challenge. There are, of course, a number of reasons why people might find it difficult to switch providers, not least the lack of good information and advice about the choices available, as I just related. It is also a major barrier to consumer activity, so I am pleased that part of the Bill proposes to create a single guidance body. That will make it much clearer for our constituents to see where they can turn for the right advice to make informed decisions and manage their finances for the future.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving an important speech. Some of the evidence that we received on the Work and Pensions Committee was from Citizens Advice, which suggested that 97% of the pension scams that had taken place in one year originated from unsolicited calls. Does he think that the measures that the Government are bringing forward in the Bill will go some way to combating that?

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for that point; I agree that it is critical that we take action to stop cold calls, and I am about to come on to some of those points.

This change will also ensure that the advice that is available is joined-up and better suited to our constituents’ needs, ensuring that decisions are not made in isolation, but with consideration to the wider implications of investment decisions on an individual’s overall finances. Measures in the Bill will also ensure that people receive the appropriate advice as a matter of course and that they should opt out if they do not wish to receive such advice. I also hope that the commitment made by the
Government and the industry to develop a pensions dashboard will be delivered, making it easier for our constituents to have access to the information that they need about their pension savings to make suitable decisions.

Thirdly, the Committee heard about the increasing number of pension scams that are being reported, with more people being actively deceived into making investments that are not in their best interests. It was suggested that many rogue companies are using cold calling to target people and to get them to invest without full thought of whether it is the right and best decision for them. I am sure that many right hon. and hon. Members have, like me, been contacted by constituents who have been continually badgered by cold calling. It is a real issue in Stoke-on-Trent South and I am sure that it is a challenge in other areas, too. Many of the people targeted by cold calling are elderly or vulnerable and are taken advantage of by those seeking to cheat our constituents out of their hard-earned life savings.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that although the pension freedoms that were introduced in 2015 were a fantastic opportunity for our constituents, they have led to an increase in rogue scammers and cold calling? That is why new clauses 9 and 4 are so important for the Bill.

Jack Brereton: I absolutely agree. That is why it is so important that this legislation is passed and that the Government have proposed these amendments. I am pleased that the Government have put measures in the Bill to ban the use of unsolicited marketing on pensions and financial products and services. It is a significant step towards preventing future abuses.

Of course, this legislation can never stop all scams being attempted—we cannot legislate away those who have nothing but contempt for legislation—but it does send a clear message not just to those conducting this behaviour, but to those who are at risk of being conned. By raising awareness of the challenge of scams, the Government can make people wary of them. This will mean that those who are targeted can have the confidence that whenever they are cold-called by people trying to offer this sort of advice about their pensions or information about their investments, the calls are not legitimate but in fact illegal, and they should put the phone down. The Government are taking a balanced approach, acting if necessary to target where cold calling is most prolific and most damaging, such as in the area of pensions and financial products and services.

4 pm

I support the Government’s efforts to encourage more people to take up advice at critical points in their life and to make the right investment decisions. I believe that the creation of a single body to give this guidance will make it much clearer where people can turn to for that independent financial advice, ensure they can get the more holistic advice they need, increase take-up and reduce the likelihood of people being successfully targeted by rogue companies. I also welcome the Government’s proposals to take action on unsolicited marketing and end the opportunities for rogue companies to target often vulnerable people through the use of cold calling. The Bill is in the consumer’s interest, because the Government are on the side of the hard-working saver, and it is for that reason that I am happy to support the Government’s amendments tonight.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that we have finally got our time to debate the Bill; some people in Parliament might not be, but I believe that consumer protection is one of the most important things we can do in this place, because it speaks to the incremental unfairness that people face in life that individuals cannot face on their own but which together as a society we can tackle. In that sense, I rise to support amendments very much in that vein, and one of their common themes is that they come from Co-operative as well as Labour MPs. The co-op movement was founded on the values of consumer activism so I want to put on the record my support for amendments 31, 1 and 2, which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) will be speaking to later. I also want to get on to the next group, which are in the name of my other Co-op colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), amendments 5, 6 and 7 on mental health and debt.

In particular, however, in speaking to my new clause 1 and amendment 4, on the FCA’s potential role in tackling the impact of high-cost credit on our society, I want to repeat my Cassandra impression on debt. The Bill is about the fair treatment of consumers. I urge the Minister and the Government, in my Cassandra-like way, to learn the lessons of the payday lending industry. I do not need to tell any Member that the nation is drowning in debt, as we all have seen in our constituency surgeries. We owe more as individuals than do the Government; total household debt in June 2016 was £1.23 trillion, which is more than the Government’s national debt.

Average UK unsecured debt is now £14,000 and will be £19,000 by the end of the Parliament. The number of people who have gone bankrupt in the last year has soared to its highest level since the financial crisis. The reasons are not rocket science: there is simply too much month at the end of their money. Research now shows that economic insecurity has become the new normal for at least 70% of the UK’s working population, who the RSA has described as “chronically broke” and that 32% of the UK’s workers—people who are earning a wage—have less than 500 quid in savings and 41% have less than a grand. It is little wonder that a third are desperately concerned about debt.

Unemployment rates might still be dropping, but we all know that the cost of living has not dropped, and personal debt has filled the vacuum. So, too, has that insecurity, with 1 million on zero-hours contracts and nearly 2 million people in temporary work—and that is even before we get on to those in self-employment. In my constituency, 15% of people are self-employed. These are people who cannot predict their incomes. It is little wonder that the high-cost credit industry has been preying on these people.

One in 10 UK adults say their incomes change significantly from month to month, and almost half say they have experienced at least one monthly drop in income, with the average monthly drop being £385. Who of us could afford to lose that much from our monthly budget without there being consequences? Nearly half those people were self-employed or in that insecure work, which makes budgeting, on which much of the Bill depends, so difficult, and more than half said that one reason they experienced problems was an unexpected expense—a quarter had had two unexpected expenses.
The costs that people face when the washing machine breaks down or the landlord puts the rent up cannot be planned for, but they are all too frequently an everyday part of life. It is little wonder that nearly 6 million households now spend more than 60% of their income on essential outgoings. They have little flexibility in their budgets to begin with, so when those unexpected costs come, of course they turn to borrowing.

We know that that is not the case for everyone. We know that there are very wealthy people whose incomes are about five times as much as those of the people in the bottom half of our income stratosphere. That is what the new clause and the amendment are about. There are people who can manage borrowing well within their budgets, but the reality of modern-day Britain is that there are many more people for whom borrowing in itself becomes the problem. We know that 25% of the UK’s lowest-income households are struggling with debt and experiencing that “chronically broke” feeling. It is little wonder that it causes so many mental health challenges.

It is not the traditional demons to which people who are struggling are now turning. We did make progress on payday lending—the so-called legal loan sharks—but that industry does not go away: it simply mutates. It simply finds new ways in which to prey on those people. The new clause and the amendment are about credit cards. I would wager that most Members have one credit card, if not two, in their pockets. Many of us may also have had that conversation with constituents who have come to us when they are about to be evicted because they cannot pay their rent and are behind with their costs. When we ask them, “Do you have any debt?” they say, “No.” When we ask, “Have you a credit card?” they say, “Of course.” Because credit cards are so ubiquitous in our society, we do not think of the danger that they can be.

That is why I tabled the new clause and the amendment. As the Minister knows, I am frustrated with the Financial Conduct Authority, which has been looking into credit cards but does not see the risk. This is where I become Cassandra, because the risk is all too obvious. Of course there are people for whom credit cards work well, but we know that a significant chunk of the British population are in persistent debt and that their credit cards are an integral part of that debt. They are paying about £2.50 in interest and charges for each £1 of their borrowing that they repay. That matters, because we stopped it happening in the payday lending industry by introducing a cap.

My simple question to the Minister is this. Why do we want to protect one group of consumers from that kind of persistent debt, but fail to learn the lessons when it comes to other types of product? The issue is not whether the credit involves a payday loan or a credit card; it is the credit itself, and the cost of the credit. I hope to convince the Minister of that.

When we look into consumer debt, we can already see just how damaging credit cards have been. At the end of 2016, consumer credit debt amounted to £236 billion, which is about 15% of total household debt, but it accounts for half the interest payments that are made each year. When the FCA conducted a survey of credit card debt, it found that 19% of consumers—one in five—paid just the interest rather than the repayment charges. What could be called “zombie debtors” had 5.1 million accounts. On average, it would take them more than 10 years to pay off their debt. They are stuck in debt because of their credit cards. Little wonder that 40% of adults say they sometimes struggle to make it to payday, and a third of them say that it is because they are making credit card repayments. Debt is breeding difficulty, and difficulty is breeding more debt for them and their communities.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):
I thank my hon. Friend for making such an impassioned speech about such a serious issue. I am sure that there are Members in all parts of the House who meet constituents in their surgeries and hear about their credit card debts, involving not just one card but, in some cases, two, three, four, five, six, seven or eight. It is the people with the most debt who are preyed on by those who give them access to additional cards, which only add to their burden.

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is no surprise that she has done so much work on the link between debt and mental health issues.

We are already seeing in the credit card industry the same patterns that we saw in the payday lending industry. If we are honest, we must admit that it took us too long, as a House, to act in respect of that industry. So many of us saw people in our constituency surgeries who were losing their homes and people who were massively in debt because they had become stuck in payday loans that they were using to pay for basics such as rent and food. But when we did act, what a difference it made. Bringing in a cap on the cost of credit has led to an 86% reduction in the number of people going to citizens advice bureaux with problems caused by payday lending. So one question for us is what the consequences will be if we do not act on credit card lenders. The Minister may say to me that the credit card industry is completely different from the payday loan industry—that is what he said when we had an Adjournment debate about this—so let me try to convince him that the two are intertwined.

I see in my local community, as other Members may have seen, companies such as Vanquis, Aqua and Capital One—indeed, Vanquis is owned by Provident, which is a doorstep lending company—offering credit to people who have bad credit histories and driving them into the same level of debt as payday loans did. Indeed, the FCA’s data shows exactly that, which is why it is such a mystery to me that it does not choose to learn the lessons from the payday lending industry and act accordingly.

Someone who has an Aqua credit card with a monthly interest rate of 3.992%, has borrowed £1,000 and is only paying the minimum monthly payment will pay £480 in interest by the end of the first year. By the end of the second year, the figure will be nearly £1,000—as much as they borrowed, which is the cap that we have put on payday lending. By the end of the third year, bearing in mind that a big group of consumers get stuck in this way for 10 years, they will have paid back double what they owed. Such companies are targeting our communities in much the same way as the payday lending industry did. They are targeting people with insecure incomes, because they have seen a new market. As I said, this industry does not go away; it just mutates.
Citizens Advice’s recent research about insecure income shows us just how much of a problem there is. People with high levels of income volatility are also five times as likely as others to have accessed this form of high-cost credit to meet the essentials—to put food on their table, to put petrol in their car to get to work and to pay their rent. Those are not costs that they can cut back on but the costs of everyday living. People with volatile incomes are also more likely to be paying fees and charges on cards, as well as overdraft fees.

That is why it is frustrating that, from the get-go, the FCA ruled out capping the cost of credit on credit cards and so learning the lesson from payday lending. It thinks the answer is to ask people to pay back money earlier, as if they have the spare cash to do that. It is not a fair fight for individual consumers against credit card companies, just as it was not a fair fight against payday loan companies. That is why we should intervene to set a fair market and learn the lessons about capping.

My new clause 1 does something simple: it asks the new financial guidance and claims body to step in, because the FCA is not doing its job and looking after the interests of consumers. It is not recognising, as Cassandra does, the risk that is coming and acting to avoid it. It says that persistent debt is when somebody pays 100% in interest and charges on top of the amount to be repaid, but it is not applying its own rule to credit cards even though we have seen how effective it has been in the case of payday lending.

I ask the Economic Secretary to show the leadership that this issue needs and that I believe the House should support. If he says today that he will take a strong hand with the FCA and not let it wait years and years, watching our constituents get into debt, he will have my backing. I have tabled my amendment and new clause to give him the opportunity to tell us that he gets it. The House does not want to wait another five or six years watching our constituents get into debt, as we did with payday lending. I am sure the Government would not want to be forced to cap the cost of credit, as we had to force them in that case, and I am sure that he is proud of the difference that capping the cost of credit for payday lending has made to millions of consumers in this country.

FCA data shows us that millions of credit card owners need our help and protection now, which is why I have tabled the new clause and amendment. I believe that there will be support for them, but I want to give the Economic Secretary the opportunity to do what I know he wants to do, which is to ensure that we do not leave it so long this time. I look forward to hearing what he says, and I hope that other Members will support my call, because frankly, there are too many people in our constituencies who need and deserve nothing less.

4.15 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): First, I should like to declare an interest as the current chair of the all-party parliamentary group on insurance and financial services. I welcome the Bill, because it will tackle some of the important issues that my constituents talk about. It includes a commitment to ban cold calling relating to pensions and to the creation of a single financial guidance body—an SFGB. I know that this approach also has the broad support of the insurance and financial services industry, but it is important that the SFGB should work with all stakeholders to fulfil its objective and of course ensure good consumer outcomes.

With the Bill, we have an excellent opportunity to improve financial resilience by promoting early intervention to help to prepare people for income shocks and life events. These preparations include planning ahead for care and understanding the benefits of protection products such as income protection insurance, critical illness insurance and life insurance.

There is a lot in the Bill that I could talk about, but given the time constraints, I want specifically to speak against new clause 8, which seeks to put a duty on the Financial Conduct Authority to ban unsolicited direct approaches by claims management services. I agree with the Government that the Information Commissioner’s Office is best placed to implement any ban and that existing legislation means that data gained illegally is already restricted. However, I agree that there is an urgent need for reform relating to claims management companies.

Previously, there have been calls for the FCA to assume responsibility for CMCs, so the fact that the Government have taken action on this is to be warmly welcomed. The Association of British Insurers has stated: “Confirmation of tougher regulation of claims management companies cannot come soon enough for people who are plagued by unsolicited calls and texts. Disreputable firms are fueling a compensation culture that contributes to higher insurance costs for many.”

Last year alone, there was a total of 752 authorised personal injury CMCs, more than in any other claims sector, including PPI. Measures in the Bill will go some way towards tackling bad practice in the personal injury claims market, which has been costly for insurance companies, put up premiums for consumers and frequently delivered outcomes in which claimants’ interests were not put first.

Added to some of the measures in the forthcoming Civil Liability Bill, such as tackling the high frequency of whiplash claims, this Bill will help to ensure the success of the Government’s wider efforts to tackle these problem areas. It is therefore encouraging that the insurance industry has expressed confidence in the FCA’s more robust regulatory regime and its ability to properly oversee these firms, citing two significant benefits, both of which will play a vital role in addressing the problems associated with this sector.

First, a strong regime based on understanding the business models of individual CMCs will prevent firms that do not offer good value to consumers from operating. Secondly, personal accountability for senior managers of CMCs will ensure that when a firm struck off, its directors cannot simply resurface as a new CMC, as is currently happening. It is anticipated that, as a result of this change, consumers will be given more information about the services that CMCs offer and more transparency about the fee structure. It is therefore important that the improved regulation of CMCs should be implemented alongside the personal injury reform proposed in the Civil Liability Bill. It can only be good news for consumers when their interests are put above all others.

As I have said, this is an excellent Bill, but I would like to propose a couple of areas in which I think it could be strengthened, and I ask the Minister to take them into consideration when summing up. First, it
would be useful if he clarified the exact scope of the services that the SFGB will provide for consumers. There is a great opportunity to look at how the Department for Work and Pensions could work with the financial services industry to make guidance a recognised norm and to look at ways to support interventions that could improve the retirement process, such as the introduction of a mid-life MOT.

Secondly, will the Minister provide a timeline for the introduction of the FSGB and tell us when the FCA will assume responsibility for CMCs? Swift action is necessary, particularly in relation to CMCs, given the drastic spike in claims relating to gastric illnesses by people who have been on holiday. It is no coincidence that this surge has coincided with CMCs preparing for the deadline for bringing PPI claims and the introduction of measures to tackle whiplash claim frequency.

The Opposition amendments to this part of the Bill are unnecessary. The Government are committed to banning cold calling in relation to pensions and by CMCs. Moreover, they and the SFGB will keep cold calling under review. If the Minister will give consideration in his summing up to the points I have made, I will have no hesitation in supporting the Government through the Bill’s remaining stages.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak to the three amendments in my name. According to a recent Bank of England survey, the average level of household debt excluding mortgages, is £8,000. While everybody should be able to access basic debt advice, people on low incomes with much higher levels of debt, at higher rates of interest, clearly need significant support. Unlike in the United States, it is difficult to work out with any certainty where such people are living in the UK, beyond relying on an individual to approach their local citizens advice bureau or another advice service.

At present, the new financial guidance body will not have access to data to allow for a detailed mapping of debt at a local level. Indeed, it will not have access to a full picture of the activity of banks and other lenders in our communities. There is no requirement on banks, payday lenders and other financial services providers to be fully transparent about the services in each of our constituencies—specifically where they lend, what rate they lend at, and the types of loan that they offer. Were that data available to public bodies, it would allow for the accurate mapping of who is lending and what is being loaned. Banks and other lenders do hold such data down to postcode level, and such data are released in the United States. Many British lenders that are active in the US are used to releasing that information, which allows public bodies to map the activities of banks and other lenders.

My amendments 1 and 2 would allow the single financial guidance body to facilitate the release of that information by lenders in an anonymised form so that we could know where debt is concentrated and what types of credit are used in different areas. That would allow for better, more strategic responses to the household debt crisis with which the House is familiar. The data would help to inform where to target the debt advice funding that the SFGB will dispense, encourage more engagement between mainstream lenders, and allow the community finance sector to scale up the provision of affordable credit in areas where there are specific problems. Indeed, such data would reveal market gaps and the communities excluded from mainstream credit.

Fair access to financial goods and services is a basic requirement for full engagement in modern society, but Thamesmead, an estate of 55,000 people in south-east London, has not been home to a mainstream bank branch for a long while. Charities report analogously that high-cost credit lenders such as doorstep or payday lenders are very active. More and more bank branches are being closed by the big banks, which is leaving whole communities, some in the poorest areas of our country, without a single mainstream bank branch. Thamesmead is not an isolated example.

At the same time, rumours persist that the big banks want to pull the plug on free cash machines. Which? has reported that over 200 communities in Britain already have poor ATM provision or no cash machines at all. The combination of a lack of access to cash machines and to mainstream bank branches could create the space for a much bigger increase in the activities of high-cost credit companies, doorstep or payday lenders or, worst of all, illegal loan sharks, as a response to the needs of people in such communities for short-term loans. We need to know where the other Thamesmeads are across the country so that charities, community banks and credit unions can be supported by the financial guidance body and other statutory bodies to target financial exclusion in such areas by signposting people to responsible financial providers.

In 2015, when considering this specific problem, the Financial Inclusion Commission, which was set up by the Government, argued for a much wider level of data disclosure to develop a greater understanding of the problem. It said specifically:

“If lenders were required to disclose data by postcode on credit applications and rejections, policymakers would be better able to understand the scale and shape of the low income credit gap.”

Since the financial crisis, banks and other lenders have withdrawn from higher-risk lending and raised the threshold for accessing mainstream credit. In turn, this has restricted the credit available to those with low credit scores, leaving them at the mercy of higher-cost lenders to bridge their income gap. Surely part of the long-term solution to the household debt crisis is to make it easier for low-cost credit providers and other alternatives.

It is true, as Ministers have previously suggested in Committee and in a letter to me, that there are other sources of data on debt. The Office for National Statistics and the Bank of England publish data on lending, but only at UK level—the data is not broken down by constituency or by area. StepChange, too, publishes some data on lending, as does the Money Advice Service, but the Minister might not be aware that it publishes only estimates of the number of people who are over-indebted.

I would not dream of criticising the Money Advice Service, but its data on lending does not go anywhere like far enough to meet the recommendations of the Financial Inclusion Commission. The Money Advice Service does not routinely collect information about the extent of debt problems at the most local level. Its last significant report was back in March 2016, and it set out estimates of the number of over-indebted households down to local authority level, not postcode level, which is
what we need. The Money Advice Service data are estimates based on survey work, not actual individuals who take out loans.

I should be clear that some lending data is already released. The coalition Government, to their credit, required the British Bankers Association, which is now UK Finance, and the Council of Mortgage Lenders voluntarily to publish some data by postcode, primarily to try to tackle the challenges that small businesses were facing when accessing credit.

There are problems with the data. For example, it does not include high-cost, short-term credit—payday lenders. Additionally, it does not disclose lending levels or rates at postcode level. Some details of loan applications and credit providers’ registers are not released either, so a full picture of the level of lending at a postcode level has not yet been able to emerge.

At the moment, the data is released voluntarily. Legal underpinning is needed so that more statutory bodies working in this field can more easily negotiate improvements in data. Specifically in this context, for example, the single financial guidance body should be able better to negotiate the release of the data that it needs.

I say this gently to the Economic Secretary, who will be. Try helpful to me tomorrow, but efforts to re-engage the Treasury in getting UK Finance to improve the usefulness of the data its members release have not had much success recently. At the very least, I hope he will be willing to join me in meeting national groups operating in this field to hear their concerns about the data, and perhaps he might be willing to use his leverage to get at least small improvements in that area.

In the United States, the Community Reinvestment Act means that banks and other lenders have to report what they are lending, where to and at what rate. The disclosure requirements are critical as they enable independent, informed assessments of what the banks are doing. Crucially, they keep the banks honest. Before the CRA, access to credit was scarce in deprived areas, and that lack of access contributed to and prolonged the decline and deprivation in such communities.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, but does he agree that the disclosure of such data would highlight the hotspots in communities such as the ones that we agree that the disclosure of such data would highlight the hotspots in communities such as the ones that we face due to poor regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority will be dealt with.

Santander, HSBC and Barclays all operate in the United States, where they release far more data on lending, down to postcode level, than they do here. So surely the questions for the House are: why are they not willing to do that here, too; and, as I believe, should they be forced to do so? Last October, Santander announced an $11 billion, five-year settlement on lending and community development in eastern parts of the United States, which is the market in which it operates. That represented a 50% increase in its Community Reinvestment Act-related activity. No such equivalent increase has been announced here in the UK. The Community Reinvestment Act has cross-party support in the US, being backed by Republicans and Democrats alike, including for its data disclosure requirements. If Ministers are not prepared to accept my amendments, I would wish, with your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, to press amendment 1 to a Division. These amendments are not onerous. Banks and other lenders record this data, and although a little work would be needed so that the information could be released in a useful format, a similar system works particularly well in the United States. In turn, the disclosure of lending details could help the single financial guidance body to make more effective choices.

I shall deal briefly with amendment 31. One key challenge for the single financial guidance body will be, as we all know, to help those who need loans, for whatever reason, to access the cheapest products—those offered by credit unions fall into that category. Surely the SFGB should be mapping where credit unions exist and what further action can be taken to promote the take-up of their services by those who are most in need.

Credit unions have very low administration costs. They simply do not have the megabucks of a major bank or a payday lender’s marketing department, so many of those who most need the support that credit unions can offer are often unaware of the services they provide. Surely another challenge for the House is to work out how we help credit unions to make more information available about the products on offer. I know that Ministers are sympathetic to efforts to expand the credit union sector, so I ask them to give specific attention to thinking about what further steps can be taken to help the credit union movement to expand and to support the SFGB in achieving that aim.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I completely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. There are problems with the data. Does he agree that one key aspect of trying to promote them is improving their professionalism, IT and this information, and using the potential for workplace credit unions? Should we not try to bring this through the workplace and payroll?

Gareth Thomas: I agree with that point, which is why it has been encouraging over the past 10 to 15 years to see Departments beginning to do their bit to encourage the workplace take-up of credit unions. I hope the Economic Secretary may be able to tell me that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will follow this trend soon, but the point about trying to increase professionalism is well made. Again, it would be good to hear commitments from Ministers that some of the problems that credit unions face due to poor regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority will be dealt with.
Gareth Snell: I apologise for intervening again, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was a director of a credit union in Staffordshire, but unfortunately it went under because the regulation from the FCA simply meant that it became unviable, because the authority did not understand the operating model. I therefore very much agree that the FCA has a big role to play, along with the Government, in making sure that credit unions are sustainable, because they offer a hope for constituents who would otherwise use high-cost lending.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend amplifies the point I was making. One last point to make is that there is a need for legislative change to allow credit unions, in particular, to offer loans for cars and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman comes to his last point, there seems to be a lack of understanding generally in the Chamber about what happens at this stage in a Bill. I cannot put a time limit on speeches; this is Report stage. We have two groups of amendments to go through, and we have until 6 o’clock. Many questions have been asked, and Members will expect the Minister to have some time to answer them.

If we go on as we have done for the last two hours, there will be no debate on the second group of amendments. It will not be up to me to explain to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) why she does not get to make her speech on her amendment in the next group. Every minute that people take in this House takes away from another colleague. Of course, there are people who prefer to hear the sound of their own voice, who only want to hear their own arguments and who will not give time for others, but I am warning now that if speeches take more than three minutes, we will get to a stage whereby the second group of amendments will not be heard. I cannot stop the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) finishing his speech—he can take as long as he likes, as far as the Chair is concerned—but I am sure that he will have a view to helping his colleagues.

Gareth Thomas: I had finished, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am delighted to hear it.

Stephen Lloyd: You make a salient point, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been sitting here for two hours, so I agreed with a lot of what you said.

I am glad that we are finally concluding our consideration of the Bill. I rise to speak to amendment (a) to new clause 9, as well to new clause 7, amendment (a) to amendment 10 and amendment 34. The Liberal Democrats welcome the amendments that the Government have tabled, but we believe that they do not go far enough.

The Bill as introduced in the other place had three major flaws. First, the single financial guidance body had no explicit function to protect consumers. Secondly, the Government missed an opportunity to ban cold calling by claims management companies, as they had promised to do in their manifesto. The ban should also have extended to other financial products. Thirdly, there were no safeguards to ensure that people received financial guidance before they accessed or transferred their pension benefits.

I pay tribute to my Liberal Democrat colleague in the other place, Lord Sharkey, whose amendments to the Bill paved the way for the concessions that we have today. I know that he and others from across the political divide have been lobbying Ministers intensely behind the scenes. It would have been nice if the concessions had come earlier in the proceedings, but there we go.

My support for the concessions is not absolute. In particular, under clause 34, claims management companies must act as though all UK phone numbers are registered with the Telephone Preference Service. As the House will be aware, however, the TPS has proven to be somewhat ineffectual. The Information Commissioner’s Office received more than 11,000 reports of cold calls from people on the TPS register last year. We believe that the Financial Conduct Authority has more teeth to enforce a ban on cold calling by claims management companies. For that reason, we support new clause 8, which would put Lord Sharkey’s amendments back into the Bill. The other amendments to new clause 9 would have a similar effect, allowing the FCA to police the ban on pensions cold calling.

Government new clause 9 allows Ministers to ban pensions cold calling and, if they do not, they must lay a statement before Parliament each year. Although I would love to name and shame Ministers every year until a ban comes into effect, I would rather that they just got on with it. Amendment (a) to the new clause would make it a legal requirement for the Government to ban cold calling, rather than just an optional extra.

New clause 4 allows the Government to ban cold calling in relation to any other financial services product after receiving advice from the SFGB. I welcome the amendment, but Lord Sharkey and I are worried that the SFGB’s duty to report on cold calling “from time to time” is too weak. I have tabled amendment (a) to amendment 10 to ask the SFGB to publish its report on cold calling at least every two years. This duty should not fall quietly by the wayside.

I also encourage the Government to accept amendment (b) to new clause 9, which was tabled by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). As my colleague, Lord Sharkey, pointed out in the other place, a ban on cold calling must also include a ban on the commercial use of data obtained by cold calling. This gives the Information Commissioner two bites at the cherry to punish companies flouting the ban.

I now turn to the two amendments that I tabled on income shocks. They would require the SFGB to improve the capability of the public to plan for sudden reductions in income. The issue was brought to my attention by the former Pensions Minister, Professor Steve Webb, and the Chartered Insurance Institute, to which I am very grateful. Too many people are unprepared for a sudden fall in income. The 2015 financial capability survey found that 26% of working-age adults have no savings to fall back on and that a further 29% have less than £1,000 saved. There are many reasons why income shocks could occur. Money Advice Service research from 2016 found that nearly three in four households receive an unexpected bill every year. One third of households have had to make an unexpected car repair or replacement, at a cost of £1,300 on average.

The “Improving Lives” Green Paper revealed that 1.8 million employees have a long-term sickness absence of four weeks or more in a year, yet statutory sick pay is worth less than three hours’ work a day on the national...
living wage. This problem is made worse because, as the FCA has noted, people with serious illnesses often have poor access to financial services, particularly insurance.

Amendments considered in the other place also touched on this issue. In response, the Government said that public preparedness for income shocks would be an aspect of the money guidance function. Although I welcome that commitment, I would like the Minister to go further. The Bill contains no specific direction for the body to improve preparedness for income shocks or any mechanism to measure the progress of the body in this regard.

The SFGB’s focus will be pulled in every direction. How will the Government convey to the SFGB the strategic priorities for the coming year, and how will Parliament and the public be able to scrutinise and evaluate that work? The Government have finally listened to the arguments made on these Benches and in the other place. I thank them for doing so, but they must now go the distance. They must take robust action to end the scourge of cold calling and protect millions of vulnerable people from sudden income shocks.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I apologise for missing the earlier part of the proceedings; I was chairing a debate in Westminster Hall.

I want briefly to voice my support for amendments 8 and 9, to which I have added my name, and also for new clause 8, in my name, which effectively repeals amendment 42 as proposed by Lord Sharkey in the other place. As Members will know, that amendment was withdrawn on the solid understanding of a promise by the Minister in the Lords who said that her officials were working through the detail of a ban on cold calling. She went on to say that the Government would bring forward amendments to this House to implement that ban. Plainly, they have not done so.

I am not quite sure why the Government have backtracked on what seemed to be such an obvious and solid promise. It might have seemed that focussing on the role of the Information Commissioner and Ofcom was the easy option, but, with all due respect to the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Clarey Tracey), the kind of cold calling that innocent people are being subjected to every day is actually a cold, calculated business strategy; it is not only an issue about the misuse of personal data, important though that may be.

This Bill is supposed to be designed to ensure that people are protected and that the financial decisions that they make are taken after careful consideration and access to independent guidance. Why on earth are the Government reneging on their promise to eliminate cold calling for commercial purposes, the aim of which is to bounce people into decision making and deny them the time for proper, careful consideration and access to good guidance? New clauses 3 and 4 simply will not do the trick. People may well see them as a deception—an attempt by the Government to fool people into thinking that they are taking action when they are not really doing so at all. Everyone knows that it is a complete nuisance and underhand practice designed to entrap consumers.

4.45 pm

Let me spell it out: I welcome the action that will be taken to try to protect those whose pension pots are the target of tricksters and speculators; but we also need to ban the claims management companies that phone people up to tell them about the accident that they have been involved in or the compensation they are entitled to for the tummy bug that wrecked their holiday. Those companies are nothing more than scam merchants, and this place should exist to expose them and put an end to their shoddy practices. Nothing else will convince the public that this Government are genuine when the Prime Minister talks about being on the side of the little person, rather than vested interests. We should demonstrate whose side we are on tonight. I want to hear the Minister say that he is going to put an end to this practice once and for all, and I hope that my own Front Benches, having reflected on the situation, might indicate that they are willing to put further pressure on Ministers with regard to new clause 8.

Alex Sobel: I am here to support the amendments in the names of my hon. Friends for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), which are complementary. I have also put my name to amendments 1, 2 and 31 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West.

Why do the poorest in our society have to pay more for the same services as the wealthiest? Why do they have to pay more for the same gas and electricity? Why do they have to pay more interest for the same loans? Why is credit more difficult to access and at much higher interest for the poorest in society? The structure of our society is such that growing inequality is in-built, because those with capital can further accrue it through cheap finance and lower costs, while those without capital cannot pursue their dreams through the high costs and limited availability of debt finance. Today we have an opportunity to make a small step in reversing that trend, casting light on the practices of high-cost credit providers and enshrining the duty to ensure that information about credit unions is provided by the single financial guidance body. The very mission of credit unions is to provide low-cost finance to people who are deemed high risk by traditional institutions, and they are owned by their own members.

Martin Luther King said: “It is obvious that if a man is to redeem his spiritual and moral ‘lag,’ he must go all out to bridge the social and economic gulf between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ of the world. Poverty is one of the most urgent items on the agenda of modern life.” Today we have the opportunity to pass these most excellent amendments and make a step towards bridging that social and economic gulf, not just because it makes sense in terms of financial justice, but on a spiritual and moral level.

The United States acted 40 years ago on the spiritual and moral lag that Dr King talked about, by introducing the Community Reinvestment Act. The Act was established to ensure that banking needs were met and monitored in low-income neighbourhoods, which had seen a retreat of traditional banking services and rising interest—a situation that we have faced in this country for far too long. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West gave an excellent explanation of the Community Reinvestment Act, so I will not repeat it. The banks in America have responded to the Community Reinvestment Act by establishing plans to service those communities and ensure that their services are not restricted. But in the US with community investment plans not only commit capital at affordable rates for loans, but invest in community development.
The amendments are needed before we can implement a community reinvestment Act. Without the disclosure of financial data and a statutory duty to promote credit unions, we cannot achieve community reinvestment by the large banks. The amendments are a necessary but insufficient precursor to getting real financial justice for communities that struggle to access affordable credit, but today we can make the first step to ensuring financial justice and legislating for a full community reinvestment Act. I hope that the Treasury Bench takes on board these excellent amendments and responds to them in kind.

Alex Cunningham: I want to speak briefly to new clause 2. While I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you have many years to go before you reach your own mid-life point, I am sure you will understand that we could all use a bit of advice at times—even though those of us with six decades or so behind us think it our duty to pass on pearls of wisdom to the younger generation.

There is plenty of talk about young people and their finances—about how they can manage their cash and get on the property ladder, which is of course impossible for many these days. This Bill does something to help young people, and I am pleased about that, but what it fails to do is help those in the mid-life stage—people who may have saved a bit, joined a pension scheme, or bought an ISA or two. More importantly, it does nothing to help those who have done none of those things and simply do not know who or where to turn to when planning their later life.

Although some excellent initiatives have passed through this House, such as Labour’s policy of auto-enrolment into workplace pensions, there have been a number of failures, not least around the issue of 50s-born women and their state pension age, which was extended by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition by several years, condemning many such people to poverty when they should have been enjoying retirement. We could have hoped that the experience of thousands of women left facing difficulty and uncertainty would act as a salutary lesson to everyone else that they cannot really depend on Governments to deliver the security they need in retirement, but need to find ways to make provision for themselves.

People are now looking at their expected pension provision, if they have any, and then panicking about how they are going to afford to live when they retire, or are faced with the reality that they will have to work beyond retirement age in order to make ends meet. We also have people who have lived their lives just getting by—who have never been able to buy their own home and now do not know how they will afford their rent once they retire. Uncertainty is very much the name of the game in the 21st century, so we have a responsibility in Parliament to make provision to ensure that everyone, whether they can afford it or not, is able to work out how they will live when they are no longer receiving a wage. This new clause to provide targeted information to people from the age of 50 delivers that.

We all know that people can now expect to have several jobs throughout their career, and redundancy, zero-hours contracts and insecure work are clouds hanging over millions of people every day. Some people in their 50s find that they need to retrain for another role, but many do not know where to begin or where to get to the facts. This body, backed by the right promotional campaigns, including multimedia, could be a lifeline for those who ignore their money problems. I am, however, concerned about the capacity of the new body. We need to guarantee that it can expand if we are to reach many more people with guidance. I am yet to be convinced that that capacity will be there. I hope that the Minister will say something about how it can expand. I also hope that he can extend its services to provide the mid-life advice that people need.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I, too, want to support my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). I hope that the FCA will look speedily at the total cap on the rent-to-owner sector, with its inflated prices for goods and roll-up charges.

I am pleased that the Bill aims to ensure that members of the public can access good-quality, free-to-client impartial financial guidance, pensions advice and debt advice. Clauses 10 and 11, which relate to my amendment 42, require the single financial guidance body to set and enforce standards across the debt advice partners it commissions. I think that everyone agrees that the body will have to have regard to standards of practice for the organisations it commissions, but the respective roles of the single financial guidance body and the FCA should not create uncertainty. There may have to be additional requirements for organisations that it commissions.

However, an independent report to the Debt Advice Steering Group run by the Money Advice Service says that the quality assurance process for the larger debt advice charities should be authorised by the FCA. The concern is that any such new and additional requirements from the single financial guidance body should not replicate the requirements faced by the debt advice organisations from their regulator, the FCA. Having had a contract from the Legal Aid Board where we had three auditors in at one time, I was tempted just to throw the files into the middle of the room and say “Fight over them.” The auditing ought to be in the same capacity, and it should be done under one audit that covers all if there are the same requirements.

The body’s standard-setting powers also need to be matched with principles of good regulation, and conditions ought to be proportionate to the benefits they will bring. Amendment 42 would make that plain. Ensuring that the new body’s standard-setting powers have regard to proportionality would smooth its functioning, guarantee assurance and stop the uncertainty as to whether the FCA or the single financial guidance body has primacy.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I want to speak to amendments 8 and 9, which, unlike new clause 4, would lead to an outright ban on cold calling by claims management companies.

Claims management companies make and send around 51 million personal injury-related calls and texts each year. Such calls are not only a nuisance; they exploit vulnerable people. It is worth reiterating that solicitors are already banned from cold calling in personal injury claims, but the fact that claims management companies are not risks bringing the sector into disrepute. Cold calling can generate the false perception that obtaining compensation is easy, even where there is no injury. It can put pressure on people to pursue unmeritorious or,
at the worst, fraudulent claims, which they otherwise may not do. It may never have been someone’s intention to make a claim, but if they receive a text promising them thousands of pounds, it might seem very tempting.

There is an important context. The Government are proposing to reform compensation rules for whiplash claims and to increase the small claims limit in road traffic accidents from £1,000 to £5,000, and in public liability and employers’ liability claims from £1,000 to £2,000. The Government say that that is to cut down on fraudulent claims and to bring down insurance premiums. However, many, including myself, are concerned that that will have a significant impact on access to justice, with people not being able to access proper legal advice in such claims.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that a total ban on cold calling, including from claims management companies, would be a much more proportionate response to insurance industry claims of fraud within claims management, and that that should be looked at before any action that will impact on innocent victims of road traffic accidents and employer injuries?

Ellie Reeves: I absolutely agree. Surely a better solution to this issue is to have an outright ban on cold calling in personal injury claims by claims management companies, which is exactly what amendments 8 and 9 would do.

New clause 4 gives the single financial guidance body the ability to advise the Government if it considers a ban on cold calling by CMCs to be necessary. If the Government receive such advice, the Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to impose such a ban. However, the Bill does not compel the single financial guidance body to give such advice in relation to cold calling; nor are the Government required to act if they receive advice.

Although the Government have promised decisive action from the outset, I am concerned that the Bill is filled with ifs, buts and maybe and still falls far short of a ban on cold calling. Amendment 8 would commit the single financial guidance body to advise on how best to implement a ban within 12 months of the Bill being passed, and amendment 9 would require the Government to act outright and impose the ban. A ban on cold calling commands support from over two thirds of the population. We must respond to that and strengthen the Bill by agreeing to amendments 8 and 9, to see through a complete and necessary ban on cold calling.

John Glen: I am acutely conscious of the need not only to get on to the second group of amendments but to respond to the amendments in the first group. I will do my best to address all of them, and I will give myself five minutes to do so.

I will start with new clause 7 and amendment 34, tabled by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd). The body is already expected to develop a national strategy to improve people’s financial capability, including ensuring that consumers improve their financial resilience, so the Government believe that the amendments are not necessary.

5 pm

On amendment 39, tabled by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), the Bill already explicitly states that one of the body’s objectives is to support people in vulnerable circumstances when exercising its functions. That was agreed after discussion in the Lords. The Government think that for the body to have specially trained advisers and guidance risks being too prescriptive on the face of the Bill. Defining “vulnerable circumstances” could narrow the body’s remit and prevent it from addressing other vulnerabilities in the future.

On amendment 40, we believe it is important that people understand the difference between information, advice and guidance, but the improvement of people’s financial capability continues to be a focus of the new body, under its money guidance function.

On amendment 41, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), although the new body will provide general information and guidance to people about the benefits of saving towards a retirement income, it will not provide financial advice, but he makes a compelling case about the opportunities to use equity release products. Consumers considering equity release should seek independent financial advice, and the single financial guidance body’s role in this case will be to signpost to such advisers but not to give advice itself.

On amendment 31, tabled by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), the Government have already done a great deal to support credit unions, and I look forward to further discussions with him in Westminster Hall tomorrow, where some linked issues can be raised. I am happy to meet him and the representatives that he suggested. The new body will continue this work by providing information about credit unions’ services through its money guidance function, which means, I believe, that the amendment is unnecessary.

On amendment 42, tabled by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), we do not expect the standards to be too onerous on delivery partners. In setting its standards, the body and the FCA will ensure that conditions are proportionate with the benefits that they are expected to bring. In addition, the body and the FCA will consider whether the standards sit well with the FCA’s debt advice and authorisation process.

I now turn to the issues of high-cost credit, to which the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and the hon. Member for Harrow West drew the House’s attention. I think the hon. Lady knows that there is a great deal of alignment between us on some of these matters. I have written to her and I would invite her to meet me and the FCA to examine her continuing concerns around high-cost credit. There was a two-year study on credit cards, whose outcome I know she is not satisfied with. Another FCA study is to be published next month. The core function of the single financial guidance body is to deliver impartial support on money matters, and we expect its efforts to be focused on delivering to a high quality. I believe the FCA has a role to play in that and I am happy to continue to have a meaningful dialogue with the hon. Lady on that. Moreover, UK Finance already publishes statistics on the geographic distribution of mortgage lending, personal loans and small and medium-sized enterprise lending by major UK lenders. We think, therefore, that placing this issue on the face of the Bill is unnecessary.

On amendment 2, the body and the FCA have different roles and functions, and the FCAs role is to gather information to fulfil its functions as the regulator. I am very conscious of the need to move on to the next group of amendments. I have not done justice to all the speeches on this group, but I am happy to give way.
Jack Dromey: In the spirit of being able to get on to the next group, we welcome the ban on pension cold calling. We have sought to extend that ban to all cold calling. If the Minister is prepared to have discussions at the next stages, and before the Bill concludes its passage through Parliament, we would be prepared not to oppose Government amendment 11 or to move our amendments 8 and 9.

John Glen: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and I acknowledge his kind words, which are reciprocated from our Front Bench. We continue to have a meaningful dialogue on the outstanding concerns that exist between us.

Frank Field: If the Minister’s optimism is misplaced on not accepting the amendments that I spoke to on behalf of the Select Committee, will he consider moving to secondary legislation?

John Glen: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I always listen very carefully to what he says. We have made provision for additional bans to take place very quickly, and if my optimism is misplaced, I would expect the body to act. I will continue to have a deep dialogue with the right hon. Gentleman on these matters.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 4 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 9

UNRESCIPIENT DIRECT MARKETING: PENSIONS (NO. 2)

'(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations prohibiting unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions.

(2) The regulations may—

(a) make provision about when a communication is to be, or is not to be, treated as unsolicited;

(b) make provision for exceptions to the prohibition;

(c) confer functions on the Information Commissioner and on OFCOM (including conferring a discretion);

(d) apply (with or without modifications) provisions of the data protection legislation or the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 (S.I. 2003/2426) (including, in particular, provisions relating to enforcement).

(3) The regulations may—

(a) make different provision for different purposes;

(b) make different provision for different areas;

(c) make incidental, supplementary, consequential, transitional or saving provision.

(4) Regulations under this section are to be made by statutory instrument.

(5) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(6) If before the end of June in any year the Secretary of State has not made regulations under this section (whether or not in that year), the Secretary of State must—

(a) publish a statement, by the end of July in that year, explaining why regulations have not been made and setting a timetable for making the regulations, and

(b) lay the statement before each House of Parliament.

(7) In this section, ‘OFCOM’ means the Office of Communications established by section 1 of the Ofcom Act 2002.’—[Guy Opperman,]

This new clause inserts a new power for the Secretary of State to make regulations (subject to the affirmative procedure) banning unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions. If the power is not exercised by June, the Secretary of State must explain to Parliament why not. This new clause would be inserted after Clause 24.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 2

OBJECTIVES

Amendment proposed: 39, page 2, line 23, leave out from “accordingly” to the end of line 24 and insert—

“(da) to ensure the needs of people in vulnerable circumstances, including but not exclusively—

(i) those who suffer long-term sickness or disability,

(ii) carers,

(iii) those on low incomes, and

(iv) recipients of benefits,

are met and that resources are allocated in such a way as to allow specially trained advisers and guidance to be made available to them,”—[Neil Gray,]

This amendment would require that specially trained advisers and guidance are made available to people in vulnerable circumstances and would provide an indicative list of what vulnerable circumstances should include.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 255, Noes 293.

Division No. 139

[5.4 pm]
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.

Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Maraden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahaeme
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Oon, Melanie
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philipson, Bridget
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
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Sluagh, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat

Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewill, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriye, Adam
Alford, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooke, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carragher, James
Cash, Sir William
Cautfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisht, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg

Turley, Anna
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: David Linden and Angela Crawley

NOES
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Priest, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
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
Girvan, Paul
Clause 3

Functions

Amendment made: 10, page 3, line 17, leave out subsection (7) and insert—

“(7) The consumer protection function is—

(a) to notify the FCA where, in the exercise of its other functions, the single financial guidance body becomes aware of practices carried out by FCA- regulated persons (within the meaning of section 139A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000) which it considers to be detrimental to consumers, and

(b) to consider the effect of unsolicited direct marketing on consumers of financial products and services, and, in particular—

(i) from time to time publish an assessment of whether unsolicited direct marketing is, or may be, having a detrimental effect on consumers, and

(ii) advise the Secretary of State whether to make regulations under section (Unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc) (unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc)”.—(John Glen.)

This amendment makes changes to the consumer protection function to make it clearer exactly what it entails.

Amendment proposed: 1, page 3, line 39, at end insert—

“(11) In carrying out its strategic and other functions the single financial guidance body must make and publish an annual assessment of the level of different types of lending across the United Kingdom by district.

(12) The types of lending covered by the assessment in subsection (11) should include—

(a) high cost short term credit,

(b) hire purchase agreements,

(c) conditional sale agreements,

(d) open ended credit,
This amendment requires the single financial guidance body to carry out an annual assessment of the level of different types of lending in different geographical areas across the United Kingdom.

*Question put.* That the amendment be made.

*The House divided: Ayes 255, Noes 293.*

**Division No. 140**

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Alexander, Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Amess, Mike  
Antoniacci, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Barron, Sir Kevin  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Benn, Sir Hilary  
Berrymore, Anna  
Browne, Alan  
Brookes, Deidre  
Brown, Sir Kevin  
Brown, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Byrne, Richard  
Campbell, Dr Liam  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Douglas  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cherry, Joanna  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Crawley, Angela  
Cree, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cuminns, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dakin, Nic  
Davey, Sir Edward  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
Day, Martyn  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debbonaire, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh  
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Mia  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Elliot, 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  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frits, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gibson, Patricia  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Graedy, Patrick  
Grant, Peter  
Gray, Neil  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Haigh, Louise  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendry, Drew  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hillier, Meg  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Hollem, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jardine, Christine  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham P.  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, Mr Kevan  
Jones, Sarah  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilien, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lamb, rh Norman  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Chris  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marson, Gordon  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
McCabe, Steve  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorris, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Graham  
Nandy, Lisa  
Newlands, Gavin  
Norris, Alex  
O'Hara, Brendan  
O'Mara, Jared  
Onasanya, Fiona  
Orr, Melanie  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
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  
Ruane, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Sidddiq, Tuhf  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smith, Ruth  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Stone, Jamie  
Streeting, Wes  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Swinson, Jo  
Tami, Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symphonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Turley, Anna  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Williams, Chris  
Wishart, Pete  
Woodcock, John  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel  

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Jeff Smith and  
Nick Smith
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill
[24 APRIL 2018]
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill
[24 APRIL 2018]

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afroimi, Sim
Afrinie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jane
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooke, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coghlan, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Douglas, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evanneth, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freyer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gamier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Michael
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Nicholas
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, rh Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millington, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, William
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warren, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

managers must ensure that—

leave out from beginning to end of line 8 on page 15 and

health crisis services irrespective of whether those individuals

this section shall be accessible to individuals in receipt of mental

considered “mental health crisis services” for the purpose of this

any other types of individual provided for by regulations under

individuals in receipt of mental health crisis services as well as

This amendment commits the Secretary of State to implement a

“and must do so before 1 January 2020.”

This amendment will ensure that people who are staying in hospital

or under the care of a crisis team in their local community”

This amendment expressly envisages the rules making provision

about how the opt-out (or confirmation of receipt of guidance)

mentioned in the new subsection (1C) inserted by Amendment 13

must be expressed in order to be effective.

Amendment (a) to amendment 15, leave out from “received” to end and insert

“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

Government amendment 16.

Government amendment 15, page 15, line 14, at end insert—

“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a member or survivor may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Clause 20(2), which relates to occupational pension schemes in Great Britain, to the changes made by Amendment 13 for personal pension schemes.

Amendment (a) to amendment 17, after “is referred to appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 17, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (c) to amendment 13, in subsection (1C), leave out from “appropriate pensions guidance or” to end and insert “has indicated to the provider of appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance the desire to opt out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments (a), (b) and (c) to amendment 13 specify on the face of the Bill that the provider of the appropriate pensions guidance should be independent and impartial, and that any desire to opt-out of guidance must be indicated to this independent and impartial guidance provider.

Government amendment 14.

Government amendment 15, page 15, line 14, at end insert—

“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a member or survivor may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

This amendment expressly envisages the rules making provision

about how the opt-out (or confirmation of receipt of guidance)

mentioned in the new subsection (1C) inserted by Amendment 13

must be expressed in order to be effective.

Amendment (a) to amendment 15, leave out from “received” to end and insert

“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

Government amendment 16.

Government amendment 17, in clause 20, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

“(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(1C) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the member or survivor has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment will enable FCA rules to require trustees of a personal pension scheme who receive an application from a member to access or transfer their pension to refer them to SFGB guidance and explain its nature and purpose (or ensure that another person, such as the SFGB, does so) and will prevent them from proceeding unless the member confirms that they have received guidance or do not want it.

Amendment (a) to amendment 13, after “is referred to appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 13, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (c) to amendment 13, in subsection (1C), leave out from “appropriate pensions guidance or” to end and insert “has indicated to the provider of appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance the desire to opt out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments (a), (b) and (c) to amendment 13 specify on the face of the Bill that the provider of the appropriate pensions guidance should be independent and impartial, and that any desire to opt-out of guidance must be indicated to this independent and impartial guidance provider.

Government amendment 14.

Government amendment 15, page 15, line 14, at end insert—

“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a member or survivor may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

This amendment expressly envisages the rules making provision

about how the opt-out (or confirmation of receipt of guidance)

mentioned in the new subsection (1C) inserted by Amendment 13

must be expressed in order to be effective.

Amendment (a) to amendment 15, leave out from “received” to end and insert

“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

Government amendment 16.

Government amendment 17, in clause 20, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

“(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(1C) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the member or survivor has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Clause 20(2), which relates to occupational pension schemes in Great Britain, to the changes made by Amendment 13 for personal pension schemes.

Amendment (a) to amendment 17, after “is referred to appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 17, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 4

Cold-calling

Amendment made: 11, page 3, line 40, leave out clause 4.—(Guy Opperman.)

This amendment removes the clause on cold-calling (inserted by the Lords). NC3 and NC4 instead provide a power for the Secretary of State to make regulations banning unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions and other consumer financial products and services.

Clause 7

Debt respite scheme: advice to the Secretary of State

Luciana Berger: I beg to move amendment 5, page 5, line 39, at end insert—

“(ia) how it will specifically provide protections and help to individuals in receipt of mental health crisis services, including NHS mental health crisis services;

(ib) which other mental health treatment services should be considered mental health crisis services for the purposes of this Act.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 5, line 39, at end insert—

“(iii) the application of the scheme for duration of a person’s stay in hospital or under the care of a crisis team in their local community”

This amendment will ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance, or has opted out of receiving such guidance.

Amendment 30, in clause 8, page 6, line 15, at end insert

“and must do so before 1 January 2020.”

This amendment commits the Secretary of State to implement a debt respite scheme by the end of next year.

Amendment 6, page 6, line 16, at end insert—

“(3A) A debt respite scheme established by regulations under this section must, specifically, provide protection and help to individuals in receipt of mental health crisis services as well as any other types of individual provided for by regulations under this section.

(3B) The regulations must define which services should be considered “mental health crisis services” for the purpose of this Act in addition to the definition in section 25 of this Act.

(3C) A debt respite scheme established by regulations under this section shall be accessible to individuals in receipt of mental health crisis services irrespective of whether those individuals have accessed debt advice.”

Government amendment 13, in clause 19, page 14, line 40, leave out from beginning to end of line 8 on page 15 and insert—

“(1B) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the member or survivor is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the member or survivor is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(1C) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the member or survivor has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment will enable FCA rules to require trustees of a personal pension scheme who receive an application from a member to access or transfer their pension to refer them to SFGB guidance and explain its nature and purpose (or ensure that another person, such as the SFGB, does so) and will prevent them from proceeding unless the member confirms that they have received guidance or do not want it.

Amendment (a) to amendment 13, after “is referred to appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 13, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (c) to amendment 13, in subsection (1C), leave out from “appropriate pensions guidance or” to end and insert “has indicated to the provider of appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance the desire to opt out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments (a), (b) and (c) to amendment 13 specify on the face of the Bill that the provider of the appropriate pensions guidance should be independent and impartial, and that any desire to opt-out of guidance must be indicated to this independent and impartial guidance provider.

Government amendment 14.

Government amendment 15, page 15, line 14, at end insert—

“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a member or survivor may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

This amendment expressly envisages the rules making provision

about how the opt-out (or confirmation of receipt of guidance)

mentioned in the new subsection (1C) inserted by Amendment 13

must be expressed in order to be effective.

Amendment (a) to amendment 15, leave out from “received” to end and insert

“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (1C);”.

Government amendment 16.

Government amendment 17, in clause 20, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

“(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Clause 20(2), which relates to occupational pension schemes in Great Britain, to the changes made by Amendment 13 for personal pension schemes.

Amendment (a) to amendment 17, after “is referred to appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 17, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Question accordingly negatived.
Amendment (c) to amendment 17, in subsection (3), leave out from “appropriate pensions guidance or” to end and insert
“has indicated to the provider of appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance the desire to opt out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments (a), (b) and (c) to Amendment 17 specify on the face of the Bill that the provider of the appropriate pensions guidance should be independent and impartial, and that any desire to opt-out of guidance must be indicated to this independent and impartial guidance provider.

Government amendment 18.
Government amendment 19, page 16, line 29, at end insert—
“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendment 15 for occupational pension schemes in Great Britain.

Amendment (a) to amendment 19, leave out from “received” to end and insert
“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or
have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—
(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and
(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Amendments 13 and 17 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Amendment (a) to amendment 21, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (b) to amendment 21, after “has either received appropriate” insert “independent and impartial”.

Amendment (c) to amendment 21, in subsection (3), leave out from “appropriate pensions guidance or” to “or has opted out” and insert
“has indicated to the provider of appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance the desire to opt out”.

Government amendment 22.
Government amendment 23, page 17, line 46, at end insert—
“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendments 15 and 19 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Amendment (a) to amendment 23, leave out from “received” to end and insert
“appropriate independent and impartial pensions guidance, or have indicated to the provider of this guidance that they wish to opt out, for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

Government amendment 24.
Government motion to transfer clause 22.
Amendment 7, in clause 25, page 21, line 9, at end insert—
“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

This amendment would require the chair of the single financial guidance body to attend a pre-appointment hearing with the Work and Pensions Committee of the House of Commons before starting their appointment. If no such hearing is held within three months, the appointment can also begin.

Amendment 37, in schedule 1, page 38, line 4, at end insert—
“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

This amendment would require the chief executive of the single financial guidance body to attend a pre-appointment hearing with the Work and Pensions Committee of the House of Commons before starting their appointment. If no such hearing is held within three months, the appointment can also begin.

Amendment 38, page 38, line 41, at end insert:
“( ) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”.

This amendment would require the chief executive of the single financial guidance body to attend a pre-appointment hearing with the Work and Pensions Committee of the House of Commons before starting their appointment. If no such hearing is held within three months, the appointment can also begin.

Luciana Berger: I shall speak to amendments 5, 6 and 7. I am incredibly grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for the constructive negotiations and discussions
that have taken place to enable this group of amendments to be discussed on the Floor of the House this evening. Their purpose is to extend the debt respite scheme set out in clauses 7 and 8 to explicitly include the provision of NHS mental health crisis services. I am incredibly grateful to the large number of MPs—81, in fact—on both sides of the House who are supporting the amendments. It has also been a real privilege to work with the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, together with colleagues from all parties, to put the amendments together.

Last year’s Conservative party manifesto contained a commitment to introduce a breathing space. The Government have since brought forward this Bill and launched a consultation into how a breathing space initiative would work in practice. This included proposals for a possible trigger point for accessing support, with the initial suggestion that a breathing space should be available only to a person seeking regulated debt advice. I very much welcome the spirit of the Government’s breathing space initiative, but I am concerned that it does little to protect the thousands of people in mental health crisis who are too unwell to physically go and seek such debt advice or to pick up the phone to make that call.

According to research by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, up to 23,000 people in England alone struggled with problem debt while they were hospitalised as a result of their mental health last year. Those people are likely to be receiving calls, texts and letters from their banks, local authorities and other creditors at a time of acute distress, and they are at risk of falling into further financial difficulty as a result of increased fees and charges. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Some hon. Members are leaving the Chamber, and there is quite a lot of chatter. It would be good to be able to listen to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger).

Luciana Berger: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am concerned about the charges that those people will face, and about the drop in their income from the loss of wages and benefits that people could experience as a result of being in in-patient care or crisis care in the community. Thousands more in the devolved nations, and those who are receiving mental health crisis support in the community, will be in a similar position. The additional anxiety and stress that those people experience as a result of those financial pressures not only threaten to undermine their recovery but make it much less likely that they will be able to repay their debts. The requirement for people in that situation to seek advice before they can benefit from a breathing space creates a barrier, and that barrier must be removed if the new scheme is to fulfil its purpose of protecting the most vulnerable customers.

Amendment 5 represents the first step towards rectifying this issue. It ensures that when the Secretary of State seeks advice from the new single financial guidance body on the establishment of a debt respite scheme, it will include advice on specifically how to protect recipients of mental health crisis services, and information on which services should be considered to be mental health crisis services. We propose that this should include psychiatric in-patient facilities and community crisis teams. Amendment 6 takes this further by ensuring that the regulations to establish the debt respite scheme specify that the service will provide protection and help to individuals in receipt of mental health crisis services, irrespective of whether those individuals have formally accessed debt advice. Amendment 7 would provide the baseline definition of an NHS mental health crisis service.

Targeting these interventions towards people with mental health problems will have far-reaching positive consequences. People experiencing mental health problems are significantly more likely to be in financial difficulty than the rest of the population, and half the people in problem debt are also experiencing mental ill health. The number of people receiving NHS crisis care services is also likely to be relatively small, and a high proportion—at least a quarter—are likely to be in financial difficulty. Furthermore, people experiencing a mental health crisis are likely to experience problems with their cognitive and psychological functioning as a direct consequence of their illness and are therefore highly unlikely to be able to seek debt advice and access breathing space through regulated debt advice.

How will the system work in practice? We suggest that a person entering the care of a psychiatric in-patient facility or crisis team in the community would be supported to access breathing space if appropriate. That could take the form of a certificate or a stamped-and-dated letter confirming that the service user is in receipt of mental health support during a crisis and should have breathing space applied. Many clinical mental health professionals are currently fighting fires before they can help their patients with their mental health. They are writing to creditors, calling bailiffs and completing reams of financial paperwork, and the changes that I am proposing would simplify things for those professionals, allowing them to focus on their day job. It would also reduce demand on mental health services, as research shows that people who are not in problem debt are much more likely to recover more quickly and less likely to experience mental health problems in the future.

It is important to acknowledge that the proposed changes would not apply in Scotland, which already has a debt arrangement scheme that would require separate legislation to amend. However, we hope that the successful implementation of our proposals could provide the case for similar reforms in Scotland.

John Glen: In the interests of time and to allow others to speak, I just wanted to confirm that the Government recognise the motives and the wide degree of support behind the proposals and the particular issues for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We will commit to ensuring that people receiving NHS treatment for a mental health crisis, either at a psychiatric in-patient setting or in the community, will be provided with an alternative mechanism to access the breathing space scheme. We will see that that is developed concurrently with the main breathing space scheme.

Luciana Berger: I am incredibly grateful to the Minister. What he has just shared with the House has been missing until now and will make a tangible difference to at least 23,000 people a year. I am grateful for the commitment that he has made. I was going to say in conclusion that amendments 5, 6 and 7 would prevent...
tens of thousands of people experiencing a mental health crisis from missing out on the protections that breathing space has to offer, which I welcome, because they are too ill to seek debt advice, so I again welcome what the Minister said, because it is critical that that most vulnerable group is not ignored.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), Martin Lewis of Money Saving Expert and I joined two people with lived experience, Lee and Susan, to hand in a petition of over 10,000 people who support the campaign. This is a truly cross-party effort, and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I have campaigned long and hard. Mental health does not discriminate, and one day one of us in this Chamber could need to access a scheme such as breathing space. It could make a difference for any one of us. I am grateful that the Government have acknowledged the need to ensure that the scheme reaches everyone who needs it, particularly the most vulnerable, and tackles and addresses the impacts of mental health and debt, and I again welcome what the Minister has committed to this afternoon.

John Glen: Being mindful of the need to allow others to speak, I rise to discuss Government amendments 13 to 24. Clauses 19 and 20, which were added by the Government in Committee, aim to build on the Work and Pensions Committee’s proposals by putting them into a workable legal framework, ensuring mirroring provisions for UK occupational pension schemes. Discussions with stakeholders and Members of both Houses have informed amendments 13 to 24. If amended, clauses 19 and 20 would place new duties on managers and trustees of all defined contribution pension schemes when an individual seeks to access or transfer their pension pot.

Frank Field: We may not get a chance to discuss the amendments supported by the Work and Pensions Committee, so will the Minister give the same undertaking that he will introduce secondary legislation if our worries prove valid?

5.45 pm

John Glen: The spirit that has run through the House during the passage of the Bill necessitates continued dialogue, and I can certainly give the right hon. Gentleman that undertaking.

I make it clear that when an individual seeks to access or transfer their pension pot, the duties will ensure that they are referred to Pension Wise guidance and that they receive an explanation of the nature and purpose of that guidance. Before proceeding with an application, subject to any exceptions, schemes must ensure that individuals have either received Pension Wise guidance or have opted out. Rules and regulations can specify how and to whom an individual must confirm that they are opting out, which allows for the opt-out process to be separated from schemes. Rules and regulations will set out the detail of the opt-out process, based on evidence of what helps people take up Pension Wise guidance.

These Government amendments lay the foundation for an effective final nudge towards guidance and will allow us to test what works best before implementation and to update the approach in future. They strike the right balance with what is set out in primary legislation, with rules and regulations providing suitable flexibility.

In the interests of time, and to be fair to everyone else, I will now sit down.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It has been good to join the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), and many others, in tabling our amendments. I very much welcome the Minister’s response.

People often get into a vicious circle, with mental ill health leading them into debt because they neglect vital things and the pressure of those debts intensifying their mental ill health. Kenny Johnston, an inspiring man who set up the charity Clasp and who walked out of darkness to build solidarity for people experiencing mental ill health and suicidal ideation, went through eight years of battle with a bank on mortgage arrears that were started by mental ill health, resulting in two suicide attempts—there was constant pressure on him over that eight-year period. This measure will make a difference. It will help, and it is good the Government have been prepared to listen.

It is important to understand that this is not a panacea. I encourage the Minister also to recognise that there are very many people beyond the scope of clauses 19 and 20, such as people in in-patient care and people supported in the community, who are still experiencing mental ill health and who may end up at risk of suicide because of debt. It is important to get the message out and to establish proper processes in companies, particularly financial services companies, to treat people with mental ill health in an appropriate way in order to protect vulnerable citizens.

Legislation is already in place. The Equality Act 2010 contains a duty to consider reasonable adjustments for people who suffer from a disability, which can include mental ill health, and it is important that we spread best practice much further. I welcome the measure, but it is a start and we need to do much more to protect people’s lives.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Given the shortness of time, I will be brief. I thank the Minister and congratulate him on providing the House with what we were looking for this afternoon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the Breathing Space campaign and the 80-odd colleagues on both sides of the House who have supported the proposal.

I thank the Minister and the Government for signalling what many people in the House and across the country hugely welcome: an appetite for cross-party working in pursuit of looking after the most vulnerable in society, in the spirit of the Prime Minister’s mission when she arrived in No. 10 two years ago. This will send a signal that we are serious.

Secondly, I echo the comments made by my neighbour, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), about the importance of understanding the vicious cycle of mental health and debt, and the way in which the two are so often implicated here. Recent figures from ComRes have shown that 56% of people in
work say that payday struggles are their biggest anxiety. Often that anxiety can lead to further complications in terms of depression, which can lead to mental health problems, which in turn can undermine their ability to earn and work. That often leads into a cycle that makes both the indebtedness and the mental health suffering worse, as I know from my own experience. Sixty years ago, my father won the Grand National and 10 years later he suffered a life collapse from a combination of indebtedness, bankruptcy, mental health issues and head injuries, which in those days were not well treated. It is a sign of how far we have come as a society and as a politics that we now talk about these issues so much more openly and we offer so much more help.

I shall close with my third point, which relates to the importance of that taboo. So many people in our society still suffer in silence from debt, which knows no boundaries and is no respecter of class, political affiliation or geography. People who may appear at ease and prosperous—and often those who appear most that way—are struggling in misery behind the scenes and compounding that misery through their inability to feel confident enough to talk about it. That is why, along with the co-chair of the all-party group on inclusive growth, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), we are working on a small campaign this summer with StepChange, the Money Advice Service, the Financial Conduct Authority and Martin Lewis called “Share not Shame” to encourage people to talk more openly about their indebtedness issues and to seek the help that is available. Many people in this country are paying far too much for debt that could be provided at a minimum—at a fraction of the price—and their debts could be rescheduled in a way that takes the pressure and shame from them. I welcome warmly the undertaking the Minister has given today and congratulate those Members who have led the campaign on this, which will signal across the country that this Parliament is taking their interests very seriously.

Yvonne Fovargue: I rise to speak to my amendment 30, which would improve the timeframe for the breathing space, ensuring its introduction by the end of 2019. That would provide greater certainty, because the current timeframe centres on the establishment of the SFGB, which is potentially moveable. I have proposed a realistic target, allowing sufficient time for the necessary preparation work. I am assured of that by the debt advice providers themselves; they say it gives enough time to plan and develop the new systems to deliver the new protections to all.

Let us not forget that debt often pushes people into a mental health crisis and that debt and depression necessitate people visiting the doctors’ surgery. They are suffering depression, but it is not that; it is the debts that are depressing them. The breathing space and statutory debt repayment plans, properly set up, will give people time and space to get debt advice, stabilise their finances through periods of temporary difficulty and put in place a long-term sustainable solution to their debts. That is not just of benefit to the individual; it benefits the creditors as well, because they know they will be getting their money back, in a fair way, over a fair period of time.

I hope that the Minister will also confirm some details of how the breathing space scheme will work. As I have said on a number of occasions, it is essential that the length of time involved is sufficient to ensure that people are not put back into the harmful uncertainty of unmanageable debt before they have that long-term plan in place. Six weeks has been mentioned, and such a period may help some people, but I have said many times that three months is probably more realistic. I have mentioned how long it takes to get people to come in and deal with the debts, with the need to open carrier bags full of envelopes that people have not had the courage to open. If we are going to start with six weeks, provision must be made for extensions to be made to that; it cannot just finish at six weeks, as it often takes longer than that to get an appointment.

I would like to see this scheme cover all relevant debts, including benefit debts, council tax debts and debts owed to central or local government. If creditors are excluded, they will be able to put the unhelpful pressure on the debtors, which will reduce the scheme’s viability and effectiveness. This has to stop creditors across the board making unaffordable repayment demands. For example, claimants on universal credit can have 40% of their benefit withheld to pay off third-party creditors, with another 40% going on paying back benefit advances—that is 80% of the money. That leaves them with 20% of what is considered the minimum amount required to live on, and that is simply unaffordable.

There is widespread unfair pressure from Government creditors. As StepChange says, bailiffs are often the first port of call rather than a last resort. Clients rate the DWP, HMRC and councils far worse than other creditors—far worse than payday lenders—for treating them unfairly. The Government should adhere to best practice, and I hope that the Minister will agree that it is in all our interests to ensure that no vulnerable people are put into a position where they are unable to pay off their debts.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I rise to speak in support of amendment 5, which is in my name and those of the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), and for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), as well as many others across the House.

We in this place often talk a very good game when it comes to mental health, and serious progress has been made in taking the agenda forward over the last few years thanks to colleagues from across the House. When it comes to parity of physical and mental health, however, small details in policy matter. The amendment concerns one such detail, and I am delighted by what the Minister has said today about bringing that into reality for some of our most vulnerable constituents. It was a manifesto commitment of the Government to introduce a breathing space scheme, whereby people who suffer from problem debt are given a fixed period without fees, charges, interest or collection. The consultation is out at the moment, and I support the proposal very much, but there is a gap in provision for those who suffer from mental health crises—those who are too unwell either to manage their finances alone or seek debt advice, and so would not be able to access this scheme.

As we have heard, last year that situation affected up to 23,000 of our most vulnerable constituents, who were hospitalised for poor mental health while struggling with debt. That does not account for those who were in a similar position while receiving mental health crisis support in the community. The link between debt and
poor mental health is indisputable; it is a marriage made in hell. I pay tribute to the work of Martin Lewis in bringing together the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, which has shone a torch on the relationship between debt and mental health. That relationship is often hidden away in some of the darker recesses of our communities, but it makes some of our most vulnerable constituents’ lives hell.

Tens of thousands of people in this country are trapped in a spiral of escalating debts and worsening mental health. Some receive court summons while they are in hospital. I know somebody who faced demands on their doorstep the day they were released following their recovery from an illness. Some people have missed bill payments while hospitalised for mental health conditions, and escalating fees and charges have led some to attempt suicide directly after contact from bailiffs.

The ask of this amendment is very clear: for the Minister to look at extending the current breathing space scheme to apply to anyone who accesses psychiatric in-patient care. We must commit ourselves ever harder to parity of esteem, as I have said. For those who have a short period of acute mental illness—who suffer panic attacks and cannot open the post, call the bank or even think coherently—going to a debt counsellor to call a halt to things is just impossible. The commitment that we seek today, and that we have got from the Minister, is important because it means that people can look to those in NHS crisis teams for advice and space in the breathing space scheme.

I thank the Minister for his willingness to listen to our concerns. The campaign has been a good one. It has involved all Members of this House and shown what can happen when those from all parts of the House work together. I come back to what I said at the beginning. We often talk a very good game—I was delighted that parity of mental health and physical health was made a manifesto commitment in 2015—but sometimes big words have to be matched by calibrated and careful actions. This is one such area, and I am delighted that the Minister has decided that he is going to work on it. I look forward to working with him and the policy institute to make that a reality for tens of thousands of people up and down the country.

Luciana Berger: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 18

Disclosure of information

Amendments made: 12, page 14, line 17, after “where” insert “—

(i) the disclosure is for the purpose of enabling or facilitating the exercise of the consumer protection function, or

(ii) “

This amendment is consequential upon Amendment 10, which makes changes to the consumer protection function, including requiring the SFGB to pass information to the FCA in certain circumstances. This amendment ensures that disclosure of information in these circumstances is protected by subsection (7) of Clause 18.

Amendment 43, page 14, line 26, leave out “Data Protection Act 1998” and insert “data protection legislation”—(John Glen.)

This amendment changes the reference to the Data Protection Act 1998 to a reference to the “data protection legislation” (as defined in Clause 22 as amended by Amendment 44) to reflect the changes to data protection legislation that are to be made by the Data Protection Bill.

Clause 19

Personal pension schemes: requirements to recommend guidance etc

Amendments made: 13, page 14, line 40, leave out from beginning to end of line 8 on page 15 and insert—

‘(1B) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the member or survivor is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the member or survivor is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(1C) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the member or survivor has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment will enable FCA rules to require trustees of a personal pension scheme who receive an application from a member to access or transfer their pension to refer them to SFGB guidance and explain its nature and purpose (or ensure that another person, such as the SFGB, does so) and will prevent them from proceeding unless the member confirms that they have received guidance or do not want it.

Amendment 14, page 15, line 10, leave out from “guidance” to end of line 11.

This amendment (and Amendment 13) removes references to independent financial advice from Clause 19, so that it refers only to pensions guidance given by the SFGB in pursuance of Clause 5 of the Bill.

Amendment 15, page 15, line 14, at end insert—

“(i) make further provision about how, and to whom, a member or survivor may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (1C);”

This amendment expressly envisages the rules making provision about how the opt-out (or confirmation of receipt of guidance) mentioned in the new subsection (1C) inserted by Amendment 13 must be expressed in order to be effective.

Amendment 16, page 15, leave out line 17 and insert—

“communication that is made for the purposes of complying with the duty in subsection (1C).” —(John Glen.)

This amendment is consequential on the changes to the duties on trustees made by Amendment 13.

Clause 20

Occupational pension schemes: requirements to recommend guidance etc

Amendments made: 17, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

‘(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments made: 17, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

‘(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

Amendments made: 17, page 16, line 10, leave out from beginning to end of line 23 and insert—

‘(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”
Clause 25

INTERPRETATION OF PART 1

Amendments made: 25, page 21, line 2, at end insert—
“the ‘consumer protection function’ has the meaning given in section 3(7);”

Amendments made: 44, page 21, line 2, at end insert—
“the ‘data protection legislation’ has the same meaning as in the Data Protection Act 2018 (see section 3 of that Act);”

This amendment inserts a definition of “the consumer protection function” into the interpretation clause, which will be necessary following the amendment to Clause 18 made by Amendment 12, which refers to the consumer protection function.

Amendment 18, page 16, line 25, leave out from “guidance” to end of line 26.

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendment 14 for occupational pension schemes in Great Britain.

Amendment 19, page 16, line 32, and insert—

“(3) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Amendments 13 and 19 for personal pension schemes.

Amendment 20, page 16, line 31, leave out from second “a” to end of line 32 and insert “communication that is made for the purposes of complying with the duty in subsection (3)”.

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendment 16 for occupational pension schemes in Great Britain.

Amendment 21, page 17, line 27, leave out from beginning to end of line 40 and insert—

“(2) As part of the application process, the trustees or managers must ensure that—

(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

(3) Before proceeding with the application, the trustees or managers must ensure that the beneficiary has either received appropriate pensions guidance or has opted out of receiving such guidance.”

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Amendments 13 and 17 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Amendment 22, page 17, line 42, leave out from “guidance” to end of line 43.

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendments 16 and 18 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Amendment 23, page 17, line 46, at end insert—

“(a) the beneficiary is referred to appropriate pensions guidance, and

(b) the beneficiary is provided with an explanation of the nature and purpose of such guidance.

This amendment makes equivalent changes to Amendments 13 and 19 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Amendment 24, page 18, line 2, leave out from second “a” to end of line 3 and insert—

“communication that is made for the purposes of complying with the duty in subsection (3)”. —(John Glen.)

This amendment is the equivalent to Amendments 16 and 20 for occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland.

Ordered,

That Clause 22 be transferred to the beginning of line 1 on page 21.—(John Glen.)

This is a drafting change to reorder some of the existing clauses in the Bill to provide a more logical order following the insertion of NC3 and NC4.

Clause 36

COMMENCEMENT

Amendments made: 45, page 35, line 6, at end insert—

“(3) make further provision about how, and to whom, a beneficiary may indicate that they have received or opted out of receiving appropriate pensions guidance for the purposes of subsection (3);”

This amendment amends the commencement clause so that the new clause on unsolicited direct marketing relating to pensions (inserted by NC9) would come into force on Royal Assent.

Amendment 46, page 35, line 25, after “Sections” insert—

“(Unsolicited direct marketing: other consumer financial products etc) and”. —(John Glen.)

This amendment amends the commencement clause so that the new clause on unsolicited direct marketing relating to consumer financial products other than pensions would come into force automatically two months after Royal Assent.

Schedule 4

REGULATION OF CLAIMS MANAGEMENT SERVICES:
TRANSFER SCHEMES

Amendments made: 47, page 47, line 17, at end insert—

“the ‘data protection legislation’ has the same meaning as in the Data Protection Act 2018 (see section 3 of that Act);”

This amendment inserts a definition of “the data protection legislation”, which is a term now used in Clause 18 (see Amendment 43) and the new clause inserted by NC9, to reflect the changes to be made to the law in this area by the Data Protection Bill.

Amendment 48, page 49, line 32, leave out “Data Protection Act 1998” and insert “data protection legislation”.—(John Glen.)

This amendment changes the reference to the Data Protection Act 1998 to a reference to the “data protection legislation” to reflect the changes to data protection legislation that are to be made by the Data Protection Bill.

Title

Amendments made: 28, line 2 leave out “cold-calling and”.

This amendment, together with Amendment 29, amends the long title in consequence of NC3 and NC4.

Amendment 29, line 3 at end insert—

“to provide a power to make regulations prohibiting unsolicited direct marketing in relation to pensions and other consumer financial products and services;”. —(John Glen.)

See explanatory statement for amendment 28.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will now suspend the House briefly in order to make a decision about certification. The Division bells will be rung two minutes before the House resumes.

6 pm
Sitting suspended.

6.4 pm
On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. Clauses 29 and 31 of, and schedule 4 to, the Bill, as amended, relate exclusively to England and Wales and are within legislative competence. Copies of the final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are now available. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON IN THE CHAIR]

6.5 pm
The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote. As the knife has fallen, there can be no debate. I call the Minister to move the consent motion.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Programme Order, 22 January, and Standing Order No. 83M(5)).

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of, and schedules to, the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill (Lords)—

Clauses and schedules certified under Standing Order No. 83L(2) as relating exclusively to England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence

Clauses 29 and 31 of the Bill as amended in Public Bill Committee (Bill 160), and Schedule 4 to the Bill as amended on Consideration—(Guy Opperman.)

Question agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to you for all the onerous contributions that you had to make to provide certification, but what can be done to ensure that the huge numbers of English Members who wish to speak in the English Legislative Grand Committee get their opportunity to do so? This is Dave’s legacy, for goodness’ sake. English votes for

English laws was supposed to be the most important issue possible. It seems that, once again, English Members have been totally denied their opportunity. Is not this just the greatest waste of time that this House has to endure?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not a point of order. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to speak on Third Reading, he is able to do so.

6.8 pm
The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This Bill is an important piece of legislation. When it started its journey in the other place in June last year, my noble colleague Baroness Buscombe told peers that it would create a framework that would ensure that people have access to the information and guidance they need to make the important and effective financial decisions that we all have to make at some point in our lives. It will also enable the transfer of claims management regulation from the Ministry of Justice to the Financial Conduct Authority, to ensure that there is a tougher regulatory framework and that people have access to high-quality claims handling services.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way so early in her speech. Does she agree that it is important that the Financial Conduct Authority and the Financial Ombudsman Service are properly equipped to take on the additional powers proposed?

Ms McVey: I do indeed. We need to have bodies that have teeth, that are able to do this and that we can have faith in. My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

The Bill has delivered on what we said it would, but it now does so much more. The inclusion of a ban on pensions cold-calling, the commitment to introduce a debt respite scheme and the ban on claims management companies cold-calling, as well as the amendment on pensions guidance, all strengthen the Bill. I welcome and appreciate the collaborative spirit that the Bill has engendered across both Houses and the hard work that officials have done. There has been a broad consensus. That is positive, and it has helped so many people in so many different ways.

In the other place, we listened carefully to the thoughtful views of those who engaged in the debates. We appreciate, in particular, the input of Lord Stevenson, Lord McKenzie, Lord Sharkey, Baroness Drake, Baroness Kramer and others who have helped us to craft the clauses on debt respite, cold-calling, pensions guidance and consumer protection. There were some very constructive and helpful debates on other issues that helped us to ensure that the FCA will have regard to the needs of consumers when setting the single financial guidance body’s standards, to strengthen offences on impersonating the new body, to extend the claims management provisions to Scotland and—to thanks to the tireless work of Baroness Meacher—to introduce an interim fee cap in respect of PPI claims. To quote Lord McKenzie on Third Reading:

These changes have come about because, broadly, we have had a shared analysis of what the Bill could achieve.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 21 November 2017; Vol. 787, c. 106.]
There have been many positive contributions in this House as well. We heard some excellent speeches on Second Reading from Members on both sides of the House. I remember, for example, the powerful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) about debt arguably being one of the biggest challenges to social mobility and, as Conservative Members particularly support social mobility, how important it is to be able to give this financial support. I still recall the very strong contributions from the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) on the proposed debt respite scheme and from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who recounted the hardships faced by her constituents.

We have listened to what hon. Members said in respect of pensions cold-calling and default pensions guidance. I would like to put on record again our thanks to the Work and Pensions Committee for its report highlighting some of these issues. I thank the Select Committee, peers and hon. Members in this House for the way in which all sides have worked collaboratively and constructively on these issues. We have been able to accept a number of the Committee’s recommendations. I am sure that all hon. Members will agree that, with its help, we have made huge progress in these areas. I look forward to continuing co-operation when we bring forward regulations on these matters later this year.

We have also listened to what was said in respect of cold-calling from claims management companies. In Committee, we tabled amendments to ban cold-calling in relation to claims management services unless prior consent has been given. This honours a commitment that we made in the other place. We believe that these changes—along with our commitment to keep under review, and potentially ban, other areas of unsolicited direct marketing in relation to consumer financial products—demonstrate our commitment to tackling unsolicited marketing calls. The Information Commissioner’s Office, which enforces restrictions on unsolicited electronic direct mailing, has the power to fine offenders up to £500,000. In 2017, the ICO issued 29 civil monetary penalties totalling £2.83 million.

In Committee, we also tabled amendments to the claims management clauses. We are now placing a duty on the Law Society of England and Wales to cap fees in relation to financial services claims management activity, as well as introducing a power for the Law Society of Scotland to restrict fee charges for this activity, to ensure that consumers are protected no matter which type of claims management service provider they use, whether it is regulated by the legal service regulators or by the FCA.

This Bill deals with important and fundamental issues not just to this House but to the many hundreds of thousands of people who will benefit from the services of a new single financial guidance body—particularly those who are struggling with debt.

I am pleased to be able to confirm again today for the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) that we have listened to the importance of providing a suitable mechanism to access breathing space for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We understand that people in the midst of a mental health crisis are likely to be too unwell to access the breathing space scheme through a regulated debt advice provider. We commit to ensure that people receiving NHS treatment for a mental health crisis, in either a psychiatric in-patient setting or the community, are provided with a suitable alternative mechanism to access the breathing space scheme and benefit from the protections it will provide. That provision will be developed concurrently with the main breathing space scheme.

In respect of claims management companies, the Bill sends out a clear message that we are on the side of the public, providing a stronger framework to ensure that individuals are accountable for the actions of their businesses. While recognising that many claims management companies do good work to support people to claim compensation, we have sent a clear message that we will tackle malpractice where it exists, such as nuisance calls and the encouragement of fraudulent claims. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.15 pm

Jack Dromey: Why does this Bill matter? It matters because of that Port Talbot shift supervisor who said he would never, ever forgive himself, having made a mistake and been conned into being sold short on his pension, with all 20 on his shift following his lead. It matters for the single mum in my constituency who has been a victim of domestic violence and had continuously to borrow to pay off her debt. As she said to me, “I borrowed to pay the debt because I borrowed to pay the debt because I borrowed to pay the debt.” It matters to Christine, who was first diagnosed with cancer in 2009 but is still feeling the financial effects today—in debt, pursued constantly for it and her bank oblivious to her condition.

The Bill will help to end scams. It will help to ensure that rogues who are exploiting in particular the vulnerable and undercutting the reputable have no place in the market in future. This is a good Bill. It was strengthened in the other place and then in Committee. It establishes the single financial guidance body, which is a strong step in the right direction.

The Bill has also seen progress today. Progress was previously made on issues of immense importance, in particular pensions cold-calling. It is deeply welcome that the Government have listened to the strong representations made across the House on breathing space and recognise the particular problems of those suffering from mental ill health. The new body will promote greater understanding and help people to plan their finances and retirement.

There is still further progress to be made. We will engage with the Government following our earlier exchanges, because of our very strong view that the time has come to stop all cold-calling for commercial purposes by claims management companies. There is very important progress yet to be made.

The Government have constructively engaged and sent some welcome signals. They have talked about the next stage of the process. The sooner we can get there, the better. I would like to thank a number of people. While there were rather robust exchanges over GKN earlier on in the Chamber, I have to praise both the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the
hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury for their helpful, constructive and collaborative approach.

I would like to thank the Work and Pensions Committee for its characteristically first-class intervention and advice, and in particular its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). The Committee can take particular credit for the progress made on the ban on pensions cold-calling.

I would like to thank all colleagues in this place who tabled amendments and contributed to the various debates that took place.

I thank the Members of the other place for the contributions that they made, again across party—particularly, but not exclusively, Lords Sharkey, Altmann, McKenzie of Luton and Drake. I thank also the Commons Clerks and other staff who worked so hard with us to shape the Bill and to take it through Parliament. All those parties and organisations have contributed to the passage of the Bill with their wisdom and many topics of interest.

I thank those organisations and individuals who passed on their research or sometimes heartbreaking stories, which brought home to us the Bill’s importance. I often say that I believe we need a story to tell the stories, and we have heard so many stories—sometimes tragic ones—throughout the Bill’s passage. It is for people like them that we are all here, and I hope that the Bill will help them in the next stages, and as we move forward, making further progress, ensuring that it benefits all, but especially the most vulnerable in our society.

In conclusion, I have something to say to that steel shift supervisor who wept uncontrollably about the change, and one that I warmly support.

In conclusion, I have something to say to that steel shift supervisor who wept uncontrollably about the change, and that I warmly support.

I would say to the shadow Minister that this is an immensely important Bill. It is very important for all the people we represent, building on the huge change that we made in giving people freedom around their pensions, and therefore there is a need to ensure that it is underpinned by proper advice and guidance.

I represent a number of financial firms in my constituency. I used to represent Legal & General, which was the biggest employer in my constituency, but it has had the impertinence to move out of Kingswood and go elsewhere. It is one of its rivals whose interests I defend. The pension freedoms that we announced in the Budget some time ago were a major challenge to two companies in my constituency—Just Retirement and Partnership. As one of my friends who worked at one of those companies said, “We have just a slight problem now, as the Government are not mandating that everybody must buy our product as an annuity. They now have options over their future.”

Those two companies were insurgents in the financial services market. Just Retirement specialises in the issue of equity release, which I addressed in the debate on the first group of amendments, trying to ensure that there is proper access to advice on people’s property as part of their asset structure in planning for retirement. Partnership specialises in identifying groups of annuitants with a shorter life expectancy, who therefore would be able to get a greater rate of return out of their pension investment. As people who had been saving with the big boys, such as Legal & General, moved into taking their pensions, they needed proper advice and guidance about the products that were available in the market.

I listened very carefully to the exchange between the Chair of the Select Committee and the Minister around the issue of the independence and impartiality of the advice that will be available. This will be the test that I apply to the Bill: people who are saving with a big player such as Legal & General must not be captured, in a sense, by simply not being exercised enough to seek independent advice in order properly to understand what options are available to them, and suborned as it were into continuing with the existing provider without understanding the options available to them. That is why the independence and impartiality, and the encouragement that people will get to seek that advice, is the test that needs to be set for whether this legislation will do the job, making them savvier about their pensions and the options available to them in retirement.

These matters are incredibly important to almost everyone in the course of their lives, when they come to make the big decisions about financial provision in retirement. I will be looking at this legislation, and at the undertakings that have been given, so that if it does not deliver what we hope it will, we can revisit it and ensure that people can access advice.

The Bill builds on the huge opportunities that we have given people to spend their own money in pursuit of their own priorities, while of course ensuring that they make sensible provision for their retirement, on the basis of advice and as informed consumers. That will take them away from being comfortable simply to be prisoners of their own big provider, without understanding the options available to them. We have given people their freedom and I hope that the Bill will ensure that they can use it in an informed way. That is a huge change, and one that I warmly support.
I want to use the few minutes available to me to echo some of the thanks that have been offered by the Minister and the shadow Minister to all those involved, including the Clerks and the House staff. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), who served on the Public Bill Committee, and Emily Cunningham, who diligently provided support as part of the Scottish National party’s research team. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), for their dialogue—we got there in the end. There were some issues along the way, not least the delays in getting to this point, but we are where we are. I thank the Work and Pensions Committee and its Chair, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), for their diligence in bringing issues to the fore. I also thank the stakeholders who provided expert advice and briefings throughout our deliberations.

We on the SNP Benches remain concerned about some aspects of the Bill, and we have all articulated that—the hon. Member for Reigate has just done so. We remain concerned about the opt-out from pension guidance and about cold calling. We will watch closely for the developments that the Government have promised as the Bill is signed into law.

6.28 pm

Ruth George: I will not detain the House for long. In a long afternoon of debate on financial guidance and cold calling since the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), we have heard how important it is that so many people receive support and proper independent financial guidance. I welcome the work that has been done on both sides of the House, by Front Benchers and Back Benchers. As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I am glad that we have been able to contribute to the work that has gone into the Bill. I hope that Ministers will continue to listen to the arguments as they develop the Bill further when it returns to the other place.

We have heard in recent hours about people suffering from mental health problems. They are more vulnerable to people seeking to take their money, whether through cold calling and doorstep selling. As we have heard, mental health problems can be exacerbated by debt. I hope that the Government will consider widening the definitions of debt and of mental health crisis. I have constituents in High Peak who, unfortunately, even at a time of crisis and having attempted suicide, are unable to access mental health crisis support—in-bed support is not available, and there is even a waiting list for support in the community. I therefore hope that the Government will have as wide a definition as possible of people either receiving crisis care or on the waiting list to receive crisis care—I am sorry to say that there are waiting lists for crisis care. The definition should be extended to all debt.

Recently, I asked some parliamentary questions about the level of debt being recovered under universal credit and was sorry to hear that about 6% of current full-service claimants are paying 40% of their universal credit payments to cover third-party debts, leaving them with just 60% of a universal credit payment, which is already lower for many recipients than legacy benefits. Those people have already seen cuts and this is leaving them with even less to pay their debts.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), companies that provide consumer credit can be ruthless in hounding their customers and often contribute to mental health difficulties. In this era of rising household debt, we have nearly £200 million of consumer credit. Independent financial guidance and support are needed more than ever. I urge the Government to ensure that as many people as possible can access it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.
Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill
(Money)

Queen's recommendation signified.

6.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health
(Jackie Doyle-Price): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.

The Bill seeks to reduce the inappropriate use of force against people with mental disorders in mental health units. It also seeks to increase oversight and allow greater scrutiny of the system when it goes wrong.

Like many Members, including the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) who brought forward the Bill, I was very moved by the events that led to the untimely death of Seni Lewis. I pay tribute to the Lewis family, who have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that such a tragedy does not happen to any other family. The Bill is testament to the commitment of the Lewis family and the hon. Gentleman to ensure that we properly hold the system to account.

6.32 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Government and the Minister on bringing forward the money resolution this evening. We have been anticipating it for a few weeks, so it is a great pleasure and slight relief to have it before the Chamber.

The resolution will allow the Committee to complete its work in the morning and take forward this important social reform, which we hope will make a big difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our country—people who are living with mental ill health and should not face extreme forms, or indeed other forms, of restraint, which can cause serious injury or even death, as we saw in the case of Seni Lewis. I thank the Minister for her commitment to seeing this through.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

COMPANIES

That the draft Companies (Disclosure of Address) (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

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

PETITIONS

European Union

That the draft European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Work in Fishing Convention) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Welsh Ministers (Transfer of Functions) (Railways) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 28 February, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Combined Authorities (Borrowing) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 12 March, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

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

HOUSING

That the draft Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (Mandatory Conditions of Licences) (England) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 March, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: In a risky move, but with the concurrence of the House, I propose to take motions 9 and 10 together. I merely remind Members—I am sure that they are keenly conscious of the fact—that both appertain to energy.

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

ENERGY

That the draft Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved. That the draft Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 March, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Bank of Scotland closure in Kilbirnie

6.35 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This petition from the residents of the North Ayrshire and Arran constituency attracted 560 signatures, which were gathered by me, dedicated Garnock valley Scottish National party activists and our SNP councillor.

The petition states:

Declares that proposed closure of the 3 branches of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland in the areas of Kilbirnie, Killoving & Saltcoats 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 into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of these branches. And the petitioners remain, etc.

Basingstoke Motorway Service Areas

6.36 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I rise to present this petition, which, with over 3,000 signatures, clearly demonstrates the strength of opposition to proposals for two separate motorway service areas in Basingstoke, at junction 6 and at a site near Hatch Warren next to junction 7. If both were to go ahead, this would mean four service station areas within a 23-mile stretch of the M3. I would like to thank local councillors who have campaigned tirelessly in their communities to raise awareness of the issue—in particular, Councillor Terri Reid in Hatch Warren and Beggarwood and Councillor Onnalee Cubitt in Basing ward.

The proposed motorway service areas cause huge concern. Residents in Hatch Warren are worried about the potential encroachment on their residential area from a proposed new motorway flyover to access the services on the opposite side of the motorway, and Thames Water has warned of the risk of sewage flooding resulting from the proposals currently being considered for junction 6. This proposal would also cause real road safety concerns, unnecessarily creating tailbacks on the M3, which in the past have led to road traffic accidents and tragically, the loss of life.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Basingstoke,

Declares that urgent action must be taken concerning proposals for new Motorway Service Areas at Basingstoke; further that there is no need for any additional motorway service areas given that the existing services at Fleet and Winchester are only 23 miles apart; further that the development of any new facilities will be detrimental to the environment and traffic congestion; further that they are clearly not in the best interests of Basingstoke residents; and further that the two proposals that have been made to date, one at Junction 6 and one near Junction 7 are not acceptable.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Government to ensure road safety and the avoidance of traffic congestion are given priority over any unnecessary new motorway service areas around Basingstoke; and further urges the Department for Transport to reinstate the requirement for there to be a minimum distance between motorway service areas. And the petitioners remain, etc.

National Bereavement Care Pathway

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—( Mike Freer.)

6.39 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to lead this debate this evening, and may I thank the Minister for being here to respond?

I never entered politics with the intention of becoming a baby loss awareness campaigner. As with so many in this field, the loss of a child—my son in 2014—brought about my interest and desire to bring about change. And being a Member of this House, gives every one of us the platform to make a difference. It can be a small change that affects just one of our constituents, or it can be something larger that affects everyone in the UK. I am proud that through my role in this House I have been able to play even just a small part in the development and roll-out of the national bereavement care pathway, which is something that will make a difference to tens of thousands of bereaved parents and families up and down the country.

Before I move on to the pathway itself, I want to pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker. You have been hugely supportive of our baby loss awareness campaigning efforts in this place, and I know I speak for all members of the all-party group on baby loss when I say a heartfelt thank you.

Launched last year at 11 sites across England, the pathway has been developed by a number of baby loss charities, royal colleges and professional organisations with the support of the Department of Health and Social Care and the APPG. It is designed to improve the quality of bereavement care experienced by parents and families at all stages of pregnancy and baby loss up to 12 months. The pathway provides a practical framework for all those healthcare and other professionals involved and has been informed and led by the views of bereaved parents at every stage of its development. Parents have stressed the importance of sensitive and consistent care, of making informed choices, of privacy, of not having to repeat their stories to different members of staff and of having opportunities to create memories and spend time with their babies. As one bereaved parent put it: “Parents don’t need protecting; they just need the chance to be parents, provide their child with dignity and create memories.”

Each year in the UK, thousands of parents and wider families sadly go through the devastating experience of losing a child. While we cannot take away that devastation and grief, good care can make a devastating experience feel more manageable, while poor-quality or insensitively delivered care can compound and exacerbate pain.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his hard work in this area—we are all greatly moved—and he is right to thank you, Mr Speaker, for all you have done. The combination of both your efforts is highly regarded in the House. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with three babies a week being stillborn or dying in the first four weeks of life in a nation as small as Northern Ireland, those suffering this heartbreak must be supported, which is why the care pathway is essential?
Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for the support he has given to the APPG since its formation. He is right that just one stillbirth or neonatal death is one too many, and while we should rightly campaign for reductions—we have ambitious targets in that regard—it is absolutely right to ensure that even if we hit those targets, as I will come to later, we make sure we have world-class bereavement care for those parents and families who sadly suffer the loss of a child. Through the pathway, we can work to ensure that they receive the best-quality bereavement care that the NHS can deliver.

Bereavement care has been a priority for the APPG for two reasons. First, there is sadly an inconsistency in the quality and standard of bereavement care across the country. Every parent and family who suffer the loss of a child should receive the same high-quality bereavement care no matter where they live, yet that is not the case at the moment. A report from Sands in 2016 found that only 46% of trusts with maternity units provided mandatory bereavement care training for maternity unit staff. Further, of those who did provide the training, 86% provided their staff with just one hour or less of training each year.

A separate report by Bliss in 2015 on neonatal units found that 41% of units had no access to trained mental health workers and that while some units had dedicated bereavement facilities, many relied on normal accommodation or quiet rooms. That is very important. In the case of 50% of bereaved mothers, care after their baby had died was considered poor enough to have affected their psychosocial wellbeing and any plans that they might have for a future baby. We should therefore be ensuring that parents who suffer the loss of a child receive the best possible care wherever they are in the country, and that is exactly what the bereavement care pathway does.

The second reason, however, is that 15 babies sadly die every single day before, during, or shortly after birth. This takes me to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Even given the Government’s ambitious target of a 50% reduction in stillbirth and infant death by 2025, there will still be tens of thousands of stillbirths and neonatal deaths, and that thousands of parents, grandparents and wider family members will still go through the tragedy of baby loss. While it is right that we work to reduce baby loss rates by, for instance, tackling smoking among pregnant women, we also need to ensure that there is high quality-care throughout the NHS for the parents who do, sadly, lose a child.

Last month, I had the opportunity to visit one of the first pathway pilot sites, established by Chelsea and Westminster and West Middlesbrough University hospitals, to see it in action. It was great to chat with staff and discuss what challenges they faced in implementing the pathway, and what benefits they had found for parents. My experience during that visit has been backed up by the recent early evaluation of the first phase of the pathway. Feedback from the pilot sites found that it had helped to raise the profile of bereavement care in hospitals—a vital change, now that that will be assessed as part of inspections by the Care Quality Commission—and that it had also encouraged different teams in hospitals and departments to work more closely together.

That independent report showed not only the need for the programme, but its obvious impact. For example, where bereavement midwives are in post, they are making a significant and positive difference in their trusts. However, more work is clearly needed to ensure that good practice is shared across hospital trusts, so that all staff who come into contact with bereaved parents are equipped and helped to deliver the high-quality care that we all want to see. The findings show the huge potential for improving bereavement care in pregnancy and baby loss, something that I, and the all-party parliamentary group, will continue to proudly support. It has also been useful for healthcare professionals to suggest ways in which the pathway can be refined, and, in particular, how it can be ensured that the documents and guidance that are issued are more practical in terms of implementation.

Last Monday, our APPG hosted a reception to mark the launch of the second wave of pathway sites. A further 21 trusts are now piloting the pathway, providing sites where bereaved parents will be able to experience better care.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on all the work that he has done in this field, including his work in the all-party group. Earlier, he gave the chilling statistic that 15 babies die each day in the United Kingdom. Of course we all know that the loss of a baby—the death of a child—is the last taboo. The irony is that, although the rolling out of bereavement pathway sites throughout the UK is welcome and much needed, it is because baby loss is so hard to discuss that it has taken us so long to reach this point.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady—and I will call her my hon. Friend—has made a very valid point, and I thank her for all her contributions to the formation and the continuing work of the APPG. She is right: there is a taboo surrounding baby loss, and we must break it. I remember the first debate about it that we held here, in November 2015, and the floods of e-mails and messages that we received from parents out there who were saying, “Thank heavens, someone is now talking about baby loss.” They had felt so enclosed, and unable to talk about it, to the extent that people would cross the street to avoid having to have that awkward conversation.

That is exactly why the pathway is so important. Although NHS professionals up and down our country are caring and compassionate to their very core, not everyone has experienced this kind of grief. It is important that the pathway is parent-led, because that enables parents to share the experience of what they went through, how they were feeling, and how things could possibly improve in the future. I encourage the hon. Lady to continue her work in the APPG and continue to participate in debates like this, because that shows the country as a whole that we are willing, ready and able to talk about baby loss, and will not stop talking about it until as have addressed some of these big issues.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is being gracious in giving way—I thank him for that. One of my staff members had two miscarriages, and the loss for her was immense. What sustained her through that time of grief, which he knows about himself, was the support of family, friends and all of us associated with her, but probably more than anything else her faith and her Christian beliefs. Does he agree that it is critical that that is part of the pathway?
Mr Philip Dunne: I hesitate to rise after that generous tribute, but may I say that I am absolutely convinced that without the work of my hon. Friend and his colleagues in the all-party group, we in the Department would not have given this issue the prominence that it has achieved under their leadership? In particular, I wish to mention the role that Sands has played in driving this agenda forward. I pay tribute to that organisation and all the bereaved parents that it represents, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing yet another debate on this topic.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. He makes a good point about the charities involved. One of the great strengths of the all-party group is that we have been able to bring together about 40 baby loss charities, and that number grows at every meeting. This is one reason why we have been so successful. Some of the charities are big, including Sands, Bliss and the Lullaby Trust, while others are very small, including those that make teddy bears or knit little items of clothing for their local neonatal units. We are bringing all those charities together with one common purpose: to reduce baby loss and ensure that we have world-class bereavement care. This is what has genuinely made the difference. When politicians work with the charitable sector, the Government, bereaved parents, clinicians and medical professionals, that is when we can really make a difference, and I genuinely believe that this is a prime example of that happening.

This is also a good juncture to pass on my sincere thanks to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. He could not have not have been more supportive of the formation of the all-party group or of our work, and I have always felt that, with him, we were pushing at an open door at every turn. I know that that feeling will be echoed by other members of the group. Every time we have tried to move the agenda forward, the Secretary of State has been willing to listen and to act, and I thank him for that.

We are also most grateful for the Department’s financial support, in the form of £50,000, to help to launch the national bereavement care pathway. However—this is the big “however”—that funding was exhausted last year. Since then, Sands has continued to support the project, covering the costs of staff, partnership, documentation production, website development and all the engagement activity that supports it. To ensure that the pathway is embedded across England by 2020, in line with commitments on improved patient safety, maternity services and bereavement care, the project has to be suitably resourced. Sands has approached the Department of Health and Social Care asking for support to cover the core costs of the pathway. It has formally requested further funding for the current financial year and the next.

There is overwhelming political, parental and professional support for the pathway. I do not want to put the Minister on the spot, but I ask the Government to commit to provide Sands with additional funding for the roll-out of the pathway, which is so important. This will mirror the commitment given by the Scottish Government, who are funding the roll-out in Scotland. More widely, the Department of Health and Social Care should look to put in place the resources needed to ensure that staff are given the training and facilities that they need to make this a success and to give bereaved parents the best possible care. The loss of a child is something that affects tens of thousands of parents every year. The Government can rightly be proud of the progress made, the ambitious targets set and the plans put in place to reduce baby loss. By committing to funding the pathway roll-out across England, the Government can ensure that families who suffer the loss of a baby receive consistent, sensitive, world-class bereavement care right across our NHS.
debate on the important work of the national bereavement care pathway. It is only three years since he was elected to this House, but in that time, he has done more than simply putting this important issue on the political agenda. He has drawn considerable attention to it and really moved it forward, and I thank him most sincerely for that.

I also thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who has been a willing ally and partner in that work. We thank her for sharing her experiences, which I know must have been very painful. I am also grateful for the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who has applied her very considerable energy to this project. It is with pride that I stand alongside all these Members today to address this important subject which, as I have said, has really moved on in the past three years. I must also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), from whom I have inherited this part of my portfolio. He left it in very good shape, which makes it very much easier for me to address the House on it this evening.

I was fortunate enough to attend the launch of wave 2 of the pathway here in Parliament just last week, when I met the charities, led by Sands, that are working hard to expand the pathway, and representatives from the wave 1 and wave 2 permanent sites. That uplifting event celebrated the difference that the pathway is making to parents across the country, and I was pleased to hear about the positive evaluation of the wave 1 pilot sites since the pathway was launched last October. I was particularly moved to hear the story and experiences of Cheryl Gadsby. She really brought to life the huge difference that the right care can bring to bereaved parents. Against that background—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am glad you did that then, Mr Speaker, because I was just getting to a good bit.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester said that he did not want to put me on the spot about further funding, he actually did—very effectively—so before I go any further this evening, I am pleased to announce that the Department of Health and Social Care will provide additional funding for Sands to further develop and roll out the national bereavement care pathway in the coming financial year. It is a shame that the House is not busier, because it is not often that Ministers get the chance to say such things from the Dispatch Box.

The Department has been in conversation with Sands and can confirm £106,000 of funding to support the roll-out of the pathway in 2018-19. That is more than double the Department’s original funding of £50,000 to support the first year of the programme. While I am sure that all Members present understand that funding for future years cannot be committed at present, I hope that the announcement of this funding demonstrates the Government’s commitment to supporting the pathway as it moves towards national roll-out. The funding comes following recognition of the great strides forward that the pathway project is making in ensuring that all bereaved are offered the right high-quality care at a time of enormous tragedy.

I should pause here, as I did at the parliamentary event last week, to highlight the Government’s wider ambitions for maternity care because, as we have heard this evening, the number of deaths at childbirth are too high. The Secretary of State’s ambition is to reduce rates of stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries by 50% by 2025. Our even closer goal is to achieve a 20% reduction by 2020, which illustrates our desire to make rapid progress.

To that end, the Secretary of State launched a refreshed maternity strategy last year—not long after the moving debate on baby loss in the House last October. The strategy highlights further action that the Government and NHS England have taken to improve safety and reduce the number of stillbirths and other adverse maternity outcomes. The initiatives include funding for the new healthcare safety investigation branch to develop investigation standards and conduct independent investigations into all cases that meet the criteria of the “Each Baby Counts” programme run by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. That will amount to around 1,000 cases annually and will improve the rigour and quality of investigations into term stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths and serious brain injuries, and of learning from the investigations. The investigations began this month and will be rolled out to all areas of England by this time next year. Other initiatives include more support for safety training for all maternity and neonatal staff and an ambition to reduce the national rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%, building on the world-class expertise already available across the 35 pre-term birth clinics in England.

The Department of Health, together with the Health Departments in Scotland and Wales, has funded the development of a national standardised perinatal mortality review tool to support systematic, multidisciplinary reviews of the circumstances and care leading up to every stillbirth and neonatal death. The tool is now available and enables teams to provide clear and accurate information to parents about why their baby died. It will also help staff to understand where lessons can be learned and allow for future care to be improved.

I am happy to report that we are making progress towards achieving our 2020 ambitions. The stillbirth rate in England has fallen from 5.1 per 1,000 births in 2010 to 4.3 in 2016. The neonatal mortality rate was 2.7 deaths per 1,000 births in 2016, down from 2.9 in 2010, but we must continue to do all we can to ensure the best maternity care in this country and the most appropriate support if parents do suffer bereavement at birth.

We are committed to providing high-quality bereavement care, as I hope I have proved and demonstrated with my announcement this evening. Since 2010, the Government have invested £35 million in the NHS to improve birthing environments, including better bereavement rooms and quiet spaces, at nearly 40 hospitals. On 2 February 2018, the Secretary of State announced the Government’s intention to conduct a review of whether the law should be changed to allow parents to register a pregnancy loss that occurs at less than 24 weeks’ gestation, as many hon. Members have called for. The review will also look more broadly at what can be done to improve care and support for parents going through such losses.
It is crucial that parents who experience pregnancy loss, regardless of the gestation stage at which the loss occurs, receive the best possible care and support, and that we use all opportunities to learn for the future when things go wrong. The review will speak to parents, clinicians, midwives and other experts to develop recommendations to ensure that pregnancy losses before 24 weeks’ gestation are handled with the same sensitivity and care as losses at a later gestation.

The Department is also conducting a review of whether the law should be changed to enable or require coroners to investigate stillbirths. Currently, coroners have the power to investigate only if there is doubt as to whether a baby was stillborn or lived independently, regardless of whether doctors declared it a stillbirth. Some parents feel that a coroner’s investigation would help to provide answers when a baby is stillborn and that such learning could help to avoid similar tragedies in future. As part of that review, the Department is working with the Ministry of Justice to consult parents and experts about whether and, if so, how current legislation on coronial powers in relation to stillbirths should be amended to ensure that all avenues for investigating and learning from tragic events are considered.

Once again, I thank all Members of the House who have done so much to raise awareness of what can be done to support bereaved families through such tragedies. I am delighted to have been able to announce further funding for the national care bereavement pathway today, and I will closely follow its development as wave 2 of the pilot sites gets under way.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.7 pm

*House adjourned.*
Wednesday 25 April 2018

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ties with the Rest of the UK

1. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen ties between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The United Kingdom is the vital Union for Scotland, and this Government will always work to strengthen the integrity of the UK. That includes working closely and constructively with the Scottish Government. But I was disappointed that, unlike the Welsh Government, Nicola Sturgeon has been unwilling to agree our proposed amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. The Welsh Government have said that this is a deal that respects devolution. They have said:

“This is a deal we can work with which has required compromise on both sides.”

I absolutely agree, and I continue to hope that the Scottish Government will join us.

Luke Graham: I share my right hon. Friend’s disappointment and surprise that the SNP Administration in Edinburgh have been unable to reach agreement with the Government. I ask him to work with those people in the devolved Government in Edinburgh who are willing to reach agreement to ensure that we put the politics of division behind us and work together so that we can move the conversation on for our constituents.

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. I was certainly very disappointed that the Scottish Government, despite sharing the same concerns as the Welsh Government, decided not to agree with this approach. We will of course continue to have a constructive dialogue with the Scottish Government, and I want to put it on the record that Mike Russell, the Scottish Minister, has put a lot of personal effort and commitment into getting this over the line, and I still hope that his Government will join him in reaching that agreement in the coming weeks.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In the interests of facilitating negotiations, will the Secretary of State confirm whether the Lords will be asked to agree to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on Third Reading before the Scottish Parliament has had time to consider a legislative consent memorandum?

David Mundell: What will happen is that today the UK Government will table an amendment to clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill in the House of Lords, on the basis agreed with the Welsh Government, and on the basis offered to the Scottish Government. The intergovernmental agreement accompanying the clause will also be published.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has taken a close interest in this matter. Is he aware that we will be travelling to Edinburgh on Sunday, for hearings on Monday on the matter? I invite him to feel less disappointment and more hope, because the SNP Government have always insisted that their interests are aligned with those of the Welsh Government. Can we give the Scottish Government time to reflect on the fact that the Welsh Government now support the UK Government’s position, and that they might wish to do so in future?

David Mundell: I am sure that the Committee will be made very welcome in Edinburgh. Anything that it can do to focus Nicola Sturgeon’s mind on what has been offered, and what the Welsh Government have been able to sign up to, given that it protects the devolution settlement, will be very welcome. I hope that Nicola Sturgeon will think again.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): May I first place on the record my congratulations to the Scottish Commonwealth games team on their success in Melbourne?

Coming back to the task in hand, it has been widely reported that Mike Russell was happy with the amendment and agreed to the deal, before being overruled by Nicola Sturgeon. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether there was an agreement on this issue from the Scottish Government at any point during the process?

David Mundell: What I can confirm is that there were extensive negotiations on the proposal, which has ultimately been agreed with the Welsh Government, and the Scottish Government were actively involved in those discussions. To be fair to Mike Russell, he has never led us to believe that there was any decision maker in the Scottish Government other than Nicola Sturgeon.

Mr Speaker: Order. These exchanges are rather ponderous. I am sorry, but we really need to speed up, because we have a lot of questions to get through. Let us get on with it.

Lesley Laird: I thank the Secretary of State for that non-response. The Labour party anticipated that political games would be played with the constitution. It is time for the people of Scotland to know exactly what has been going on behind closed doors, so will he tell me the truth and shame the devil, and agree to publish the minutes of all meetings and conversations between the Scottish and UK Governments and any member of the Conservative party or the SNP on clause 11?

David Mundell: What we will publish is the clause and the intergovernmental agreement that goes along with it, which is what the Welsh Government have signed up to. That is what was on the table for the Scottish Government to agree. It remains on the table.
Ross Thomson: The SNP’s Brexit Minister, Mike Russell, said that he could not envisage a situation in which Scotland would be content and Wales would not be, or vice versa. Those words ring hollow today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Nicola Sturgeon’s belligerence in snubbing an agreement on clause 11 reminds us that the SNP believes in independence, manufactured grievance and a narrow nationalist agenda, which will always come before the good of the country?

David Mundell: Some people might conclude, given that Mike Russell did say that the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government were in exactly the same position, that there might be just one issue where there is a difference. That difference is that the Welsh Government believe in devolution and the Scottish Government believe in independence.

Pete Wishart: For the first time ever, I probably agree with the Secretary of State. It comes as no surprise to us that Welsh Labour has so easily capitulated to the Tories on this issue. We will never stop defending the integrity of our Parliament, and we will never allow the Tories to diminish our Parliament’s powers. We will not allow that to happen. Is it the case with these amendments that, if the Scottish Parliament does not give its consent in these devolved areas within its responsibilities, the UK Government will simply overrule our democratic Parliament again? Is that what is going to happen?

David Mundell: I read recently on the hon. Gentleman’s blog that the SNP should stop talking nonsense. He needs to take his own advice. Our position is still clear: we want to secure the agreement of the Scottish Government to our proposals in relation to clause 11. We have been very clear. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has been clear. Our door is open. We recognise Aberdeen’s great exporting tradition, which is why we want to ensure that the Secretary of State for International Trade to do so.

Kirsty Blackman: Consistently, reports have said that Aberdeen is set to be hit the worst by Brexit, not least because of the number of incredibly successful exporting businesses we have. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that we stay in the single market and the customs union to protect businesses in Aberdeen?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the Secretary of State for International Trade is visiting Aberdeen. We recognise Aberdeen’s great exporting tradition, which is why we want to ensure that there are opportunities for Aberdeen’s businesses around the world. This Government will not sign up to a single market and the customs union so that we can negotiate free trade agreements that allow businesses to take advantage of those opportunities.

John Lamont: The Scottish borders have a number of industries with international reach, including the textiles industry, which is a global player in fashion. There is also an international market for food and drink from the borders, and indeed from across Scotland. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that producers of textiles and of food and drink in the borders and across Scotland will be taken account of as part of the Brexit negotiations so that they can take advantage of the opportunities that Brexit presents?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is always a champion for the businesses in the borders, and I can of course give him that reassurance. We are talking to producers in the borders, across Scotland and indeed across the UK to ensure that they can make the most of the opportunities around the world as we leave the EU.

David Duguid: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his response. Will he encourage the Secretary of State for International Trade to meet seafood processors during his visit to Aberdeen next month?

David Mundell: Yes.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Exports

2. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to promote Scottish exports as the UK leaves the EU. [904845]

5. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to promote Scottish exports as the UK leaves the EU. [904849]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): From funding UK Export Finance support to re-establishing the Board of Trade, the UK Government are working to support all Scottish businesses that are looking to export or expand their operations abroad.
the EU. It is now incumbent on this Government to negotiate the best possible terms for that departure. The Government have made it absolutely clear that we will not be part of a customs union and will look to negotiate our own bespoke free trade agreement with the EU.

**Renewable Energy Sector**

3. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on supporting the renewable energy sector in Scotland. [904846]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has regular discussions with colleagues on a range of issues, including the renewable energy sector in Scotland. The Government remain committed to a thriving renewables industry across the UK, and Scotland is a central part of that, with up to £557 million of support being made available for new generation projects.

Liz McInnes: Given that we are an island, wave and tidal energy should be a priority for this Government. However, due to the allocation of funding through the contracts for difference scheme, wave and tidal energy have never secured funding, as they cannot compete financially with more established technologies. Will the Secretary of State undertake to review the way those allocations are carried out and consider allocating a specific pot to less established technologies?

Stuart Andrew: In previous rounds of contracts for difference, Scottish projects won 11 of the 25 contracts. On the specific point the hon. Lady makes, Lady makes, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has committed to raise the issue with the Minister responsible and will come back to her on that.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Recently, I visited the community hydro scheme in Callander, which is a first-class project that makes the best of our Scottish rain—there will be no shortage of that in the short term or the long term. What encouragement can the Department give to Scotland’s hydro energy businesses?

Stuart Andrew: The next round of contracts for difference is expected in the spring of next year. That is an opportunity for new and innovative schemes to come forward for grants, and I suggest that an application be made.

**Social Media Consultancies**

4. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What his Department’s policy is on using social media consultancies. [904848]

5. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What his Department’s policy is on using social media consultancies. [904853]

6. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What his Department’s policy is on using social media consultancies. [904855]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland does not currently use social media consultancies and has not done so in the past.

Neil Gray: Freedom of information requests published by The Ferret show that one advertising campaign from the Scotland Office targeted small business owners solely in the Secretary of State’s Dumfriesshire constituency. Did he direct his officials in the Department to target his own constituency specifically?

David Mundell: There are very clear rules in relation to such matters. If the hon. Gentleman has any specific suggestion to make, he should take them up through that process.

Alan Brown: It must be more than a coincidence that the Scotland Office did a very targeted Facebook campaign in the Secretary of State’s own constituency, excluding cohorts such as those with an interest in Scottish independence, so can he tell the House when he knew that his Department was using social media to target his constituents only?

David Mundell: I have clearly answered the point that the hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), raised, and if he has specific suggestions that the very clear rules under which the Government operate have been breached, I would like to hear them. But it is very clear, for example, that the Scottish Government target specific audiences, and if he is saying that they do not, I would be very surprised to hear that.

Brendan O’Hara: We have been told that the Scotland Office published numerous Facebook posts to coincide with Government visits, but it appears that only the posts relating to the Secretary of State’s constituency received a financial boost. If that is the case and the Scotland Office is seen to be micro-targeting tailored Facebook adverts only on voters in his constituency, does he consider that a misuse of taxpayers’ money and an abuse of power?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman does have a track record of asking questions when he does not know what the answer is going to be. I return very clearly to the point that, if there are specific suggestions that the code under which the Government operate has been breached, they should be made and taken forward in the proper way. But if the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that the Scottish Government do not target specific individuals with their material, he is misleading this House.

Mr Speaker: Well, if the hon. Gentleman were suggesting it, he would be, but he is not, so he is not. I am sure that the SNP is not accusing the Secretary of State of impropriety, as that would be the wrong thing to do on the Floor of the Chamber, but equally, I am sure that the Secretary of State is not making any accusation of impropriety.

David Mundell indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful for the nod of the head from a sedentary position.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Cambridge Analytica claimed yesterday that the SNP’s involvement with it was far more than Nicola Sturgeon has previously claimed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the SNP
should be far more open and honest about its involvement with Cambridge Analytica, particularly with its own MPs?

David Mundell: Mr Speaker, I might well agree, but as I am sure you would tell me, I am not responsible for the SNP.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend share my interest in the answers provided to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) by Cambridge Analytica yesterday, in the most recent hearing, and does he agree that it is important that the separatists are equally open about how they have used these consultancies?

David Mundell: What I agree with, and this is not necessarily the forum, is that the SNP has a very great many questions to answer about its involvement with Cambridge Analytica. Perhaps Mr Peter Murrell, when he deigns to speak to the MP group, will answer some of those questions for them.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is rather ironic that the SNP submitted this question en masse, given its subsequent unwillingness to offer basic transparency over the party’s dealings with Cambridge Analytica, but I hope that today the Secretary of State can be more transparent than the SNP has been. While his Government decimate public services, his Department is spending £50,000 on targeted social media, so can he tell us what data the Scotland Office gathered on the public and whether he believes that this was an appropriate use of taxpayers’ money?

David Mundell: The Scotland Office did not gather data on the public. We used established methods of advertising effectively on Facebook. If the hon. Gentleman pays attention to some of the debates and discussions in this House, he will know that many people now gain information through social media, so in terms of the Scotland Office fulfilling its obligation to the people of Scotland about what the Government and the Scotland Office are doing, social media is a perfectly appropriate channel to do it through.

Leaving the EU: Effect on Scotland

6. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with the Prime Minister on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on Scotland.

Dr Whitford: The Home Office cap on tier 2 visas has been reached in each of the last four months, meaning that applications are now being prioritised according to the salary offered. As a result, the average salary now needed has risen from £30,000 to £55,000, meaning that the majority of such visas are likely to end up in high-income areas such as London, as companies in Scotland, and indeed the NHS, cannot simply double their salaries. Does the Secretary of State not accept that we in Scotland need our own immigration system so that we can recruit high-skilled professionals for our industries and NHS?

David Mundell: I do not accept that Scotland needs its own immigration system, and it was clear at the time of the Smith Commission agreement that immigration would not be devolved, but I will look into the specific issue the hon. Lady has raised.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Secretary of State’s Government have repeatedly talked the talk about a partnership of equals, so will he explain where on earth is the equity and partnership in proposals that the Westminster Parliament be able to restrict the Scottish Parliament’s powers for up to seven years without its consent?

David Mundell: As I made clear earlier, the UK Government are committed to working with the Scottish Government, but we are not just partners; what the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues cannot accept is that Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, and that is the nature of the agreement we have reached, which the Welsh Government say protects the devolution settlement.

Angela Crawley: The SNP asked the Secretary of State countless times whether amendments to clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill would be tabled to protect devolution, and time and again he promised that they would. The Scottish Government have drafted amendments and provided proposals, but the Westminster Government have ignored all of them. Is this not just another broken Tory promise to Scotland?

David Mundell: I am sure that question looked better written down than it sounded. The Welsh Government, who Mike Russell only last week said were fully aligned with the Scottish Government’s purpose and requirements, have made it clear that the amendment we are lodging to the EU withdrawal Bill protects the devolution settlement.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): East Renfrewshire has a vibrant business community, but only 75 of its businesses have more than 20 employees, and by far their most important market is the rest of the UK. What reassurances can my right hon. Friend give them that as the UK leaves the EU they will have seamless access to the rest of the UK?

David Mundell: The debate on clause 11 arose because of the importance to businesses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland of retaining that UK market, which is why we place such importance on getting that right. I believe our amendment does just that.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: I call Bill Grant. No? He was bobbing previously. Does he want to get in?

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My question has been answered, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is in danger of setting a precedent against repetition in the House of Commons, but it is an isolated case. I am grateful to him.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Two thirds of the UK’s jobs in financial and professional services are outside London and many are in Scotland. Reuters estimates that 5,000 jobs in financial services might move because of Brexit. What advice has the Secretary of State been given about how this could affect jobs in Scotland?

David Mundell: The hon. Lady is right. It is very important that everyone is clear that financial services are not just in the City of London but are hugely important in Scotland and the other constituent parts of the UK. That is why we are fighting for a good deal from the EU on financial services.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Economy

7. Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the potential effect on the Scottish economy of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement in place.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): We want our future relationship with the EU to be a deep and special partnership that takes in both economic and security co-operation. We are confident that this is in the interests of both sides, so we approach these negotiations anticipating success. We do not want or expect a no deal outcome.

Ged Killen: In its year-end report, the Fraser of Allander Institute pointed to uncertainty over Brexit as one of the principal drags on the Scottish economy. The people of Scotland are fed up with the ongoing pantomime that is the relationship between the Scottish Tories and the SNP. What meetings has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government on clause 11, and how does he intend to bring this farce to a close?

Stuart Andrew: I think my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it very clear that we want the Scottish Government to agree to the clause 11 amendment as the Welsh Government have. The Welsh Government have accepted that the UK Government have gone a long way, and I hope that the Scottish Government are listening and will take part.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally and briefly, Patricia Gibson.

Ayrshire Growth Deal

10. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on low-income families of the roll-out of universal credit in Scotland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Universal credit is transforming lives across the country. Research shows that universal credit claimants spend more time searching and applying for work than those on previous benefits. There are now more than 100,000 fewer workless households in Scotland than there were seven years ago.

David Hanson: The Trussell Trust reports that there was a 17% increase in food bank use in Scotland last year. Could that be linked in any way to universal credit?

Stuart Andrew: I think it is widely accepted that there are many reasons why people use food banks, and many different issues. Even the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty has accepted that. We have rolled out universal credit slowly and made changes when we have considered them to be necessary, and we continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: Finally and briefly, Patricia Gibson.

Universal Credit: Low-Income Families

12. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the progress of the Ayrshire growth deal.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I am sure the hon. Lady will join me in welcoming the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when she visited Ayr and said that the UK Government were opening talks to deliver such a deal.

Patricia Gibson: Given that the Secretary of State has told me on the Floor of the House that he shares my frustration at the lack of progress on the deal, and given that the Prime Minister has now committed herself to it publicly, will he finally, at long last, for the love of God, give us a timetable?

David Mundell: I think that somewhere in the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) could be improved, as I tried to call him a few moments ago, but I am in a generous mood. Let us hear the fella.
Bill Grant: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the city and growth deals that cover the vast majority of Scotland are a great example of what can be achieved when Governments and authorities work closely together rather than picking a fight with one another?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Let me add that it is his disposition—his bonhomie—that takes deals and arrangements forward, rather than the negativity and hostility of some.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904929] Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 25 April.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our warmest congratulations to their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on the birth of their son earlier this week.

I know that Members on both sides of the House will also want to join me in marking Stephen Lawrence’s death 25 years ago. For each of those years, the Lawrence family have fought heroically to ensure that their son’s life and death will never be forgotten. As I announced earlier this week, the Government will work with the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust to establish a national annual commemoration of Stephen’s life and legacy.

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.

Gavin Robinson: My colleagues and I acknowledge the fortitude of the Lawrence family, and, indeed, the joy that the nation shares on the occasion of a royal birth.

In 2017, through the confidence and supply agreement, the Prime Minister not only recognised the need to give Northern Ireland an economic boost but agreed to a package of measures, including a Belfast region city deal, a city deal for others, and ultra-fast broadband investment. That will transform our part of this United Kingdom. In response to the eager anticipation of our communities and in reaffirming her commitment, will she ensure that sufficient progress is made to advance both in time for the autumn Budget?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary is committed to working positively with partners in the UK Government, the Belfast city region and the Northern Ireland civil service to progress the city deal.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Bowie.

Q4. [904932] Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Earlier than expected, Mr Speaker; thank you very much. Yesterday, the Welsh Government reached an agreement with Her Majesty’s Government on the withdrawal Bill. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is in the interests of Scottish business and the Scottish people that the Scottish National party leadership should do the same and reach a similar agreement as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that we are making progress on the withdrawal Bill. I think that has been acknowledged by all sides, and after many months of negotiation—I pay tribute to my right hon. Friends, particularly the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for the work he has done in those negotiations—we have reached agreement with the Welsh Government. That is a significant achievement and will provide legal certainty, increase the powers of the devolved Governments and respect the devolution settlements. We have made considerable changes to the Bill to reflect issues raised by Members and the devolved Administrations. It is indeed disappointing that the Scottish Government have not yet felt able to add their agreement to the new amendments, and we sincerely hope that they will reconsider their position.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on the birth of their baby and I wish them well.

We should also reflect on the fact that Doreen and Neville Lawrence fought for years to get justice for the death of their son. The Macpherson inquiry showed that institutional racism was a major factor in the inquiry. We need to drive out institutional racism in all its forms, wherever it raises its head within our society. We recognise that the Home Secretary has rightly apologised to the Windrush generation and made a commitment to compensate people for the hardship they have endured. The Government are committed to compensation in theory, but as yet nothing in practice. There is an understandable lack of trust on the part of the Windrush generation, so can the Prime Minister today be clear and confirm that those British citizens, who have worked, paid taxes here for decades and been wrongly denied pensions and benefits, will be fully compensated?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that across this House we should all be absolutely clear in our determination to ensure that we stamp out racism in every form. Let me set out to the House the action that has been taken. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made very clear the offering in her statement to the House that those who came here before 1 January 1973 from Commonwealth countries—this is from Commonwealth countries as a whole—will be offered citizenship status without paying the fee and without
taking the knowledge of language and “Life in the UK” test. The children of the Windrush generation who are in the UK will in most cases be British citizens already; but where that is not the case, they will be able to apply to naturalise at no further cost.

We are also taking action in relation to those who made their life here but retired to their country of origin and have found it difficult or impossible to return to the UK. We will work with high commissions to make sure that they can easily access the offer of formal British citizenship, because the Windrush generation are British; they are part of us. There will be a compensation scheme, the details of which my right hon. Friend will set out in due course, but I think everyone will see that the action the Government have taken is because we know the Windrush generation—[ Interruption. ] The Labour Front Benchers shake their heads and go, “Oh no!” The Windrush generation are British, they are part of us, and we will ensure that.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is not an act of generosity to waive citizenship fees when they are British citizens already. They should be granted full status immediately. Four years ago, an internal Home Office memo stated that the right hon. Lady’s “hostile environment” policy could make it harder for people like the Windrush generation to find homes and that it could “provoke discrimination”. Why did the Home Secretary ignore that memo?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about a “hostile environment”:

“What we are proposing here will, I think, flush illegal migrants out. We are trying to create a much more hostile environment in this country if you are here illegally.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) when he was Labour’s Immigration Minister. The Labour leader ought to know about this because the right hon. Gentleman sits on his Front Bench.

Jeremy Corbyn: What I am talking about is the Windrush generation of people who came here completely legally. The Prime Minister herself was warned directly about these policies in 2014 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who is now the shadow Home Secretary. And when the Immigration Act 2014 was going through Parliament, the then Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, wrote to the right hon. Lady warning:

“The costs and risks considerably outweigh the benefits”.

Why did the Prime Minister ignore his advice as well as the request from my right hon. Friend?

The Prime Minister: In relation to the Windrush generation, we have made it absolutely clear that those people who came here from the Commonwealth before 1 January 1973 have a right to be here: they are British, they are part of us. The problem at the time was that they were not documented with that right, and that is what we are now putting right. He talks about action that the Government have taken in relation to those who are here illegally. The Windrush generation are here legally. Action against those who are here illegally has been taken by successive Governments. Checks on someone’s right to work here came in in 1997, measures on access to benefits in 1999 and civil penalties for employing illegal migrants in 2008—both under a Labour Government. Why have these actions been taken? Because people up and down this country want to ensure that the Government are taking action on those people who are here illegally. It is not fair to those people who work hard, who have a right to be here and who have contributed to this country if they see people who are here illegally being given the same access to rights and services.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister seems to want to get away from the injustice done to the Windrush generation. The Equalities and Human and Rights Commission warned her about the Immigration Act 2016, saying that the Bill “is likely to lead to destitution and may cause inhuman and degrading treatment, in breach of Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights”.

The Government have quite rightly apologised for the scandalous way in which British citizens have been treated, but it was due to the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, so will the Prime Minister now commit to reviewing that legislation to make sure this never happens again?

The Prime Minister: As I set out for the House last week, this is a generation who came here prior to 1973—[ Interruption. ] Labour Front Benchers say “We know this,” but the questions that the right hon. Gentleman is asking suggest that they are ignoring some of the facts in relation to this. This is a generation who came here prior to 1973. We are not ignoring the problems that some members of this generation are facing. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has set up a special team in the Home Office, not just to deal with their inquiries but to actively help them find the documentation to clarify their status. That is why we have made the offer that my right hon. Friend made of ensuring that we can give them formal British citizenship which recognises that they are British but does so in a formal, documented way. The problem was that, prior to 1973 when the Windrush generation came here, they were not given documents that set out their status. We are now putting that right, and we will leave no stone unturned to put that right.

Jeremy Corbyn: In 2013, the then Home Secretary said that introducing the legislation was about creating “a really hostile environment”. Had the Windrush generation not mounted a campaign and had Opposition Members not raised the matter persistently, there would have been no compensation, no review and no apology. Any review of legislation needs to go wider than just immigration law. The dismantling of legal aid provision in 2012 made the impact of the Immigration Act 2014 harder to challenge. The policies swept up British citizens and legal migrants, causing them immense suffering, as the Prime Minister was warned. Will the Prime Minister send a clear message today and tell us that the hostile environment is over and that her bogus immigration targets, which have driven the hostile culture, will be scrapped? The Windrush generation have served this country and deserve better than this.

The Prime Minister: The Windrush generation are British. They have contributed to this country. They have made their life here. This is about dealing with those people who are in this country illegally—not the Windrush generation, who are here legally. I say to the
right hon. Gentleman again that I have quoted the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill from when he was Labour’s Immigration Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition referred to 2013. In 2013, the then shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), said that “we need much stronger action from Government to bring illegal immigration down.”

That is—[Interruption.] Labour Front Benchers are saying that the Windrush generation are not illegal. They are not illegal; they are here legally. That is why we are providing support to enable them to get the documents for their status. What the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is talking about is whether we should deal with illegal immigration, and up and down the country the British public will tell him that we should deal with illegal immigration.

Jeremy Corbyn: We are talking about the environment created by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary for six years, when she knew full well of the problems that the Windrush generation were facing, and at last she has been forced to act upon that.

Last week, the current Home Secretary admitted that the Home Office “sometimes loses sight of the individual.”—[Official Report, 16 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 28.]

Yet we now know that when she took over from her predecessor, her intent was to harden this cruel and misdirected policy, pledging to do so “ruthlessly”. A report last month by immigration officials stated that “hostile environment” measures were not even having the desired effect. The current Home Secretary inherited a failing policy and made it worse. Is it not time she took responsibility and resigned? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself. We need much stronger action from Government to bring illegal immigration down.

Mr Speaker: Including the hon. Gentleman. He should not be too shy about it.

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Matt Campbell. I understand Matt Campbell’s JustGiving page has now raised over £140,000 for the Brathay Trust, which works to inspire vulnerable young people to make positive changes in their life. I am sure Members across the House will want to join me in offering condolences to Matt Campbell’s family and friends, but I am also happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the runners in this weekend’s London marathon, including the 15 Members of this House who competed.

If I may say so, I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend, who was the fastest Member of Parliament in the marathon, completing it—we should have it on the record—in 3 hours and 38 minutes. Many congratulations to him.

It is also right that we pay tribute to the ambulance workers and medical staff for all they did on the day to enable the marathon to take place.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On behalf of those of us on the SNP Benches, I pass on our congratulations to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on the birth of their son. I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks on Stephen Lawrence.

The CBI, the National Farmers Union, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, the House of Lords and, overwhelmingly, Members of this House want the UK to remain in the customs union. Why is the Prime Minister on the side of her cynical Brexiteers and Front Benchers and not working in the interests of all the nations of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The British people voted to leave the European Union. In voting to leave the European Union, they voted to leave the single market and the customs union. What we want to ensure is that, as a country, we are able to independently negotiate free trade deals around the rest of the world, that we deliver on our commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that we have as frictionless a border as possible between the United Kingdom and the European Union. What businesses tell me is that they want a tariff-free, frictionless border, and that is what we are negotiating for them.

Ian Blackford: That answer simply is not good enough. The single market and the customs union, quite simply, were not on the ballot paper. The Prime Minister’s own Government analysis shows that almost every sector of the economy in every region of the United Kingdom
would be negatively impacted if the UK left the customs union. Negotiations in Brussels are effectively at a standstill because the Government are bereft of ideas for how to deal with the Irish border issue.

Why is it that jobs, living standards and even the Good Friday agreement are all secondary concerns to this Government? Will the Prime Minister confirm now that if this place votes in favour of a customs union, this Government? Will the Prime Minister confirm now that if this place votes in favour of a customs union, this Government? Will the Prime Minister confirm now that if this place votes in favour of a customs union, this Government? Will the Prime Minister confirm now that if this place votes in favour of a customs union, this Government? Will the Prime Minister confirm now that if this place votes in favour of a customs union, this Government?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong in so many of the statements that he has just made. First, this Government are not bereft of ideas on how we can approach the issue of the Northern Ireland border, because we have published proposals for dealing with that very issue. If he wants to listen to Scottish businesses, I suggest he listen to those businesses—the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, Scottish Bakers and the Scottish Retail Consortium—that just yesterday said: "Scotland’s businesses benefit enormously from the existing and largely unfeuded UK single market."

The Scottish National party Government in Scotland should listen to that.

Q9. [904937] Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): At Thursday’s recovery meeting in Salisbury, the public were told that nine Novichok hotspots remain in and around the city and that the clean-up may take until the end of the year. In thanking the Prime Minister for her very close interest in this matter, may I ask what more can be done to expedite the clean-up, so that life in south Wiltshire can return to normal as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important issue, on which I am happy to update the House. First, let me make it absolutely clear that Public Health England has said that Salisbury is safe for residents and visitors, and there is no need for anyone to take any additional precautions. Cordons are in place to protect the public while decontamination work is carried out on the sites he has referred to. After decontamination is undertaken at each site, sampling will be carried out to ensure that the sites are safe to be released back to the public. I assure him that the need to expedite this work is well recognised, but we want, of course, to ensure that it is done in a way so that those sites will in the future be available to, and safe for, the public.

Q2. [904938] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): About 20 of my constituents, most of whom are living around Harthill, and 4,000 other low-paid workers around the UK are waiting for money that is rightfully theirs. They have been waiting for 20 years. Some will have died waiting, and others are now seriously ill. Mr Speaker, you represent, as do others across this House, constituents who are waiting for their payout from the Roadchef employee benefit trust, which has been trying to get Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to take a decision on £10 million wrongly paid to it 18 years ago. Will the Prime Minister join me today in calling on HMRC to finally decide on this case and get the money back to the people who rightly deserve it?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the hon. Gentleman raised this case with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week. My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary has offered to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the wider issue. HMRC is working closely with the trustees’ representatives to resolve the case and will be meeting them next month. HMRC is operationally independent, and that is important. It must of course apply the law fairly and collect the taxes set out in legislation by Parliament, but it is working with the trustees’ representatives, and as I said, the Financial Secretary is happy to meet him to discuss this.

Q12. [904941] Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for reaffirming the Government’s clear position that we will not be remaining in any form of a customs union? While we are on the EU, will she reassure fishermen in South Dorset and around the country, especially the under-10-metre fleet, that they will not be disadvantaged by any incoming EU policies during the implementation period?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this question of the fisheries is a matter that my hon. Friend and others have raised previously. Let me reassure him that, during the implementation period we have negotiated, the UK’s share of catch cannot be reduced. This safeguards the livelihoods of our fishing communities and, importantly, also delivers a smooth and orderly Brexit. There is also an obligation in the agreement on both sides to act in good faith throughout that implementation period, and any attempts by the EU to harm the UK fishing industry would obviously breach that obligation. Obviously, in December 2020, we will be negotiating fishing opportunities as a third country—as a fully independent coastal state—deciding who can have access to our waters and on what terms for the first time in more than 40 years.

Q3. [904931] Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Prime Minister will be aware that in my constituency we are putting the finishing touches to our second aircraft carrier the Prince of Wales, but as we near the end of that contract, more than 400 people in the Rosyth yard are now facing redundancy, with many more job losses in the pipeline. Will she visit my constituency to explain to the Rosyth workforce, face to face, why her Government intend to award a £1 billion shipbuilding contract to yards outwith these islands when we have the skills, talent and infrastructure to deliver right here?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing through our national shipbuilding strategy is focusing on giving the Royal Navy the ships it needs, while increasing economic growth across the country and investing in a more skilled workforce. We are encouraging a more competitive industry in shipbuilding and growing jobs across the country. The hon. Gentleman may have been referring to the future support ships for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary that are being procured through international competition. Three ships will be built in the fleet solid support programme. They will be subject to international competition to secure the best possible value for money for the UK taxpayer. Through our national shipbuilding strategy, we are ensuring that we develop that shipbuilding capability in the UK, so that we can encourage all UK shipyards with the necessary skills and expertise to continue to engage in that programme.

Q13. [904942] David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, according to the World Health Organisation, the second largest medical system
in the world, with 300,000 doctors treating 200 million patients every year, is homeopathy—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] That is the evidence. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate—[INTERUPTION.]

Mr Speaker: Order. That is very discourteous. I want to hear the views of the hon. Gentleman on this matter.

David Tredinnick: Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the doctors who are members of the Faculty of Homeopathy on their work in the health service, particularly in dealing with cases that are too difficult to treat conventionally? Does she agree that homeopathic vets should be able to make their own minds up about whether to use homeopathy on its own or with other treatments, too?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has been a long-standing advocate in this House for homeopathy. Obviously, some patients who are treated in the NHS and the private sector are users of complementary and alternative therapies, but it is the responsibility of the local NHS to make decisions on the commissioning and funding of healthcare treatments and to take account of issues with safety, clinical and cost-effectiveness, and the availability of suitably qualified and regulated practitioners. As regards all the issues he has addressed, it is right that those who are professionally able to make these judgments are left to make them.

Q5. [904933] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, in the Borough of Rochdale, one year 6 child in three is overweight or obese. With our children being bombarded with junk food adds on their favourite television programmes, billboards and even bus tickets, will the Prime Minister take the bold steps needed to tackle junk food marketing, support Jamie Oliver’s latest campaign and say that she, too, has “#AdEnough”?

The Prime Minister: We already have plans to tackle childhood obesity that are world leading. No other developed country has done anything as ambitious. Our soft drinks industry levy is a bold action that we are taking, and our sugar reduction programme will cut the amounts of sugar consumed by young people. Of course, we are also putting in plans for the amount of exercise and physical activity primary school children get every day. Those steps will make a real difference and help reverse a problem that has been decades in the making, but of course we have not ruled out further action if the right results are not seen.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that events since the very powerful debate on anti-Semitism that we held in this Chamber have demonstrated that Labour is still not taking these judgments are left to make them.

Q6. [904934] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I see the results of the Prime Minister’s “hostile environment” in my casework every single day. My constituents, Mr Shaikh and Ms Gul, applied for leave to remain on the same day, 27 March 2017. His was granted, but hers was refused on 28 March—a full year later. The couple’s five-year-old and their four-month-old are both British citizens, but Ms Gul has been told that she should be ready to leave the UK. Why does the Prime Minister want to separate this family, and will she intervene?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well that those who work in the UK Visas and Immigration section of the Home Office look at every case very carefully. She has made her point in this House, and I am sure that the Home Office will look again at that case.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The City of London has recently topped the worldwide Z/Yen index and it supports 450,000 jobs and is worth £45 billion to the UK economy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential for both the EU and the UK that the final Brexit agreement supports these financial services, because otherwise they will simply move elsewhere in the world?

The Prime Minister: That is an important issue and I referred to it in my Mansion House speech. I said that we wanted to ensure that financial services were a part of the deep and comprehensive partnership that we wished to build with the EU27. Our goal should be to establish access to each other’s markets. That should be based on maintaining the same regulatory outcomes over time, with a mechanism that determines proportionate consequences where they are not maintained. That is part of my ambition for an economic partnership with the European Union that goes way beyond any existing free trade agreement, covering more sectors and co-operating more fully. My hon. Friend is right that if firms and financial services are looking to go elsewhere, they are more likely to look to go elsewhere in the world, rather than elsewhere in Europe.

Q8. [904936] Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): A stem cell transplant can be a life-saving treatment for people with blood cancer. Recent research shows that having a younger stem cell donor improves a patient’s chance of surviving post-transplant. Will the Prime Minister join me in supporting the upcoming “Be a Lifesaver” campaign by the charity Anthony Nolan, which aims to recruit more young people aged 16 to 30 to the stem cell donor register? Will she congratulate the 1,000 people in Coventry North East and all others who are already signed up to be donors?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating those people in Coventry and elsewhere who have already signed up to be donors. Anthony Nolan has done excellent work over many years. I was not aware of that particular campaign, but I will certainly look into it. It sounds like a very good campaign, and I am sure that she will be encouraging other Members of this House to support it as well.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Increasing numbers of children of school age are now being educated at home. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important to ensure that those children receive an education that is appropriate for their needs?
**The Prime Minister:** This is very important. Parents will sometimes decide to educate their children at home, and they will have their reasons for wishing to do so, but it is important that the school teaches in an appropriate quality and level of education. I reassure my hon. Friend that I know that the Secretary of State for Education is looking at the issue.

**Q10. [0904938] Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Saturday, I met a lovely young couple who had all but given up hope of ever being able to buy their own home, but thanks to an innovative and genuinely affordable housing scheme by Manchester City Council, they have just moved into their own house, right near the university. Will the Prime Minister join me in praising Manchester Labour, which, despite her Government’s planning and funding restrictions, has built many hundreds of truly affordable homes in my constituency, and will have another 2,000 coming on stream very soon?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to say to the hon. Lady that I think it is important that we are providing and building more homes for people, and that within that we include affordable homes, too. I am pleased to say that, since we came into office in 2010, we have delivered more affordable homes than the previous Labour Government did in their last seven years in office. The Government are in fact working with Manchester—with the Mayor of Manchester and the combined authority—to ensure that we are supporting them in certain areas with funding, encouraging that building of affordable homes, and indeed ensuring that there are homes to which young people can aspire, so that those who never thought they would be able to get their foot on the property ladder can do so.

**Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Morley Newlands Academy scored “outstanding” during a recent Ofsted inspection, and Bruntcliffe Academy in Morley scored “good” for the very first time in its history. Will the Prime Minister confirm to the House that an additional 1.8 million children since 2010 are now taught in “good” and “outstanding” schools, under this Conservative Government? I hope that the Prime Minister will join me in congratulating the principals, teachers, staff and students of the two schools on their hard work to attain this admirable achievement.

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming that funding, which will sometimes decide to educate their children at home, and they will have their reasons for wishing to do so, but it is important that the school teaches in an appropriate quality and level of education. I reassure my hon. Friend that I know that the Secretary of State for Education is looking at the issue.

**Q11. [0904940] Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): My constituent, Anthony, who lives with a chronic, disabling illness, worked all his life until finishing on medical grounds three years ago. From 2002, he received disability living allowance, but last year he was transferred to personal independence payments and his mobility allowance was cut. Yesterday, Anthony handed back the mobility vehicle that he has had for 16 years. Today he is housebound and fearful for his future. The total injustice of the system means that he now faces a nine-month wait for his appeal at Liverpool tribunal services. What message does the Prime Minister have for Anthony as he adjusts to his new life as a prisoner in his own home?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sorry to hear of that case. As all Members will know, there are cases where people have had to appeal against such judgments. I will ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions is aware of the case raised by the hon. Gentleman.

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): In October last year, the national bereavement care pathway was launched in 11 pilot sites. Last week, it launched in a further 21 hospital sites. I am delighted to announce that yesterday, the Government set aside funding for a national roll-out of the national bereavement care pathway. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that funding, which will make such a difference to bereaved parents up and down the country?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend has championed and campaigned on this subject with great personal commitment. I recognise the importance of providing bereavement counselling and of supporting parents in the most difficult circumstances of having lost a child. That is why the Government are providing this funding.

**Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister will be aware of the concern that if the Home Office cannot deal humanely and efficiently with the immigration status of 50,000 UK residents of Caribbean origin, it will seriously struggle to deal efficiently and humanely with the registration of 3 million European nationals. Will she address the particular concern that the Home Office is now taking powers, under the Data Protection Bill, to cover up future mistakes by blocking access to individual files sought by individuals and their lawyers to check the accuracy of their data?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman’s interpretation is not correct. It will be possible for people to access the information that they need. He mentioned the issue of EU citizens. There is a real difference between that case and the situation where people came to this country but were not given documented status here. That is the issue with which we are dealing regarding the Windrush generation. They have contributed to this country and lived here, but when they came here they were not given that documentary evidence. There is a difference in the system that we are putting in place for EU citizens, who are being encouraged and asked to apply for settled status, so that they have evidence of their status. We are ensuring that this problem will not occur in relation to EU citizens.

**Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): This week in this place, we have been talking about higher education. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the action the Government are taking shows that a Conservative Government are committed to delivering for students, working with them and treating them as adults, in stark contrast to Opposition Members, who look to win votes from young people by offering illogical and undeliverable free stuff?
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The review we are bringing in on tertiary education is about ensuring not just that the funding and financing of tertiary education is right, but that young people have access to the routes through education, be it technical or university, that suit their particular needs. Of course, last year the Leader of the Opposition said that he would deal with student debt. Students thought he was going to go back on his promise.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I was not going to raise this, but the Prime Minister quoted me. Let me say this to the Prime Minister: do not try to hide behind me or the Labour party when she was warned repeatedly of the damage that her obsession with her migration target was doing. Do not try to hide behind the Cabinet when they do not agree with her on this and are trying to clear up the mess, and do not try to hide behind civil servants—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not having the questioner interrupted. The question will be heard and it will be heard in full, and that is the end of it.

Yvette Cooper: Do not try to hide behind civil servants when she set the policies and instilled in them the culture of hostility, and when the high commissioners told us this morning that they had warned the Foreign Office about the Windrush generation immigration problem in 2016. What did she do? Because a few years ago the Prime Minister said:

“I’m actually sick and tired of government ministers...who simply blame other people when something goes wrong”.

What has changed?

The Prime Minister: Nobody is trying to blame anybody else. The question of the Windrush generation arises from the fact that when they came here, their status to live here was not documented. Over the years—[Interruption.] Yes, there have been individual cases over the years of people who have had to regularise their documentation and have done so. We have now seen cases of people in difficulty because they have not been able to do that. That is why the Home Office is taking action to deal with that. But under Governments of every colour, including the Government in which the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), wrote to the Prime Minister’s then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Gentleman, I have always said: no deal is better than a bad deal. As regards being in a customs union, that means that we would not be able to negotiate our own trade deals around the rest of the world, and we want to be able to do that. As I saw last week at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, there is considerable interest around the rest of the world in being able to have those independent trade deals negotiated between other countries and the UK.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): In 2011, I wrote to the Prime Minister’s then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), about my constituent who came here in 1956 aged four, and in 2011 was told that he could no longer work and he did not have British citizenship. Her Minister wrote to me and basically said, “Tough.” Can she now explain in a little more detail what compensation will be available for my constituent, who has been unable to work since 2011—for seven years? Will she also, importantly for many people who are feeling vulnerable and scared, assure them that if they ring her hotline, they will see no enforcement action to remove them from the country, because they are scared when ringing that hotline?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, obviously, individual cases will have different circumstances, but my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be setting out the compensation scheme shortly.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s second point, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it clear that there is no question of taking enforcement action when people ring that hotline. We actively want people to ring that hotline, to bring their cases forward, so that the Home Office can help them to ensure that they have got the documents needed, so that they can be reassured and will not see any problems in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from a baron—John Baron.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for a very positive meeting about the need for NHS England to release all of the £200 million cancer transformation funding to frontline services, so that they can better deliver on the cancer strategy. However, the system has been painfully slow in following through on what was agreed at that meeting. If that continues, will the Prime Minister meet me, so that we can unblock the logjam on behalf of cancer patients and their families?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry to hear that there has still been some slowness in the system. I will look into the matter, and if we are not able to unblock it, I am quite happy to meet my hon. Friend again.
Points of Order

12.51 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For the first time since the birth of devolution, the Westminster Government—[Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is too much noise as people are leaving the Chamber, so we will pause for a moment. I would not want the gravamen of the hon. Lady’s inquiry to go unheard or inadequately heard. If people toddling out of the Chamber could do so quickly and quietly, that would be much appreciated by the hon. Lady and doubtless by others. With a bit of projection, I think we will hear her?

Liz Saville Roberts: I greatly thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support for my point of order.

For the first time since the birth of devolution, the Westminster Government have succeeded in clawing back powers that should be held by our National Assembly. That will have major consequences for the UK’s constitution, and it is all thanks to the Labour party in Wales. Despite the profound significance of that backroom deal, it has been raised by the UK Government through written statement only. Can you advise me how best to request an oral statement in the Chamber and to whom I should direct such a request?

Mr Speaker: My interpretation of what the hon. Lady just said is, “I don’t like just having to content myself with a written statement; I want an oral. Mr Speaker, can I register my point?” The truth of the matter is, as she is very well aware, that that is precisely what she has just done to considerable effect, in the sense that it has been heard. Whether there will now be an oral statement, I do not know, but events take place and matters evolve. If in subsequent days she is not satisfied, she can always seek, if she thinks the matter warrants the urgent attention of the House, to persuade me that it does, and I will have to judge on a case-by-case basis. For today, she has done her best.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is actually worse than that. These issues and matters are being determined in the unelected House of Lords, yet democratically elected Members of Parliament will have no say in the outcome. Is there anything we can do to wrest back control, to ensure that it is democratically elected Members of Parliament who determine and decide these very important issues?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that I think we can await the return of the Lords amendments, and then this Chamber can come to a view about those amendments. I rather imagine that it will do so, but he has very properly vented his concern, and I hope that it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench as well as it has been by me and by other hon. Members.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) just mentioned me by name, in a critical manner, for an action I apparently took as a Minister some years ago. I have no memory of the individual action, but I would like to confirm that I was given no advance notice that he was going to mention me by name. Can I have your confirmation that you would deprecate that behaviour in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: I have just received advice on the matter, as the right hon. Gentleman was raising his point of order, and my response is as follows. First, I did not interpret what the right hon. Member for Tottenham said as an accusation of dishonourable conduct. It was critical, but it was not an accusation of dishonourable conduct or the absence of integrity. Secondly—this is related to my first point—I think that the criticism was of the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) in his capacity as a Minister and the discharge of the duties that he held at that time. I do not think it was a criticism of him as a Member of the House.

In the name of the smooth running of this place, it is ordinarily desirable that Members should be as candid with each other as possible, and I would go so far as to say that it would have done no harm for the right hon. Member for Ashford to have been informed, but I am guided by procedural experts, and the Clerk is our most distinguished procedural expert. In narrow terms, was the right hon. Member for Tottenham guilty of an impropriety in that sense? No, he was not. That is, I think, the balanced and fair answer that I should give and have given to the right hon. Gentleman.

I thought that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was shifting in his seat as though he was about to raise a point of order, but obviously the point of order appetite has been satisfied, at least for now, which is very reassuring. We come now to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has been patiently waiting.
Health Impacts (Public Sector Duty)

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

12.57 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require public authorities to have regard to the need to consider physical and mental health impacts in the exercise of their functions; and for connected purposes.

This Bill is designed to bring a health in all policies approach to the making and delivery of all central and local government policies, and it has a simple aim: to improve the physical and mental health of our nation for generations to come.

The Roman statesman Cicero said that the health of the people shall be the supreme law. Down the centuries, when Governments have heeded his advice, they have performed great deeds: building great sewers and providing fresh water; cleaning up our food by banning contaminants; clearing slums and giving children safe spaces to play; cleansing our city air; vaccinating our children against killer diseases; banning smoking in public places; bringing in health and safety; protecting pedestrians against the dangers of traffic; introducing seatbelts; and, of course, creating our national health service, which delivers physical and mental health care at the point of need, irrespective of the ability to pay.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. New challenges and threats to our health and wellbeing arise in each generation. New responses are required, and that is what my Bill is all about. Hon. Members will have heard me speak about the mental health crisis we face in this country. That is not the only health crisis we face as a nation. We face a crisis of social care. We have a system stalling in the improvement in life expectancy for the first time in 100 years. In modern Britain, a person’s length of life, and the number of years they spend healthily, depends on their address and income. These inequalities exist for a range of other factors too, including likelihood of suffering a road traffic accident, likelihood of suffering a house fire, likelihood of being a victim of violent crime and likelihood of suffering mental ill health. Look at the locations of our food banks. Look at the epidemic of knife crime. Look at Grenfell Tower.

Inequality is a terrible scar on our society, so what is to be done? My Bill aims to place the physical and mental health of the population at the centre of all Government activity, beyond the confines of the Department of Health and Social Care and the responsibility of local authority directors of public health, so that no policy is developed or enacted without due consideration of its impact on health and, where possible, policies are designed actively to improve our wellbeing.

That is not a new approach. I would like to highlight the work of the all-party parliamentary group on health in all policies and its chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). The World Health Organisation adopted a statement on this approach in Helsinki in 2013. It states:

“Health in All Policies is an approach to public policies across sectors that systematically takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts in order to improve population health and health equity. It improves accountability of policymakers for health impacts at all levels of policy-making. It includes an emphasis on the consequences of public policies on health systems, determinants of health and wellbeing.”

Health in all policies has been adopted in Wales, through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which is designed “to minimise any damage and increase any benefit” from new policies. Wales joins Tasmania, Quebec and British Columbia in having statutory health impact assessments. Other countries are striving towards the same goal. Ecuador has its Plan Nacional para el buen vivir—the plan of good living. In Finland, the health in all policies approach has been part of governance for years. In Thailand, citizens have the right to request a health impact assessment if they feel that any proposal might be detrimental to their wellbeing.

Health in all policies means, for example, ensuring that the design of all buildings, estates and urban environments encourages walking, running, cycling, sharing and talking, and deters crime and vandalism. It means designing social security systems, including their assessments, that add to, rather than subtract from, people’s sense of security, which enhances their physical and mental wellbeing because they know that the system is on their side.

Health in all policies means placing duties on food and drink manufacturers, shops and takeaways concerning the ingredients in their goods, pricing and the locations where they sell them, to discourage alcohol abuse and poor diets. It means designing services for young people and teenagers, new parents, people seeking work or the recently bereaved, so that we serve and benefit. The creation of Sure Start centres was an example of this highly innovative approach. Indeed, given that we know how important the first 1,001 days of a child’s life is,
and how what happens from conception to the age are
two still determines an infant’s life chances and their
mental and physical health through childhood to adulthood,
there is no better example of why we need a health in all
policies approach in services for mums, dads and infants.
This stretches way beyond childcare provision and health
checks; it means looking again at patterns of work,
income, benefits, parenting, education, food, housing,
transport, air quality, playgrounds and many other
areas of policy.

I acknowledge that we have seen some helpful steps
forward in recent years, such as the introduction of a
sugar tax and the banning of smoking in cars when
children are present, but these are piecemeal and unco-
ordinated. My Bill represents a step change. It is not
just about saving money for the national health service,
although the approach would save resources, which is
particularly important at a time when we know that our
NHS and social care are under such pressure. It is also
about what the King’s Fund calls
“a cost-effective use of society’s funds that reflects the value
society puts on health and other goals.”

The health in all policies duty could be placed on all
public authorities, which would be further defined in
the Bill to include Ministers of the Crown, Departments
and local government, as outlined in schedule 19 to the
Equality Act 2010. It would be backed by strong machinery
within Government. It was a mistake for the coalition
Government in 2012 to scrap the Cabinet Sub-Committee
on Public Health, which might have served such a useful
purpose, bringing together all those Departments across
Government. Its remit was to enable the Secretary of
State for Health to
“lead public health across central government”
and
“work across multiple departments to address the wider determinants
of health.”

In order to work, health in all policies will require a
central driver that can range across Departments and
agencies, with the full authority of No. 10, bringing
people together, breaking down the walls of Jericho and
creating real cross-Government working. No submission
would appear in any red box without a thorough assessment
of its impact on our nation’s physical and mental health.

Lest some hon. Members feel that this is a licence for
the nanny state, let me point to the so-called family test,
supported by this Government and policed by the Cabinet
Sub-Committee on Social Justice, which requires all
policies to be tested against their impact on family
relationships and functioning. That is just one example.
Governments assess the impact of policies all the time.
Surely no impact is so important as the impact on our
physical and mental wellbeing. We are told that Brexit
affords us an opportunity to reshape our laws and
regulations. No measure could have more positive benefit
than the UK adopting a robust, full-throated approach
to health in all policies.

I am grateful to colleagues from both sides of the
House for their support. That includes more Members
than I was allowed to include in the list of sponsors, so I
will quickly reference them now. They are my hon.
Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and
Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for Stoke-on-Trent North
(Ruth Smeeth), for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for
Birmingham, Selly Oak (Derek Twigg), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for
Stockport (Ann Coffey) and for Weaver Vale (Mike
Amesbury), my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield
North (Joan Ryan) and my hon. Friends the Members
for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Stoke-on-Trent
Central (Gareth Snell), for Warrington North (Helen
Jones), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Bristol
East (Kerry McCarthy).

The Bill would provide a platform for tackling the
health inequalities that blight our communities and
allowing more people to be fully engaged in maintaining
their own health and wellbeing. It would be as solid a
step forward as the restrictions on making and selling
cheap gin in the 18th century, building the city sewers
and delivering clean water in the 19th century, creating
our NHS and the clean air Acts in the 20th century, or
introducing the smoking ban in the 21st century. Health
in all policies would be our legacy to future generations,
and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Luciana Berger, Debbie Abrahams, Dr Lisa
Cameron, Rosie Cooper, Stella Creasy, Mr George
Howarth, Diana Johnson, Norman Lamb, Johnny Mercer,
Rachel Reeves, Andrew Selous and Dr Philippa Whitford
present the Bill.

Luciana Berger accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on
Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 198).
Opposition Day

9TH ALLOTTED DAY

School Funding

Mr Speaker: There have been some late withdrawals, but a not insignificant number of Members wish to speak in this debate. Therefore, although there is no time limit on Front-Bench speeches, I am sure that both the shadow Secretary of State and the Secretary of State will wish to tailor their contributions sensitively to take account of the fact that others wish to contribute.

1.8 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House notes the Conservative Party manifesto pledge to make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new national funding formula, the statement by the Secretary of State for Education that each school will see at least a small cash terms increase and the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s guarantee that every school would receive a cash terms increase; endorses the Government’s guarantee, allows for reductions of up to 1.5 per cent in per pupil funding for schools; and calls on the Government to meet its guarantee, ensuring that every single school receives a cash increase in per pupil funding in every financial year of the 2017 Parliament.

The last time I moved an Opposition day motion, I know I upset the Government. With the support of every party except theirs, our motion rejecting the regulations that increased tuition fees was passed by the House. After that, the Government announced that they would no longer vote on Opposition days. Today, they should find our motion more helpful.

As I suspect Members on both sides of the House know all too well, the Conservative party lost hundreds of thousands of votes at the general election due to its policies. In January, the Secretary of State told us at the Dispatch Box that every school got in touch with me on Friday to say it has had a nutritional breakfasts programme to help young people? Surely she would welcome that.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Brampton Primary School in Chesterfield got in touch with me on Friday to say it has had a £130,000 budget reduction this year. That school has one of the few autism units in the area. Spending on special needs has been halved. The most vulnerable pupils in the schools that most desperately need funding are the victims of that broken Tory promise.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree. That is one of the travesties of this issue. Many parents up and down the country are angry and upset, particularly parents of children with high needs and special educational needs. They feel let down by this Government and their broken promises.

When the Institute for Fiscal Studies heard what the Secretary of State said about a cash-terms increase, it responded: “This is not true.” When I raised the matter with the UK Statistics Authority, it too said that the claim was not, as it stood, accurate. The fact is that the national funding formula does not guarantee every school a cash increase per pupil. In fact, it permits a cut.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Out of 103 schools in Coventry, 102 will face cuts. Put another way, over the next two or three years, education in Coventry will face cuts of just under £14 million. Put yet another way, there will be cuts of £249 per pupil. Is that not disgraceful? Is it not terrible for a party to entice people to vote for it through a manifesto, then cut their throats?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I remember visiting his constituency and seeing the fantastic work that teachers and support staff do in his area. I commend their work, but I say again that the Government have to listen to teachers and parents up and down the country who say that enough is enough and that the cuts to their budgets are not acceptable.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that the IFS also said that the extra £1.3 billion for schools means that school spending will not fall but stay the same per pupil?

Angela Rayner: It is interesting that the hon. Lady says that. That may be the case from today onwards, but that £1.3 billion figure takes no account of the £2.7 billion that her Government have already taken from schools, so they still face cash cuts between 2015 and 2020. Our motion offers the Government the support of the House to change that and to put their own words into practice.

Schools increasingly face an environment that is completely unacceptable in a country like ours. Earlier this month, teachers warned of a growing child poverty crisis. Staff said that children were coming into school without clean clothes. We even heard that pupils were showing signs of malnutrition. I doubt that anyone—in this place or outside—thought they would read headlines like that in 2018, but every part of our children’s education system is experiencing a funding squeeze.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned malnutrition. Does she acknowledge that it took a Conservative-led Government to introduce the free schools programme and invest £26 million in a nutritional breakfasts programme to help young people? Surely she would welcome that.

Angela Rayner: If the hon. Lady casts her mind back, she will remember that at the general election her Government offered school breakfasts at 6p a breakfast. I do not know how they thought they could feed children for 6p a breakfast. I will take no lectures from
Government Members given that, after six months, the Government still do not have a chair for their Social Mobility Commission.

Our motion offers the Government the support of the House to change that and to put their words into practice. Earlier this month, teachers warned of a growing child poverty crisis. The Government should support children and their families from the beginning of their lives, but funding for Sure Start has been slashed by hundreds of millions of pounds and 1,200 Sure Start centres have been lost since the Tories came to power. School funding cuts have left more children crammed into super-size classes, there are fewer subjects on offer and the school day has even been squeezed.

**Maria Caulfield:** Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

**Angela Rayner:** No, I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

The NASUWT warned just weeks ago that one in five new classrooms is a portakabin. Is it not time for the Government to match our commitment to getting the school estate into a safe and acceptable condition?

For kids with special educational needs, the funding crisis creates even greater challenges. Let me declare an interest: only last week, I was one of those parents facing the issue of making transitional arrangements for their child with special educational needs. Frankly, parents up and down the country worry that support will not be in place for their children. When school budgets are cut, the services that support children who are most in need are often lost first. The National Education Union found that almost two thirds of schools have had to cut special needs provision.

The Government’s new funding formula presents local authorities, which are at breaking point due to cuts to their budgets, with the terrible choice between top-slicing additional funding for high needs and giving schools their full allocation. Councils should never have to face that choice. Will the Secretary of State look at giving £1.3 billion from the existing education budget does nothing to mitigate the £2.7 billion of cuts that schools have faced.

Will the Secretary of State tell us how many new schools will now be built by local authorities and how much money will be saved?

The rest of the cuts come from mysterious efficiency savings, which the Secretary of State’s predecessor said would be identified by officials. Have those savings been identified and can he share that information with the House today? Will he admit that the £1.3 billion will not reverse the loss of the £2.7 billion from school budgets, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) reiterated?

Money is not the only factor, but it is hard to escape the reality that the cuts are the fundamental fact of life facing those who run our public services and those who rely on them. Can the Secretary of State tell us exactly how many schools will face a cash-terms cut to their budget in the next year?

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Local parents in my constituency have formed a group called Fair Funding Enfield, which recently contacted schools to see what effect the current funding arrangements are having on them. Of the 59 schools that responded, 49% said they had cut teaching staff, 76% that they had cut teaching assistants, 72% that they had cut learning resources, 32% that they had cut school trips, 95% that the cuts would negatively impact the quality of education being delivered and 42% that they had requested or were considering requesting financial contributions from parents. Does my hon. Friend agree, despite statements to the contrary from the Government, our schools are in financial crisis and in urgent need of proper funding?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I commend the work he is doing across his constituency and the work that Fair Funding Enfield and other parents’ groups are doing on this issue. Alongside the unions, such groups have tried to push the issue up the agenda. I also pay tribute to the work of the Select Committee on Education and hon. Members across the House who have raised this issue continuously. I hope that the Government take heed of that today.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady also pay tribute to the Minister for School Standards, who has listened carefully to headteachers in my constituency who came to see him about the new funding formula? They have received an increase from £4,100-odd
to £4,800 per pupil per year for their schools. Is it not right to acknowledge that the Schools Minister has listened and acted accordingly?

**Angela Rayner:** I did commend the work of hon. Members across the House to push this issue forward with the Government. The Government have to understand that their manifesto made the commitment that there would be no cuts in cash terms, yet the IFS has already said that there will potentially be cuts of 1.5% to schools. Today’s motion is about holding the Government to account for their promises at the last general election.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned cash terms, but spending per pupil under this Government in 2019-20 will be 50% higher in real terms than under Labour in 2000-01. When she talks about cuts, will she look at the evidence and at the real-terms effect of this policy?

**Angela Rayner:** I say to Government Members that the evidence is clear. Under the last Labour Government, there was a 70% per pupil increase in school budgets. Since 2015, schools have faced cuts. We have heard that time and again from media reports, teachers, parents and leaders of councils of all political persuasions. All of them have said that these cuts are having a detrimental effect. If Government Members want to stick their heads in the sand, that is up to them, but we are trying to hold the Government to account for their promise to give a cash increase to all schools.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): To give an example of the cuts that education faces, does my hon. Friend agree that the cuts to the music service in Conservative-controlled East Sussex, which covers my constituency, are a real danger? The Conservative council is proposing to cut the music service in Brighton and Hove because it cannot afford it. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) is chuntering away. In Brighton, 40% of the schools have had to cut mental health services because they cannot afford them any more. Those are real cuts that are harming real children.

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. Arts and culture are suffering under this Government. All children across the country should have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument at school. Under Labour, they would get that opportunity.

**David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) rose—

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con) rose—

**Angela Rayner:** I will make a bit more progress.

What requests has the Secretary of State received from local authorities that cash cuts hitting face their schools and what has his response been? How much additional funding would be needed to meet the shortfall? That is all we are asking for in the motion. We are not asking the Secretary of State to match Labour’s commitment to increase per pupil funding each and every year to restore the funding lost since 2015. We are asking only that he is true to what he has promised in this House and ensures that not a single school faces a cash-terms cut next year.

Luckily for the Secretary of State, the Chancellor has given schools across the country the same guarantee. Will he give us the commitment here today that he will go to the Chancellor and ask for the funding to meet that guarantee? Even he has to acknowledge the reality.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thinking of the future, whichever side we were on in the Brexit debate, this country will face real challenges. We must upskill like we have never done before if we are to compete. If nothing else, that is one dashed good reason for investing in our young people and in education.

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Gentleman touches on an important point. When I was speaking to my constituents in Ashton-under-Lyne, who voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, one of their frustrations was that they felt their children had not been given opportunities and had been left behind. How will they feel when the schools in my constituency face these cost pressures and cuts? The Government have to listen to people across this country who feel left behind and as if their children are not being treated fairly by this Government.

Only a few months ago, the Secretary of State said at the Association of School and College Leaders conference: “It has been tough, funding is tight, I don’t deny that at all.” The fact he recognises the problem is welcome, but action is always better than words.

**David Evennett:** I am listening with great interest to the hon. Lady’s peroration. She has quoted the IFS, but since 2010 the core schools budget has been protected in real terms and we are protecting per pupil spending until 2020. Surely she should recognise that as well.

**Angela Rayner:** The right hon. Gentleman and I have worked well together across the Dispatch Box at times, but however we cut the figures from the IFS, our schools still face cuts. That is what the motion is about: it is about the commitment that the Government and the Conservative party made at the last general election. I hope to see many Members from across the House supporting the motion, because all we ask is that the commitment that was made at the general election is fulfilled and the promise kept.

The same is true of pay. The Chancellor promised to lift the pay cap after seven years of real-terms pay cuts left support staff £3,000 a year and teachers £5,000 a year worse off. Only this week, I was at Unison’s conference meeting support staff at the frontline of our public services. Along with teachers, they are essential to our schools and the children they serve, yet nearly one in 10 teaching assistants was lost between 2013 and 2017. Too many are now living on poverty pay. The GMB union found that three quarters of apprentice teaching assistants were on £3.50 an hour, yet the Office for Budget Responsibility has warned that without new funding for pay, there will be cuts in other education spending or to the workforce. The Government’s own pay review body has warned that “some schools will find it challenging to implement any pay uplift at all.”
Does the Secretary of State agree? Has he assessed the gap in funding, and how will he ensure that we can recruit and retain the teachers and vital support staff that we need without yet more cuts?

As I outlined at the beginning of my speech, Government Members have developed a habit of abstaining on all Opposition day motions, but today, I hope that we have offered them something different: a motion that they can actually vote for, because this motion does not ask them to do anything but follow the lead of their Ministers. They have repeatedly promised that all schools will get a cash-terms funding increase and have then failed to deliver it. The Education Secretary recently told us that “the mere repetition of a falsehood does not turn it into the truth.”—[Official Report, 13 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 801.]

I hope that his promises were indeed the truth.

The Government have given a guarantee that not a single school will face a cash-terms cut to its budget. If that guarantee stands, there is no reason Government Members should not join me in the Aye Lobby after this debate. Our children deserve the best education in the world and our teaching staff need the resources to do their job, so I ask all Members across the House to commit to the promises made at the election. I commend the motion to the House.

1.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): I start on a note of agreement with the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner): it is a moral imperative to strive for the very best for the next generation in our country and education plays the most central role in that. That is what the 450,000 teachers in English schools are dedicated to and what we are dedicated to supporting them in. To achieve that takes many things, but high on the list of course is money. There is more money going into our schools than ever before—rising from almost £41 billion last year to £42.4 billion this year and then rising again to £43.5 billion next year. That includes the additional £1.3 billion, to which she referred, that we are directing to frontline spending by prioritising money from elsewhere in the Department for Education’s budget, as my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), announced in July last year. That means that overall we are protecting schools’ per pupil funding in real terms over the next two years.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Opposition’s motion notes the Conservative party’s pledge that no school would lose funding as a result of the national funding formula. The formula is in fact giving every local authority more money for every pupil in every school in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Every school is attracting at least a cash increase of 0.5% per pupil through the formula this year, and 1% more next year, compared with their baselines.

Of course, we have always been clear that local authorities continue to have some flexibility on how this funding is distributed across schools in their local area. I think that is right and it is a good thing that the flexibility exists for local authorities as we transition into the national funding formula. As our extensive consultation showed, flexibility is important because it allows local authorities, in consultation with their schools, to reflect local need and to smooth the transition toward the NFF where this represents a significant change.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that although in my area we have achieved above average results with some of the lowest amounts of per pupil funding anywhere in the country, we are now at the point where it is simply too little? Will he please have some urgency in getting us a bit closer to the average because we simply do not have enough?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. As well as ensuring that every school attracts more money, the national funding formula also allocates the biggest increases to schools that have
historically been the most underfunded. Thousands of schools will attract 3% more per pupil this year and another 3% per pupil next year, and some of the lowest-funded schools will attract even more as a result of our minimum per pupil funding levels, which mean that every primary school will attract £3,500 per pupil and every secondary school £4,800 per pupil by 2019-20. As a result, many areas will see quite big increases across the board. For example, by 2019-20 in Knowsley, there will be an increase of 4.3%, and in Derby there will be an increase of 6.7% in the same timeframe. In York, there will be an increase of 7.9%, and in Bath and North East Somerset, an increase of 7.2%.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As someone who has supported the national funding formula through the f40 group for a long time, I am grateful that this has now been brought to fruition. The problem is that the way in which the formula is being operated in my area, with the conflation of special needs within the base budget, is causing significant problems among some schools. Will the Secretary of State look at how that special needs allocation is operating to ensure that the poorer schools do not get even poorer, relatively?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman raises important points about the high needs block. As I was saying, it is right that there is some flexibility at local authority level. Local authorities have the most up-to-date figures and profiling of the children in their areas, in terms of special educational needs and so on. Protections also apply to the high needs block through the minimum guarantees and so on, while overall high needs funding has of course gone up.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about flexibility within local authority budgets. I have to say, as someone who is about to leave the London Borough of Redbridge this May, that he is in cloud cuckoo land. There is no flexibility in children’s services departments; there is just consistent need and insufficient funding. Parents do not need the UK Statistics Authority to show that some schools face budget cuts. They have seen it for themselves in cuts to the curriculum, and on how to get the best value for money; through nationally negotiated purchasing deals; and through school resource management advisers—business management experts from within the sector providing hands-on support to the schools that most need our help.

John Redwood: I welcome what the Secretary of State has said about minimum levels. I have shared the figures from my local authority with the Minister for School Standards. I have primary schools receiving less than £3,500 per pupil and secondary schools receiving less than £4,600 per pupil. When can I tell them they will be brought up?

Damian Hinds: I will write to my right hon. Friend with the specific figures for his schools. The formula is there both to create a guaranteed minimum level and to make sure that the schools that have historically been most underfunded see the greatest increases.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): After decades of underfunding, schools in my constituency are benefiting from a 6% increase per pupil over the next two years. Parents and pupils in my constituency are glad to hear that, but can the Secretary of State reassure me that this will not just be a two-year process but that we will continue to move towards fairness afterwards and that he will press for a settlement in the next spending review that allows us to make quick progress towards greater fairness?

Damian Hinds: It is clearly essential, as several colleagues from across the House have said, that our education system be properly funded. In an increasingly competitive world, it is important that we live up to that challenge and make sure that all children can be properly fulfilled and reach their potential. On future funding, there is a comprehensive spending review process, with which my hon. Friend is well familiar from his days at Her Majesty’s Treasury. We have set out in the national funding formula what will happen over the two-year period and established the principle that funding should be fair.

It is right that we have the highest ever total cash funding going into our schools. The kind of practical support I have just outlined is also a key priority for me because it is not just the total funding that matters but how far it can go in achieving the objectives we all share, which is incredibly important. Our reforms in schools are paying dividends thanks to the hard work of teachers, our continued focus on raising standards and the emphasis on phonics. Over 150,000 more six-year-olds are now on track to become fluent readers than in 2012, our top pupils are among the world’s best readers, and GCSEs and A-levels rank among the world’s best qualifications.

There can be no great schools without great teachers—to inspire curiosity. The quality of teaching matters more
than anything else, and it matters most of all for the most disadvantaged children. Right now we have many brilliant teachers in our schools—it is the best generation of teachers yet—and my top priority is to make sure that teaching remains an attractive and fulfilling profession. I am clear that we need to get back to the essence of successful teaching, which means stripping away the workload that does not add value and giving teachers the time and space to focus on what actually matters, in the interests of teachers and, of course, children.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State tell us where Portsmouth schools should be making savings, given that they are already having to make ongoing cuts? Should they cut teachers, have even bigger class sizes, shorten the school day? Parents and teachers in my constituency deserve better.

Damian Hinds: What I was outlining, on the issue of trying to give more support to schools on managing resources, is that it is all about ensuring that money can be devoted to the frontline to maximise the amount of great teaching from great teachers. I know that teachers in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will be as focused on that as teachers in constituencies throughout the country.

Toby Perkins: I want to help the Secretary of State make good on his promise. He made a commitment that no school will see a cut in funding. What is the strength of that guarantee? If it turns out that a school has had a reduction in funding, will he consider it a resignation matter?

Damian Hinds: I think the hon. Gentleman has been here from the beginning of the debate, so, unless he was reading something, he will have heard me set out how the national funding formula works. It allocates money—

Toby Perkins: If what he said—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he cannot conduct the debate from a sedentary position. Perhaps the Secretary of State will give way again later, but he must let him finish answering the question he has just asked.

Damian Hinds: The formula allocates money to each school, subject to set minimum cash increases, but there is flexibility for local authorities—which have the most-up-to-date information on the profiles of children in their schools, in terms of special needs, free school meals and so on—to reallocate money up to certain limits. I think that is right. Does the hon. Gentleman think it is wrong that they have that flexibility?

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for asking the question. Is he guaranteeing that no school will lose money? Is that his commitment? If there is no such commitment, he should say so, and if there is, he should not hide behind councils.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is repeating what he just said. The national funding formula allocates money in respect of every school. It then goes to the local authority, which has a certain amount of discretion to reallocate that money between different schools up to a certain limit to ensure that the funding goes to the places where it is most needed.

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I did not want to interrupt his conversation with the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

While I, and many other Conservative Members, may have individual issues about individual schools or how the funding formula might work out in practice in certain circumstances, I welcome the principle—which was agreed by Labour Members—of a fair funding formula that is allocating more money where it is required. It is going to pupils on the basis of need, and that is something that we should all support.

Damian Hinds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is a historic challenge to have taken on, and it is not without its difficulties, but it is right to ensure that funding goes where it is most needed, not according to the way in which various funding settlements have accumulated over the years in different areas on the basis of accidents of history and geography.

I had better make some progress towards the conclusion of my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, because otherwise you will do it for me. We have the best-qualified teachers we have ever had, backed up by the largest amount of money that we have ever had in the schools budget. We are protecting schools’ per pupil funding in real terms over the next two years, at a time when pupil numbers are rising. Working alongside a brilliant set of teachers and other education professionals, we are striving for a world-class education for everyone, whatever their background.

Since 2010, the Government have helped more children to go to good schools. We have helped primary school children to become better readers, we have helped secondary school children to gain higher-quality qualifications, and we have helped more students than ever to go on to university. We have extended early years education so that more children are school-ready, and we have raised the participation age so that everyone can build up the education and skills that they need for life. Through academies and free schools, we have given our frontline professionals, local communities and parents more freedom and choice. We have invested and are investing—with £7 billion committed in a six-year period—to create the quality of extra school places that we need, and let me repeat that more revenue funding is going into our schools than ever before.

The benefits of our reforms can be seen in schools up and down the country, thanks, of course, to the hard work and dedication of our teachers and education professionals. In its most recent annual report, published in December last year, Ofsted stated that “the quality of education and care provided to young people today is better than ever.”

Since 2010, we have increased the number of children in good and outstanding schools by 1.9 million. The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has narrowed by 10%, and 95% of three and four-year-olds are benefiting from early years education. We have introduced the pupil premium and have extended free school meals to further education colleges and 50,000 more schoolchildren, as well as introducing universal infant free school meals.

However, the job is far from done. We are ambitious for all our schools, and for all our children. Someone’s background does not dictate their talents, and it should
not limit their dreams. The attainment gap between children from different backgrounds has narrowed, but it is still too wide, so we are continuing our commitment to the pupil premium and the opportunity areas programme. Some places have seen dramatic gains, but others still need extra assistance. We must spread opportunity to the parts of the country where children are still left down by the limited depth and breadth of the education that is available. Every child should be able to go to a great school, which is why we are putting more than £300 million into support programmes over the next two years. To ensure that our economy has the skills that it needs to be fit for the future, we will do more to encourage the take-up of science, technology, engineering and maths by, for instance, introducing the maths premium and teacher bursaries for priority subjects.

By improving our nurseries, schools, colleges and universities, we can build a society in which it does not matter who people are, where they live or who they know. Alongside school leaders, governors, teachers, parents and pupils, we are striving for a world-class education for everyone, whatever their background, so that we can make our economy fit for the future in a world of rapid technological change. We want to boost our productivity and our children’s future prosperity, so that they are better equipped for their own futures and more of them can achieve their potential and lead fulfilled lives. That is what a world-class education can bring and that is what we are working for.

1.54 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I must first declare an interest. My wife is the cabinet member for children and young people in Cheshire West and Chester, my local authority—and what a good job she does!—and two of my children attend a local school that is affected by the funding issues that we are discussing today.

A central promise in the 2017 manifesto on which every Conservative Member stood was “we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula.”

As we heard today from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the Conservatives’ promise has been augmented in recent months by subsequent statements from Cabinet Ministers about cash increases for every school, but that is not what we are told is happening on the ground. All but one of the schools in my constituency face a funding cut; local schools will lose about £3 million between 2015 and 2019.

Toby Perkins: It is true that we are being told by schools that there is a real-terms cut. Was my hon. Friend as alarmed as I was by the fact that, even in the Chamber, the Secretary of State was unwilling to offer the guarantee that no school would lose money?

Justin Madders: Yes, I was alarmed, because I think it is clear from all the information that Members have received—and they are hearing from schools, heads and parents every day—that a real crisis is here now, and will get worse over the next few years. There is a very clear difference of opinion, but I know who I think has the real information: the people who are actually doing the day-to-day job.

The figures that I have seen suggest that pupils in my constituency will receive £300 per head less over the next three or four years. The situation is at breaking point. I know from talking to parents, teachers and heads that schools are already facing very tough choices. One headteacher told me:

“I believe that as a school we will also have to reduce the number of extra activities we offer pupils...fewer clubs, fewer arts days, fewer visits and visitors to school. ‘Balancing the books’ has become one of the worst aspects of my job. Begging letters to parents for equipment, repairs and resources are common in some schools. I feel that class sizes will increase and the curriculum will be pared back to the basics. To put it bluntly—children will be the losers.”

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend chairs the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility, so he will know that many of the vital extra-curricular activities that are being reduced are crucial to giving children from less advantaged backgrounds the experiences and opportunities that those from the most advantaged backgrounds receive by virtue of their wealth. Does it not say everything about this Government’s commitment to social mobility and tackling educational inequality that they cannot even appoint an adviser on social mobility, let alone deliver the policies in practice?

Justin Madders: I think that my hon. Friend must have read my speech, because I was going to make exactly that point. It is worth reminding Members that the previous chair of the Social Mobility Commission, Alan Milburn, resigned in November. That was a damning indictment of the state of social mobility in this country and the Government’s record on it, yet here we are, nearly six months on, and little if anything seems to have been done to try to redress that.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: many of those extra-curricular activities—the soft skills, information, advice and support that children are given outside the classroom environment—are vital to building up skills that will help them to progress and make the most of their life chances.

I hear school heads saying that they are going to have to send begging letters, and my constituents are not wealthy people. They cannot really afford to pay any extra for their children’s schools. They are anxious to help in any way that they can, but they do not have the spare cash. It makes me ashamed that in this country we are reduced to having to send letters to parents who work hard and already pay their taxes.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): We have encountered this very issue in Reading. A particular problem in many areas is the loss of a large number of skilled teachers with years of experience in the profession. I have written to the Secretary of State about that. Does my hon. Friend agree that the loss of highly skilled and highly experienced teachers with many years of service is a specific issue which should be addressed by the Department?

Justin Madders: Yes, it is concerning. As we know, in any organisation seeking to balance the books—and schools are no different—the more experienced and more expensive staff are often the ones encouraged to
perhaps take early retirement or redundancy. The replacement staff, if there are any, are often at the lower end of the pay spectrum—not that they are any lesser people for that, but they do not have the skills and experience that justify being in a higher pay bracket.

The cuts to school funding extend to council support. Changes to central support grants will lead to about half a million pounds being lost to my local authority in the next decade, which will further emasculate its already strangled ability to support schools. Not that it can help most of them even if it wanted to, thanks to the acceleration of the academies programme.

Faisal Rashid: Under the new system, Warrington will have among the worst funded schools—141st out of 150—and could also lose just under £2,500 per child. Clearly, the system is not fit for purpose or balanced across the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should ensure that the fair funding formula is just that: fair?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hon. Members are making points about the situations in their constituencies, and I want to talk about the ludicrous situation facing one of the academies in my constituency. It was placed in special measures last year, but has had to wait over six months to get any financial support from the Department to help it to improve. In the past, the local authority would have stepped in the next day—it would probably have been helping all along—but now the academy is required to go through a lengthy application process, which delays progress. Six months in a failing school is six months too long, and the lack of progress, which has been visible to the local community, has long-term implications for the school’s viability. Because of its situation, the roll is now falling. In fact, the school faces a double whammy of funding losses, which will only exacerbate an already extremely challenging situation.

The net result is that the other schools in my constituency end up being over-subscribed. The chaos of an academy-led admissions system means that some parents end up feeling that they have nowhere to send their children to. That is quite a dramatic statement, but that is how many parents feel and it represents an absolute failure by the state. The prospects of the situation remedying itself any time soon look bleak. If we were truly following the market-led approach that the Government appear to be advocating, the successful schools in my constituency that can attract more pupils would be allowed to expand, but there is precious little funding available for them to do that.

One example of a school in my constituency that has turned round and been a success story is Ellesmere Port Catholic High School, which has seen huge improvements since 2013. The headteacher and the school have worked exceptionally hard to turn things round, and in June 2015 it was officially rated by Ofsted as good. So impressive has the school’s improvement been that the chief inspector of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, referred to it in a speech about schools making remarkable transformations, saying:

“At Ellesmere Port Catholic High School, only a third of pupils achieved 5 good GCSEs. Now almost three-quarters do.”

I am pleased to say that this year the school has had full admissions for its year 7 pupils. These improvements should be applauded, as they have been by Sir Michael Wilshaw, but how is the school rewarded? With a budget scenario that envisages staffing cuts.

The school tells me that it desperately needs to expand as a result of its progress, but where is the capital funding that it needs to help to achieve that aim? How can it build on its success when it is not allowed to build? I am sure that if it reopened as a free school, there would be no problem getting the cash needed, but why does it need to reinvent the wheel? Why are existing schools that have put the effort in and that made great improvements and are already an established part of the community discriminated against because they are not part of the latest Government fad? How about a capital funding policy that rewards improvement and looks at where existing provision can be augmented? Indeed, we can contrast that with a story I read yesterday about a brand new free school in Plymouth that cost £4.2 million to set up, but which has closed after just 16 months. How can money be thrown down the drain on experiments like that when existing good schools cannot expand?

Education is at a tipping point in this country. We know from a National Education Union survey that 55% of schools that responded said that class sizes had risen in the last year and that over three quarters reported cuts in spending on books and equipment.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Class sizes have risen in 80% of the secondary schools in my constituency since 2014. Every secondary school in my constituency has had to cut staff in the same timeframe. Does my hon. Friend agree that cuts to school budgets are responsible for that?

Justin Madders: I think there is a clear correlation, and at the next election we may go back to what we said about class sizes on our 1997 pledge cards. It certainly resonated then, and I think it will again.

The National Education Union survey also showed that two thirds of schools had reported cuts in special educational needs provision. I know from my surgery appointments how anxious and distressed parents feel if there is a delay in agreeing an education, health and care plan or if they feel it is not being delivered in full because the school faces funding pressures elsewhere. The situation is distressing, and it is difficult to see it improving any time soon. As we know, nationally there are about 4,500 children and young people still waiting for their statements to be put into practice.

We are at a tipping point. Schools are already reporting extremely difficult situations. They are already having to make choices that under ordinary circumstances we would consider completely unacceptable, but they now face three or four years of even more funding cuts. If we cannot invest in our children’s future, we cannot invest in ourselves.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next hon. Member to speak, let me say that I hope we can manage without a formal time limit this afternoon, because the debate flows much more easily without one. If hon. Members stick to around
nine minutes each—and if you cannot say it in nine minutes, it is probably not worth saying—[Interruption.]

Yes, it is a challenge. I challenge hon. Members to say it in nine minutes, and if that does not happen, I will have to impose a time limit.

2.7 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): One thing is certain: thanks to dedicated staff and reforms, educational standards have been rising. I have been visiting schools and colleges in my constituency for almost 18 years, as a candidate and an MP, and I am convinced that the quality of education, particularly in English and maths, has improved greatly. The teaching of phonics in particular has played a role in improving literacy, and I pay tribute to the Minister and others on the Front Bench for ensuring that it is a key part of our curriculum.

However, it is not clear that that improvement can be sustained in the face of rising pressures on schools. Our education system faces a number of major challenges, the first being resources. Despite steady investment in the English education system over the last 20 years and record overall levels of public money going into schools—it is important to get that on the record—there are rising cost pressures, which lead to serious challenges to the delivery of high-quality education for all our children.

Last Thursday, the Education Committee announced a new inquiry into school and college funding ahead of the next spending review—I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), a member of our Committee, in the Chamber. It is our hope that a forward-looking inquiry will move beyond the exchanges here and elsewhere, which have largely taken place at cross purposes and to little effect, and inevitably take on a party political tinge. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), whom I admire greatly, said it was clear that this debate was linked to the local elections.

The Government have rightly chosen to protect overall education funding. Let us look, however, at what the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has done. He has made the case for increasing funding for the NHS, supported by the chief executive of NHS England. We need the same level of vocal support for our schools and colleges, and a similar long-term vision. The key figure to bear in mind is real-terms per-pupil expenditure. After all, it is the experience of individual students that matters, and I hope that our inquiry will give them the opportunity to inform and influence the spending review. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) should be commended for redirecting money from the Department to the frontline of schools, but the time has come to seriously rethink the way in which we fund schools and colleges and to adopt a much more long-term perspective. I have suggested 10 years as a starting point—as is being talked about for the NHS—because it is clear that making a decision every three to four years is just not strategic enough.

The second challenge that schools are facing is the workforce. Becoming a teacher is a special and remarkable career choice, and more should be done to celebrate the contribution of the teaching profession. Many Members will have seen the Department’s public campaigns designed to attract new entrants to the profession, and will know of the financial support available through bursaries. However, the National Audit Office found last year that whereas £555 million was spent on training and supporting new teachers in 2013-14, the Department for Education spent just £35.7 million in 2016-17 on programmes for teacher development and retention, of which just £91,000 was aimed at improving teacher retention.

It is widely acknowledged that retention is just as important as recruitment, but far too many teachers leave the profession when in other circumstances they could stay. In 2016, Policy Exchange published research showing that a quarter of teachers leaving the classroom were women aged between 30 and 39. This is a challenge for productivity and for social justice, and schools will need to become much more open to part-time and flexible working in order to stop the classroom brain drain.

The third challenge involves improving social justice in our school system; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned that earlier. This goes beyond just increasing public investment and strengthening the teaching workforce, because there are still great social injustices in our education system. Just 1.3% of children taught outside mainstream settings get five good GCSEs. I know that the Schools Minister is passionate about GCSEs, so why is this group of children being neglected in this way? Only a third of children receiving free school meals get five good GCSEs, compared with 61% of their better-off peers.

We must act to remove the built-in injustices and anachronisms, such as the favourable conditions under which the independent school sector operates. I have previously challenged the advantaged and entitled nature of many private schools. I fully acknowledge that I was proud to go to one; my father came here as an immigrant and wanted to send me to such a school. However, I believe that, given the charitable status benefits that they enjoy, there should be a levy on private schools similar to the apprenticeship levy, to ensure that we give the very poorest children in our country the chance to access and climb the private school ladder.

The fourth challenge concerns the curriculum. We face real challenges in terms of our skills deficit, the march of the robots and the arrival of the fourth industrial revolution. We must not allow a gradual and dangerous narrowing of the curriculum, to the exclusion of either creativity or vocational education. The argument is often between traditionalists and non-traditionalists, and the Opposition paint a picture in which the Government are butchering our education system. I do not agree. We need to be not so much a butcher and more of a Baker. What I mean by that is that we should support the work of Lord Baker in encouraging much more vocational education, and I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to read the Edge Foundation’s report on 14 to 19 education in relation to expanding the curriculum and looking into the possibility of replacing A-levels with a wider baccalaureate that would include much more vocational and technical education. We still have a way to go in giving young people the consistent message that technical education is every bit as demanding and worthwhile as a traditionally “academic” course, and we need to make it clear that the link between technical education and apprenticeships and the world of work is often much stronger.
The fifth and final challenge involves improving careers advice. Schools often cite the proportion of students who go on to elite or prestigious universities, but I believe the case can be made for shifting that focus on to the proportion of students in work or undertaking quality apprenticeships. We need to replace the existing duplicated careers services with a national skills service, as well as fulfilling our manifesto commitment of creating a UCAS for further education. We also need to work with Ofsted to ensure that schools are much clearer about how to address the skills needs in schools and provide careers advice. We need to ensure that schools are—to use the Baker terminology—meeting the requirements of the Baker clause, which states that they must invite university technical colleges and other colleges to talk to their children about apprenticeships.

So there you are, Madam Deputy Speaker: five challenges in what I hope was no more than nine minutes. My final challenge as Chair of the Education Committee is to carry the debate beyond the false choice between traditionalists and progressives, to focus on addressing social injustice and our skills deficit and, above all, to set out a strategic plan for the next 10 years for what our education must become.

2.16 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). I so enjoy being on the Education Committee with him, and with all my other Committee colleagues—

Robert Halfon: I just want to say that I did not see the hon. Lady sitting there—because I was so busy looking at the marvellous hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker)—but I am delighted that she is also here today as another member of our Committee.

Emma Hardy: Thank you very much. We do genuinely get on very well on the Education Committee, which is a welcome change from what happens in some of the debates that are conducted across the Floor of the House. I sometimes feel that there is a false dichotomy between the sort of education we are putting forward here and the type of education that the Government are putting forward. There are also many things to do with statistics that are simply not true. It reminds me of when I was studying for my A-levels and I was talking to my lecturer about the use of statistics. They said to me, “Ah, Emma, you see, statistics are what a lamp post is to a drunken man: it is not so much for illumination as for leaning against.” That has often been proven to be true in debates about education.

What I experienced in my 11 years as an infant teacher until 2015 was the cuts to our schools and the impact they were having. The Government can cite figures and dance around the issue, but we can cite figures right back at them, but what are the parents, the teachers and the headteachers saying? That is where the truth of the matter actually lies. In March, 50 primary headteachers from Hull wrote to the Secretary of State about funding. They are desperate for more money for the special educational needs and high needs budget. In Hull, as many as 526 children aged four and under have been identified as displaying challenging behaviour or SEN.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Do you agree with me that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I think the hon. Lady means, “Does my hon. Friend agree with me?”

Laura Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that schools are having to bid for extra funding, and that that is a really dangerous direction for us to head in?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are so many people across this Chamber who have a shared sense of purpose and a belief that every child matters. I still believe that every child matters, but that seems to be getting twisted and distorted along the way. We simply do not have the money that SEN children in Hull desperately need. Headteachers wrote to the Secretary of State back in March and said:

“Mainstream schools are increasingly having to resort to fixed-term and permanent exclusions to deal with challenging pupils. This is despite the best efforts of dedicated staff in schools. There is a feeling that something has to change or schools will implode.”

Now, we know from the Education Committee’s recent inquiry into alternative provision that an increasing number of children are being expelled from the system or off-rolled. Why is that? It is not because teachers have suddenly become heartless or have suddenly stopped caring about the children in their classes, but simply because they do not have the necessary resources to deal with the different challenges that pupils come to school with due to the impacts of austerity and poverty.

What is happening outside schools is reflected in what is happening inside our schools. Children who come to school hungry or are coming to school after awful childhood experiences will display challenging behaviour, and schools do not have the necessary resources to deal with that behaviour. I say to the Secretary of State and the Schools Minister that alternative provision is a false economy that will cost the Government more money in the long run. Alternative provision is more expensive. Dealing with interventions for all these pupils as they go through their school career will be more expensive than helping and supporting schools at the beginning, when they need it. I never thought that I would be citing Estonia as a country with an education system that we should look at, but Estonia evaluates every single child at three years old for learning difficulties or any signs of special educational needs, so that interventions can be put in place to deal with the situation before those children start school. Our Government should be doing that if they actually want to save money.

Turning to saving money—another one of my bugbears—there seems to be a lot of talk from the Government about vice-chancellor pay at the moment. They seem to be getting hot under the collar and worked up about the issue, but there has not been a word about the pay of chief executive officers of multi-academy trusts. Is it right for some CEOs to be receiving over £450,000 a year? You are right to look shocked, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right for CEOs to be getting paid that much money when our schools do not have enough money for their SEN pupils? Also on academies, is it right that millions of pounds have gone on related transactions within multi-academy trusts? Money could be saved by delving more deeply into the accounts of some trusts to examine what money is being wasted on. As a new Member of Parliament, I am subject to certain rules, which I absolutely support, and
one such rule is that I cannot employ any direct relation, and nor should I. However, the CEO of a multi-academy trust can employ every single member of their family in a number of different roles on whatever salary they see fit. We could examine that to find a way of redirecting funds towards the SEN pupils in Hull who so desperately need them.

Headteachers in Hull have asked for an additional £5 million, which is all that they need to help give every single child in the city a quality education. But this is not just about the children with SEN; there is an impact on every child. I know that because I was a teacher for 11 years, and if a child in a class has challenging behavioural difficulties, the teacher needs additional resources to help that child, which will help every other child in the class. A teacher who is dealing on their own with a pupil’s challenging behaviour or learning difficulty will end up spending a disproportionate amount of time with that one pupil to the detriment of the others. The resources need to be in place to help SEN children and every other child in the class.

I get a bit—

Afsal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) rose—

Emma Hardy: Oh, go on—before I start again.

Afsal Khan: Would you also have—


Afsal Khan: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the recent Children’s Commissioner for England report that talks about the deep north-south divide in education? The situation in my constituency is a stark demonstration of that. All 25 primary schools and five secondary schools are facing cuts so, considering that all 25 primary schools and five secondary schools are facing cuts so, considering that over half of all secondary school pupils are on free schools meals, that means less support for some of our worst-off children, which cannot be good for society.

Emma Hardy: Absolutely. Interestingly, I was reading George Osborne’s report about education in the north, and he has come up with the radical solution of having local bodies responsible for all the schools in a particular local area. Who could have thought of that? Who could have imagined that that could be a solution to some of our schools’ problems? I do not agree with the Government’s rhetoric about what our schools are facing and what the changes that they are introducing, which are damaging education and our children’s futures. I will end by quoting my nanny, who says, “If you pay cheap, you pay twice,” and that is exactly what is happening with this Government. The lack of money for education will lead to a higher bill in the future for all our young people.

2.28 pm

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am pleased to be able to participate in this debate on schools, although I am rather disappointed by the Opposition’s motion. I have a lot of time for the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who made an interesting speech and is a passionate believer in education, but any debate on schools must be wide-ranging and not just about money. Resources are of course vital, but this is also about the curriculum, the quality of staff, good leadership, the ethos of the school, the behaviour of schools and so much more.

Access to good schools is essential for children, as a good education is the foundation of success throughout life, both professionally, personally and for our economy. I congratulate the Secretary of State for Education on his speech and his approach, which is reasonable and realistic. I was fortunate to be the first in my family to go to university, which can be attributed to the fantastic state schools I attended and the brilliant teachers I was fortunate to have. Family background obviously helped, too—my mother made sure I did my homework—but, having said that, it was inspirational teachers who helped me.

I am a former teacher and lecturer, and we should applaud the significant progress that this Government have made on education standards and opportunities in particular, as well as on resources. There are 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010, which is a real achievement. We all need to be much more positive about our education system and the improvements we are seeing. So many more young people are going to our world-class universities than ever before, and we have the highest proportion of 16 and 17-year-olds participating in education since records began. Those are real achievements. Of course there are issues—there are always issues in education—but we have to build slowly and satisfactorily to achieve what we want to achieve.
School funding is increasing, but we also appreciate and understand that there are increasing pressures on school resources. The Secretary of State is right to say there are no great schools without great teachers. Frontline teachers have to be the best if we want to get the best out of our young people.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a fact that 50 out of 55 schools in Halton, which is part of the constituency I represent, have had a real-terms funding cut totalling more than £4 million. I listen to the teachers and parents I represent—maybe I am living on a slightly different planet from Conservative Members—and that is the reality on the ground.

David Evennett: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, and I am in the real world, too, as we all are on this side of the House. Every Conservative Member goes around schools in their constituency and listens to what teachers, school governors and parents are saying, but the fact remains that this Government are spending more and putting more into our education system than any previous Government.

I will take no lectures from Labour Members. When they were in government, we had falling standards and high inflation, which undermined the resources that were being put into schools. Let us be reasonable and realistic.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Evennett: The hon. Lady will have to listen for a little bit, otherwise I will go over the informal time limit.

The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne talked about healthy breakfasts, and we all know that a healthy breakfast helps children to make the most of their school day. We should also recognise that £26 million is being invested in breakfast clubs to help the most disadvantaged in our society. I think we all believe in a truly meritocratic society, and to get that we have to make sure there is fairness in schools.

Regrettably, many schools across the country have historically been underfunded. The Minister for School Standards has been receptive to meeting people to discuss the funding issues, and the Government have attempted to make sure there is fairer funding across the country. We cannot achieve everything immediately, but we can achieve it in the long term. The Department is determined to make sure that schools across the country are getting a fair deal on funding, and we welcome that.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the London challenge, a project to produce improvements in schools, was completely transformative and set London on the path to having the best, rather than the worst, schools in the country? Does he agree that Lord Adonis and those involved in the scheme should be congratulated?

David Evennett: Some very positive things came out of the London challenge. I would not want to denigrate it but, on the other hand, there are areas where the London challenge was not quite so successful.

We also need to look at how much we are investing in new good school places, and at the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard in phonics, which has risen from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2017. That good news means 154,000 more six-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers compared with 2012. Those are real achievements. It is not just about resources; it is about the money that goes in and what comes out—the consequences of the money and the consequences of the teaching.

I was honoured to work with my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), as his Parliamentary Private Secretary when he was Secretary of State for Education, to help implement the academies programme in 2012. The programme has transformed schools, releasing those schools from local authorities, particularly in areas that were doing badly.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned that education was pretty poor under certain London local authorities, and now it has been transformed. In my Borough of Bexley, as a result of the coalition Government and then the Conservative Government, there are now 25 more good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010. Schools in Bexley have seen a funding boost of £3.8 million for 2018-19, which brings the funding for schools in Bexley to just over £211 million a year. That is a real achievement. The Government have to be praised for doing this, and so do the teachers, parents and pupils who have rowed in behind those extra resources to make sure they achieve for themselves in society.

We have many brilliant secondary and primary schools in Bexley, with diverse education provision—church schools, academies, grammar schools and technical schools—and that is the way forward. Diversity allows children’s talents to be maximised.

I highlight Slade Green, which is the most disadvantaged part of my constituency. It now has St Paul’s (Slade Green) Primary School, Haberdashers’ Aske’s Crayford Temple Grove north campus, and Peareswood Primary School, which I am afraid were neglected by the funding system under the last Labour Government but are now achieving and succeeding. They are giving children in a more deprived part of my constituency a real opportunity to achieve.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Bexley was listed as one of the social mobility hotspots by the Social Mobility Commission’s state of the nation report in November 2017, but there is still much more to be done. We need to achieve social mobility, and I am proud to join the social mobility pledge that my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), the former Education Secretary, recently launched. The pledge makes three commitments: partnering directly with schools and colleges to provide coaching through quality careers advice, which is so important; providing
structured work experience and/or apprenticeship opportunities to people from disadvantaged backgrounds or circumstances; and adopting open recruitment practices that promote a level playing field, such as blind recruitment. Conservative Members, just as much as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, want to see disadvantaged children have the maximum opportunity to achieve what they need to achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in line with your determination that we should not speak for too long, I have had my time, but I would say to the House and to both Front Bench teams that education is a vital service for our future, for our country and for individuals. It is our duty to work to our best ability to make sure that the most disadvantaged get the opportunities and encouragement to narrow the attainment gap. Making sure that more and more children attend good or outstanding schools is the only way forward, as everyone will then be given opportunities.

I regret that we have not heard much from the Opposition about their policies for doing that, apart from more money. We are not just talking about money, although, yes, we are giving more money. Education would not be safe in their hands if they were in government because they just want to throw money at it. Money and resources are important, but it is about much more than that.

I congratulate Ministers and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on their work to provide more power to achieve these things for the benefit of all our children.

2.39 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): At the start of 2017, before becoming a Member of Parliament, I attended a meeting at a local high school, which was being held to raise awareness of the national funding formula and how it would impact on that school, and indeed others in the area. The headteacher was very honest about the challenges the school would face with the additional real-terms cuts to budgets; historically, ours was one of the worst areas in the country on this already. Parents listened to the facts and rightly raised their concerns about the impact this would have on their children: teaching assistants and teachers faced uncertainty as to whether they would still have jobs; the curriculum would be squeezed of subjects not seen as essential; opportunities for extra-curricular experiences would be jeopardised; and buildings and IT would not be updated unless critical. The mood was one of absolute disbelief. People were encouraged to engage in the consultation, but it was so unbelievably complicated that it had school governors and headteachers scratching their heads.

As a teacher myself, I left that meeting knowing that I had to do something; local parents needed to be informed and my colleagues deserved to be heard. I took to social media to explain what this funding formula would mean for our schools, and it is amazing what happens when people are informed about facts. I organised a campaign consisting of a packed public meeting, a 1,000-strong march and lots of people engaging with the consultation. It raised the profile of the issue locally, we had national coverage and it gave concerned parents and teachers a voice.

What we are actually facing long term in education is a complete crisis. Research shows that 94% of teachers are buying equipment and resources for basic teaching. My experience of teaching is that staff have always been willing to spend some of their own money for the odd item, such as prizes for children, but the funding cuts are digging deep. That is making it hard for schools to manage without being subsidised by staff and parents; the National Education Union reports that one in five said their schools were asking parents for financial contributions as a result of budget pressures, while two thirds said funding for special needs provision had been cut. It is wrong to rely on the good will of teachers and parents to meet the shortfall when pay has fallen over the past 10 years. The Government need to fund schools adequately, so that children can enjoy a full curriculum, in properly resourced institutions.

Many of my friends are still teachers, and staff morale is the lowest I have ever known it. Teachers are being stretched in so many different directions. Any time teachers might have once had for prep at school and to complete the ever-increasing amount of admin is being taken away to cover for staff who are not being replaced. Funding cuts are resulting in bigger class sizes, and cuts to support staff mean we are seeing more and more children with complex needs not getting the necessary support. The cuts to frontline teaching posts are happening at a time when pupil to classroom teacher ratios are rising, which means bigger classes and less individual attention for children. The funding situation also continues to have a growing impact on teachers’ pay and working conditions. The NEU believes that the damaging cuts to teachers’ pay must be reversed. Pay should be restored at least to the levels in place before the Government misguided them impos ed their pay freezes and pay limits. With schools already struggling with the funding crisis, it is vital that the Government allocate additional funding to support the pay levels needed to address the recruitment and retention crisis.

Another impact of the real-terms funding cuts is on the opportunities for children to participate in extra-curricular activities and school trips. Today, my son is going on his first residential trip, at six years old—one night, sleeping over, at the cost of £60. Like his school friends, he is bursting with excitement. I know that he is about to do something that he will always remember. How awful then to hear from other schools in my constituency that they will be unable to do school trips. Why? It is because they cannot afford to subsidise the trips for the poorer students. So, once again, the poorest are starved of opportunities that children from wealthier families can access. How desperately unfair our education system has become.

My constituency is part of the f40. Forty-one of the group’s 42 member authorities responded to its survey and unanimously agreed that the formula being introduced in April 2018 did not yet fully meet f40’s aspirations. f40, like myself, welcomed the Government’s commitment to an additional £1.3billion for school funding, but the survey demonstrates that concerns remain and there is still more work to do to tackle the remaining locked-in inequalities. Although the Government have added more cash to the system, the gap between the better funded and worst funded remains. Specifically, maintaining protections to the best-funded areas has meant that the historical inequalities will take longer to iron out. Like the f40,
I believe that a needs-led funding formula that reflects the true cost of running a school and an adjustment to the balance between funding blocks, with an enhancement of core funding and reduction to additional needs, are required changes.

Michael Tomlinson: I have been listening carefully to what the hon. Lady is saying. Like hers, my constituency was part of the f40 campaign. Will she therefore recognise the steps this Government took, which the last Labour Government failed to take, to address those inequalities? While I am standing, let me say that it is welcome at least to hear her acknowledgement of additional money going in.

Laura Smith: I believe I acknowledged that extra money going into the system and mentioned it in my speech.

The right to a decent, diverse and inspirational education is something every child deserves, no matter their background, no matter their ability. School is about so much more than just results and attainment. It should be a place of safety, support and development, and children deserve access to teachers who feel valued and inspired themselves. I became a teacher because I love to see the spark in a child’s eyes when they find that thing that makes them tick. Every child I ever worked with had something to offer, and as a teacher it was my thing that makes them tick. Every child I ever worked

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Laura Smith: I am still getting used to this place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise. The hon. Lady made the point that there is more funding going into the system, and I recognise that—it is true—but does she also accept that there are more children in schools, so that money is being spread more thinly?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but once again, I think that the myths have been spread and spread. If we look at it historically, in Erewash during all the 13 years of Labour government, schools were underfunded completely. Thankfully, this Government are correcting the wrong that was in place for so many years.

Like many other public services, schools are much more than just the building or the money we spend on them. As others have mentioned, those who go into education often talk about a vocation—a calling in life—and in Erewash we have some extraordinary examples of teachers and teaching assistants who go above and beyond to give our children the very best start in life.

One example is Chaucer Junior School, whose pupils

Laura Smith: The point has been made—you just made it—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Laura Smith: The hon. Lady just made the point—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Excellent.

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One example is Chaucer Junior School, whose pupils can often be found gardening or litter picking. I joined them to pick litter, and it taught them a lesson about how important it is not to drop litter, so it is an educational activity as well. They also visit places such as Parliament, which adds real value to their education. That is down not to the funding the school receives but the hard work and dedication of the staff who are willing to organise and facilitate those activities. I can cite example after example from my constituency, including English Martyrs in Long Eaton, which was visited a couple of years ago by the Minister for School Standards, who is on the Front Bench and who tested their maths when he visited. That school regularly gets to the final of the green school awards, which means they can come down to London, go to London Zoo and be part of the bigger picture that schools and education provide.

Sadly, the story in Erewash is not all a bed of roses and students are suffering, not because of funding cuts but because of teaching time lost by politically motivated strike action. Like its colleagues in Labour and Momentum, the NASUWT has been prepared to weaponise teachers in opposition to academisation, despite it being in the best interests of students and, I remind the House, a policy that began under Labour.

Last month, the Opposition were forced to retreat over the issue of free school meals, not just by the Government but by the team at Channel 4. Indeed, even the Labour candidate in Erewash embarrassed herself in our local press by jumping the gun, blindly following the party line rather than checking local facts, and was
rightly exposed for it. In a similar vein, the Opposition are pursuing today’s debate with the same misguided intent, rather than using it as a constructive way of proposing policy.

Having spoken before this debate to those in my office about their own time in school, with their experience spanning time from Wilson to Cameron, I found that they can all recall the charitable element historically embraced by our education system to support the formal budget set by Government. The parent teacher association raffle, the summer fair, the Christmas pantomime and the sponsored walk while dressed as a hippo—I have yet to find out who wore the hippo outfit—helped to pay for things as wide-ranging as a minibus and basic extra equipment. There is nothing new about people contributing to school budgets rather than relying on what the Government provide.

We must ask ourselves what makes a school. I would argue this is about more than just the funding that the Government provide. I agree with the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) on one point: she said that it is not just about money. Yes, we would all like more money, but it is clear that in Erewash there are no cuts, despite what the Opposition would like the public to believe. Instead, we have both an increase in funding and significant investment in new school buildings.

Mike Amesbury: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maggie Throup: I am just finishing.

In Erewash, at the core, we have an inspirational team of teaching professionals who manage their schools creatively within budget and, more importantly, look beyond the balance sheet, choosing instead to focus on the vital job of educating our next generation.

2.54 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I would like to begin by putting on record my admiration and appreciation for the remarkable efforts of schools in my constituency and the Borough of Merton. I am proud to say that under the most testing of circumstances, every single secondary school in Merton is now rated good or outstanding and has a GCSE progress 8 score that the Department for Education ranks as No. 1 in England, with Liberty Primary School in Mitcham in the top 1% of all schools for pupil progress in reading, writing and maths.

I am sure that Members across the Chamber will join me in congratulating Harris Primary Academy, which last year became the second outstanding primary school in Mitcham and Morden after Singlegate. They join Merton’s growing list of outstanding secondary schools, which includes Harris Academy Merton, Harris Academy Morden, the Ursuline, and Ricards Lodge. What makes that success even more remarkable is the circumstances in which it has been achieved—circumstances that are worsening term by term.

Schools in Merton are set to lose a staggering £1,820,818 between 2015 and 2020, despite their pupil numbers rising. It is no wonder that 40% of primary schools and 60% of secondary schools in Merton have had to cut staff since 2014. By 2020, Aragon Primary School will lose £100,118, William Morris Primary School will lose £72,582 and the outstanding Singlegate Primary School will lose £102,086—the extraordinary equivalent of £204 per pupil.

Across the country, staff numbers in England’s secondary schools have fallen by 15,000 since 2014, despite there being 4,500 more pupils to teach. That is 5.5 staff members lost in each school. Meanwhile, 62% of those schools have increased the size of their classes, despite the shortage of staff.

Behind the facts and figures are the governors, pupils and teachers struggling to cope. Yesterday, a group of teachers wrote to me from their staff room and said:

“We are stretched beyond belief. Corners are being cut, stopping the breadth of the curriculum and yet, despite the setbacks, we are expected to produce better outcomes than ever before! We’ve even run out of pens, glue sticks and basic stationery!”

Schools have been admirably shielding their pupils from the damage these cuts are causing, but they can go on for only so long. These schools are facing hardship like never before.

I would like to read some brief extracts from letters I have recently received from three different headteachers in my constituency. First:

“We see children who eat their lunch very quickly, whilst ‘protecting’ their plate with an arm as they eat” so that nobody can steal their food. Secondly:

“If he won the lottery, one child said he would go food shopping to buy lots of cereal and porridge to fill him up and keep him warm.”

Another said:

“We believe that a significant number of our children are so used to feeling hungry and cold that they do not recognise these feelings”, and:

“We have children in temporary accommodation changing schools several times, impacting them socially, educationally and financially.”

When I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is responsible for children and families, about the impact of temporary accommodation on education he acknowledged that it can mean changing schools and that it is strongly associated with poorer attainment, but he then claimed that these schools are provided with extra resources to combat that. The reality is that the pupil in question, moving from school to school, has now become a persistent absentee. Experience suggests that he might never overcome that avoidable dismantling of his education.

The Government argue that they are trying to distribute funds more fairly, but they fail to address the uneven battle that those in the most disadvantaged areas face even to attend a good school in the first place. A child living in one of England’s most disadvantaged is 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a child living in one of the least disadvantaged areas. Spreading the funding evenly, therefore, does not fairly share the opportunity. How do I explain to the furious teachers, governors and parents across Mitcham and Morden why their class sizes are bigger, why their teaching assistants have gone, and what has happened to the subjects that their school now simply cannot afford?
There will be almost no real-term winners under the Government’s proposals. The cake needs to be bigger for anyone to get a bigger, fairer slice.

2.59 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate and to have the opportunity yet again to speak on the important subject of our schools.

On Monday evening, I asked the shadow Secretary of State whether her debate about students was playing politics with students. She did not directly answer me then, but she answered me today and made it absolutely and explicitly clear that her reason for calling this debate was directly linked to the upcoming elections, so she is playing politics not only with our students, but with our school children. It was very disappointing to hear that. There were one or two parts of her speech with which I agreed and I will come to them in a few moments, but there was much with which I disagreed.

The old system over which Labour presided had areas with similar characteristics receiving vastly different sums of money. That was not because of deprivation. Had it been because of areas of deprivation, I could have looked my constituents in the eye and said, “The reason you are receiving £2,000 per pupil less than students in another part of the country is that the area in which you live is not as deprived.” That was not the reason. It was because of historical anomalies and because successive Governments had failed to tackle the problem. This Government have tackled it. Dorset was in the bottom 11 for funding of local authorities and Poole was in the bottom two—the two local authorities that cover my constituency.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), who is no longer in her place, mentioned the f40 campaign. I pay tribute to him for his role as chairman of the f40 campaign. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) also dwelt on that point.

The question is, what to do with that money? What do we as parents want? What does any of us want? We want our children to be happy, to go to a good school, to achieve their potential and to get the best results that they possibly can. Now that we have shown, and now that some on the Labour Benches have accepted, that we are spending more money than ever before, we need to turn the conversation to look not just at money, but at standards—what we are actually doing with that money—and to congratulate our teachers who are doing such a good job.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): An independent study by the Education Policy Institute said that Labour-run Harrow was the most improved education authority in the country and that the progress that pupils make in Harrow is greater than anywhere else in the UK when they start at secondary school. Therefore, I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would follow the example of other Conservatives who have blessed us with their presence for campaigning purposes in Harrow and perhaps bring with him the Schools Minister to see what works so well in Harrow. If he does, I warn him that he will hear stories from headteachers, parents and governors starved of resources at Harrow schools and worried about whether they will be able to maintain the high standards that they have achieved because of real-terms cuts in funding.

Michael Tomlinson: I would be delighted to accept the hon. Gentleman’s invitation. In fact, I am campaigning elsewhere tomorrow. Had I not been, I would certainly have taken him up on his offer and come to Harrow. When I do so, I will ensure that I let him know. He is right in this respect: he is right to look at standards. He is right to look at the output and to congratulate our teachers when they do that excellent work, as I do now. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to all those teachers when they do that excellent work, as I do now.

We should look at funding not just in this country, but internationally. I was delighted that the Secretary of State mentioned the international comparisons. For example, spending per pupil in England is higher than in Germany and Japan. I would like the Schools Minister to consider whether it is higher than in France. The international tables suggest that our spending per pupil is higher than in France as well as than in Germany and Japan. Can he confirm that in closing the debate?

Real-terms spending has also gone up. The motion mentions a “cash terms increase”, but this Government have gone further than that because there are real-terms school spending increases. Per pupil spending in 2019-20 will be more than 50% higher than it was under Labour in 2000-01. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich did accept, perhaps slightly grudgingly, that more money is going in. Perhaps we need to have more clarity and more acceptance of that fact from the Labour party.
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talked about the measurement of “outputs”; I think that is what he said. I would suggest “outcomes”. I agree that looking at what money goes in and what the outcomes are is crucial. When I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee last year, I asked the Department for Education how it was measuring the changes in funding over the next few years with regard to the outcomes that we are currently using and what we will have by, for example, 2020. There is no measurement of the current money going in, the outcomes that we have and the future outcomes under reduced budgets over time. You cannot track it in that way. I am interested to hear his views.

Michael Tomlinson: My view is that we should look at the definitive evidence, which is the international standard, the progress in international reading literacy study, because that is an international comparative study directed at the end of last year showed a significant increase in costs of running schools. I took those headteachers to mine, for decades, have been funded significantly less than urban authorities: 49% per head of population have been funded less than in urban areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said, this was based not on need, but on geography and history. That is a wrong that this Government are rectifying?

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My hon. Friend, like me, represents a rural constituency. The lack of funding that we get in comparison with urban areas is putting real pressure on schools, especially in dealing with children with special needs. Does she agree that the time has come to ensure that the differences between rural and urban areas are rectified?

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. Ministers are listening to this, and it is an ongoing debate and process. The figures published late last year are an indication of the progress that we are making. The facts have been checked by independent sources such as Full Fact, which has said that it is “correct” to say that school spending is at record levels. The shadow Secretary of State quoted the IFS. I will repeat what the IFS said, which is that the extra £1.3 billion for schools means that school spending will not fall but will stay the same per pupil. And that is the key point. There are not actually school cuts; there are pressures and costs, but the funding is increasing.

I have some questions for the Minister from primary schools in Lewes. First, will the Minister confirm that the pupil premium will be ongoing for the long term? Schools have found that extremely helpful. The second question is a request for a long-term funding settlement, not a year-on-year one, as it would make long-term planning easier for schools. Thirdly, schools would like us to use the census data starting from January, not October, because they are sometimes carrying pupils for the length of the school year, but are not actually being paid for them. Those are three requests from primary schools in Lewes, in a serious debate about school funding.

Gareth Thomas: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not for the moment.

How have the unions reacted to this debate? Do they welcome this school funding? Do they welcome the Government redressing the balance between urban and rural areas? No. The National Union of Teachers has been quite open about making this a political campaign. In fact, it spent £326,000 campaigning on this issue during the general election last year—more than the Green party and UKIP. The union uses this issue as a political football for election purposes. That is a shocking state of affairs.

The NUT sent letters to parents, frightening them about school funding cuts that were not actually coming, and put banners in schools telling parents how much their children would be losing, when that was not true at all. It spread lies and fear. It is under investigation by the Electoral Commission for submitting incomplete spending returns. Given the funding announcements after the election, hon. Members might think that there would be a consensus to support the Government and welcome the funding increase. But no—the joint general secretary urged members at a recent conference in Brighton to ramp up their efforts ahead of the local elections as school funding is a top concern for voters. This is the true reason that we are having this debate. The NUT said about the issue of school funding that “if voters changed their mind because of that—then we are pleased... We make no apology. We will do it again.” That is the whole purpose of today’s debate. It is about next Thursday; it is not about schools funding or the future of our children.

Just look at the example of Labour authorities up and down the country, including Brighton and Hove, right next door to me, where some of my constituents...
send their children to school. The council there has been having issues taking in more children. Brighton's The Argus newspaper investigated this case in an exposé by their lead reporter, Joel Adams. The council told parents that it had no money and could not accommodate children, and that this was all down to Government cuts. The Argus found, however, that the Government had actually given Brighton and Hove City Council £15 million to deal with the problem and build new classrooms, and that the Labour council had refused to spend it. It preferred to send out letters scaremongering parents and to put up banners on railings than to spend the £15 million that it was given by this Conservative Government. That is the truth.

Some of the schools in my constituency that sent letters to parents have now had an 8% increase in funding. When I challenged them on this, they said that there is pressure from the unions to get the message out. It is absolutely disgraceful. Opposition Members should be ashamed of themselves for raising this fear and scaremongering. But the truth is out today, because we heard it from the shadow Secretary of State; we all know that this is about the elections next Thursday.

I will close my speech with another irony. The whole point of this debate was to challenge parties about what they put in their manifesto and how they will find the money. Well, what did the Labour party put in its manifesto? Abolishing tuition fees. But once the election was over, that was suddenly just an aspiration and the abacus was put into storage for the next general election.

Angela Rayner: Will the hon. Lady take the opportunity to correct the record? We said in our manifesto that we would abolish tuition fees, and we continue to say that we would abolish tuition fees.

Maria Caulfield: I welcome that announcement, as it takes me to the second point I mentioned: where is this money coming from? As the abacus is in storage, we will have to wait until the next election to find out.

The Labour party's aspiration is to spend, spend, spend— with no idea where the money is coming from. But we know from the Labour leader that Venezuela is the role model that his party is following—an aspiration to all of us fighting against austerity and neoliberal economics. At schools in Venezuela, children are missing 40% of their classes while teachers queue up in food lines, and the rate of children dropping out of school has doubled. That is Labour's vision for this country. It is not one that I want for the children here.

3.16 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief speech in this debate. I had attempted to intervene on the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who it is a pleasure to follow.

I will take this opportunity to praise the work of all the teachers across the country, particularly—if the House will forgive me—those at Harrow schools. I commend the governors of Harrow schools for their leadership, but some credit is also due to local authorities, particularly to a local authority that has been recognised by the independent analysis of the Education Policy Institute as offering the best education in the country. It is a Labour council facing huge cutbacks as a result of the Government's austerity policies. More than £100 million has been lost, yet it still provides as good a service as it is able to for our schools.

I gently say to Conservative Members that there is certainly a case for schools in rural areas to receive more funding. I do not dispute that. But there is also a strong argument that schools in urban areas, such as my own, should also be receiving additional funding. I gently chide the Conservative Members who I have had the chance to listen to this afternoon for not acknowledging the challenges that headteachers and teachers in urban areas such as mine face in managing budgets that are shrinking in real terms. For example, most primary schools in my constituency have lost teaching assistants in the last 12 months.

I gently suggest to any Conservative MPs wanting to campaign in local elections in Harrow that they are extremely welcome; I would happily facilitate meetings with headteachers in my constituency, so that they can hear from the horse's mouth—from those at the coalface of education in Harrow—about the challenges that they face in managing shrinking budgets. There is second issue around capital, which I will come to in a minute.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman asks us to sympathise with his schools, but how can we do that when our schools receive a fraction of the funding per head that his schools get?

Gareth Thomas: I will take back to my constituents the fact that a Conservative MP is saying that schools in Harrow should be cut to fund schools in his area. Had he asked whether I would join him in calling for more funding to be invested in education, I would have been happy to consider that. I repeat to him the offer that I made to his Conservative colleagues: if he wants to come and campaign in my constituency and help to achieve an even bigger Labour majority on Harrow Council, he would be very welcome to do so. I would happily facilitate for him a meeting with the headteachers of a couple of the primary schools who had to axe teaching assistant positions just in the past 12 months alone.

Daniel Kawczynski rose—

Gareth Thomas: I am not going to allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene again, if he will forgive me, because I want to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I do not think that either hon. Member was here at the very beginning of this debate, and the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) had not indicated that he wished to speak. Of course he has every right to speak, but I hope that he will pay respect to the amount of time that he is taking out of other people's speeches.

Gareth Thomas: It is for exactly that reason that I was resisting the very agreeable temptation, in other circumstances, to allow the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) to intervene a second time.

My last point is about capital funding. It would be good to hear from the Schools Minister that he might be sympathetic to further requests from Harrow schools
for the additional capital they need to tackle asbestos hazards and which are not fit for purpose as a result, or from schools that need further investment as a result of an increase in population in Harrow. We have been starved, as other areas have, of the capital that is needed to invest in our schools. I hope that that issue will be addressed, if not now, then at a future Budget.

3.21 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is obvious that the Schools Minister is becoming increasingly isolated in this Chamber because he will be the only Member to stand at the Dispatch Box in this debate who is not a Mancunian. The Secretary of State said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), regarding the devastating impact of school cuts that are going on up and down the country and in his constituency, that the funding is what it is. I think that teachers up and down the land, particularly headteachers, will be very worried about that. I remind the Secretary of State that between 2015-16 and 2019-20, Hampshire, his local authority, will be facing a £14 million cut.

The Secretary of State actually went to school very near me, at St Ambrose College in Hale Barns in Trafford borough, which I had the pleasure to visit again only last week. Interestingly, Trafford borough, which I represent—its education authority is a member of the f40 group, as is the case with many Members here—faces a real-terms cut of £3.3 million. That is certainly a big issue on the doorstep as we pound the streets night after night. Meanwhile, the Schools Minister in West Sussex faces his headteachers threatening a four-day week because of school funding cuts.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said, this motion, is about what the Conservative party promised at the last election. It promised:

"Under a future Conservative Government the amount of money following your child into the school will be protected. There will be a real-terms increase in the schools budget in the next Parliament."

That pledge was also made also by the previous Prime Minister, who was very clear about what he meant. He said:

"I can tell you, with a Conservative government, the amount of money following your child into the school will not be cut."

But the Government are not keeping their promise to the British people. Under this Government, schools are facing the first real-terms cuts to their budgets in nearly 20 years, despite the Secretary of State having inadvertently claimed the opposite in the House earlier this year. The National Audit Office has said that with the current spending settlement there will be an 8% cut in the pupil funding between 2015 and 2020. The same conclusion was reached by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. This means that every school in every region and every town will lose money because of the failure of this Government to protect funding for our schools.

The so-called fair funding formula will simply redistribute the same inadequate sum of money that is already failing to support our schools and provide our children with the excellent education they are entitled to. The National Audit Office, again, has said that the Department for Education is expecting schools to find £3 billion in savings over this Parliament, yet it has failed to communicate to schools how they can achieve this. While we do of course support the principle that schools should receive fair funding, the answer is not to take money away from existing schools and redistribute it when budgets across the country are being cut. The solution is to invest in education to help every child to receive an excellent education.

The Government’s stated aim in revising the school funding formula is fairness. There should be fairness in the funding formula, and there are good things about it, such as an emphasis on high needs and a deprivation index, albeit a crude measure, and a focus on prior attainment. Why would we not welcome those things? However, there is nothing fair about a proposal under which funding will be cut from high performing schools in deprived areas. A fair approach would be to take the best performing areas in the country and apply the lessons from those schools everywhere. It would look objectively at the funding required to deliver in the best performing schools, particularly in areas of high deprivation, and use that as the basis of a formula to be applied across the country.

Unfortunately, though, this Government are not listening to the chorus of voices of schools, teachers and parents across this country. We only have to look at the impact already being played out in our schools. Let us start with class sizes. Over half a million infant school children are now in super-sized classes. New research by the leading education unions shows that class sizes are rising in the majority of secondary schools in England as a result of Government underfunding of education. There is a particular problem in secondary schools because of the shortfall of £500 million a year in funding for 11 to 16-year-olds between 2015 and 2020. This disaster does not end there. When our children get to sixth form, they face even more deep cuts—over 17% per pupil since 2010. Sixty-two per cent. of secondary schools in England have increased the size of their classes in the past two years alone.

The second huge impact is on teacher numbers, as we have heard. Staff numbers in secondary schools have fallen by 15,000 between 2014-15 and 2016-17, despite 4,500 more pupils to teach. This equates to an average loss of over five staff members in each school since 2015. In practical terms, this means nearly 2.5 fewer classroom teachers, 1.6 fewer classroom assistants, and 1.5 fewer extra support staff in every school. Cuts to frontline teaching posts are happening now—at a time when pupil to classroom teacher ratios are rising, meaning bigger classes and less individual attention for children.

New research published only last month by the Education Policy Institute shows that many schools that have been struggling financially are now in deficit. The number of local authority-maintained schools in deficit has nearly trebled, meaning that over a quarter of all local authority-maintained schools are now in deficit. In 2016-17, the proportion of primary schools in deficit also increased significantly, to 7%. The average primary school deficit noticeably increased from £72,000 in 2010-11 to £107,000 in 2016-17.

Similar figures are found for local authority-maintained primary schools. In 2016-17, over 60% were spending more than their income. A quarter of local authority-maintained primaries have had a falling balance for
two years or more. The Education Policy Institute report points to the inevitable outcome of those growing budget pressures. It states that staff account for the majority of spending by schools—around two thirds—and it is likely that schools will “find it difficult to achieve the scale of savings necessary” to shoulder the Government’s real-terms cuts without also cutting back on staff.

We have had a good debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the £3 million of cuts in real terms to his area. In his excellent speech, the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harrow (Robert Halfon), said that we must never forget to celebrate the contribution of teachers in our classrooms. The lamp post reference from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) will probably go down in history.

The right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) made a passionate and interesting speech, but he did not say why his borough will be losing £7.2 million in real terms between 2015-16 and 2020. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) made a very passionate speech indeed, and we wish her son all the best on his field trip. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) said there were no cuts, yet Derbyshire is losing £11.5 million from 2015-16 to 2019-20. We have seen the excellent campaign being run by Catherine Atkinson in that constituency, where Wilsthorpe school alone is going to lose £200,000.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made another passionate speech about the impact on the poor in her constituency, in addition to her speech on housing last month. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) made a very good speech, and I am also an f40 representative, but he failed to point out that Dorset is losing £3.1 million from 2015-16 to 2019-20. The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) also forgot to point out that her constituency is losing £1.5 million in the same period, but she is right about one thing: this is political. Research shows that 750,000 people changed their vote at the last general election because of school cuts, and the Government are not reversing this, so let us see what happens a week on Thursday and subsequently at the next general election.

Labour is committed to investment in our schools and investment in our pupils, while the Conservative Government offer disinvestment from our schools and our pupils. I call on all Members of the House to be a voice for pupils, a voice for parents and a voice for teachers in their constituencies and to support the motion.

3.32 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): This has been a good-natured but energetic debate—I wrote that before the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) finished his peroration. I was surprised that he did not acknowledge the 2.3% increase in funding for schools in his constituency once the national funding formula is fully implemented. Nor did the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) acknowledge the 3.5% increase in funding for schools in her constituency. No local authority is facing cuts in funding under this Government.

Since 2010, this Government have been committed to raising academic standards in our schools, improving behaviour in our schools, taking action to ensure that every local school is a good school and to banish the bigotry of low expectations, so that every child, regardless of their background or where they live, has the best education possible, to help them fulfil their potential.

Since 2010, despite the overarching imperative of tackling the crisis in our public finances that overshadowed our economy when we came into office, we have been able to increase school spending to record levels. This year we will be spending £42.4 billion on school and special needs funding, up from just under £41 billion last year. The new fairer national funding formula will ensure that funding is distributed more fairly and more transparently than previous Governments have dared.

Every local education authority’s funding is now calculated on the basis of the actual levels of pupil need in each of the schools and academies in their area—on pupil numbers, on pupils’ age, on their level of disadvantage, on their prior educational attainment and on whether they speak English as an additional language. It is fair and transparent, and the principles it is based on have widespread support, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) pointed out.

I should say to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) that Warrington is seeing a 3.4% increase in funding under the national funding formula. He raised the issue of class sizes, but I point out that they have remained broadly constant, at 21 on average for secondary schools and at 27 for primary schools, despite the huge increase in the number of primary school places that we have created. I should have thought that he would congratulate us on that achievement. Pupil-teacher ratios have remained below 18.1 since 2011.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford, in an excellent speech, pointed out that there are now 25 more “good” or “outstanding” schools in his constituency than there were in 2010. We should congratulate all the teachers in his constituency on that achievement. He was also right to highlight the total absence of any specific education policies from the Labour party in this debate.

I listened carefully to the passionate speech by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I gently point out that schools in her constituency will receive a 4.2% funding increase under the national funding formula, and that the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers has closed by 10% since 2011. That is what this Government have been driving.

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister acknowledge that there is now greater demand for SEN funding, because of the increasing number of children requiring it? As I
mentioned in my speech, 526 children under the age of four with SEN will be starting school in Hull. He says that he has given more money, but the demand has increased to such an extent that the money per child has actually decreased.

Nick Gibb: We take the education of children with special educational needs very seriously. My hon. Friend the former Schools Minister, Ed Timpson, reformed the system and introduced education, health and care plans, which is a much more streamlined and effective way of ensuring that those children get the right care and education. The hon. Lady is right to acknowledge that that has led to increased pressure on the high needs budget, which is why we have increased it, from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year. Those are very significant sums of money.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for bringing a dose of reality to the debate and correcting some of the points made by Opposition Members. She was right to welcome the 5% increase in schools funding for schools in her constituency under the national funding formula.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for pointing out that every school in her constituency is now rated “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted, including the recently inspected Harris Primary School—it was rated “outstanding”. I congratulate all the teachers in her constituency on that achievement. The Government’s overriding objective has been to ensure that every local school is a good school, so that parents can be confident when they send their children there.

Siobhain McDonagh: The Minister is aware that I am a supporter of Labour’s academisation scheme, whereby failing schools that cannot be fixed by the council became academies. The problem for my constituency and many others is that the number of good or adequate sponsors is now running out and schools are being forced to become academies, which is not always in the best interests of pupils.

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady’s support for Labour’s academisation programme, which is why we expanded it from 200 academies to over 6,000. She is fortunate to have in her constituency the Harris Federation, which is one of the most successful multi-academy trusts and school sponsors in the country. She should also want to acknowledge that funding for schools in Mitcham and Morden will rise by 7.3% under the national funding formula, and that Merton will receive an extra £6.3 million by 2019-20—a 5.4% increase in funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), in yet another highly effective speech on education, rightly pointed out that Dorset will receive a 4.2% increase and Poole a 3.8% increase under the full national funding formula. He also highlighted that England is rising up the PIRLS league table for the reading ability of our nine-year-olds. Reading is the basic fundamental building block, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who is sitting on the Opposition Back Bench, would acknowledge. This country’s adoption of phonics and the hard work of primary school teachers up and down the country mean that we have risen from joint 10th to joint eighth in the PIRLS world league table.

In her strong contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), like my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, effectively revealed Labour’s and the unions’ political motives for raising school funding. Lewes’s schools will see a 4.3% increase in funding under the national funding formula, but I will certainly come back to her on the three requests from the primary schools in her constituency.

Although I think there is some consensus in the House about the principles underlying the national funding formula, we disagree with the Opposition on the overall amount. Is the £42.4 billion we are spending this year enough, and can our public finances afford more? Last July, we announced an additional £1.3 billion increase in overall school and high needs funding, over and above the increases agreed in the 2015 spending review—£416 million more for 2018-19 and £884 million more for 2019-20. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that school funding will be 50% higher in real terms per pupil by 2019-20 than in 2000.

However, we know that in the past two years schools have incurred increased costs, such as higher employer’s national insurance contributions and higher pensions contributions. Of course, both have applied to other public services, and higher national insurance has also applied to private sector employers. Those costs are all part of tax and revenue-raising measures that were introduced to help reduce the public sector budget deficit, which stood at £150 billion per year—10% of our GDP—when we came into office in 2010. That was unsustainable and would have been bankrupting if we had not addressed it. Thanks to the hard work of the British people and a series of difficult decisions, that deficit has reduced to £42.6 billion—2.1% of GDP—and is set to fall further.

Without that balanced approach to public spending and the public finances, we would not now have a strong economy providing young people with the job opportunities that a record number of jobs in the economy brings. Without that careful and balanced approach, we would not have been able to spend £42.4 billion on schools this year and allocate more than £23 billion to capital spending from 2016 to 2021, and we would not have created more than 800,000 new school places, with more in the pipeline; seen a rise in reading standards in our schools; helped schools raise the standard of maths teaching; allocated significant funds to music and the arts; ensured that 91% of 16-year-olds studied at least two science GCSEs, up from 62% in 2011; or seen 1.9 million more pupils in schools rated “good” or “outstanding” by Ofsted than in 2010.

equal to nearly a fifth of the schools budget blown on increased debt interest charges to fund Labour’s spending plans.

What do we know about Labour’s statements and promises on spending? We know that they cannot be delivered without bankrupting the country. It would lead to a run on the pound, a flight of investment and a rise in unemployment—the hallmark of every period of Labour in office. That is why, no doubt, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, in a moment of candour, described Labour’s economic policy as “a bit of a” something “or bust” policy.

By contrast, because of our balanced approach to public spending, funding for schools under the national formula will ensure that every school attracts at least 0.5% more per pupil funding this year and 1% next year than in 2017, with thousands of schools receiving significantly more. It means that for schools that have historically had the very lowest funding, we can introduce a minimum of £3,500 per pupil for primary schools and £4,800 per pupil for secondary schools. It means that we can increase funding for special educational needs from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year.

Delivery, not promises, is what matters and this Government are delivering—delivering on the economy, delivering on jobs, delivering on school funding and delivering on academic standards.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House notes the Conservative Party manifesto pledge to make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new national funding formula, the statement by the Secretary of State for Education that each school will see at least a small cash terms increase and the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s guarantee that every school would receive a cash terms increase; endorses the aim of ensuring that there is a cash increase in every school’s budget; agrees with the UK Statistics Authority that such an increase is not guaranteed by the national funding formula, which allows for reductions of up to 1.5 per cent in per pupil funding for schools; and calls on the Government to meet its guarantee, ensuring that every single school receives a cash increase in per pupil funding in every financial year of the 2017 Parliament.

**Angela Rayner:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you can help me with something. Earlier today, the Prime Minister said that the Leader of the Opposition had said that he would ameliorate student debt and suggested that he was no longer looking to make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new national funding formula, the statement by the Secretary of State for Education that each school will see at least a small cash terms increase and the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s guarantee that every school would receive a cash terms increase; endorses the aim of ensuring that there is a cash increase in every school’s budget; agrees with the UK Statistics Authority that such an increase is not guaranteed by the national funding formula, which allows for reductions of up to 1.5 per cent in per pupil funding for schools; and calls on the Government to meet its guarantee, ensuring that every single school receives a cash increase in per pupil funding in every financial year of the 2017 Parliament.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** That is not technically a point of order, as the hon. Lady may know. It is up to any Member of the House to correct the record if they feel that they may inadvertently have misled the House.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House notes that Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that Government failure to deal with this crisis has pushed the funding problem on to councils and council tax payers and has further increased the funding gap for social care; is concerned that there is an unacceptable variation in the quality and availability of social care across the country with worrying levels of unmet need for social care; and calls on the Government to meet the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of this Parliament.

It has been six months since the House called on the Government to commit the extra funding needed to ease the crisis affecting social care—six months of missed opportunities for the Government to bring more stability to our fragile social care system; six months in which the situation has deteriorated further. The care of older people and of younger people with disabilities seems sometimes to be an afterthought for this Government. The Secretary of State finally made a speech about social care in March, having had the words “social care” added to his title two months previously. Indeed, he told a conference of social workers:

“We need to do better on social care”.

This Government have had eight years to do better on social care.

The simple fact is that since 2010, things have got manifestly worse. I told the House in October that the care system, in the words of the Care Quality Commission, remains at a “tipping point”. Eight years of cuts to council budgets has meant that over £6 billion has been lost from social care budgets since 2010. The diminishing care fees that councils are able to pay in the light of those cuts have further destabilised the care sector, which is already described by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services as “perilously fragile”.

ADAASS reported last year that two thirds of councils had seen care providers close in their areas and that more than 50 councils had contracts with care providers handed back to them. A major chain of care homes, Four Seasons, recently ran into financial trouble, bringing with it the threat of care home closures and uncertainty for thousands of vulnerable elderly people. A few days ago, Allied Healthcare, one of the country’s biggest providers of home care, announced that it would be seeking a financial rescue plan from its creditors. Allied Healthcare has contracts with 150 councils and it cares for over 13,000 older and vulnerable people, so the Minister needs to tell the House how local authorities will be able to discharge their statutory duty to deliver care if Allied Healthcare collapses.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): On local authorities, my hon. Friend will know as well as I do that because of the cuts to local authority budgets, there is, on the one hand, bed blocking in hospitals, because local authorities do not have enough social workers to prepare a care package, and on the other, when people can go into care, care is so expensive that they cannot afford it. Councils are under pressure to try to make up the shortfall, which they cannot do.
Barbara Keeley: Indeed they cannot, and given the fragility in some of these private care providers, I wonder what on earth councils are supposed to be able to do.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the shadow Minister agree that Allied Healthcare looks like the tip of the iceberg? So many care providers are contemplating getting out of the publicly provided social care market or have already done so that we run the real risk of drifting towards a situation in which people with money can get good care privately but those who do not have the money could be left behind.

Barbara Keeley: That is almost the situation we are in at the moment. It is worth thinking about why we seem to have this issue with Allied Healthcare, given that the problem has occurred in the last few days. It was reported that Allied Healthcare’s cash-flow problems had been triggered by increases in the national minimum wage for care staff and by an £11 million bill for back pay owed to sleep-in care staff. However, Allied Healthcare is not the only provider that is facing a large back-pay bill for care workers on shift. Learning disability social care providers have warned that they will have to withdraw services or close altogether to pay the bill for back pay, placing the care of even more people in jeopardy and putting care staff jobs at risk.

This trend of closures and contract cancellations is set to continue. A recent report into residential care by the Competition and Markets Authority painted a bleak picture of the current care home market.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I recently met Lifeways Group, which looks after thousands of people with learning disabilities and has many hundreds of staff who do sleep-in shifts. It pays above the national living wage and is a good employer, but it cannot afford the back-pay claims if the finding goes against it. Should the Government not provide the funding to support these organisations?

Barbara Keeley: It is reported, in fact, that the total back-pay bill across the social care providers that provide sleep-in cover will be about £400 million, so it is not surprising that a care provider such as Lifeways would say that. The Government have to come up with answers for this, because there has been a dragging of heels, the guidance has been very confusing, and it is a serious matter. I understand, too, that the Government have completed two reports, but they have not been made public. Hon. Members and I would certainly welcome having those reports placed in the Library so that we can get that information.

We have seen warnings from the Competition and Markets Authority that care homes would find themselves having to close or move away from local authority-funded care because the funding is now only just covering day-to-day running costs. It is quite clear from all this that there is a growing funding gap in social care that must be filled. The Local Government Association has said that our social care system needs an immediate injection of £1.3 billion to fill that gap, and this is projected to rise to £2.5 billion by 2020, according to the King’s Fund.

In our last Opposition day debate on social care, in October, the strain social care was under—from the weight of growing demand, reducing supply and the lack of funds from Government—was plain to see, but since then the system has cracked still further under the pressure of Government funding cuts.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): When elderly people fall, they often have a stay in hospital, putting additional pressures on the NHS, and when they are ready to be discharged, hospitals sometimes cannot discharge them, because local social care provision is not available. Two thirds of admissions to hospitals for falls could have been averted by early intervention in the home. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need more money for our adult social services?

Barbara Keeley: I do absolutely—and that is the point I was making. It was only when the number of delayed transfers of care hit a record high that the Government started to pay much attention to this issue. The other worry is that, as the British Red Cross has reported, in attempting to reduce the number of delayed transfers of care, hospitals often eject people before they are ready. One can see a vicious cycle of admission and readmission.

As I was saying, the system is beginning to crack. Hard-pressed councils and their associations are pleading for more funding to deal with the ever-increasing demand for social care. In December, the former president of ADASS, Margaret Willcox, said:

“The crisis facing us is so acute that we fear social care could pass the point of no return in 2018 while we wait for decisions to be made.”

The National Audit Office has warned that councils could face insolvency after using their reserves just to meet those increasing costs of social care. As well as Northamptonshire County Council being technically insolvent, we recently learned that Worcestershire County Council has a massive budgetary disparity. A report from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy has warned the council that it faces a £26 million hole in its finances this year and that that would rise to £60 million in 2020, owing mainly to an increase in demand. The council chief executive, Paul Robinson, has said that “there comes a point where cost-cutting can’t go any further — there has to be a solution, and I think it has to be a national solution.”

Lord Porter, the Conservative chair of the LGA, has said to councils that:

“you can’t keep dipping into your savings; sooner or later the money will run out.”

Let us think about what these cuts to social care mean for the quality of care that people receive. In the recent words of the Secretary of State himself, there is unacceptable variation in the quality of services. One in five care facilities receives the lowest quality rating from the Care Quality Commission, and Labour’s own research has revealed that over 3,000 care facilities that already have the lowest quality rating continue to receive the lowest rating even after being re-inspected. Cuts mean providers have less money to pay staff or to invest in training or building renovations, which can obviously lead to their getting trapped in a cycle of poor-quality care provision, and that poor-quality care has a serious impact on the lives of people who need care.
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out the very high percentage of care homes being found to be inadequate or requiring improvements—the figure is over 40% in my local authority. Does she agree that in many cases this is about care not being safe in those care settings? The real worry is not just that the settings are a bit grotty but that the care is unsafe.

Barbara Keeley: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend takes me ahead in what I was going to say, but I know she has been involved with Age UK in understanding the state of care in her own local area, and I applaud her for that. Cuts have resulted in providers giving poor-quality care, and that is having a serious impact on the lives of people who need care. It means people not being washed or going hours without receiving a meal or being given a drink; it means people being left without help to go to the toilet; and in some cases, as she just said, it means people not being given crucial medication.

Care quality has become so bad that Age UK’s recent report was entitled, “Why call it care when nobody cares?” Many Members went to the launch of the report and listened to the older carers who were there. The anger of those older carers who spoke at or attended the event was palpable. Some told me that they and their families were often at breaking point, that they felt betrayed by a system of care that left them with little or no affordable support, and that they faced rising care costs which they described as crippling, although the care for which they paid was often not good enough.

I know that the Minister was present at that event. She may have talked to one carer there, Elaine from Northamptonshire, whose council is battling insolvency. Elaine gave up her job to care and has cared full-time for her husband ever since, but rather than giving her any extra help, the council recently tried to increase the weekly cost of care support at home from £88 to £178 per week. That was another battle for a carer who already had to pay £178 per week. That was another battle for a carer to fight to obtain the care support that she needed at a price that she and her husband could afford.

Labour Members recognise that unpaid family carers need more support. We understand how much families are doing to look after their family members, and how hard that is for many carers but the Government have not even developed an updated national strategy for carers, having scrapped the planned strategy back in October. Since then, they have even failed to publish the action plan that was promised for January. What does that say about their attitude to carers?

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The motion states that “there is an unacceptable variation in the quality and availability of social care”. Where in the country does the hon. Lady think it is really good at the moment?

Barbara Keeley: It tends to be outstanding in the independent sector. Charities in particular can be outstanding, although they are not always so.

The care sector’s funding crisis also has an impact on the growing number of people who need care but are given none at all. More than 1.2 million people are now living with unmet care needs, many of them isolated and lonely, and that number rises to 1.5 million with the addition of people who need assistance with taking medication. Unmet needs can lead to people being forced to wear incontinence pads overnight because there is no one to help them get to the toilet, which takes away their dignity. The number of older people living with unmet care needs will inevitably rise without an injection of new funding, because of the growing demand for care in our ageing population.

It is clear that the social care system needs sustainable funding from central Government, but the Government’s response to the crisis so far has been to push the funding problem on to hard-pressed councils and council tax payers through the social care levy. The only increase in Government funding has been the paltry £150 million extra for social care in the local government finance settlement. That is nowhere near enough to avert the crisis that the Government have created in social care. Moreover, it was not the new money that councils desperately needed. The Government admitted that the increase would be funded through an expected underspend in existing departmental budgets.

It is clear that local authorities are now facing some of their greatest challenges just to make ends meet. I want to highlight the heroic efforts of Labour councils to protect adult social care in the face of swingeing budget cuts from the Government.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has referred to Labour councils. In each of the last two years, my local authority, Bolton Council, has had to increase its council tax rates by 3% and 2% respectively in order to fund social care, and it will have to increase them next year as well. It has had a shortfall of £6 million, and has been able to cover it only by increasing council tax, which is really not acceptable.

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. As I have said, the Government have pushed the problem on to councils, which have been forced to use their reserves, and pushed the council on to council tax payers, who have had to pay the levy.

I was talking about the heroic efforts of some councils. Despite budget cuts, which are now running at between 40% and 50%, my local authority, Salford City Council, and neighbouring Manchester City Council have acted to ensure that care providers with which they contract will pay care staff a real living wage, and I know that Labour councils in Lambeth, Southwark and many other London boroughs have committed themselves to paying their care staff the London living wage.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): As my hon. Friend is mentioning many councils, may I draw her attention to the work of Bristol City Council under Councillor Helen Holland? It is leading an important Proud to Care campaign to encourage more care workers back into sector, particularly at a time of increasing demand and labour shortages. Will she join me in commending Bristol City Council’s work in this area?

Barbara Keeley: I will indeed, because given the cuts that many councils have been facing—I am sure Bristol is the same—these efforts to protect care services are really excellent.

I was talking about those London boroughs that have committed to pay care staff the London living wage, which, at £10.20 an hour, is way above the Government’s
so-called living wage of £7.83—a commitment that is no small undertaking. That is a further example of the good that Labour-run councils are doing for the most vulnerable people in their communities. We on this side of the House—this ties in very much with the point that my hon. Friend has just made—see the need for social care to be valued as a career. At last year’s general election, Labour pledged to implement the real living wage for all care staff and to ensure that care staff were paid for travel time, that 15-minute care visits were scrapped and that zero-hours contracts were ended for care staff. Those are important steps, but we know that we have to go much further if we are to improve care quality.

It is clear from the reports of the Care Quality Commission that staffing levels are still a major issue in those care services rated as inadequate or requiring improvement. Much of the care workforce are underpaid, undervalued and overworked, which leads to high turnover and vacancy rates in the sector among care staff and, more importantly, the registered managers who are responsible for overseeing care quality. Improving pay for care staff will help with that, but we also need to commit to improving care staffing levels to reduce the workload pressure and offer better training and career paths.

The National Audit Office has criticised the Government for failing to have an up-to-date workforce strategy for the care sector and for their lack of oversight of workforce planning in local areas. Indeed, the Government have no major workforce strategy for social care. It was the Labour Government who produced the last strategy, in 2009. The head of the National Audit Office has said:

“Social care cannot continue as a Cinderella service—without a valued and rewarded workforce, adult social care cannot fulfil its crucial role of supporting elderly and vulnerable people in society.”

Skills for Care has a budget of only £21 million for care staff training, whereas Health Education England has a budget of £4.7 billion. That disparity in budgets between health and social care says it all about the Government’s lack of priority for improving the quality of social care.

At the 2017 election, Labour pledged an extra £8 billion for social care across this Parliament, with an extra £1 billion to ease the crisis in social care this year. That aimed to relieve the pressure on the social care system. It would have been enough to begin paying care staff the real living wage and would have sought to offer more publicly funded care packages for people with different levels of need. Today’s debate is not primarily about the long-term funding of social care, but Labour has made it clear that maintaining the current funding system is not an option in the long term. Recently, polling by the Alzheimer’s Society has shown that paying for social care is a growing public concern and that there is overwhelming public support for a cap on care costs. The next Labour Government will implement a lower cap on care costs than the cap set under the Care Act 2014. We will also raise the asset threshold to a higher level than under the current system.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am listening with interest to the hon. Lady’s opening remarks. I am obviously interested in the cap, in paying care workers more and in raising the threshold, but how would a Labour Government pay for that?

Barbara Keeley: I think there must be an echo, because the hon. Lady asked me exactly the same question in the last debate, six months ago. I said to her previously that there is a range of options that we could use to raise the money, including wealth taxes, an employer care contribution and a social care levy. However, it really is a bit rich of Government Members to raise that question when they have no idea whatsoever how they would take forward any social care developments. Furthermore, there was absolutely nothing in the Conservative party’s election campaign last year about the funding for anything. We had a costing document. We had a costed manifesto. I can stand here and say that we had the funding to put £8 billion extra into social care in this Parliament, including £1 billion this year. The Conservative party said nothing whatsoever about that.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am listening with interest to the hon. Lady’s opening remarks. I am obviously interested in the cap, in paying care workers more and in raising the threshold, but how would a Labour Government pay for that?

Barbara Keeley: I think there must be an echo, because the hon. Lady asked me exactly the same question in the last debate, six months ago. I said to her previously that there is a range of options that we could use to raise the money, including wealth taxes, an employer care contribution and a social care levy. However, it really is a bit rich of Government Members to raise that question when they have no idea whatsoever how they would take forward any social care developments. Furthermore, there was absolutely nothing in the Conservative party’s election campaign last year about the funding for anything. We had a costing document. We had a costed manifesto. I can stand here and say that we had the funding to put £8 billion extra into social care in this Parliament, including £1 billion this year. The Conservative party said nothing whatsoever about that.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Barbara Keeley: No. I need to move on. The Deputy Speaker has asked me not to take too long, and not take too many interventions. I have been very generous up to this point.

We believe that the time to act on this care crisis is now, but instead of taking the bold steps needed to fix the crisis, this Government are promising a Green Paper. Since the royal commission first reported on the long-term funding for the care of older people in 1999, we have seen 12 consultations and four independent reviews, so I really question why the Government are undertaking yet another consultation and producing yet another Green Paper. It is clear that they have become increasingly fond of consultations, reviews and Green Papers. In fact, they have launched more than 1,600 consultations since 2015, and more than 500 of them have not yet been completed. Sadly, I have to say that that includes the carers strategy. The Government spent £1 million on the Dilnot review, only to delay the introduction of its recommended care cap before shelving it indefinitely. The Government are wasting time and public money on consultations, and even more on adopting then shelving long-term funding solutions for social care.

The time to act is now. I urge the Government to give our social care system the funding it so badly needs, both this year and in the longer term, and I urge hon. Members to support our motion tonight. We must give councils the proper funding to deliver the high-quality care that people across this country need to live with dignity. That is nothing less than they deserve.

4.11 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for introducing the debate. We want this to be the best country in the world in which to grow old and in which people can face their third age knowing that they will be supported to live healthy, independent lives for longer and for as long as possible, with a choice of
good-quality, affordable care that is there, should they need it. Today’s debate is a welcome opportunity to cover the action that this Government have taken to improve social care, highlighting a few examples where real progress has been made, as well as discussing our longer-term plans for the Green Paper, which will be published later this summer.

Most of all, however, I want to do something that the hon. Lady forgot to do, which is pay tribute to the extraordinary people—both the social care workforce and the informal carers—who play such a vital part in our health and social care system. At the heart of their endeavours is the commitment to do all they can to support individuals and families throughout the country.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister has just said that I did not pay tribute to informal carers. That is just not true. Everybody who knows me knows that I have never stopped paying tribute to informal carers, and I did so in my speech today. Please will the Minister not attribute comments to me that I did not make?

Caroline Dinenage: What I actually said was that the hon. Lady forgot to pay tribute to informal carers, and indeed to paid carers, but does she not feel uncomfortable with the fact that she and all her colleagues on the Conservative side legislated with us to introduce a cap, committed in 2015 to implement the cap, then abandoned it, thus abandoning the very informal carers she says she cares so much about?

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is right to pay tribute to informal carers, and indeed to paid carers, but does she not feel uncomfortable with the fact that she and all her colleagues on the Conservative side legislated with us to introduce a cap, committed in 2015 to implement the cap, then abandoned it, thus abandoning the very informal carers she says she cares so much about?

Caroline Dinenage: We have not abandoned the cap. The Prime Minister said very clearly that we would continue to consult on the cap, and that will come forward as part of our plans for the Green Paper later in the year. We in this Chamber often hear about Labour’s recession and how it led to some hard decisions about public spending to get the country back on track, but we often forget—

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Caroline Dinenage: Let me make a little progress, then I will happily take the hon. Lady’s intervention.

We often forget that we inherited not only difficult spending choices but a social care system that was on its knees because successive Governments—not just Labour—had failed to act. Labour acknowledged the problem in its 1997 manifesto, promising to find a solution. However, 13 years later, after one royal commission, two Green Papers and the 2007 spending review pledging to address the situation, Labour left office without delivering it. Worse than that, by the time Labour left office, despite the booming economy, council tax had doubled and every year 45,000 older people were forced to sell their home to pay for residential care costs.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Let us get back to the present day, because that is what we are debating. Disabled people of working age make up more than half of adult social care users. Given that the UN condemned the Government’s breaches of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly article 19 on independent living, what does the Minister estimate to be the impact on independent living for disabled people of the cuts to social care?

Caroline Dinenage: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I will come on to discuss that, but there will be a separate, parallel workstream on working-age adults, who account for over half of the spending—

Barbara Keeley: Why?

Caroline Dinenage: If the hon. Lady will give me the courtesy of allowing me to finish my comments, I will explain why in a moment.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) wondered why we are going back to the past and looking at Labour’s record, but Labour is asking people up and down the country to vote for them in the local elections, so they will rightly look at Labour’s record and at how it dealt with the social care crisis when it was in government. After 13 years of inactivity and bluster, people need to be able to make a choice based on historically accurate facts.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady had plenty of time to make her comments, so I will make a little progress.

When the Conservative party formed the coalition Government in 2010, it is worth remembering that not only did we have to deal with the parlous state of the country’s finances, but we inherited a burning platform of social care. Of course, that meant taking difficult decisions in those early years, which were challenging times for local authorities.

Karin Smyth: Will the Minister give way on the cap?

Caroline Dinenage: I will be coming on to the cap later.

To give the Labour party its due, it recognised that we had difficult decisions to make. Had Labour stayed in government, it planned £52 billion-worth of cuts to local government budgets by 2015. However—enough of the history lessons—I intend to make progress and answer many of the shadow Minister’s questions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Dinenage: If the hon. Members will bear with me, I will now make some progress.

The tough spending choices that we have made have paid dividends, meaning that we have turned a corner in recent years. That is why local government will be able to increase spending on adult social care in real terms in each of the next three years. Our population is growing, ageing and diversifying. At the same time, the money, means and methods that we deploy to serve their long-term health and care needs are under increasing pressure to deliver, and we need to address those issues now.
There is recognition across the House that even if we had an infinite amount of money to fix the problem, the system would need reform. We are taking steps to make the system more effective and to ensure that it better serves the needs of vulnerable people and society in general. That is why this summer’s Green Paper will complement those measures and ensure that our social care system is placed on a sustainable footing and will serve this nation for generations to come.

The Secretary of State recently outlined the seven key principles guiding our thinking on social care as we approach the Green Paper: quality, whole-person integrated care; control; workforce; supporting families and carers; a sustainable funding model for social care; and security for all. As I have said, this is not just about older people. The Green Paper will cover a range of issues that are common to all adults with care and support needs, but we are committed ensuring that any issues relating to social care that are specific to adults of working age are identified and given the right focus. Work on that is being led jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I will reflect on some of the Green Paper’s themes, but first I will highlight a couple of areas where real progress has been made. I have said that we know there is growing pressure on local authorities’ finances, but we are committed ensuring that any issues relating to social care that are specific to adults of working age are identified and given the right focus. Work on that is being led jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Yasmin Qureshi: The Minister talks about trying to use finances appropriately. My local council has had a 54% cut to the funding that it receives from central Government, which is why it has a shortfall in funding for social care.

The Government have been able to find money to cut corporation tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax, as well as £1 billion for the Democratic Unionist party. Are they really saying this is all about austerity and choices? Is it not really that the Government have different priorities from the Opposition?

Caroline Dinenage: I can honestly say with my hand on my heart that the Labour party does not have a monopoly on care or kindness.

I mentioned earlier that local authorities will receive a real-terms, above-inflation increase in their funding profile. We have announced significant dedicated funding for social care. The Opposition regularly seem to forget that we allocated an additional £2 billion to social care only a year ago, with a further £150 million this year. That means councils have access to £9.4 billion of dedicated funding.

Thelma Walker: Kirklees Council has had its funding cut by central Government by nearly £200 million. This year, it has raised its council tax by 5.9% to help pay for services. The three percentage points for social care come to £4.8 million, but there is a shortfall of £12 million a year. Can the Minister tell councillors where the rest of the money for social care should come from?

Caroline Dinenage: We are looking at the long-term sustainability of adult social care funding, and there will be more news in the Green Paper later this year.

The last Labour Government had 13 years without dealing with the here and now, so I will take no lessons from them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Dinenage: I will make a bit of progress.

The shadow Minister asked about Allied Healthcare. She is right to raise that, and I am grateful that she has done so. As she said, Allied Healthcare announced last Thursday that it is proposing a company voluntary arrangement to its creditors. I want to talk about that specifically because people across the country will be concerned. I spoke to the chief executive officer last Thursday to emphasise the importance of continuity of care for everyone receiving its services, both in adult social care and primary care, and the company has made it clear that those who receive services from Allied Healthcare will continue to receive the same level of care and that their care plans will not change.

Barbara Keeley: I am glad the Minister has responded in that way, but I asked her how she would ensure that 150 councils can fulfil their statutory duty to provide care if that company goes bust. We need to know a bit more than that she has had verbal reassurance. Of course the chief executive, in his current position, will try to give her verbal reassurance but, under the CVA, the creditors have to be satisfied within four weeks. What is going to happen if this company goes bust? Is it going to be another Southern Cross?

Caroline Dinenage: I am happy to answer the hon. Lady’s questions, which she is right to ask. Although we are very hopeful that this procedure will have a positive result, we are taking steps to ensure we are prepared for all eventualities. The Care Quality Commission and my Department are monitoring the situation, and the CQC will notify local authorities in the event it considers it likely that services will be disrupted as a result of business failure. The law means that local authorities will step in to meet individuals’ care and support needs if a care provider business fails and its services are disrupted. The relevant local authorities are working up contingency plans to ensure individuals’ care and support needs continue to be met.

While the long-term options are being resolved, it is right that funding for social care comes from a variety of sources, including business rates, general taxation and the social care precept. Delayed transfers of care is one area where that money is clearly making a difference. This Government are clear that no one should stay in a hospital bed for longer than is necessary; doing this removes people’s dignity, reduces their quality of life and leads to poorer health and care outcomes.

Maria Caulfield: My local East Sussex County Council is a rural authority, so for decades it has had 49% less funding per head of population, yet it has had the same pressures as the areas represented by Opposition Members. By working together with health services, my council has reduced delayed discharges by 38%. Will the Minister welcome the hard work of East Sussex County Council?

Caroline Dinenage: I do welcome it. I recognise the very hard work of local councils that have managed to reduce delayed transfers of care. Indeed, I also recognise
the very hard-working NHS staff, such as my hon. Friend, who have also helped to make that a reality.

We know that the NHS is busier than ever before, with hospital admissions rising by 33% since 2007, yet we have set clear expectations for reducing delayed discharges. Despite these challenging circumstances, both the NHS and social care have been working hard to free up beds. Since February 2017, more than 1,600 beds per day have been freed up nationally. I need slightly to take exception to the way the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South described people being discharged before they are medically fit. If someone is experiencing a transfer of care that has been delayed, it is because a multi-agency team have already assessed them as being medically fit for discharge.

John Redwood: Following on from the point about the big variations in how much per head councils get, may I point out that some time ago West Berkshire and Wokingham were cut back because they were very efficient and doing a good job? Will the Minister make sure that in the new formula good conduct is taken into account and does not lead to penalties?

Caroline Dinenage: I will certainly take that into consideration.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister is just proving that she was not listening to what I was saying. What I said was that the British Red Cross has said that it had found innumerable cases where discharges have happened so quickly that people were discharged without the right amount of care, and that can just lead to a cycle of readmission. A constituent told me that, in the case of Salford Royal, which is an excellent hospital, she felt she had been “thrown out of hospital.” That is what she told me.

Caroline Dinenage: I very much thank the hon. Lady for that clarification.

Our funding increases have gone into initiatives such as the better care fund, which provides a mechanism for local authorities and clinical commissioning groups to pool budgets for the purposes of integrated care.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I hope my hon. Friend will not mind, but I want to make a little progress. The fund has helped to join up health and care services so that people can manage their own health and wellbeing, and live independently in their communities for as long as possible.

Another area where we have made significant progress is quality and safeguarding. The Care Act 2014 placed adult safeguarding on a statutory footing for the first time and established a national threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities must meet. This eliminates the postcode lottery of eligibility across England. Last year, local authorities in England advised more than 500,000 people how to access services to meet their care needs—this includes services provided by leisure, housing, transport and care providers, as well as voluntary groups.

Everyone is entitled to, and deserves, quality care, and we are working to improve the terms and conditions for people accessing care, to ensure that their rights are protected.

Norman Lamb: On the sleep-in allowance, is it reasonable to expect providers to fund these back-pay claims, given that at the time the liability was incurred commissioners and providers entered contracts on the basis of what the Government said was right in terms of the minimum wage? When the Government change the position, surely it is not fair on organisations, private or third sector, retrospectively to expect them to pay.

Caroline Dinenage: I understand and share the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns on sleep-ins, and will be addressing this a little later in my comments.

We have established adult safeguarding boards to help to protect vulnerable adults in our society from abuse or exploitation. They can also act as an important source of advice and assistance for those using the adult safeguarding system. This Government also introduced the toughest system of care home inspection in the world. Eighty-one per cent. of adult social care providers are good or outstanding according to the CQC, which is a testament to the many hard-working and committed professionals working in care, to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude. The CQC regime is already having a positive impact and 82% of providers who are rated as inadequate go on to improve.

Regardless of that, there is too much variation in the quality of care. Neighbouring local authorities can have radically different success rates on care quality and we are taking steps to address that. We are working with the adult social care sector to implement Quality Matters, a shared commitment to take action to achieve high-quality adult social care for service users, families, carers and everyone working in the sector.

We welcome the Competition and Market Authority’s recent market study on care homes. It makes difficult reading, but we have welcomed it and as part of developing the Green Paper the Government are carefully looking at all the issues identified. What is more, we have published a package of measures to improve consumer protections in the social care sector after the CMA raised concerns about unfair consumer practices in homes, including the charging of unfair fees to residents and the lack of contractual and pricing transparency.

Those measures, which include working alongside industry to develop model contracts and supporting the CQC to better hold providers to account, aim to put the power back into the hands of residents and their families. We are clear, however, that if improvements are not seen we will look to change the law to strengthen protections so that people can be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

That leads me to the third aspect on which I want to focus. Ultimately, the social care workforce are the backbone of the care sector. We know that there are challenges and that is why we need to ensure that they are supported to deliver the best-quality care now and in the future. Part of that endeavour involves respecting not only the compassion and dedication of care workers but the vast range of skills they have. Alongside social workers, occupational therapists and nurses, we have many care workers who could benefit from or be inspired
by new career progression ladders. We need to ensure that we have enough people within all those skilled roles to support individuals and families in living their best possible lives. That means ensuring that new routes into social care professions have as much variety and value as those developed by the NHS. Apprenticeships are part of that story. I am proud that in 2016-17 more than 90,000 social care apprentices began their training. That is up more than 40,000 compared with in 2010.

Of course, pay remains a constant and often emotive issue. Care workers deserve a wage that reflects the true value of their work. The national living wage is, in part, a reaction to that and the average salary for a care worker in the independent sector has gone up by 4%, with those full-time staff on the minimum wage seeing a pay rise of up to £2,000 since 2015. We are not complacent about the economic pressures faced by many in the system, but that is a good place to start.

A couple of hon. Members have spoken about sleep-ins and they are absolutely right to raise that. The Government are committed to creating an economy that works for everyone, ensuring that workers are paid fairly according to the law, including through the national minimum wage, but we recognise the pressure that has been placed on the sleep-in sector by historic liabilities for back pay. We are carefully exploring options to minimise any impact on the sector caused by this and have been engaging with the European Commission to ensure that any response would be legal. The Government will continue to work with representatives of the social care sector to strengthen the evidence base, building on the work we began over the summer. I will, of course, keep the House informed when we have made progress.

There are thousands of care workers in England, and we need many more, but it is true that we already have hundreds of thousands of carers out there—the unpaid hidden army of family, friends and community volunteers, without whom the system would simply grind to a halt. We know that about 60% of us are likely to become carers at some stage in our lives. As it is today, one in eight of the adult population is a carer. That is why carers will be a fundamental part of the Green Paper. A sustainable settlement for social care will simply not be possible without focusing on the support we provide to them. Ahead of the Green Paper’s publication, we will shortly publish an action plan on carers, setting out a cross-Government programme of targeted work to support carers over the next couple of years.

Another principle that the Secretary of State has spoken about in the context of the Green Paper is control. We know that the greater control people have over their care, the better the outcomes. The only people who have a specific right to have a personal health budget are adults in receipt of NHS continuing healthcare or children receiving continuing care, which is why earlier this month we launched a consultation on extending the right to personal health budgets and integrated personal budgets to achieve better outcomes for those with the greatest ongoing social care needs as well as health needs. Those are some of the principles that are guiding the Green Paper. The goal is that, whatever a person’s age, they can be confident in our care and support system, not just for their own health and care needs but for those of the people close to them. **Karin Smyth:** The 2015 Tory manifesto was very clear on the commitment and the assurances about the cap. The 2017 manifesto abandoned that. I think the Minister said earlier that it is still part of the Government’s considerations. Will she clarify from the Dispatch Box today what we are to expect in the Green Paper with regard to the cap?

**Caroline Dinenage:** The Prime Minister said last year in the general election that we would be consulting on the cap in due course and that will be part of the Green Paper. Building a sustainable care and support system will require some big decisions, but getting this right promises a better system in which everyone can have confidence, where people understand their responsibilities, and can prepare for their future and know that the care that they receive will be to a high standard and help them to maintain their independence and well-being. The paper will set out options to put the social care system on a more secure footing and address issues to improve the quality of care and reduce the variation in practice.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Before I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, I should inform colleagues that we have about 17 people who wish to participate in this debate. I do not want to impose a time limit, which means that I require some discipline. I suggest that if hon. and right hon. Members confine their speeches to about seven minutes, we might not have to impose a time limit.

4.35 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It seems no time since we were discussing this topic in the autumn. There are three groups of people who require social care. The first and the one commonly thought about are the frail elderly. There is expected to be a rise of 25% in those aged 85 and above between 2015 and 2025. By 2030, that proportion will have gone up 63%. Therefore, this requires us to make urgent preparations. Elderly people requiring social care need support and comfort.

The next group comprises those who are facing the end of life. They want dignity and, if possible, to be at home. If their family is looking after them, they want their family to have respite. The third group, as has already been mentioned in the debate, are younger people with disability. For them, it is the quality of their whole life, their mobility and their ability to participate in society. This last group is expected to rise by 9.2% between 2010 and 2020.

The five year forward view for the NHS and the amount of money requested were based on a game-changing approach to public health and a strong increase in social care funding. In actual fact, the opposite has happened and social care has lost almost £5 billion. Age UK says that 1.2 million elderly people have a social care need that is not being met—up 48% since 2010. In England, there has been a 26% drop in local authority-funded patients getting social care—that is 400,000 people—despite an increase in the ageing population.

One third of the elderly population is looked after by their family. Those carers have been paid tributes here, but they need a bit more than tributes; they need support and, in particular, they need respite, because
many of them are literally working all the hours of the week. There will be 2 million carers who are themselves over 60. At the moment, carers’ allowance is only £60 a week; it is not even the same as the jobseeker’s allowance. In Scotland, this is one of the benefits that we now have control over, and it is rising to meet the level of the jobseeker’s allowance. That is little enough tribute to these people who, frankly, are saving the state millions.

Some 700,000 people were identified by Age UK as getting no help whatsoever. The Green Paper is looking at options in the long term, but the problem is that social care needs funding now, and it is estimated that the gap will be £2 billion by 2020. The social care precept has been identified, allowing local authorities to raise council tax by 2% to 3% over the next few years. That will bring in £1.8 billion, but it will be the richer areas that will be able to raise more money.

The better care fund has been put forward for the integration of health and social care, which we should all welcome. It is estimated to raise £1.5 billion by 2019-20. The problem is that some of it—£800 million—has been raided from the new homes bonus, and when we are not here talking about social care, people are at the Dispatch Box talking about the lack of housing and the lack of affordable housing. The problem is that if we do not get away from silo thinking, we will never reach a point of health in all policies.

At the same time, the local authority funding grant will be cut by £6.1 billion by 2019-20, so we are talking about giving with one hand and taking away with the other. As has been touched on, the cuts to local authority funding of social care are causing providers to close. In the first half of 2016, one third of local authorities had at least one home care provider—and half had a care home or nursing home—that closed due to becoming bankrupt. Anyone who has had a relative supported by these services will know how traumatic it is, particularly if it is a residential care home, for someone who may have lived somewhere for years suddenly to be moved to a strange place.

Perhaps some consideration should be given in the Green Paper to combining health and social care, and to looking at some of the different approaches in order to consider whether it is actually safer to provide social care. In Scotland, we have been increasing the funding into the community in primary care, which will rise to 11% of the health budget, and in mental health, community care and social care. The aim is to rebalance the budget over the coming years to 2021 until half the health budget is going to the community. We have been funding integration joint boards since 2014, and the care, design and planning is by health and social care partnerships. This is already joining up health and social care, so that we do not have the situation that I experienced when I worked in a hospital, with the social care side and the health side bickering over where Mrs Jones would be best served. With integration, we should just be able to work out what is best for Mrs Jones.

Dr Whitford: I utterly agree. Obviously, we recognise the change in title of the Secretary of State. I am sure that many of us across the House hope that that would mean a move towards a more joined-up approach to health and social care. The pressure on the NHS is absolutely exacerbated by problems in social care.

Kate Green: There is an inconsistency between funding through continuing healthcare as part of NHS provision and the funding that is available to support people through social care. Does the hon. Lady intend to suggest that that discrepancy should in some way be rectified so that there is not a difference between the routes through which someone comes into the care system?

Dr Whitford: Many relatives and patients complain about the fact that, depending on which illness people have towards the end of their life, they will either be supported in an NHS or hospice system or they will pay for it in the social care system. A fragmentation has resulted from the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and the change in structure. Someone’s treatment may be delivered under NHS England as a specialist service for so many days, but then they go back to the clinical commissioning group and the ongoing care is suddenly not there. It is all very disjointed. In actual fact, we require an entire approach that joins up health and social care for the entire patient pathway. We should not expect patients to navigate from one pothole to the next.

We have exactly the same challenges with an ageing population. Indeed, the Scottish population is older and ageing more quickly than the English population. In all these debates, I always say that we must not look on this as a catastrophe. Having spent over 30 years of my life trying to get people to live longer, I ask Members to remember the alternative—living shorter. However, without public health changes and a game-changing approach, we are not ageing well; and we need to age well. But that will take a long time to turn around. We need to look after the people who require care right now.

Having failures in social care traps people in hospital. In Scotland, although we have a long way to go as well, delayed discharges from hospital have dropped in every year since 2014, when the integration started. Between 2010 and 2017, the average hours delivered through home care have doubled from six to 12 per week. In future, a quarter of us will die in a care home, so what kind of quality of care do we want to have, and what kinds of palliative care skills would we like our nursing homes and care homes to have? We need to create links between the hospice movement and care homes so that those skills and that supportive approach are shared.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Lady’s dedication and work in the NHS knows no bounds. One of the things that no one has touched on is the absolutely vital importance of aids and adaptations that allow people to go home and have social care, or even have their family provide care. Often one of the major problems with delayed discharge is the lack of access to those adaptations—the commodes, the hoists, the hospital beds and the walk-in showers that people need in their home. Does she recognise that that is one of things that nobody is talking about that we must get right, and that money must be put in to make it possible?
Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. In my years of working particularly as a breast cancer surgeon, where I was involved in the palliative care of my own patients, we often met that as a barrier. We started to have the fast response teams who could get hold of hospital beds and commodities and get the changes done, particularly for somebody who actually might not have very long to live.

Since 2015, those who are defined by their medical care team as being in the terminal phase of an illness, whether it is cancer, motor neurone disease or another condition, have not been charged for personal care or nursing care at home. This means that they are not delayed by means-testing, which is another thing that can end up keeping a terminal patient stuck in hospital for weeks and weeks that frankly they just cannot spare.

Younger people with disability have been mentioned. In England, approximately half of local authority spend, and in Scotland approximately 40%, is for the working-age disabled. However, Scope, a charity involved with those with disability, says that two thirds of those who applied to local authorities for care were offered no help and were simply signposted to other charities. The 83% who were given some care felt that they did not get enough hours for it to support them sufficiently.

When we discussed social care in October, I mentioned that in Scotland we were hoping to pass Frank’s law, which is in honour of Frank Kopel—a footballer who played for Man Utd and Dundee Utd and who, possibly related to heading the ball, developed dementia at a very young age. I am glad to report that this law has now been passed. Starting from April next year, those under 65 with degenerative, chronic and eventually terminal illnesses will also be able to have personal care, and this will simply be needs-based, as it is for those over 65. I pay tribute to his widow, Amanda, who fought for a very long time to raise the issue of people over 65. I pay tribute to his widow, Amanda, who

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): There are of course also carers who are not employed. I came across kinship carers in Hartlepool. Does the hon. Lady agree that kinship carers, and in particular those who receive no benefits, should also feature in this debate?

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. There are all sorts of aspects to the provision of care, for whichever age group or needs, and the Green Paper will fail if it does not result in us stepping back and taking a wider view.

It is important to pay the real living wage, which the Scottish Government already support and fund, and not the national living wage. All hours should be paid—that commitment is being consulted on in Scotland at the moment—and that should include travel as well as overnight care.

For local authorities that have social care within their service, this is the biggest driver of the gender pay gap. Men who empty the bins are paid considerably more than the women who are caring for our grandparents. We should think of job satisfaction and give them the time to care, not 15 minutes. We should think of continuity for both the patient and the carer, but particularly we need to think of the career structure and the training.

Caring needs to be a profession, and a profession that is respected.

4.52 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). I think the Opposition are quite right to want to debate this issue, and I also think strongly that the long-term solution to the problem of funding care—particularly for the frail elderly—will require cross-party agreement, so I hope that the debate can take place in a relatively non-partisan way.

I agree with the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) that radical change is needed, but I gently put it to her and her colleagues that in this long-term and complex area, indignation is not enough. Simply saying, “We must spend more money,” at the same time as saying, “But we must restrict the amount of money we take from other people,” which I understood to be the import of part of her speech, does not cut it.

Norman Lamb: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Green: I will certainly give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a moment, because I am about to mention him, but I am conscious of time.
There needs to be radical change, and the Green Paper needs to be radical and brave, because although in this debate, as in the wider debate on this issue, a lot of people talk about the fact that we live in an ageing society, we have not remotely adjusted as a society to what that means yet. Our population is projected to grow by around 10 million over the next 40 years. Almost all that growth comes from older people, and particularly those in the oldest age group. There are 5.3 million people over 75 in Britain today. That number will double to more than 10 million in 40 years. This is not just a looming problem; it is a problem today. There is a short-term and a long-term problem to solve. Frankly, in the spirit of non-partisanship, no party has a record unblemished by using social care as a political football. Phrases such as “death tax” or “dementia tax” make good copy and can affect the outcome of elections, but they do not help rational debate or, more importantly, help us improve the lot of the increasing millions of older people.

Barbara Keeley: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is admonishing his own Chancellor, who used the expression “death tax” in the last Budget.

Damian Green: I think that the phrase “death tax” dates back to the previous Labour Government’s attempt to solve the problem in 2008, and I am sure that the hon. Lady used the phrase “dementia tax” during the last general election campaign. I hope that she will reciprocate my attempt to be non-partisan—so far it does not feel like it.

In the short term, the challenge for the Government is one of capacity and quality of care. Both problems will become more difficult in the long term. There is a range of things that we must do as a society before people need social care. For example, we need to keep people active for longer, we need to keep them in the workforce for longer, because that is good for their health, and we need to make changes to the planning system so that we can keep them in appropriate housing of their own for longer. In the end, however, the nub of the issue will be funding.

I want to address a point raised by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire about joining the whole thing up with health funding. I agree with the broad thrust of the 10 principles proposed by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) yesterday, particularly the idea of hypothecation, whose time is coming, but I think there is a problem with the idea of simply integrating all health funding and all social care funding.

It is a no-brainer that, organisationally, social care and healthcare need to be much better integrated, so that the individual is not trying to negotiate a very complex system, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said. If we simply roll all the funding together into one pot, however—a sort of national health and social care fund—there are two serious dangers. The first is that social care takes over from mental health as the Cinderella of the health system, never quite at the top of the priority list when money is allocated. The second is that nobody feels that their contribution is related to their personal needs. The effect is that some of the sources of funding that could be made available—I agree with all those who say we need more funding—such as the £1.7 trillion of equity in residential property, of which more than two thirds is held by the over-65s, would be in danger of being permanently excluded, which I think would be a great mistake.

Norman Lamb: The right hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful and reasonable contribution. He suggests that if there was a completely combined united funding stream for health and social care, social care would be relegated and disadvantaged. Of course, social care already loses out here and now—under Labour, the coalition and the Conservatives—compared with NHS funding. He complained about people just using indignation, and he made the case for cross-party working. Does he share my frustration that those of us who have tried to make the case for working together are constantly rebuffed by the Government? Will he join us in pressing the Prime Minister actually to engage in this, so that we can make it a reality?

Damian Green: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that cross-party working is necessary. I gently point out that when I was a member of the Government, I met him and the hon. Member for Leicester West in a cross-party group to discuss precisely this—I was responsible for this policy area at the time—because I wanted to work with them. I thought that was the only way forward when I was in government, and I still do.

There is not time today to go into detailed funding proposals, but I think we have to accept that in the long term the funding of social care will need to be not only more generous than it has been in recent years, but fair, and seen to be fair, to every generation. I make the point, which is not often made in this context, that intergenerational fairness means being fair to older people as well as younger people. The view has taken hold in some circles that being over 60 means being over-privileged. I strongly challenge that view. The current generation of 50 and 60-somethings is the first in which people are often simultaneously trying to help their children with housing and their parents with care needs. This is not special pleading for a particular cohort. It is important to remember the obvious but salient point that young people themselves will grow old. Setting one generation against another is not only a bad basis for policy making but very short-sighted for the individuals most affected. Instead, we need to find a solution that will provide stability for decades to come.

I suspect that Members on both sides of the House would be united by the proposition that, however much better we get at using technology and housing design to keep people in their own homes for longer, the sheer growth in the number of people needing some kind of care will mean that we need to find more money. Precisely because that will be a problem for decades, not just for the rest of this Parliament, it is vital that the solution has cross-party support. Social care is a challenge for all parties.

The fundamental issue of whether social care should be a national or local service is often ignored. I am struck that 44% of Kent County Council’s budget goes to adult social care. That number will only rise. I am also struck that, in contrast with almost every other area of policy that involves local government, when I talk to local councillors about this issue they say, “Maybe
this should be dealt with at a national rather than a local level.” They almost do not want it to be their responsibility any more. That is practically unique. I hope that Ministers will address that.

I urge Ministers to include staffing needs, the importance of which has been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House, in the Green Paper. Given what the wider situation will be post Brexit, we need to find ways of using technology, being much better at training care workers from the British population, and raising the status of care work. Labour Members mentioned that, and I agree. Looking at care purely as a business sector, it seems to me a classic case of somewhere that both technology and the human touch are vital. That combination is vital to providing high-quality care. To put it starkly, a robot may be able to do the lifting part of the work, but it cannot provide the equally necessary words of encouragement and comfort. I think social care will be an employment growth sector in the decades ahead.

Getting social care right is clearly one of this Government’s biggest challenges, as it will be for every Government for many decades to come. Over the next couple of years, we will have the chance to reset the debate so that it becomes calmer and more realistic. I know that my right hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister for Care want to provide that calm and realism, and I hope that those of us contributing to this debate from the outside will live up to that, too. I very much look forward to the publication of the Green Paper.

5.3 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab) (Lab/Co-op): There are few career commitments more commendable than dedicating time to the care of others, especially our elderly and vulnerable relatives. I am disappointed that the Care Minister is no longer in her place. I was shocked by some of her comments. She accused my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) of not mentioning or thanking social care workers. I listened very carefully to my hon. Friend’s speech, and it was imbued throughout with a passionate defence of the status of care work. Labour Members mentioned that, and I agree. Looking at care purely as a business sector, it seems to me a classic case of somewhere that both technology and the human touch are vital. That combination is vital to providing high-quality care. To put it starkly, a robot may be able to do the lifting part of the work, but it cannot provide the equally necessary words of encouragement and comfort. I think social care will be an employment growth sector in the decades ahead.

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Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a regressive form of taxation. Every time the precept or local council tax is raised, people pay twice: they see less of a service, but they are still paying through their income tax and through council tax.

I want to talk about the people who are the backbone of our care system: those who work in the care sector. In my local authority area, just over 170 social care staff are employed to support about 5,750 people. That is an average of 33 to 34 cases per member of staff, with all the challenges and safeguarding issues that come with that. The more experienced staff often deal with many more cases than that. As people live longer, with multiple and increasingly complex health conditions, the time and effort required from staff becomes greater. Currently, about 22% of residents in Redcar and Cleveland are over the age of 65. That is expected to increase to 27% by 2030. There are also many working-age disabled or vulnerable adults who have long-term care needs.

The needs of the individuals who need care vary hugely, from those who are frail and need physical support to those with learning disabilities or mental health problems. Mental health poses a particularly difficult challenge, with one in 14 people over the age of 65 developing symptoms of dementia in their lifetime. The care demands required of staff to support these people are ever more complex.

Mike Hill: I praise Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council for being the first council in the north-east to adopt Unison’s ethical care charter, which promotes...
staff training and pay and quality care. It has also been adopted in Hartlepool. Will my hon. Friend join me in supporting the further ambition to establish local care academies to guarantee that such training and care packages are written into employment contracts?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Much has been said today about the prestige of the sector and that suggestion would go a long way to addressing that.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): To follow up on the issue of training, it is important that people who are going into people’s homes to care for them or who care for people in a home setting have all the training they require to perform the duties that are expected of them. Too often, they are not given the training they need and are expected to do far more than they are qualified to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I believe there is a voluntary time limit of seven minutes. We are in danger of spoiling that. If we do, I will have to bring it in time limit of about 5 minutes. I do not want to do that, so I need Members to help me ensure that everybody gets an equal amount of time.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) is absolutely right and I welcome all the interventions, but I should probably now crack on with my speech. She is spot on in saying that there is a critical need for training in the workforce and that not enough has been invested in them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) mentioned Unison, which has done fantastic work in the sector. Its biennial survey with Community Care magazine last year revealed a worrying picture of care workers having a lack of time to spend with residents. Nearly half the respondents to the survey said that the volume of cases they were responsible for left them feeling “over the limit” and more than half blamed staff shortages for their heavy workload.

As well as providing direct care, practitioners often have a responsibility to support the army of family carers who themselves are working to look after relatives at home. The shadow care system, as it is known, is running alongside the care system, keeping the whole thing going through the love and good will of unpaid family support and kinship carers, as has been discussed. For example, the Junction Foundation in my constituency, which I am proud to support as my charity of the year, provides support and tailored services to people in care roles. It is aware of around 7,000 carers in the borough, but the 2011 census suggests that the number could be much higher.

I want to say a bit more about the workforce. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South said, they are underpaid, undervalued and overworked. The National Audit Office report from February was damning in its assessment that the Department of Health and Social Care “is not doing enough to support a sustainable social care workforce.”

Data from the Skills for Care charity suggests that there is currently a turnover rate of 32% for the role of care worker in adult residential care in England, but that rises to a shocking 44.3% for care workers in adult domiciliary care. It is completely understandable that people working in this tough environment decide to leave the care profession when the pressure becomes too great. If people are to see social care as a viable career, they need to feel valued, and too often that is not the case.

With demand for social care increasing as our population ages, the workload will only get larger for the staff who remain. As the National Audit Office report also suggests, the Government are simply not providing the leadership that is needed. Local councils and care partnerships that are commissioning care are not being given the confidence of a national strategy designed to support the workforce and recruit new carers. A national strategy, for example, could see health and social care brought more closely together. The silo mentality between the NHS and social care has meant that the two services have passed patients to and fro, duplicating resources and missing the opportunities to work together to deliver better outcomes.

It is welcome that the Government have endorsed more partnership working, and these relationships are already getting results. In Redcar and Cleveland, our current partnership, which is led by the health and wellbeing board, has been given a rating of excellent by the National Audit Office. Our better care fund shared budget with the local clinical commissioning group is already leading to some positive outcomes, with a reduction in the number of non-elective admissions to hospital. This joined-up working is also leading to the establishment of an intermediate care centre in Eston in my constituency, which will help elderly patients to avoid long hospital stays and receive recovery support closer to home. It is a great initiative, with the local council and the NHS working more closely together. These initiatives show the huge possibilities from integrating health and social care, but on their own, they barely scratch the surface in dealing with the crisis facing services.

Social care is in desperate need of an urgent cash boost to address the funding gap, to ensure that social care services are properly staffed, and to ensure that the workforce get the pay and development support that they deserve for the work they do. The social care levy and grants in the autumn 2017 Budget have staved off collapse, but the disastrous bankruptcy of Northamptonshire County Council shows what happens when the pressure from cuts becomes too great to manage.

In the longer term, the system needs reform and these decisions cannot be kicked into the long grass any more. It is time for a care system fit for the 21st century, which puts social care on an equal footing with the NHS, and does not leave elderly people and their families worrying about needing to sell their home to pay the care bill.

5.12 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and to take part in this very important debate. For me, this is the biggest service delivery challenge that we face as a nation. The UK has an ageing population and a finite amount of money, regardless of what Members
on some Benches in this place say. We have to focus on delivering outcomes for people. Sometimes that gets lost when we are chasing our tail and focusing on dealing with conditions, rather than with prevention. We face a challenging environment in terms of service delivery. That is why I would support a royal commission on social care, and I agree with and echo the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) on that.

In Cornwall, the challenges are compounded, and let me explain why. The last census showed that 22% of people in Cornwall were over 65, and this will increase as more and more young people leave the county to seek work or a career. I believe that the next census will show that the problem has been compounded even further. As for the rural sparsity of Cornwall, we have 550,000 people in this county of ours across almost 150 miles of coastline. Traditionally, we have had a low-wage economy and a much less competitive marketplace, particularly in care. This highlights the rural productivity lag and the economic challenges facing the day-to-day delivery of care in our area. It is the perfect storm.

A typical day for a carer in Cornwall might involve long journey times to make care visits, difficulties parking and meeting care time targets and delivering complex care in pressured timeframes, and when people step in to cover sickness or pick up a complicated care package because someone is away, it can be particularly difficult. It is easy to see why people might choose to work in a supermarket or another career, rather than work in the care sector, but there might be light at the end of the tunnel. Recent changes implemented by the Royal Cornwall Hospital, which now agrees care packages when people arrive at hospital, have improved the system, increased bed capacity and helped people return to their own beds—in my view, a person’s own bed is the best bed for them. The £12 million the Government recently provided to Cornwall Council, for which I thank them, has also helped.

Technology, which has been alluded to, has a huge part to play in delivering care in rural communities. There are big opportunities here. The roll-out of 4G, 5G and broadband will make rural communities much better connected, while the GovTech initiative, which the Government recently announced, is looking at health provision. We have a chance to utilise technology to take a much more community-focused approach to care. The Post Office has a part to play as well. I recently attended a dinner hosted by the Post Office, and what it does in terms of care in the community should be welcomed.

I am vice-chairman of the Parliamentary Internet, Communications and Technology Forum, and I had a very interesting discussion with somebody recently about a social care app they were developing to provide a care service that works in much the same way as Uber, by linking purchasers and care providers, and which could cut out some of the top slicing by private providers and local authorities and put that money directly into the pockets of carers, who, instead of surviving on the national living wage, could see a significant uplift in income.

It is vital that we retain good people in the profession and boost morale. If we can create a better and more effective system in our rural areas, that is what we should do. So I say to the Government: be bold, go for the technology and see what we can do. The provision of social care needs to be much more socially inclusive and decentralised. We empower individuals—both carers and their loved ones—and create a balance that puts rural communities on a level playing field with urban communities. This matters to people in North Cornwall and so it matters to me. I want to make sure we get it right.

5.18 pm  

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak once again in a debate on this important subject. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, who has made this speech before and been resolute in standing up for the care industry, and I support the Labour motion, which is very good. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who spoke for the Scottish National party, also made some very important points.

I support what the royal commission on long-term care for the elderly said 19 years ago: long-term care should be free at the point of need and paid for out of general taxation. I want to go beyond what Labour is saying at the moment, however, which I applaud and support, and look to a world with free long-term care and a care service run on exactly the same basis as the national health service. We were moving in that direction just before we lost office in 2010. The then Secretary of State for Health suggested a national care service like the national health service. I intervened on him and said, “Yes, and paid for out of general taxation and free at the point of need,” but we did not get it. We did not get the support all those years ago, despite the support of many Members for the royal commission report, strong support in the country and a trade union-led campaign calling for free long-term care. It was all to no avail and so the issue has rumbled on ever since. The issue did not go away, however, and I raised it myself in the Chamber several times over those years.

Eventually, the Dilnot commission was set up, and in its 2012 report it recommended a compromise. Sir Andrew Dilnot, whom I know well, is a superb man, and he did a brilliant job. He came up with a compromise that he thought might be worn by the Treasury, proposing that self-funding should be capped at £35,000 for a lifetime. The Government dragged their feet and resisted, but eventually, after wriggling a lot, they agreed to a lifetime cap of £72,000—twice the amount that Sir Andrew had suggested. Even then, however, that was deferred until 2020, and now it seems to have been deferred indefinitely. We are well away from where we should be. Scotland, of course, has had free care, and I applaud Scotland for that. I do not know why we should not follow suit.

If self-funding affected only the wealthy, it would not be such a worry, but it actually affects millions of working-class families. The first generation who became owner-occupiers have been particularly badly hit. Successive Governments have wrung their hands about the difficulties experienced by young people in achieving owner-occupation, while at the same time cutting off one of the only possible routes to owner-occupation for many: the cascading of family equity down the generations, whereby the capital in Granny’s home passes down to grandchildren when she ends her days.
I hold resolutely to the view that long-term care should be free to all, and funded from progressive taxation at the point of need. I am not too concerned about how that taxation is raised—it could be national insurance, income tax or a hypothecated tax—but the money should come from general taxation.

Scott Mann: The hon. Gentleman is making a valid point about the funding of care, but I should be interested to know whether he considers the use of technology, which I mentioned and which was mentioned by a couple of my colleagues, is an option that might enable us to do things slightly better.

Kelvin Hopkins: I am always in favour of improving the way we do things, and technology is of course important.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, given that some funding decisions come from general taxation.

Kelvin Hopkins: In fact, the royal commission did cover funding. Over the last 20 years and more, I have spoken to many audiences, and have asked them, “What would you prefer—to have your house taken away from you, or Granny’s house taken away, or to pay slightly more tax?” The unanimous view was in favour of a slightly increased level of taxation to pay for long-term care. Everyone is going to get old. I am easily the oldest person in the Chamber. I am not planning to go into long-term care any time soon, but on the other hand I am closer to it than the other Members who are present. However, I will not speak about myself.

There is another factor in all this. In my constituency, there were three local authority care homes where the residents were happy, the staff were wonderful, and the healthcare professionals treasured them. All those homes were closed, and the land was sold off. Now we see the private care sector in constant difficulty.

Another scandal has been reported recently, namely the practice of effectively using self-funders to subsidise publicly funded residential care. Contracts with cash-strapped councils are squeezed, and charges for self-funders are increased to compensate. In one case, the charge for a care home resident who had been state-funded and then became self-funding was multiplied by several times. Most worryingly, there have been reports of inadequate care in homes across the country, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. When care is provided by homes in the private sector that are squeezed for funding and have to make profits, it is inevitable that care standards will eventually be cut. It is clear that long-term care should not be in the profit-driven private sector, but should be a true public service, in the public sector. I commend today’s motion and all that has been said by many hon. Members on both sides of the House, but we have to move towards a national care service, based on exactly the same principles as the national health service.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I would like to praise our social care workforce and those who provide care voluntarily. The Government are not in denial about the issues that we face. That is why the Green Paper is being worked on and will be with us within months.

In spite of the huge challenges in this area, the Select Committee on Health and Social Care learned only yesterday that there were 1,700 fewer delayed transfers of care this February compared with the previous February. That is a small bit of progress in the right direction. In evidence to our sustainability and transformation inquiry, the Committee learned about some of the other good things happening around the country, including the passport scheme for care home staff in Wakefield, which allows them to transfer easily around the sector with their qualifications and experience properly registered and recorded. That will lead to an extra 750 jobs in that area by 2025.

In addition, we learned that in the 12 months to quarter 2 in 2017-18, compared with the 12 months to quarter 2 in 2015-16, emergency admissions in enhanced healthcare homes fell by 1.4%, compared with care homes in the rest of England that were not in that scheme, where they rose by 6.7%. We learned that in Buckinghamshire, through joint working between the NHS and local councils responsible for social care, there was a 57% reduction in falls leading to harm. The last example is from Tameside and Glossop, where, we were told, nurse-led telemedicine to care homes reduced hospital admissions from 122 to 75 and resulted in 75 earlier discharges. Those are examples of good practice around the country, but as ever with health and social care the question is how we can mainstream them all over the country.

In my remaining few minutes, I want to discuss what we do about the situation. Germany has introduced a proper nationalised social care insurance scheme, whereby people pay contributions, with adjustments made every few years. It has been in place since 1995 and has settled. It seems to me that the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, is agreeing with what I was saying. We can debate how it is paid for, but we want a national care service, paid for by everybody.

Kelvin Hopkins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: Very briefly.

Kelvin Hopkins: It seems to me that the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, is agreeing with what I was saying. We can debate how it is paid for, but we want a national care service, paid for by everybody.

Andrew Selous: I think Germany absolutely has something to teach us, and it has a private insurance scheme on top of that as well.
We need to see weekend discharges in hospitals, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, with local authorities and social care being available over the weekend, so that we do not get a backlog on Monday morning, causing our hospitals huge problems. We need proper pay for care home staff. They have a choice, but there is no choice for us as a country about whether we look after our frail elderly people and those who need social care. We have to do it, but people do not have to choose social care as a profession. Therefore, we need some proper labour market analysis and parity between similar jobs in the NHS and social care. The lowest-paid workers in the NHS have just had a 29% pay rise. If we are to have true parity, we need to treat the social care workforce as well as we treat the NHS workforce. Independent living schemes, which my own local authority of Central Bedfordshire is pioneering, are showing the way, and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee was impressed when it went to see Priory View in Dunstable. I gather that in East Sussex there is data to show that this type of extra care scheme—

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think that there is also a role for the greater use of co-operatives such as the CareShare organisation, which matches those in need of care with care givers so that they can swap time with each other?

Andrew Selous: That is an excellent scheme. Returning to East Sussex, I understand that data suggests that its extra care scheme is now saving about £1,000 per resident. We have seen examples from overseas—Germany and Japan in particular—and we have a Government who are committed to finding a solution. I eagerly look forward to seeing those solutions in the Green Paper and to our implementing them quickly.

5.30 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is very knowledgeable on these issues.

In October last year, we sat in the Chamber and conducted an Opposition day debate on this crucial issue of social care. Today, six months later, we are doing exactly the same thing, not because there has been any major policy change or even any significant ideas from the Government, but because, six months on from the Government being told that there was a social care crisis, they have taken no concrete action to solve it. In fact, rather than tackle it head on, all they have done is shift the responsibility further on to hard-pressed councils and devolved the funding burden and pain on to individual taxpayers in my constituency and throughout England.

Social care faces a deficit of £2.5 billion by the end of the decade. That is not a Labour party figure, and it is not fake news; it is from the reputable King’s Fund. Cuts of £6.3 billion have been made to adult social care since 2010. As a result, there has been a 26% fall in the number of people accessing care, meaning that 400,000 fewer people are able to get the support they need and deserve.

My constituency of Weaver Vale is served by two councils: Halton, and Cheshire West and Chester. Both have fought a valiant battle against Tory austerity, doing all they can to protect the most vulnerable, but things are now at crisis point. Figures show that since 2011–12, external funding for Cheshire West and Chester Council and Houlton Council has been cut by 38.1% and 43.7% respectively. That situation is unsustainable. The care sector says so, the charities that support our vulnerable people say so, and even the Tory-led Local Government Association says so, yet still the Government do not listen. If they do not listen to the experts, or even to their own Tory councillors, perhaps they will listen to those at the sharp end on the frontline of social care: our staff.

On Saturday, I spoke to Paula, who represents thousands of local government workers in Unison in my constituency. She had a message for the Secretary of State:

“Do the right thing. Invest in our valuable public services. Invest in our amazing workers”.

This touches on some of the points made by Conservative Members. I agree with some of my hon. Friends who have said decent, quality social care costs money and that we need to put our money where our mouth is. We need to have an honest conversation about this. Let us finally take the bull by the horns and establish a national health and social care service. The Government must listen to public sector workers like Paula, and the millions of people like her, as well as to unions such as Unison. Only then will our communities and our councils have the funding that meets their needs, and which is stable and fair. Only then will we begin to tackle the crisis in social care.

5.34 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). I start by declaring an interest as my husband is the non-executive director of a social enterprise in the area of social care. I join my colleagues and others across the House in welcoming this debate, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about this hugely important issue.

I am a great believer in localism. I was a borough councillor for several years before entering this place. As a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I have worked with colleagues to examine the issue and to question Ministers on the provision of social care across the country, and I am pleased that the Committee published a report on adult social care last year.

The health and social care devolution settlement to my region of Greater Manchester provides us with an opportunity to tackle health issues from the ground up, and I commend the Government for the considered approach that they have taken since the proposal’s inception several years ago. Greater Manchester is home to almost 3 million people across 10 local authorities. However, according to the Office for National Statistics, life expectancy in Greater Manchester is among the lowest in the country, so the challenges that we face are significant. If things continue as they are, we will be facing an unsustainable £2 billion shortfall in health funding by 2021.

Greater Manchester faces a number of issues, one of which is dementia. Members will know from the experiences of the constituents they meet in their surgeries, or perhaps through their own personal experience, that dementia causes immense suffering to individuals and their families. Dementia is now a leading cause of death in the UK,
and it is estimated that there could be nearly 35,000 people living with dementia in Greater Manchester by 2021, a third of whom will have symptoms so severe that they will require 24-hour care. Dementia care is estimated to cost around £375 million a year in Greater Manchester alone.

Similarly, strokes are the fourth biggest killer in the UK and a leading cause of disability. More than 100,000 strokes happen in the UK each year, with someone suffering from one every five minutes. In Greater Manchester, there are 6,000 a year. However, swift, specialist treatment can make a huge difference. My constituency has the No. 1 rated stroke unit in the country. Stepping Hill hospital's stroke centre has high-tech scanners to detect blood clots in the brain and uses emergency clot-busting drugs to break them down. It also provides stroke patients with a full rehabilitation programme and a high-tech sensory garden in which they can recover.

Hospitals are an important part of our healthcare provision. However, if we were to start again, given the sort of patient environment we have today, perhaps we would not design a system like that developed in 1948, which focused on acute hospitals. We would create a system much more focused on health and tackling long-term conditions such as dementia, heart disease and diabetes, all of which account for 70% of the NHS's total spend. As a result, much more needs be done in the community. A key aim of combining the health and social care budgets is to reflect that trend. Care needs to be moved out of hospitals into the community.

To provide effective support, integrated services are vital. A key Government aim from the outset has been to enable care to move out of hospitals and into the community, closer to where patients want to be—in their own home. An example of that strategy in practice is the “Stockport Together” programme, through which five health and care organisations have come together to integrate health and social care services across the borough. Stockport is proud of the fact that we are one of the healthiest places to live in the north-west, but the rising number of older people in Stockport means that there will be a greater need for health and social care support both in the short and long terms. Currently, one person five in Stockport is over 65.

NHS and social care organisations in Stockport, led by the local clinical commissioning group, have come together to tackle fragmented care by joining up services for older people in supported living schemes and care homes. I appreciate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing social care—what works for Stockport might not work for areas such as Salford, Sale or Stretford—so this is not about reducing the amount of money spent on care, as Members sometimes assert; it is about investing it in a smart way to ensure that we can meet the increased care needs that we face. The “Stockport Together” programme has demonstrated that, by joining up the arms of local government and health providers, we can reduce the number of ambulance call outs to falls and reduce the number of people in hospital who could be treated at home.

The Greater Manchester combined authority has £6 billion of devolved funding at its disposal, and I hope part of that will be channelled into primary care to facilitate early assessments and to support patients newly diagnosed with dementia. Doing so would have a positive knock-on effect. By focusing on community care we can reduce emergency admissions and care home placements, and relieve the pressure on our local hospitals.

The integration of health and social care in Greater Manchester is a significant milestone in tackling the challenges I have outlined, and I look forward to the publication of the Government’s Green Paper on this hugely important subject.

5.40 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I will make three brief points. The cuts we have seen to social care because of the huge reductions in local council funding are not just morally questionable but economically illiterate. Hundreds of thousands fewer people are now getting publicly funded social care, which is there to help frail, vulnerable people just to get out of bed and dressed, fed and washed—things we all take for granted. Those who still get publicly funded support are seeing it reduced, with shorter visits than they desperately need. The result is increasing numbers of elderly people going into hospital and getting stuck when they do not need to be there, which is terrible for them and costs the taxpayer far more.

As the shadow Care Minister said, this has a huge impact on unpaid family carers. One in four unpaid carers has not had a single day off caring for five years. Not a single day in five years! Think of the strain that puts on their physical and mental health. One in three unpaid family carers in work has had to give up their job or reduce their hours, so their income goes down, they end up claiming more in benefits and their employer loses their skills. There would be an outcry if that happened in any other area of the workforce.

I am afraid that the Government still do not get it. They are still failing to look properly at the NHS and social care together. It is astonishing that we have a separate Green Paper on social care, and doubly astonishing that the Green Paper focuses only on older people and not the hundreds of thousands of disabled people. We have to look at them together, and I urge the Minister to think again about the Government’s approach.

That leads me to my third point, which is about the solution. We need an urgent and immediate injection of cash into social care and the NHS. We simply cannot put the services, patients, carers and families through this all again next winter. We also need a bold 10-year strategy for investment and reform.

The NHS and social care will always be political issues, and rightly so—they are things we deeply care about—but we need a cross-party approach on future funding, especially of social care, not just because any party that comes up with a bold proposal risks being obliterated by its political opponents, but because we desperately need a system that will last for the long term, not for the politicians but for the people who use and work in those services.

I urge the Government to heed the calls from more than 100 MPs on both sides of the House for a short parliamentary commission on a long-term strategy, which would report within a year. I also hope the Government will consider the 10 principles of long-term funding for the NHS and social care put forward by myself, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb).
and the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). We agree that the NHS must remain a universal tax-funded service, available free at the point of delivery, based on need, not ability to pay. We agree that spending on the NHS and social care must increase by substantially more than inflation over the next 20 years because of our ageing population, new treatments and technologies, and the need to achieve genuine equality of access to treatment for people with mental ill health. We believe that people are more likely to be willing to pay more for the NHS and social care if they can be certain that additional resources are dedicated to that end and cannot be diverted into other Government programmes—in other words, there should be hypo-
thecation. We believe that increases in funding must be progressive and fair between the generations, with higher earners, the self-employed and better-off pensioners making a fair contribution to future funding. We also believe that every five years there should be an independent assessment, carried out by the Office for Budget Responsibility or a separate health-focused body, to look at the resources needed to run the NHS and social care in future, which Parliament will then debate and decide on.

These are tough issues, no one is denying it, but we have to join up the services, and we need in this year, the 70th anniversary of the NHS, to get a future funding settlement. If we were creating the NHS today, it would be a national health and care service. It must be fair, it must be progressive and it must last for future generations. I urge the Government to act.

5.46 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), who made a typically passionate speech, and I echo what she said about the need for a cross-party approach. When she mentioned that anyone talking about social care almost has to do it out of election time because otherwise they can end up being torpedoed by their opponents, I was reminded of one particularly vile leaflet issued in the Cheltenham constituency during the 2017 election, which stated, “First dementia will take your mind. Then the Prime Minister will take your house.” That sort of politics is pretty low and does a disservice. So I firmly believe that we need cross-party working on these very long-term issues.

Building a social care system for the mid-21st century—it is incredible to be talking about the upcoming mid-21st century; this feels very old in that respect—is one of the most important tasks facing this Government and any subsequent Government. Many Members have mentioned the fact that our population is ageing, and indeed it is. The number of people aged 75 and over is expected to increase by 70% between 2015 and 2035, and the figure for older people as a share of the population is expected to rise from 28% in 1971 to more than 36% in 2037, when I reach retirement age. Not only are people living longer, but there will be fewer working-age citizens to support them through the taxation system. That is particularly acute in my constituency. In the Sylhill ward, from which the constituency takes its name, 40% of people are over 65, and I regularly come into contact with people who are dealing silently with huge care issues. Solihull rests and survives on a sea of volunteers and those who are willing to give of their time in order to help people in this vulnerable situation.

I welcome the Government’s decision to invest an extra £2 billion in our social care sector over the next few years. That is a first step, but this is not a problem that can be fixed just by spending money. We need not only to explore why some councils are perfectly able to provide quality care on their current budget whereas others are not, but to futureproof our social care system against demographic trends that will place huge strains on it.

I wish to focus on the two structural reforms that Ministers should consider as they draw up their Green Paper, the first of which is providing more support for the co-operative movement in this sector. There has not been a great deal of debate on that, although I mentioned it to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). I am thinking of examples such as CareShare, which helps to match those in need of care with care givers and which fosters that peer-group support—it is a social care platform owned by its members. There are working international examples of that in areas that do not have an NHS, such as Spain, Italy and Latin America, which also have strong family networks and strong family connections. The social care co-operatives have proved very popular and could augment rather than replace state and other systems. It is about a network, effectively, moving us forward, because the state alone cannot solve or resolve this.

On the subject of creating variety in the sector, I would also like to see support for the growth of mass market social care insurance. That could be provided by both the state and, to a degree, private suppliers. The state approach should follow a National Employment Savings Trust model for funding and for distributing that funding to the carers. That is a solid example that we can follow, and we need to look closely at the examples we have seen in Germany and Japan. That can help people to prepare for their old age while they are still able to set appropriate funds aside and make meaningful decisions about their future care.

Ministers are rightly trying to ensure that individual service users are at the heart of the reforms as we go forward. Making patients equal partners in the care process and instituting principles such as “No decision about me without me” are all about empowering people and delivering higher quality, greater transparency and more accountability as a result. Supporting a wider variety of providers and care methods is the next step in that process. That is the lesson of the free schools movement, where the Government recognised that supporting a wide range of schools was essential in giving parents and pupils meaningful choices about their education. Ministers must ensure not only that the new social care system properly supports the work of excellent third sector providers such as Mencap, but that it uses tax breaks and other incentives to help to foster alternatives such as the patient-led co-operatives I talked about earlier.

We also need to restore the market for long-term care insurance products to fund social care. That used to exist to some degree, but it was never able to achieve substantial economies of scale. Since the disintegration of independent financial advice, it has basically also disintegrated. That must change, for two reasons.
First, people need a realistic idea of how much they will need to set aside to fund the level and style of social care that they want, and a properly functioning market with a wide variety of products is by far the most successful way of achieving that. Without it, that essential planning will be the preserve of the well-informed few.

At present, too many people put off thinking about social care until they have no other choice. I had this happen in my own family. At a moment of crisis, they are suddenly in need of extra support, but leaving all the decisions to this late stage hugely reduces a patient’s scope to make decisions about their care and choose a model that works for them. I believe, having echoed the point made by the hon. Member for Leicester West about the need to work across parties and not torpedoing ideas, that we need an honest conversation in this country about when we need care, and to plan it, rather than reaching those crisis points.

5.52 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I want to touch on some of the social care workforce issues. Social care is what we rely on when we need help—whether that is residential care when we need to go into a home, or care in our own home. We rely on social care workers, residential care workers, and home care workers and support workers if we need help at home. These are staff who deal with our most personal needs at a time when we might be at our most vulnerable, yet we fail to value adequately the work that they do and the care and sensitivity with which, on the whole, they deliver it. I know how vital that support is and how well and compassionately it can be delivered when it is at its best, as we briefly had that support for both of my parents recently.

These are staff who are often under pressure to meet impossible visit schedules, who are on the frontline of looking after our families and neighbours, and who are on the lowest pay grades, too. They are predominantly female. As has been mentioned, Unison, the trade union that represents many of these staff, conducted a survey of the staff in social care with Community Care magazine. It showed a picture of staff feeling stressed, working more hours than they are paid for each day, and staff shortages that put pressure on others. It gets more basic than that: many staff are not even being paid the national minimum wage let alone the national living wage; domiciliary care staff are not being paid for the time that it takes to travel between visits; and staff on zero-hour contracts—Unison estimates that there are about 300,000 of them—are facing uncertain and often disrupted hours.

Unison has been pushing an ethical care charter for home care workers and a residential care charter, too—here I should mention the “sleep-in” staff who are not being paid the national minimum wage. I am sorry that the Minister is not in her place at present, because when she touched on this matter she appeared to suggest that the Government are looking at legal ways not to pay sleep-in payments at the national minimum wage rate. Perhaps she, or one of the other Ministers, could correct me if I misheard that point. These staff deserve, and are entitled, to be paid for the work that they do.

It is no wonder that staff turnover is huge in the sector, varying from 31.8% in the residential sector to 44.3% in domiciliary care. These are not just trade union figures. Yesterday, the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which are working together on adult social care, heard from the chief executive of Care England, the providers’ body, who also highlighted the huge problem of turnover in staff. This is not good for employers and it is certainly not good for the people for whom these careworkers work.

This is no way to provide care for the most vulnerable people in our communities—they deserve the most compassionate care that meets their needs—or to treat the staff who provide that care. This is not just about the staff. They are under such pressure because, year after year, this Government have cut funding to local councils, which provide the care, at the same time as those councils face a huge rise in demand. We know that the care market itself is fragile and failing.

Our social care system is not working as it should do. If we are to make it work, we must ensure that funding is provided now and that the care staff are treated properly. We must give social care equity with NHS services. Our older people, and those who care for them, deserve nothing less.

5.57 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure indeed to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), and all the other contributions that have been made. In the brief time that I have, I wish to start by speaking about my own experience and why I am so passionate about this subject. I am one of the one in six people to whom the Minister referred when she talked about carers. I am a carer for my elderly mother who has dementia, so many of these problems touch me and my family quite personally. I totally recognise the situation that we face up and down the country. My own mother is receiving excellent care in Cumbria. I am delighted to pay tribute to the carers in Cumbria who are doing a fantastic job looking after her in a very challenging situation.

Closer to home, in Redditch, I recognise the importance of getting care right in my constituency. I have taken a close personal interest in the care that is available in my own home town. I have seen some amazing examples of care—whether it is at the Dorothy Terry House, Stonebridge or Brambles. In all those places, I have seen staff go above and beyond to care for elderly people at a very difficult and challenging time in their lives. That is really important and it is something that the Government are getting behind.

We have heard much criticism of the Government from Opposition Members. It is very difficult to take that on board when we all know how difficult the situation was when we came into office. To put the matter into perspective, I had a meeting with Worcestershire County Council just this week, and I discovered that the care of some people in Worcestershire costs £38,000 a year. I am sure that every Member will recognise that that is a lot of money. We all want to provide the best care for our constituents. That is what we all came into politics for. I resent the accusation that we do not care and that we do not want to get that right. We passionately want to get it right. We know that our constituents deserve that; people in Redditch deserve it and demand it. It touches all our hearts when we see people being failed by the system.
At the same time, we need to have a realistic debate about where the £38,000 comes from. We sometimes hear from the Opposition that, in the words of the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), it is wrong to ask hard-pressed local council tax payers to pay. Well, if money is to be found, the only place that it is going to come from is tax payers—the tax payers in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and up and down the country—and we are all mindful of that. The economic argument therefore has to be at the heart of what we are doing.

The Minister for Care has just returned to her place. I commend her for showing real leadership on this issue. Like the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who has just left her place, I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on carers, and I attended the meeting, as did the Minister. We all heard the stories from the carers, which were similar to the stories that we hear from our families and constituents. This Government and the Minister have shown considerable commitment, and real care and compassion towards getting this right. I also commend Carers UK, which is behind the excellent APPG, for its work; it really celebrates unsung heroes in our communities.

The Minister is going above and beyond to put into practice a system that can be long-term, sustainable and, most importantly, funded. She is aware that there has to be money going into the system. Money has to come from somewhere, and the only place it can come from is taxes. It is therefore important that we get behind the leadership of the Health and Social Care Secretary, who has shown a dedication to bring together the health and social care sectors. That is the only way that we will solve the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, there has to be cross-party consensus on this matter. We cannot descend to the pitiful levels seen in the general election when the Conservative party tried to have a grown-up conversation about one of the most difficult issues in our society—dementia. [Interruption.] Whatever Opposition Members are saying from a sedentary position, they know that the debate then really frightened and upset some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. [Interruption.] I am sorry, but I am going to focus on the experience in my constituency.

The Government are putting a lot of money into public services, which help people every single day of their lives. I have seen evidence of that in my constituency, where £29 million is on its way to the Alexandra Hospital and the Worcestershire Royal Hospital, which serve my constituents in Redditch. Joining up hospital care will of course help with some of the issues around delayed transfers of care. It will also aid the elderly and frail unit to help people who are most in need of both health and social care.

I recommend that the Government take forward the consultation as soon as possible. Today’s debate has been excellent.

6.4 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is great to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), although I do not believe in most of the things she said. I am grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for once again giving Members the opportunity to raise the important issue of social care funding on the Floor of the House. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for leading this important debate.

Time and again, we hear from care providers, service users and charities that the social care system is at tipping point, that it is in crisis, that urgent Government action is needed, and that without that help the entire system will collapse, yet the Government continue to bury their head in the sand on this issue. It is clear that the social care system is still in crisis and the Government are still failing to act. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said that we should make this non-political. Well, the Conservative record on social care is utterly appalling. It is a record of savage cuts, U-turns and passing the buck that cannot be ignored. Since 2010, we have witnessed a fall in the quality of care, as well as cuts to the number of services that are offered and the number of people they are offered to. The Conservatives are spending less money on social care now than Labour was when we left office in 2010, despite demand having increased significantly. As it stands, only 2% of social care services are rated as “outstanding”, and according to the CQC, 41% of services that have been rated as “requiring improvement” in the past have failed to improve or have even deteriorated.

Even worse, though, is the Conservatives’ record on action on these issues. There has been a policy vacuum from the Government since the U-turn on the disastrous dementia tax, and they have since missed the opportunities to address the crisis. They failed at the autumn Budget, and they failed again with the one-off £150 million local government financial settlement, which fell well short of what is needed to rescue the sector. They have abandoned plans for a cap on care costs and a plan to introduce an asset floor of £118,000. These are cold, hard facts that cannot be ignored any longer. The social care system is at tipping point. This is about ensuring that the most vulnerable adults in our society receive the care they need, when they need it.

Since 2010, councils have shouldered the largest burden of spending cuts. Years of underfunding mean that our councils can no longer put enough money into care to meet the needs of an ageing population. As a result, cuts to adult social care during that time have now reached over £6 billion, and now less than one in 12 director of adult social care is fully confident that their local authority will be able to meet its statutory duties in 2017-18. As I said in an intervention, Warrington Borough Council is facing funding pressures of over £3 million in meeting adult social care needs in 2018-19.

Social care infrastructure is at the heart of our society. Many of us here today will rely on the social care system for ourselves or for our loved ones at some point in our lives. Indeed, some of us here today, and many of the constituents we represent, will already have experience with this broken system, and it will be clear to every single one of them that social care is in crisis. The situation is simply not sustainable. This is one of the most pressing issues of our time, and it cannot continue to be ignored. The Government must get to grips with this crisis now, before it is too late.
John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the detailed analysis of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). As a Yorkshire MP, it is always good to follow a Member from the other side of the Pennines—it is early season yet, Mr Deputy Speaker, but particularly when Yorkshire is at the top of the county championship and Lancashire is at the bottom.

I want to take up two points directly from the seven principles that the Secretary of State outlined when he talked about the Green Paper in March. One of them is about a valued workforce, which many hon. Members have spoken about, and the other is about a sustainable funding mechanism for the future.

Every morning in the villages and towns of Airedale and Wharfedale—some of which I am lucky to represent—very early, before the commuters have got up and even thought of going into the great cities of Bradford and Leeds, another workforce have just finished their night shift and are getting the first buses and trains into those cities, where they live. They have the characteristics of the social care workforce, who number about 1.4 million in our country. They are a massive workforce. About 80% are women and 80%—the overwhelming majority—are British, with 11% coming from outside the European economic area and about 5% from within it. There is a massive turnover in the social care workforce, as Unison has illustrated, with more than one in three care workers in care homes leaving their job in the course of the year. It is higher in domiciliary care.

Members on both sides of the House have talked about valuing these workers more. They are undervalued, underpaid and in many cases undertrained. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) talked about building a consensus, so that in the future we value more this extremely important workforce, who look after the most vulnerable people in our society at the time they need it most.

I have a couple of suggestions for the Government. It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) that a Labour Government would abolish 15-minute care—the maximum five-minute one—of which I am lucky to represent. The hon. Gentleman talks about valuing these workers more. They are undervalued, underpaid and in many cases undertrained. The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) talked about building a consensus, so that in the future we value more this extremely important workforce, who look after the most vulnerable people in our society at the time they need it most.

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There are things the Government could do, and some are little things. I notice that there is an advisory council on the Green Paper. The great and the good are on that advisory council, but it would be good to have a figure from the workforce on it. I remember the Prime Minister speaking on the steps of Downing Street about involving the workforce more. Unison is a union you can do speaking on the steps of Downing Street about involving the workforce more. Unison is a union you can do
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, as a Manchester MP, to follow a Yorkshire Member from the other side of the Pennines, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan). I am pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to the debate and want to make a few points that have not come up very much in the debate and that particularly affect my constituents in Trafford.

We have a relatively elderly population in Trafford, compared with Greater Manchester as a whole, which creates a higher level of need in the borough. We also suffer from a high level of delayed transfers of care—in February we had 737 days of delays in the system because of a lack of places in nursing homes, residential care homes or domiciliary care. We also have a disproportionate number of self-funders, which makes it more difficult for the local authority to shape the market. It also means that many self-funders have no connection with the social worker, so they do not necessarily get good advocacy to ensure that their care needs are met.

In Stretford and Urmston we have relatively few large chains supplying residential or domiciliary care; the market is characterised by small businesses, often long-established and family-owned. Those businesses struggle with a lack of reserves, and they are often in buildings that they have occupied for decades and that were not purpose built as care homes. They are now unable to raise the funds to enable them to upgrade their facilities to meet modern standards, not least because of the relative inadequacy of funding from the local authority. Only the other day another small local business decided that it will have to close its doors. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), that is a cause of great anxiety and stress for residents and their families.

Many hon. Members have talked about the pressures on the workforce. That is a particular problem in Trafford, where there are many job alternatives—people can work in the Trafford Centre or in MediaCity, or they can travel into Manchester to work in the many businesses in the city centre. I am sorry to say that I think that position will become worse as a result of Brexit, because we rely heavily on European Union nationals to serve our care sector.

One thing that I think the Government could helpfully do is talk of care jobs as skilled jobs. They might be low-paid jobs and they might have relatively low qualification entry requirements, but they are skilled jobs. If we have to replace workers from the European Union with more workers from our domestic workforce, we will need to make social care jobs seem attractive to them with good pay and conditions, training and career paths, and by talking up the quality and importance of those jobs.

I am sorry to say that the pressures on Trafford put us in a very bad position. According to Independent Age, we have the seventh worst CQC inspection record in the country. The CQC has found that 43% of residential care homes and 45% of domiciliary care providers in Trafford are either inadequate or require improvement.

I turn to what I hope will be in the Green Paper. Let me say first how concerned I am that the CQC system, although it provides assessments, seems to lack real bite when it comes to bringing about improvements. It seems that providers are given poor assessments and have six months to try to raise their standards, during which time the local authority has some conversations with them but there is a lack of sustained external attention and pressure to ensure that they actually improve, and that by the time the CQC comes back they have not much improved. When a care home or care setting receives a poor assessment, the local authority rightly is no longer prepared to place residents there, which of course means that its income drops further, making it even harder to improve. I would be grateful if Ministers, in preparing the Green Paper, paid particular attention to how we could make that CQC process work better so that it drove improvement, rather than simply providing a picture of what is going wrong.

We have talked about family carers. I absolutely recognise and applaud the work they do. Age UK recently held a focus group in my constituency with family carers, who said they felt it was difficult to find co-ordinated information and support. Very few people plan or choose to be a family carer, and it is incumbent on us to think about ways we can get much better co-ordinated information and support to them about the support that is available and how they source it. We must also recognise that family care is not always appropriate. Some family members will not be able to provide family care—someone’s needs may be too high or the family member may have other commitments. In some cases, the person who requires care will not want a family member to provide intimate care to them.

I want to draw Ministers’ attention to a second phenomenon in my constituency that is putting further pressure on the system. The south Asian community in particular has relied heavily on family care, but traditional family patterns in that community are breaking down. We must look to the point in 10, 15 or 20 years’ time when we have raised the education and aspirations of women in those communities and they are no longer prepared to stay at home and care for auntie and granny, as previous generations have. We desperately need attention to be paid to building up the provision of culturally appropriate care.

Integration has been much talked about. We are finally making progress with the health and social care partnership in Greater Manchester. I welcome that, because we have talked about integration in Trafford without many visible results for many years. Members touched on working-age adults, for whom integration with just health is missing the point. Many of them have talked about the stresses that come up very much in the debate and want to make a few points that have not come up very much in the debate and that particularly affect my constituents in Trafford.

I hope the Green Paper picks up on that point.

Let me join other hon. Members in talking about funding. We need much greater clarity about what is means-tested and what is universal. We need to think that through in a strategic and rational way. We have all said that it is not right simply to expect those who need care to bear the whole cost of it. We must begin to set up a system that properly enables us to pool and share cost and risk. I am with my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) in thinking that that requires us to use a range of measures through progressive taxation. I am also with my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) in saying that that means that inheritance tax, and taxes on assets, have to be part
of the mix. That is necessary to ensure intergenerational fairness and fairness between my constituents in the north of England, where house prices are relatively lower and all someone’s assets will be used up paying for care, and those in London and the south-east with much more valuable properties, who may be left with more assets after they pay for their care.

Finally, I say to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who sadly is not in the Chamber, that council tax can be only a very small part of the answer, because it produces a very uneven pattern of funding given the very different council tax bases in constituencies around the country.

I would be grateful if the Green Paper picked up, in addition to all the other points that have been made this afternoon, on the specific points I have made. It would make a big difference to people in my constituency who need care today, to their families and to all of us in the future if, finally, this matter was properly and strategically addressed.

6.25 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

Four weeks ago today, one of my constituents from the village of Hough attended Parliament to speak at Age UK’s parliamentary reception. We meet some people in life whom we will never forget. Joyce Yoxall is one of those people. Those who came to the event will remember her harrowing account of life as an unpaid carer. I was as moved then as I was when I first visited Joyce at her home to discuss the problems she is having with our social care system. Joyce’s husband David suffered a stroke in 2014. Since then, she has been forced to stop the care that David should be entitled to because of its high cost and poor quality. She talked about crippling care costs and how she felt she had been “let down”. I had to fight back the tears as she spoke about being mentally and physically exhausted, and how she dare not think of the year ahead.

Joyce has literally become the face of hundreds of thousands of people—and maybe more—who are in a similar situation by featuring on the front cover of Age UK’s aptly named report, “Why call it care when nobody cares?” The report is the result of 127 interviews regarding the quality of social care that people have experienced. I encourage anybody who has not read the report to do so.

The reason I started by talking about Joyce and David is that I want to remind everybody of the heartbreaking human reality behind the statistics I will refer to later. Let us start by reminding ourselves why those like Joyce might feel let down. As has been mentioned, a growing and ageing population is placing ever more demand on the social care sector, but that should not come as a surprise to anybody who has been living in the real world for at least some of the time in the past few decades.

Almost eight years ago, the Dilnot commission was set up by David Cameron’s coalition Government, tasked with making recommendations for changes to the funding of care. It published its recommendations in 2011, including a more generous means-testing threshold and a cap on care costs. That sounded promising, but after another general election the Government announced that the measures would be delayed until April 2020 and, at around the same time, closed the independent living fund. Then the Government promised to publish a Green Paper in the summer of 2017, but along came yet another general election, during which the current Prime Minister threatened to introduce a dementia tax.

Since then, we have had an autumn Budget in which the Chancellor failed even to mention social care, let alone provide adequate funding. We have seen the Department for Health and Social Care’s single departmental plan, which failed to mention the social care workforce. More recently, we had the spring statement, and still there is no lifeline for those with care needs or their families or carers.

We know that at some point, hopefully before the summer recess, the Government will publish their Green Paper on social care for older people, but we do not yet know when any proposals will be implemented after the consultation. To make matters worse, the Green Paper will not cover care for younger adults, which accounts for almost half of all council spending on adult social care.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Smith: No.

There has been one missed opportunity after another—delay, delay, delay. Meanwhile, local councils, which are responsible for delivering social care, are seeing their budgets slashed, and one care home after another is placed in special measures or forced to close. What is the result? Research published recently by BMJ Open links cuts to adult social care and health spending to nearly 120,000 excess deaths in England since 2010.

The Care Act 2014 has been about as useful as a chocolate fireguard against a backdrop of inadequate funding and insufficient resources. The legislation has done nothing to protect the 1.2 million older people whose care needs are not being met. Our system clearly places more emphasis on councils setting balanced budgets to an ever-reducing bottom line than it does on making sure that all its residents’ care needs are met.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Smith: No.

Cuts have consequences: I refer to my constituent’s words—that she “dare not think of the year ahead.” I do not blame my constituents for having little faith. The past eight years have been nothing but empty promises and never-ending cuts. Fully integrated health and social care would be a good start, but that does not go nearly far enough. We need a whole new approach to disability and ageing based on a commitment to the social model of disability that permeates every aspect of Government.

For example, our social care system needs to be aligned with an appropriate welfare policy and housing strategy, so that we remove as many barriers to disabled people as possible. Access to services should be on the basis of need and not affordability. I wholeheartedly agree that pumping more money into a broken system is no long-term solution.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?
Laura Smith: I have waited a long time to speak and I am going to carry on.

We need to stop viewing social care as a cost or a burden and instead see it as a wealth creator. Penny-pinching has proved to be a false economy when it comes to social care. It undermines the ability to take preventive action that not only is morally and ethically the right thing to do, but saves money in the long run by reducing the demand on our NHS. We also need to stop neglecting our 1.5 million workers in social care and build a more highly skilled and better-paid workforce. Finally, we need to address the failings of privatised adult social care, as outlined in the 2016 report by the Centre for Health and the Public Interest. Without any real debate, market values have penetrated areas where they do not belong and social care is perhaps the worst example of this. We cannot keep burying our heads in the sand and letting the crisis escalate.

There is no excuse for the Government’s inaction. The CQC warned us last year that social care was reaching a “tipping point”. This was after the Prime Minister had herself acknowledged that our system is broken. This cruel, callous Conservative Government have turned their back on older people and disabled people up and down this country. They have also repeatedly let down the social care workforce and the invisible army of unpaid carers.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Smith: No.

We need a Government who put people before profits. Until then, I fear that we will be left with the same fragmented, failing system that is letting our constituents down daily.

6.32 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Thank you for keeping the best until last, Mr Speaker. It is a great honour to speak in this very important debate.

The care home market, both for residential and nursing care, is dominated by the private sector, which holds 86% of all places. It is divided between lucrative self-pay homes and those with local government-funded residents, which are really struggling to cover the growing costs of caring for a population that is living longer, with more complex health needs. Many councils are struggling just to meet their statutory duties on a reduced budget. The Government’s decision to push a crisis of their own making on to local government is helping nobody. Central Government funding is totally inadequate. That is why, despite the new funding that has been made available for adult social care, there will still be a funding gap of £2.2 billion by 2020. I hope that this is addressed in the delayed Green Paper.

The Government must accept that their over-reliance on the private sector is not solving the problems in the social care sector and all too often is making them worse. In the last few days, Allied Healthcare has issued warnings and is now searching for a rescue plan. The company cited a rise in the cost of nurses and doctors as a result of tighter immigration rules and a shortage of trainees—problems that were created wholly by Government policy. Across the sector, providers and councils are reporting difficulties in recruiting from overseas because of the hostile environment created by our Prime Minister.

One of the nine priorities in the Government’s “Shared delivery plan: 2015 to 2020” is to “make sure the health and care system workforce has the right skills and the right number of staff in the most appropriate settings to provide consistently safe and high-quality care.” A report by the National Audit Office published in February shows the extent to which the Government have failed on this. The high turnover rates and difficulty recruiting that the NAO reports can be traced back to central Government underfunding. A cash-starved state is forced to tender contracts for services that private companies can deliver only by paying low wages, cutting corners or exploiting their workforce with zero-hours contracts and unpaid travel time. The Green Paper is an opportunity for the Government to go back to the drawing board on social care funding. Councils need a sustainable settlement, and we need to see adult social care given parity with the health service. Surely this joined-up thinking was why the Department of Health was renamed the Department of Health and Social Care.

6.35 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have had a very wide-ranging debate with 16 Back-Bench contributions. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley), for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Keighley (John Grogan), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) for their passionate, powerful and well-informed contributions. I also thank the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), and the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Chesham and Amersham (Mary Robinson), for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for their contributions. We might not always see eye to eye, but there is consensus that we have to fix the problem in adult social care, although how we go about that will always be up for debate.

Kevin Hollinrake: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the very constructive cross-party, collegiate visit of the Communities and Local Government Committee to Germany, where we looked at its social insurance scheme, which could provide the perfect, sustainable and scalable solution to the adult social care conundrum?

Andrew Gwynne: The Government need to decide their position, but there are examples across the world of how adult social care can be funded. We need to make sure we get a system that works for England.

I also pay tribute to the workforce and carers. They do not just need platitudes from us in the House; they need the Government and politicians on their side.

This is the second time we have had to call an Opposition day debate on this issue, following the Government’s lack of action on social care. In our debate last October, there was broad agreement across the House, as there has been more or less today, that
reform of social care was a priority, but here we are, six months later, and little has changed. Last month, we heard the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care tell the British Association of Social Workers that he accepted his share of responsibility for the lack of progress since the Conservatives entered government in 2010.

The social care Green Paper, due this summer, has faced substantial delays. We need a commitment from the Government that it will not be delayed any further. There is only so much longer that the sector can wait. Let us remember that in January there was hope that the Government would place an extra focus on social care after the Department of Health was rebranded, but then, shortly afterwards, in what sounded like a tribute act to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government told a packed LGA conference—I was there—that “nothing has changed, nothing has changed”.

Confusion still reigns, and it is true: nothing has changed. This confusion means that 1.2 million people are being denied the support they need.

Let us look at what the cuts mean. According to its director of adult care, social care provision in Northamptonshire County Council—a Conservative council—is “on the verge of being unsafe” as a result of the cuts. That council has effectively been the first in England to declare insolvency. According to the director, the additional funds in the local government finance settlement will have “little impact” on the county’s problems, and I fear that that is right, but the Minister will be aware of the widespread fear that what has happened in Northamptonshire could happen again elsewhere. Mark McLaughlin, who was appointed from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in December to oversee Northamptonshire’s finances, has warned that all top-tier local authorities will soon face similar issues. Then, only last week, we heard that Worcestershire County Council, the Conservative-run local authority in the constituency of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, had buried a report expressing urgent concern after rising costs, including the cost of adult social care, had forced the council to use more than half its reserves in the past five years. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy expects the growth in demand to result in a budget deficit of £60.1 million by 2020-21.

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: No. I will not. Well, I will, because it is the hon. Lady’s local council.

Rachel Maclean: Worcestershire County Council covers the whole of my constituency, and I am aware of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I want to respond to them, because I too have been worried about the position, as many other people naturally are. I met the chief executive and the leader of the council to address this very issue, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they have a sustainable plan to deal with it. However, I will of course keep it under review, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for providing me with a nice segue. On Monday, Paul Robinson, the chief executive of her council—Tory Worcestershire County Council—said that “there comes a point where cost-cutting can’t go any further—there has to be a solution”.

He is right too, but we have yet to hear a Minister even acknowledge that this crisis in social care funding in local government is as serious as it is—and it is a crisis that has its roots in Downing Street. Let us be clear: austerity and cuts in local government budgets have been a political choice by this Government since 2010. It gets worse. Behind every statistic that I can quote are real people working in the service, real people receiving services, real people requiring services, and families worried about how to support their loved ones. Funding cuts, poor pay, recruitment problems and a lack of support for the sector have hit the quality and availability of adult social care support. In the past year, one in five local authorities has seen more of its care homes rated “inadequate” or “requires improvement”. In some areas, as many as one in two care homes is now rated inadequate.

For some of the most vulnerable, even gaining access to any form of support is difficult. Vulnerable older people with conditions such as dementia and motor neurone disease are being denied support because there is a postcode lottery for treatment. According to Which?, where people live can make them 25 times more likely to receive social care support. South Reading paid care costs for 8.7 patients per 50,000 people, while Salford funded 220.3 per 50,000. In Stockport, people are nearly seven times less likely to receive the funding than those just a few miles away in Salford, and patients in Richmond are more than three times more likely to receive it than those in Ealing.

Ministers cannot hide the terms of a social care levy behind flexibilities on council tax. They know, as we know, that in the areas with the greatest need, a small increase in council tax will never make up the shortfall in funding caused by cuts in grants from central Government, which have been slashed by an average of 50% since 2010. That has exacerbated inequality, as poorer areas, which often have many needs, have struggled to raise the funding that they so desperately need. I will use a local example for the Minister. Tameside, one of two local authorities that cover my constituency, will face a £33 million funding gap in adult social care for the next three years, yet a 1% increase on council tax raises just over £700,000—never, ever enough to plug that gap.

The news that Allied Healthcare, one of the biggest providers of home care, has fallen into financial difficulty shows the impact that is being felt in the sector. The fact that 150 councils rely on Allied Healthcare should send shivers down the spines of Ministers. We got no real answers or any assurances from the Government that they were taking these developments seriously or putting in place emergency contingency measures to ensure that we do not see a repeat of the Carillion collapse.

There are four reasons that people now give for their dissatisfaction with social care: staff shortages, long waiting times, a lack of funding, and Government reforms. That is coming not just from the Opposition; the same concerns that we have raised today are being raised in living rooms and care homes across England. The Government have a duty to respond, and I commend our motion to the House.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I should open with a thank you to those Members who have made some very thoughtful contributions to today’s debate. We recognise the challenge we face, and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) put it most strongly when she said that it is the result of something very positive: that we are all living longer. That requires some serious strategic thought about how we fund social care. It is in that spirit that we are rising to the challenge.

Both Opposition Front Benchers, the hon. Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), expressed their dissatisfaction with the speed with which we are pursuing these reforms, but it is important that we get it right and that we take people with us. With that in mind, we have put together an advisory group to work with on the reforms. The whole sector is co-operating with us and actively contributing to the debate, because it more than anyone recognises the need to fix this and get the solutions right. I make no apologies for the fact that we are where we are now, but we are well down the track with the process. In the spirit of cross-party consensus that I have heard a lot about this afternoon, I will not get into some of the partisan points that have been made, but I want to set the context of where we are with the debate. When we introduce the Green Paper, I hope it will be received in the spirit of the comments that we have heard from most hon. Members today.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister who opened the debate was unable to respond to my question, so I will repeat it to this Minister. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of social care cuts on the ability of disabled people to live independently, and will she apologise to those disabled people for what the UN has described as this Government’s “grave and systematic violations” against disabled people?

Jackie Doyle-Price: To be frank with the hon. Lady, one of our priorities is to make sure that disabled people can live independently for longer. That is very much a central part of our approach and we are making more money available for it. [Interruption.] She can sit and smile, but that informs our approach.

I should also like to associate myself with the comments made by a large number of colleagues in paying tribute to the hard-working, committed people who make up our social care workforce and to the informal carers who play such a vital part in our health and social care system. Central to the points made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Keighley (John Grogan) is that we all collectively need to send a clear message that the work that those people do is valued. We are working with Skills for Care to put more value on this as a profession. People who work in the care sector do so because they are personally motivated and money actually matters less to them. We ought to give them a clear message that we really appreciate all the efforts that they make.

Many Members have raised the issue of funding cuts to council budgets. That subject obviously informed the debate. When we introduce the Green Paper, I hope that we get into some of the partisan points that have been made, but I want to set the context of where we are with the debate. When we introduce the Green Paper, I hope it will be received in the spirit of the comments that we have heard from most hon. Members today.

Andrew Gwynne: I fully appreciate the Minister’s point that we can only spend the money that we raise from taxes, but this is a question of priorities. Why did she vote for a £5 billion cut to the bank levy in the Budget? Is that not the wrong priority?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I think the hon. Gentleman will find that we actually have a very progressive tax paying system none the less.

I want to celebrate those areas that have continued to deliver their social care responsibilities in challenging circumstances. We have heard a lot about what has gone wrong, but let us just remember this statistic: 81% of people in care homes are in homes that have been rated good or outstanding. I think that is an achievement, and something to be celebrated. I also want to compliment those councils that have really stepped up to the plate to deliver an improved performance on delayed transfers of care. Stoke and Traford in particular have cut their delayed discharges by more than half. This comes down to leadership and determination. Where councils show real leadership, that will deliver improvements and change—[Interruption.] I have just named those councils: Stoke and Traford.

Kate Green: The Minister is right to say that we are making progress on delayed transfers of care, but the figures have been very high. It really comes down to the fact that we just do not have enough well-funded places to enable people to be discharged from hospital quickly and get into the care in the community that we all want them to have.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not disagree with that point. That is why we need to embark on a process of reform and really get it right. We are embarking on the process on that basis.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Blyadon (Liz Twist), mentioned sleep-ins, and I just want to restate what was said, because it seems to have been misunderstood. We fully recognise the pressure on the sector resulting from the ruling on sleep-ins and the fact that the historical liabilities could be a problem. We are working closely with providers, in liaison with the European Commission, to come up with a solution. Hon. Members will understand that the matter is too commercially sensitive for me to say any more than that—[Interruption.] We are working with providers and meeting them on a regular basis.

Liz Twist: I understand what the Minister has just said about sleep-ins and that she is working with providers. We all understand the pressure on those providers, but I asked earlier, are we looking at a way to reward the staff properly for the work they do during sleep-ins, or are we trying to avoid the question?
Jackie Doyle-Price: The ruling from HMRC is clear that those on sleep-in shifts are still entitled to the minimum wage, so we are working out a solution to those historical liabilities. We are clear that we expect all employers to abide by the national minimum wage legislation, and I hope that that gives the hon. Lady some clarity on that point.

We can expect the Green Paper to be brought forward, but I also want to address what Members have said about the variation in quality and availability of provision. As has been said, local councils are responsible for responding to that, and the CQC has rated 81% of care services as good, but it is important that we work with those that are performing less well to achieve significant improvements so that everyone is entitled to the best possible care.

I was pleased to hear the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). His philosophical approach perhaps reflects the amount of time that he has spent thinking about this topic. I associate myself with the comment made by him and several Members across the House about the fact that no one has an unblemished record when it comes to debates about social care. If we are genuinely to come up with a long-term solution, we need a spirit of consensus to take people with us, and people on both sides of the House need to remember that.

In conclusion, we have had a full debate and it will not be the last time that we debate this subject. We are now quite a way down the track when it comes to working up real proposals to bring genuine reforms of the social care system to equip ourselves for a world where life expectancy ends not at 70, but at 100. That will require significant change. We are stepping up to the challenge and will bring forward proposals in due course.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House notes that Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that Government failure to deal with this crisis has pushed the funding problem on to councils and council tax payers and has further increased the funding gap for social care; is concerned that there is an unacceptable variation in the quality and availability of social care across the country with worrying levels of unmet need for social care; and calls on the Government to meet the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of this Parliament.

Barbara Keeley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The motion that has just been unanimously agreed calls on the Government “to meet the funding gap for social care”—widely said to be £1.3 billion—“this year and for the rest of this Parliament.”

Given that Ministers have agreed to the motion, can you advise when we might expect an announcement from the Government on this important agreement on social care funding?

Mr Speaker: The most pertinent response that I can offer to the hon. Lady—I understand her perfectly legitimate point of order—as follows: On 26 October 2017—obviously this was done in the light of a number of Opposition-day debates and motions voted thereon—the Leader of the House said in a written ministerial statement: “Where a motion tabled by an opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate.”—[Official Report, 26 October 2017; Vol. 630, col. 12WS.]

That is the position as things stand. The hon. Lady has registered her point with considerable force, it is on the record, and I do not dispute the fact of what she said about the motion being carried unanimously.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 4 and 5 together.

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

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Crime and Courts Act 2013 (Deferred Prosecution Agreements) (Amendment of Specified Offences) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 26 February, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Transport Levy Bodies (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 March, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 6 to 10 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6) and Order of 20 March),

LEGISLATIVE REFORM MEASURE

That the Legislative Reform Measure (HC 785) passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

MISSION AND PASTORAL ETC. (AMENDMENT) MEASURE

That the Mission and Pastoral etc. (Amendment) Measure (HC 784), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

ECCLESIASTICAL JURISDICTION AND CARE OF CHURCHES MEASURE

That the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches Measure (HC 783), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

PENSIONS (PRE-COMBINATION) MEASURE

That the Pensions (Pre-Consolidation) Measure (HC 782), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

STATUTE LAW (REPEALS) MEASURE

That the Statute Law (Repeals) Measure (HC 781), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(Dame Caroline Spelman.)

Question agreed to.
PETITIONS

Mount Wise Tower Block Cladding

6.59 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition relating to the combustible cladding on the Mount Wise tower blocks in Plymouth. I thank Bill Stevens, the Labour councillor for Devonport, for starting the petition, which has been signed by hundreds of people across Plymouth. I also thank Sarah and her team at Devonport Live, a community café, for rallying the community behind this campaign.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport,

Declares that, in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, safety measures in high-rise housing across the country need to be re-evaluated; further that the three Mount Wise tower blocks urgently need to be re-clad to ensure the towers are safe for people to live in and live near.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to allocate funding for the re-cladding of the Mount Wise tower blocks as a matter of urgency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Fibromyalgia as a Disability

7.1 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to present a petition relating to the recognition of fibromyalgia as a disability, the need for greater research into the causes and treatment of fibromyalgia, and the need for greater awareness of fibromyalgia. The petition was started by my constituents Adrienne and Leann Lakin and has been signed by 1,379 people from across the United Kingdom. The petition should be seen alongside the Change.org petition of the same title that has been signed by 104,551 people—the number is going up all the time—which demonstrates vividly that this is an issue that reaches into every single Member’s constituency.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that fibromyalgia should be considered a disability; further that individuals with the disease struggle daily and often do not receive the medical help or support that could and should be provided; and further that other nations such as the United States of America, are leading the way in fibromyalgia research, but the United Kingdom is not following suit.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to recognise fibromyalgia as a disability at last.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Digital Images and Consent

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

7.3 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The taking of digital images without consent, and particularly the lack of recourse in law for victims, is a very serious issue. I pay tribute to a very brave woman, my constituent Emily, who has chosen to speak out about her experience in the hope that we can secure a change in the law. I hope that by speaking about her ordeal today, I, along with other Members who I know share an interest in this issue, can encourage others to share their experience with us so we can add their voices to persuading the Government of the need for action.

Emily found herself alone in a hotel room with a stranger. There is the prospect of legal action, so I will skip over the detail of everything that happened that day, but it came to light later that this man had filmed Emily for just over a minute while she was asleep and naked. This video was not, as far as anyone knows, distributed to any third party, uploaded online, shared or transferred to other digital platforms. The video was taken on that ubiquitous modern-day accessory, a mobile phone.

Prior to today’s debate, I have been in contact with the Government about what plans they have to legislate. So far, the answer is none, although I thank the Minister for the detailed response that came from her Department. I want to highlight today the concerns I have with the Government’s response and to push her to see what she can do to take this back into the heart of Government and push for change herself. Before I do that, I want to highlight the fact that, although my debate is focusing on this private video, there is a wider theme here. As I am sure you are aware, Mr Speaker, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is promoting a private Member’s Bill to ban upskirting—that is when someone takes a photograph up someone’s skirt. Upskirting has been banned in Scotland since 2009, and I raise the issue because its prevalence, and therefore the impact, has been exacerbated as well by the growth of mobile phone use.

That is one reason the Government’s response is not good enough. No one, least of all Emily, expects a change in the law to be without its challenges, but in this modern digital world we need laws that deal with the reality of life.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the House for consideration. Does she agree that her constituent’s case has made it clear that the law is far from settled and that our role in this place is primarily to clarify ethical issues and enshrine them in legislation? Thus far, that has not happened in this area and so we need a change urgently.

Meg Hillier: Absolutely. I will go on to highlight some of the expert advice we have had about where there may be possibility for change or interpretation of the law as it stands. Currently, the law does not appear to recognise the difference between viewing someone naked, and filming or photographing someone naked
without their consent. I put it to Members: should it be legal for someone, whether a stranger, partner, spouse or friend, to film another person naked without their consent when they are in a private situation? Most people would say no. None of us would want bad law made in hurry, so I understand the Government may not want to rush into this, and although the initial response may have been disappointing, I get where they are coming from. However, they do need to tackle this issue. This may not be affecting that many people now, although we do not know the full extent of it, but this issue is not likely to go away while people have mobile phones in their pockets. It causes great distress, so the Government do need to think about the impact on the individuals concerned and they have to consider a way forward.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she share my concern that the sheer plethora of legislation—30-plus pieces, one of which dates back to 1861—to deal with digital abuse is unsuitable for the 21st century? Does she agree that criminal justice professionals need training in this area, as well as our needing to consider new powers?

Meg Hillier: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that. She rightly highlights the fact that there is law in this area but it does not fit modern purposes and it is very complicated for people to navigate their way through. It is not beyond the wit of Government to pull some of that together, perhaps under a future legislative vehicle, if not a law in its own right.

Everybody has a camera in their pocket and everyone has a laptop with a tiny camera in their bedroom. The Government responded to me, saying that: “we would not necessarily want to criminalise all photographic images depicting naked people without consent because there might be legitimate use for that data in some circumstances.”

I asked the Minister what circumstances those might be, and I am going to go on to talk about some of that in a moment. The Government also say it would be unreasonable to seek consent in all cases, and they give the examples of a streaker at a sports event or a public event that involves nudity. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you are so busy in the House that you may not have noticed that there are sometimes naked bike rides around Parliament Square. There is a big difference between what we are discussing and someone choosing to get on a bicycle naked in Parliament Square—I do not think anybody would say that there is a reasonable expectation of privacy in those circumstances.

The reasonable expectation of privacy is used to define a “private act” under section 67 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. It states that a person commits an offence of voyeurism if:

(a) the person’s genitals, buttocks or breasts are exposed or covered only with underwear;
(b) the person is using a lavatory, or
(c) the person is doing a sexual act that is not of a kind ordinarily done in public.”

The Crown Prosecution Service appears to have dismissed Emily’s complaint about the video as the circumstances were such that there was no reasonable expectation of privacy. Even if she had been in the room consensually with another person, there is not a reasonable expectation that the other person would not “observe” her sleeping naked in bed. However, the law does not appear to recognise the difference between “observing” and, crucially, recording for posterity, regardless of intent to distribute or publish. Had the image been published or distributed, we would have been having a different debate today.

The 2003 law appears to address a “peeping Tom” scenario—that is, someone secretly viewing or observing a private act. The issue I am raising today is the situation of someone being photographed or filmed without consent when doing a private act—surreptitious filming of a private act—when they would reasonably expect not to be filmed without giving their consent. That is what happened to my constituent.

I should also make a very clear divide between this issue and revenge porn. If things are published or distributed, that is a very different area. That is not what I am talking about today, although it is of course a very serious issue.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who has also been pursuing this matter. A response to him from the CPS gives me some hope, and I hope that the Minister will take heed of these words. It states that “the conclusion could be reached that there is a reasonable expectation of privacy in respect of being filmed naked whilst asleep. However, the law is far from settled but this is certainly an argument which could be reasonably advanced.”

It is often the case that when there is more than one lawyer, there is more than one opinion, and I suspect that Government lawyers have come down on one side at the moment but will, I hope, take those words away and consider them.

If we asked most people whether they would be happy to be filmed or photographed doing a private act without having consented, by any other person—a partner, a spouse or a stranger—despite that other person having been present in the room, most would say no. I am not just assuming that. An opinion survey helpfully carried out by Opinium found that three in four—76%—of UK adults think that it is currently illegal in the UK to video without their consent someone over 18 who is naked. That is the general expectation of the public, and is way out when it comes to the law. Four in five UK adults would support a change in the law so that videoing someone over 18 who is naked, without their consent, becomes illegal in all circumstances. Of course, that latter point is from an answer to an opinion survey, and I recognise that for the Government to legislate they would have to consider carefully whether they wanted to cover all circumstances and how it would be defined, but the Government are here to legislate. They have drafters. They could work through how this could be delivered.

"and—

(a) the person’s genitals, buttocks or breasts are exposed or covered only with underwear;
(b) the person is using a lavatory, or
(c) the person is doing a sexual act that is not of a kind ordinarily done in public.”

The 2003 law appears to address a “peeping Tom” scenario—that is, someone secretly viewing or observing a private act. The issue I am raising today is the situation of someone being photographed or filmed without consent when doing a private act—surreptitious filming of a private act—when they would reasonably expect not to be filmed without giving their consent. That is what happened to my constituent.
To highlight the distress, when I was researching this matter in preparation for today, I came across a debate on a Mumsnet forum from 2013—this is not new, sadly. The demonstration of the hurt and damage that this does, the person writing was a married woman checking emails on her husband’s phone, and she writes that “something made me look at his photos. I found some taken of me, asleep on the sofa, photos of my cleavage. There was also video footage of me getting undressed in the bedroom the night before. Disgusted, I challenged him that night... We had a big row, he promised the photos were not posted on the Internet, and that he didn’t know why he’d done it. She goes on “fast forwarded to now and I’ve just found some photos of me taken on our recent holiday, me asleep on the sunbed, photos of my bottom, and my breasts. I feel sick. I can’t trust him anymore”. That underlines the human hurt in a situation such as this.

If we look at the criteria under which the media have to operate, we can see that although the use of photography in the press is self-regulatory, the editors’ code of practice for the Independent Press Standards Organisation states: “It is unacceptable to photograph individuals, without their consent, in public or private places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy”. Many Members of this House are very well aware of that. However, nowadays everyone is a photojournalist in respect of their own, and others’, life story. Many young people, in particular, record their lives online and it is time for better regulation in this area.

Since I wrote to the Government, there has been some progress. The Secretary of State for Justice said yesterday that he is reviewing the law to make sure that it is fit for purpose in relation to upskirting. He has indicated that he is looking at the matter, and I urge the Minister, who I know is a very reasonable and thoughtful woman, to take away what I have said, talk to the Ministry of Justice, because I recognise that this issue falls between the two Departments, and urge the Secretary of State to consider taking forward this issue in the review of upskirting and in the review of the use of digital photography. There are many victims out there who have not come forward, but even if there is only one, it is one too many to have this distress. It is time for the Government seriously to consider proper legislation.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for securing this debate and I congratulate her on it. This is a very important issue. I associate myself with much of what she said particularly the tribute she paid to her constituent, Emily, about whom we have corresponded, and with whom I have also corresponded.

We are living through a digital and technological revolution. The tech sector is one of our fastest-growing industries, which is creating hundreds of thousands of good high-skilled jobs up and down the country, and is therefore at the heart of our modern industrial strategy. We will continue to invest in the best new innovations and ideas, in the brightest and best talent, and in revolutionary digital infrastructure. It is absolutely right that this dynamic sector has our full backing, but, while we want the sector to remain free to innovate and to continue to do good, we must guard against the harms to our society that it can facilitate. Some of those harms are very considerable indeed, as exemplified by the hon. Lady’s speech today.

When it comes to the use of digital images, there are a number of existing laws that may apply, from data protection to criminal laws, as the hon. Member mentioned. For example, digital images containing personal features can be considered personally identifiable information and thus their processing may be governed by data protection laws. Organisations and individuals may have a legitimate need to take, store and share digital images of individuals—for example, sporting events wanting to display athletes and spectators, private premises wanting to use digital images in crime prevention and security, and media organisations for journalistic purposes. I mention those things because if we are to consider new law, we must take into account the panoply of potential. In some of these instances, consent is sought. However, consent will not always be a lawful basis for processing personal data. For example, there may be a legitimate interest to process personal data. A legitimate interest could be a commercial interest, an individual interest, or societal benefits. In journalism, for example, our data protection laws enable processing where publication is in the public interest. However, the use of photography will still be subject to regulatory standards and codes of practice adopted by the publishers and the press.

It is unacceptable to photograph individuals without their consent in public or private places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. There must not be persistence in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist and journalists cannot remain on a property when asked to leave, or follow people. If requested, journalists must identify themselves and whom they represent.

Regulators also issue separate guidance regarding the photography of children. It is worth noting that data protection laws do not apply to processing activities undertaken in personal household or family settings. The Government have taken the position that to do otherwise would be to improperly extend the reach of regulation into personal lives—although I must say that I was very moved by the example that the hon. Lady read out from the Mumsnet service.

Meg Hillier: I know that the Minister is a thoughtful woman and I am pleased that she is pausing for thought on this matter. There is an interesting point here about regulation in the home. I understand the political difficulty of legislating for things that take place in the home, but we do legislate against domestic violence and child abuse, and on other safety matters. These take place in the privacy of people’s homes, so it is not beyond the wit of Government to tackle this issue, even with those caveats.

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes some good points. I shall consider those examples. Intrusive behaviour and sexual harassment may take place in the home and, as she says, the law does not stop at people’s front doors, nor should it.

As I said, data protection laws do not apply to processing activities undertaken in personal households. Data protection laws do, however, apply when digital images are shared online—as they so often are—or
made public in some other way. The Data Protection Bill will empower people to take control of their data, and strengthen their rights to move or delete personal data. That includes the use of images. We expect online platforms to have robust processes in place to remove images or user accounts that do not comply with the law or their own policies.

Our internet safety strategy Green Paper, which was published last October, set out the three key principles that underpin our online safety work. First, what is unacceptable offline should be unacceptable online. Secondly, all users should be empowered to manage online risks and stay safe. Thirdly, technology companies have a responsibility to their users. We will shortly be publishing the Government’s response to the strategy consultation, and this will set out further details on how we plan to tackle a wide range of online harms. When considering privacy rights, individuals or organisations that process personal data should consider alongside data protection law compliance with a wide range of legislation, including the Communications Act 2003, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the European convention on human rights.

In relation to explicit images, some images recorded may depict persons who are, for example, naked, and we would not want the law to prevent that from occurring in all cases. But under data protection law, data controllers are already under duties to keep the data safe and secure, and not to hold on to it longer than necessary. Moreover, if any images recorded were subsequently used by an individual for the purposes of sexual gratification, other offences may then be relevant.

The hon. Lady mentioned the offence of voyeurism, which criminalises non-consensual photography and the filming of certain private acts when taken for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, as well as for a number of other offences that may have related relevance—for example, the outraging of public decency and revenge pornography offences.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the specific legislation that has been passed in Scotland since a tailor-made offence was introduced in 2011. I point out that there have been only four prosecutions for upskirting since that Act was introduced. The Act was presumably passed because Scottish law did not previously capture the behaviour that she mentioned. That behaviour, captured to a large extent—although potentially not wholly—by the voyeurism offence set out in sections 67 and 68 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The offence applies when someone observes or records another person engaging in a private act without that person’s consent, with the intention of looking at that image or another person looking at that image for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification.

The hon. Lady also drew attention to the remarks made by my ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Justice. I am not sure whether this is the exact quote that she read out, but I was encouraged when my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary said this in reply to a question from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) about the policy on upskirting:

“I am sympathetic to calls for a change in the law, and my officials are reviewing the current law to make sure that it is fit for purpose. As part of that work, we are considering the private Member’s Bill that is being promoted by the hon. Member for Bath (Vera Hobhouse).”—[Official Report, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 724.]

I have also had conversations with my right hon. Friend, and we are in agreement that more must be done in Government to look at this very difficult area. Much of it is covered by the offence of voyeurism and, in the upskirting context, by offences that occur in a public place. The two Acts I mentioned deal in large part with the issues of concern that the hon. Lady spoke of, but it seems that they may not wholly cover them. I, too, was encouraged by the letter from the Director of Public Prosecutions.

I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government are considering these matters, including upskirting, and we will continue to do so. I thank her for her very detailed research into this area, which will undoubtedly contribute to the Government’s thinking.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.
Dr Coffey: We will have the opportunity to have an even better environment and to take direct action through more local initiatives. I commend the work that is being done across the European Union but, as I said to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), EU-funded research is not supportive of oxo-biodegradable plastics. As we make progress, we must be careful that we do not end up with knee-jerk reactions as we look for these important solutions. We need something that is long lasting.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Single-use plastic bottles can be 100% recyclable but, unfortunately, those that we use do not contain anywhere near 100% recyclable material. How can we influence behaviour in how we dispose of single-use plastic bottles to change that?

Dr Coffey: I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that most bottles are recyclable; the challenge is how to get more people to recycle them. He might be referring to schemes that the Government have said we will consult on later this year, including a deposit return scheme. One of our biggest challenges involves the littering of plastic, and that is what we want to tackle.

Agricultural Policy

2. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What assessment he has made of the responses to his Department’s consultation on its future agricultural policy.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The future farming consultation is still open and continues until Tuesday 8 May. We encourage everyone with an interest in food, farming and the environment to respond. We will make a full assessment of the responses once the 10-week consultation is over, but it is clear from initial responses, and events that have taken place across England, that there is a real appetite to embrace change.

Edward Argar: Will my hon. Friend reassure me that as well as protecting and enhancing environmental protections in this country, our future agricultural policy will seek to ensure the primary importance of our landscape as a working agricultural countryside that produces food, and that that will continue to be protected?

George Eustice: Yes, I give my hon. Friend that undertaking. Our consultation sets out how we can change our approach to farm husbandry so that it is more sustainable and we put more emphasis on things such as soil health and water quality. It is clear that we want to support farmers to become more productive and profitable.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I share the bemusement of Sussex farmers that, when the Government published a list of public goods for land use in this country, food production was not one of them. Why? Will the Government reconsider that and, if so, when?

George Eustice: Food is obviously vital to life, and in that sense it is a public good. The hon. Gentleman will, I am sure, understand that “public good” is an economic definition that means things for which farmers are not
financially rewarded. My view is that food production is vital and essential, and farmers should be rewarded for food production in the market.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The National Trust has two beautiful properties near my constituency—Packwood House and Baddesley Clinton. They would welcome the opportunity for their tenant farmers to be rewarded for the provision of new public goods, but the National Trust seeks assurances from the Minister that if things such as new bridle paths and footpaths need to be provided, there will be long-term sustainability for such a shift.

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend makes an important point—this is crucial as we design environmental land management policy. There will be some interventions that may be highly short term, because they are instant and affect, for instance, the way in which farms approach agronomy or cropping. Others, such as those that my right hon. Friend highlights, may require a longer-term, more multi-annual commitment. That is entirely doable within the nature of the agreements that we are considering.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There are concerns among those involved in agriculture in my area about whether there will continue to be appropriate access to workforce when we leave the European Union. What are the Government doing to ensure that that will be the case?

George Eustice: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Migration Advisory Committee is carrying out a large piece of work on the UK’s labour needs after we have left the European Union. We have also listened carefully to industry representations about a seasonal agricultural worker scheme after we leave the European Union, and a working group is looking at seasonal agricultural labour.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah. Let us hear from Chris Davies; he knows about these matters.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Can my hon. Friend reassure upland food-producing family farmers that they have a future under his Department’s plans?

George Eustice: Yes I can, and I have had meetings with the Uplands Alliance, which is very excited by the approach set out in our consultation. Our uplands deliver many public goods and environmental benefits, and under our new policy we will be rewarding those.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Food manufacturing and farming are great British success stories, so does the Minister think that a customs union arrangement with the EU will help to ensure their future success?

George Eustice: No, but I do believe we should have a comprehensive and ambitious free trade agreement.

Mr Speaker: We will hear from the good doctor—Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The overwhelming response of farmers to the consultation is that they want to know what help and advice they will get in managing the change from the basic payment to environmental support. As the Minister knows, that is particularly true of smaller and tenant farmers. What will the Government do to put in place some form of advice strategy so that those people can get independent, objective and, more particularly, comprehensive advice about how to completely change many of the ways in which they have farmed in the past?

George Eustice: We will look at that issue, but fundamentally we have been clear that we recognise the current dependency on the existing basic payment scheme—the area payments. That is why we have set out a plan for an agricultural transition period to give farmers, especially those on our smaller family farms, plenty of time to prepare. Our new environmental land management scheme, when published, will have plenty of guidance alongside it.

Seafood

3. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the seafood sector to the economy.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government fully recognise the importance of the seafood sector not only to the economy but, historically and culturally, to coastal and local communities. In 2016, the gross value added for the fish processing sector was £650 million.

Martin Vickers: Around 5,000 people in the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area are employed in the seafood sector, and it is clear that it is vital to the local economy. Will the Minister reassure the industry that the Government will work with it to ensure a continuation of supplies and create further job opportunities?

George Eustice: I have had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend’s constituency, and the Secretary of State will visit it next month. I have met representatives from the processing sector. My hon. Friend’s part of the world is home to a world-beating fish processing industry. I have had detailed dialogue with the sector about the importance of trade with non-EU countries such as Norway and Iceland. I am confident that we can roll forward the trade agreements on which they depend.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Scottish Creel Fishermen’s Federation says that the cost of fishing could increase by between 40% and 90% if we have no trade deal with the EU. What is the Minister doing to ensure that fishing continues to make its current contribution to the economy?

George Eustice: We have made it clear that, when we leave the EU, it is our intention to depart from relative stability and current quota-sharing arrangements, and there is an opportunity to secure a better and much larger share of fish in the future. Alongside that, as I said earlier, we are seeking a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union.
**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): The seafood sector, particularly regarding supply, is very important, and there are great opportunities post-Brexit. Under international law, we only need to offer any supplies that the UK fleet cannot catch. Will the Minister confirm that that will be the case once we leave the common fisheries policy?

**George Eustice:** Yes. My hon. Friend is an expert in these areas, given her experience, and she will be aware that when we leave the European Union, the UN convention on the law of the sea becomes the new legal baseline. Under that international law, we are responsible for controlling access to our exclusive economic zone. Indeed, as she says, there are also provisions around joint working with partners and others who have a shared interest in the stock.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I got a text message this morning stating: “If there is any glimmer of hope from Gove I won’t sell.” That was from a fisherman on the west coast who is short of crew. Now that he knows that the Home Office has run a hostile policy to migrants and migrant workers, he is hoping that he will not be forced to sell, so what will DEFRA do to ensure that the west coast fishing industry, and I believe the fishing industry in Northern Ireland, is not forced out of business? There is a real need for the Home Office to give fishermen pieces of paper to keep the Home Office happy. In other words, we need non-European economic area fishermen—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We have got the gist of the hon. Gentleman’s inquiry.

**George Eustice:** I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) about this issue, and the hon. Gentleman is aware that we are in dialogue with the Home Office on these issues. As I said, the Migration Advisory Committee is looking in the round at our labour needs after we leave the EU.

**Leaving the EU: Food and Drink Industry**

4. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the UK food and drink industry after the UK leaves the EU. [904947]

5. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the future of the UK food and drink industry after the UK leaves the EU. [904948]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** There are regular discussions between Ministers about the benefits of leaving the EU, including for the UK’s food and drink industry. We are committed to helping our farmers to grow more, sell more and export more great British food and drink. The Government have made good progress this year on opening access to global markets, and we also have the opportunity to harness the food and drink sector’s ambitious plans for increasing exports as part of a sector deal under our industrial strategy.

**Peter Grant:** Those discussions must have been the shortest in history if they were about the benefits of leaving the European Union.

This week, the chief executive of the National Farmers Union warned against selling out agriculture for simple ideology. Does not the Secretary of State accept that the unilateral decision to withdraw from the customs union and single market was based purely on ideology? When is he going to stop the platitudes and the mild assurances, and accept that that ideological decision threatens to destroy the future of agriculture in these islands?

**Michael Gove:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have to say that the discussions about the benefits of leaving the EU that I undertake with my Cabinet colleagues go long into the night, often fuelled and sustained by glasses of fine Scotch whisky and smoked salmon from parts of that beautiful country. One of the things we appreciate is that the appetite for smoked salmon, whisky and Scottish and British produce is growing faster outside the European Union than it is within it.

**Douglas Chapman:** Scotland produces some of the finest food and drink, which is exported around the world. That allows us to punch well above our weight in terms of balance of payments, and it is based on our valued Scottish brand. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to protect Scotland the brand to ensure that our reputation for quality food and drink is enhanced during and after the Brexit process?

**Michael Gove:** That is a very constructive contribution, because Scotland is a very powerful brand. I mentioned whisky and smoked salmon, and it is the case that the high-quality food producers of Scotland—from those who are responsible for beef in the north-east of Scotland to those who are responsible for the wonderful organic carrots and potatoes of Aberdeenshire—are individuals who work incredibly hard, and it is my desire to champion them. That is why I am just a little bit sad that the First Minister of Scotland has decided not to collaborate with the UK Government to make sure that we have effective UK-wide frameworks so that we provide a firm platform for future exports and growth.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What are the post-Brexit prospects for exploiting the growing demand for dairy products in the middle east and south Asia?

**Michael Gove:** There is growing demand for dairy products, and not just in the middle east and south Asia, as we have also had a very successful drive to increase sales of organic milk to the United States of America. Our dairy farmers do an amazing job and the opportunities for their quality products—yoghurt, cheese and others—to be sold worldwide will only increase as we leave the EU.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): While acknowledging that food and drink labelling will be subject to a UK framework post-Brexit, may I ask my right hon. Friend to join me in supporting the Diabetes UK “Food Upfront” campaign to improve food labelling and introduce traffic-light systems so that people suffering with that condition can be clear about the nutritional value of pre-packaged food and drink?
Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically acute point. We want to ensure not only that we produce more food, but that we produce more healthy food and help consumers to make the right choices. When we are outside the European Union, we can improve our approach on food labelling.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Food processors in my constituency export their products directly to the Republic of Ireland, straight off the production line. They fear that Brexit might require them to follow new procedures that would delay their exports, largely because of a lack of warehouse space in the Greater Manchester area. What assurances can the Secretary of State give them?

Michael Gove: I have already met, and hope to meet again very shortly, Ministers in the Irish Government to ensure that we have a shared approach across these islands and that trade can continue to flow with as little friction as possible, but our success will require good will on every side. I therefore look forward to visiting Ireland in the week after next to talk to its Agriculture Minister and those directly involved in trade.

Plastic Waste

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps is he taking to reduce levels of plastic waste in the marine environment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Let me first congratulate my hon. Friend on being the leader of the group of 50 Conservative Members who gave up single-use plastic for Lent. Her leadership in that regard is well known.

Our microbead ban is one of the toughest in the world. We have taken more than 9 billion plastic bags out of circulation through the 5p levy; we have announced that we want to end the sale of plastic straws and stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds; and we are consulting on the deposit return scheme. At the Commonwealth summit, we launched the Commonwealth Blue Charter as a group of 53 nations. I am pleased to say that the UK and Vanuatu are leading the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance, which brings together countries, businesses and non-governmental organisations to tackle the global challenge of plastic in the marine environment.

Vicky Ford: I was delighted by this morning’s news that all our top supermarkets will ensure that all their plastic is recyclable within seven years. We know that half the plastic in the oceans comes from developing countries, but only 0.1% of our overseas aid is spent on helping those countries to deal with waste. Will you work with the International Development Secretary to increase that amount?

Mr Speaker: I won’t, but she might.

Dr Coffey: I am pleased to say that that is already under way. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently announced a £61.4 million Commonwealth oceans package to boost global research and development. In particular, £3 million will fund new waste management initiatives in cities, building on the successful waste management programme launched by the Department for International Development in Sierra Leone. We are also funding the £6 million Commonwealth litter programme.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Does the Minister accept the very weak analysis of UK marine litter in the UK’s “Marine Strategy Part Three”, which has been highlighted by the Environmental Audit Committee? Given that 80% of marine litter comes from the land, is there a plan to monitor litter levels and how the litter reaches the marine environment? Will the Government announce a timescale for the publication of a more accurate assessment of the levels and impacts of marine litter?

Dr Coffey: A year ago we launched the litter strategy, in which we said that we would estimate a baseline. The inclement weather in the first part of the year has led to a slight delay in the gathering of research findings, but we intend to publish them before the summer so that we can take effective action where there are hotspots. I encourage people to join the clean-up, organised by the Daily Mail and Keep Britain Tidy, which will take place between 11 and 13 May. The purge of plastic goes forever forwards.

Sue Hayman: Obviously, plastic bottle litter is a huge part of the problem. When will the Government take real action? I know that a consultation is taking place, but will the Minister commit herself to introducing, as soon as possible, effective legislation to provide for a deposit return scheme covering drink containers of all sizes, including plastic bottles? Will she confirm that she has the Treasury’s support in working with producers to finance such a scheme?

Dr Coffey: The front end of a deposit return scheme is pretty common across different systems: the challenge is how the scheme is operated and financed. We need a scheme that will be effective in tackling on-the-go consumption in particular. No other country faces that specific challenge, and that is why it is taking us some time to complete the consultation, which will be published later this year. If legislation is required, we will of course introduce it, but at this stage we need to work out the details of the scheme.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The Government deserve credit for their world-leading efforts to ban microbeads and to phase out the single use of plastic bags. I massively applaud their newer commitment to ban plastic straws, plastic stirrers and plastic coffee mugs and to introduce a new deposit return scheme for bottles. Nevertheless, may I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has done more than all his predecessors combined on this issue, to go further still? Can we look at the types of plastics we are using; attempt to phase out, as quickly as possible, those plastics that cannot be recycled; and commit to narrowing the range of plastics that we use, to make the job easier for those in the recycling industry?

Dr Coffey: At the launch of the 25-year environment plan, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister identified that issue of the wide range of polymers used. I assure
my hon. Friend that the Government are working, through officials, with the Waste and Resources Action Programme and the UK plastics pact to undertake the research and innovation required for manufacturers to work together to reduce the number of polymers, so that there are fewer of them and they can be recycled more readily.

**Fisheries White Paper**

7. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): When he plans to publish the fisheries White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [904950]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We have committed to introducing a fisheries Bill in this Session of Parliament, and we will publish a White Paper in due course. It will set out our vision for future fisheries management and the legal requirements to manage our fisheries in future.

**Melanie Onn:** What assurances can the Minister give that there will be sufficient time to consult on that White Paper before the Bill is published?

**George Eustice:** When we publish White Papers, we always ensure that there is plenty of time to discuss their content before legislation is proposed.

**Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): Given that the Government have failed in their pledge to take back absolute control of our fishing waters from day one of leaving the European Union, can the Minister be explicit about how he intends to use the powers that he already has domestically to redistribute fishing quota, to deliver a better and fairer deal for our coastal communities?

**George Eustice:** We have already made many changes to give additional quota to the small under-10 metre fleet in particular. We permanently realigned some unused quota in 2012, and since the introduction of the discard ban, the annual quota uplift has been top-sliced and additional quota given to the under-10 metre sector each and every year.

**Leaving the EU: Agriculture Frameworks**

8. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on common UK frameworks for agriculture after the UK leaves the EU. [904951]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I regularly meet Ministers from the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations. The most recent occasion on which I did so was 26 February, to discuss the Government's planned agriculture consultation document. I am looking forward to seeing Ministers from Scotland and Wales, as well as representatives from the Northern Ireland Administration, on 14 May in Edinburgh.

**Andrew Bowie:** My right hon. Friend will understand that, whether potatoes are grown in the Mearns or in the March fens, they must all be grown under common UK regulations; otherwise we risk damaging the UK internal market. Does he therefore agree that farmers across the UK expect UK-wide regulations and that politicians must not throw up artificial barriers for narrow political gain?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend makes an absolutely brilliant point. Recently, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been negotiating with devolved Administrations to ensure that, as we leave the European Union, we can have a successful internal market in the United Kingdom. Agreement has been reached with the Welsh Government. Mark Drakeford, the Labour Minister, has shown a degree of flexibility and taken a constructive approach, which is in stark contrast to that of the Scottish Government and the First Minister of Scotland, who has put a narrow ideological pursuit of separation ahead of the interests of the people of Scotland—and not for the first time, either.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Many agricultural unions in Wales have expressed concern about clarity relating to the future arrangements for common frameworks. Do the UK Government intend to apply the Barnett formula to any funding allocated to Wales in the future?

**Michael Gove:** We want to make sure that, as is the case at the moment, farmers in Wales—indeed, farmers under all the devolved Administrations—receive more money than would be strictly the case under the Barnett formula. It is appropriate that they should continue to do so, because of the unique nature of the landscapes they farm.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not think that anyone disagrees that there might be a need for common frameworks, but I do not think they would disagree either that democratic decisions by democratically elected Parliaments are artificial barriers, so will the Secretary of State guarantee that no frameworks will be imposed across the UK without the democratic consent of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly?

**Michael Gove:** That is a good try, but the hon. Gentleman knows that the stark contrast between the constructive approach of the Labour Administration in Cardiff and the obstructive approach of the nationalist Administration in Holyrood does not redound to the credit of the Scottish National party. The truth is that the SNP has only one policy, which is separation. Everything else is tactics and they are prepared to throw Scottish farmers under the bus—[Interruption]—or, indeed, the bandwagon in their desperate desire to elevate the destruction of the United Kingdom above the creation of wealth for the people of Scotland.

**National Park Authorities**

9. **Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to appoint members to national park authorities. [904952]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Department is currently recruiting Secretary of State-appointed members for five national parks, including the Peak District. The full criteria have been published as part of the recruitment process. In 2018, these include a commitment to the statutory purpose of the national
parks, an understanding of farming or environmental land management, an ability to champion national parks and an ability to provide advice and challenge.

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin**: National parks play an important role in protecting our areas of outstanding natural beauty, but they are excluded from any of the Government housing targets. That means ever-increasing house prices in those areas. Will any future appointments have this as part of their criteria, to ensure that we see some limited development in every village?

**Dr Coffey**: One of the criteria involves providing advice and challenge. It is important that we continue to build new homes right across the country, but we need to balance that with maintaining the protection of our most beautiful landscapes. My right hon. Friend might be aware that there is to be a national parks review, and I will certainly draw his concerns to the reviewer's attention.

**Mr Speaker**: I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) has a penchant for energetic hikes through the Derbyshire dales, but if so, I think we would all benefit from photographic evidence thereof.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Does the Minister share my sense of regret that not one member of the Yorkshire Dales national park authority lives in any of the great towns or cities West Yorkshire? Does she further agree that if there were more urban dwellers on national park authorities, they would be likely to take more notice of the recent report by the Campaign for National Parks urging more public transport from the towns and cities into the parks?

**Dr Coffey**: The national parks tend to reflect a more rural, countryside landscape than an urban environment. There are different ways to identify the conservation areas that are often prevalent across towns and cities, including those in West Yorkshire. I will share the hon. Gentleman's concerns with the Minister responsible for this portfolio, my hon. Friend Lord Gardiner.

**Common Fisheries Policy**

10. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether he plans for the UK to leave the common fisheries policy after 2020. [904953]

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice)**: On 19 March, the UK and the EU reached an agreement on the nature and length of a transition period. Under the agreement, current fisheries rules will continue to apply until the end of 2020. However, in December 2020, we will negotiate fishing opportunities for 2021 as a third country and an independent coastal state outside the common fisheries policy.

**Diana Johnson**: The Secretary of State has admitted that the Government accepted a "sub-optimal outcome" for the UK's fishing industry in the Brexit negotiations, although I think that people in Hull would call it something else. Can the Minister guarantee that, at the end of the transition period, our fishing rights will not be traded away for some other political or economic priority?

**George Eustice**: We have been absolutely clear that when we leave the European Union and at the end of the transition period, we will be an independent coastal state managing and controlling access to our own waters.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [904974] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove)**: I was delighted to be able to present at the Countryside Alliance's "Rural Oscars" awards in the Cholmondeley Room of the House of Lords yesterday. A number of the local businesses that do so much to help local food economies and to sustain and champion local food production were celebrated for their outstanding work, and I was pleased that businesses from across England and Wales were celebrated in that way.

**Tonia Antoniazzi**: My constituency has a long coastline and, unfortunately, a large amount of plastic pollution, like the rest of our island nation. The coastal communities of Gower are working hard to gain plastic-free status, and thanks to an active community councillor, Susan Rodaway, beach cleans are taking place across the constituency. Will the Government heed the call of the Environmental Audit Committee and introduce a coastal clean-up fund to support the removal of plastic waste from our beaches and seas?

**Michael Gove**: I know the hon. Lady's constituency, and I know what a beautiful coastline it has. The beach at Rhossili bay in particular is one of the most iconic landscapes in the United Kingdom, and we need to do absolutely everything we can to free those landscapes and our marine environment from litter. I will look at her request. I understand that funding for these matters is devolved, but of course all the nations of the United Kingdom can work together to keep our seas and our beaches cleaner.

T2. [904975] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This week, the European Parliament's PECH Committee adopted a report that would make the UK's access to the EU market for fishery and aquaculture products dependent on EU vessels' access to British waters and on the application of the common fisheries policy. That is unacceptable, so will the Secretary of State confirm the Government's commitment that the UK will become an independent coastal state at the end of the implementation period, free from the CFP?

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice)**: We strongly disagree with the position set out in that European Parliament report, and I can confirm that we will become an independent coastal state at the end of the transition period.

T3. [904977] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Many of my constituents from Blaydon have contacted me about the need to ban wild animals in circuses, so will the Secretary of State guarantee that such a ban will be on the statute book and say when it will happen?
Michael Gove: The Government are absolutely committed to banning the use of wild animals in circuses, and we will work with all parties across the House to expedite legislation to that effect.

T4. [904978] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is doing incredibly well with the banning of the ivory trade, which is helping endangered elephants, but what is he doing about other endangered species, such as gorillas, lions, giraffes and leopards, to name but a few?

Mr Speaker: Let us hear about the gorilla situation.

Michael Gove: The Secretary of State will be holding a conference on the illegal wildlife trade in the autumn. It will be our aim to ensure that many of the creatures that my hon. Friend mentioned—charismatic megafauna or, as you and I would think of them, Mr Speaker, attractive big beasts—are preserved for the future.

Mr Speaker: The only trouble is that the Foreign Secretary’s hair is the wrong colour.

T6. [904980] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Last month, the UK and Hong Kong issued a joint statement on trade collaboration, but there was no mention of food and drink. Is that a sign of things to come? Will the Minister enlighten the House on why the food and drink industry was left on the shelf?

George Eustice: No, the statement was not a sign of that at all. Indeed, there are very strong trading links in food and drink between the UK and Hong Kong, which is a major market for both British lamb and British beef.

T5. [904979] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Following the successful campaign by the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, when will the Government introduce legislation to toughen up sentences for animal cruelty?

Michael Gove: Not only do we hope to introduce legislation to improve the courts’ powers and access to additional sentencing sanctions for those who are responsible for acts of horrific animal cruelty, but we also want, as was confirmed by the Lords Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union last night, to introduce legislation to ensure that the principle of animal sentience is recognised and, indeed, enhanced after we leave the EU.

T7. [904981] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My Food Insecurity Bill contains a cost-neutral proposal to measure UK hunger. It is supported by 77% of the public, over 100 MPs across the House, two cross-party groups and more than 20 organisations, but it is not supported by the Government. Why?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady knows why, because I met with her to explain it. The work is already being done. A Food Standards Agency food survey asks exactly the questions proposed in her Bill, and we also have the annual living costs and food survey.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): T.S. Eliot said:
“When a Cat adopts you,” you just have
“to put up with it and wait until the wind changes.”
A cruel wind may be blowing for the thousands of cat owners who put protective fencing in place to stop their much-loved pets joining the hundreds of thousands that are killed by cars on our roads each year. Will the Secretary of State, a noted cat owner, stand alongside those friends of felines, or will he send T. S. Eliot spinning in his grave and many cats to theirs, too?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising both cat welfare and invoking the spirit of T. S. Eliot. At the beginning of “The Waste Land”, T. S. Eliot wrote:
“April is the cruellest month”.
But this April will not be a month in which cruelty towards any living thing will be tolerated. We want to introduce legislation to ensure that the use of shock collars as a means of restraining animals in a way that causes them pain is adequately dealt with.

My right hon. Friend raises another important point in that containment fences can play a valuable role in ensuring that individual animals, dogs and cats, can roam free in the domestic environment in which they are loved and cared for. Several submissions have been made to our consultation on the matter. I know that my right hon. Friend cares deeply about the welfare of domestic pets and other animals, and he and others have made representations that we are reflecting on carefully.

Mr Speaker: That exchange should be captured in a reusable bottle and preferably stored in one of our great museums.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Teesdale farmers tell me payments that should have been made under the higher level stewardship scheme are late. They are upland farmers on the lowest incomes. Will Ministers stop blaming Europe and sort out their own administration?

George Eustice: We have made a number of changes and are working very hard to deal with the current problems with countryside stewardship, and progress has been made. I would simply say that we are not blaming the European Union. It is true that it has changed the rules so that all agreements must be processed simultaneously, whereas they used to be processed across the year, which has caused major administrative problems both for the Government and for farmers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Only 49% of the food consumed in the UK is produced in the UK, while our annual trade deficit on food and drink is now £23 billion a year and rising. What is the Secretary of State doing to address these challenges to our national security and economic sustainability?

George Eustice: The UK’s current food production-to-supply ratio is actually 76% for indigenous-type foods and 60% for all foods. That is not low by historical standards and has been relatively stable in recent years.
However, we want to have a vibrant, successful, profitable food and farming industry, and our recent consultation sets out some thoughts to deliver that.

**Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op):** Following local concerns about an animal rescue centre in my constituency of Leigh, I was shocked to learn that in England there are currently no regulations or licensing requirements for pet rescue centres. Will the Government commit to introducing proposals to protect the welfare of animals in rescue centres?

**George Eustice:** We recently introduced new regulations and licensing requirements covering commercial boarding establishments, but there are no current plans to regulate rescue homes. We do not want to create unnecessary burdens on the charitable sector. However, many such establishments are members of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes, members of which must already meet minimum standards.

**Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con):** I think we can all agree that we have great British food and great British farming, but we also have a processing industry that is 13% of our manufacturing sector. Why does the Command Paper not talk more about food, food security and food production, which are essential not only for our environment but for our food security in this country?

**Michael Gove:** The Chairman of the Select Committee and I share a commitment to making sure that the food and drink sector can become an even more important part of our economy in the future. As well as the consultation on the future of food, farming and the environment, which the “Health and Harmony” Command Paper initiated, there is ongoing work to develop a sector deal as part of the broader industrial strategy, on which the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy leads.

**Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab):** Last week, the Secretary of State told my Committee that the agriculture Bill is no longer urgent as we have agreed a transition period with the EU. Farmers are the bedrock of Britain’s food and drink sector, which are essential not only for our environment but for our food security in this country.

**Michael Gove:** Through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

**Phil Davies** (Shipley) (Con): In the interests of consumer choice, will the Secretary of State introduce compulsory labelling of halal and kosher meat? That would benefit both those who particularly want to buy it and those who particularly do not want to buy it.

**Michael Gove:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for raising this issue. We are consulting at the moment on how we can improve food labelling to ensure that we can provide consumers with greater choice, but it is also important to bear in mind that freedom of religious worship and practice is a core virtue of the United Kingdom. Although I believe very strongly in improving animal welfare standards, I also believe that we should show appropriate respect towards those individuals, from whatever faith background, who want to ensure that the meat they eat is prepared in accordance with their religious traditions.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** The recent floods in York brought back into sharp focus the serious gaps that still exist in resilience planning and in the insurance market. What is the Secretary of State doing to advance that, and will he meet me to talk about these serious issues?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** I would be more than delighted to meet the hon. Lady. She will be well aware of the Government’s ongoing investment to improve defences, but I am more than happy to discuss further resilience measures that home owners and business owners can take.

**Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** Last weekend more than 35,000 volunteers collected 65 tonnes of plastic waste from 571 beaches across the United Kingdom, organised by Surfers Against Sewage. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating and thanking all those volunteers, and does he agree that we now have a grassroots unstoppable people’s movement determined to rid our coast of plastic waste?

**Michael Gove:** Surfers Against Sewage has done an amazing job in creating wider awareness of what we all need to do together to cleanse our oceans and seas of litter. The Plastic Free Parliament campaign, and its encouragement of all Members of the House to move away from plastic and embrace appropriate alternatives is a model of social action, and one that I know you are anxious to embrace as well, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Most certainly, with alacrity.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we are over time and there is exceptionally heavy pressure on time today, as colleagues will know, on account of the business.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

**The right hon Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—**

### Freedom of Religion or Belief

1. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what discussions the Church of England had at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2018 on freedom of religion or belief; and if she will make a statement.

2. **The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Commonwealth initiative for freedom of religion or belief convened a two-day summit at Lambeth Palace.
last week involving 40 parliamentarians and religious leaders from 11 Commonwealth countries. The aim of the meeting was to look at ways in which parliamentarians and leaders from across the Commonwealth could champion freedom of religion or belief.

Martin Vickers: That is encouraging to hear. The Commonwealth and the Church of England have similar values where they overlap. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the two organisations continue to work in unison to influence Governments in countries where freedom of religion is not respected?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The geography of the Anglican Communion and the Commonwealth do overlap; in fact the communion is larger still. The charter of the Commonwealth contains a commitment to freedom of religion or belief, but the truth is that not all members abide by that. The personal relationships built at Commonwealth meetings and across the Anglican Communion mean that faith communities must advocate for the same global standards for freedom of religion and belief.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is sad to see Commonwealth countries on Open Doors UK’s world watch list of Christian persecution around the world. What more can we do following the Heads of Government conference to promote tolerance between people of faith and none in the long term in the Commonwealth?

Dame Caroline Spelman: A number of actions were agreed at that seminar. For Lambeth Palace and the Anglican Communion, freedom of religion remains an important priority. Every time the Archbishop of Canterbury visits a Commonwealth country where there is a problem you can be sure, Mr Speaker, that he will raise it.

Part of the initiative in the Commonwealth involves developing a toolkit that Members of Parliament can use to champion issues of freedom of religion and belief in our constituencies.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Is the Church of England aware of deeply disturbing reports that restrictions on the freedom of Christians to practise their faith have severely increased this year in China, including a ban on taking children under 18 to church? If so, what step is the Church taking on this?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England is very aware of those reports, and China is a priority for the Archbishop of Canterbury. He hopes to be able to take up the invitation to go there, when I am sure he will raise these issues. Even before such a visit, Church officials are engaging with Chinese officials to discover the implications of the new five-year plan on religious engagement and raise concerns where it appears that Christians are being oppressed.

Circular Economy

2. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment the Church of England has made of the potential merits of the circular economy.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church has for many years been involved in the recycling, reuse and repurposing of materials. It completely embraces the circular economy. Most recently, the Church’s environment programme ran a “Lent Plastic Challenge”, which was supported by 40 MPs. It produced a calendar of things we could do on each of the 40 days of Lent, and it was helpful to all who took part to see how much we can do individually.

Rachael Maskell: Last weekend I attended the launch of the Catholic diocese of Middlesbrough’s book about how we can live simpler lives. What is the Church of England doing to further its reach into communities to help people to change their behaviours and lifestyles?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I have said, all of us as MPs had a golden opportunity during Lent to use the calendar produced by the Church of England, which was available to all Church members and was very popular throughout the Church community. Every day it set a challenge to each of us to do something to change the way we live our lives so that they are simpler and embrace the circular economy. Within the Church, a number of churches embrace the concept completely, with 860 participating as eco-churches in the Big Church Switch, for example, which is looking at ways to ensure that the energy we use comes from renewable sources. We promote the circular economy right across the Church of England.

Rural Schools

3. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what plans the Church of England has to support rural schools.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yesterday I hosted a reception to highlight the interest of the Church of England in working with the Government and others to support a viable future for rural schools. The Church has published “Embracing Change: Rural and Small Schools”, which I commend to the House.

Helen Goodman: The Church obviously should be taking a long-term, if not eternal, approach on rural schools. People in Startforth were disappointed when a brief dip in performance led to the closure of that Church school, so in future will the Church take into account the significance of rural schools as community assets?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England has 4,700 schools, of which 53% are in rural areas. That often presents challenges—for example, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers—but the report that I have referred to highlights those challenges. In addition to that report, we have a Church of England educational leadership foundation, which is designed to encourage and retain teachers, to ensure that children in small rural schools do not suffer as a result of the shortage of teachers.

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

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) can bang on about out-of-school educational settings instead.
Out-of-school Education

4. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment the Church of England has made of the Government response to the consultation on out-of-school education settings.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Following the publication of the findings from the Department for Education’s consultation on out-of-school settings, I am pleased to say that the Government have sharpened their focus on tackling risks associated with unregulated out-of-school settings and have come up with proposals that are far more proportionate for use. The Church of England has welcomed this.

Michelle Donelan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential that the Government combat radicalisation, but in a way that does not mean the state encroaching on the realm of religion or crossing the Rubicon in a way that could one day lead to the assessment of Sunday schools and the like?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Of course, the Church of England completely underlines the importance of tackling radicalisation, but the original proposals might have caught education in out-of-school settings such as Sunday schools, where teachers are subject to Criminal Records Bureau checks—as everybody in this place who has ever taught in one will know—and domestic premises used to teach children out of school have to be inspected too. The new proposals are proportionate to use and have been welcomed by the Church of England.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady knows that I have been a champion of forest schools and out-of-school education with the John Clare Trust over many years. More worrying is out-of-school education in foreign parts. Many churches support orphanages around the world, but very often they are not orphanages and are not for orphans, but are used in child trafficking. Many churches support these so-called orphanages, so will she look into that?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious point. I heard the broadcast of the “Sunday” programme about an Australian Senator who is pioneering a serious point. I heard the broadcast of the “Sunday” programme about an Australian Senator who is pioneering an amendment to Australia’s modern-day slavery legislation to ensure that the whole world wise up to the risks associated with donating to orphanages that might be a scam or a front for children who are subsequently trafficked, or certainly put at risk. All of us need to be aware in our dealings with our constituents and their churches of the need to look carefully at where those resources go and how they are used.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Election Expenses: Northern Ireland

5. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): To ask the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, what discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the decision to publish election expenses in Northern Ireland submitted since July 2017.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I congratulate the National Audit Office on its report, but why did the investigation not seek to evaluate either the value for money of the projects or the decision to cancel?
Julian Knight: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his tireless work in this area on behalf of his constituents. The NAO conducts investigations to establish the underlying facts and circumstances where concerns have been raised. Investigations are not evaluative and do not seek to provide a conclusion on value for money. The report was focused on the concerns that had been raised. However, the report does comment on the costs and benefits of the three cancelled electrification projects and the case for electrification more generally. In the Secretary of State’s announcement in July 2017, he explained that projects were cancelled on the basis that it was no longer necessary to electrify every line to deliver passenger benefits. The NAO investigation says that it was too early to tell whether the promised benefits could be achieved without full electrification. When the Secretary of State made his decision to cancel electrification, the Department told the NAO that it expected the manufacturers to be able to develop bi-mode trains that would deliver the required service improvements on the midland main line.

Mr Speaker: We are all now considerably better informed, and we are grateful for that.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting

7. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): To ask the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, what representations the Commission has received on the potential installation of electronic voting systems in the Chamber as part of (a) the restoration and renewal programme and (b) the northern estate programme.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Representations have been made through previous oral questions to the House of Commons Commission, including by the hon. Gentleman himself. He may remember that I responded in similar terms to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) in January. The Commission has given no formal consideration to a move to electronic voting in the House as part of either the restoration and renewal programme or the northern estate programme. Its responsibility in this matter is limited to any financial or staffing implications of any change to the present system were such a change to be agreed by the House.

Patrick Grady: Can the right hon. Gentleman explain whether the Commission would be prepared to receive any such representations, or whether there should be some other mechanism by which this House can actually have a proper debate and a proper discussion about dragging ourselves somewhere into the late 20th century in time for this restoration and renewal somewhere in the middle of the 21st century?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I suspect that, from earlier responses, he will be aware that he needs to present his ideas, in the initial stages, to the Procedure Committee for it to consider. However, there will also be an opportunity, as part of a consultation around the northern estate programme, for him to contribute, and he could contribute in advance of that by contacting Emma Wharton who is responsible for that programme and for the restoration and renewal. I am sure that she would be happy to receive his representation.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Protection of Churches

8. Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent discussions the Church of England has had with local authorities on protecting historic church buildings and settings.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am grateful for that answer. St Mary the Virgin’s church in my constituency is a rare and beautiful example of one of the finest small Anglo-Saxon churches in the country, going back to the 7th century. It is threatened by a large-scale development and it has fallen to Historic England to submit objections. Historic England indicates that the proposals would have a harmful impact on the setting of the church and, indeed, of Seaham Hall. Is there a role for the Church of England or the Church Commissioners to object to such developments in order to protect the setting of churches of historical importance?

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for that answer. St Mary the Virgin’s church in my constituency is a rare and beautiful example of one of the finest small Anglo-Saxon churches in the country, going back to the 7th century. It is threatened by a large-scale development and it has fallen to Historic England to submit objections. Historic England indicates that the proposals would have a harmful impact on the setting of the church and, indeed, of Seaham Hall. Is there a role for the Church of England or the Church Commissioners to object to such developments in order to protect the setting of churches of historical importance?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I understand that the local authority has taken a decision that would adversely affect the setting of this beautiful grade I listed Anglo-Saxon church. I will be in discussion with the diocese about what support we can provide as a stakeholder in this important decision.

Theft from Churches

9. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government and the insurance industry on the theft of metal, stone and decorative objects from churches.

10. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government and the insurance industry on the theft of metal, stone and decorative objects from churches.
Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church is concerned about the significant rise in metal theft, which is not unconnected to the fact that the price of lead and copper on world markets has risen by 65%. Our advice to churches follows that of the police, which is to do target hardening wherever possible. There are a certain number of practical suggestions that I can provide that may assist with this inquiry.

Sir David Amess: While all thefts should be condemned, it is particularly despicable to steal from churches and their graveyards. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what impact the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013—pioneered by Sir Richard Ottaway—has had on the situation?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There is no question but that the private Member’s Bill promoted by our dear friend and former Member of this House gave rise to a change in Government legislation on metal theft. However, there are new thefts—not just of metal, but of stone, ornamental artefacts and even, recently, some 12th-century keys. This is why I have joined the revised all-party parliamentary group on metal and stone theft, and I encourage other Members to support its work in Parliament.

John Grogan: Will the Church Commissioners urge Ministers to introduce a scrap stone Act along the lines of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013, which improved councils’ regulation of metal and stopped the trading of scrap metal in cash?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Just as with metal, it is very important to mark artefacts with smart water, dye or in other ways where possible, so that thieves may be caught and ultimately prosecuted when artefacts turn up in dealers’ yards. The APPG will be involved in this work and the Church of England will actively support it.
Home Office Removal Targets

10.32 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) Urgent Question: To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement about the use of removal targets in the Home Office.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Yesterday, I gave evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs about the Windrush generation—the people who contributed so much and who should never have experienced what they have. These people are here legally and should never have been subjected to any form of removal action; and, as I told the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, I have seen no evidence that that has happened.

Everyone in this House agrees that this group were here legally, but also that people who are here illegally should be treated differently from legal migrants. I am personally committed to tackling illegal migration because I have seen at first hand the terrible impact that it has on the most vulnerable in our society—the exploitation and abuse that can come hand-in-hand with illegal migration. That is why my Department has been working to increase the number of illegal migrants we remove.

I have never agreed that there should be specific removal targets and I would never support a policy that puts targets ahead of people. The immigration arm of the Home Office has been using local targets for internal performance management. These were not published targets against which performance was assessed, but if they were used inappropriately, then I am clear that this will have to change. I have asked officials to provide me with a full picture of the performance measurement tools which were used at all levels, and I will update the House, and the Home Affairs Committee, as soon as possible.

Ms Abbott: Another day, another revelation about the Windrush scandal. Yesterday, giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, the Home Secretary said in terms: “We don’t have targets for removals.”

But the general secretary of the Immigration Service Union told the Committee earlier that there is a net removals target that enforcement teams have to meet and that they are aiming to remove a certain number of individuals in any given month. The general secretary later confirmed that the target this month was 8,337, with targets on posters in regional centres. When Lord Carrington resigned over the Falklands, he said that it was a matter of honour. Is it not time that the Home Secretary considered her honour and resigned?

Amber Rudd: I would like to make the very clear distinction between legal and illegal migrants. The right hon. Lady talks about the Windrush cohort. We have already established that the Windrush cohort is here legally. This Government are determined to put this right, which is why I put in the new measures to ensure that that happens.

I believe that I have addressed the issue of targets, referring to the fact that some offices are working with them. Unfortunately, I was not aware of them, and I want to be aware of them, which is why I am now putting in place different measures to ensure that that happens.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend be assured that she has the total support of Conservative Members in trying to resolve a very difficult legacy issue? Does she agree that dealing with the Windrush generation, who are entirely entitled to be here, is not the same thing at all, as Labour Members try to say, as removing illegal immigrants?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for putting it so clearly; it is such an important distinction to make. This Government, like many Governments before, including Labour Governments, took action against illegal immigrants. Some former Labour Home Secretaries had some very clear targets about removing illegal migrants. Removing illegal migrants is what Governments should be doing in order to protect the taxpayer and in order to make sure that no abuse takes place in the UK.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The revelation that Home Office removal targets exist comes as no surprise to me or any of the hundreds of constituents who have come to my surgeries over the past three years. There is a litany of callous incompetence from this Department. It is a problem of deliberate policy—a cruel “hostile environment” policy introduced by the former Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, and continued unabated by the current Home Secretary.

Can the Home Secretary tell this House when targets were introduced, who signed them off, and how they were monitored? Can she tell us about the local targets and whether they were in place in Scotland? Can she tell us what happened to Home Office caseworkers who failed to meet those targets? If it is true that posters were being displayed to remind staff of the targets, how is it possible that the Home Secretary and the director of border, immigration and citizenship were not fully aware of this? This Home Secretary is presiding over a Department out of control, marked by cruelty and chaos. Will she stop shielding the Prime Minister? Will she do the honourable thing and resign?

Amber Rudd: I think that once more the hon. Lady is confusing legal and illegal migrants. Like any other Member of this House, I do not think that she would want the UK to be a home for illegal migrants. That is why we have policies which make it difficult for illegal migrants to thrive in the UK. That is exactly the right thing to do. It was started under former Governments. It has been continued under this one because we must remove people who are here illegally.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend not to be knocked off course by the Opposition parties on the issue of illegal immigration. Most people in the real world, outside of the Labour party, the Scottish National party and the metropolitan London elite in the media, believe that the Government do not do enough to remove illegal immigrants from this country, not that they are doing too much. All the Opposition
parties are demonstrating is how out of touch they have become with working-class communities up and down the country.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. He is right; the public expect us to remove illegal migrants who are here and who do damage to our society, and it is right that the Home Office has a policy which makes sure that that has happened. Once more, I want to be absolutely clear that that is not the case with the Windrush cohort, who are here legally, and the group of people we are reaching out to, to make sure that we support them and get the documentation they need.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is obviously deeply disappointing that the Home Secretary did not know the facts when she gave evidence to our Committee yesterday. I look forward to more detail from her on this, and I have a follow-up question. The Foreign Office has said that in April 2016, as part of regular ministerial dialogue with Caribbean partners, Foreign Office Ministers were made aware of concerns about some immigration deportation cases. Were those concerns passed to Home Office Ministers, and what did they do?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Lady raised that with me yesterday, and I said to her then, that I will look into that and come back to her with an answer to that question as soon as I can.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Home Secretary’s remedy has been rightly generous, but should not the target for law breaking always be zero?

Amber Rudd: That is a target we can all agree with.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I asked the Home Secretary at the last urgent question how many people had been deported. She said she did not know. I asked her how many people had been imprisoned in the Windrush cohort. She said that she did not know. There are impact statements that have been ignored. There are letters from MPs, and she said she was not aware of a pattern. We now understand that people have been removed because of targets, and she said she did not know. I say with all conscience: is she really the right person to lead this office of state?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman asked early on about the issue of removals, and I have addressed it in the action that I have taken and in the report that I gave to the Select Committee yesterday. We have established that there were 8,000 people within the cohort who might have had Windrush characteristics—the indication that he has put in his social media—and we have gone through them and found that of the 7,000 we have looked at by hand, none qualify in terms of removal. He quite rightly continues to ask questions about what might have happened in different situations, but I must respond by saying that until we have looked, we cannot have a definitive answer. It has come as some element of surprise to have this particular shape as a number of cases that came to the Home Office over a period. As we discussed yesterday in the Select Committee, there were indications, but they were not put together as the systemic failure that clearly took place.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The Opposition talk about a culture of fear being spread, but is my right hon. Friend aware that it was the shadow Home Secretary in 2013 who complained about a reduction in the number of illegal immigrants being deported?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. There are plenty of examples and quotations from the Labour party about its targets and determination to remove illegals. Removing illegals is something that everybody and every Government should do and want to do, and this Government make no excuse for wanting to do it, but the Windrush group, whom we all respect, are a completely separate group, are legal, and we want to make sure that we look after them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Government have a target to reduce immigration, legal or illegal. Could it be that officials were following Ministers’ lead?

Amber Rudd: It is my experience that our caseworkers work with compassion and care in administering their duties. Under this leadership, I will always make sure that they do.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): To what extent was my right hon. Friend’s Department’s ability to monitor and assess the level of illegal immigration impeded by the abandonment of exit checks in 1998?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is right of course that exit checks are an important part of securing our borders and knowing who comes and goes, and I am very pleased that this Government reintroduced them in 2015.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I have always been puzzled about why my constituent Shiromini Satkunarajah, a Londoner and student at Bangor University, was wrongly detained at Yarl’s Wood last year. The answer now seems to be clear. She was a Tamil who escaped from Sri Lanka as a child and was reporting to the police station, as she was required to do under law—she was doing her duty under the law. She was, to use that horrible, dehumanising phrase, “low-hanging fruit”. What is the Home Secretary now doing to identify and provide redress to those not of the Windrush generation but whose lives have wrongly been disrupted by Home Office target chasing?

Amber Rudd: I want to make it clear that I would never use that phrase, and it is not an approach I would want anybody working in the Home Office to take. I have said that, as a result of the Windrush changes, I will make sure that the Home Office has a more human face. I am setting up a new contact centre and making sure there are more senior caseworkers so that the more junior caseworkers have the confidence to make their decisions by engaging with somebody really experienced. I accept that we need to make the Home Office more personal, and I will be doing that.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate a few more colleagues, but there is huge pressure on time and therefore all inquiries, without exception, need to be brief, and the responses characteristically so from the Home Secretary.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I commend the Home Secretary for her response to the Windrush scandal but press her on the separate issue of illegal immigration? Press reports this week show that 27,000 illegal immigrants have been arrested by 28 forces in the past four years. Why is it being left to the police to arrest illegal immigrants? Why are they not being stopped at the border?

Amber Rudd: I accept that we should do more at the border, although there are areas where we are having some success. I point, in particular, to our juxtaposed border in France, in Calais, where we stop an enormous number of illegal migrants trying to get to the UK. We are investing more money, alongside the French, to make sure we can have more success there, so I hope that my hon. Friend will see some progress.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): This is not about illegals; it is about British citizens and people with a legal right to be here, and it goes well beyond the Windrush generation. How many cases are known to Ministers and officials of people who have been wrongfully deported or wrongfully detained? I know for a fact that there are cases in both categories—I met some of the individuals yesterday. How many are there in each category?

Amber Rudd: As I said to the hon. Gentleman yesterday at the Select Committee hearing, as a result of the Windrush scandal, we are going back to 2002 to look at whether there have been any inappropriate deportations, and when we have that information, I will come back to the Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When I was elected in May 2010, I was shocked by the sheer number of unresolved immigration cases I had to deal with straightaway. Does my right hon. Friend recall that under the last Labour Government, the then Home Secretary had to have two separate amnesties because no one knew how many people were here?

Amber Rudd: I do recall that, and I do recall some of the choice phrases that previous Labour Home Secretaries used about the Home Office. Under this leadership, we will be able to change that and make real progress.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Immigration is one of the most high-profile areas the Home Secretary is responsible for, and one that the public care deeply about. Was she asleep when she did not know there were targets for the removal of illegal immigrants?

Amber Rudd: Immigration is a really important part of the role of the Home Office and the Home Secretary. It is not the only part, but it is one in which I take a serious interest, and I believe that the changes I will be making will enable better monitoring of issues that arise, such as that of the Windrush cohort, which, as we have discussed, is a situation that has been going on for many years and was not spotted by any previous Government. I hope that those changes will help to give me those sorts of alerts.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Whatever the historical background to the problems, the Government have committed to paying compensation, where appropriate, to members of the Windrush generation. Will the Home Secretary confirm that she will have a wide-ranging consultation before putting that scheme in place?

Amber Rudd: I do think it is important to set up a compensation package; it is important that that compensation is independently monitored; and it is important that a consultation is carried out before that takes place. I hope that my hon. Friend will be satisfied when I set that out in due course.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I think people will accept that the Home Secretary and her lead official did not deliberately mislead the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, not least because what she said was so easily disproved. But it is a very serious matter that she and her lead official appeared not to be aware of the removal targets.

Amber Rudd: I repeat to the hon. Gentleman that I have not authorised any targets for the future. I have seen the information that has been revealed, and I have heard about the types of phrases that the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) referred to, and that were apparently used to the Committee. I thoroughly disagree with that; I think we should have a compassionate, clear and informed approach to immigration, and I am going to ensure that that happens.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Quite rightly, my right hon. Friend has set up a dedicated team to deal with the issues that affect the Windrush generation. Will she update the House on how quickly these cases are being processed?

Amber Rudd: I committed in the House to making sure that when the information is collected by my taskforce, the conclusions and the documents are passed to the individuals within two weeks. That target is being exceeded at the moment, and it is my strong aim and ambition to ensure that that high level of service is kept up, because those individuals deserve nothing less.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary, like her predecessor, the current Prime Minister, “sick and tired” of Ministers who blame others when something goes wrong? Surely, if the Home Secretary takes full responsibility for this serious issue, she should do the honourable thing and resign.

Amber Rudd: I do take seriously my responsibility, but I think that I am the person who can put this right. I understand that the House will want to hold me to account for that, but I am confident that the changes I am committed to making will put in place, and the transparency that will go with them, will deliver the changes that are expected.
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): May I ask the Home Secretary bears in mind the views of my constituents, who have praised the compassion that she has expressed on behalf of the Windrush generation, but also said that they would like a continued focus on the removal of illegal migrants who take advantage, unfairly, of all law-abiding taxpayers?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Although I do not in any way minimise the serious nature of what took place with the Windrush group, I agree with him that in the vast majority of cases and situations, my office and UK Visas and Immigration do an excellent job, and I am proud of the work that they do.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is clear that the extreme pressure that is put on local teams is coming from the central target to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands, and to include international students in that target. Is now not the time to rethink that central approach to immigration, and to make sure we focus the pressure where it needs to be focused, not on things that are unrealistic?

Amber Rudd: The targets that were apparently being looked at were for illegal migrants, so I think it is wholly different. There may be a time for a discussion about legal migration, but at the moment I think it is right that our focus is on illegal migration to make sure that it is handled in a fair, compassionate and transparent way.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Yet again, the Opposition are playing politics with people’s lives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is morally wrong to confuse illegal immigration with that of the Windrush generation?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the strong difference between legal and illegal migration. If Opposition Members looked back at their own former Home Secretaries, they would find some very strong language and some clear targets on removing illegals from this country.

Mr Speaker: Single-sentence inquiries without semicolons or subordinate clauses, please.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I will do my best to delight, Mr Speaker. Many highland families have faced deportation or have been deported because of the highly technical rules, or even because of rule changes during compliance. Does the Secretary of State agree that this aggressive targeting is ripping the heart out of highland communities?

Amber Rudd: I have resolved to put in place a more personal system for when applicants go to UKVI, and I think and hope that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will, in due course, notice a difference.

Mr Speaker: Brevity personified, Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is not fair, Mr Speaker. You set me up to fail and I always do. This is a serious issue. Does my right hon. Friend agree that part of Labour’s dreadful legacy was an obsession with targets? As an excellent new broom, will she assure us that she will search in every nook and cranny, and ensure that immigrants, migrants, are seen as people and not numbers?

Amber Rudd: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend’s approach, and I do not want us to be run by a target culture. I want to ensure that the individual is put at the heart of every decision.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Burden, who in my experience is also brevity personified.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will do my best. Is not the problem that a culture of tunnel-vision suspicion has been encouraged in the Home Office? Only last week in my constituency, that culture led officials to attempt to remove a man who had come to this country legally on a multi-entry visa, to be with his wife who had just been through a difficult pregnancy and termination. He had booked a return ticket to Jamaica, but officials said that he had “undermined his position” because he said that he wanted to spend as much time with his wife as he was legally able to do. Is not there something wrong with that kind of mindset?

Amber Rudd: I hope the hon. Gentleman was able to resolve the situation for his constituent. I have had nothing but praise from MPs about the MPs, hotline, which works well for people—[Interruption.] Clearly there are a few exceptions on the SNP Benches, but most colleagues across the House have said that it works well, and I hope it was able to be of assistance.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Illegal immigration is wrong because it creates unfairness for legal migrants, like the Windrush generation, who do the right thing and play by the rules. Is it not vital to keep that distinction and not allow the Labour party cynically to conflate the two issues for political purposes?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right: it is a completely different situation. Everybody in the House wants to welcome the Windrush cohort and ensure that they are properly looked after and that a compensation scheme is put in place, which is the right thing to do, but we all have a different view about illegal migrants.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This week the Home Secretary said that she was not aware of a number of policy initiatives. Who is running her Department?

Amber Rudd: I accept the criticism regarding the issue that I debated earlier today and my conversations with the Home Affairs Committee, and that is why I am in the House to set out the changes that I will make. I hope I will have the opportunity to make those changes clear to the House in future, and to continue to develop the confidence of everybody involved.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I am lucky to have constituents who have come to Leicestershire from all over the world, and they are inspirational people. Does the Home Secretary agree with them that it would not be fair to abolish the distinction between people like them who have done the right thing and obeyed all the rules, and those who have come to this country illegally?
Amber Rudd: That is a good point: people who have come here legally and who go through the rules and pay—sometimes quite a high cost—to become a member of our communities, are also those who do not want illegal migration to be treated trivially. That is why we are committed to taking a firm approach to illegal migration.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As reported by Faisal Islam yesterday, in 2013 the Foreign Office funded videos that promoted deportation to Jamaica, but it acknowledged that the challenge of resuming a life after an absence of 20 or 30 years can be daunting. Will the Home Secretary explain why Government Departments are pushing for deportations to countries such as Jamaica?

Amber Rudd: We are not pushing for that sort of event. [Interjection.] The hon. Gentleman may want to bring videos into the Chamber, but I am not aware, Mr Speaker, that we are allowed to play them in here yet.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My right hon. Friend is showing real steadfastness throughout this situation. Is she aware of the disquiet on doorsteps in Solihull about illegals accessing services? All sensible countries have a balanced approach to immigration, including removal when necessary.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment, and he is right. His constituents, like mine, will want to make sure that services available from the DWP, such as benefits, are not made available to illegals. Labour of course supported that approach when they were in office some years ago, and this Government have continued to build on that.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Home Office decides who is legal and who is illegal in these cases. I have seen deported—or threatened with deportation—a man with scars on his back from whipping; somebody who was terminally ill and later died; and somebody whose dead children are buried in my constituency. All those people have been classed as illegal by the Home Office. Surely they should not be removed.

Amber Rudd: All those cases sound very difficult, but I cannot make immigration comments on the Floor of the House. I am very happy if the hon. Lady wants to talk to me or send me details of individual cases; I will make sure that we look at them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for being completely focused on getting help to real people who need and deserve it. Can she reassure my constituent that the compensation scheme will be designed in full consultation with those people who deserve compensation?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. We need to make sure that the compensation scheme addresses the actual needs of people who have lost out by not having their proper documentation put in place by successive Governments. That is why I am committed to having a consultation on the scheme and making sure that it is run independently.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary please commit to Home Office officials playing by the rules as well, and look into the case of the partner of my constituent Kelly, who was deported back to Jamaica last week with no notice, when his appeal had still not been decided? His partner is due to give birth in four weeks’ time.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that case with me. The Minister for Immigration is sitting beside me; I know she will want to discuss that case with the hon. Lady.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The independent inspector’s report in 2015 reported: “The Family Returns Process’s target for the financial year 2014/15 was 252 returns”—including both voluntary returns and required returns. Is or is not that a target? Did the Home Secretary or her predecessor know about it? Is it still in place or not?

Amber Rudd: We made changes in 2010 that were specifically to support families and children who might be at risk of being removed. For instance, we banned some changes in 2010 and going forward, which really were trying to assist families and children, rather than the opposite.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the Home Secretary consider the Chagos islanders, who are in the UK because they were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands by the British state, to be illegal migrants? Do any attempts to remove them count towards these targets?

Amber Rudd: I know the Chagos islands have a specific situation. I also know that my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) will be bringing his British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill to the Chamber soon and I look forward to hearing the arguments on it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Even if they avoid final deportation, the experience of being arrested and being detailed indefinitely without trial is a humiliating and degrading experience for any innocent person. Can the Home Secretary tell us how many innocent, legally here, people have been subjected to unlawful arrest and detention, thanks to these targets?

Amber Rudd: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman’s question. The real issue here, which started with how the Windrush generation have been treated, is one that I am looking at very seriously, because I believe that they were incorrectly identified, in some cases, as illegal, when of course, as we all know, they are here legally. That is the case load that I am going through at the moment. We have gone through 8,000 out of 9,000, back to 2002, and we have not yet found anybody who meets that threshold.
Business of the House

11.3 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Would the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 30 April will be as follows:

Monday 30 April—Remaining stages of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill followed by debate on a motion on section 5 of the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993 followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 1 May—Remaining stages of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill [Lords] followed by a motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Bill.

Wednesday 2 May—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on Windrush on an Opposition motion.

Thursday 3 May—A general debate on matters to be considered before the May adjournment. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 4 May—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 May will include:

Monday 7 May—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 8 May—Remaining stages of theSecure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill [Lords] followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Nuclear Safeguards Bill followed by a motion relating to a statutory instrument on criminal legal aid.

I am the 336th woman to be elected to the UK Parliament ever. To put that into perspective, there are 442 male MPs in Parliament today, so for all the great women in this place and around the country, the unveiling of the new permanent memorial to Millicent Fawcett was a superb moment, celebrating her achievements and all those of the suffrage movement.

As we mark the 100th anniversary of some women getting the vote, I look forward to the many occasions there are to recognise the valuable contribution that women make to public life. In particular, I recommend that all Members take part in the excellent initiative by Parliament’s education and engagement team for a series of “EqualiTeas” in our constituencies, where schools, girl guides, the women’s institute and many others will be hosting celebratory tea parties.

This week we have had the joyful news of a new royal baby, and the House has sent its warmest congratulations to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

Finally, I take this opportunity to wish the House a belated happy St George’s day for last Monday.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the shadow Leader of the House, I must emphasise to colleagues that it may not be possible to call everybody today. The Government have put two statements on the agenda before we even get to Back-Bench business, so what is needed is a short question each time and a short reply. I will have to judge when to move on to the next business, because it is Back-Bench business day, not a day for just lobbing statements on to the Order Paper which could have been made at some other time.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business and support her in sending our congratulations to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge on the safe delivery of their son on St George’s day. And yes, women are very important—we hold up half the sky.

I asked the Leader of the House about allocating time for nurses’ bursaries. Will she allocate time for a debate on that? I thank for her finally allocating time for a debate on the Criminal Legal Aid (Remuneration) (Amendment) Regulations 2018—a matter that was raised as a point of order by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon). I am sure that the Leader of the House will have heard your words, Mr Speaker, when my hon. Friend did that. You said that it was “a regrettable state of affairs” and “in terms of the smooth running of the House” does not help to build an “atmosphere of trust”.—[Official Report, 23 April 2018; Vol. 644, c. 639.]

The changes to the legal aid fees have triggered the barristers’ boycott of new legal aid work. Lawyers are being asked to peruse documents and are not being paid for it. That is part of the evidence bundle. Bizarrely, the Lord Chancellor on Tuesday at Justice questions said that the Government are waiting for information from the Labour party. I am not sure whether he meant that they are waiting for a Labour Government, so that we could then revoke the statutory instrument.

I want to ask the Leader of the House about another small House issue: is it possible to have email alerts for statutory instruments that are published on Fridays? Our hard-working staff have to trawl through all the statutory instruments to see the new ones. They get an email alert for statements, so could we have that for SIs?

The Prime Minister said on the steps of No. 10: “We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives”, but that does not seem to apply to the Windrush generation. Amelia Gentleman, a journalist for The Guardian, publicised in November 2017 the case of Paulette Wilson, who used to cook for us in the House of Commons. She had been here for more than 50 years and was taken to Yarl’s Wood and was about to be deported. Although it was grand having the Home Secretary making her statement in the House, it raised more questions than answers. The Home Office should know who is in detention and must know why they are there.

When will the Government produce these figures? Why are they now waiving the citizenship fee for anyone in the Windrush generation who wishes to apply for citizenship when they are British citizens and do not need to apply, as the Prime Minister repeated over and over again yesterday? Why are the Government saying that they will waive the requirement for them to carry out a test on knowledge of language and life in the UK,
when most of the Windrush generation have lived here for years—some for over 50 years—and they speak English? The Government do know how many people are affected, because the Home Office has written to tell them that they have to leave. May we have a further statement updating the House on all the figures, and on whether the Cabinet Secretary should conduct an inquiry into the Department? What sort of Government throw a net using unassessed policy, rhetoric and ads to catch people who are here legally along with those who are here illegally? What sort of Government throw a net that catches the innocent with the guilty?

But there is more chaos in the Government. In the autumn Budget, the Chancellor promised that councils would be compensated for losses incurred as a result of changes to the “staircase tax”. Days later, a letter was written to council finance officers stating that the Government would not be compensating local authorities for any loss of income caused by the reversal of the tax. On Monday, legislation overturned the tax. May we have a statement on why the Government have U-turned, and are not honouring the expenditure that was committed by the Chancellor?

More chaos: the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has finally visited the Irish border, but he broke parliamentary protocol by failing to tell the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mickey Brady). He said that it was “an administrative oversight for which we are happy to apologise.” Despite his being a prominent member of the leave campaign, that was his first visit.

More chaos: EU negotiators have said that backstop plans to prevent a hard border in Ireland after Brexit will not work. The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has described the Prime Minister’s plan for a “customs partnership” as “completely cretinous”, and “a betrayal of common sense”. Had he said that here, Mr Speaker, you would have been on your feet telling him that it was unparliamentary language.

Will the Leader of the House urge the Prime Minister to visit the border, and has she had a chance to work out when the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will come here from the other place?

I join the Leader of the House in her congratulatory remarks about firsts for women. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) has been elected Welsh Labour deputy leader, in Labour Wales, and I too was delighted to attend the unveiling of the statue of the suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett in Parliament Square—the first statue of a woman erected there—by another woman, Gillian Wearing. That was excellent, and we should thank Caroline Criado Perez and the Mayor of London for this important work of public art.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on her new appointment. That is fantastic news. It is excellent to hear of yet more achievements by women.

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments, and asked specifically about the Criminal Legal Aid (Remuneration) (Amendment) Regulations 2018. Let me gently say to her that the Opposition were perhaps a little tardy in making their request for a debate; having prayed against the SI one month after it was laid, they then raised it during Business Questions for the first time on 29 March. By that stage it was already too late to schedule a debate within the praying period without changing last week’s business through an emergency business statement. We have now provided time for a debate as soon as possible, but on that occasion the Opposition’s request was not really a reasonable request with which the Government were able to comply. Let me also point out to Members that in the current Session the Government have already scheduled more negative statutory instruments for debate on the Floor of the House than have been scheduled in any previous Session since 1997. I assure the hon. Lady that we are working very hard to try to deliver on our obligations in this regard. She also asked for email alerts about statutory instruments, and I will of course look into that on her behalf.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of Windrush. As I have said, it is a very serious and very regrettable unintended consequence of the intentions of many Governments over many years to try to limit and restrict illegal immigration. The Windrush generation are absolutely British, and it is absolutely the intention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has said, this was an administrative oversight for which he has apologised.

The hon. Lady asked when the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will come back to this place. I had the pleasure of visiting the other place to sit at the steps of the throne and hear the opening of Report stage. They are very interesting debates and take some time. The Bill is due to be back in this place in the next few weeks; the precise date will be announced through the usual channels.

Finally, I join the hon. Lady in congratulating all those involved in the work to unveil the fabulous statue of Millicent Fawcett.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the National Fund, which was established in 1927 by an anonymous donor? If a debate is held, I think the House would be pleased to learn when the money will be released and what it will be spent on.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point, about which I was not aware. The Attorney General’s office is working with the Charity Commission and the fund’s trustees to help resolve what is a legally very complicated matter. My hon. Friend might like to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate to receive an update directly from Ministers.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing this debate for next week and associate myself with all the remarks about suffrage and the raising of the statue of Millicent Fawcett?

Today is World Intellectual Property Day and I will have the great pleasure of hosting the annual parliamentary event to celebrate our inventors, creators and artists. Let us continue to grow our economy on the imagination of our people.

Are the Government going to come out to play in today’s debate on the customs union, or are they going to continue to contemptuously refuse to vote on non-Government business? I say to the Leader of the House that there is no running away from this issue. It will have to be confronted by this Government and it looks like they do not have a majority. All of the business community are saying that they want “a” or “the” customs union, yet the Government are in thrall to the Brexit nutters on their Back Benches, who still hold sway over them. Will the Leader of the House confirm that, if the Government are defeated, the will of the House will be respected?

This has been a black week for devolution. The will of the Scottish Parliament on large swathes of devolved areas is to be totally ignored, and last night we learned that even if we withhold our consent in the Scottish Parliament, it will be considered as consent anyway. No self-respecting Scottish parliamentarian worth his or her salt could sign up to that. There is still time, however, so will the Leader of the House say that nothing will be finally decided until Third Reading in the House of Lords, when this can, I hope, be resolved?

Lastly, the farce of English votes for English laws continues to profoundly embarrass this House. The only thing it seems to be good for nowadays is to give a bit of exercise to the Serjeant at Arms when he lowers then raises the Mace. There is no opportunity to speak on English votes for English laws. It is Dave’s daft legacy to this House—a stupid sop for an English voice that has never been raised. It has not worked and it shames this House. I say to the Leader of the House that enough is enough: get rid of this nonsensical process.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in celebrating World Intellectual Property Day. He talked about the imagination of our people, and I certainly celebrate that: we are the most extraordinarily creative four nations, and we can be very proud of that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about today’s debate. As always, the Government will fully take part. My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will lead on it and it will certainly be very interesting to hear views from right across the House, which always inform policy and help us to form conclusions as to what should be our approach.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the devolution settlement and the EU withdrawal Bill. Through the amendments to clause 11 the Government are seeking to devolve as many powers as possible to the devolved nations while ensuring that we keep the integrity of the UK internal market, which is worth almost £46 billion to the Scottish economy, approximately four times more than the value of exports to the European Union.

Finally, I genuinely do not understand why the hon. Gentleman keeps talking about English votes for English laws being a waste of time and a travesty. The point is to ensure that those matters that affect only English or English and Welsh voters and residents are voted on only by English and Welsh Members of Parliament. That is fair.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we have a statement next week to explain why single-lens reflex cameras have been forbidden in Westminster Hall?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. I shall have to look into it and come back to him.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Despite the fact that the Backbench Business Committee has a number of unheard debates on the stocks, it has been difficult to cajole hon. Members to air their debates on Thursday 3 May. There must be something happening outside in the country on that day, although I am not quite sure what it might be. It therefore falls to us to have a general debate on matters to be raised before the May Day Adjournment. I thank the Leader of the House for giving us that time on 3 May, but I hope that that will not prevent us from getting more time during that month for other debates to be aired. May we also have a debate or a statement in Government time on the strategy to upskill the population and workforce of this country? There has recently been a significant drop in the number of people being recruited into apprenticeships, and that coincides with the number of students doing degrees with the Open University falling by 74,000 between 2012 and the present day. What is going wrong with our strategy to upskill our population to meet the demands of the new technological age?

Andrea Leadsom: We always seek to give as much Back-Bench time as we can, because the hon. Gentleman has some very important debates going on and we seek to support them wherever possible. He also raised the issue of upskilling, and I can tell him that we have committed to reaching 3 million new apprenticeship starts in England by 2020, and that there are more than 1.2 million starts already. So we are in a good place and we seek to do more. With the new apprenticeship levy, we expect to see many more taken up in due course. We have also abolished the cap on student numbers in further and higher education, and record numbers—particularly of disadvantaged young people—are now going to university. I do not think we should be concerned about a failure to upskill our young people; on the contrary, there is an enormous improvement going on that we should all be proud of.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The town of Montrose in my constituency is suffering from the impact of coastal erosion. The world-class golf course there is eroding hole by hole, and if the erosion continues at this pace, the town will be at risk of flooding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should debate the impact of coastal erosion on our communities in the United Kingdom and discuss what we can do to alleviate it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to stress the importance of our coastal communities and the impact of coastal erosion. I am aware of the problems
at Montrose golf club in her constituency, and of its request for help. She will recognise that this is a devolved matter, but in England we have committed nearly £1 billion to support defences against erosion and coastal flooding. She might want to seek an Adjournment debate, which might be answered by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who is a fellow coastal constituency Member as well as being an Environment Minister.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House knows how precious business questions are to genuine Back Benchers. Will she try to do a little more to prevent us from being squeezed by so many statements on a Thursday? Also, may we have an early debate on the fact that three former Health Ministers have called for £50 billion more investment in the NHS? Many local hospitals, including mine in Huddersfield, are facing closure, and we are fighting that hard in the constituency. May we have an early debate on the closure of hospitals?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to see the hon. Gentleman in his place at business questions. We do have some good discussions here, and I am not sure that we ever really lose out. There are some good issues raised. I can tell him that the NHS now has over £14 billion more to spend on caring for people than it did in 2010. He will be aware that new plans will be brought forward for a long-term plan for the NHS, which is absolutely vital for the success of its future. Nevertheless, we are doing more, and there are almost 40,400 more clinical staff looking after patients now than there were in 2010.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): My constituent Pamela Corbett is extremely poorly—how can I put it; time is of the essence—but power of attorney would not be appropriate in her case, which is not unusual. However, TSB has frozen her bank account, which has caused her and her daughters considerable distress. May we have a debate on how we can ensure that banks see the human being—the person—in such cases instead of having some over-bureaucratic process?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am aware that TSB’s chief executive was on the radio this morning to apologise for the awful service that customers have received over the past week and that he pledged to sort it out. My right hon. Friend is right that there are times when personal intervention is necessary to ensure that constituents can access their money, and I encourage her to seek a debate on the subject.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Acquired Brain Injury Week is coming up in a few weeks’ time, so may we have a debate on the condition in Government time, because it is a hidden epidemic that affects hundreds of thousands of families every year? It is not just about health; it is about the criminal justice system, the education system, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Defence. The Leader of the House is so nice, so will she—[Interruption.] Well, she supports my private Member’s Bill. Will she please ensure that we can have a debate in Acquired Brain Injury Week?

Andrea Leadsom: Flattery gets you everywhere. I will, of course, be delighted to see what can be done, but I also encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Backbench Business debate, because he raises an important issue, as he has several times. I have a constituent who is in a permanent vegetative state as a result of being attacked and hitting his head. He is a relatively young man and the situation is absolutely appalling, so I am extremely sympathetic towards what the hon. Gentleman says.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): A significant amount of construction has occurred in Colindale in my constituency over the past decade. While residential properties are welcome, many of the people who bought these leasehold properties now find themselves subject to crippling service and management charges. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to say what the Government can do to control the situation, as they have done for ground rent?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises another important matter. Service charges must be fair and transparent, and there must be a clear route to redress when things go wrong. Consumers should be paying only for the services that they receive. I can tell him that we are establishing a working group on regulating letting and management agents with a remit to look into unfair fees and charges, and to set minimum standards for service charges through a statutory code of practice.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): When will we have the promised debate on the Government’s serious violence strategy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly serious point, as she often does, about the rise in certain types of crime, particularly knife crime. As I have said, I am talking with other business managers about whether we can find time for a debate, and there is a lot of sympathy towards that. The legislative agenda is busy, but she is absolutely right to raise the issue, which is of great concern, and we will seek to provide that time.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): My constituent Sharon Hollman went through the devastating consequences of the suicide of her teenage son. It appears that safeguarding procedures were not followed by Kent County Council, so may I call for a debate about the safeguarding procedures that schools should have in place to ensure that children suffering from mental health difficulties get the support they need?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue. Everyone in the House is worried about young people’s mental health and the action being taken to support young people. My hon. Friend will be aware of the Government’s Green Paper on mental health in schools. We are bringing forward measures to improve support and training for schoolteachers, peer support, and child and adolescent mental health services, to try to address this appalling problem.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen early-day motion 1115, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and refers to Firefighters’ Memorial Day on 4 May?
[John Cryer]

[That this House joins with firefighters across the UK on Firefighters’ Memorial Day; on 4 May 2018, remembering the bravery and sacrifice of the 2,524 colleagues who have lost their life in the line of duty: extends its sympathies, especially on this memorial day, to all the bereaved families of fallen firefighters; acknowledges the good work of the Firefighters’ Memorial Trust in remembering and honouring all firefighters who have lost their life while serving humanity and recording their names on The Firefighters’ Memorial located close to St Paul’s Cathedral in London; applauds the commitment and selfless dedication of all UK firefighters who stand ready today and every day to risk their life to save others and protect their local communities from the consequences of fire, floods, terror attacks and numerous other emergency situations; and calls on Members of both Houses to join members of the Firefighters’ Memorial Trust and the Fire Brigades Union at the Firefighters’ Memorial, St Paul’s or to stand with firefighters at their nearest fire station to observe the minute silence at midday on 4 May 2018.]

Given the cuts to the fire service that are now biting deep in my area, where fire cover has been cut by 50%, may we have a debate on the fire service?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the amazing work done by all firefighters—they really do make our lives so much safer and their prevention work is vital. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, luckily and fortunately, due to much greater fire prevention measures, the incidence of fire has dropped quite dramatically in recent years. Nevertheless, he is right to raise the issue of Firefighters’ Memorial Day and the importance of a debate on this matter. I suggest that he seeks an Adjournment debate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): May we have a debate on energy security? The southern gas pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey, and then on to Greece and Italy, is shortly about to open and is a direct threat to the Russian monopoly of supply to Europe. May we therefore have a debate in Government time so we can debate the issues, and make sure that this gas pipeline is secure and operated by BP, a wonderful British company?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday. He raises an important point about energy security and I am pleased to say that gas security in the UK is strong. Nevertheless, the creation of new gas pipelines, and in particular the gas security of those in eastern Europe, is important. I encourage him to take this up at oral questions on 1 May.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): MPs from all parties have signed my letter about plastics pollution. Does the Leader of the House agree that now is a good time to have a debate in Government time on the action being taken across all industrial sectors, not just by supermarkets?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has been able to attract cross-party support. She will be aware that all hon. and right hon. Members are keen to see everything being done to reduce the amount of plastics in our environment. The 5p plastic bag charge that the Government introduced has reduced the incidence of plastic bags by around 9 billion. We have also created the blue belt around our overseas territories to protect our valuable marine areas. Many more measures are under way, and there will certainly be plenty of opportunities to discuss our plans to be the first generation to leave our environment in a better state than we found it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): On Saturday, I will be in Immingham to attend a ceremony to mark Workers Memorial Day. Three events in north-east Lincolnshire are being organised by my constituent Herbert Styles, who does a tremendous job. Mr Styles was delighted when the day was officially recognised, but he would like it to receive more publicity. Will the Government look at putting more details on websites and the like? Perhaps publishers would then follow suit in diaries and so on. Will the Leader of the House consult other Departments and bring forward a statement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for his constituency. I commend his constituent, Herbert Styles, for the work he has done in organising these events in north-east Lincolnshire. The Government do recognise Workers Memorial Day, which is a poignant reminder of why it is vital to manage workplace health and safety risks. I am happy to promote it in any way that I can, and people will be delighted to hear my hon. Friend raising Workers Memorial Day in this House. Many people will have been listening to him.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Pontypool rugby club on its stunning achievement of going through an entire league season unbeaten? May we have a debate on the contribution that local rugby clubs make to our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: Now we are talking! Rugby is a much better sport than some others that get raised in this place. I only wish that Northampton Saints, my own club, could boast the same proud record. Of course I am delighted to congratulate Pontypool rugby club. Rugby is a fantastic sport. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate, and I would be delighted to take part in it.

Mr Speaker: I think I get the hint.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My constituent Sarbast Hussain was told last year that his application to renew his British passport had been refused. Having fled Saddam’s Iraq before working for the Home Office for 15 years as an interpreter, he has now lost his business, his family are being split up and he is being treated like a criminal. May we have a debate in Government time on the waste of Home Office resource and how this injustice might be addressed?

Andrea Leadsom: I am truly sorry to hear about the case that the hon. Lady raises. Members on both sides of the House often raise individual cases, and it is very valuable for our constituents that we are able to take up cases in which the rules have not been applied properly or when further information must be gleaned. I encourage the hon. Lady to take this up directly with Home Office Ministers or, if she would prefer to write to me, I can take it up with them on her behalf.
Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): New data released by the Trussell Trust this week shows that emergency food bank usage has increased by an average of 52% in areas of full universal credit roll-out. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time so that we can prevent the roll-out from inflicting even more suffering on our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the work of food banks. The volunteers and those who donate to them do a fantastic job. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that food banks should not be necessary, but they have been a feature of our communities for a long time. All hon. Members must agree that, in terms of giving people an incentive to get into work and providing continued income once they do so, universal credit offers a valuable change to our benefits and the safety net for people who are looking for work. It has also had the impact of encouraging more people to look for work and find work. The Government continue to listen to ways in which we can improve the roll-out of universal credit, which is being done very slowly so that all lessons can be taken into account.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My constituent will reach state pension age in 2021, but she has only three years of contributions and thus will not qualify for any pension. That is because she spent her working years with her husband, a warden on a remote island with simply no employment opportunities, while jointly contributing to the married couple's pension. May I request a debate on pension provision and people such as my constituent whose circumstances are exceptional?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important and worrying constituency case. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate in which she can raise it directly with Ministers. Alternatively, she can simply write to them—via me, or directly—and seek their answer regarding this very particular exceptional case.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The debate on the Royal Bank of Scotland, latterly in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), has twice been cancelled due to pressure on Government business. Will the Leader of the House rearrange the debate as a matter of urgency with the Backbench Business Committee so that constituents such as Clive May, who has real grievances about the way in which he was treated by RBS, can get justice?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said before in the House, I am very sorry that that very important debate has had to be cancelled not once but twice due to unforeseen circumstances. I am very keen to see it rescheduled, and I am working with business managers to ensure that the Backbench Business Committee has the time to reschedule it.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on community transport? Badenoch and Strathspey community transport group is extremely concerned about proposals for new rules on operating permits. The Transport Committee has already warned of a devastating effect on the sector and communities.
Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady for pausing for breath in the middle of her lengthy sentence and join her in congratulating that organisation. That sounds like a fantastic concept. Much more of that should be done around the country, and I am absolutely sure that she will find a way to continue to raise it in this place.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware of concerns about Government cuts to bereavement support payments, which will force many widows and widowers to increase their working hours at the same time as they are trying to cope with the loss of a partner and their children are trying to cope with the loss of a parent. Does she agree that this is an issue on which the House should have further debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that we need to do everything that we can to support bereaved families while balancing the need to provide good value for the taxpayer, who has to foot the bill for benefits. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment so that she can raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): This week it was announced that Plymouth Studio School will close. Parents have raised concerns about not receiving enough evidence and not being consulted, so may we have a debate on Plymouth Studio School’s closure before Ministers sign off the closure order?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the matter in this House. I encourage him to seek an urgent Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was very concerned to hear the Home Secretary say that MPs across the House have been overwhelmingly positive about the UK Visas and Immigration hotline service. Given that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) have tabled written questions about it, and that my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has written to the Minister for Immigration to set out our concerns about the service, will the Leader of the House ensure that the Home Secretary comes back to the House and explains in an oral statement what she meant?

Andrea Leadsom: My experience as a constituency Member is that the MPs’ hotline for UKVI is very efficient and effective, but if hon. Members have problems with it, they should raise them with the Home Office. There will be plenty of opportunities, including in next week’s Opposition day debate, to speak to Home Office Ministers directly.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I welcome the long-overdue pay awards for NHS staff, but may we have an urgent debate on the effect of the proposed NHS pay increases on voluntary sector hospices?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is glad that more than a million NHS workers will benefit from the new pay deal. Of course, we are all incredibly grateful for the amazing work done by the hospice movement, and if she has specific concerns about the relative pay scales, she might want to raise them directly at Health questions on 8 May.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2015, City of York Council has built zero social housing and commissioned zero social housing, so may we have a debate about disaggregating social housing from affordable housing?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very concerning local constituency point, but on the bigger point about affordable housing and social housing, she will be aware that affordable housing is roughly 80% of the normal market cost and social housing roughly 40%. That is the differentiation, but she may seek to raise the matter at oral questions or seek an Adjournment debate to clarify the distinction directly with Ministers.

Mr Speaker: I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I knew you would not forget about me.

Right now, in Glasgow, people are injecting heroin on waste ground and in dirty back lanes and bin shelters. My ten-minute rule Bill, which would amend the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to allow for supervised drug consumption facilities, is published today. The proposal is backed by Glasgow City Council and a majority of Members of the Scottish Parliament. May we have a debate in Government time about treating drug misuse as a public health issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady, as she often does, raises a very important issue about drug misuse. She is right to raise it and I congratulate her on bringing forward her private Member’s Bill. Nevertheless, she will appreciate that if she wishes to seek a debate further to that which she will have on her Bill, she should probably apply for an Adjournment debate or raise the matter directly with Ministers.
The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement today in response to the Government’s publication of the sector deal for artificial intelligence—a major collaboration with industry to secure the UK’s global leadership in AI and data.

AI holds transformative potential for every aspect of our lives—from how we travel to how we work and live—and for every sector of the economy. For the UK, the prize is clear: potentially adding 10% to our GDP by 2030 if adoption is widespread, with a productivity boost of up to 30%. In pursuing that prize, we start with strong foundations. The UK was recently ranked first among OECD countries in the Oxford Insights Government AI readiness index and is home already to globally recognised AI companies, including DeepMind, Swiftkey and Babylon Health. This success is supported by the UK’s strong combination of world-leading universities that drive skills and research and development, a thriving venture capital market for AI that leads among economies of comparable scale and trusted universal public institutions such as our NHS that can pioneer data-driven innovation and connect the power of AI to the public good.

The sector deal that we have published today on gov.uk outlines how we are intending to build on those foundations and on the independent review led by Professor Dame Wendy Hall and Jérôme Pesenti, reflecting that review’s spirit of partnership and consultation between the Government, industry and academia. In skills, we have made it the UK’s ambition to be home to the world’s best and brightest minds in AI. We will support the Alan Turing Institute’s plans for expansion to become the national academic institute for AI and data science.

We will create 200 additional PhDs in AI and related disciplines by 2021, rising to 1,000 Government-backed PhD places at any one time by 2025. We have set a target of 200 places for an industry-funded AI master’s programme and we will introduce an internationally competitive Turing fellowship programme in AI. We are also doubling tier 1 exceptional talent visas to 2,000 a year to attract the brightest minds to the UK. In infrastructure, we will ensure that the ambition of our AI sector is matched by the means of delivery in communications, in data and in supercomputer capacity.

In telecoms, we are investing more than £1 billion to create a country with world-class digital capabilities from 5G mobile networks to full-fibre broadband. In supercomputer capacity, we are pleased to announce that, as part of the sector deal, the University of Cambridge will make the UK’s fastest academic supercomputer, capable of solving the largest scientific and industrial challenges at speed, available to AI technology companies. This complements Government support for start-ups’ access to hardware via the Digital Catapult’s machine intelligence garage and builds on Cambridge’s existing track record as a hub for AI and technology.

We are also investing in data, because data is infrastructure; just as roads help us to reach a destination, data helps us to reach a decision. For AI systems, data is the experience that they learn from to be able to process information and interact usefully with the world and its citizens. This Government have always valued the economic benefits of pioneers having access to high-quality public datasets, but some of the most useful datasets for AI are those that organisations are reluctant to share with others, perhaps because they have commercial value. The world’s first centre for data ethics and innovation will therefore work to unlock the usefulness of that data, while protecting its value for those organisations and, most importantly, keeping people’s data secure. We want AI-led growth to be both empowering and inclusive, and that applies to our approach to data. This also informs our commitment that the benefits of AI should be felt across the whole country.

The sector deal makes a commitment to establish clusters and regional tech hubs designed to power AI growth across the entire country. We will invest £21 million in Tech City UK over four years so that it can expand into Tech Nation, thus transforming the UK from a series of stand-alone tech hubs into a powerful network that can place the nation firmly at the top of the global tech rankings. The new Tech Nation’s AI programme will operate in two or three key clusters where there is existing AI expertise and a potential to provide the mentoring, growth and support that is needed for ambitious AI businesses to thrive.

Industry shares our ambition to link promising AI clusters into a powerful network of high-growth AI businesses, and the sector deal confirms that. For instance, Barclays is launching the bank’s first Scottish Eagle Lab in Edinburgh, in a new partnership with the UK’s largest tech incubator CodeBase, to help AI businesses go from start-up to scale-up.

Taken together, these measures send a signal to AI business, science and research communities around the world. The UK will attract talent, invest and lead on standards and ethics. That message is made clear by the investment of industry that, along with investment from the Government, forms a total package of almost £1 billion. That sits alongside the £250 million already allocated for connected and autonomous vehicles, and the £1.7 billion that has been announced for the cross-sectoral industrial strategy challenge fund thus far.

Our ambition in AI will not stop at this sector deal. This is only the start of UK plans to seize the opportunities of modern technology and to ensure that it follows the highest ethical standards. By so doing, we will ensure that we can build a Britain that is fit for the future. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Ordinarily, a shadow Minister is expected to take no more than half the length of time taken by the Minister, and they certainly should not exceed five minutes maximum. But I simply say to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) that it is not obligatory to take that full length of time, and he need not think that he is doing the House or the nation a gross disservice if he takes less time.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful for that guidance, Mr Speaker. It is always good to see the Minister in her place. She certainly knows how to pack the House with her statements. I am sorry that I am not able to respond to the detail of her statement, but it only came to me by email at 11.25 am, so I was not able to see it in advance. None the less, it is good of her to show up and present her plans, which were first presented to The Times, rather than to Parliament. It is welcome that the Government
have now decided to step into the breach where a policy should be. It is a shame that the Minister has allowed the French, the Americans, the South Koreans and the Chinese to get there first, but better late than never.

From what I can divine from what the Minister said to the House, no new money has been announced today. Rather, a top-down earmarked amount of cash has already been handed out to research councils. That is fine as far as it goes, but it is an awful long way short of the £1 billion of funding that President Macron has just announced to support artificial intelligence in France.

As the Minister knows, a strong AI sector in this country will be built on three basic foundations: good networks, which support the internet of things; trust, which supports big data; and skills, which require a great education system. Today, our science spend is, I am afraid, in the second league, our digital networks are lamentable, our framework of trust is hopelessly out of date—in fact, we still have no date for the Data Protection Bill returning to this House—and our skills base is alarmingly thin. Indeed, the Government prayed in aid Jérôme Pesenti in their strategy this morning, but he was told by the Government that he was not allowed to look at the maths curriculum, as he told the House of Lords Artificial Intelligence Committee when he was giving evidence to its inquiry. That is why we call for science spend not at 2.4% of GDP, but up at 3%. We think there should be universal provision of networks at 30 megabits per second, a Bill of digital rights to restore trust and a national education service to restore the skills base.

In the interests of brevity, Mr Speaker, I have some specific questions for the Minister. First, the sector plan makes great play of a £2.5 billion investment fund delivered by the British Business Bank. Is this just for A.I., or for innovation generally? Is it DEL—departmental expenditure limit—funding or loan guarantees? Is it intended to deliver grants or loans? When does that expenditure limit—funding or loan guarantees? Is it DEL—departmental expenditure limit? Is it, in other words, spin over substance?

Secondly, the Minister will know that artificial intelligence will accelerate the destruction of existing jobs, so when will we have a White Paper on the future of work? This will be a G20 agenda item in November. We have heard nothing about the Government’s plans to explore this and put in place adequate protections for workers today.

Thirdly, where is the strategy to harness Government procurement, with a cross-Whitehall futures unit, to use the power of Government to drive forward this agenda? That is the way that every other western, and eastern, nation drives its science and tech investment. Why are the Government not doing this?

This morning, the Bank of England published figures showing that this Government have presided over the worst productivity figures since the late 18th century. If we are to be masters of the fourth industrial revolution, as we were of the first, the Government will have to do an awful lot better than this.

Margot James: I apologise if the right hon. Gentleman received my statement such a short time ago. That was certainly not my intention. I shortened my statement in anticipation of Mr Speaker’s wish for brevity, and perhaps that delayed matters.

It is a shame that the right hon. Gentleman’s response was pretty overwhelmingly negative, given that we start from a good base in this country with our world-leading institutions and our state of the art. The Oxford Insights, which I mentioned in my statement, has put us at No. 1 across the world on its Government AI readiness index. He referred to other countries, predominantly in Asia, which are indeed investing hugely in this area.

He mentions Macron from a sedentary position; he also mentioned him in his response. We are of course delighted that President Macron is also seeing the potential for AI. There is nothing wrong with that. We are a global-facing country. It is great that our partners in Europe are also committing to this agenda.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of data and digital performance in this country. The UK is in a very competitive position in terms of digital performance. We now have 95% access to superfast broadband, which was delivered by the end of last year. Only yesterday, I was at a meeting with all the successful parts of the country that bid for the 5G test bed and pilot programme, which will put us in a pivotal position to take advantage of the internet of things. These test beds and pilots extend right across the country, from the Orkney Islands to the south-west of England, and a new wave of bids will be announced this summer. We are very determined on this front.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the British Business Bank. I can assure him that this is new money that will be provided to tech start-ups and tech scale-ups via both equity finance and loans. I remind him that as of September last year, the British Business Bank had supported, through a combination of loans and equity finance, very many tech companies to the tune of £350 million. We are building on success.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the future of work. This is an extremely important issue. Of course, we recognise that we are in for a fast ride here. The pace of technological change is such that momentous changes that are not always predictable can potentially displace groups of workers. We are very cognisant of the need to smooth the path through continuous training. The industrial strategy has at its heart improving the world of work and access to retraining throughout people’s lives, so that no one is left behind by these technological advances.

Finally, on that critical subject, the Government’s response to the Taylor review and the consultations that we announced at the beginning of the year will be out at some point this summer, and I am sure that the points raised by the right hon. Gentleman about the future of work in the context of technological advance will be taken extremely seriously.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I take questions on this statement, I should advise or rather remind the House that there is a further statement to follow, but that statement is not likely to absorb much time in the Chamber, not least on account of the 39 Back-Bench Members who wish to contribute to the principal debate of the day, on customs and borders. I would not want colleagues to be taken unaware, and therefore I am taking the unusual step of indicating that the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. and learned Member...
for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), together with the 39 Back Benchers who wish to speak in that important debate, should really as I speak be beeting across to the Chamber, because it would be most regrettable if they had not arrived for the start of the debate, which they so eagerly sought and of which I am myself in eager anticipation.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the Minister for her statement. I did not require artificial intelligence to establish DeepMind’s view on Brexit. When I googled “DeepMind” and “Brexit”, it came up immediately with the company’s concerns about the impact of Brexit. How will the Minister ensure that the IT innovation that currently flows around the European Union can continue post Brexit? How will she ensure that top-flight companies such as DeepMind can continue to attract EU citizens to work in that important sector? Finally, she will be aware that the EU investment fund for British start-ups, which was investing £500 million in 2016, has dropped to £53 million. Much of that money would have been spent on artificial intelligence. Is she confident that Government funds will be able to replace that?

Margot James: The right hon. Gentleman makes some very serious points. We are committed to making the UK a destination for global talent and equity finance and venture capital in the years to come, post Brexit. As he says, we already have companies that have invested substantially in the UK; he mentioned DeepMind, and we have many others. We have doubled the number of exceptional talent visas to 2,000, and we are offering scientists who have come to this country on tier I visas full settlement rights at three years. I mentioned in my response to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) that, post the EU investment in this country and AI, the Chancellor has announced substantial additional moneys available through the British Business Bank to replace over the long term EU funding that will be lost once we leave the EU.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. In Scotland, we believe that this should be the best place to live, work and do business. While we welcome this announcement, a number of questions have to be answered.

We welcome the investment by Barclays in the Edinburgh CodeBase hub, but we want to know what the Government are going to do that is new. As has been pointed out, there is no new money here, and the statement is short on detail and the level of ambition required. The Minister talked about making data secure for people, but are the Government talking seriously people’s right to own their own data in the future?

It is important that 5G is developed to take advantage of AI. Are the Government considering licensing spectrum and an outside-in approach, to make sure that the outlying parts of the nations of the UK, which normally get served last, have a fair shot at getting that connection early? In terms of the customs union, what work has been done to mitigate the negative effects of a hard Brexit on our ability to take advantage of AI trading? What work has been done on the effect on jobs, and does the Minister agree with the Scottish Trades Union Congress that workers should be collectively involved in how automation is introduced?

Finally, on the digital skills gap, what news is there of young people, particularly girls and young women, being encouraged into the sector, and how will we attract the brightest and the best, given the current immigration shambles, particularly the situation facing EU nationals? Will the Minister work with the Scottish Government to set positive targets on immigration, and what discussions has she had with the Scottish Government about these proposals?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I fail to address all his questions, for want of time, but I appreciate his positive response to the sector deal. On 5G, I take his point about the licensing of spectrum. The Department is undertaking a telecoms infrastructure review looking at, among other things, the way we license spectrum to make sure it is the most efficient at reaching all the areas currently underserved, including in many parts of Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman asks about jobs and the digital skills gap. We are addressing this through the sector deal and our wider industrial strategy—for example, by placing an emphasis on reskilling throughout people’s lives. He asks particularly about diversity and women. We have launched the tech challenge charter to engage businesses in both AI and the wider technology sectors and to encourage them to commit to looking closely at their recruitment, retention and progression policies to make sure that women and girls are supported throughout—and to publishing their data in a transparent manner.

I have not personally had discussions with the Scottish Government, but I am sure the Secretary of State has, and I look forward to working with them and Scottish colleagues across the House to make sure that Scotland gets its fair share of the benefits of the sector deal.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Artificial intelligence is coming—we cannot stand in its way—but we must enhance it to the benefit of workers in this country. In that regard, however, the statement was woefully inadequate. The companies developing AI are looking to cut their bottom lines by cutting the number of people they employ; driverless vehicles, aeroplanes with no pilots—the list is becoming endless. What will the Government do to come up with a strategy not just for the UK—the way the Minister put it sounded esoteric—but for people and jobs? We need an AI strategy that will benefit workers in this country.

Margot James: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that, just as there will undoubtedly be some job displacement as a result of technology, let alone AI, so new jobs will be created. We are looking at this. I mentioned the response to the Taylor review by colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who are looking at this. We are taking it extremely seriously and will come forth with more developments on our projections in due course, but be assured: new jobs will come and replace many of the more routine and repetitive jobs, and we will be upskilling people so that they can take advantage of these new opportunities.
Stamp Duty Land Tax

Mr Speaker: The Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Paymaster General wishes to make a statement on stamp duty land tax—a subject he has obviously decided is of intense and pressing interest to the House—but I feel sure that, with his usual sensitivity to the concerns of colleagues who wish to speak in the subsequent debate, he has no plans to expiate at length.

12.9 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the quarterly stamp duty land tax statistics published this morning.

As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, the Government announced at autumn Budget 2017 that we were introducing stamp duty relief for first-time buyers, unlocking invaluable support for first-home buyers up and down the country. The relief cuts stamp duty for first-time buyers who purchase a property for less than £500,000. Those who purchase a home for between £300,000 and £500,000 will save £5,000. The relief abolishes stamp duty for first-time buyers who purchase a property for £300,000 or less, and more than 80% of first-time buyers will not pay any stamp duty as a consequence. Although we want to help all buyers, the Government consider that it is fair to target the support where it is needed most. The Government therefore think it only right to reduce the up-front costs that cash-constrained first-time buyers need to pay, giving them much-needed support with their first purchase.

The quarterly stamp duty statistics published this morning reveal, for the first time, the tangible impact of them much-needed support with their first purchase.

The quarterly stamp duty statistics published this morning, reveal, for the first time, the tangible impact of the relief on Budget day on 22 November last year and the end of March between the coming into effect of the relief on Budget day on 22 November last year and the end of March 2018, a significant 69,000 first-time buyers benefited from it. That figure represents nearly 20% of all residential transactions, and it is broadly in line with the official estimate at autumn Budget 2017.

Over the next five years, the relief is projected to help more than 1 million first-time buyers to get on to the housing ladder. It is part of a broader housing package announced by the Government at autumn Budget last year—an ambitious package of new policies designed to tackle the housing challenge—that consists of wide-ranging planning reform, additional spending and a new agency, Homes England, to work more effectively with the housing market.

Although we are firmly on track to raise annual housing supply to its highest level since the 1970s, we are aware that housing is a complex issue and that there is no single solution to the challenge. We know, for example, that we need to support the private sector and local authorities to convert planning permissions into homes built. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing are working closely together to ensure that that happens. Government will be working with 44 local authorities that have bid into the £4.1 billion housing infrastructure fund to unlock homes in areas of high demand.

We are going further; over the next five years we have committed at least £44 billion of capital funding, loans and guarantees to support the housing market. We will more than double the size of the housing growth partnership with Lloyds banking group to £220 million, to help to provide 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. That will take total affordable housing delivery in London to more than 116,000 by the end of 2021-22.

Housing stock is on track to be higher than ever before during the upcoming decade, and the Government are committed to supporting those people who aspire to make their dream of home ownership a reality sooner rather than later. That is why measures such as the stamp duty relief for first-time buyers are so important. More than 95% of first-time buyers paying stamp duty will benefit from the relief.

The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone in this country can afford to buy a home if they choose to do so, and the Government have taken steps to make home ownership a reality for many more people. Targeted policies such as the first home buyers stamp duty relief are supported by other robust, ambitious and groundbreaking reforms to housing policy in the United Kingdom. Together, they will transform new home creation for years to come.

12.13 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Government appear to have arranged to give this statement so that they can pat themselves on the back, while reducing the amount of time spent on customs union with the EU. I appreciate that that issue may be controversial—albeit only for the Government; every other actor seems to feel that some kind of customs union is a good idea—but that should not prevent democracy from running its course on the matter. The Government’s cunning plan to introduce the statement today has spectacularly backfired, because rather than offering an opportunity for congratulation and digression, it has merely provided a chance to indicate the Government’s failure to deal with the housing crisis.

The Government have said—we heard it again just now—that their stamp duty cut is intended to back home ownership, but home ownership has fallen to a 30-year low under this Government. They say that the cut was intended to help first-time buyers, but there are now a million fewer under-45s who own their own home than there were in 2010. Home ownership was up by some 1 million under Labour, but it has fallen since 2010 under Conservative Ministers as part of this Government’s eight years of failure on housing.

At the root of that failure is an inability to increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing. I do not need to set out how the stamp duty cut has failed to deal with that issue; I will use the words of the Office for Budget Responsibility, which stated that “the main gainers from the policy are people who already own property,” not first-time buyers. In contrast, measures from the Government to increase supply are woefully inadequate. To take just one example, local authorities will only be able to bid into a pot in order to borrow to build—a farcical situation when demand is so pressing. The number of genuinely affordable homes is declining, not increasing, under this Government.
We parliamentarians see all around us the worst impact of the Government’s failure on housing, whether it is on the people we walk past who are rough sleeping in the city of London—rough sleeping is now at record levels here, as it is in many other cities—or the 120,000 children who are living in temporary accommodation, and whose families come to see us in our constituency surgeries. I am keen to hear the Minister’s response to the question of whether he has commissioned research into the impact of this flagship measure on prices, in the absence of decisive measures to increase affordable supply.

It would be helpful to hear from the Minister how Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is dealing with what appears to be a quadrupling of money-back claims related to a malfunctioning online calculator. What HMRC rather amusingly— it is not amusing for the people affected— calls a “ready reckoner” appears to be anything but, in view of its failure to take into account relevant stamp duty discounts. I would be grateful to hear from the Minister when it will be amended so that it properly reflects mixed-use properties.

On the subject of confusion over what stamp duty should be paid, it would be good to hear from the Minister about what the Government are doing to deal with those who make bulk purchases of individual flats, thus avoiding the buy-to-let surcharge. Let us imagine, as a hypothetical example, someone purchasing seven flats, worth between £450,000 and £1 million each, in a seaside town. They might try to do so using their own company, rather than as an individual. If so, I would hope that they registered the beneficial ownership of that company with Companies House—a matter that I look forward to debating with the Minister next week in our consideration of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. Aside from beneficial ownership, however, by undertaking such a bulk purchase, our imaginary, hypothetical person would avoid a significant amount of stamp duty—say, around £100,000—which could have gone into our cash-strapped NHS. Can the Minister please inform the House what he is doing to deal with that loophole?

Above all, can we please have genuine action from the Government to deal with our appalling housing crisis—we parliamentarians cannot fail to notice that it is causing much misery to our constituents and blighting the lives of many children—rather than misplaced self-congratulation?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution and her questions. She opened by asking what was the motivation for giving this statement today. I reassure her that it is that we believe that housing policy is one of the great issues of our age and we are determined to get on top of it, as the Chancellor set out in the autumn Budget. That is why—to move on to her question about how we will drive up the level of home ownership—the Chancellor made it clear at Budget that a further £15 billion would be made available, taking us up to £44 billion over the next five years, to drive up the supply of new homes. That is alongside planning changes and the review that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is undertaking to ensure that where planning permission is granted, houses are actually built. I suggest that we look at our record. Last year there were 217,000 new properties in this country, which is the largest figure since 2005–06. That indicates that our move towards having 300,000 more properties on the market by the middle of the next decade is realistic.

The hon. Lady asked specific questions about the effect of stamp duty relief on house prices, and she will know that the OBR forecast a small impact of 0.3%. She will also know that that projection did not take into account the various supply-side measures that I have mentioned, and other measures that we have undertaken. She asked about the specific case of properties bought within a corporate wrapper, and I hope she will be familiar with the annual tax on enveloped dwellings, which stands at 15% if the property is put into the wrapper. Indeed, on the basis she outlined where a property is then rented out, ongoing charges recruit tax in that way.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I welcome the Minister’s statement, and express my support for stamp duty relief for first-time buyers. That measure exists to reverse the trend of declining home ownership that began in 2003, and it is the right thing to do. Will the Minister confirm the commitment made in the autumn Budget to increase the amount of housing supply delivered by small and medium-sized developers, as they are a crucial part of solving the housing crisis in the UK?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman should not undersell himself; he is an illustrious estate agent, and I have now drawn wider attention to that important fact.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right to mention smaller builders, and we recognise the importance of ensuring that finance is available to them. They play a key role in providing new housing, and I confirm that the £630 million announced in the Budget for the small-site infrastructure fund will be going ahead, as will measures that we have taken to support bank lending specifically to smaller builders.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the Government are serious about boosting housing provision, will the Minister join me in congratulating councils such as Sutton Council, which is building council homes for the first time in 30 years? What more can the Minister do to support it to provide homes that are genuinely affordable?

Mel Stride: I have already, at length, gone through the various measures we have taken to support increased housing supply. Given that I have been urged to stray towards brevity rather than to respond at length, I will leave it there, other than to say that we will have our foot firmly to the floor. When it comes to council housing, we have of course built twice as much since 2010 than the Labour Government built during their 13 years in office.

Mr Speaker: I say to the House that I have not detected much beetling taking place. I exhorted colleagues to beetle across to the Chamber if they wished to take part in the next debate, but by my reckoning, fewer than half the would-be contributors to that debate have landed in the Chamber. I hope there will be some beetling or toddling of a hasty kind pretty soon.
Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Hundreds of families in my constituency have benefited from Help to Buy, and I very much welcome the changes in stamp duty. How many people in the north-west have benefited from those changes?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Mr Speaker, at one point you wanted me to respond rather quickly. If you now wish me to go a little more slowly to allow others to attend the Chamber, I am at your disposal.

Mr Speaker: That is extremely accommodating of the right hon. Gentleman, and I would expect no less of him. He can rest assured that the next debate will start no later than 12.30 pm, and preferably earlier, notwithstanding the fact that his own erudition is endlessly intoxicating.

Mel Stride: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend asked about the north-west, where 6,900 individuals benefited from stamp duty relief between 22 November and 31 March this year.

Mr Speaker: Things are hotting up now.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My area has many thousands of extant planning permissions that have yet to be brought forward. How will the Treasury try to get those planning permissions to a state where we can build houses? Is it about time that we had a sensible debate on land value taxation?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point: there is little point in land that has planning consent if properties are not swiftly built on it. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is conducting a review of exactly that matter, and we will come to the House in due course with our proposals.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Horsham has very high house price multiples, and I welcome the Government’s efforts to help first-time buyers with that vital first step on the ladder. I also welcome the impact of that policy from a macroeconomic perspective. The Financial Policy Committee at the Bank of England has talked about broadening home ownership as a way of encouraging and improving financial stability. That should have an important impact, which I also welcome.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. As well as the many advantages and benefits of home ownership for individuals, society and the economy, his point about financial stability is right and another reason why the Government are determined to make progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. As colleagues will know if they have studied the Annunciator, the second of the two debates scheduled for this afternoon has been withdrawn, so we have simply one debate on customs and borders. Members will recall that when the House debated estimates on 26 and 27 February, the motions were proposed by the Backbench Business Committee under an arrangement recommended by the Procedure Committee. Today, we have a complementary proceeding of a Backbench Business day in which the motion has been proposed by the Liaison Committee.
Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right: there are so many unanswered questions and the clock really is ticking. We secured this debate to try to tease out those questions and get some answers, and to put forward some proposals for this debate. I also put on record apologies from the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), but that Committee is taking evidence in Berlin today.

Why put forward an effective customs union as part of the proposals? It means no tariffs on the goods we buy and sell with the European Union. It means no customs checks at the border. It is a crucial part of delivering the frictionless border for trade that the Government have rightly promised. It clearly does not solve all the problems and meet all the challenges that we face, but it is an important part—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady accept, though, that even with a customs union there would still be a need for checks at the border for things like product standards?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. There are wider regulatory issues that need to be addressed. There is a wider debate about regulatory alignment.
That is obviously particularly important as it affects Northern Ireland, but it will affect ports across the country as well. The focus of today’s debate is specifically around a customs union. There are a lot of other aspects to Brexit that we will need to continue to debate in this place.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders announced today that there has been a 14% drop in the output of cars manufactured in this country over the past year, and emphasised that certainty over our negotiations and access to the EU market is essential for the future prosperity of that industry and our economy.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right, because the lack of certainty makes it extremely difficult for any employer to plan. I have discussed the subject with employers in my constituency, particularly manufacturers, and frankly any business that is involved in cross-border trade in any way is desperately concerned about the lack of certainty. The idea that new arrangements could have to be in place in less than 12 months’ time has an impact on investment; it has an impact on the decisions that employers—businesses—are making right now.

At Dover, 400 lorries an hour rumble on and off the ferries to France. In Ireland, 6,000 lorries and 8,000 vans whizz to and fro across the border, without even braking. From apples to aerospace, from Yorkshire woollens to Scottish salmon, Britain does more than £230 billion of export trade with European countries every year. Those businesses do not get stopped at the border, do not pay tariffs or submit extra forms. They can just sail on through. That is the frictionless trade that so many of our manufacturing jobs depend on.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In the right hon. Lady’s contacts with business, has she come across any businesses that are currently exporting, or intending to export, to the EU that are looking forward to filling in all the customs forms that will be required once we have left?

Yvette Cooper: Funnily enough, I have not, and I doubt that many of us have either, because for those employers—those businesses—this goes much wider than simply what happens at the border. It extends to all the bureaucracy, all the paperwork, and all those additional burdens and costs that they could face outside a customs union.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency of Colne Valley, like others across the country, are deeply concerned about the UK’s walking away from our largest export market. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a customs union with the European Union would offer the best protection to businesses in each of our constituencies?

Yvette Cooper: I do agree with that and it is, interestingly, the view of both the CBI and the TUC that a customs union is particularly important for the future of our economy and the future of trade. Hon. Members can see why it would matter at the border. James Hookham, the deputy chief executive of Britain’s Freight Transport Association, has warned that an average delay of two minutes as a result of new Brexit spot checks at Dover would create a tailback of 17 miles. In a world of just-in-time production and retailing, when companies hold less stock, when supply chains run across borders and back again, it makes even small delays costly.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the right hon. Lady explain how it is that we have such a smooth-running, fast-growing and very large trade with the rest of the world, on World Trade Organisation terms, where we have to pay EU tariffs, and we are not allowed to negotiate them down all the time we are a member of the customs union?

Yvette Cooper: I think the right hon. Gentleman is simply making the point that our trade was growing, within the current arrangements, with the rest of the world. That seems to be a good thing, and suggests that perhaps, therefore, we can carry on increasing our international trade and our global trade, even within customs union arrangements.

Anna Soubry (Bromytle) (Con): Would it not also be the case that, as a country that champions free trade, we have seen the reduction of barriers with those other non-EU members, which may explain the growth? Does the right hon. Lady agree that it seems rather perverse that, at a time when we want to increase free trade, we are going to put up a whole load of barriers to stop access, in the best existing free trade area in the world?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Lady is exactly right. Where we currently have good free trading arrangements we should cherish them, because the truth is that it is getting harder to negotiate new trade deals. The politics of trade deals has become more complex, as communities across different countries become more worried about the losers and winners of big changes to trade arrangements. At a time when it could take very many years to negotiate new trade arrangements, if we pursue the idea of ripping up our existing arrangements before the conclusion of such negotiations it will be deeply damaging to many of our jobs and communities.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): In answer to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I am struggling to think of a country that we have a ro-ro ferry arrangement with that is not in the single market—which we are going to have very soon, if we follow his direction.

Yvette Cooper: Unfortunately, I did not catch the beginning of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. May I ask him to repeat it?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman, I am struggling to think of a trading partner that we have, outside of the single market and customs union, that we have a ro-ro arrangement with, and I think that would be the answer to his question.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. Not only that, but those other countries that we might seek to get alternative trade arrangements with are further away, and when it comes to manufacturing industry in particular, geography matters—gravity matters.
The best opportunities and the greatest markets will be those that are closest, especially in a world of just-in-time production where you might need to get supplies very rapidly into your factories or into your retailers.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The European Union is a customs union. The right hon. Lady has spoken of preserving our existing arrangements, but the motion speaks of the establishment of a customs union. Can she explain what the difference might be between “the customs union” and the customs union that she envisages?

**Yvette Cooper**: Obviously, the customs union is a part of the European Union; that is the arrangement that is in place at the moment. I think we need a customs union because once outside the European Union you cannot have “the customs union”; but we are in danger of getting ourselves tangled up on the definite and indefinite article. We chose the words “an effective customs union” in the motion to avoid disputes about grammar, and to get to the substance. We want an arrangement that includes no tariffs, but has frictionless borders and, crucially, a common external tariff. That is the immensely important point that I want to cover now.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My right hon. Friend mentioned trade through ports. She is aware that my constituency is on the frontline of Brexit, and is the busiest port with the Republic of Ireland—400,000 lorries a year pass through it. This is not scaremongering: already, Irish companies are making contingency plans to trade directly with mainland Europe, bypassing Britain altogether, on a business case.

**Yvette Cooper**: They are, and it is perhaps unsurprising that they should do so, because businesses will make investments, they will take a precautionary approach, and they will look for the best way to protect their trade at a time of such huge uncertainty about what might happen to trade that we want to pass through the UK. We will see more and more of those consequences, therefore, particularly if we do not get answers and decisions soon.

**Rachel Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the biggest threat of all is the threat to jobs, as businesses are making their investments elsewhere in mainland Europe as opposed to the UK now, let alone in the future?

**Yvette Cooper**: I do, and I think this is also particularly about our manufacturing communities, and many of our towns across the country, where those jobs are so important.

**Kevin Hollinrake** rose—

**Yvette Cooper**: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, and then I want to make progress, as a lot of Members want to speak.

**Kevin Hollinrake**: I am grateful. The right hon. Lady has been very generous in taking interventions. Earlier, she referred to the potential for tailbacks as a result of checks. What I was trying to get across in my earlier question was that if we were still in the customs union but not the single market, checks would still be needed for product standards, so is she actually proposing membership of both the single market and the customs union, and if she is, is there any point in leaving the European Union at all?

**Yvette Cooper**: Look, there will be some for whom this debate is partly about what happened in the referendum. Others will want to have nothing to do with anything that is linked to the European Union in any way. I am looking to see where the consensus can be in this House, and I think there is a possibility of a consensus around a customs union. We can have a separate debate another time on the wider regulatory alignment—on which the hon. Gentleman and I have particular views—and on what other aspects of regulatory alignment, or of a single market, we may each care about. For now, the focus should be on a customs union, which does not prejudge the conclusions of some of the wider questions.

I want to say something about the common external tariff, because I think this bit gets lost too often. If we are in a customs union, we have the common external tariff; the consequence of which is that not only all those products, but all the components and agreements of the products can spin back and forth across different borders within the EU and not have to face rules of origin checks. Many businesses are particularly concerned about the rules of origin checks, because that means that they have to account for where the different ingredients come from. If they suddenly change the mix of ingredients in a product or if they suddenly change the source of their supply, they might also suddenly have to change their evaluation of the rules of origin and fill in different forms. That is a huge ongoing burden for businesses, employers and particularly for manufacturers. It is not just a one-off cost or an easy thing about ticking an online box.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am really pleased that the right hon. Lady secured this debate. The point she is making about the importance of the shared external tariff is absolutely vital, because of the rules of origin. Does she share my concern that some Members in this House seem to be wilfully misunderstanding what a customs union really means and cannot cope with the idea that this will result in a huge amount of extra paperwork?

**Yvette Cooper**: That is right. If a manufacturer’s components come in from China but then, as part of the manufacturing process, the product moves to France for further manufacturing, and the components come back again and are then sent somewhere else, at every stage those calculations would have to be done. At the moment, because we all have the common external tariff, when the components come in from China or elsewhere in the world, those rules of origin checks do not need to be done after the manufacturing process and before it is sold on. It does not matter where the widgets come from or where the gadgets go; we have the common external tariff, which makes that process much, much smoother than it would otherwise be.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend will be aware that third countries represent some 12% of our exports via the EU. Already, South Korea,
Australia and Chile have said that they want to renegotiate the trade agreements, including tariffs, if we are not in the customs union, and many more may. Is she fearful that we will end up with higher tariffs, worse terms of trade and fewer jobs?

Yvette Cooper: That is right. I think there is common agreement that we want no tariffs with the EU as part of this—I think that is shared across the House—but we also want to ensure that we do not end up with worse terms of trade with the rest of the world, rather than having the promises we have had that somehow things will magically be better.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has mentioned that businesses are very concerned about this issue. I met over 20 businesses in my constituency that provide nearly 2,000 incredibly valuable jobs in my rural area. They are very concerned that they are already seeing European competitors coming in and taking contracts from under their noses. They cannot compete because they do not have the certainty that the UK will be in a customs union this time next year.

Yvette Cooper: That goes to the heart of the situation. It is partly about certainty and partly about knowing that businesses can smoothly trade in the way that they have been doing, and that we can build on that trade and not end up with new barriers in place. It is manufacturing where this matters most—manufacturing is still the spine of our economy and so much else depends on it. For so many of our towns, such as those in my constituency and across the north and midlands, manufacturing is still at the heart of the local economy, and it could be hugely jeopardised if we end up with a damaging change to the terms of trade.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Unite—the union shop stewards who came to visit me from Rolls-Royce—made exactly that point. They explained the real damage that could be done by this to the aerospace industry in particular and the long and detailed supply chains that stretch across not just the whole of the UK, but the whole of the European Union.

Yvette Cooper: That is right. Many of these manufacturing towns and areas may well have voted to leave the European Union, but they will also argue strongly for support for manufacturing jobs within their communities. We should be listening to their voices.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; she has been very generous. If she wants to unite the House on staying in “the” customs union, because it is right when she says that small towns such as the ones that I represent—Bottesford, Kirton and Scunthorpe—voted to come out of Europe, but they did not vote to lose out when that happened, and they will be looking for an arrangement that makes sure they do not.

Yvette Cooper: That is exactly right. They want a Brexit deal that is good for manufacturing, and to be honest, any deal that rejects a customs union is going to hit manufacturing across Britain.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): To go back to the question that the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) asked, any free trade agreement inevitably comes with strings attached. If one is going to do a free trade agreement with 27 member states that co-ordinate their own trade, I simply do not see how we will escape the strings that are obligatory if such an agreement is going to work. The trouble is that it then starts to look very much like a customs union, because that is what, in reality, it has to be if it is to work at all.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right: in the end, any agreement has obligations attached to it, as well as enforcement mechanisms.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will make this one of the final interventions. I want to deal with the objections that people have raised to a customs union, because it is important to respond to those.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am very grateful. To build on the point that the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) made, a free trade agreement in this context is highly misleading. The UK would not have a free trade agreement, but a “less trade” agreement, and when we talk about free trade agreements with the rest of the world, we mean bits of trade agreements. Trade will not be as free as it currently is in the European Union.

Yvette Cooper: There is no doubt about that. If we have no customs union, there will be less free trade than we currently have, and that is where the manufacturing industry is at risk.

Manufacturing is very important in my constituency, and we are very proud of having Haribo there. I have been to visit, and I particularly enjoyed doing the quality-control checks on the Starmix—we made sure that they were particularly rigorous and tried many times to make sure that the Starmix was very top quality that day. The chief executive of Haribo said clearly to me: “If a truck loaded with materials that we desperately need to make a product is held up or not released at border control for a day or two, the worst case scenario would be production grinding to a halt”.

That is the reality.
We know, too, that this issue is particularly important for the Northern Ireland border. Ministers have rightly said that there should be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic or between Northern Ireland and Britain. Parliament has a responsibility to make sure that that happens.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the right hon. Lady take a moment to reflect on the statement that the Prime Minister made yesterday at Prime Minister questions when she was happy to endorse the idea, peddled by the Government again, that there should be no hard border in Northern Ireland, that Ministers have rightly said that there would be better than a bad deal? That is a very dangerous strategy, and I say that as someone who represents a Northern Ireland constituency. If we have no deal, we will inevitably have a hard border in Northern Ireland, and we will see the return of violence in Northern Ireland.

Yvette Cooper: I have huge respect for the hon. Lady’s views on this, and I agree. We have to show some responsibility. This is not something on which we can simply trade political slogans or vote for an abstract. We have to be very honest and real about the consequences. The removal of the security and economic checks at that border and the growing economic integration between Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as with the rest of the United Kingdom, are an important part of ending a conflict in which so many people have died. We have a huge responsibility to future generations who will not forgive us if we just rip all that up and throw it away because we did not face the facts.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: May I make some progress first?

Three specific objections to a customs union tend to be presented. First, people say that we do not need a customs union because there are alternatives, usually based on new technology. Secondly, they argue that we will be better off outside the customs union, and that being outside is a price worth paying for the benefits that we will enjoy as a result. Thirdly, they make an emotional appeal, claiming that it is somehow at the heart of our sovereignty or the Brexit vote. I disagree with all three counter-arguments, and I will deal with each of them briefly.

Let me deal first with the claim that a customs union is not needed and we can solve everything with new technology instead. So far the Government have put forward two alternatives: a customs partnership and “max fac”, which seems to be the latest name for a streamlined arrangement described as “maximum facilitation”. The customs partnership—to be honest, I had to struggle to get my head around it—seems to involve our collecting EU tariffs at the border, tracking products, and then paying some of the money to the EU. I understand that both the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and Brussels have agreed that it is unworkable. It is quite a triumph for the Government to have come up with a proposal whose unworkability has managed to unite Brussels and the Brexit Secretary and those whom he defends.

The alternative is speeded-up customs arrangements at the border. The idea is that all the customs forms would be filled in online, customs checks would be carried out at the trader’s own premises rather than at the border, and there would be cameras and automated number plate recognition. An extreme version of that was proposed by the Financial Secretary, who compared it with the congestion charge between the Islington and Camden borders.

Let me be clear: I think we could do a great deal more with new technology at our borders. In the interests of trade, we should be improving the technology, and the use of technology, at our borders and at borders throughout Europe and the world. However, there is still a limit to how far we can go. First, it will take a long time and a lot of investment to roll out many elements of the technology. Secondly, in the case of the congestion charge, the cameras identify only the cars, not what was in them, so cameras do not solve all the problems involving checks. Thirdly, we would have to rely on the willingness of France, Belgium, Ireland and other countries to provide the same level of investment in the technology at the same pace.

The proposal also assumes a higher level of tolerance of smuggling and evasion of tariffs. The Prime Minister, for example, has suggested that in Northern Ireland 80% of trade—the micro, small and medium-sized businesses—could be exempt from all checks. That level of exemption would require agreement with other countries. There is also the question of how enforcement would take place to ensure that there was no systematic evasion of tariffs.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Would that not also be in breach of World Trade Organisation rules? It would require exemption in all the most favoured nation states, effectively creating a massive inability to monitor huge amounts of goods coming into this country.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Lady is right. It raises huge questions about the rule of law, about how the system would be enforced, and about how it could operate in a sensible and fair way without being opened up to challenge from other areas.

Crucially, the technology approach relies on cameras. I have no doubt that part of the response at Dover will be the introduction of new automated number plate recognition and other such mechanisms. As I said to the Prime Minister before Christmas, cameras are infrastructure. If we add a whole load of cameras to the Northern Ireland border, we will still be creating the infrastructure and—crucially—the targets that the police fear will become a focus for dissident groups who want to disrupt the peace process. That, I understand, is why everyone, including the Government, has concluded that cameras at the Northern Ireland border are not a sensible solution and should not be part of our approach.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am listening closely to what the right hon. Lady is saying, but there are already cameras for number plate recognition at all the ports on the UK mainland, recording traffic to and from the island of Ireland.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the concern relates to what happens around the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and the introduction of new infrastructure at that border, especially such symbolic infrastructure, and especially anything that would increase the sense of
there being targets for dissident organisations. We do not want them to become more active and have more to focus on.

**Hywel Williams:** When the Exiting the European Union Committee visited South Armagh a couple of months ago, everyone we met, from Sinn Féin councillors to the deputy chief constable, agreed that there should be no infrastructure on the border, for the very reason that the right hon. Lady outlined.

**Yvette Cooper:** It is significant that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee concluded last month that there were no technical solutions anywhere in the world “beyond the aspirational” that would remove the need for physical infrastructure at the border.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab) The Northern Ireland shadow team, of which I am a member, paid a visit to Stormont. We met the leaders of all the parties, and they all expressed their concerns about the barrier. There must be no barrier at any price.

**Yvette Cooper:** I completely agree; I think that is immensely important. It brings me back to what I said about our sense of responsibility. It is no good pretending to be in a parallel universe when all the things that we might want to be true simply are not. We must face up to the world as it is, and to our responsibility and the consequences of any decisions that we make in the House for a process to build peace that has been going on for so many years. We are only the custodians of that process, and we must not be the ones who put it in jeopardy.

Another crucial point is that even if all that technology were possible—even if it were possible to solve all those problems at the border—it would not remove the need for rules of origin checks if we were not party to the common external tariff. It would not remove the bureaucratic burdens that would be imposed on manufacturing businesses every time they changed ingredients or components, because those ingredients and components will be subject to different external tariffs if we are outside a customs union, and the businesses will then have to account for their origins. That is why even new technology, however fabulous and whizzy it becomes in the years ahead, cannot solve the wider problem of what will happen if we have no customs union.

The second argument advanced by those who object to the customs union is that being outside will be worth it, because the benefits of not having a common external tariff and being able to have our own new trade agreements are somehow better than the benefits of being in the customs union. The problem is that the evidence—the Government’s own EU exit analysis, and the findings of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research—shows that the potential benefits of new trade treaties with far-flung countries, even if they could be created quickly, will still be outweighed by the losses resulting from the rules of origin checks and the friction at the border.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): When members of the Treasury Committee were in the United States, we were told one thing consistently by almost everyone we spoke to, namely that when it came to negotiating the new, alternative free trade agreements in which those in favour of Brexit put all their stock, the UK would have to put everything on the table and the US would have to put nothing on the table. Does that not lie at the heart of this issue? Our position will be substantially weakened, and nothing that the United Kingdom can negotiate will compensate for the losses that it is likely to suffer.

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Gentleman is right. Other Members will have more evidence and experience than I when it comes to all the detailed arguments, but if we are a smaller market offering to trade, we will be in a weaker position to get a good deal than if we are part of a larger argument in that trade negotiation. Trade deals can take a long time, regardless of the best intentions. There can also be winners and losers, which means that even in this country it may take us a long time to agree on whether new trade agreements are right or wrong.

For example, consumers might want to enjoy more and cheaper New Zealand lamb, but Welsh farmers might take a different view. Industry might be able to get cheaper Chinese steel, but what about the consequences for the British steel industry? If the price of a US trade deal is lower environmental standards or giving US private healthcare companies access to, and the right to aggressively compete for, contracts in our NHS, many of us will want nothing at all to do with that. The truth is that any trade agreement will be complicated to agree in this place, never mind with countries across the world.

Moreover, as the CBI has pointed out, we can increase our international trade—and our EU trade—while still in a customs union with the EU and without having to spend years negotiating complex new treaties. As the CBI points out, Germany currently sells four times as much as we do to China. We should be trying to make the most of those opportunities.

Research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research shows that the overall trade increase from possible future agreements with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand would amount to less than 3% of our current trade. Are we really going to rip up all the benefits of what we have in a customs union for the sake of a 3% increase that will not be sufficient to balance what we will lose?

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; she is being very generous. Analysis by the Cardiff Business School and supported by the Welsh Labour Government states that our economy is best protected by membership of the customs union. Wales is currently attracting record inward investment, but businesses in my constituency are very worried due to the lack of certainty from the Government.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. This is affecting businesses all over the country.

I want to make one final point. I have taken a lot of interventions because I know that many Members will not get the chance to speak later and they want to give their views. I am conscious, however, of the time. Time is running out in the negotiations and the clock is even sharper today.
The final reason given by those who object to a customs union is that it is a point of principle. They say that it is about our sovereignty and that that was at the heart of the “Brexit vote.” Even if it is bad for us, it is a point of principle that we should be able to set our own tariffs and sign our own trade deals, and that is somehow at the heart of the taking back control that Britain voted for.

I find that argument illogical as well as inaccurate because, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said, any trade treaty involves signing away some sovereignty. Any kind of trade agreement involves legally binding conclusions and an independent dispute resolution procedure, and once the state has signed up to such an agreement, it might not be able to stop, for example, a US company taking contracts with the NHS or whatever we might have signed away as part of it.

Nobody wants to defend a principle of sovereignty whereby we never do any trade agreements with anybody or sign anything away. We should not do that because it would prevent us from getting a good deal with Europe that would help our manufacturing industry.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will not, because I am conscious of time.

We did not do this simply to create a new Department for trade and give certain hon. Members a sign on the door. We did not have the debate so that the only thing we would gain was a label of sovereignty or trade. This has to be about what really happens in communities across the country. I have not heard anyone who voted to leave say that they wanted to hit our manufacturing industry at any cost. I have heard from leave voters, as well as remain voters, who support getting a good manufacturing deal, the Northern Ireland peace process and a customs deal.

This is about the kind of country we want to be. Not for me the kind of country where the only thing that matters is a sign on the door that says, “We do our own trade deals.” Instead, I want a country that supports our manufacturing industry and communities and our historic obligations for peace on the island of Ireland. That is why I support a customs union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Neither the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) nor the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) will be subject to what I will call the common external tariff, otherwise known as a time limit. Such time limit as they are subject to will be self-imposed. I am sure that they will want to bear it in mind that, while we wish to enjoy the fruits of their intellect and eloquence, colleagues will wish to do so only if it is not at their personal expense.

1.5 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I will strive to do my best, Mr Speaker.

May I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the other Chairmen of the Select Committees and the Liaison Committee on obtaining this debate and on tabling the motion? It is remarkable how little attention Parliament has been allowed to pay to the momentous events that are taking place at the moment and that will certainly take place over the next few months, which have a profound importance for the future health of our economy and the standing of this country in the world.

At the moment, Cabinet members are trying to agree among themselves their negotiating position, and those in the shadow Cabinet are trying to reach an agreement among themselves on their response. Meanwhile, events are moving on, and I think the House of Commons should have more opportunities to give its views, exercise influence and debate a substantive motion every now and again, not just a motion that has already been dismissed, in the curious way we do in this Parliament, as somehow not legally binding and therefore one that need not be regarded as important.

I have often agreed with the right hon. Lady. In the past, but I do not think I have ever heard her make a speech in which I agreed with just about every sentence she uttered. That will enable me to respond to your request, Mr Speaker, because she said it all with great eloquence and there is absolutely no point in my simply trying to repeat all of it or anything like all of it. The only thing I disagreed with is that she revised—no doubt for party reasons—the strange conspiracy theory that trade deals with America might involve privatising the NHS. I have no doubt that someone will try to explain the logic of that argument in the course of this debate. However, I totally agreed with everything else she said.

That is rather surprising, because everything the right hon. Lady said was in line with what has always been the official, mainstream policy of the Conservative party throughout the first 50 years of my membership of it. Some of my colleagues seemed to have a strange conversion—like St Paul on the way to Damascus—about two years ago, but I am afraid that the light did not strike me.

This debate bodes well for what needs to emerge. Many of us in this House have argued for some time for a cross-party convergence, in the national interest, so that this House can make sure that no damage is inflicted by the consequences of our leaving the European Union, or—to be more precise, I am afraid—that we can limit that damage so far as possible.

The underlying point is clear: the economy of this country and, to an extent, those of other European countries, will be damaged if a sudden decision is taken to erect new barriers at the border between the UK and our major trading partners.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab) rose—

Mr Clarke: I will give way in just a second. There are no advantages in introducing tariffs to European trade, which I do not think anybody wants to do, or new customs procedures and processes, and there are no advantages in producing regulatory differences between our market and the European market. If people insist on having a new free trade agreement, it should include, and as far as possible replicate, the arrangements that the customs union and the single market give us now. If any hard-line Eurosceptic wishes to get up and say why it is positively in the British interest to have new customs procedures, and that we want more lorry parks at Dover
and wish to delay the lorries carrying goods one way and the other, I would be interested to hear it. I shall turn in a moment to the main argument—indeed, as far as I am aware, it is the only argument—that most of them ever give for leaving the customs union. First, I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Chuka Umunna:** I am grateful to the Father of the House for giving way. He has served in this House for 48 years, if I am not mistaken, and served in a number of Governments. He will know that this Government have been advised by their own officials that leaving the single market and the customs union will make this country poorer. In all his time in this House, can he think of any Government who have knowingly taken a decision of this gravity that would make the country poorer? Can he think of any example of any Government he has seen do that?

**Mr Clarke:** Not deliberately—but accidentally, several times. [Laughter.] The hon. Gentleman makes reference to my great longevity, which is the one non-controversial feature of my presence in this House. Practically all my old friends from several Governments are now ennobled and in the House of Lords, where they are debating these very matters. Actually, all my colleagues who have served in Governments during my time—particularly under Margaret Thatcher and John Major—who are still with us and in the House of Lords are voting in line with this motion. They are of the same opinion, because it is utterly unprecedented for us to get into a position of this kind.

The only argument—certainly the only one the Prime Minister ever uses—for leaving the customs union is that we can have trade agreements with the rest of the world. We also refer to “a customs union”, for reasons that have been explained; it would be a replica of the present customs union. It is quite right to say that, in the customs union, we do not have total freedom to negotiate. We have a common tariff barrier around the customs union, and no member can punch holes through it and start letting in goods from various markets under different arrangements. Once anyone started to do that, it would be necessary to stop the goods seeping through. A great deal of work is being done at the moment, as I understand it from following the leaks in the newspapers and talking to my contacts among those involved, to try to find a way to achieve something similar that would be acceptable. We will have to see how that goes.

It has already been said that, for over 40 years, Governments of both parties in this country who essentially believed in free trade, and who found that Britain gained ever more advantages from developing a free trade climate, have been extending free trade through our membership of the European Union. First, we had the common market—the customs union—and then we added the single market to it, removing all the regulatory barriers. Then we encouraged EU agreements with an ever-increasing number of countries, which reduced the barriers yet further in all those markets around the world. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has said that this helped us to make progress in the rest of the world as well. Not only have we participated in that but, in my opinion, British Governments have been the most influential and leading advocates of that approach inside the European Union.

It is not true to say that we have been an isolated, powerless member, ignored and penalised by the others. I believe that on issues of the economy, on liberal economic policy and on trading policy, the United Kingdom has been the leading influential member in Europe, and I think that was probably as true under the Blair Government as it was under the Thatcher and Major Governments. We were responsible for the single market. All the way up to the Cameron coalition Government, we were in the lead in Europe in pressing for the EU agreements to be extended to other countries.

I do not remember even Eurosceptics bothering to raise much objection to that policy. Even during the referendum, I did not hear any Brexiteer, including the ones I debated with, saying that they wanted more protectionism or that they wanted to withdraw from all that. Dan Hannan is one of the most articulate advocates of the Eurosceptic cause, and I debated with him twice in town hall settings during the referendum. I always got the impression that he was in favour of the single market. Again it is important to stress that it is possible to leave the European Union and to stay in the single market and the customs union. There is no constitutional or legal barrier to that happening, and the Commission has made it plain that it could be on offer. However, if we are not going to do that—for reasons that I do not understand—we will have to replicate it pretty well.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

**Mr Clarke:** I will give way, after which I will go back to the question of trade relations with non-EU countries.

**Peter Kyle:** On a recent visit to Norway with the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, we heard Norway’s lead negotiator with the EU explain that, being outside the customs union, Norway is in a permanent state of negotiation with the EU regarding trade and customs. He said that Norway would sometimes win a concession, only to lose it in a negotiation a couple of years later. Is not this precisely the status that businesses come to Britain to avoid?

**Mr Clarke:** I quite agree. The Norwegians have a second-best solution by a good long way. When I was Chancellor, we were engaged in negotiating with the Norwegian Government and with other would-be new members over full membership of the European Union, which on the whole the entire Norwegian political class, left and right, supported. The same thing happened here during the referendum, when every significant political party in this country was in favour of remaining, with the exception of UKIP and the Democratic Unionist party. The Norwegians came out with not a bad compromise, but it was far less satisfactory than the one we are starting from as we negotiate now.

**Anna Soubry:** Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

**Mr Clarke:** With great respect to my close ally and friend, I must make a little progress and finish making this point. I might already have had my 10 minutes.
The theory is propounded to the British people that we somehow have nothing to do with these EU trading arrangements and that somehow, when trade deals are done, grey men in the European Commission secretly impose upon us all sorts of restrictive terms. Indeed, the right-wing press give the impression to all their readers that that is what we are facing now. They suggest that Jean-Claude Juncker and Michel Barnier are somehow plotting against us, that the whole thing is being done by unaccountable Eurocrats who are trying to take revenge on us, and that the trouble with our EU trade deals is that we have no say in them and they happen mechanically. That is complete rubbish, and it is rubbish that has been propounded for the last 30 or 40 years.

The Commission does have some roles that our civil service does not have, but basically it can negotiate only if it has the approval of each and every member state's Government. It negotiates only within a mandate that the states have agreed. In my own ministerial experience of EU trade and economic affairs, the bigger countries—particularly Britain—have a huge influence on what is being negotiated. In my last job in the Cameron Government, when I was in the Cabinet Office without portfolio, I was asked by David Cameron to lead for us on the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership deal. I spent time in Brussels and Washington doing that. I cannot say that I played a key role, but the whole point was that the British were keen advocates of that, along with the Germans, the Italians and the French. We were all close to what was going on, and seeking to find out where things were going and whether we could push it. No deal has ever been done by the EU with any other country that anybody has ever objected to in the United Kingdom. For example, no British Government ever protested about the EU deal with South Korea, which is one of the better ones that we have achieved recently. No one ever told me they were against it.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: I really should not, because the Speaker has already said, all trade deals are not done by a sovereign country saying, “Of course we are not binding ourselves to do anything.” They involve the agreeing of market regulations and of the trading rules that will apply. We would not say, “It’s all going to be decided by the British courts.” There would be an international arbitration agreement to which businesses and countries could look if one side started breaking its treaty obligations. The Americans will say, “Give up these European food safety and environmental regulations, and we will trade with you on ours.” If we let in chlorinated chicken, hormone-treated beef and genetically modified crops—personally I am not convinced that they are the health hazards that most people in the country seem to believe they are—that means new barriers with Europe, which will not let those products through, and we will probably lose a large part of our biggest market, for food and agricultural products, which is in Europe.

I have one final point to make on international trade and about where the debate is unrealistic. WTO rules have suddenly been elevated to some mystic world order that means that our new trade agreements will somehow be much better. I wish that were true. This country does abide by WTO rules, but they are nothing like as comprehensive as they ought to be because the Doha round failed. The Americans take no notice of the WTO. The Americans and the Chinese are about to start a trade war, and everything that they are doing is in total breach of WTO rules. We will not get a deal with Donald Trump subject to WTO rules. He will not even appoint judges to the WTO court, because otherwise it might do what is usually its major duty, which is settling disputes between states.

Going back to what the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford said, we want trade with Europe that has no barriers between ourselves and Europe. It will require some ingenuity to find some basis on which we might still be able to do trade deals with other people, but the idea that some marvellous new global future with fantastic new trade deals is about to open up is hopeless. If someone can get the Americans to open up their public procurement to international competition and give up the “Buy America” policy or to open the regulatory barriers that they have put in the way of professional and financial services, they will be a miraculous negotiator, because we could get nowhere when Obama was in power. I do not think that the present Administration are offering us anything; they just want their beef to come here.

Finally, on Ireland—I will be much shorter on this because it is a big question that has been touched on already—it is absolutely critical that we do not break the Good Friday agreement. It is quite obvious that most people on this side of the Irish sea had never thought about Ireland when we were debating during the referendum and when they were propounding their policies. The problem of the Good Friday agreement has been addressed by most Brexiteers by them saying, “Surely that’s all over now? Isn’t it a nuisance? What an irrelevance. Let us break it now, because it no longer matters. It is far more important that we get the kind of hard Brexit that we want.” That is very dangerous.

The Good Friday agreement is one of the major achievements of the British Governments of my time. It was negotiated with the Americans, with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and with every section of opinion in Northern Ireland. It brought an end—almost; it is the end, I hope—to 200 years of the troubles in Ireland after they erupted into violence. When the troubles were under way in the ’70s and ’80s we lost more policemen and soldiers in Ulster than we did in Iraq and Afghanistan put together. The agreement was a splendid achievement for John Major and Tony Blair, so to say, “What an inconvenience. It is getting in the way of our leaving the customs union,” is very dangerous.

I thought that the Government had accepted that. Indeed, I think they have done so formally on two occasions. First, we had the Prime Minister’s Florence
speech, which addressed the matter. Talking about the discussions she had had with Europe about Northern Ireland, she said that “we have both stated explicitly that we will not accept any physical infrastructure at the border.”

That was solemnly agreed. It was the agreed Cabinet policy. The Foreign Secretary made a strange speech before the Florence speech and a statement shortly afterwards that gave the impression that he was trying to undermine the speech, but I am sure he was not. That statement is already agreed Government policy.

Secondly, we finally managed to make progress by finishing the withdrawal agreement, and we published the texts of what had been agreed. As people have said, there are all these other possible solutions involving using congestion charge cameras and things to avoid issues at the border, but I do not think that they will get very far. We have already committed ourselves to the following:

“In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation,” which I think means pretty well full regulatory convergence.

As someone has already said, the chief constable of Ulster has said that we cannot have infrastructure at a new hard border. It would outrage nationalist and republican opinion across the whole island and take us right back to all the problems we had. Symbolism is huge in the politics of Ireland and always has been, and it would be grossly irresponsible to put a hard border in the middle of the island of Ireland again. We have never been on such good terms with the Government of the Republic of Ireland since the Republic was founded.

If we have those arrangements at the Irish border, the same arrangements will of course apply to Holyhead and to Dover. That is what I want to see. We want no new barriers and no customs processes. We want the necessary level of regulatory convergence. Obviously, the easy way to do that is to stay in the customs union and stay in the single market. If not, we will need what I think the Prime Minister described as a “customs procedure”, which will be something that looks remarkably like the single market and the customs union.

The customs union is what today’s business is about, and it would do terrible damage to this country if, for strange ideological reasons in the confused aftermath of a misguided referendum, we were to take such a foolish step as not to replicate the customs union in any future arrangements.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for interrupting this important debate on a topic on which I have strong views, but something has come to my attention in the last few moments. As you will be aware, the Home Secretary endured some strong questioning both this morning and at yesterday’s sittings of the Home Affairs Committee about removal targets. The BBC’s political editor is now reporting that the Home Office in fact intends to scrap the internal removal targets, so I wondered whether you had received notice that the Home Secretary plans to come back to clarify the statement that she made earlier, which was of course a clarification of statements made by her and her officials yesterday and, indeed, by the Prime Minister, who is responsible for this mess starting in the first place.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is no. I have been attending to my duties in the Chair since 9.30 am without interruption. It would have been perfectly possible for somebody to beetle into the Chamber to advise me of a Minister’s intention to make a statement on this matter but, as a matter of fact, that has not happened.

I know the hon. Gentleman is always looking onward and upward—he is an optimistic fellow—and, although there is no great likelihood of a statement on the matter today, as he contemplates the joys of his weekend ahead in Cardiff South and Penarth, he can always look forward to Monday.

1.29 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I very much think that I will not need to take cognisance of your allowing me longer than Members who will speak later.

I see the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)—my constituent—regularly and I congratulate him on his speech. He said that he agreed with every single word of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who moved the motion, and, I can say—very carefully—that he will probably not agree with a single word that I say. I feel a little alone today. We will have an important debate about this issue in a few weeks’ time, when there will be a very different tone in the Chamber, and I hope that saying my few words today will not stop my being called when it comes to our real debate on this issue.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said in the final sentence of his speech that we should stay in the customs union and the single market, but there is no doubt that he was really saying that we should stay in the EU. I am afraid that a lot of Members in the Chamber are using the issue of the customs union as a way of restarting the process of trying to stay in the EU. They will not achieve that, but they are sending a message that the European Union will love. The EU will love seeing such division in this Parliament and that we cannot unite in telling it that we want a proper agreement in which we do not need tariffs and under which we can work with the EU as we would want to work with the rest of the world.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Hoey: I will give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but then I will not give way an awful lot.

Mr Clarke: The hon. Lady does not normally use a European debate to make the allegation that this is just a subtle way of staying in the EU and defying the referendum. She will recall that during our eight days in Committee on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, no amendment was tabled as an attempt to stay in the European Union. Nobody has cast a vote in this House to stay in the European Union. Although there have been only two speeches so far, there have been many interventions, and nobody has stood up to demand that we stay in the European Union. Of course, the private opinion of many Members—the majority, I think—is that it would be better if we stayed in the European Union, but we are working on the premise that, if we do leave, we must minimise the damage.
Kate Hoey: My point, of course, is that if we were to stay in the customs union, that would be seen as a transition before going back in again. For a start, staying in a customs union is not taking back control of our trade, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Members who want to stay in the single market have lost that argument because the previous Prime Minister was very clear in public, on television and in the House that a vote to leave the European Union would be a vote to leave the single market. The public who voted to leave, and even those who voted to remain, understood that a vote to leave was a vote to give up the treaties of the European Union. Within those treaties, of course, is where we find the customs union.

I have been in this place long enough to remember the great and wonderful MP for Eton and Slough, Joan Lester. She was a principled and doughty champion of the developing world. I remember, and have since looked up, one of the speeches she made back in 1971 opposing the UK joining the European Economic Community. I cannot remember whether the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe was here in 1971—I know he was here a very long time ago—but he knew Joan Lester well. Sadly, she is no longer with us. It is worth reading part of that speech:

“The political significance of British entry into Europe will have far-reaching effects upon the third world, the developing world.

Because of the protectionist policies of E.E.C. we shall not close the narrow channels between the rich and poor nations but rather widen them. Much has been said about the ability of E.E.C. to increase assistance to the developing world and to guarantee that the Community will continue to be outward looking in the future.

I cannot understand—and nobody has explained this to me from either side of the House—how an organisation like E.E.C., which everybody agrees is based on a protective tariff wall to which this country must agree as part of the price of entry and which will mean erecting a fresh tariff barrier against helping other parts of the world, can be said to be outward-looking. I do not believe the interests of the E.E.C. are identical with the interests of the smaller, developing and weak nations of the world.”—[Official Report, 21 October 1971; Vol. 823, c. 954.]

I will take Members back a little further to 1962—I genuinely do not think the right hon. and learned Gentleman was here then—and the words of Clement Attlee:

“I think that integration with Europe is a step backward. By all means let us get the greatest possible agreement between the various continents, but I am afraid that if we join the Common Market we shall be joining not an outward-looking organisation, but an inward-looking organisation.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 8 November 1962; Vol. 244, c. 428.]

All these years later, some things have changed, but the European Union is still an inward-looking organisation. Do we really want our future arrangements to be tied to that?

The EU customs union is not a progressive policy, and it is certainly not one that anyone who vaguely calls themselves of the left should desire to retain. That is probably why there are so few customs unions in the world. The protectionist external tariff around the entire European Union prevents poor developing countries from accessing our markets on equal terms, as many of us saw when we met members of the Commonwealth who were here last week. They are desperate for the changes that would come about if we were no longer in the customs union. For months if not years, we have heard the people behind the motion proclaiming that the EU market is singularly valuable, yet this policy denies the poorest people in the world the ability to freely trade with us or with the rest of the EU market. To make matters worse, the tax paid is largely siphoned off to Brussels, with UK consumers seeing little or no return.

In 2018, surely we want the development and growth of the poorest nations so that they are successful through trade, not reliant on aid. The customs union is a deliberate and persistent barrier to realising that. Outside the customs union, the UK could immediately reduce or remove these tariffs, becoming a great friend to the world’s poor.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady but, with respect, she is rehearsing familiar arguments. What is her answer to the point on Northern Ireland that has been expressed?

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman might remember that not a single person who has spoken so far has even mentioned this, so I urge a little patience.

Kevin Hollinrake: We spend a lot of time in this Chamber developing new regulations and rules that put costs on business. They might be environmental regulations, workplace regulations or animal welfare regulations. If the hon. Lady is talking about doing a free trade deal with nations that do not have such high standards, would she not be putting UK businesses at a significant disadvantage?

Kate Hoey: There is an issue there, but it is something that we can solve through negotiation and discussion. We do not solve it by putting up an immediate barrier to countries that desperately want to benefit from trading with us but are currently prevented from doing so.

The public’s expectation when they voted to leave, or even when they voted to remain, was that if we chose to leave, we would regain our trade policy. I do not think that we can do that other than outside the regressive customs union.

I will move on to Northern Ireland in a moment, but let me respond to a number of points that have been made in various ways. Why should we not want to trade with the rest of the world? Why are we being weak? Why can we not get our own trade deals? The EU takes so long to get a trade deal. We have seen how long it has taken, and we can do so much better.

Ruth George: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kate Hoey: I will not. Well, I had better give way to one Member from my own side.

Ruth George: Businesses in my constituency have expressed huge concern that, when we leave the EU, we will cease to receive the preferential tariffs that we currently enjoy with 188 countries outside the EU. Those businesses will cease to have the same competitive level playing field with EU countries that they have now, and by the time we have these free trade agreements, they will have lost their trade.
Kate Hoey: The problem with our staying inside a customs union is that we would then be subject to the decisions of a European Union of which we are not a member. Let us not forget that nations to pursue certain country do not trade with the EU at all, but are bound by all the rules, regulations and paraphernalia that go with EU membership. In any kind of customs union, I cannot see that the EU would allow the kind of things for which some of my colleagues are pushing.

While the EU accounts for 40% of our trade, that is because the arrangements imposed on us by our EU membership concentrate trade within this protectionist block. Although the proportion of our trade with the rest of the world is rising, I believe that the customs union holds us back and we could be doing so much better. We do not seem to have much confidence in our own country and our own businesses. Despite what the EU has insisted on, those businesses have still managed to export, trade and do very well. We could do so much better if we were outside the customs union.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Will the hon. Lady give way again?

Kate Hoey: Oh, all right.

Mr Clarke: I will not intervene again, I promise. It is very courteous of the hon. Lady to give way.

Let us look at China as an important market. Germany exports four or five times as much—I am probably understating it—to China as the United Kingdom does. It is not held back in some curious way by being in the EU, and nor is the growth of all our trade with the wider world held back in the slightest by the customs union or the single market.

Kate Hoey: The right hon. and learned Member and other Members have said that, and we have to make a lot of changes in this country to ensure that we can do much better than has been the case inside the European Union, but being outside the EU and the customs union will be almost a catalyst by ensuring that our businesses have that opportunity and freedom to do better than they are doing at the moment.

Those people who pushed for the Norway option during the referendum campaign and even since seem to forget that Norway is outside the customs union and is doing well. In fact, when I went to a conference in Norway recently, the feeling among people there was that they wanted to get out of the European economic area as well. They are looking to us to make a successful transition from the EU and they will probably follow us.

Helen Goodman: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Kate Hoey: No, I will not give way to my hon. Friend. I should like to move on to the issue of the border and Northern Ireland. Under the Tony Blair Government, I was one of those who went over and campaigned for a yes vote. I was very keen to see what happened happen, and I pay tribute to all those who made that happen. There is no doubt that there is an issue relating to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but the European Union is seizing on divisions to pursue certain demands that are just not necessary. It is certainly using the Irish border as an issue with regard to the customs union. EU officials recently said that they had systematically and forensically annihilated the Prime Minister’s proposals for a loose customs arrangement, but in fact they did not do that—they simply refused to discuss any creative compromise. They talk down every British proposal, and they are being helped by some in this Parliament who talk down everything positive that is said about what might be done. Proposals are talked down and talked down.

People need to remember that there is already a legal border in Northern Ireland for excise, alcohol, tobacco, fuel duty, VAT, immigration, visas, vehicles, dangerous goods and security. Indeed, the primary function of the hard border of the past was to be a security border, not a customs border. People forget that because they want to forget what happened during those long years of troubles. Today all those border functions are enforced without any physical infrastructure, so adding customs declarations and marginally divergent product standards to the long list of functions that the border already implements invisibly does not require a huge, drastic change to the nature of the border.

Even in the most complicated area—agriculture—the director of animal health and welfare at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has already given evidence to Parliament that sanitary and phytosanitary-related risks would not be altered by Brexit from what the authorities are already managing across the border pre-Brexit, and that additional infrastructure at the border would not be needed. There are already cameras—not at the border itself, but further away—and checks are going on all the time. There is intelligence all the time. There is no reason why businesses on both sides of the border that need to move back and forth every day will have any problem.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. I can assure her that I do not forget the appalling years before the signing of the Good Friday agreement.

Will the hon. Lady please address the worrying issue that, if there is in any shape or form a harder border than what we have at the moment, Sinn Féin will exploit that and agitate for a border poll, which would jeopardise Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as part of the United Kingdom? I, as a Unionist, will not tolerate that, and we need to be careful that we address that issue.

Kate Hoey: Of course Sinn Féin would love a border poll, but as the hon. Lady knows, there are regulations about when a border poll can be held, and there has to be a certain ratio of contentment before that can happen. It is almost as if we are being blackmailed by Sinn Féin and those who have been responsible for violence in the past. It is as if we have to shape our whole economic policy and future according to whether some dissidents will start to do dreadful things again. That is not how we should tackle it. We should take those people on and put them in jail, and we should make sure that decent, ordinary people can go about their lives without being attacked and threatened by the idea that if we do not do Brexit in a particular way, terrorism will start again.

Hywel Williams: At the recent meeting of the Brexit Committee in Northern Ireland, the Deputy Chief Constable said that he was absolutely against a physical border post. Was he blackmailing us?
Kate Hoey: No, he was not at all. The problem is that people think of a hard border as big cameras, lights, structures and so on. I remember those, as does my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Lady Hermon): we all remember what that looked like. No one is talking about having that again, but some people are using it as a way to change the fact that the people of this country voted to leave the EU, the single market and the customs union.

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

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Hoey: No.

I believe that the EU is using the border to try to change our policy. It is obviously unhappy that we are leaving and is doing everything possible. It is being helped by the Irish Government, but the Irish Government should be terribly worried that we will end up with no deal, which is not what anyone wants, because that would really hammer the Republic of Ireland. Varadkar and the Irish Government should get in there and use their position to get the European Union to see some common sense. Such a small proportion of total European Union trade relates to the Republic of Ireland, yet the Irish Government have got into a position where it is their country that the European Union is listening to.

There is a whole dishonesty about the debate in this Parliament, and I hope we do not see that. I mean that not in the sense of people being dishonourable, but in the sense that we are not really saying what we want to say. I hope that I am saying what I want to say: we should leave the customs union and the single market—that was what people voted for. The country will recognise the way in which the debate is now being pushed by those who fought so hard to remain, and people will see though that. We have to go ahead with getting out of the EU, getting our trade deals, getting our laws, and not being subject to the European Court of Justice, which we would have to be if we stayed in the customs union. I hope that today will be the preparation for what will be a very big and serious debate in a few weeks’ time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. A five-minute limit on each Back-Bench speech will now apply.

1.51 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow three such excellent speeches, two of which I agreed with and one that, as I think the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) will not be surprised to hear, I did not. However, I do agree with one point that she made. Right at the end, she mentioned a dishonesty in debate, and I take the tenor in which she made that point. Actually, Parliament is doing today exactly what it should do and teasing out the issues in these complex and important negotiations, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said.

The Select Committees are bringing before Parliament the hours and hours of evidence that we have gathered from expert witnesses. I know there is a suspicion of experts, but there are many people who want to share their thoughts, their expertise and the points that they had to get on the record before the Select Committees. It is right that those Committees should have called today’s debate via the Liaison Committee, because this is a very important issue. When the hon. Member for Vauxhall talks about dishonesty, let me say to her that the dishonesty is not facing up to the issues that we face. We must be able to discuss them, and part of the reason for today’s debate is that we are not having it in the heat of amendments to legislation, when we know there is enormous pressure on Members on both sides to vote one way or another. I hope that today’s debate can remain calm and rational, so that we can get the evidence out there. If there is any doubt about the amount of evidence, Members have only to look at the number of reports on the Table here in the Chamber or the number of reports tagged on today’s Order Paper.

Time is very limited and I do not want to repeat all the points that have already been made, but I want to say a few things, in particular to my party colleagues and party members out in the country, some of whom seem to think that it is an affront for Members such as myself and others with my views to be making these points today. First, the Prime Minister was very clear in both our manifesto and the Lancaster House speech when she talked about wanting a customs agreement. The manifesto talks about a “free trade and customs agreement”, and the Prime Minister said in the Lancaster House speech:

“I do want us to have a customs agreement with the EU. Whether that means we must reach a completely new customs agreement, become an associate member of the Customs Union in some way, or remain a signatory to some elements of it, I hold no preconceived position.”

Much has been said about free trade agreements and the fact that they will take some time to negotiate, but it is not just the new free trade agreements to be negotiated; it is the ones that we are currently party to that have to be renegotiated. That is a complex project. It will take a long time to make that pulling apart happen, and I do not think that the time necessary for it has been allocated by the Government.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I utterly agree with everything that my right hon. Friend has just said. I joined a free-trading Conservative party that was pro-business. Does she agree that inevitable delays and complexities, the additional form filling that is required and dead-weight costs on businesses can do nothing but reduce the competitiveness of British business, unless we have the kind of effective customs union that she is talking about?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The cost to business, as identified already by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), must not be forgotten. This is not just about costs for the Government; it is about costs for business.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con) rose—

Nicky Morgan: I give way to the former Trade Minister.

Mark Garnier: Just on a small technical point, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that a trade deal takes a long time to complete and negotiate, but the plan is to transfer across the existing trade deals that we
enjoy within the European Union at the early stage and then renegotiate at our leisure where we can improve them, so we will ensure continued business afterwards without deviation.

Nicky Morgan: I understand the point my hon. Friend has made; he is a former Minister and everything else. I will talk about this in a moment if I have time, but the trouble with it is that we have been saying, “The plan is...” for some time now. We had a speech last month from the Prime Minister and we had position papers last summer: “The plan is...”. Time is running out, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) is not in his place, but as he said, when we travelled to the United States with the Treasury Committee, the US was very clear: “Yes, you can have a free trade agreement. It’ll be on our terms.”

Let me talk about logistics. As I have said, part of today’s debate is about getting the evidence, and we took evidence in the Treasury Committee from Jim Harra, a senior official at Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, who said:

“The key challenge, for example, in ro-ro ports, in contrast with container ports, is that in a lot of them there are no port inventory systems in place.”

We have less than 12 months to go to March 2019 and not that much longer to December 2020, and no port inventory systems are in place. He also talked about ensuring that declarations can be linked

to the vehicle that is carrying the goods,”

so that they can

“flow off the ferry and we know what...lorry we need to check.”

The British Irish Chamber of Commerce has come up with a proposal for a new customs arrangement. Have the Government been exploring it? Much mention has been made of Northern Ireland, and for me this is a critical issue. I had the pleasure in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament of being a Treasury Minister. I was the Duties Minister, and I visited the Northern Ireland border. Other hon. Members will know far more about it than I do, but it is over 300 miles long and incredibly porous. Had it not been for the policemen I was with, I would not have known which side of the border I was on. It was impossible to tell. Realistically, how on earth is such a border going to be policed? This is not just about the economy; it is about the political and cultural sensitivities of the border. We have already heard about the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s conclusion about the aspirational aspects of the technology that might be needed.

This is a debate of the Government’s own making, because as we have heard, time is running out and silence on these important issues is no longer an option. It is completely right that Members of Parliament and Select Committees should ask questions about these issues. What are the Government’s plans? How are things going to work? We have to listen not just to those in the country, but to individuals and business in our constituencies. The Treasury Committee and the Select Committee on International Trade had a joint evidence session this week. When asked about the free trade agreements and the free trade policy that we are apparently going to pursue, Professor Patrick Minford, who many Members on my side of the House will say is somebody we should listen to, said:

“We don’t have any precedents for this.”

This country is being asked to experiment, at other people’s pleasure, with a free trade policy when we do not know what the costs will be for constituents and businesses in this country. I say to my party: if we undermine and ignore the evidence, the peace in Northern Ireland and the business and financial security of people in this country, we will not be forgiven for a generation.

1.59 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate, which was secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and other Chairs of Select Committees.

A number of issues have been raised. In the interests of time, I do not propose to go over them, but they include the issue of no new barriers, the wider issues of regulatory convergence, the need to continue the ease of our trade and the dream of independent free trade agreements closing the gap created by what we will lose as a result of leaving the European Union, the single market and the customs union.

I want to raise a few of the wider economic issues that have not so far been addressed in this debate. The predecessor to the EU customs union first came into being about 65 years ago with a treaty establishing the European Steel and Coal Community. Some people seem to think that that makes it an anachronism. There is also an argument that the UK is now mainly a services economy, so an agreement that eases trade in goods is no longer as relevant as one that eases trade in services.

Putting aside the fact that goods remain around half of UK exports and so are still important and essential in their own right, the argument fails to grapple with the complexity of the modern economy that any stark dividing line between goods and services is false. Being in the customs union has relevance for services as well as for goods.

The UK economy is bound up in a complex network of EU supply chains for producing intricate products such as cars and pharmaceuticals. A substantial share of the value of these goods, ranging from 20% to 40% across most regions, according to estimates from the UK Trade Policy Observatory, is the services that go into them. Therefore, when a car rolls off the production line in Sunderland, Ellesmere Port or Luton, the value of that car includes the cost of accountants, administrators and auditors who the car company employs in making it. These services are then exported indirectly when we sell these cars abroad. Therefore, it is not only the goods but indirect services exports that rely on a near seamless passage that the customs union provides.

Robert Neill: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Malhotra: I will not, unfortunately, because of the pressure of time.

Robert Neill: You will get an extra minute.

Seema Malhotra: Yes, all right, I will give way.
Robert Neill: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the linkage between goods and services. A customs union does not deal with the issue of services, but does she agree that services do benefit indirectly, because many goods are exported with a financial service product attached—an insurance policy attached to a car and other forms of warranty, for example? The two are inter-linked.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point and, indeed, takes my argument further. I thank him for his contribution.

The risk to these exports, both of goods and services, is not distributed evenly across the UK. The implications for regions in the UK, particularly the most affected regions, are stark. In Wales, the north-east and Yorkshire and the Humber—areas that can least afford an economic shock to their manufacturing bases—an estimated 55% to 60% of their indirect service exports goes to the EU, and they are therefore reliant on the customs union for efficiency and speed.

It would be a dereliction of our duty if we exposed regions, families and businesses to greater risk in a world that is already rife with uncertainty without a proper debate on the implications for their prosperity, especially as the most affected regions are also those least well positioned to respond to any shocks arising from leaving the customs union. As the City Region Economic and Development Institute at the University of Birmingham found, Brexit will aggravate, not reduce, inter-regional imbalances. Its research also found that the regions most exposed to Brexit are not remain-voting London and Scotland. For this risk of further damage, what do we have to look forward to in order to mitigate those effects? By the Government’s own analysis, whatever model for leaving the European Union that we take, there will be, at best, between 2% and 5% less growth over the next 15 years. That means lower wages than would otherwise have been the case, and lower tax receipts and therefore less in our public purse to redistribute resources to the very areas that expressed discontent in the referendum and, indeed, to go into our public services.

This issue is not just about economic divides. Perhaps I can come to my closing remarks with a few comments about Northern Ireland. It is clear to most—and I suspect even to the Government now—that there is no technological solution to achieving no hard border without infrastructure. The “Smart Border 2.0” report, which is often cited as an option, has rightly been acknowledged as insufficient by the Government. Perhaps I could quote from the report from the Exiting the European Union Committee. It says that “we remain of the view that we cannot see how it will be possible to maintain an open border with no checks and no infrastructure if the UK leaves the Customs Union and the Single Market.”

I support the motion before the House today, because the customs union is vital to ensure that the complex supply chains within our economy continue to function effectively. This is also an argument based not just on politics and ideology, but on academic research and evidence. Anyone with a genuine interest in greater equity in the distribution of economic gains in our country cannot take these warnings lightly. For Ireland, supporting membership of the customs union is also about accepting the reality that, without it, a border in Northern Ireland is eventually inevitable. I cannot vote in any way in this House other than the one that makes a border in Northern Ireland less likely to happen.

2.5 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I join all those who have spoken today, other than the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), and endorse and embrace pretty much everything that has been so ably said. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Nicky Morgan) said, this is not just a simple case of our having a debate, which of course we should have had some time ago in order to assist the Government in this extremely difficult process, but of having the debate that we should have had in the run-up to the EU referendum.

I do not know whether the good people of Vauxhall actually did sit and discuss the intricacies of the customs union and the single market. Perhaps they did. That might explain why, of course, they voted to remain in the European Union. What we are seeing—I am sorry that I am repeating myself here—is the dawning of a Brexit reality. In that reality, businesses the length and breadth of our country are worried. They are extremely worried, especially those in the manufacturing sector.

On Tuesday, a real-life business in my constituency, which employs 750 people, came to see me. Such is the atmosphere in this country that it has not allowed me to tell Members its name, because it is frightened of the sort of abuse that many Members on these Benches have received and to which we have become accustomed. We will not give up, and we will speak out, because it is not about us, but about the generations to come and indeed the people in our constituencies who now, in the real world, face the real possibility of losing their jobs.

What did this company tell me? It makes a world-leading medicine. I am enormously proud to have it in the borough of Broxtowe. The reality is that, as it uses specialised medicinal ingredients, it imports them into our country. In Broxtowe and Nottingham, it puts them altogether and makes a world-leading medicine. Some 60% of its exports go directly to the European Union. Tariffs do not concern it so much. They concern the car industry where margins are so tight that any imposition of a tariff simply will see those great car manufacturers, which employ 425,000 people—people, whom I am afraid, the hon. Member for Vauxhall, casts to one side—move their production and new lines to their existing facilities in countries such as France, Germany and other places.

Returning to the pharmaceutical company that came to see me, any delay at all of those basic ingredients will have a considerable effect on its ability to produce, and time costs money. Any delay also means that it has to look for warehouse spaces—and it is doing this now—so that it can stockpile. I am talking about the sort of expanse that we can barely begin to imagine. It is looking for warehouses so that it can store and stockpile both the ingredients and the finished products. It fears that any delay will affect its business of exporting into the European Union.

Albert Owen: As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I met some pharmaceutical companies. One thing they told us, which was quite stark, was that research and development
is done in this country, and manufacturing in the Republic of Ireland, and the product is then transferred back to the UK to go to mainland Europe. They will be paying tariffs perhaps half a dozen times, adding costs to our NHS.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman speaks with authority because he knows the reality. He will also know that pharmaceutical batches must be checked to ensure that the quality and ingredients are right. That work has to be done in a European Union country in order for those products to be sold within the European Union, so this pharmaceutical company is going to replicate exactly the same brilliant labs that it has in Broxtowe and in Nottingham over in Amsterdam. This is the stuff of madness. The company is looking at flying qualified, high-skilled technicians out to Amsterdam on a weekly, if not daily basis, to do the work there. Replication adds to costs, and I have no doubt that it will not be long before the senior managers simply say, “Why on earth are we doing it in the UK, facing the end of the customs union and the single markets, when we could simply go into another country in the European Union and replicate our manufacturing process there?”

Kevin Hollinrake: Is my right hon. Friend therefore proposing that we stay members not just of the customs union, but also of the single market?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely am. I made it very clear to my constituents when I stood for re-election in Broxtowe last June that I would continue to make the case for the single market and the customs union—oh, and by the way, for the positive benefits of immigration—and they were good enough to give me and our party their vote. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough said, each and every one of us must look deep into our hearts when deciding the future relationship that we will have with the European Union. It is imperative that we put our country and the best interests of our constituents first and foremost—and, in particular, over and above any ideological drive that too many people have—in this most critical of debates.

The final thing I want to say is this: I get rather agitated at the notion that we are about to be global Britain. Why? Because we are already global Britain. I had the great pleasure of going to the far east with David Cameron, and I went to China with George Osborne. Why did we go to these countries? To do trade. In fact, to do more trade; we already trade all around the world. That ability to trade should not be diminished in any way, and it will not be by our membership of the customs union. We have struck up well over 40 deals, and at the heart of those deals we made the case for free trade in a way in which no other European Union member state has done. We are recognised for our strong belief in free trade and we have achieved that by virtue of our membership of the customs union.

I am old enough to remember when we were described as the sick man of Europe, and we were. The reasons that we became such a hugely successful economy was because of our membership of the single market and the customs union. Other Members—especially my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who was undoubtedly around at the time—have referred to Margaret Thatcher’s great speech, when she not only described the single market, but was the finest exponent of it. She believed in the single market. As many of us now know, she promised the Prime Minister of Japan that our country would never leave the single market, and that is why the Japanese invested in our country on the scale that they did.

I hope that the House does not have to divide tonight; nobody wants that. But we all want the best deal for our country, and that is in the customs union—and, by the way, the single market.

2.13 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I will focus my remarks on the work of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee regarding our relationship with the European Union and the customs union, and on the impact that leaving them will have on British businesses.

A couple of weeks ago the Select Committee visited Norway, where we were looking at electric vehicles. Of course, while we were there, we discussed with the people we met the border between Norway and Sweden. Norway is not in the customs union, but Sweden is in the European Union and therefore part of the customs union. Trade is not frictionless along that border. There is physical infrastructure and there are sometimes queues. The goods trade between Norway and Sweden is worth £13 billion a year. Goods going through the port of Dover alone are worth about £120 billion a year, and trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is worth more than £5 billion a year. This is not straightforward. There are huge risks and costs of us coming out of the customs union.

My Committee has produced five specific reports about the effects of leaving the European Union, on the civil nuclear sector, aerospace, the automotive industry, pharmaceuticals, and the food and drink sector. We received almost 100 pieces of written evidence during our inquiry and took oral evidence from more than 30 witnesses. Pretty much every witness, apart from the chief executive of JD Wetherspoon, spoke of their fears and worries about leaving the European Union and specifically about leaving the customs union, which is why I am so pleased that we are having this debate.

The Committee heard time and again that any border delays would undermine just-in-time delivery systems; force companies to expand warehousing facilities massively, at a significant cost, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said so eloquently; and put at risk time-sensitive imports and exports, particularly of food, medical radioisotopes and many pharmaceutical products.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that the members of the International Trade Committee made a similar finding when we visited the border between Canada and the United States? We saw very long delays there, and that was between friendly countries. Transposing such a situation to Northern Ireland would be a nightmare, especially with all the rifles on the shoulders of border guards and so on.

Rachel Reeves: Yes. Of course, this is most keenly felt and apparent along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as other Members have pointed out. But this is an issue not just in Northern
Ireland, but at every port in the country. As an island and a trading nation, leaving the customs union will have a huge and devastating impact on us.

**Robert Neill:** To reinforce the hon. Lady’s point that her findings apply everywhere, is she aware that the report of the Select Committee on Justice about the Crown dependencies identified precisely the same issues? For example, avionics parts—a key part of the Isle of Man’s economy—are in international supply chains. Spec savers exports internationally from Guernsey into the EU, and fishermen in Jersey and Alderney need to land their fish in France because that is the way that it fits in with the real-time supply chain. All that is assisted only by being in the customs union.

**Rachel Reeves:** The hon. Gentleman and I have a long history, as we fought the Bromley and Chislehurst by-election against each other in 2006. Today, however, I cannot find a word on which I disagree with him; he is absolutely right. The work of his Select Committee and so many others mean that we can bring this evidence to the fore, and raise the concerns of businesses, the people who work in them and the trade unions in all our constituencies. That is why the work of Select Committees is so important, and it is also why this debate, which was called by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), is so important.

I will now touch on a few pieces of evidence given to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that really bring home what we are talking about, especially regarding the effects of which we are fearful. Honda, which produces cars in Swindon, said that just a 15-minute delay at the border would cost it £850,000 a year. If hon. Members multiply that by the number of minutes or hours for which goods and components might be delayed, and multiply that across the number of car and component manufacturers in the country, they will get a feel for the sort of impact that we are talking about. It is estimated that Ford would have to fill in 115,000 import declarations at a cost of £35 per declaration for imports from the European Union, resulting in a total cost of £4 million, as well as the additional administrative costs.

**Helen Goodman:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Rachel Reeves:** I will just make a little bit of progress.

Diageo uses 11% of Ireland’s cream output every year in the production of Baileys. That is quite a staggering statistic. Some 18,000 trucks cross the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland every year in the production of Baileys. Diageo estimates that delays at the border would cost it £1.3 million a year, and even greater costs in the supporting supply chains. It went on to say that even small hold-ups to the process would be a huge problem.

Both Nestlé and Honda said in evidence to us that companies produce for the market that they are supplying to. Therefore, even if we did secure free trade agreements with Asian and American countries, and others, we would not see a huge increase in jobs and investment here, at least in the sectors that we looked at. Ferrero Rocher told us that 5,000 trucks a year go between the UK and the rest of the European Union. It talked about costly delays and the effect on the freshness of its goods. Businesses said that border delays would be very expensive. Leaving the customs union, they told us, was about damage limitation rather than seeing and forging new opportunities ahead.

My own view is based on the evidence that the Committee has taken, which leads me to a very simple conclusion: we need to remain in a customs union to retain the benefits of frictionless trade that we enjoy today for the good of jobs and investment in our country.

2.20 pm

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I am delighted that this debate has been extended to 5 o’clock, but I am afraid that my duties as Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Northern Ireland Office mean that I will not be here for the wind-ups. I apologise to the House for that.

My constituency, as I have said many times in this place, voted more strongly than anywhere else in the country to leave the European Union, and I, as an individual, voted to remain. I suppose that I am therefore one of those whom the Father of the House teasingly described as someone who has undergone a damascene conversion. One of my constituents suggested that I had undergone a damascene conversion from kamikaze to life support when I voted to trigger article 50.

My starting point is the same as the point that I made when we were fighting the referendum campaign—we have to respect the result. That means that we have to define what we discussed during that campaign. In my constituency, as in many others up and down the country, the two defining points that we discussed were ending freedom of movement and being able to strike our own trade deals around the world. Those two things—although we may not have expressed it in these terms at the time—require us to leave the single market and to leave the customs union.

If we are to respect the way that people voted, it is impossible to get away from those positions, for two very simple reasons. First, freedom of movement is absolutely bound up with our membership of the single market. That point is probably more accepted by those who have called this debate than the second point. On the customs union, no one on any sensible side of the debate—certainly no one in my constituency—is arguing for a compromise in which we are unable to control our own trade policy but have to take the rules that the European Union makes. No one is suggesting that there is a compromise that both upholds the result of the referendum in allowing us to go and strike our own trade deals around the world and allows us to remain in the customs union. I simply do not see how today’s proposal would allow us to respect that.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** Many of my constituents say to me that they voted to join a common market. If there were a compromise that delivered a common market but took them out of the political institutions of the EU, they would accept that as an acceptable compromise, and it would bring together remainers and leavers.

**Matt Warman:** I would like to agree with my hon. Friend, in the sense that if the European Union were to offer an option that said, “Remain in the customs union and remain in the single market, but you don’t have to...”
have freedom of movement and you do have the ability to go and strike your own trade deals”, then a lot of us would think that that was a very attractive move. However, that would make it a better deal to be outside the EU than to be in it.

I simply do not see how it is a sustainable, coherent position to think that the European Union would offer us that sort of compromise, so we have to live, as Opposition Members have so often said, in the real world. That requires us to say that people did not vote for the European Court of Justice to continue to have its rulings being valid in this country when we play no part in that organisation, and people did not vote for us to have no remedies on our trade policy. What people voted for, whether some in this place like it or not, is a clean break, because that is what allows us to have the control that they wanted. Many Conservative Members accuse the Opposition of trying by subterfuge to force us to remain in the European Union. However, the more we pursue the line that we can remain in the customs union but also do our own trade deals, the more we not only undermine faith in the referendum result overall but undermine faith in democracy as a whole, and we have to preserve that above all else.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Rubbish!

Matt Warman: My right hon. Friend proclaims “Rubbish!”, from a sedentary position. I think he knows me well enough to know that I am not an ideological hard Brexiteer, by any means. However, surely we all have to accept that we should be ideological about preserving the primacy of democracy. If we in this place are not all democrats, then we have a real problem.

Anna Soubry rose—

Matt Warman: I give way to my right hon. Friend, who—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the right hon. Lady intervenes, can I make this point? People are perfectly entitled to intervene, but if they keep doing so, particularly those who have already spoken, they do so knowing that they are stopping other colleagues speaking. Let us be clear about that. Does the right hon. Lady still wish to intervene?

Anna Soubry: No.

Matt Warman: I was about to say that my right hon. Friend is talked of frequently in my constituency. I say gently to my own colleagues that democracy must come first.

2.27 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Two great problems have plagued Governments in this place for over 200 years—the Irish question and the European question. It takes a Government of some genius to bring those two questions down on their head simultaneously. I have been waiting a long time to say that.

I welcome this opportunity to confirm that my party’s policy is, and always has been, to stay in the customs union. We are a pro-European party—not blindly so, because we have long-standing criticisms of the European Union, but we have always been in favour of co-operating with people who share our views and our values. But that is all for a wider debate. Today I want to concentrate my remarks on the relationship with Ireland.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Hywel Williams: I will give way once.

Caroline Lucas: I am very grateful. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that generations to come may well look back at this moment and find it utterly incomprehensible that we could even have been considering sacrificing the Good Friday agreement on the altar of this ideologically driven Brexit? Five former Northern Ireland Secretaries have said a hard border threatens the very existence of the Good Friday agreement. Does he agree that that would be unforgivably reckless and careless?

Hywel Williams: As I said in an intervention, I have recently been to South Armagh with the Select Committee. I could scarcely spot the difference between the north and the south. The only difference was that the tarmac was slightly different, with the better tarmac being on the southern side. That is a light remark, but it does make the point that the Good Friday agreement has brought peace almost entirely to the island of Ireland. We gamble with that at our peril, and we will not be forgiven if it is lost. That is certainly the point made by my Irish friends. I should declare an interest: if I want to visit an easy-going and entertaining European capital, Dublin is a good deal closer to me than Cardiff or London, for that matter. My Irish friends tell me how much they value that link, and that is what I want to talk about.

I have been cautioned by Democratic Unionist party colleagues not to embroil myself in their domestic matters, but this is particularly relevant to north Wales and my Arfon constituency. There is an east-west element to the question of the border, as well as the north-south element between Northern Ireland and the Republic, as the Brexit Secretary acknowledged yesterday when he appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee. The north-south element gets the attention, but this is particularly relevant to north Wales and my Arfon constituency. There is an east-west element to the question of the border, as well as the north-south element between Northern Ireland and the Republic, as the Brexit Secretary acknowledged yesterday when he appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee. The north-south element gets the attention, but the trade between the UK and Ireland, and specifically for me the relationship between Wales and Ireland, is hugely important and larger.

The east-west trade between Irish and Welsh ports is much more significant than the north-south trade, though it does not have the same political significance, because
of the historical and tragic troubles they have had in the north of Ireland. The Secretary of State noted that the customs union is not only between the Republic and the UK, as there is also significant trade between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom via the Republic. It is a complex relationship.

We have heard a great deal about the potential problems in Dover, should there be border checks, of potential tailbacks all the way to London, with perishable goods spoiling and costs to business. The same could be said for Holyhead, though possibly at a slightly less intense level. I know that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) has pushed that matter very hard indeed and is always ready to make the point. I am glad to support him this afternoon. The same point could also be made about the link with Fishguard in south-west Wales.

The lack of attention to the Wales-Ireland link is significant for not only our local economies in the north-west but the Welsh economy in general. The problems are quite obvious. In Holyhead, there is absolutely no room at the port for the expansion required to deal with any sort of customs checks. That is a practical problem. The A55, which crosses north Wales, is not a good road in many ways. It has no hard shoulder and no crash barriers in many places. It is a designated Euroroute between Dublin and Moscow, and on to the Urals. There are only two roundabouts on that route between Dublin and Moscow, both of which are in north Wales: one in Llanfairfechan and one in Penmaenmawr. Indeed, we also have two very bad bridges over the Menai strait. Those sorts of practical problems really worry me when time is so short.

The Government and the European Union have provided us with A, B and C options, with A being a comprehensive deal, B being a particular deal for Northern Ireland and C being the rejected backstop of Northern Ireland staying within the customs union. The UK rejects the C option, and the A option of a comprehensive deal is very much favoured. The Secretary of State said yesterday that he reckoned there was a 90% chance of achieving a comprehensive deal—option A—with the European Union, but that leaves us with a 10% chance of option B. I worry that if we have a particular fix for the Northern Ireland problem, we will then need a particular fix for customs between the north and the south. As one former Taoiseach said, that might entail turning a blind eye.

I cannot see how we can have two competing customs regimes between two countries or two economic blocs. I asked the Secretary of State yesterday if he could name a pair of countries that have competing customs arrangements between them. He did not answer, and neither could Pascal Lamy when he was before us some time ago. For all those reasons, I think the customs union is the option to choose.

2.33 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): As we head towards our departure from the European Union in just under a year, I believe that our future trading arrangements are more important than ever. As deputy chairman of the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, I was involved in last week’s Commonwealth business forum, before the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which was an important event for discussing trade, especially in the light of Brexit. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade hosted the first ever Commonwealth Trade Ministers’ meeting, and last week the Prime Minister and Secretary of State announced £1.5 billion worth of commercial deals.

According to World Economics, the Commonwealth economy is bigger than that of the current eurozone, while intra-Commonwealth trade has grown faster than the global average over the past 10 years. I fundamentally believe that the diversity of the Commonwealth is a strength in itself, with half of the top 20 global emerging cities within the group. There are 2.4 billion people in the Commonwealth, of which more than 60% are under the age of 29. It is worth remembering, in terms of opportunity for British business, that the middle class of India alone is bigger than that of Europe.

Even the European Commission has conceded that 90% of global economic growth in the next 10 to 15 years is expected to be generated outside of Europe. The Commonwealth’s largest members account for a quarter of the G20 and a fifth of all global trade, meaning that millions of jobs are directly affected through trade between these countries. Since the EU referendum, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade have been building links with the rest of the world, which is a positive step towards higher levels of economic growth. That leadership will place the UK in as strong a position as possible when we eventually leave the EU.

So why should we avoid remaining in a customs union with the EU? The answer is very simple and it is borne out by the facts. The Government have set out to ensure that we are a truly global Britain. As we have heard, remaining inside a customs union with the EU would prevent the UK from committing to that agenda and striking lucrative free trade agreements with countries across the world. Recent data from the World Bank show that the EU27’s share of world GDP has fallen from 25% to 18% in the last 10 years alone. I simply cannot understand why some colleagues would prefer to remain within a customs union with a bloc that is declining in its share of global trade.

It is in the EU’s interests not to impose tariffs and barriers to trade, especially as EU members continue to sell more goods to the UK than we do to them. That point is particularly pertinent when stood next to the fact that the proportion of our exports going to the EU27 has fallen from 54% to 43% in the last decade alone, at a time when our trade with the Commonwealth has increased.

Membership of a customs union restricts a country’s right to trade freely with third countries. Free trade agreements are not, I concede, easy to negotiate, as we saw with the comprehensive economic trade agreement between the EU and Canada. Many of us remember the Belgian region of Wallonia almost unilaterally collapsing that painstakingly negotiated free trade agreement. I for one am not prepared to allow future growth in the UK to be hobbled by a regional Government in another EU country. The possibility of being forced to wait for regional Parliaments in 27 other EU countries to ratify a free trade agreement is wholly unacceptable in today’s world.

I would like for a moment, as a former Northern Ireland Minister, to pause and think about Northern Ireland, which was one of the reasons I voted to remain.
I agree with the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) that we cannot allow the tail to wag the dog, and I very much hope that the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Dublin will in future work collaboratively with both the UK Government and the EU to resolve this. We do not want a hard border, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister has been clear that it would be unacceptable to break up the UK’s common market by having a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea. We share the same policy goals even if they are achieved by different means.

The British people voted to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016. As someone who campaigned and voted to remain, I was naturally disappointed with the result. However, it is up to us, as representatives, to respect and implement the wishes of the public. I do not believe it is feasible or credible that, when the British people voted to leave the European Union, they did so in the hope that we would remain within the customs union, and I simply do not buy into the idea that people did not know what they were voting for. I find that argument incredibly condescending.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I fully associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) when she opened the debate and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) when he put the case about what the public voted for. Had there been a very clear exposition of the either/or position, we could say that, but it was not clear at all, and now is the time for clarity. I want to focus on the practical issues facing this country if we leave the customs union. The Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, is a cross-party Committee made up of Members from four parties in this House—Members who voted both Brexit and remain and whose constituents voted similarly differently. Yet as a Committee we have been a very clear exposition of the either/or position, and make sure that we have a serious discussion.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) spoke about what the public voted for. Had there been a very clear exposition of the either/or position, we could say that, but it was not clear at all, and now is the time for clarity. I want to focus on the practical issues facing this country if we leave the customs union. The Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, is a cross-party Committee made up of Members from four parties in this House—Members who voted both Brexit and remain and whose constituents voted similarly differently. Yet as a Committee we have produced a series of reports, two of which I want to talk about today, that highlight the practical challenges facing this country.

The first report was on the customs declaration service. Testing of that system, which is to replace the outdated customs handling of import and export freight—CHIEF—system to ensure we have a customs declaration system fit for purpose, is only now just under way. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs estimates that the volume of customs declarations per year could rise by 200 million, from 55 million in 2015 to 255 million, and that the number of traders making declarations could increase from 141,000 to 273,000. We will need border checks for people and goods—we heard a lot from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on this; we will see increased costs for businesses and Governments, as others have touched on; and we will see enormous delays at the border.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend’s Committee looked at the cost and number of officials we will need at the border after Brexit?

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In another report, published last December, we looked at Brexit and the border—I say “looked at”, but the situation is not static; we are working closely with sister Committees, particularly the Treasury Committee, with which we are doing some joint work on the cost of Brexit. We need to look at the wider cost and what Departments are having to do to implement these new systems and employ new staff.

HMRC has told us very candidly that it does not expect, as the right hon. Member for Loughborough highlighted, to have any additional border infrastructure in place by next March, yet other countries are planning for this already. In the Netherlands and Ireland, they are buying up land and planning to build facilities to do those necessary checks. Pieter Omtzigt, the Dutch Parliament’s Brexit rapporteur, has said that his country is “preparing for the stated policy of the UK government” and that it needs “hundreds of new customs and agricultural inspectors”. He says: “if we need” that, “the British are going to need thousands”. Already this week, we have seen Border Force advertising to recruit 550 staff—in addition to staff it has already had to recruit and will have to recruit again in the future.

Extraordinarily, a response to our work from the border planning group, which comprises a number of Departments, told our Committee there was no evidence to suggest that the risk profile of goods would change on day one. It went on:

“The Government is reviewing the specific areas where the risk posed by these imports could change, both immediately following EU exit and over time, and the measures that should be put in place to address this”—should be put in place! We are one year away from Brexit. Even with a transition period, it will be enormously challenging—in fact impossible—to deliver the infrastructure needed to make sure that our country is safe.

We need full clarity on the costs. The Treasury Committee and the Public Accounts Committee are pressing the Treasury and other bits of Government about what the total cost will be. Let us be clear: there will be additional costs to the financial settlement, which will be only a small portion of the overall costs. That is the cost we will have to pay for the political exit, but there are the on-costs—the lost opportunity costs. We need to see the full bill and to have it analysed by the National Audit Office. We need to have that before any meaningful vote in the autumn. We are still woefully short on such
information, but the right hon. Member for Loughborough and I are on the march, so I warn the Government: they had better be prepared.

As with the emperor’s new clothes, we need to call it out. Wishful thinking is not enough. It is not about ideology or romance, though many of us hold ideological positions. We need clarity. We need a decision so that business, and indeed the Government, can prepare. We need a customs union—we need the customs union. The alternative is chaos, cost, confusion and huge damage to the UK economy.

2.44 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I see that a Treasury Minister is responding to this debate, not a Trade Minister. This is a new phenomenon: when the Government are in trouble, they no longer uncork the Gauke; they un-shell the Mel.

I do not know about the emperor’s new clothes, but I feel I am living in an Alice in Wonderland world. I am learning more and more about Brexit every day. I have learned that we can be out of the EU but in the single market; that we can be out of the EU but in the customs union; that we can be in the EU and have a blue passport made by a British company; that we can be out of the EU and have a blue passport made by a French company; that the Windrush scandal is the European’s fault because they are in favour of people presenting papers, and that Brexiteers are very pro-immigration; that there will no longer be a bonfire of EU regulations—but it’s all right because we are going to adopt them all; that we are not trading enough with the EU so we are going to make it more difficult to trade with the EU; and that the Good Friday agreement is a waste of time going to make it more difficult to trade with the EU; and that the will of the people, even though during the referendum, the only reason we had better be prepared. Wishful thinking is not enough. It is not about

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): In Mid Norfolk, where my constituents voted to leave, the majority opinion on the doorstep was: “Mr Freeman, I wanted to be in the single market, not in a political union. It was Mrs Thatcher who took us into the single market. I want to be in the single market, not in the political union.” Does my right hon. Friend agree with my constituents?

Mr Vaizey: That is absolutely right. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), in his excellent memoirs, says he parted company with the Brexiteers, having been a Eurosceptic, because he supported a free trade arrangement with the EU but did not want to leave the EU in order to cause damage to our economy—I have not put that very well, but the key point is that, if we are to leave the EU, which we are, and we are a free and sovereign nation, we can then make decisions in the interests of our economy; and if it is in the interests of our economy to be a member of a customs union, it should be possible for Parliament to debate that and make that decision without being accused of betraying the will of the British people. The people who are passionate about Brexit have tipped over into an ideological fervour where anything that involves Europe in any shape or form is wrong.

I have come here to ask un-shell the Mel some questions to educate myself, because I want to make the decision that is best for my country. I am one of the Prime Minister’s trade envoys to Vietnam, so I know a tiny bit about trade. If it is best to leave the customs union and make up for the economic impact of doing so by means of free trade deals, can my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury tell me when we are planning to sign these new trade deals, who we are planning to sign them with, what their value to our economy will be and what the related issues will be? For example, I have read in the newspapers that one aspect of trade deals with countries such as India and Australia—they are both countries that I love—will be more relaxed immigration and visa rules. I do not have a particular problem with that, but is my right hon. Friend aware of that issue, and how does he think it will go down with the public?

When it comes to regulatory standards, I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), although I do not have a problem with food standards in America, Australia, we do not see a lot of Australians or Americans dropping down with food poisoning. Given that food standards in those countries are different from ours, are the Government content to sign up to them? Let us face it; one of the reasons we have tariffs is that there is an element of protectionism in every economy. What will be the reaction of sectors of our economy, such as agriculture, when we sign these trade deals?

I would like to know the Government’s view on the cost of leaving the customs union, and the impact of doing so on sectors that are important to our economy, such as cars, agriculture, pharmaceuticals and chemicals. The hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)—the excellent Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee—has done a lot of this work for the Government. Perhaps the Minister could help me, as a bear of little brain, with something else. As far as I am aware, staying in the customs union will allow us to export goods to the European Union without tariffs, but it should leave us free to negotiate free trade deals outside of those goods. It should, indeed—this is particularly important given that services now account for 80% of our economy—allow global Britain to negotiate service agreements with the US, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe pointed out.

The Minister could perhaps help to explain the paradox of how Germany, which is a member of the customs union, has managed to increase its exports to China so significantly while it has been anchored and shackled to this protectionist racket. Why is Germany exporting five times as much to China as Britain is doing? Is it simply that Germany makes a hell of a lot of effort to export goods? If we made a hell of a lot of effort while we were still in the customs union, perhaps we could continue to increase our exports to China.

2.51 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I have sat and listened to some expert speakers this afternoon. As a Member who was elected only last summer, I do not pretend to
be an expert on Brexit or its implications, but the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) has just said it all: we have all learned an awful lot over the last 12 months or more. We have to be very good listeners, and that is what I have tried to do since my election.

I have heard from many hon. Members on Select Committees who have listened to businesses. Every single Member who has spoken and quoted what businesses are telling them has supported our remaining in the customs union. Less than two weeks ago, I held a Brexit seminar with local businesses in my constituency, rural High Peak in Derbyshire. I heard their huge concerns not only about leaving the customs union in a year's time, but about the impact of the uncertainty that is being caused by Brexit and the possibility that we will not be able to continue in the customs union.

Leaving the customs union will slow up the supply chains of these companies. They have just-in-time procurement, and if they cannot manage that, it will slow the whole manufacturing process and increase their costs. If we have hard borders, their costs will increase further not only because of tariffs, but because of paperwork and bureaucracy. That does not just apply to their trade with European Union countries; much of their trade goes through EU countries, even if it ends up elsewhere in the world. Any impact on our borders with the EU will affect our trade elsewhere.

Such costs will put us at a serious competitive disadvantage to companies in other European countries, and those companies are not slow to take that advantage over British companies and approach their customers. My companies tell me that they are already losing contracts because, when they go to bid, they are asked, “Can you guarantee that you will remain a member of the customs union, and that you will be able to maintain frictionless trade and supply chains?” Less than 12 months from our departure from the EU, my companies cannot give that guarantee.

At least four companies in my constituency have already had to set up branches in European Union countries; the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) mentioned that issue. Ireland has a significant backlog of companies seeking to register for VAT in the Republic of Ireland, because so many companies are having to do so. Given the barriers to trade that may come with us leaving the customs union, we will end up with more and more jobs having to go from the UK to EU countries because it makes sense for companies to trade from there.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is making excellent points. Is she also worried about the impact on inward investment? When the Japanese ambassador who represents companies as large as Nissan and Hitachi says that the customs union is important for Japanese trade, does that spell out a bad long-term future for us?

Ruth George: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and global companies in my constituency say that their head offices have put a kibosh on any inward investment into companies at UK sites until they know the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. That is holding them back compared with other sites in the rest of the world, and it is having a long-term impact on valuable manufacturing jobs and other high-skilled jobs in my constituency.

Whatever my constituents voted for when they voted—by a very small majority—to leave the European Union, they did not vote to give British companies a competitive disadvantage compared with those in Europe, or for jobs to be transferred from the UK to overseas, as is already happening at companies in my constituency. As the negotiations proceed, and as we vote in this place on the Brexit deal, I intend to keep listening, particularly to those businesses that will be most affected and feel that they have the least voice in this process. We must ensure that whatever deal we get will work for my constituents and the businesses that employ them.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): On Monday, Michel Barnier laid bare for all to see what staying in the customs union would mean for the UK: effectively staying in the EU. In his speech he mentioned the need for state aid rules, and that would probably mean no bailing out of the steel industry or any other industry that needs it in future. I remind hon. Members of the situation of a Shetland leasing and processing company that was run by Shetland Islands Council. More than a decade ago it fell foul of the European Commission when a Labour MEP reported it for operating outside state aid rules.

Mr Barnier also mentioned the need for tax rules. All those who hoped for the end of taxation on women’s sanitary products, and thought that Brexit could finally make that happen, might be very disappointed. He also talked about the need for shared social and environmental standards, which would mean that although people had thought that live animal exports could be banned, that would not be likely to happen. He spoke of the need to clarify the role of the European Court of Justice, and, yes, that probably means that he wants the EU Court of Justice to continue to rule over our laws. If hon. Members want an example of that, I refer them to the Factortame case.

When I knocked on the doors of my constituents, I found that people were absolutely sick of an EU over which they have virtually no say making the laws that govern them. Last month, the Prime Minister clearly said that “the jurisdiction of the ECJ in the UK must end.” I wholeheartedly agree; let us make it so.

Nicky Morgan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Murray: I will not give way because other Members wish to speak. I am really sorry.

The worst of all possible scenarios would be one in which we had to abide by and be ruled by the European Union, but without any say. I wonder how long it will be before we start hearing suggestions about EU access to our fishing grounds—my fishermen—to pay for trade. How long will it be before we hear what the cost of staying in such a customs union will be? No doubt we will still have to pay a divorce bill, but on top of that, if people voted for a customs union, we might face an annual bill for effectively staying in.
The Prime Minister has always maintained that no deal is better than a bad deal. I can think of no worse deal than effectively staying in the EU with all the costs, but no say over it. That would also be a massive betrayal of the British people, who voted to leave. South East Cornwall voted to leave for the reasons I have outlined, and Cornwall voted to leave. Most importantly, the whole country voted to leave, and to do anything else would be a massive betrayal of the people we are supposed to represent. Brexit means Brexit; leave means leave. We just need to get on with it.

3 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): To me, this debate means more than just customs and borders; it means jobs and investment in my constituency.

I live on the frontline of Brexit—my constituency is on the frontline. I am closer to the great city of Dublin than the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), and over the years, European Union and Irish politics has meant a lot to people in north-west Wales, because we are linked to the people of Ireland and the people of the European Union.

Of course, the Republic of Ireland joined the European Union at the same time as the United Kingdom. We had, and still have, a common area of trade between the two countries, but if we were to leave without the protection that a customs union could give us, we would have a completely separate entity for the first time in our recent history.

The amount of European trade that comes through the port of Holyhead in my constituency is second only to the amount that goes through Dover. Some 400,000 lorries enter and exit the port annually. It is the gateway to the United Kingdom from the Republic of Ireland, and 11,000 jobs are directly or indirectly supported by the Welsh ports that handle goods from the European Union.

I hear talk about “Project Fear”, as we did with other referendums, but the reality is that many Irish shipping companies, hauliers and agencies are preparing contingency plans as we speak to reroute trade directly from the ports of Cork and Dublin straight to mainland Europe, bypassing the Welsh ports, the English ports and the Scottish ports. That trade would take with it the job opportunities and investment that make the United Kingdom a strong trading nation.

The relationship is very special, and people I speak to in the Republic of Ireland care about what withdrawal and exit from the European Union would mean for us, because it will have a severe impact on us and on them. The customs union would provide a lifeboat for the United Kingdom come Brexit. I think that the Prime Minister really believes that, but has been forced by forces within the Conservative party to take a different route. That route would be disastrous for the port communities, the regional economy in my area, and the entire United Kingdom.

I want to deal head on with the issue of the will of the people. My constituency was split down the middle in the 2016 EU referendum, with a small majority—just over 700—in favour of leaving the EU. I spoke to a lot of people during that period, and many of them told me that one reason why they wanted to leave the European Union—these were older constituents—was that it had become too big and cumbersome, and was not the Common Market that they voted for in the 1970s. Well, a customs union is very similar to the Common Market—

Helen Goodman indicated dissent.

Albert Owen: It is slightly different, but it needs arbitration—

Robert Neill rose—

Albert Owen: I will take one intervention—from the hon. Gentleman.

Robert Neill: I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman makes that point. My constituency voted to remain by 521 votes, and my experience in London was exactly the same: people voted to leave the political institution. They actually believed in the market—that was what we signed up for, and it is what they will be content to remain in. It is actually misleading for any person, either in this House or elsewhere, to hijack what was a vote on a simple yes/no issue otherwise.

Albert Owen: I am grateful for that intervention. I am making the point that the customs union replicates the Common Market, and I feel that continuing in a customs union will give my constituents the job security that they need.

To return to the will of the people, the Prime Minister called the 2017 general election—the hard Brexit general election—so that she could boost her majority in the House of Commons. She failed to do that—in fact, she lost her majority—and she now relies on a party that represents a part of the United Kingdom that voted to remain in the European Union. That is significant. In the previous general election, I had a very small majority, and I told people that I would come to this House to fight for their jobs and investment, and for what I feel is best for the people of Ynys Môn. My majority, unlike the parliamentary majority of the Prime Minister and the Conservative party, went up.

I believe that the customs union is right for this country. I also believe that we should go further, but I am a realist. I want to unite the people of this divided United Kingdom and I believe that the customs union could be the symbol to do that, because while we could leave certain aspects of the European Union, we could remain in the customs union, trading freely with our European neighbours. That would also not deter us from trading with other countries. We heard from the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), that Germany is increasing its trade with India, for example, and we can do the same. An outward-looking United Kingdom in the customs union could be of benefit to us. There could be a positive double whammy of our remaining within the customs union and trading freely with my friends in the Republic of Ireland, thereby benefiting my constituents, and that, I believe, is in the national interest of the whole United Kingdom.

3.6 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I have a confession to make: when I voted in the 2016 referendum, I did not spend a great deal of time thinking about the customs union, rules of origin or other such matters. In that regard, I suspect that I am not alone in the House
or in the country. I do not believe that many people gave a lot of thought to our place in the customs union, because very few leave campaigners mentioned leaving it. Indeed, one of the few direct references that I could find was in an article from 2012 in *The Mail on Sunday*, in the name of the now Secretary of State for International Trade. A copy of the article is still on his website as I make my remarks. He wrote:

“I believe that the best way forward is for Britain to renegotiate a new relationship with the European Union—one based on an economic partnership involving a customs union and a single market in goods and services.”

That sounds like a good way forward for my constituents, and I want to make a similar case today.

The last two years have been a crash course in customs and borders policy. At the centre of my education has been the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a Member. My view is that in this House we should make policy based on evidence. I urge my hon. Friend for South East Somerset to read some of the reports. I understand the importance of the fishing industry to her constituents, and she needs to understand the importance of the chemical, pharmaceutical and car industries to the north-west. The reality is that if we do not negotiate some form of agreement that leads to a European economic area-style—

**Mrs Sheryll Murray:** It is Cornwall, not Somerset.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray)—I am corrected.

Pharmaceuticals, car manufacturing, agriculture, food manufacturing, the energy sector and the nuclear sector are absolutely key to the north-west. The Government’s own analysis shows that if we do not have an EEA-style agreement, there will be a 12% reduction in GDP growth in the north-west. If I am to represent my constituents, I have to vote in a way that supports their interests—that is what I am elected to do. A decision was taken to leave, but the question of how we leave was delegated to the House. I am not a delegate; I am a representative for the interests of my constituents.

**Anna Soubry:** Does my hon. Friend share my concern that so many Members do not even know what the customs union is? For example, while we have heard today that there are no other customs unions in the world, there are 12. As for state aid rules, we now know that the Government said on Monday that they would adopt all the state aid rules that we currently have as a member of the European Union.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s intervention.

Let me explain why the customs union is so important. There is evidence that the crankshaft of a Mini crosses the English Channel three times on a 2,000-mile journey before the car is even finished. It is first cast in France, before being sent to Warwickshire to be milled into shape. Once it is complete, it is sent to Munich to be added to the engine. Finally, it is sent back to Oxford, where the engine is installed in the car.

The Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), spoke eloquently about the additional costs to the motor manufacturing sector of not being party to a customs agreement. We may call it a partnership or a union, but I am not bothered about what it is called. It is the outcome that I want to achieve, and that outcome is what leave campaigners promised to my constituents: free and frictionless trade. That must be delivered, and if the way to deliver it involves leaving the political institutions of the EU while remaining in the single market and the customs union, I will support that.

As for all this guff about being a rule taker, if we want to export to any other country in the world, we must export according to that country’s rules. If other countries want to export to us, they must accept our rules. It is in our interests to have aligned rules. In fact, much of the body of our rules is global regulation, as is made clear in the BEIS Committee’s report on the aerospace sector. In many cases, we are talking about not EU standards but international standards.

Most of the countries involved in the free trade deals that have been held up by leave campaigners are covered by our membership of the European Union. If we are part of the single market and a customs union, we may be able to access to the 32 Commonwealth countries that already have free trade deals with the EU. It will be much easier for us to roll over our existing free trade deals, which is the Government’s aim—I support it. Only 12% of countries do not have current free trade agreements with the EU or agreements that are being negotiated with the EU. It makes absolute sense for us to consider an EEA or EFTA-style agreement that would allow us to take back control of fisheries and agriculture, provide a brake on immigration and take us out of the jurisdiction of the European Court, but would be a recognised and acknowledged partnership.

3.13 pm  
**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach).

I agree with much of what has been said today, but I want to talk specifically about my own region, because nowhere in Britain will be harder hit by Brexit than the north-east. It is projected that as a result of the Government’s preferred outcome of a comprehensive free trade agreement, growth in the north-east could take a 11% hit, whereas if we ended up with the alarmingly possible no-deal scenario, there could be a staggering 16% hit.

We are significantly more exposed to the risks of a bad deal—or, indeed, no deal—than other parts of the country. The north-east is the only region in England with a consistent surplus in goods and services trade with the EU. We export 60% of our goods and services to European markets, which is a larger proportion than any other region. Many thousands of valuable local jobs rely on a good Brexit deal that would secure frictionless, two-way access between Britain and the EU. Without that access, those jobs will be at risk, and given that we have one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, that is something that our local economy simply cannot afford.
Helen Goodman: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Is she as alarmed as I am that those projections would result in unemployment in our region rising to 20%, meaning 200,000 people without work?

Catherine McKinnell: It does not bear thinking about. I and my hon. Friend are not alone in our concerns. Last July, when the North East chamber of commerce, which represents more than 3,000 businesses of all sizes across the region, conducted a survey of its members, 88% of respondents said that they wished to remain in some kind of single market and customs union. Unsurprisingly, the proportion is even higher among those who export solely to the EU.

The confusion and uncertainty is particularly felt by small and medium-sized enterprises in the north-east, especially those that currently export only to the EU and have no idea what the future holds. The situation has certainly not been improved by rumours that the Department for International Trade will in future provide support only to firms with a turnover of more than £4 million. I hope that the Minister will disabuse people of that concern.

The chief executive of the North East chamber of commerce, James Ramsbotham, wrote to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in February to express his concerns about the forecasted harmful effects of Brexit on the north-east and the Government’s strategy to mitigate them. More than two months after he wrote that letter, he is still waiting for a reply. It is worth quoting from his letter at length:

“...I was not surprised that the biggest potential impact is on North East England. As you know, we are the region with the best record at trading with the rest of the EU: an achievement delivered by many Chamber members. It is to be expected that anything which makes doing business with Europe harder will have a greater impact here. I am, however, very disturbed that Government has so far failed to adequately allay the obvious concerns this has created among our members, even before these assessments became public.

You will recall the Government was elected last June on a manifesto that said closing the gap between London and other parts of the UK is ‘the biggest prize in Britain today’, a ‘great endeavour’, and that the Conservative Party was ‘determined to lead the way in the next Parliament’. These forecasts suggest the gap will not reduce but grow significantly wider. If there are figures being shared around Whitehall that suggest your Government’s figures being shared around Whitehall that suggest your Government’s record at trading with the rest of the EU: an achievement delivered by many Chamber members. It is to be expected that anything which makes doing business with Europe harder will have a greater impact here. I am, however, very disturbed that Government has so far failed to adequately allay the obvious concerns this has created among our members, even before these assessments became public.

I assume that Government must expect a better outcome from Brexit than that indicated by these forecasts, otherwise you would not be going through with this plan. Given the manifesto commitments mentioned above, I also assume that you expect it to be at least as good for North East England, if not better, than for London. I therefore assume you must have some evidence to support this. It is beyond time for some frank communication from Government so we can understand the basis of this confidence.

In light of these forecasts, Government should re-think its position on leaving the Customs Union. It seems clear that to do so will exacerbate the risks to the economy, particularly in our region. The freedom to pursue independent trade deals with other countries will present opportunities—but it will also present significant risks, involve great complexity and require huge capacity building. We have not yet seen any evidence to suggest that the opportunities can genuinely be greater than the negative impact of disrupting trade with our nearest markets.

If there is sufficient evidence to show there will be benefits from leaving the Customs Union, then there should be consideration of extending the implementation period. The time to put in place the capacity to deliver such trade deals, and the time for businesses to adjust to new terms of trade and respond to a signal that they should prioritise different markets, is perilously short.

In the meantime, we should be seeing significant investments going in to the support structures to help businesses make these adjustments, and in to the agencies that must manage major new processes—not least HMRC. At present we do not see this and businesses have very limited sources of expert advice available.”

It is difficult to imagine a more damning assessment of the Government’s approach. It is shocking that these calls for clarity, from a body that speaks on behalf of the north-east’s business community, have so far been ignored. I fear that that confirms that the Government do not have our region’s best interests at heart, or that they simply have their head in the sand.

I want to end by asking the Minister a fundamental question: how do the Government intend to close the gap between London and the north-east when all the evidence suggests that their Brexit policy—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): As a remainer and a democrat, I must respect the result of the referendum. Membership of the customs union is possible only for member states of the EU. This was not in any doubt at the time of the referendum; David Cameron said as much on “The Andrew Marr Show” during the penultimate weekend of the campaign. He said: “We cannot leave the EU and remain in the customs union”.

However, that does not mean that we cannot negotiate a deal with the EU to keep trade as frictionless as possible, and the UK Government have put forward proposals to that end. Whether it is called a customs arrangement or a customs union, I do not really mind the label as long as it achieves the shared goals of frictionless trade and as few barriers as possible.

I want to talk about some of the concerns raised by the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), and me as a member of that Committee when we looked into the details and practicalities that will face us if we do not have a firm and solid customs agreement with the European Union. In 2015, roughly 55 million customs declarations were made by 141,000 traders. It is predicted in the reports that we have received, however, that we could see a fivefold increase in the number of declarations needing to be processed after Brexit. That would involve up to 255 million declarations, which would put a great deal of additional pressure and strain on HMRC and on its new customs declaration service’s systems.

Even allowing for a transitional period to be agreed and in place, we are still working to a tight timetable for putting in place an operational system that traders here in the United Kingdom and abroad will be able to use. The planning for the introduction of the customs declaration service—CDS—system was put into action in 2013-14, before Brexit became a reality, although the planning to account for the increased numbers is obviously a direct consequence of the Brexit decision. There is also uncertainty over the investment in the current customs handling of import and export freight—CHIEF—system, which requires around £7 million if it
is to serve as a back-up, just in case the CDS system is not ready when we hit the Brexit date and agreements are not in place.

HMRC has acknowledged in the Public Accounts Committee that there are four main areas of risk. They involve the integration of all the CDS components, testing to ensure that the system can handle 255 million declarations a year, migrating registered users to the new system and ensuring that users are ready to make declarations on the new system. HMRC will not know until July this year whether the system will work as intended. That is barely a year before the first traders will begin to use it.

I therefore reiterate to the House the recommendations agreed by the Public Accounts Committee that we believe will help to rectify the situation. First, the Treasury must provide sufficient funding for the back-up CHIEF system and ensure that the CDS is properly funded. Second, we need to ensure that there is a fully fleshed-out contingency plan to match the funding for the CHIEF system. Finally, we need to ensure that HMRC has everything it needs to ensure that the affected businesses can be informed of how all this will affect them. That includes businesses here in the United Kingdom and our trading partners around the world.

We have already touched on the effect of Brexit on our borders, especially in Northern Ireland, so I will not labour that point. I will simply reiterate the point made by others that we are committed to maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom and that we must have an agreement that respects the Good Friday agreement in Ireland.

I want to comment briefly on the tone of our past debates. Today's debate has been a lot more constructive than some of our past debates on the European Union, but we should not forget some of the pessimism that was rife just before Christmas, when the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin)—who is not in her place—intervened on me multiple times to say that the Brexit negotiations were a mess and that we were in a constitutional crisis. I have to remind the House that only a day later the Prime Minister reached an agreement establishing the financial settlement with the EU and ensuring that EU and UK citizens' rights would be respected, that the UK would have territorial integrity and that the Good Friday agreement would be respected.

None of our constituents voted to be poorer, and none of them wanted there to be more barriers between ourselves and our international trading partners. We do not mind the labels or the mechanisms, but I know that my constituents want a customs system that they can rely on, that respects the United Kingdom's integrity and that will allow them to prosper and be better off than they are today.

3.24 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I begin by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for securing today's debate, which has been incredibly important, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for liberating me to speak. It was extremely generous of him, and I intend to make full use of it.

I want to do something unusual in my new free-speaking, freewheeling role and agree with one of the things said by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). She said that there has been a great deal of dishonesty in this debate, and she is completely right. It is pretty much the only thing that I agree with her on, but dishonesty has been the hallmark of the Brexiteers' arguments before, during and after the referendum. I am sorry to break with the more consensual, collegiate tone that many Members have struck, but we need a bit of truth telling in this debate. We need to be clear about the risks that we face as a country and clear about some of the fibs that were told to the country during the process.

As a former shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and as someone in the Labour party who feels a huge degree of pride about all we did to bring about an end to 30 years of civil war in a part of our country, we cannot countenance any return to any hard border in Northern Ireland. It would be utterly unconscionable for this place to allow that to happen. When the Chief Constable of the Police Service in Northern Ireland is warning us all publicly—a pretty remarkable thing for him to do—that we risk the return of a hard border, that would jeopardise the safety and security of his officers and of the people of Northern Ireland and when that view is shared across the political divide in Northern Ireland, this place must listen.

The situation was not discussed prior to the referendum, when it was not clear that we were going to jeopardise peace in Ireland. If there is to be any sort of harder border in Northern Ireland, it is now clear that we run the risk of jeopardising that peace. That is the first and most important thing that I have to say, and that alone should cause us to pause and say, “We must stay in the customs union and the single market.” The truth is that staying in the customs union is insufficient to guarantee that we will not, over time, have a return to a hard border on the island of Ireland. Regulatory divergence unfolding over a longer period will be the one thing—more than the short-term effect of customs tariffs at the border—that will guarantee the return of the hard border, which cannot be countenanced by this place. If we allow it to happen, we would be betraying the people of the Northern Ireland and the national interests of this country.

Let me turn briefly to the economic effects of Brexit, because we need some truth telling there, too. Brexit is already damaging the economic this country’s wellbeing. The International Monetary Fund said just this week that the only G7 country that will not grow at anything like the almost 4% that the world is predicted to grow at over the next period is the UK, and its view is that that is due to Brexit. The Office for Budget Responsibility, the OECD and the Government hold the same view. The Government’s own projections clearly show that with the very best outcome, which is staying in the single market and the customs union, we will still see a reduction in GDP of around 2%, which is equivalent to the change we saw after the 2008 crash.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Brexiteers’ claim that we have to leave the customs union to grow our trade with the rest of the world is just grossly misleading? Germany exports £77 billion to China against our £22 billion, so we have every opportunity within the customs union to grow our trade wherever we want. It is down to us, not the rules of the customs union.
Owen Smith: It is frankly arrant nonsense to suggest that staying within the EU or being in the customs union or the single market is in any way, shape or form an impediment to growing our trade outside the EU. The truth is that we have succeeded in doing that over the past 30 years from within the EU, and other countries are doing it even as we speak. It is utter nonsense, and we need to call it out as such and not accept the set of lies that continues to be propagated by those who are ideologically determined to drive Brexit through.

Finally, all I have just described as truth is completely contested. I fully accept our country is still very much divided, and it is not sufficient for the Government or for the Labour party in opposition to acquiesce, in respecting the will of the people, to allowing our country to become poorer, less secure and more isolated, but nor is it sufficient for us simply to override the will of people. The only way we can sort this out, the only way we can act in the national interest and secure the agreement of the British people, is to give them the opportunity, once we know the final terms of the deal—what is really on offer, not the lies that have been told but the truth that is then exposed—of a final ratifying referendum, a final say, a people’s vote, or whatever we want to call it. That would bring this country together. Frankly, it would save this country from a lesser future—a less secure, less prosperous and more isolated future. That is the right thing to do, and it is what we should—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

3.30 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I am a firm supporter of the Prime Minister’s position on this question, and I will set out why.

I am clear that continued membership of the customs union would represent a breach of faith with the referendum result and with the wishes of millions of Labour voters up and down our country. It would also be a serious misjudgement, given the way it would leave our country bound by EU rules on trade but with no say on them, which would represent the worst of all possible worlds.

The only large country that has a customs union with the EU but that is not an EU member state is Turkey, but Turkey’s customs union is almost unbelievably asymmetric. The EU does not need Turkey’s consent to enter free trade agreements with any other country, and Turkey is obliged to reduce its tariffs with such countries. However, the third country with which the EU enters an asymmetric arrangement is Turkey, which goes a long way towards revealing the true motivation of many who make this argument—they see it as a stepping-stone to undoing the people’s vote to leave.

We need to remind ourselves of why the leave campaign lobbied to leave the customs union in the first place. The EU has been slow at negotiating trade deals on our behalf, not least because there are 28 members states on one side of the negotiating table. The EU’s trade talks with Japan have taken 61 months and are still awaiting ratification. By contrast, it took Switzerland 28 months to settle its deal with Japan. EU trade talks with the US have been ongoing for 64 months now, with no sign of progress, whereas the US managed to negotiate trade deals with Canada in 20 months, Australia in 14 months and South Korea in 13 months. At the time of the referendum, the EU had managed to negotiate trade agreements with only two of the UK’s 10 largest non-EU trading partners.

Not leaving the customs union would also fatally damage the prospects for the idea that, more than any other, has captured the imagination of the Teesside public since our vote to leave. A free port at Teesport, which is a project championed by Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen and me, would be an enormous boost to local industry and provide a great incentive to reshore jobs to the South Tees mayoral development corporation site. That goes directly to the point that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell)
made about north-east jobs. There has been enormous buy-in from local people and businesses to this idea, and people are genuinely excited about what it would mean. However, a free port will not be possible if we do not leave the customs union.

Some people try to maintain the argument that free ports are possible within the EU. The reality is that those zones that exist are glorified bonded warehouses—places where people can defer tax, duty and VAT. What Ben and I are saying is that within the Tees free port there will be the potential for significant tax and regulatory divergences, but that will be stymied if we remain in a customs union.

Outside a customs union there are other significant advantages.

**Mr Grieve:** How does my hon. Friend imagine that he can engage in this regulatory divergence without incurring tariffs with those countries with which we do our principal trade or the economic consequences that flow from that? I can understand the fantasy behind the picture he paints, but it simply is not the reality of what will happen if we cut ourselves off from our principal trading partners.

**Mr Clarke:** We are precisely seeking an ambitious free trade agreement both with Europe and with the rest of the world. This goes to the heart of that matter.

**Robert Neill:** Dreamland.

**Mr Clarke:** It is certainly not dreamland. If my hon. Friend reads the compelling paper written by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) for the Centre for Policy Studies, he will see why it is not dreamland, why there is such ministerial buy-in and why there is so much enthusiasm from the business community in the north-east.

The additional advantages are that we can cut tariffs on products such as food, clothing and footwear. These goods happen to be where the highest tariffs are concentrated and are those on which the poorest in society spend the greatest proportion of their income.

Others have made points about Northern Ireland on which I shall not dwell at length given the shortage of time, but the chief executive of HMRC Jon Thompson told the Exiting the European Union Committee:

“We do not believe, and this has been our consistent advice to ministers, we require any infrastructure at the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland under any circumstances.”

I will leave that point there.

Britain remaining inside the customs union with the EU would be unwise, unnecessary and unacceptable to me and millions of people who voted for Brexit in good faith.

3.38 pm

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Resisting a customs union and the single market without a mandate from the voters, which we have not, would be an act of grotesque economic irresponsibility. Being in the customs union means that we are part of team Europe when we negotiate with big blocs such as the United States, China and Japan. If we leave, we will be one player against a whole team. The idea that we can negotiate better terms is farcical. The idea that we can get more trade to compensate for the trade lost as a result of turning our backs on the EU in terms of the single market, tariffs, product standards and barriers, is absurd.

People may be aware of the economic model of trade called the gravity model, which says that the closer and bigger a market is, the more there is trade. Empirically, over the past 140 years, it has been found that the relationship is: halve the distance and you double the trade. That basically accounts for the fact that 50% of the UK’s trade is with the EU, while for Wales, the north-east and Yorkshire the figure is 60%.

In Britain, some of the poorer areas that voted for Brexit will suffer much more if we end up out of the single market and the customs union. Some people still believe, because of Government spokespeople, that we can boldly go and trade where others have not been before, when in fact we are already trading there. The former permanent secretary at the Department for International Trade likened leaving the single market and the customs union to swapping a three-course meal for the promise of a pack of crisps. He was right, and why did he say that? Because if we look at the big markets, where the opportunities are, are they there? In the United States, Donald Trump said in his inaugural address that he would stop foreign countries ravaging his economy and taking jobs, and would stop the country importing more than it exports. We have seen with Bombardier, EU steel and tariffs on China that the US will act against anyone who thinks they can gain an advantage, and the US is much bigger than us alone, as opposed to us as part of the EU. What is more, the US will try to export its standards, be they in chemicals, food, the environment or workers’ rights, which will prevent us from exporting to the EU.

We have already heard that the Germans export four times more to China than we do. We can do that on our own. Again, China will be much more powerful. The Chinese have demanded that they build Hinkley Point, even though the cost of energy is sky high, and have already negotiated to build HS2. They will be coming in, taking our jobs—exporting our jobs—and we will be like putty in their hands, without any ability to negotiate on human rights, carbon and so on.

On Japan, the EU is doing a trade deal that will embrace a third of the economy of the world. If that trade deal is secured after March next year, we will not be part of it. Forty per cent of Japanese investment in the EU is in the UK. We will lose that, and it is not just cars. I am talking about financial services, and 80% of our exports are in services. The EU-Japanese deal will include financial services and we will be out of it. Therefore, a centre of gravity for financial services will grow in Europe, with the axis of yen and euro, and that will hurt the City of London.

As for third countries, 14% of our trade is with them. Chile, South Korea and Australia have already said that they want to change the terms of trade, and so will the others. When it comes to the timing, we will end without any trade deals in the transition period. We will basically close the door behind us and it will be a complete nightmare. After March we will have left, and Wallonia can just vote down whatever we agree and we will end up with no deal.
So why are the Government doing this? Why are they like a doctor prescribing cigarettes to someone with anxiety, knowing that ultimately it will kill them? The answer is that the Government know that the only hope for Brexit voters is believing that there will be these trade deals, and the Government know that there will not be. That is why Lord Patten, Lord Heseltine, Lord Lansley and Lord Willetts have all put country before party, and the people out there know this is too complex, and too costly, and too much time—

Mr Speaker: Order.

3.43 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate, but I do not want to repeat what was said by the proposing Member, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), or my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I agreed with every sentiment they expressed.

My desire to participate stems, first, from my continuing frustration that every time, as a Member of Parliament, I want to come and participate in such a debate, I get told by roundabout means that I should not, because it might somehow put the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) into Downing Street. My experience in politics is that when it comes to fantasticals, wherever they may come on the political spectrum, the greatest chance of getting them into Downing Street is if people of a moderate and sensible disposition stop debating important issues, and I am absolutely determined that they will be debated.

Today’s debate offers us an opportunity to look at the possible merits of staying in a customs union. Of course a customs union is not perfect, particularly, I might add, a customs union when we are outside the EU. I agree with some of the comments that have been made that, by being outside the EU, we lose some of the influence that we have in creating and managing the customs union. That, I am afraid, is the price that we are paying for the folly of the decision in the referendum of 2016. Just because one has imposed one calamity on oneself does not mean that one then goes to inflict greater calamities simply on the basis that one has to do it in order to prove the theory—the mistaken theory—that one has espoused.

I am also a lawyer. I cannot deny the fact that it is noteworthy that we appear to be a gaggle of lawyers on these Benches who find an irrationality in the approach that some of our Conservative friends adopt and in which the Government sometimes appear to be mired.

Free trade agreements are wonderful things to have—I am a great believer in free trade agreements. I can see that, by being members of the EU, we have lost something in terms of being able to do our own free trade agreements, but not one single Government analysis suggests that they outweigh the advantages of participating in the best free trade arrangement that we have with our EU partners.

What is the point of having a free port in Middlesbrough—if forgive me—if it is only going to be used to trade with the United Kingdom? Assuredly, it will not be to trade with our EU partners because they will not allow any of the goods in between Middlesbrough and the European continent. Why is it that pharmaceutically related businesses
content that this left, hard-line Brexiteers and their supporters in the press peddled the myth that leaving the customs union was a talismanic and essential feature of the Brexit that the British public had narrowly voted in favour of. This was never the case. Membership of the customs union was barely debated during the referendum campaign and it was certainly not on the ballot paper. Membership of the customs union is not the same as membership of the EU. It has been misrepresented as such by the hard Brexiteer ideologues, whose hatred of the EU runs so deep that they cannot bear the thought of any formal association with our friends and neighbours in the EU.

The UK's current annual goods trade with the customs union is valued at £466 billion. Leaving the customs union could cost the UK an estimated £25 billion every year until 2030. The cost of new tariffs alone could be at least £4.5 billion a year for UK exporters. Analysis by HMRC suggests that new customs checks could increase the cost of imported goods to UK customers by up to 24%. Supporters of a hard Brexit claim that leaving the customs union will open up opportunities for the UK to negotiate trade agreements with many other countries. This is like promising to replace two birds in the hand with one in the bush. The Government's own analysis shows that they believe that new free trade deals will add between 0.2% and 0.7% to UK GDP, compared to a 5% hit from leaving the single market.

Membership of the customs union delivers for the UK now. Future trade deals will take a minimum of three to five years to negotiate, and their terms are by no means guaranteed. Their impact on the UK economy will be much smaller than the current benefits of the customs union, and negotiations cannot even begin until we have left the EU. This is what a cliff-edge Brexit looks like.

There is no time for me to consider the impact on the Northern Irish border, to which many Members have already referred, so I will bring my remarks to a close. My constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood did not vote for Brexit. But even in the areas of the UK that voted to leave, nobody voted explicitly to leave the customs union. Leaving the customs union was not a Vote Leave pledge, and damaging the UK economy was not a Vote Leave pledge. Some 57% of the British public—a bigger majority than voted to leave the EU in the first place—support staying in the customs union.

The Prime Minister is not negotiating in the national interest; she is simply losing a negotiation with her own Back Benchers. In doing so, she is putting our jobs, and businesses and peace in Northern Ireland at risk. This is nothing short of reckless. I call on Conservative Members to show the leadership in the national interest that the Prime Minister seems to lack, and to vote today to remain in the customs union with the EU.

3.52 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Outside an effective customs union there is no such thing as a frictionless border. There is no escape from border checks, rules of origin and expensive infrastructure, and that means costs, delays and red tape. There will be implications for future investment, for people's jobs and livelihoods, and for the stability of peace in Northern Ireland. But there is one area that has not been touched on: the implications for patient safety.

I am privileged to chair the Health and Social Care Committee, and we have been hearing detailed evidence about the implications of leaving the customs union on patient safety. These consequences go far beyond the economic consequences for individual pharmaceutical companies, about which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) have spoken compellingly. In fact, these are consequences that directly affect patient safety.

The Committee heard clear and compelling evidence about the extent to which NHS care is dependent on a network of highly integrated, complex and time-sensitive supply chains for the delivery of medicines. For years, we have taken it for granted that when a prescription is issued, it will be available on the pharmacy shelf. I am afraid that we will not be able to take that for granted in the future, because the complex supply chain—from the research lab right through to the pharmacy shelf—will be disrupted by delays at the border, and that will affect costs.

Delays at the border will also directly affect the delivery of patient care. For example, every year in this country, about 700,000 diagnostic tests take place that rely on the availability of medical radioisotopes, which are very time-sensitive. Very many other products would be affected, such as blood plasma derivatives. There are products and devices that are not manufactured in the UK, but which we know from past experience have very fragile supply chains, such as dialysis equipment. We have had problems with this before and it could happen again.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Speaking as a member of the hon. Lady's Committee, can I ask her to confirm that every single witness who provided written and oral evidence to our recent inquiry said that their preference was for us to stay in the customs union and the single market?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the right hon. Gentleman; I can confirm that.

There are other very worrying examples. After the Manchester Arena attack, a very rapid supply of 500 highly specialised trauma-related items was flown in at very short notice from a Belgian-based company. There are very many serious patient safety issues.

There is also an issue of cost. A report today from the King's Fund highlights the increasing cost of drugs to the NHS. The cost of medicines has grown from £13 billion in 2010-11 to £17.4 billion in 2016-17. However, that cost has been held down by the impact of the supply of generics and the way that primary care has actively switched to these products. Generics are pharmacologically equivalent products that become available when a medicine comes off patent. The British Generic Manufacturers Association told us in evidence that once a medicine comes off patent, a dozen to 20 companies will pick it up. The risk is that as costs and other non-tariff barriers go up, some companies will relinquish their licences and their marketing authorisations. Why would they bother with all the red tape and extra costs? That immediately
means that the number of manufacturers goes down, and the likelihood of the cost of generics to the NHS increasing goes up.

I am afraid that the fast and unhindered free movement of medical equipment, medicines, devices, organs and blood products between the UK and the EU that has evolved over decades is at risk if we leave the single market and the customs union. I think there will be a huge crunch moment of reality. The public will never forgive us if, after we leave the European Union, people’s drugs and life-saving equipment are not available. This is where we are starting to run into Brexit reality, as opposed to the overly optimistic, unrealistic prospectus that has until now been sold to the British public. It is time for the Government to respond to our request in the Committee to hear when the Ernst and Young-commissioned report on the supply chain will be available. We need far greater contingency planning and a great dose of reality.

3.58 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry—I should have formally announced a four-minute limit. It is in effect but I should have announced it formally. The right hon. Gentleman has four minutes from now.

Tom Brake: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I agree that we need a dose of Brexit reality. In fact, I agree with everything she said. I am sure she will share my concern about the recent figures on the number of EU nurses who have gone off the register, and indeed the number who have left the country, just at a time when we have significant vacancies.

Just as I agree with everything the hon. Lady said, I disagree with everything said by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who is no longer in her place. However, at least she had the courage to be here to present that hard Brexit line. Where are the hard Brexiteers on the Conservative Benches? Where is the Foreign Secretary? Where is the Secretary of State for International Development? Where is the Leader of the House? [Interruption.] Oh, there is one. They should be here to hear what they are inflicting on the country. Perhaps the reason they are not here is that they did not want to hear some very well-judged, measured contributions from Members on their own Benches explaining precisely the damage that they are causing.

Norman Lamb: I agree with everything my right hon. Friend is saying. Does he share my complete confusion that many of those hard Brexiteers have spent their political lives fighting to cut red tape, yet here they are gratuitously proposing to massively increase red tape? What sense does that have?

Tom Brake: Absolutely, and I will come on to that very strong point shortly. The chaos those people have caused is being added to on a daily basis. Today, for instance, we have the Home Secretary refusing to confirm that the UK will come out of the customs union, and on the same day, we have the Foreign Secretary threatening to resign if we do. Well, there you are—what a well-run Cabinet delivering Brexit for us in this chaotic manner.

Why does the customs union matter? Before I touch on that, I should point out that, if people look at the literature circulated during the campaign, they will see that it was about spending Britain’s cash in Britain, it was often about immigration, it was about posters such as Nigel Farage’s poster scaring people with that picture of all those refugees. He did not have a massive poster saying, “What do we want? To come out of the customs union. When do we want it? Now.” Of course that was not a major feature of the campaign. Anyone who suggests otherwise is speaking somewhat remote from the truth.

Why does the customs union matter? Many Members have referred to the Irish border; it is a real pity that the Secretary of State only went to the border for the first time a couple of days ago. It also matters for the Dover border. I understand that “BBC South East Today” has confirmed that, so far, not a single Minister from DEFEN has been to the port of Dover. I find it incredible that they have not managed to visit the port of Dover. If they had, they would have been able to see directly the impact of the customs union on our largest port.

I could touch on the impact on BMW and its ability to manufacture cars in Oxford, or indeed the issue of red tape for small businesses. There is also the cost of roughly £30 for every small business that exports to the EU to process electronic paperwork that it does not have to process at the moment.

What have the Government offered in return? What is their solution? Under a customs partnership, the UK would collect duties “on the EU’s behalf” for goods destined for the European Union. Think about what would happen if the EU put the reverse offer to us, whereby the EU collected duties on the UK’s behalf for goods destined for the UK. Would the Brexiteers on the Conservative Benches say, “That’s a brilliant idea. That’s exactly what I want the EU to do for us”? Of course they would not, because it is absolute nonsense to suggest that and they would not possibly support that if the EU suggested it.

The UK has recently been threatened with a nearly £2 billion fine for failing to handle imports at its ports effectively, leading to significant VAT losses in other EU countries. I cannot see the EU queuing up to give us responsibilities for something that we are not handling very well at the moment. As for the highly streamlined customs arrangement, no one has been able to identify the technology for it, and that technology needs to be in place, I suggest, by the end of 2019 to be properly run in and tested.

On the position of the Labour Front-Bench team, I do not know whether seeking a final deal that gives “full access” to European markets and “maintains the benefits” of the single market and the customs union is anything other than having your cake and eating it, but the Liberal Democrats still think we are better off in the European Union, in the single market and in the customs union, and we want to secure a final say on the deal for everyone in the country, to do this democratically.

4.3 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is quite daunting to speak in a debate in which there have been so many knowledgeable and learned speeches, not least from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who has...
been fighting this fight since I was a child. Indeed, 
I think he was the Paymaster General when I was born. 
I, like him and like the majority of my constituents, 
voted to remain in the European Union, so I must 
admit that, if someone had told me a couple of years 
ago that I would be standing here setting out why I 
think it is in Britain’s best interests to leave the customs 
union, I simply would not have believed them.

However, when we make decisions as a nation, we 
should stick to them. As the then Prime Minister said in 
2016, the vote on 23 June was to be a referendum, not a 
neverendum—something that the hon. Member for 
Pontyprridd (Owen Smith) would do well to remember. 
Both campaigns in the referendum were very clear that 
leaving the European Union would mean leaving both 
the single market and the customs union. Like my right 
hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo 
Swire), I find the argument that people did not know 
what they were voting for on 23 June deeply condescending.

Staying in the customs union would prevent us from 
negotiating trade deals with third countries, which would 
mean missing out on one of the biggest benefits of Brexit. 
It is a well-rehearsed argument that 90% of growth is set 
to take place outside the EU in the near future. The 
trajectory is clear: in 1980, the EU accounted for 30% of 
world GDP; by 2023, according to the IMF, that will 
have fallen to 15%. It would be madness to tie the hands 
of our country by locking ourselves into a customs 
union that would mean, in effect, becoming a silent 
partner in trade deals, such as that with Turkey.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the 
hon. Gentleman not accept that outside the customs 
unions we are a small market, but that inside the 
customs union we are a large market, and that his 
constituents benefit from being inside that large market?

Andrew Bowie: I disagree. We are the fifth-largest 
economy in the world and, unlike the hon. Lady, I 
passionately believe in a global Britain. And we will not 
be cutting ourselves off from the EU either. It will 
remain a vital trading partner for the UK, and vice 
versa, which is why the Government are working so 
hard to maintain tariff-free and frictionless trade across 
 borders. That is in all our interests—those of the remaining 
27 members and those of the UK. Clearly, unlike many 
Members here today and many Members of the other 
place, I am an optimist. As a Scottish Conservative of 
many years, I have had to be.

One cannot speak about this issue, however, without 
touching on the Irish border. I am sure I speak for many 
in this House and beyond when I express my frustration 
at the intransigence of some on the EU side of the table 
when it comes to finding solutions to this issue. If 
solutions can be found for the border between Sweden 
and Norway and along the Swiss border, surely it is not 
beyond the wit of us and the EU to find a solution to 
the border in Ireland while respecting the vital Good 
Friday agreement.

As I said, I am an optimist, and I am confident of our 
future outside the EU and the customs union, for I truly 
believe that this country really does have its best days 
ahead of it. It is incumbent on all of us in the House—it 
would be really good if we could do this—to get behind 
the Government and say with one voice, yes to an 
unbreakable relationship deeply rooted in bonds of 
friendship and respect, yes to untrammelled free trade 
between partners, but no, I am afraid, to a customs 
union.

4.6 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My mother, 
who reaches a milestone birthday today, has taught me 
many things in life, including what she calls the “eat the 
frog” rule, which is that, if we have something difficult 
to do in life, there is no sense in prevaricating. I am here 
today to plead with Ministers to eat the frog and admit 
that there is no better alternative for this country than 
remaining in the customs union. After two years, it has 
become patently apparent that there is no better alternative.

In the short time available to me, I want to speak up 
for our remaining in the customs union. I reject the 
argument that those who challenge our leaving it are 
traitors. The only traitor is the person who does not 
speak up for the country’s best interests and who believes 
that democracy stopped the day after the referendum. 
We know that being able to trade in the way the customs 
union allows—making it as easy to buy and sell goods 
in Berlin and Budapest as in Birmingham and Belfast—is 
the best outcome for our communities. When the 
Government said they were taking the red tape challenge, 
I did not realise they meant creating more of it, yet that 
is exactly what leaving the customs union will do.

I am a fan of technology—I am a geek, I love it—but 
even I recognise that we do not have the hovercrafts 
with scanners to make frictionless trade and a lack of 
infrastructure at our borders a reality. We hear from 
those in Dover—people who work every day on our 
borders—that just a two-minute delay would mean a 
17-mile queue to Ashford; a four-minute delay a queue 
to Maidstone; six minutes and it goes to the M25; and 
eight minutes and it goes to the Dartford crossing. I 
know what that would do to businesses in my constituency 
and around the country. Whatever new technology has 
been created, it cannot make up for the delay and the 
impact on just-in-time.

Then there is the extra paperwork involved. At the 
moment, we have 55 million customs declarations a 
year, but if we leave the customs union, that could 
increase to 255 million, which means British businesses 
large and small having a lot more paperwork. We might 
have a free trade agreement, but we will not have a 
paper-free trade agreement, and that matters to them. It 
matters because it is not within our gift. It is not just 
about the rules we create—when we trade, we are only 
50% of the partnership; it is about the rules that those 
we trade with create.

That is why the customs union is so important. We 
learned that lesson not least from a time in Irish history 
when there was a trade deal between Ireland and Britain. 
After 1965, the tariffs that had applied to trade since 
1923 did not disappear, which is why the Irish delegation 
demanded that goods be labelled “Made in Britain”. 
That caused Denis Healey to inquire whether we should 
stamp that phrase on the balls of the bullocks that were 
being shipped to Ireland, to which Paddy Hillery replied 
that bullocks do not have balls, but they still need 
paperwork. Such paperwork will be damaging to all 
our constituents and will result in massive costs to 
manufacturing. That is before we even get on to the 
impact of the World Trade Organisation.
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): In my constituency, 4,000 jobs—16% of the total employment—are in manufacturing. Does my hon. Friend agree that for the Government not to consider a bespoke customs union is both reckless and a huge risk?

Mr Speaker: I emphasise that if there are further interventions, which are legitimate in parliamentary terms, the time limit will have to be cut for remaining speakers.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Our car industry imports 60% of its components, so a British-made car probably has a German exhaust, Spanish-designed seats and French windows.

We have talked a lot about trade, but I also want to talk about people. It is clear that leaving the customs union will damage the lives of thousands of people in Northern Ireland and Ireland. We know that to be clear because we have no alternative. Ireland has 208 border crossings—more than the EU has with the rest of Europe. There will clearly be change. The consumers who may get cheaper goods are the same workers who will face the race to the bottom that will result from leaving the customs union and entering into the mythical free trade deals that we are being offered. We have heard that £25 billion annually will be lost to GDP.

Please, Minister, on this day of all days, listen to Ma Creasy and eat the frog—admit that the customs union is the best option, not just for our economy and British business, but for all our futures.

Mr Speaker: Happy birthday to Mummy Creasy.

4.11 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. Our trading arrangements are of great importance to constituencies and country alike. It is critical that we approach the matter in the spirit of the kind of country that we want to be, and the opportunities that we want to seize. I want this country to have the freedom to seize opportunities, rather than being tied as closely as possible to the EU simply because we are afraid of the future.

When we discuss this matter—it has been raised by others, from all parts of the House—it is critical to understand exactly what a customs union is. As has happened during the debate and, indeed, in the motion, it is often conflated with a free trade area. The two things are often lumped together, but they operate differently. A free trade area achieves reduced or zero tariffs on trade between its members. It is possible to have free trade with the EU from outside the customs union, as Norway and Switzerland do. The motion suggests that being in the, or a, customs union would automatically include frictionless trade between the UK and the EU, and that it would solve the Irish border issue, but that would not automatically be the case. The key to enabling frictionless trade and solving the Irish border issue is a comprehensive free trade agreement that eliminates tariffs, with mutual recognition of standards and the use of new technologies. That is exactly what the Government's policy is intended to achieve.

To leave the European Union but to remain in the customs union would be the worst of all worlds. It would mean surrendering, subject to whatever agreement is subsequently reached, 100% of our trade policy to Brussels and having zero say on that policy. We would have less say than we do now. I do not see how that is compatible with the referendum, however one voted, and I do not see how it is compatible with this country’s best interests. When we look at the effect of the customs union, I suggest that we can do much better outside it than we can in it.

Britain, which is by nature and instinct a globally trading nation, has always been disproportionately penalised by membership of the customs union. For most of our membership we were the only state—or one of only two—to export more outside the EU than to it. That phased application of the common external tariff in the 1970s hit British consumers and Commonwealth exporters badly, and although there have been improvements, our trade remains distorted. The EU currently has no free trade agreement with the world’s largest economy, the USA, or with rising giants such as India, or with long-standing British allies such as Australia. Where free trade agreements are in place, they are often limited in scope.

In my last 30 seconds or so, I will briefly consider Turkey. I know there is an issue as to what agreement is involved, but Turkey is required to apply EU product standards to its domestic economy, accept the ECJ in those areas, but have no say in the EU’s trade negotiations with third countries. When the EU signs free trade agreements with third countries, Turkey must allow full access to its internal market with no reciprocal guarantee. I do not see how that is compatible with the referendum, however one voted.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the next speaker the time limit will have to be reduced to three minutes.

4.15 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome this debate and I support all the excellent points raised by those who, like me, support the motion—I will try hard not to repeat them. I am not alone in being somewhat bemused that the party in government is the party that generally prides itself on being pro-business and anti-bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the Government appear to be ignoring the pleading of businesses large and small, and they are leading this country towards a tsunami of additional paperwork as we move towards leaving the customs union and the EU, given the implications of all that paperwork for trade deals that we will now have to put in place for our trade with the EU. Leaving the customs union means the introduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade in goods with our largest trading partner. That involves 40% of our trade, and it means, as businesses tell us again and again, added delay and costs for manufacturers.

Before the recess I had the pleasure of visiting Honda in Swindon with the Industry and Parliament Trust. It said that outside a customs union, there is no such thing as a frictionless border.

Motor manufacturers will be subject to 10% tariffs on cars and 4.5% on components and parts, plus additional delay. Currently, if someone takes their car to the dealer because they need a new exhaust pipe, the order goes in today, and tomorrow the dealer will have that part and be able to fit it. I understand that once we are outside...
the customs union there will be a wait of up to five days for that new exhaust pipe. That is not just inconvenient for the car owner—it has an economic cost for the owner of a van who uses that van for business.

It was also good to see how Honda’s presence in Swindon has transformed that town since I was last there many years ago. There is no doubt that Swindon’s low unemployment rate and well-paid jobs—not just at Honda but at all its suppliers—are directly based on Honda being there, which is probably linked to the message that, as we have heard, Margaret Thatcher gave to the Japanese Government many years ago when she said that Britain would never leave the customs union. Now all that is at risk.

We will not see big-bang announcements by big manufacturers in those key sectors—not just the automotive industry, but pharmaceuticals and many others. Instead, we will see incremental decisions and loss of capacity, and incremental elements of production going to Europe where the biggest market will be. That will be a long-term cost for our economy. We cannot afford that.

Briefly, on borders and Northern Ireland, many of us will have seen in our Twitter feed the map of Switzerland and the hundreds of customs points. I remember County Fermanagh in the old days, before the Good Friday agreement, and we cannot go back to that.

I support the motion, calling on the Government to establish an effective customs union with the EU, and like other Members I believe we should stay in the single market as well, because 80% of our economy is in services.

Mr Speaker: Order. A three-minute limit now applies.

4.19 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I voted remain and campaigned heavily to remain. I held eight debates during that campaign, alongside a gentleman from the UK Independence party, to help voters to decide what was the right or wrong thing to do. I said repeatedly that if we left, the negotiations would be difficult, and for two reasons.

First, given that we had been members of the European Union for 44 years, the complexity of the relationship was almost inconceivable. Today, hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about the complexity of supply chains, and that is obviously why people support remaining in a customs union. My second reason for saying that the negotiations would be difficult was that the UK and the EU had different priorities and imperatives.

For starters, our exports to the EU account for 12% of our economy—to anyone listening to today’s debate, it would almost sound as though we were talking about the whole economy—but that represents only 3% or 4% of the EU economy, so there is clearly a disparity there. Then there is the fact that the EU’s principal priority would be to ensure that the EU did not fall apart as a result of other people walking out that door. For that reason, it is very difficult for the EU to give us a good deal, despite the fact that the Prime Minister has been very reasonable on exit terms and on proposals for a future relationship regarding things such as the highly streamlined customs border, which seems the preferable option of the two on the table. Such a border arrangement works in north America, and in Norway and Sweden, so it makes sense.

Nevertheless, the negotiations will be difficult. That is why people on both sides of the House are concerned, and it is why people are talking about a customs union. I think that that is the wrong thing. Yes, being in a customs union would remove the need for checks on tariffs, but unless we were also going to stay in the single market, we would still need checks to ensure regulatory alignment, so the queues at Dover would continue.

In addition, if we were in the single market and customs union, we might as well be in the European Union. In fact, that would be worse than being in the European Union, because we would have no say whatever over the rules—no say in the trade agreements and no say in the new rules. The worst of all options would be to be in those two without being a member of the European Union.

Another option would be to stay in the single market only. That is my preference; if I had to choose the single market or a customs union, I would stay in the single market, through the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area. That has benefits. For example, there would be no need for checks on product standards. Other than that, however, I support the Prime Minister in her negotiations and wish her well.

4.22 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I have previously severely criticised Parliament’s inaction as seen in its failure to properly scrutinise the Government’s approach, for example through the European Scrutiny Committee, but today we see Parliament doing what it should be doing. It is just a pity that we knew before we started that the Government will not listen. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) called for everybody to get together behind the Government. How about the Government just once getting themselves together behind the overwhelming will of Parliament and behind what they know as well as we do is the overwhelming will of the people?

Let us stop this nonsense about a referendum vote to leave the customs union and the single market—no, there was no such vote. There was a vote to leave the European Union, and we have been told that that became a vote to leave the single market because that was what the losers said would happen. I am fascinated by the idea that, after an election, the winners are expected not to implement their own manifesto but to bring about what the other side said would happen if the eventual winners got in. Tory Members might want to look at what the Tories said would happen if the SNP ever won an election in Scotland, as we did in 2017, 2016 and 2015, and on many other occasions.

It is dangerous to give the people a binary choice but then to claim a democratic mandate to interpret the infinite number of variations of what that binary choice might mean. I do not have the right to say that the people who voted leave wanted to stay in the single market and the customs union, and nobody has a right to say that those people wanted to leave, but what I do have the right to say is that 62% of people in my country voted to stay in the European Union. Those who insist that we should be working for the best Brexit for the people of Scotland have to accept that the sovereign
people of Scotland have said that the only good Brexit is no Brexit. If we must have Brexit, we want Brexit to hold us as close as possible to the European Union.

Luke Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that I do not have time to take interventions.

A lot has been said about the Irish border. Let us remember that it is now 15 months since the Prime Minister promised, as a matter of priority and as soon as possible, to bring forward her practical solution for the Irish border that was consistent with leaving the customs union. We have seen nothing. None of us has any idea what that practical solution will be. None of us even has any idea of when the Government will have any idea of what that solution will be. It is deeply offensive to a great many people of good faith on all sides and in all communities in Northern Ireland to accuse them of blackmail when all that they are saying to us is, “For heaven’s sake, please do not destroy the great work that has been done,” which I think was perhaps the greatest act of reconciliation and peace-building that certainly these nations—these islands—have seen, and that perhaps has been seen in the whole of Europe.

We talk about taking back control of our trade, but we cannot take back control of our trade. Every trade deal has to be bilateral. We are not in the empire anymore; we are in the Commonwealth. We are a community of nations and we have to treat other nations with respect. We are in the best trading partnership in the world; why would we want to leave?

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): In her Mansion House speech, the Prime Minister set out five tests for the EU negotiations and the agreement that we will reach through them. The first test was the need to respect the referendum result and the desire of the people expressed through that referendum to take back control. The customs union plan entirely gives up control to the EU, and the free circulation of goods would also require regulatory harmonisation in the single market, as we just heard. The second test was that the agreement must endure. The customs union plan, which would go against the outcome of the referendum and the election, would divide the country and not settle the issue.

The third test was that the arrangement should protect jobs and security through our continuing to work together with the EU. The customs union plan would give our commercial policy, our trade defences, our tariff levels and our relationships with third countries to the EU, and I do not see how that is consistent with that test. The fourth test was that we would be a confident, modern, outward-looking country that is proud to stand up for its values, but the customs union plan would mean that we would be unable to make our way independently in the world, and to spread our belief in free trade and the opportunities that come from it. The fifth and final test was that the arrangements should strengthen our Union and our union of people, but the customs union plan would take their sovereignty and powers and give them to the EU. It would weaken them, and weaken and discredit their representative institutions.

If the proponents of the customs union succeeded in getting it adopted, and if the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership were revived as a trade agreement between the US and the EU, the UK could commit the UK to that without Britons having any practical say at all. The Cabinet resolved recently—the Prime Minister expressed its settled view—that it wants the freedom to negotiate trade deals with other countries and to take back control of our laws. The customs union plan goes directly against that.

In the final seconds of my contribution, I want to say that the customs partnership idea, which is one of the options, has serious problems. Full traceability is a long way off and would impose costs on every transaction throughout the economy. The full circulation of goods would require full regulatory harmonisation, and full ECJ oversight and submission to it. The need to make rules of origin declarations would not go away because importers would still have to cope with that—they would just be EU rules of origin.

4.28 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to be the first person in this place to congratulate Ruth Davidson, who has just announced her pregnancy. I send huge congratulations from those of us on the Scottish National party Benches.

I feel very sorry for the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, because when we went through the initial stages of consideration of the customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill—his Government had not announced that they were against being in a customs union. In fact, a couple of days after we finished the Bill’s consideration in Committee, the Government randomly—on a Saturday morning—announced that they were not going to pursue a customs union. The Committee stage would have been an awful lot easier had we been aware of the Government’s position.

It was almost as if the Government took that position without really thinking it through. They said, “Of course we are not going to be in a customs union.” Then everyone said, “What about Ireland?”, and the Government said, “Oh, right. We’d better do something about that.” Then we said, “What about rules of origin checks?”, and the Government said, “Oh, yes.” It was almost as if they were being held to account by some Brexiteer Back Benchers and, without thinking, announced this crazy policy that they now cannot row back from.

A customs union means a shared external tariff. It generally means that countries lower the tariff barriers between them. It is not anything else. It is not anything that anyone else says it is. Half our trade in goods is with the EU, and the other half is with the rest of the world.

I want to debunk some of the myths that have been put out in recent days. Every single lorry is stopped at the Norway-Sweden border—not every one is checked, but every one is stopped. We will lose free trade agreements. The Government say, “All these countries have decided that we will continue to be party to the free trade agreements,” but I am not sure that that is the case. We do not have it in writing from anyone. The Government expressed its settled view—that it wants the freedom to negotiate trade deals with other countries and to take back control of our laws. The customs union plan goes directly against that.

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Bill does not give us any more scrutiny; in fact, it gives us less scrutiny. The Commission needs authority from the European Council, and then it needs consent from the European Parliament, but we will not have those mechanisms. The Government will be able to do what they like because there is no mechanism for parliamentary scrutiny under the Bill.

The Brexiteers talk about trade with Africa. I look forward to their tabling amendments to the customs Bill to increase the number of “least developed countries” from 49, to increase the number of “generalised scheme of preferences” countries from 19, and to increase the number of GSP+ countries from nine. They do not know what will actually happen, and they need to table amendments if they want to fulfil their bright idea of the future.

4.31 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for securing the debate. This is clearly not an abstract debate; it is extremely serious, given the impact that this policy will have on us.

The question of the customs union is important because it strikes at the heart of our trade policy, our business exports and imports, and the strength of the UK economy. The prospect of our not being part of a customs union poses, I believe, an existential threat to the UK car industry, and therefore to the wider UK economy. What businesses in that industry and those more generally are calling for is certainty, clarity and, of course, urgency. Their representatives—the CBI, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses—are doing the same.

We know that many businesses have complex supply chains and production processes that are integrated across Europe, with parts and assembly travelling back and forth across the continent. Frictionless trade is essential to those operations, and a customs union helps to facilitate that. We also know that increased customs checks could lead to delays. We have heard about—we saw them for ourselves—the eight-minute delays on the US-Canada border. We have heard about delays of up to 15 minutes at the Norway-Sweden border and the additional costs that are incurred. We know about the infrastructure—the huge X-ray machines that check every few vehicles to confirm their contents—and, of course, we know that Northern Ireland relies on a frictionless border for the continuation of peace. The symbolism of a manned or marked border between Northern Ireland and the Republic puts at risk the peace secured by the Good Friday agreement. For all those reasons, it is vital that we remain in the customs union.

As the Member of Parliament for Warwick and Leamington, which is at the heart of the car industry, I cannot stress enough how critical this issue of the customs union is, and how costly our departure from it will be for the sector. Some 79% of all components used in the UK car industry come from Europe or other countries abroad. If WTO rules are applied, there will be an incremental cost of £1.8 billion for our exports and £2.7 billion for our imports. It is no wonder that the Japanese invested in the UK in the 1980s. That happened because we were part of the customs union, and we very much welcome their investment here.

I believe that we can remain part of the customs union at the same time as increasing our trade with and exports to markets outside Europe. That is what we should plan to do, and that is why I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Order. The winding-up speeches of up to eight minutes each will begin now.

4.34 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing the debate. I was one of the original signatories to the motion, but I had to leave that behind when I was asked to do this job of speaking for my party—I was wearing many hats at one stage.

I am sure that a lot of us have learned many things during this important debate, and that underlines what has been happening during the Brexit process. In the beginning, people did not know about or pay attention to the ins and outs. It was like a motorist who gets in a car and drives down the road happy and oblivious to the difference between a camshaft, a crankshaft and a tappet, or whatever components are in the engine, because the car works and is fine.

We now have to drill down and understand what happens at borders, which essentially do three things: tariffs, VAT checks and regulatory alignment. A customs union helps only the first of those, but it also goes some way towards helping with paperwork and rules of origin. For those who knock the idea of a customs union, I point out that there are 12 of them in the world, comprising 103 of the 193 United Nations countries. Customs unions are therefore more the norm than the abnorm.

If the UK insists on being out of the customs union and the single market, it will inevitably face barriers to trade. For those who do not believe that, a cursory glance at Google Earth will show them the barrier between Norway and Sweden, both of which are in the single market but only one of which is in the customs union. If they look at the south-east corner of the European Union between Turkey and Bulgaria, or between Turkey and Greece, they will see further barriers, because Turkey is in the customs union but not in the single market. We need to be in both.

Why are we trying to do this? We have seen analysis by the Scottish Government, which was dismissed as politicking; by the Treasury, which was dismissed as mere forecasts; and by the Irish Government, which was met with silence. Analysis shows that the damage to GDP will be 2%, 6% or 8%. To give an idea of what that means, the crash of 2008 was a 2% event for GDP. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that such things had not happened deliberately in the past. He was, I think, hinting that this is being done very deliberately—damage is being done to the UK economy in the full knowledge of what will happen.

The Prime Minister has not chosen the option of membership of the customs union and the single market outside the European Union, which would result in 2% damage. She has gone for the middle option of
6% damage, or three times the economic crash of 2008 over 12 years. We have to be absolutely certain that that is fully understood and communicated more widely among the public, because there will be much waiting and gnashing of teeth when it happens. As someone who was once poor said, “I have tried poverty and it is not very good.”

The Brexiteer line that I heard from the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) was that we are not in control of our trade, but nobody, by definition, is in control of their trade, because they have to deal with another partner. We certainly will not be in control when 27 other countries put up barriers to our goods, and we will have a lot less control over our trade at that point.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) made a number of excellent points. She talked about the idea of global Britain. May I let the House in on a secret? There is a thing called global Ireland, global Germany, global France, global Australia, global Argentina—everywhere, ladies and gentlemen, is global. On global Japan in particular, diplomats are going into offices explaining that they have put 40% of their investment into one basket in the EU, namely the UK, and they are very nervous indeed about what will happen to that investment. Outside the UK, global Japan has the biggest worry of all about exactly which direction the UK is taking.

In an intervention, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) gave the example of avionics and Spesavers. Who knew about these things? I knew about shellfish. People say that they want fantastic trade agreements with many other countries across the world, but lorries currently take shellfish from my constituency in the Hebrides to France or Spain on a journey that is uninterrupted by borders. If borders are put at the ro-ro facilities, the lorries’ journeys out and back will be delayed. We might get free trade with Paraguay, but there is no way that anyone could drive a heavy goods vehicle from the Outer Hebrides to Paraguay and back in a week. People sometimes lose sight of exactly what they are talking about. Trade does not happen on bits of paper. Trade happens because a person on my island, Donald Maclean, phones somebody in Spain and they make a deal between themselves. That is how trade works, but the Government are now putting themselves right in the middle of the trade that is happening between the Outer Hebrides and the continent of Europe, and that is going to be very damaging.

I get frustrated when I hear the Prime Minister, who has led the charge on this, saying that the European Court of Justice is not our court, but an external court. The ECJ is our court, your court and everybody else’s court. It is every European’s court, in fact. The idea that the UK and the EU are two separate entities is wrong as well. The UK is one of 28 members, and we have full access to the ECJ, just as everywhere else does.

We should also be mindful of the words of Simon Coveney, the Tánaiste and Irish Foreign Minister, because the moment might be approaching faster than we think. He said last week that if there was no agreement on the Irish border by June, everything could be off the table. The UK could crash out of the European Union a lot sooner than it thinks, because if the border issue is not sorted, no other issue will be sorted and there will be no deal. We know that the hard Brexiteers have abandoned the WTO idea because they have accepted a transition, but they might not get that transition. That could be a problem for them, but they have not yet woken up to it. Indeed, they might wake up to it too late, because the cliff edge is closer than we think. It has not been delayed as a result of the Prime Minister begging the European Union for two extra years but walking away with only 21 months.

It is absolutely incredible that the United Kingdom is taking the steps that it is taking. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) has tried to shout to warn people and wake them up to the economic damage that is being done to the people who live in our islands. It will be worse for those in the north of England and in Scotland than it will be for those in London, but there is still going to be bad news for London. But I fear that people are not listening. They are on their ideological high horses, ignoring the facts that are staring them in the face. They are grabbing platitudes in the great hope that something will come up. The reality is that nothing is going to come up unless we climb down from a position of trying to square unsquareable circles. The UK is in a very difficult position of its own making. From my point of view as a Scottish National party member and a Scottish national, we have to be referendum-ready in Scotland, because that is the only lifeboat I can see that could take us out of the economic calamity that the UK is about to force on itself.

4.42 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The debate has been enlightening and I have welcomed the chance to listen to all the Members across the Chamber. I should like to thank the 12 cross-party Chairs of the Committees and the Liaison Committee for enabling us to explore this motion today, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who set the scene. I would also like to thank the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who said that we needed a proper debate. To some extent, we have had that debate today. The motion and the debate have set out in stark terms the overwhelming case for the UK to negotiate a new customs union with the European Union on our exit.

I would like to share a quote with the House. Forty years ago, almost to the day, a former Leader of the Opposition wrote this in a German newspaper:

“It is no small thing to have completed and preserved a customs union covering a market of nearly 300 million people.”

That was Mrs Thatcher, then the Leader of the Opposition. The current Leader of the Opposition takes the same view—that a customs union involving Britain and the European Union is a project worth preserving. However, bound by the whims of the misguided or the ideologues in her party, the Prime Minister is unable to serve the national interest and commit the Government to negotiate a customs union with the EU beyond the transition period. As the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) asked, what are the plans? There do not appear to be any at all.

We are calling for an outcome that will protect the UK economy—a “jobs first” Brexit in the context of the six tests set by the shadow Brexit Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). So, while the Prime Minister talked about leaving under no deal, we have tried to
work with the manufacturing industry and other business sectors to examine how we might best protect the interests of both producers and consumers, as have other Members across the Chamber. The Prime Minister explicitly ruled out a customs union with the EU in her Mansion House speech in January, yet at the Press Gallery lunch today the Home Secretary apparently cast some doubt over that, but she has since tweeted to say that we are now back on track and that there will not be a customs union. It is the lack of continuity and the confusion that creates problems.

By direct contrast, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made it clear that Labour is committed to such an arrangement, saying that “Labour would seek to negotiate a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union to ensure that there are no tariffs with Europe and to help avoid any need for a hard border in Northern Ireland.”

As on many other issues, a cursory glance at Labour’s position shows that that is the line that we have been taking for a considerable period. Whether we like it or not, the Prime Minister has caused confusion. As far as we are concerned, we are campaigning for a customs union, and we are determined to follow that. We are not in the business of keeping Britain in the EU through the backdoor, nor would we countenance a deal that left Britain as a passive recipient of rules decided by others elsewhere. However, many in the Chamber have acknowledged the huge risks and uncertainties that leaving the customs union presents for jobs, manufacturing, business supply chains and, importantly, continued peace in Northern Ireland. A comprehensive and effective UK-EU customs union is possible and would ensure that there are no tariffs with Europe and avoid the need for a hard border in Northern Ireland.

In entering a new customs arrangement with the EU, we would ensure that our hard-won workers’ rights, standards and protections are maintained and protected, blocking attempts by the more ardent Brexiteers to create a bonfire of such rights and the weakening of environmental protections. The new customs arrangement needs to ensure that Britain can have a say in future trade deals. A new customs union would ensure that the UK maintains close and progressive co-operation with the whole of Europe after Brexit, rather than creating the risk of growing isolation, which would see us further apart from our European neighbours on regulation, rights and standards. As has been identified today, even the Government’s leaked impact assessment, among other reports, shows that their highly streamed customs proposal will lead to non-tariff barriers and some tariffs, and it reaches the same conclusion as we have: a customs union is the only way to guarantee frictionless trade between the UK and the EU.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: Would I like to, but I do not have the time.

Clause 31 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, which gives the Government the power to enter into a customs union, was published in November 2017, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). However, within weeks, the PM was ruling out a customs union, but it remained in the Bill on First and Second Readings and in Committee. Has anyone bothered to mention that clause to the Prime Minister? Is she even aware of it? Should she not commit to clause 31?

Today’s debate will send a clear warning to this Government that they cannot simply steamroll over the wishes of Members. It is time for the Prime Minister to act like one and to challenge those in her party and her Cabinet who continue to hold the country and the negotiations hostage. The road ahead is clear, and Labour’s position has been consistent, as many have said today. It is time for the Government to listen to the consensus and adopt a position that seeks to negotiate a new UK-EU customs union. It is the only practical way to ensure frictionless trade and to protect jobs and the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland. As many Members have said, we owe that to our constituents and to our country.

4.49 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing today’s extremely important debate. I thank all Members for their passionate, heartfelt and informed contributions.

I do not intend to go through all the contributions, given their volume and the fact I would like to make sure I leave time for any Member who wishes to intervene on me to ask any questions or to make any points. If I have time, I will leave a minute for the right hon. Lady at the end.

A number of important points have been made in this debate. First and foremost is the matter of Northern Ireland and its Irish border. Some Members have suggested that, in fact, we are prepared to jettison the Good Friday agreement, to undermine it in some way or not to stand up for it, which is certainly not the case. We remain entirely committed to the Good Friday agreement, as we do to having no hard border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland and, indeed, no effective customs border down the Irish sea.

Lady Hermon: Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Lady Hermon: Thank you. It is nice that the Minister regards me as an hon. Friend.

I gently say to the Minister that it would be very helpful in a sensitive situation if the Prime Minister would stop repeating the mantra that no deal is better than a bad deal, because it directly contradicts her pledge, sincerely meant, to uphold the principles of the Good Friday agreement, which I believe she does and intends to do. However, there is a contradiction there, and I am sure the Minister agrees that we do not want to see any risk of a hard border with Ireland. That would lead to violence along the border.

Mel Stride: The position of the Prime Minister and the Government is that we are confident of a deal. In that context, this issue of no deal is not particularly pertinent.

Other important points have been raised. I think everybody recognises the importance of having as frictionless a border as possible. Of course, it is recognised that we would achieve that if we stayed within the customs union or a customs union, which is de facto the
same thing, but that is not the same as suggesting that there are not alternative arrangements—I will discuss those alternative arrangements in a moment—that would achieve a good deal the same thing as a fritless border.

Many Members today have emphasised the importance of being free as a nation to go out and negotiate our own free trade arrangements, which of course means that we need to leave the customs union.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Does the Financial Secretary believe the trade agreements we negotiate could possibly be better than the trade agreements we currently have and would continue to have as a member of the EU?

**Mel Stride:** As the hon. Lady knows, we are currently working on transferring the EU’s agreements with third-world countries. Of course, in future we will be free to strike our own FTAs with other countries, which we are currently prohibited from doing.

It is good to hear the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) agree with Margaret Thatcher at long last. She stood for free markets, free trade and fiscal responsibility, and I look forward to hearing more of that from him in the years to come.

I have just been informed that I must leave two minutes for the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, which I will endeavour to do—[Interruption]—although she is generously saying that one minute will be enough.

The hon. Member for Bootle suggested that the Government’s position is confused, although I am not sure whether he was thinking of his own position when he said that. The reality is that the Labour party has a classic fudge on the customs union. It wants to tell everybody that we can somehow be in the customs union while not being a rule taker—that we can somehow negotiate to be in the room when FTAs between the EU and other countries are negotiated. The Labour party accuses us of seeking to cherry-pick, but by its own logic, it is quite clear that this is just not a realistic possibility.

The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned clause 31 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, which will indeed permit the UK to enter into a customs union with another customs union or territory. That is something we will almost certainly wish to do with our Crown dependencies. The clause will therefore not be relevant to the European Union after our departure. The Government are therefore clear that when we leave the European Union we will leave its customs union. That is a matter of fact. The Government have also been clear that forming a new customs union with the EU is not compatible with a meaningful independent trade policy, so we will not be doing that. Outside the EU and a customs union, the UK will be able to sign its own trade deals with our partners around the world.

**Mr Vaizey:** Now that the Minister has been un-shelled—he is doing very well—could he name one trade deal and tell us when it will be signed?

**Mel Stride:** An ingenious question; I would expect no less. As my right hon. Friend will know, we are not able to enter into and sign such deals until we have left the EU and, indeed, we are beyond the implementation period. Of course we are working actively on these deals, but saying that does not mean that we will no longer need a deep and special partnership with our nearest trading partner. The EU is still and will remain a significant marketplace for us. Our markets are deeply interconnected, and that will remain the case for the future.

That is why the Prime Minister set out the Government’s intention to negotiate the broadest and deepest possible economic partnership covering more sectors and co-operating more fully than any free trade agreement anywhere in the world and recognising the point of deep convergence from which both sides begin.

In leaving the EU customs union, we will be guided by what delivers the greatest economic advantage to the UK, framed by three strategic objectives. The first is to continue UK-EU trade that is as frictionless as possible. The second is avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. The third is establishing an independent international trade policy.

The Government have already set out two options for our future customs arrangements with the EU that most closely meet these objectives. One is a new customs partnership. In this model, the UK would mirror the EU’s requirements at our border for imports from the rest of the world with a final destination in the EU. This would mean applying the same tariffs and rules of origin as the EU for those goods. By following this approach, we would know that all goods entering the EU via the UK will pay the right EU duties, removing the need for customs processes at the UK-EU border.

The other option is a highly streamlined customs arrangement. This approach would involve the introduction of formal customs processes between the UK and the EU, driven by technology, to streamline and enable this model. However, the UK would look to implement a range of measures—both negotiated and unilateral—to minimise friction, together with specific provisions for Northern Ireland. The precise form of any new customs arrangements will of course be subject to negotiation, and we are pursuing both approaches vigorously with our European friends. I look forward to further progress in these talks.

For the reasons I have given, the Government cannot support the motion before us today. As we prepare to leave the European Union, a significant opportunity awaits us—the opportunity to promote our national interest above all else and the opportunity to shape our future trading policy—because when the people of this country voted to leave the European Union, they voted for democratic self-government and to take control of our future trading arrangements. Moving forward, we will seek to maximise our trade, across all countries and markets as we prepare for the challenges and the exciting opportunities ahead, confident as an independent trading nation and proud of our long history as a global champion of free trade.

4.58 pm

**Yvette Cooper:** This has been an excellent debate. We have had substantial speeches drawing on huge evidence and experience from across the country and from so many Select Committees, but what the Minister—he did the best he could—delivered in response was not up to the debate. He had lines to take, the words on the page, but in the end there is no meaning behind them, no evidence that underpins them and no future that we can build on them. In the end, I think in his heart he knows that. That is why I urge the Government to bring forward a proper debate on legislation, on amendments.
Give the House the opportunity to steer the objectives of the negotiations before it is too late. This is about the future of our whole country, the future of our prosperity, the future of our manufacturing industry and whether we have peace within our borders and across our borders. It is immensely important for our entire future, and too important to be simply left to a massive row and crisis afterwards, when it is too late. The Minister knows, and the Government know, that time is running out. It is time for the Government to stop running away. Let us have this debate; let us support a customs union.

*Yvette Cooper*

Resolved,

That this House notes that the EU is the UK’s largest export market for goods, accounting for a total of £145bn of exports and £241bn of imports in 2016; further notes the Government’s expressed aim to secure the freest and most frictionless possible trade in goods between the UK and the EU after 29 March 2019; notes the importance of frictionless trade without tariffs, customs or border checks for manufacturers and businesses across the country who trade with the EU; further notes that the free circulation of goods on the island of Ireland is a consequence of the UK’s and Republic of Ireland’s membership of the EU Customs Union; in addition notes the Government’s commitment to (i), in the UK-EU joint report on progress during phase 1 of the Article 50 negotiations, the maintenance of North-South cooperation and the all-island economy on the island of Ireland, (ii) the Belfast Agreement implemented in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 remaining a fundamental principle of public policy and (iii) the continuation of unfettered access for Northern Ireland’s businesses to the whole of the UK internal market; and therefore calls on the Government to include as an objective in negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and the EU the establishment of an effective customs union between the two territories.

Mr Speaker: I am not certain that I am in a position to confirm anything today. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman, having just heard his point of order, is this. There is a compelling logic in such an arrangement and an equivalence of treatment between this, the first debate under this parliamentary architecture involving the Liaison Committee and co-operation between it and the Backbench Business Committee, and the arrangement that has come to apply in respect of motions passed after Opposition day debates. I repeat: there is a compelling logic in such an arrangement, and it might be thought—I say this with my beady eye on the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who is an unfailingly courteous individual—that it would also be a courtesy for the Government to oblige the House with such an explanation. I think we will have to leave matters for today, but I use the word “compelling”—one might also use the word “inexorable” or “irresistible”—for the logic of which I speak. I hope that is helpful to the House.

PETITION

Royal Bank of Scotland closure in Isle of Barra

Mr Speaker: We come now to the petition. What a busy denizen of the House today is the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)!

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on the closure of the RBS branch in Castlebay on the Island of Barra in the Hebrides, in my constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar, which will also adversely affect RBS customers in Lochboisdale in South Uist. Incidentally, the RBS bonus pot would keep those branches open and pay for salaries for hundreds of years. The absence of a bank on the Island of Barra would be akin to the people of Dover banking in Calais. With the Economic Secretary to the Treasury promising to visit and see the situation for himself in August, I still hold out some hope that the CEO of RBS, Ross McEwan, and/or the chairman, Howard Davies, will come and explain their strange and damaging decisions to the people of Barra and Uist.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Na h-Eileanan an Iar,\n
Declares that the proposed closure of the Castlebay branch of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland on the Isle of Barra will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy\n
The petitioner 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 into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of these branches.\n
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Angus Brendan MacNeil

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5.5 pm

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And the petitioners remain, etc.
Lung Cancer

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), let me say that I will not be in the Chair for this debate—it will be admirably chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means—but I want to say, pursuant to the debate only a week ago, what a pleasure it is to see the right hon. Gentleman in his place, having contributed so forcefully and powerfully in last week’s debate, and I wish him Godspeed with this debate and in every other respect. The whole House is happy to see him in good heart, good spirit and good health, leading debates on these important matters.

5.5 pm

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for your kind wishes and kind comments and the support that you have given to me as I renew my acquaintance with the ways and processes of the Back Benches. I very much appreciate your kind words and support.

A week ago today, I had the privilege to speak in the brain tumour debate inspired by the incredible work of Baroness Tessa Jowell. It was one of those very special moments in this House, which was made even more poignant by Tessa being present to hear the debate and to hear the tributes to her courage, her spirit and her determination to bring about positive change for people to live well with cancer for longer. The abiding theme through all that debate was a message of hope—hope for the future, hope for others, and hope in the face of personal physical adversity. There was also the overriding power of human kindness, compassion and love, and I want to return to some of those themes later on.

At the end of August last year, I was out in Northern Ireland for a family weekend. It was a Saturday afternoon and we had had some fun exploring somewhere new with the kids and we were about to have some lunch. I had just sat down when I realised that I needed to clear something from my throat, thinking that it must be a bit of food or perhaps some phlegm. The next think I remember is looking down and realising that my tissue had a bright red blob of blood in it. I felt my heart pounding and a knot at the very pit of my stomach at the shock. That is the thing about cancer: half of us will come to appreciate that stigma and misperceptions can be a barrier to getting people the help they need. We just do not get it picked up quickly enough.

Symptoms could include a persistent cough that just will not go away; feeling breathless but just not knowing why; hoarseness in the voice; unexplained tiredness or lack of energy; weight loss that cannot be understood; coughing up blood. Yet, according to opinion research commissioned by the British Lung Foundation and BritainThinks, one in five people in the UK are unable to name any symptoms of lung disease at all. Smoking is a clear risk factor, but many people who have never smoked develop lung cancer. I was one of them. Around 15% of lung cancers are in non-smokers. Given that 46,000 people are diagnosed each year, that is a big number in its own right.

I have been struck by the number of people who have asked me, “Did you smoke?” And that is how I have come to appreciate that stigma and misperceptions can be a barrier to getting people the help they need. Rightly, we have made huge steps forward in smoking cessation programmes. We have firmly cemented in people’s minds that lung cancer and other lung diseases are caused by smoking. But there are unintended consequences. Lung cancer can be caused by a number of factors, not just smoking; yet British Lung Foundation opinion research suggests that as many as a quarter of us assume that everyone with a lung condition is a smoker. This was brought home to me as I underwent a tube down my throat to have a poke around in my lungs—after my CT scan showed a small area of inflammation

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I trusted my consultant’s advice to have a bronchoscopy—a tube down my throat to have a poke around in my lungs—after my CT scan showed a small area of inflammation

“because we probably shouldn’t leave it there.”

At each stage, I could have left it there. I was too busy with work, too busy with Brexit and too busy with the Northern Ireland political talks, but I did not leave it there and that saved my life. I was lucky because my cancer was caught early. I was able to receive curative treatment—surgery to remove the upper part of my right lung—but, sadly, too often that does not happen. Too often people find out that they have cancer too late, and that is what we need to change.

Every year around 36,000 people will die from lung cancer. That is more than breast, prostate and pancreatic cancer combined. It is the UK’s biggest cancer killer and survival rates remain stubbornly poor. One of the main reasons for this is that it is detected at a point when curative treatment is no longer an option. Two thirds of lung cancers are diagnosed when the disease is at an advanced stage. Let me give hon. Members a sense of what this means. Some 83% of lung cancer patients diagnosed at stage 1, when the cancer has not spread, survive their cancer for at least a year. This drops to just 17% at stage 4, when the cancer has spread to another organ. But this is not a numbers game. It is real life—and death.

The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, which does such excellent work, gave me just one example of this stark reality. Steph lost her dad to lung cancer in December last year. He died 12 weeks after diagnosis. She said:

“I think the worst thing was my dad wasn’t given the opportunity to really fight it.”

We are talking about mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, loved ones and colleagues. Lives are cut short because we do not pick up on the signs and symptoms. We just do not get it picked up quickly enough.

Too often people find out that they have cancer too late, because we do not pick up on the signs and symptoms. We fail to appreciate that some cancers are curable, even at advanced stages, if we only act in time. The abiding theme of the whole debate was a message of hope—hope for the future, hope for others, and hope in the face of personal physical adversity. There was also the overriding power of human kindness, compassion and love, and I want to return to some of those themes later on.
they do smoke, they might not seek help. We need to challenge perceptions and ensure that stigma does not get in the way. We need to see that people with lung cancer receive the support and treatment they need, whether or not they have smoked.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman back, hale and hearty, as we say in Scotland. I wish him well for the future. He is quite right that not everybody who gets lung cancer is a smoker. Attention is often not drawn to health and safety at work, but people should be very careful. Workers who deal with deadly industrial processes are not always aware that this could have quite an effect on their health. Medical science is now gradually starting to make some breakthroughs, which gives us all a little bit of hope. I hope that he will touch on that.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman is prescient, because I was about to say that I believe there is real reason to be positive about what we can achieve.

Since my diagnosis, I have met leading experts in the field in the charitable sector and within our NHS. I have experienced incredible care by amazing NHS professionals on the frontline and spoken to experts in the field working on ground-breaking programmes. I have heard about new immunotherapies that are offering new hope even when surgery is not possible. I have even donated a small sample from my own tumour to an amazing Cancer Research UK programme to help understand cancer better by getting to the heart of its DNA to get to grips with its specific genetic make-up, help us find its weaknesses, and destroy it.

I commend the work of the NHS England clinical expert group for lung cancer, chaired by Professor David Baldwin, in seeing that speedier routes to diagnosis and other good practice can be applied across the country. The 10 new one-stop shop rapid diagnostic and assessment centres announced this month to speed up cancer diagnosis where there are vague or non-specific symptoms are another exciting new initiative. There is the work of the cancer taskforce in delivering the Government’s cancer strategy. There is the work of the taskforce for lung health to develop a five-year plan to improve lung health and prevent lung disease more generally. We should be hopeful, we should be positive, and we should be ambitious about what we can achieve and focus on how we can make the biggest impact.

From everything I have seen and experienced, early diagnosis and treatment lies at the heart of this. That is why I believe that a national screening programme for lung cancer is needed, as we have for breast cancer and bowel cancer. We are not starting from scratch. I commend NHS England for its announcement in November of a lung health check programme. It drew on the success of the Manchester scanner scheme, where mobile CT scanners detected four out of five cases of lung cancer in the early stages. In 12 months, the mobile scanning trucks picked up one cancer for every 33 patients scanned. Following this announcement, new lung screening pilots are about to get under way in various parts of the country.

But we risk each pilot doing its work in varying ways—not being joined up and with a fragmented approach to data collection preventing us from making comparisons and harnessing the lessons learned. There also remains some reticence to see this work progress to a national screening programme, with a desire to wait and see the results of the NELSON trial from Holland and Belgium. Yet we have already seen the huge benefits of CT scanning in the United States, and we have already dealt with issues such as false positives in other screening programmes.

There is a real human cost to delay. We should reflect on how many lives could be saved and how many lives are being lost while we wait. One example of this is Bill, whose lung cancer was picked up early through screening. He shared his story with the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, saying:

“If I hadn’t gone through that scan I could have been dead in a year’s time. The doctor when I went said it’s probably given you ten more years of your life.”

It is because of an overriding desire to see more people enjoy more years of life that I believe we should act now rather than wait. We should commit to a national screening programme and use the pilot programmes to support its implementation. If we want to see a step change in survival rates—to see people living through rather than dying from lung cancer—now is the time to be bold.

The last few months have been hard, knowing that in resigning from Government, my illness would be very public, and knowing that because of the need for a public announcement, many friends and family would be hearing about it on the TV or radio rather than hearing from me directly. When you go through something like this, it puts things in perspective and reminds you of what is really important—most especially, your family and those you love. In so many ways, it is even harder on them than it is on you. I want to thank my wife Cathy and my children Sophie, Jemma and Ben for the love and support they have given me and how they kept me going and kept me positive at some of my darkest moments.

I thank the incredible NHS professionals who have looked after me. They are very special people and without them I would not be giving this speech today. I have also got to know and appreciate even more the work of amazing organisations such as the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Support and the British Lung Foundation. I have been humbled and overwhelmed by the kind messages of support, prayers and letters of encouragement from so many people, the contact I have had from people who have gone through or are going through a similar experience and the good advice I have received from key friends. It reminds you of the power of basic human kindness.

I have been very touched by the concern, kindness and support of colleagues from right across the House, some from people I might have expected, and some from people I did not. It has meant a great deal to me at a very difficult time. I hope that we can harness that spirit of good will and the skills, knowledge and experience of Members across the House, so that we can work together to shift the dial on cancer survival and above all deliver on the message of hope that I started with—hope for people receiving a lung cancer diagnosis just like me, hope for the future, hope for a continued life well led and hope for ourselves—and see that more of us are living well with cancer, and living well beyond it.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a real privilege to respond to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) because he genuinely is a friend and has been a great friend to me. The public see this bear pit where we rip each other apart on a regular basis, but I am sure you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that this is also a very special place.

The House takes a judgment of people and views us all as honourable Members, and my right hon. Friend is known for being one of the most decent men in this place. The genuine outpouring of concern and love when he was forced to make his announcement was tangible. I am not surprised that he was surprised to hear where some of the good messages came from, but he should take that as well deserved. He has talked today about a very personal and traumatic experience, and he did so with real purpose and dignity. In doing so, he has shown the best parts of being a Member of this House, and I warmly congratulate him. It has made it very difficult for me to answer, but there we are.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. He suggested he was lucky to get an early diagnosis and the outcome that he has. There is an element of luck in it, but I will come back to that. The most important point he made was the fact that he followed up with his doctors and did not let it go. The most important thing in getting a good outcome from cancer is being vigilant and taking that early action.

In my right hon. Friend’s speech, he has humanised his story: We all recognise the behaviours that he outlined. It must have been a very painful decision for him to make—at the top of his game, having entered the Cabinet as Secretary of State and done really good stuff, he was suddenly faced with physical health issues but knew it was the right thing to do and took comfort from his family. The rightness of that is here for all to see.

Luck forms part of it, but we also need to properly engage with health professionals. Some people are dogged, others do not want to face up to it, but we all need to have a much more open conversation. The days when cancer was a death sentence are gone. Cancer survival rates in this country have never been higher. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, that is down to early diagnosis and good treatment. The latest survival figures show an estimated 7,000 more people surviving cancer diagnosis and good treatment. The latest survival figures shoot up. This might also sound provocative, but it pays for itself. If we can screen people and catch it early, treatment is cheaper than when it is caught later, so although screening would entail a big upfront cost, it would not only save many lives but pay for itself.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) on a superb speech. It sounds a provocative thing to say perhaps, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that we have cured cancer, in the sense that if diagnosed early enough survival rates shoot up. This might also sound provocative, but it pays for itself. If we can screen people and catch it early, treatment is cheaper than when it is caught later, so although screening would entail a big upfront cost, it would not only save many lives but pay for itself.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It has always been a mystery to me why we spend £200 a year on an MOT for our car but do not do the same for our own health. But I will come to the issue of screening in a moment.

I first want to tackle some of the specific points about lung cancer that my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup raised. As he said, it is one of the most common and serious types of cancer, with 44,500 people diagnosed every year in the UK. Early diagnosis is key but, as he said, in the early stages there are not necessarily signs or symptoms, which is why diagnosis can often come too late. We need to raise public awareness and people need to be vigilant.

The issue of smoking is a very important one. It says here in my brief that smoking is the leading cause of avoidable cancers, particularly lung cancer—that is true, but because it is true it has led to a stigma around the disease, and because of its close association to smoking, many people, even if only subconsciously, view it as a self-inflicted disease. As we can see, that was not the case for my right hon. Friend, but it is very unfair to reach such prejudiced judgments about what is a very unpleasant disease.

As was the case with my right hon. Friend, 15% of lung cancer patients are non-smokers, yet an international survey by the Global Lung Cancer Coalition revealed that a quarter of people in the UK had less sympathy for people with that illness than for those with other forms of cancer. It is clear that lung cancer is not just a smoker’s disease, yet some people believe that that stigma is one of the reasons that lung cancer does not receive the level of research funding that other cancers enjoy. When it comes to cancer research, we know that as well as Government funding there is lots of voluntary funding, and for as long as that prejudice exists, lung cancer will not attract as much investment.

It is important, however, that we continue to spend money on research because, as my right hon. Friend has pointed out, lung cancer survival rates are poor and, although overall cancer survival rates are at an all-time high, some cancers have a five-year survival rate of less than 20%. That is why the Government are supporting the less survivable cancers taskforce, which the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), launched last year and which will look specifically at lung cancer, but also liver cancer—which I suspect suffers from the same stigma—brain, pancreatic and stomach cancer. It will focus on encouraging more research into less survivable cancers. My right hon. Friend also referred to the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, which does fantastic work to raise awareness of the disease, and I thank it for its work.

By way of an aside, if people are diagnosed with lung cancer, that tends to be all people see. I had a relative who died of emphysema, but he was a smoker. His death certificate pointed out that the cause of death was emphysema due to smoking. It ignored the fact that he had spent most of his working life in mills, where he would have inhale various things. That is something that happened to him. The public see lung cancer patients are non-smokers, yet an international survey by the Global Lung Cancer Coalition revealed that a quarter of people in the UK had less sympathy for people with that illness than for those with other forms of cancer. It is clear that lung cancer is not just a smoker’s disease, yet some people believe that that stigma is one of the reasons that lung cancer does not receive the level of research funding that other cancers enjoy. When it comes to cancer research, we know that as well as Government funding there is lots of voluntary funding, and for as long as that prejudice exists, lung cancer will not attract as much investment.

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On screening, the United Kingdom national screening committee advises Ministers and the NHS in all four nations about screening policy. At the moment, systematic population screening for lung cancer is not recommended,
owing to a lack of evidence that it will save lives. There is a considerable amount of research worldwide on CT screening for high-risk groups, such as smokers and ex-smokers. In the Manchester pilots, NHS England offered free health checks and on-the-spot scans to smokers and ex-smokers in Manchester, as my right hon. Friend has explained, as a result of which 46 cases of cancer were discovered. There is evidence that we can achieve things by intervening, and that is something that we should look at. NHS England is encouraged by the results. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) has said, by reaching diagnosis early, we take cost out of the NHS. What is not to like about that? We will look at it further.

I am running out of time, but the Floor belongs to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup, who is now trying to intervene on me.

James Brokenshire: I think my hon. Friend has a few minutes left, because we started just after 5 o’clock. I commit to working with her and her ministerial colleagues to advance screening. I know that there is a lot of discussion about how to do so in the expert working groups. The pilots were not so much about screening as they were about carrying out scans, so the set-up is slightly different. None the less, it is important that they inform our working together. As I have made clear, CT scanning has the clear benefit of ensuring that we can pick up cancers sooner and enabling patients to get the treatment that they need to live full and long lives.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend has made a generous offer. I will address the point that he has made in two ways. The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, is responsible for cancer screening programmes. Our current advice is that national uniform screening would not be productive, but we know about that route. I come back to my right hon. Friend’s experience because he had the wherewithal and courage to face up to a health issue that he had identified and take things forward. I think that the best way of getting improved outcomes is to empower patients to look after and manage their own care, and to have mature conversations with medical professionals so that full investigations can be made. Such conversations would lead to earlier screening. I would be delighted to work with my right hon. Friend to achieve that. We educate the public by sharing real-life examples, and that is how we give them the tools to look after themselves. I look forward to working with him on that.

In the time I have left, I re-emphasise that we are making good progress and remain on track to deliver each of the 96 recommendations in the cancer strategy. That will help us to transform cancer services in England, to the benefit of all cancer patients including those with lung cancer. I cannot thank my right hon. Friend enough for securing this debate. I wish him continued success with his own health and send my best wishes to his family, who have gone with him through a very painful and traumatic journey. I thank him again for all the work that he is doing to raise awareness of the disease.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before I put the question, I want to echo what Mr Speaker said. Welcome back, and know that this House is at its best when we need to support each other. I have been through that, and I cannot speak highly enough of the way that people get together. Welcome back, and may your health continue to be of the best.
**House of Commons**

**Friday 27 April 2018**

*The House met at half-past Nine o’clock*

**PRAYERS**

*The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).*

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move, That the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).*

*The House proceeded to a Division.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

*The House having divided: Ayes 2, Noes 69.*

**Division No. 141**

[9.34 am]

**AYES**

*Tellers for the Ayes: Gareth Johnson and David Morris*

[Fitzpatrick, Jim
Grady, Patrick]

**NOES**

[Argar, Edward
Baldwin, Harriett
Bebb, Guto
Bradley, rh Karen
Brennan, Kevin
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Cartidge, James
Chalk, Alex
Charalambous, Bambos
Courts, Robert
Crabb, rh Stephen
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Eagle, Maria
Eustice, George
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Ghani, Ms Nasrul
Grogan, John
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hillier, Meg
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hudleston, Nigel
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Knight, Julian
Laird, Lesley
Lynch, Holly]

*Question accordingly negatived.*
that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

New clause 9—Assaults in prison (No. 6)—

“In section 243A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, after subsection (2) insert—

'(2A) Subsection (2) does not apply if the prisoner has assaulted any person listed in section 3(d), (e) or (f) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 during the course of their sentence.”"

This new clause would mean that a prisoner serving an extended sentence under sections 227 and 228 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 who assaulted an emergency worker during that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

New clause 10—Assaults in prison (No. 7)—

“In section 244 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, after subsection (1A) insert—

'(1B) Subsection (1) does not apply if the prisoner has assaulted any person listed in section 3(d), (e) or (f) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 during the course of their sentence.”"

This new clause would mean that a prisoner serving a sentence of less than 12 months who assaulted a prison officer or anyone carrying out the same functions as a prison officer or a prison custody officer during that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

New clause 11—Assaults in prison (No. 8)—

“In section 246 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, after subsection (4)(i) insert—

'(j) the prisoner has assaulted any person listed in section 3(d), (e) or (f) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 during the course of their sentence.”"

This new clause would mean that a prisoner serving a fixed term sentence of more than 12 months who assaulted a prison officer during that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

New clause 12—Assaults in prison (No. 9)—

“In section 247 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, after subsection (2) insert—

'(3) Subsection (2) does not apply if the prisoner has assaulted any person listed in section 3(d), (e) or (f) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 during the course of their sentence.”"

This new clause would mean that a prisoner serving an extended sentence under sections 227 and 228 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 who assaulted a prison officer or anyone carrying out the same functions as a prison officer or a prison custody officer during that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

New clause 13—Assaults in prison (No. 10)—

“In section 248 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, after subsection (2) insert—

'(2A) Subsection (2) does not apply if the prisoner has assaulted any person listed in section 3(d), (e) or (f) of the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 during the course of their sentence.”"

This new clause would mean that a prisoner serving a fixed term sentence of more than 12 months who assaulted a prison officer or anyone carrying out the same functions as a prison officer or a prison custody officer during that sentence would not be eligible for automatic release after the requisite period.

Amendment 3, in clause 2, page 2, line 39, at end—

“(aa) an offence under section 3 (sexual assault) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003”.

Amendment 9, page 1, line 10, leave out “12” and insert “24”.

This amendment would increase the sentence for the new offence from 12 to 24 months in Crown courts to allow for longer sentences and to ensure Crown courts have greater powers of sentence for the offence than magistrates’ courts.

Amendment 3, in clause 2, page 2, line 39, at end—

“(aa) an offence under section 3 (sexual assault) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003”.

This causes the fact that the victim was an emergency worker to be an aggravating factor in cases of sexual assault.

Philip Davies: I am delighted to support the Bill today—a Bill that I have supported from the outset. I am pleased to be one of its sponsors. May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on getting his Bill to this point and on using his customary charm to do so? I also congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who has played an invaluable role in supporting the hon. Gentleman in getting the Bill to where it is today. As we all know, she is a doughty supporter of the police, and I know that they appreciate her support greatly. While I am at it, may I thank the Minister, who has played a crucial role in ensuring that the Bill has got to this stage? We are all very grateful for the constructive way in which Ministers have engaged with the process.
My amendments begin with new clauses 1 and 2. I have quite a few to go through, but I will race through them as quickly as possible. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] Well, everything is relative. I will also ensure that I do my amendments justice.

New clause 1 would make assaults on police constables carry the same penalty as the new offence in the Bill, not just the six months currently available to the courts. New clause 2, which I will discuss together with new clause 1, would make assaults on police constables carry a greater penalty than the new offence and ensure that Crown courts had greater powers of sentencing for the offence than magistrates courts. The two new clauses are alternatives—people may consider which one they think would do the job. I would be perfectly content with either.

In an ideal world, I would like to see the highest sentences possible given for offences against the police. Assaulting a police officer is currently a summary only offence that cannot usually be dealt with by the Crown court, and certainly no more than a six-month sentence can be given. I appreciate that assaults against police officers can be charged as other non-police offences of violence, but that is another story. It is relevant to the new clauses, but not something I want to dwell on. I believe that if we have an offence of assault against a police officer, it should attract a robust sentence, because in reality a lot of assaults against the police will be charged in this way.

I have been helpfully informed by the West Yorkshire Police Federation of the number of such assaults in West Yorkshire. Perhaps, in passing, I might praise Nick Smart from the West Yorkshire Police Federation, who does a fantastic job of representing the interests of his members. He is absolutely first class and has done a brilliant job in helping with this Bill. He gave me the Home Office figures that had been collated for April 2016 to March 2017, which showed that there were 1,240 recorded assaults on West Yorkshire police officers in one year. Those figures are not deemed 100% accurate, but they certainly give an idea of the number of assaults going on. The West Yorkshire police figures, based on recorded crime, show that there were 1,729 recorded assaults on police officers from April 2017 to March 2018.

I am sure everybody would appreciate that those are very high figures. They mean that nearly five West Yorkshire police officers are assaulted every day. To me, that is completely and utterly unacceptable, and it is one reason why the Bill is so worthy and important.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about recorded cases, but does he accept that in their normal line of duty, there is an acceptance that police officers are roughed up and pushed around? Much of that is not even taken into account.

Philip Davies: As always, my hon. Friend raises a very good point. I hope later to deal with part of that issue, because there are persistent offenders who assault police officers time and time again. Even when they are found to have done it time and time again, the sentences that are imposed can be derisory. If there is more robust sentencing, it is blindly obvious that the more criminals there are behind bars, the fewer criminals there are out on the streets committing crimes. That would certainly apply here. The more of these characters we can send to prison, the less chance there will be of police officers being assaulted. My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point.

New clause 1 mirrors the Bill with 12-month sentencing powers in magistrates courts and Crown courts. Of course, magistrates do not yet have 12-month sentencing powers for one offence. In reality, they would be left with just the six months they have now. I hope that one day that will change so that magistrates can sentence people up to 12 months for all the offences we are talking about today.

I say to the Minister that we have promised magistrates for many years that we will increase their sentencing powers to 12 months. The law has been passed; it just has not been brought into effect. The Government have promised magistrates those extra powers for many years, and the Select Committee on Justice has reported on that and said that it should be done straight away. It would certainly help in relation to this Bill. I hope the Minister will reflect on the fact that we need to give magistrates those additional sentencing powers, not least because it is much cheaper to prosecute offences in the magistrates court than to take them to the Crown court.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I seek a small clarification. When the hon. Gentleman says “we” have promised magistrates an extension of their sentencing powers for some time, does he mean we the Conservative party, we the Conservative Government, the coalition Government or we collectively as a Parliament?

Philip Davies: All of the above. Labour introduced this power in legislation, but did not enforce it. The Conservative party has promised it in manifestos and still has not delivered. The previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised it to the Magistrates Association personally and still did not deliver it. I hope that at some point somebody, whichever side of the House they are on, keeps the promise they have made to magistrates, because both parties are guilty of promising something and not delivering it.

New clause 2 would—

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on to new clause 2, I want to raise a query about new clause 1. My reading of the Bill, particularly clause 3, is that it would cover an assault on a police officer. Does he not believe that prosecutors would look to charge under this Bill? Why is it necessary to amend the old legislation if the Bill will be available to a prosecutor in an appropriate case?
Philip Davies: Because the Police Act 1996 will still be on the statute book, so it will still be possible for people to be prosecuted under that Act. All that I am asking for is a common-sense new clause to even up the law. If we got this Bill, which says that the sentence should be up to 12 months, in statute, why on earth would we keep in law an Act that says that the maximum sentence for assaulting a police officer is six months? It makes no sense at all. My new clause would simply ensure that the law is tidied up. It is an inevitable consequence of passing this Bill, and I would hope that it is not particularly controversial, because it is simply about ensuring that the law is sensible. Otherwise we would have two separate laws, both supposed to deal with the same thing and carrying different maximum sentences, which is the sort of thing that brings the law into disrepute.

10 am

New clause 2 would again mirror the sentencing already in the Bill, but it would also take into account amendment 9, which I will come to later, and its purpose is to increase the sentence available in a Crown court to up to two years. The Police Federation agrees with me that, although the Bill is worthwhile, it would be much better for the maximum sentence to be two years rather than 12 months, so I suggested amendments to that effect. I tabled new clause 2 in the hope, rather than the expectation, that amendment 9 would be accepted, and if amendment 9 is accepted, new clause 2 would even up the law. When the Minister comes to sum up, I hope he will accept that new clause 2 is simply a sensible tidying up of the law. It is not designed to provide extra sentencing powers; it would simply ensure that the law is consistent. I hope he will accept it in that spirit.

The fact is that some serious assaults are being charged as an assault against a police officer. I heard of one case in which a police officer lost her finger following an attack by a female defendant, which absolutely should have attracted a higher sentence than the six months available to magistrates. The woman had attacked four other police officers on the same occasion, as well having previously been convicted of multiple previous assaults on police officers, which goes back to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). That may be an under-charging issue, but it is one that we see time and again in the courts.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I just want to clarify something. When my hon. Friend talks about an under-charging issue, does he mean that, in the example of an officer’s finger being severed, a more serious charge could have been brought—grievous bodily harm, I would imagine—that would have attracted a much higher sentence? Therefore, it may not be primary legislation that needs to be changed, but simply the charging practices of the Crown Prosecution Service.

Philip Davies: That is all very well in theory, and I am pretty sure that that would do the trick in an academic dissertation, but the problem is what we see in the real world and again. I would be astonished if any Member could not think of an example of a criminal who had committed a serious offence being under-charged and prosecuted for a lesser offence. The reasons for that are numerous, but the biggest one is as follows.

This country supposedly does not have the American system of plea bargaining, but we do in reality. No matter how much the criminal justice system would deny it, we do have that system. The CPS will say that it is going to charge somebody with a serious offence, and the person will say, “I am going to plead not guilty to that.” The defence solicitor or barrister will no doubt then say, “I’ll tell you what, if you charge them with a lesser offence, my client will plead guilty.” So to avoid a trial or to save time or whatever, the CPS, which often feels overstretched, will say, “Oh, go on then. We will charge them for the lesser offence. It will not be the actual offence that they committed, but it will get them a criminal record and get us a guilty plea. It will tidy up our figures, and we will be able to say that we have brought somebody to justice.” The CPS will then consider that it was a great success. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the victim of the crime, who presumably is barely even considered in this box-ticking, target-driven agenda, sees the person who committed the offence against them being given a derisory sentence. That is what we see time after time. Anybody who thinks that we do not is not living in the real world, because it happens on a daily basis in the criminal justice system.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) is right that the responsibility clearly lies with the CPS to charge people appropriately for the offence they have committed—nobody disagrees with that principle—we know that that does not happen in practice. Therefore, even if the CPS does what it seems to do on a regular basis and charges people for a lesser offence, it is beheld upon us to ensure that the judge or magistrate has an appropriate sentence to give out when the most egregious cases come before the courts. In the example that I just gave, a police officer actually lost a finger but the defendant was charged with assaulting a police officer, and we cannot let it stand that the sentence can be just six months, or even just 12 months.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In that example, my hon. Friend shines a light on the potential issue here. Under the circumstances that he has indicated, there is no doubt that the defendant should be charged with grievous bodily harm with intent, which carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. If, under my hon. Friend’s new clause, a defendant is charged with the maximum penalty of 12 months and pleads guilty, they will be entitled to a third off the sentence and would serve only half. In any event, the penalty would therefore be far less than he desires. The real issue here is whether the proper charging decision is made, because that is what makes the material difference to the sentence. This is about the difference between whether someone spends two months or three months in custody.

Philip Davies: I am delighted that my hon. Friend seems to be agreeing with amendment 9 and that he thinks that the sentence in the Bill should be more than 12 months, perhaps 24 months. I will take that as support, but I am unsure whether I have accurately deciphered what he was trying to say. However, he is right that the CPS should charge people for the appropriate offence, but the point is that it does not, and I can assure that even if things will be the same after this Bill comes into effect. The CPS will still prosecute people for offences that it knows will get a conviction. When someone goes before the courts for a particular
offence, we must ensure that the judge or magistrate has the appropriate sentencing powers to make sure that justice is done properly and is seen to be done properly. At the moment, however, that is not the case.

I wish that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) was right. I wish that the utopia he describes, in which the CPS accurately prosecutes people for the serious offences that they have committed every single time, was the reality. If that were the case, there would probably be no need for this Bill, but the fact is that the CPS does not do that. We have to deal with the world as it is, not as we would wish it to be. My hon. Friend has much more expertise in the criminal justice system than me—[Interruption.] On the right side of it, obviously, I respect my hon. Friend’s opinion, but debates in this House on justice issues can often resemble a lawyer’s dinner party. Things can be very interesting, but most people in the real world do not really give a stuff about that. They want to know about what is happening on the ground, rather than what the legal profession would like us to think is happening, which are two very different things.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says about the reality of the prosecution system and how it operates on the ground, but this Bill is about a little more than just the legal mechanisms we want the Crown Prosecution Service to follow. It is about the signal we send out. It is about trying to change the culture. Right now, we have a situation in this country in which many people think it is okay to engage in this behaviour. Yes, we need to change the technicalities of the law, but we must send out a stronger signal on what is acceptable in society. There must be a change in culture, as well as in practice.

Philip Davies: I am not sure I agree. To be perfectly frank, I get rather tired of people passing legislation on Fridays just to send a signal. We could send a signal just by saying something, but we are in the business here of passing law. It would be a rather wasted opportunity if all we achieve today is sending a signal from this House that assaulting police officers and other emergency workers is a terrible thing. I do not want us just to send a signal; I want to see people who are guilty of these offences spend longer in prison. That is what I want to see: not a signal but a real, tangible difference. I am not sure that sending a signal will do the job. We will have achieved something when some of these terrible people end up with longer prison sentences, and that is what my amendments are designed to do.

In the case of the woman who caused a police officer to lose her finger, the maximum sentence on a guilty plea, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham intimated, is actually four months, even given the number of offences of assaulting other police officers. Of course, a maximum of only half the sentence would be served. So, actually, two months in prison is the maximum that person could face for assaulting numerous police officers, leading one of them to lose their finger. In this country, we should be ashamed that that is the maximum sentence a court can impose on that person. In my opinion, and for many people in this country, that is a sick joke.

Again, as my hon. Friend said, two years is probably too little, but two years is certainly better than six months. Should the Crown Prosecution Service do what it does day in, day out and undercharge people, surely we must all agree that giving the courts the opportunity to sentence a person to two years in prison is better than the current situation. The purpose of my new clauses is to make sure we can guarantee that, whichever route a person ends up in court for this offence, a more appropriate sentence can be handed out.

Another more recent example of why the amendments could be helpful is the case of Leroy Parry, who was convicted this week of biting a police officer. He was sentenced to 22 weeks in prison, despite having six previous convictions for assaulting police officers among his 42 previous offences. The police officer, who apparently needed blood tests and antibiotics after being bitten, said that the level of violence exhibited by Parry was the worst he had seen in more than 14 years in the police force.

Increasing the sentencing options for this offence would ensure that magistrates and judges can take the offence more seriously, and much bigger sentences could then quite rightly be handed down by the courts. We would no longer be tying the hands of magistrates and judges, who I am sure also feel frustrated when they cannot pass the sentence they would want to pass. It would mean the seriousness of Parliament to ensure higher sentences for those who assault the police would be recognised, and hopefully sentences, overall, would be higher as a consequence.

This is necessary because the figures are incredible. I asked several years ago how many previous convictions for assaulting a police officer someone had managed to rack up without being sent to prison for doing it again, and the answer showed that, in one year, a person with 36 previous convictions for assaulting a police officer had assaulted at least one more officer and still avoided being sent to prison altogether. By anyone’s standards, surely that is completely unbelievable and completely unacceptable. That is what we should aim to tackle with this Bill.

Such sentences do nothing to help the police, do nothing to deter criminals and do nothing to make our streets safer. If one of my amendments were to be accepted, it would at least assist in increasing the likely consequences of assaulting a police officer, which would hopefully deter some people or, at the very least, keep the culprits off our streets for longer.

10.15 am

Amendment 9 would increase the sentence available to Crown courts for the new offence from 12 months to 24 months to ensure they have greater sentencing powers than the magistrates courts. A magistrates court could then refer a particularly serious offence up to a Crown court for it to be taken more seriously.

Amendment 9 would therefore do two things: it would increase the maximum sentence for an offence against an emergency worker to two years; and it would create a clear differential between the sentence available to a magistrates court and the sentence available to a Crown court. As I have said, assaulting a police officer, a prison officer or someone working in the NHS—these people are protecting and saving the public—should be treated very seriously. Having the power to give an additional year’s sentence would reflect that seriousness.

We are apparently going to have higher sentences for assaulting animals, maybe up to five years’ imprisonment, and I am all for that. I am completely in favour of that
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: Yes, my hon. Friend is an expert.

Michael Tomlinson: I made exactly this point on Second Reading and in Committee. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have not been able to find a single other offence in which the sentence in a magistrates court is exactly the same as the sentence in the Crown court, and I hope to develop that point in due course if I am given the opportunity to make a speech.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As I said, he is an expert in this field. The fact that someone with his expertise cannot think of another offence that carries the same penalty in both courts says a great deal, so why would we do it in this Bill?

I hope the Minister is making profuse notes, because I feel I am scoring some runs here. I do not think many people would disagree if he were to say he is prepared to accept these new clauses. I do not think there would be many Divisions on them. That raises a question: if he will not do that, why does he think that this offence should be unique in the criminal justice system by carrying the same penalty in both the magistrates court and the Crown court, and why does he not believe that the Crown court should have powers for harsher sentencing, which happens, as we have just heard, in respect of every other offence we can think of? I hope the Minister will reflect on that during the debate and perhaps give us a positive response. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said he mentioned this on Second Reading and the hon. Member for Rhondda said he hoped we would come back to this point on Report, so my amendment seeks to make sure that we do that.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am interested in this fascinating speech. Perhaps to prefigure some of the arguments that will be made from the Dispatch Box, let me say that one issue about increasing the sentence to 24 months is that we would, in effect, be saying that somebody who assaults an emergency worker or police officer receives not twice but four times the maximum sentence that would be received were the attack to be on an “ordinary” victim. Is there not a question of proportionality in terms of the relationship between the equality of citizens in general and their right to be protected as victims, and the special status of a uniformed officer, if it is suggested that an increment of four is better than that of two?

Philip Davies: The Minister makes a reasonable point, but he is working on the basis that the existing general sentencing for assault is right and should be the benchmark by which we judge everything else. My argument is that most people would consider that maximum sentence to be derisory, so we would at least be making this one appropriate. If the Minister wants to follow through on his point, he could then increase the maximum sentence for assaults on everybody else. He would be happy, because the approach would be proportionate, and I would be happy because we would have some tougher sentences on the statute book—everyone would be a winner. I hope that he is moving in the right direction. If we passed my new clauses and amendment today and then changed the other sentences, I would be doing cartwheels.

I shall discuss new clauses 4 to 6, 8 to 11, 13 to 16 and 18 together—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I can sense the disappointment in the Chamber; can you, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Just for clarification, no, I cannot sense the disappointment. The hon. Gentleman has just made a very wise statement and he has the House with him.

Philip Davies: As usual, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I have said until I am blue in the face, I would like all sentences handed down by the courts to be served in full. At the very least, however, offenders should not automatically be released halfway through their sentence. That was a scandal—

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I understand why the hon. Gentleman has tabled these measures, and particularly new clause 4, because figures released yesterday show that prisoners attacked officers 2,327 times in the last quarter of 2017 alone. A guard is being hit every hour in our prisons.
Honesty in sentencing criminals to hold the system in contempt. That victims and wider society place in the courts, and it encourages a year in jail is usually out after little more than five months. The automatic release on licence halfway through the sentence for all In the Criminal Justice Act 2003, the Government introduced sentencing. The fight against crime depends on integrity in the criminal justice system and on courts that deliver swift, effective sentences. The proposals would mean that prisoners who assaulted a prison officer or not, of whether they have misbehaved in prison or not, of whether they have assaulted a prison officer or not, of whether they have with such behaviour yet still be released halfway through their sentence irrespective of how badly they behave in prison. Someone does not need to be a rocket scientist to realise that if a criminal sees that they can get away with such behaviour yet still be released halfway through their sentence, it is not surprising that lots of people behave badly in prison.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend see this through the prism of the fact that consideration for early release should be seen as a privilege and that, if someone abuses it, the bottom line is that they should lose it?

10.30 am

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right. I am perhaps a bit more hardline—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] When I was at school, those who behaved would be let out on time, but those who misbehaved would be kept in for longer. It seems to me that our prison system should reflect that. We should expect prisoners to behave well in prison. Those who do should serve the sentence handed out by the courts, but those who misbehave should serve longer. That is what I would like to see and, I think, what most of the public would like to see.

I certainly take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). If we are to allow people to be released early, that should be conditional on good behaviour in prison, rather than the automatic right that it is at the moment. That automatic right—the figures and the correlation are perfectly clear—is part of the reason behind the increasing number of assaults on prison officers, because there is no consequence for someone abuses it, the bottom line is that they should lose it?

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend thinks that I am a bit of a lefty on many things, so he might be surprised to hear that I have a great deal of sympathy with many of his points, particularly his last one. Long Lartin Prison is in my constituency. When we say that we want to be tough on prisoners, we are really saying not that we need to be unreasonably tough, but that we are treating them how they should expect to be treated in the light of their behaviour. My hon. Friend is making some valid points.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend; this is a red letter day.
Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The one issue that the hon. Gentleman missed out is the lack of prison officers. As the POA will tell him, the numbers are insufficient and they are going down, because of the problems in our jails. We need to recruit more prison officers.

Philip Davies: Madam Deputy Speaker, you would rightly start to pull me up if I were to go down the rabbit hole that the hon. Gentleman is trying to take me down, as that would not be relevant, particularly to these measures. However, I think that everybody has accepted that there is a shortage of prison officers. To be fair to the Government, they have done a pretty good job of recruiting quite a lot of additional officers over a fairly short timescale. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I would say that his point is one with which everyone agrees, which is why the Government have done something to increase the numbers. Whether or not that is enough is a different question, but we should give the Government credit where it is due.

There are 21 assaults on prison staff each and every day, two of which are serious. Prison officers have a hard and dangerous job, and I am sick of hearing about the pathetic additions to sentences for prisoners who assault them. Members might be as shocked as I was to learn that, in 2015, the average number of extra days given to prisoners who assaulted prison staff was 16—absolutely ridiculous! I believe that if someone assaults a prison officer, they should immediately lose their right to automatic release. Let the message go out that the Government are on the side of prison officers, and that those who assault them can expect to be properly punished, not just given the derisory slap on the wrist that they are given at the moment.

I have spoken to the Minister about this, so I know that he is passionate about protecting our prison officers. If he wants to do something tangible to stop assaults on prison officers, he should accept my proposal, because that will make the biggest single difference to reduce the number of such assaults. It would make an enormous difference if criminals knew that they would no longer be allowed automatic early release.

My new clauses in this group relate to three categories of people. The first set—new clauses 4 to 6 and 8—relates to prisoners assaulting all emergency workers, as defined in the Bill. The second set—new clauses 9 to 11 and 13—relates to all prison officers and those acting in a similar capacity in prisons. The third, which is new clauses 14 to 16 and 18, relates just to prison officers.

The measures were designed to give the House the second set—new clauses 9 to 11 and 13—relates to all prison officers and those acting in a similar capacity in prisons. The third, which is new clauses 14 to 16 and 18, relates just to prison officers.

I think that new clauses 4 to 6 and 8, which cover all emergency workers, fit best with the Bill because, of course, prisoners can come into contact with health professionals and other emergency workers, such as police officers investigating subsequent offences. It seems to me that an assault on those people should also be covered. If Members feel that only assaults on prison staff should be covered, however, they can pick alternative new clauses, and if they think that only assaults on prison officers should be covered, new clauses 14 to 16 and 18 are available.

Any of those approaches would be better than the status quo. They would mean that prisoners serving sentences of less than 12 months in prison could not be released automatically after six months or less if they had perpetrated an assault while in prison against any of the people I have mentioned. Prisoners serving fixed-term sentences of more than 12 months would also not be eligible for automatic release following an assault. Finally, the proposals would stop those who assault a relevant person from being eligible for early release.

In an ideal world, this would all be happening anyway—it would just be a matter of common sense—but I fear that common sense was thrown out of our criminal justice system an awfully long time ago. I understand that those serving life sentences and indeterminate sentences for public protection will already have any assaults and the like considered by the Parole Board before their release. I certainly hope that assaults are treated as a good reason not to release anybody, and that they would be a bar to people being released as early as would otherwise be the case. Otherwise, Parole Board hearings would be a farce, although some might argue that many already are.

If somebody has assaulted a person inside prison, they are perfectly capable of doing so outside prison, which is another thing that the Parole Board must bear in mind before release, and another reason why we should not automatically release such people early. At a time when assaults seem to be on the increase, we need much tougher action to protect those who come into contact with prisoners. Prisoners are clearly in prison for a reason. It is quite hard to be sent to prison these days, so those who are there, especially if they are serving long sentences, either have already committed a significant crime, or are repeat offenders. That is the only way to get incarcerated these days. If such people thought that they would have to serve their full sentence, rather than just a derisory extra 16 days in prison, they might well think twice about assaulting those who work in prisons to look after them and keep order. Anything that would reduce the number of assaults would surely be welcomed, and this would be a very effective deterrent.

I do not intend to speak to the two amendments in the group that were tabled by the hon. Member for Rhondda, as I am sure that he will do an excellent job of doing so, but I have added my name to them. They relate to spitting and sexual assault. I think we can all agree that spitting is absolutely disgusting and incredible dangerous, particularly to the emergency workers who face it. I appreciate that spitting already constitutes an assault, but I certainly see no harm in highlighting it separately, as the hon. Gentleman has. The West Yorkshire police federation says that spitting affected 21% of all police officers in the latest year, so the Minister should not underestimate how big a problem it is. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that sexual assault should be covered by the Bill—it would be perverse if it was not. Any assault, including sexual assault, should not be tolerated at all, and making this an aggravating factor is a welcome move. I hope that the Government will accept both the hon. Gentleman’s amendments.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I thought that I was going to follow him a little earlier, not least because he told me on the phone the
other night that he was going to speak for 15 minutes, but we have loved every minute of it and inflation—\[\text{Interruption.}\] Yes, we were given a rather longer sentence than we anticipated. He is in favour of longer sentences—and paragraphs, clearly.

I will not go into the whole meaning of the Bill, as we are here today to discuss specific amendments. We are, after all, on Report. Before I go any further, I want to pay tribute to a significant number of Members on both sides of the House, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I feel as if I am carrying the baton over the next stage, because this Bill very much started with her, so I want to pay tribute to her. In fact, there are Members in all parties in the House who support the legislation in broad terms. I hope that, by the end of today, we will have a Bill that is eminently suitable to go to the House of Lords and to be on statute book by the end of this year, preferably by the end of today, we will have a Bill that is eminently suitable to go to the House of Lords and to be on statute book by the end of this year, preferably by the end of today. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Shipley for referring to my charm earlier; I am not sure whether he entirely carried the whole House at that point.

I want to speak to two amendments in my name. Amendment 2 adds the words, “including spitting” as a way of helping to define the concept of common assault or battery, which is in clause 1. There are three different types of spitting to which the law might refer. The first is at or on a person. The second is at or on property, such as on clothing. This matter has often come before the courts, but the outcomes of such cases tend not to be very satisfactory. None the less, there are instances where spitting on property could constitute criminal damage. The third category is spitting in the street, which was, until 1990, an offence carrying a £5 fine. Incidentally, the local authority in Waltham Forest and one other in, I think, Enfield now have £80 fines for spitting in the street—this is not spitting at anybody, but just spitting in the street. Interestingly, at the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese authorities were very keen to try to prevent this, a matter of good manners, and I think that we would all agree that it would be good to stop that here. However, that is not what this amendment is about. This is about spitting at a person.

It is interesting that the deliberate act of spitting at someone, for instance at a football match, is deemed a threat of further violence, demeaning the sport, and bringing the sport into disrepute. FIFA, for instance, counts it as violent behaviour, which can lead to a player being sent off. The Football Association in the UK expressly includes it as a sending-off offence. Indeed, the West Ham player, Arthur Masuaku, has only just finished a six-month ban for spitting. If Members watch the incident in that match, they will see that it was particularly disgusting and despicable. I think that every supporter of football would agree that the ban was wholly appropriate.

Section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 includes the statutory reference to common assault or battery, but it has no specific definition of what constitutes common assault. It is an old common law offence, which has been brought into statute law. In one sense, that is good, because it means that the courts can take cognisance of precedence and that they can look at a whole variety of different issues, but it does also mean that while the vast majority of people in this country would presume that deliberately spitting at another person constitutes assault, and there might have been some other physical element, which might be battery, it does not expressly say so in law.

By introducing a new offence of common assault or battery on an emergency worker, including all the emergency workers who are later defined in the Bill, we have effectively tried to bring that concept of common assault or battery from the Criminal Justice Act to apply to all spitting at emergency workers. The problem is that, as the statute does not expressly define spitting as being part of the offence of common assault or battery, there is anxiety in some circles that prosecuting authorities do not take the matter very seriously.

The truth is that there is a growing incidence of spitting at emergency workers. The West Midlands police, for instance, reported that in just one year—2016—there were 231 cases of police officers being spat at. Some of the instances are quite horrific. A few years ago, I was supporting legislation to ban foxhunting. There was a fundraising dinner in Cardiff for the Labour party, and many people who opposed foxhunting decided to come and protest outside. When they saw me arrive, from about 300 yards away, they decided to chase me down the street. The police bundled me into the back of a blacked-out van to protect me, and they locked the door. The slightly unfortunate thing was that they forgot that I was in the van and, four hours later, I was not able to get back out of the van. It felt as if I had been given a longer sentence than many others.

10.45 am

Later that evening, the police decided to try to get me into the building. They formed a phalanx of eight officers around me. One of the police officers was a woman of a Chinese ethnic background. Horrible racism was shouted at her by some of the protestors—really, really vile stuff—and because we were going through in tight formation, the spitting at the police officers was quite extraordinary. By the time we got through the door, the Chinese police officer’s face was dripping with saliva. Some of the people had deliberately bitten into their lips, so there was blood in the saliva. They were shouting and saying horrible things at the same time. It was deliberately offensive and intimidating and designed to prevent the police officers from doing their work.

Dr Drew: I think I am correct in saying that these were supporters of foxhunting, rather than people who objected to foxhunting. Does my hon. Friend accept that one problem at the moment is the lack of clarity over spit hoods? Some forces have introduced them; others have not. This does not help the situation when arrests are being made. Does he agree with that?

Chris Bryant: Yes, clearly there is an issue. It is entirely appropriate that different police forces should have autonomous powers to be able to take these issues in the direction that they want. Different police forces face different challenges at particular times, then there is the issue of resources as well.

It is absolutely true that this is a growing issue. One problem is that, because police officers may sort of have got used to this behaviour, other emergency workers are now being treated in exactly the same way. Let me read one case from the east midlands last November:
"A man spat at a newly recruited police woman 24 times while under arrest in the back of an ambulance. The handcuffed man laughs as he spits at the officer who warned him he was being recorded on her body camera. He repeatedly targets her face as he sat on the bed next to a paramedic. The police woman was in her first year on the job when she became a victim of the vile attack.”

I think that every single one of us wants to send out an absolutely clear, unambiguous message from this House—I know that the hon. Member for Shipley does not like sending out messages, but sometimes declaratory legislation has an effect as well—that spitting at emergency workers is not on and that the full force of the law should be used against those who do it.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I agree with the hon. Gentleman: that is exactly what we do want to send from this House today. If the will forgive me, there has to be a slight torsion if I am to get in the point that I want to make, but it does follow the point that he has just made. I had an officer in my constituency who was giving first aid to someone whom he had to arrest, and he was spat at repeatedly while doing so—similar to the circumstances faced by the person to which the hon. Gentleman referred. When the case finally got to court, it was deemed that the officer had not been acting in his capacity as a police officer when he was applying first aid—that was beyond his remit—which seems to be an extraordinary situation to be in. As courts can look at our proceedings, may I invite the hon. Gentleman, as the proposer of this Bill, to confirm for the record that, in clause 2(b), we are seeking a wide interpretation of an emergency worker acting in the exercise of their functions as such a worker, as it is ridiculous that a court could rule on such a basis.

Chris Bryant: To be honest, when the law behaves in such a pernickety way as to be able to provide a ludicrous—

[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who has some legal expertise, is laughing at the idea of lawyers being pernickety. I know that that is sort of their job, but when we end up with loopholes being abused in such a way, the law ends up looking an ass. It is therefore incumbent on us sometimes to draw legislation as widely as possible to ensure that all such offences are caught. That has been the deliberate intention of the Bill.

Incidentally, I hope that in drafting the Bill, with the assistance of Government draftspersons and ministerial help, we have managed to land on a piece of legislation that is more effective than the parallel legislation that exists in Scotland. Scotland may, in fact, want to look at our legislation and reshape its own law to reflect this.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Bill is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the instances where a court can find that aggravating circumstances apply? The last thing that we want is for a court to say that an incident is not covered by the Bill and therefore cannot find it to be an aggravated offence, because the perpetrator might then receive a lesser sentence than they would now.

Chris Bryant: There are two aspects to the Bill. The first is the offence of common assault, which I think is now drawn in such a way that the courts will be able to circumvent some of the arguments that have thus far been used to prevent any kind of successful prosecution. The second aspect relates to the aggravated offence, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we have not included every single offence in the world. If amendment 3 is accepted this morning, I think that we will have included all offences that could relate to emergency workers.

The Minister was right to say that it is important that we take cognisance of the fact that, with this Bill, we are saying that emergency workers are going to be treated slightly differently in law from the rest of the wider public. It is not that I want to create great hierarchies in society, with some people being more important than others; it is that emergency workers are suffering these attacks and assaults because they are emergency workers, and that places a greater onus on us to ensure that they have the protections that they need.

I return to amendment 2 and the question of whether spitting is common assault. The Sentencing Council has in recent years looked at whether spitting increases the culpability and seriousness of the offence, and it removed spitting from each of those categories in 2012. Quite a lot of magistrates and judges have now started to say that this is one of the primary reasons that there has been a deflation in the number of successful prosecutions and in the sentences that are handed down. I regret the fact that spitting was removed by the Sentencing Council and hope that it will revisit that decision in the near future. I hope that the Minister might also be able to say something about how we can ensure that the courts take spitting seriously as a part of common assault offences.

There is an argument that putting the words “including spitting” in the Bill could mean that there is a danger that the courts in other incidents of common assault might say, “Well, it doesn’t include those words, so Parliament intends that not to include spitting.” I am guessing that the Minister may make that argument. If so, I am quite happy to listen to his point. It may well be that we will not need to divide the House on this, but I want to ensure that the courts are clear that common assault could involve merely spitting.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, in which he is rightly drawing attention to the heinous act of spitting, which is upsetting and completely unacceptable. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Crown Prosecution Service already can and does charge people with spitting under the offence of common assault. I have prosecuted it myself, and I am aware that there is a case—not ancient—where someone was jailed for 21 weeks for exactly that. We are aware that the Crown Prosecution Service already can and does charge people with spitting under the offence of common assault.

The second aspect relates to the aggravated offence, and hope that it will revisit that decision in the near future. I hope that the Minister might also be able to say something about how we can ensure that the courts take spitting seriously as a part of common assault offences.

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Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is always a delight to have a lawyer in the House, but not too many, eh? [Interruption.] I think I have carried the House with that one.

The hon. Gentleman does, however, make a serious point. I tabled the amendment simply so that we could have this debate and the message goes out completely unambiguously from the House that merely spitting—I use the word “merely” legallyistically; in other words, spitting alone—can constitute a common assault. That is true of
Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill

27 APRIL 2018

the Criminal Justice Act 1988, and spitting at an emergency worker of any kind should constitute an assault under this Bill.

My other amendment—amendment 3—relates to sexual assault. The major part of the Bill introduces an aggravated offence; that is to say that the Bill lists a series of different offences that, when perpetrated against an emergency worker, will be considered to be aggravated. When I drew up the Bill, I was primarily thinking of physical violence towards emergency workers. But the truth is that, since I have been working on the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax and I have received lots of representations, particularly from health service workers, about the sexual assault of ambulance workers, nurses, mental health nurses, doctors and others. One difficulty, both for the Government and for us, has been that these statistics have never been gathered by NHS Protect, which no longer exists anyway. However, the numbers of such incidents reported by the trade unions working on this matter are quite dramatic, particularly given that the figures show increases.

Since 2012, such incidents are up 143% in the East of England ambulance service; up 40% in London; up 133% in the North West ambulance service; and up 1500% in Northern Ireland. Incidents have increased by 400% in South Central ambulance service since 2013; by 100% in the South East Coast ambulance service since 2015; by 400% in Yorkshire ambulance service since 2013; and by 500% in the West Midlands ambulance service since 2012. I wanted to say that it is true that these are not large numbers, but there have been 238 reported cases of sexual assaults on ambulance workers in the East of England ambulance service. Parliament has to take cognisance of such figures and we have to act.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. This also happens to female police officers, as graphically described to the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm, which did a report on the issue. One senior officer said to us, “If I take a team through a club at night, by the time we have gone from one end of the club to the other, the female officer will have been felt up several times.” That is totally unacceptable.

Chris Bryant: It is totally unacceptable; more than that, think about the effect that it has on emergency workers. It destroys their sense of self-worth, and means that they have to summon up courage when they go to work and often live in fear when they are at work. It also means that additional resources may be needed. Of course we have to deal with this issue.

I have a wider set of concerns around alcoholism. My mother was alcoholic and it killed her in the end. I worry that we sometimes use legislation too readily to deal with such issues. It is depressing that, in 100 years, the only thing that we have really come up with to deal with alcoholism is the 12-step process, which does not work for a lot of people who find it difficult to believe in another being above and beyond them. I hope that we will one day have far, far more significant research into what causes alcoholism and how we help people out of it, but the truth is that we will continually have to address the role of alcohol in fuelling violence and sexual violence, particularly against young women.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that, because it is correct that alcohol plays a large part in assaults on emergency workers. Does he agree, therefore, that, while welcoming this Bill, we need to look further to address the issue of cheap alcohol as an underlying key cause of many of these assaults?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. All too often, in some of our towns and villages, it is far too easy to get very cheap alcohol, and vast quantities of it. Under-age people are growing up with the expectation that they will able not just to get half a pint of cider on a Friday night but to get a whole bottle of vodka, doing themselves irreparable damage. I have been doing a bit of work on traumatic brain injury of late, and in particular how it affects the criminal justice system. It is depressing that people who get violent after alcohol will often take enormous risks with their own personal safety or will get violent with others. The brain injuries that can result from alcohol develop especially between the ages of 14 and 21, when the executive function of the brain, which sits largely at the front of it, has not yet fully developed. The damage that is done out of the criminal justice system, because we have thousands and thousands of people in our prisons who have brain injuries that were never properly looked at by medics and dealt with.

As the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said, it would be bizarre not to include sexual assault when we are looking at other areas of assault. I know that the Government have been reluctant about this and have said that we want to treat sexual assault differently, but I think it is better for us to treat it in the same terms.

Alcohol Concern recently said that between a third and a half of all emergency service people who responded to their research had suffered sexual harassment or abuse at the hands of intoxicated members of the public. Over half of ambulance service workers reported that they had been the victim of intoxicated sexual harassment or assault, and 41% of police had been sexually harassed by drunken people.

I do not want to pretend that legislation, of itself, solves a problem. That is true of the whole Bill, and I will say a little more about that when we get to Third Reading. After all, if legislation, of itself, ended offending behaviour, we would have no murder, no theft and so on. However, we need to send out a clear message that trying to touch up emergency workers, make inappropriate advances to them, or make even more advanced forms of sexual approach is wholly inappropriate behaviour. It prevents emergency workers from doing their job properly, undermines morale, and makes it more difficult for us to lead a safe life. That is why I very much hope that the Government will signify, first, on amendment 2, that they accept that spitting is part of common assault and battery; and, secondly, that sexual assault should be included as an aggravated offence.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Let the lawyers’ dinner party commence! It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—I will say a few words about him in a moment—but an even greater pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I fear that he credits me with greater expertise than I possess, but there are real experts in this area in the
Chamber—other lawyers. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster). There may well be others I have not named who have expertise. [ Interruption. ]

With regard to the hon. Member for Rhondda, who has just shouted across the Chamber from a sedentary position, it is a great pleasure to speak on his Bill. I congratulate him on the work that he has done, as has the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster). There may well be others I have not named who have expertise. [ Interruption. ]

I will not speak at great length, but I want to elaborate on the points that I made on Second Reading and in Committee. In particular, I will speak to new clause 2 and amendment 9. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), because I had tabled an amendment framed in almost identical terms to his in relation to extending the sentence in Crown court from 12 months to 24 months. Very bravely, two weeks later I withdrew that amendment, so I am delighted that he has tabled it and that we have the opportunity to debate it today.

As I said on Second Reading and in Committee, under clause 1(2), a person guilty of an offence could potentially be sentenced to the same amount of custody unless the case is tried in the magistrates court or in the Crown court. The clause says:

“A person guilty of an offence to which this section applies is liable...on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months”

and “on conviction on indictment”—that is, in a trial in a Crown court in front of a judge and jury—is also subject “to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months”.

That is odd, which is why I raised it. I have done some research into this—my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley teed me up—and I cannot find a single example of another Bill that sets out exactly the same sentence for an offence tried in the magistrates courts as in the Crown court. We are breaking new ground, and it is therefore worth questioning whether that is appropriate.

I have challenged myself to find another offence against the person—assault-type—offence where the sentence in the Crown court is only 12 months. This where the expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham comes in. What do we as parliamentarians do when we come into the House of Commons first thing? We go and have a cup of coffee or a cup of tea in the Tea Room, and there I met my hon. Friend and challenged him to come up with another similar offence where the sentence in the Crown court was one of 12 months, and he too could not find one. I found two examples that may be relevant.

Rory Stewart: We have returned to the subject that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) raised. Fundamental to this is not the question of the precedent in the Crown court but the relationship between the maximum sentence that can be imposed for an assault on an ordinary member of the public, who has equal status as a victim, and the maximum sentence that can be imposed for an assault on an emergency worker. At the moment, the Bill proposes that somebody who assaulted an emergency worker could receive a maximum sentence of double the one that would be given in relation to an ordinary victim. Is my hon. Friend really proposing that it is appropriate that somebody should be punished four times as much for assaulting an emergency worker as an ordinary member of the public?

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the Minister for his intervention. People who know me know that I do not want sentence inflation. In fact, I disagree fundamentally with the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley. I do not think we should be locking up ever more people, and that is where I agree fundamentally with Ministers and the hon. Member for Rhondda; I see entirely his thought process. Locking up ever more people is counterproductive. I want to see more people rehabilitated and fewer people committing crimes in the first place. That will help the very victims whom my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley passionately wants to defend.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): My hon. Friend echoes my thoughts exactly on the sentencing of prisoners. It might be helpful for him to look at the marvellous report prepared by the Justice Committee last year on the position of magistrates. I wonder whether magistrates should be given greater sentencing powers and whether we should worry less about differences between different types of court, and instead focus on what the offender has actually done.
Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, as she always does. I look forward to her speech.

Victoria Prentis indicated dissent.

Michael Tomlinson: If she is not going to make a speech, I am very disappointed. I look forward to her further interventions and certainly to her further work in the area of justice, because she speaks powerfully for it and is absolutely right in this case.

There are other examples of sentences in the Crown court where there is no penalty of imprisonment, but those fall into a different category. They are generally regulatory offences—exciting offences such as Town and Country Planning Act offences and the like, which get lawyers very excited and passionate, but perhaps no one else. In my research I could find no other equivalent, so it is worth pausing and reflecting on the fact that the Bill breaks new ground in that respect. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham came up with one other example of where there is a sentence of two years—he will probably dwell on that in greater length and with greater expertise than I ever could—in relation to contempt of court and the like, but again, that is slightly different.

We are breaking new ground in the Bill by having the same sentence for the magistrates court and the Crown court. However, in case anyone has not been following closely, I add that clause 1(4) clarifies that until section 154(1) of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 is brought into force, the sentence will be six months rather than 12 months in the magistrates court. I am sure that that is part of the reason for the difference in sentences.

That brings me neatly on to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) made and to new clause 3 and amendment 11. I welcome the opportunity to touch briefly on both. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley and I disagree fundamentally on many things about criminal justice and the criminal justice system, but he is right to say that there should be honesty in sentencing—we probably believe that for the justice system, but he is right to say that there should be honesty in sentenced. Our respective Governments have said that we want magistrates courts still to be able to impose a sentence. However, in case anyone has not been following closely, I add that clause 1(4) clarifies that until section 154(1) of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 is brought into force, the sentence will be six months rather than 12 months in the magistrates court. I am sure that that is part of the reason for the difference in sentences.

One of two things should happen. Either we in this place should say that we want magistrates courts still to have the power to give sentences of six months and no more, or we should say that it is absolutely right to extend magistrates’ sentencing powers from six months to 12 months. If that is the position—from the earlier exchange, I think that respective Governments have held that view—we should get on and do it. I know that some Members in the Chamber who have sat or currently sit on the Justice Committee have looked at that issue, and I want to hear from them in greater detail. New clause 3 is also attractive for that reason, because it draws attention once again to the fact that the law supposedly passed in 2003 is not yet on the statute book. If we think it is the right thing to do, we should get on and do it.

Philip Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that it seems rather bizarre and pointless for the Government to agree to a piece of legislation that gives magistrates the power to send someone to prison for 12 months for a particular offence and then not give magistrates the power to send someone to prison for 12 months?

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend comes back to his point, I suspect, about being honest and straightforward. We either think it is the right thing to do, in which case we should do it, or we do not, in which case we should say so, not do it and stick with the system we currently have.

I do not want to obstruct the safe passage of the Bill, but I thought it important to raise those issues and potential anomalies, and to acknowledge the fact that this Bill is breaking new ground.

11.15 am

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to speak on the Report stage of this Bill. It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), who has been a friend of this campaign from the very start. He raised a number of interesting points, and I look forward to hearing Ministers’ response. We have greatly benefited from his legal expertise throughout this process, and I am grateful to him for that. I am grateful to Members across the House who have recognised the role that I have played in initiating this campaign, but it has been a tremendous team effort, and I will thank a number of people on Third Reading.

I rise specifically to speak in support of amendment 3, which would add sexual assault to the list of assault charges in clause 2, so that it would become an aggravating factor within sentencing if sexual assault were inflicted on an emergency service worker. Having started this campaign with the Police Federation following the experience I had with a single-crewed police officer—a tale I have shared in the Chamber on several occasions—one of the deciding factors in broadening the campaign to cover more emergency service workers was having met female paramedics who had been subject to sexual assaults while on duty. That is why I am so keen to see this addition made to the Bill.

A very clear pattern emerged of female paramedics having to deal with male patients who are often under the influence of drugs or alcohol, as we have heard, in towns and city centres and predominantly on Friday and Saturday nights. I am grateful to Stacey Booth, an organiser with GMB—which I must declare is my trade union—from West Yorkshire who introduced me to a number of paramedics who recounted their experiences, which were worryingly similar.

One of those women was Sarah Kelly, who I am delighted has joined us in Parliament this morning, after taking the brave decision to share her story in the hope that it would help us to fix the broken system that has let her down. On some occasions, it was a combination of the patient being under the influence of drugs, alcohol or both, with a diminished capacity to determine right from wrong, and they took advantage of the situation, sexually assaulting a lone female paramedic in the back of an ambulance. On other occasions it was even more sinister: sexual predators, who have fine-tuned this approach, engineer a situation where they are alone in an ambulance with a female paramedic, with the specific aim of sexually assaulting them.

The risk to ambulance staff is heightened because, unlike the police, who have access to a certain degree of information about a person’s previous criminal history prior to attending an incident, the ambulance service...
[Holly Lynch]

does not. I have met female paramedics who have been dispatched to the address of someone who has only recently sexually assaulted them, pending a court appearance, which must be against all safeguarding and legal advice.

Sarah has led the way in Yorkshire, seeking to work with her trade union and her employer, the Yorkshire ambulance service, to implement the necessary changes from a grassroots level—to accurately report and record such attacks, follow up with support and advice in order to secure a conviction and to build up the data required to put protections in place so that unnecessary risks do not have to be taken in future. I commend her efforts. As we have reflected on many times over the course of the Bill’s journey, the reason why we have to go that bit further on protections for emergency service workers is that we are the ones who ask them to run towards danger and persevere with individuals who seek to do them harm, because they simply cannot walk away.

Like other paramedics, Sarah, having been sexually assaulted by the perpetrator, had to continue to persevere with him in the back of the ambulance until they arrived at hospital, first and foremost because he needed medical attention, and she could not walk away or escape him. We owe it to Sarah to make this amendment a reality in law. She is not alone in her experience as a paramedic, nor are paramedics the only emergency service workers to be exposed to this particularly vile manifestation of assault, so I urge all colleagues to lend their support to amendment 3 and add it to the Bill.

I also support amendment 2, to which I have added my name, and I will return more specifically to the manifestation of assault, so I urge all colleagues to lend them harm, because they simply cannot walk away.

Like other paramedics, Sarah, having been sexually assaulted by the perpetrator, had to continue to persevere with him in the back of the ambulance until they arrived at hospital, first and foremost because he needed medical attention, and she could not walk away or escape him. We owe it to Sarah to make this amendment a reality in law. She is not alone in her experience as a paramedic, nor are paramedics the only emergency service workers to be exposed to this particularly vile manifestation of assault, so I urge all colleagues to lend their support to amendment 3 and add it to the Bill.

I also support amendment 2, to which I have added my name, and I will return more specifically to the hideous act of spitting when I speak to amendments 4, 5 and 6. I am also sympathetic to a great deal of the work done by the hon. Member for Shipley, and I agree with a number of the points that he outlined in his new clauses. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the debate.

Alex Chalk: It is such a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). She is a truly passionate defender of the interests of police officers, and she does that with great skill. I pay tribute to her and to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies).

I have a few observations, building on the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley. In his powerful submission he said that it is important that police officers—I know there are some in the Public Gallery—receive justice, and that that justice is not “a sick joke”. However, we must also ensure that we do not inadvertently replace one sick joke with another.

In my experience as a prosecutor, the biggest injustice for police officers was along the following lines. A police officer attends the scene of a serious robbery, for example, and he or she makes an arrest. During the course of that arrest, the defendant spits at the police officer, in an extremely upsetting and unpleasant incident. The defendant is taken to the police station, where he is subsequently charged with robbery and with assaulting a police constable in the execution of his duty. The case then comes to court, and the defendant says to the prosecutor, through his solicitor, “Alright. I will plead guilty to the robbery”—that is technically a more serious offence and punishable with life imprisonment—but do me a favour and drop the offence of assaulting a PC.” A lazy prosecutor—this point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley—might say, “Oh for goodness’ sake. Let us carve this up. He is going to get a custodial sentence of two to three years for this unpleasant robbery. Is it really worth proceeding with the charge of assaulting a PC?”

What should happen in those circumstances? A conscientious and decent prosecutor would speak to the officer and say, “This is what is being proposed. What are your thoughts about it?” If in those circumstances the officer says, “I want justice to be done. I want this individual to have on their record not just that they are a robber, but that they have assaulted a police officer”, it would be wrong for the prosecution not to proceed with that charge and for justice not to be done. A prosecutor should already take into account the feelings of the victims, and I suggest that it would be in breach of their duty as a prosecutor not to proceed in such circumstances, and it would be a failed assessment of the public interest. In my experience, where those decisions have gone wrong and a case has been dropped, police officers rightly feel that their interests have not been taken into account.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is speaking specifically about police officers, but there is already an existing offence regarding police officers in the Offences Against the Person Act 1861—a rather elderly piece of legislation. However, there is no similar provision for other emergency workers.

Alex Chalk: That is absolutely right. I was using that example to make a point, but whether we are talking about a police officer or an emergency worker, if this Bill becomes an Act—I would entirely support that—the principal potential for injustice is not the absence of legislation used to arrest, prosecute and convict an individual; it is where a prosecutor might make the wrong decision to drop a charge because, in an erroneous assessment of the public interest, he or she decides that it is not worth the candle. That is critical.

The second potential area of injustice is wrongful or erroneous charging. The example given was of a police officer who attends the scene of an alleged crime and her finger is bitten off. An offence for that already exists—causing grievous bodily harm with intent—and the maximum penalty is life imprisonment. If the defendant was convicted, Sentencing Council guidelines suggest that he or she should receive between nine and 16 years’ imprisonment.

Why do I make that point? Let us suppose the defendant is inexplicably charged with assaulting a PC—maximum sentence six months. Under the current position, the defendant would plead guilty and those six months would be reduced to four, because a third of the sentence would be docked. He would then serve half that sentence, which is two months. That is the maximum penalty. It is vanishingly rare that anyone ever gets the maximum penalty, but let us suppose someone does in this case and receives two months. Under the new regime, he would have a maximum sentence of 12 months, but we take off four because of the guilty plea, so the sentence is down to eight months. He will then serve four months, which is a bit more.
Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill

The amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley would make the maximum sentence 24 months, but let us look at what would happen in practice. If the defendant pleads guilty, 24 months is reduced to 16 months, and he will then serve half of that. We must be careful about this. The net effect is simply that the sentence would go from a maximum of two months in custody to eight months, even with my hon. Friend’s amendment. The true area of injustice is not the absence of the offence; it is when a prosecutor makes the default decision not to charge someone with the appropriate offence. Of course I support the Bill, but we must keep our eye on the real areas of injustice, which are upstream.

Finally, in my experience, police officers, and perhaps, in future, emergency workers, will take umbrage at the fact that if a defendant is convicted of, for example, a robbery, even if the court says, “Right. That’s it. Two years for the robbery and four months for assaulting a PC”, those sentences will invariably run concurrently, and a police officer could be left thinking, “What on earth was the point of that?”

Chris Bryant: That is another reason for structuring the Bill in this way. All too often, the courts might have borne in mind the fact that an offence was against an emergency worker when sentencing, but that might be completely unknown to the emergency worker. The mere fact that, because of the Bill that aggravating factor must be stated in court, will be of some comfort to the victims.

Alex Chalk: That is why I am prepared to support the Bill. It sends an important signal that I hope police and emergency workers will welcome. It is right that such an offence should be on that person’s record. My simple note of caution is that, in my experience, the areas of injustice come from wrong charging decisions and the wrongful exercise of discretion on the doorsteps of court.

Michael Tomlinson: At the start of his speech my hon. Friend mentioned the disgrace of sentencing, which he said was a joke or a scandal or whatever. I want to ask about honesty in sentencing—he is coming on to that point. Can we have honesty in sentencing without having ever more inflation in the sentences that are handed down? My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) might be right in saying that we should have honesty in sentencing, but the net result need not be that people are locked up for an ever longer time. We need better communication about what happens with the examples given of a third of a sentence being knocked off and then another half. If the public understood that, they might well get behind such a measure and support it.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point, and we must ensure credibility, understanding of, and basic confidence in the criminal justice system. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley makes a pertinent point about what people feel if someone gets an eight-year sentence but are out in four years, and probably less. I accept that that causes concern, but it cannot seriously be suggested that we in this country are soft on imprisonment. In the United Kingdom we imprison around 95,000 people, but in Germany the figure is closer to 60,000, as it is in France. Of course there is an issue of perception, but it would be a great mistake for the message to go out from this debate that we are soft on imprisonment because nothing could be further from the truth. The UK imprisons more per capita than any other western European country.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) raised a point about sexual offences, and it is appalling to think that an ambulance technician or paramedic who goes to a nightclub, for example, to try to give first-aid to somebody who has been assaulted on a dance floor, might be sexually assaulted. If she has been sexually assaulted—let us be honest, it is probably a “she”—there is an offence under section 3 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that has a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. It would be a very curious case if I, as a prosecutor, were faced with those facts—if a defendant put his hand up an ambulance worker’s skirt in a context where she is trying to provide first aid to an individual—and the CPS then said, “Do you know, we have this new offence, so we are not going to bother with the Sexual Offences Act, section 3, which carries the maximum penalty?” There is a risk that that ambulance worker would say, “What on earth is going on here? Why are they going for the easy option?”

11.30 am

Chris Bryant: However, the truth is that now, large numbers of ambulance workers never bother to report an incident because they feel that it will not be taken seriously. All too often, they have a sort of message from society, the law and prosecuting authorities that somehow or other, this is sort of part of their job. That is why it is important that we say, very firmly, “It is not part of their job and there should be prosecutions.”

Alex Chalk: We should say it firmly, and if I may say, no one can say it more firmly and eloquently than the hon. Gentleman. That is great, but we have to be chary of using legislation to send a message. I do not have any difficulty with doing it—we are doing that and it is absolutely fine—but there is a risk of one sick joke being replaced by another. I would feel very aggrieved if my daughter, say, was an ambulance worker, and a defendant was charged with what might be perceived to be an easier and lesser offence in circumstances where if the same thing happened, for the sake of argument, to one of the nightclub’s patrons who was not an emergency worker, the defendant might be charged under section 3 of the Sexual Offences Act. We rely on prosecutors using their judgment, and I am sure that they will continue to do so, but my simple point is that this has the greatest scope for injustice, and it should not be allowed to happen.

Kevin Foster: I am finding my hon. Friend’s speech very interesting and thought-provoking. Does he agree that Parliament can make its intentions clear on this subject by making this an aggravating factor in the offences that he refers to, and not by looking to incorporate it as such into this offence? Of course, the intention may well be common assault, but this is about making it an aggravating factor in existing sexual offences and not about saying to prosecutors, “You went for this offence when you should have gone for the offence under the 2003 legislation.”

Alex Chalk: I take that point entirely.
[Alex Chalk]

My final point is about the issue of grievous bodily harm with intent, which most right-thinking people would think is the appropriate offence to charge someone with who had bitten a police officer’s finger, but a middle ground exists between grievous bodily harm with intent and common assault, which currently has a maximum sentence of six months—that is, assault occasioning actual bodily harm. Why do I mention that? As has been intimated, common assault is for offences that leave no mark at all. If any offence leaves a mark that, in the language of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, is more than merely transient or trifling—in plain English, that is reddening of the skin—the defendant can be charged with assault occasioning actual bodily harm, whether the victim is an emergency worker or not, with a maximum penalty of five years. That would mean, once the discount for an early guilty plea is taken off, that someone could be inside for 20 months maximum.

This is my central point: let us support this Bill and let us send out the message that attacks on our emergency workers are heinous, that they are not to be tolerated and that the law should come down like a ton of bricks. However, let us also not forget that getting justice means selecting the offence so that the punishment will fit the crime—

Holly Lynch rose—

Alex Chalk: Just before I finish my peroration, I give way to the hon. Lady.

Holly Lynch: The hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful speech and raising some really interesting issues. For me, when we are looking at how we can make a difference in this area, our role as legislators means that we are in some ways limited in how we intervene in the other areas of injustice that he has raised. My question to him, using his legal background and expertise, is this: once we have done our bit by amending the legislation—that will go some way to addressing this problem—how do we appropriately intervene to address the other areas of injustice that he also outlined?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. It would be a very dark day indeed if Members of Parliament in this place were effectively directing independent prosecutors how to exercise their discretion—I know she is not suggesting that for a second—so we have to tread extremely carefully. Ultimately, when a prosecutor decides which charge to choose, they will have to weigh two things: first, sufficiency of evidence—is there sufficient evidence to make it more likely than not that a jury properly directed would convict?—and secondly, is it in the public interest? They have to weigh certain factors in considering the public interest, ranging from the likely sentence at the end of a conviction to protection of the public, and all sorts of things. What we say in this Chamber, however, is capable of forming part of that public interest. If we send the message out that we expect condign punishment, to use a faintly pretentious expression, to be visited on those who assault our emergency workers, that factor can properly be weighed into the mix when prosecutors decide—in the circumstances of the emergency worker who attends the nightclub or the police officer who has their finger bitten off—what offence to choose. The message will ring out from this Chamber that we expect our protectors to be protected.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a great honour to speak in this important debate and it has been nice to hear legal experts making some very important points.

In March, I received a letter from the Bedfordshire police and crime commissioner explaining why the Bill is so important to protect our emergency workers. In Bedfordshire, a police officer who has been assaulted is contacted by a member of the senior team within 72 hours of the assault. Sadly, such calls are a weekly event. Some 24,000 police officers were assaulted in 2016-17, as were more than 70,000 NHS workers and staff in England alone. Assaults on emergency workers should not be viewed as an occupational hazard. While some judges will add an additional penalty if an assault on an officer is proven in court, that is not automatic. CPS judges have historically viewed an assault in the course of arrest as to some extent just part of the job. We must not tolerate that any longer.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech and important points. He is right that some people seem to accept the situation, so as well as this being a matter for legislation, do we not also need to change the whole culture?

Mohammad Yasin: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need to change the culture in this country because it is currently not acceptable.

We must put legislation in place to guarantee that a tough line will be taken on anyone who assaults an emergency worker. This must extend to spitting—a disgusting and aggressive attack—and sexual assault. The regional Crown prosecutor for Bedfordshire advises officers and staff to give the same amount of attention to their own witness statements as to those of other victims, and to provide personal impact statements to the court. The chief constable of Bedfordshire police has agreed to supply a supplementary personal statement in the event of any serious assault, detailing its impact on the force and colleagues, to add weight to the argument for the maximum penalty. However, such good practice is weakened if there is not legislation to back it up. That is why this Bill is so important and why I support it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this very important debate and to follow so many knowledgeable and impassioned speeches. I join every other Member in paying tribute to the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who have campaigned for so long to bring forward this Bill, which I entirely support.

I will in due course speak to some of the amendments and new clauses, but I wonder whether I might be permitted to say a few words about my general support for the Bill, simply because I have not yet had the opportunity to address this matter. I simply would like to say—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has explicitly told the House what he is about to say. He would probably have got away
with it if he had not been so explicit—since we are in this dinner party of lawyers atmosphere, I had better be careful, too, to live up to the name of lawyer. He cannot be general at the moment—he can be so on Third Reading—but this group does, of course, cover an enormous range of matters, and I am quite sure he will be in order in addressing them.

Robert Courts: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. As you rightly said, had I simply said what I intended to say—that we all owe a debt of gratitude to our emergency workers in the police, the ambulance service and everywhere else, and that it is important that they have the full weight of the law behind them—without preannouncing it, I would perhaps have finished that part of my speech by now.

As others have pointed out, there are some anomalies in the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said, its sentencing provisions are unusual. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), I have prosecuted these offences and others like it, and it is strange to have the same sentence on indictment as for summary offences. Broadly put, anyone charged with an either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward. An either-way offence can choose between a summary trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward and carries the prospect of a lesser sentence, and a jury trial, which is quicker and relatively straightforward.

As I understand the Bill, it contains little to compel anybody to opt for trial on summary jurisdiction—everybody would go for trial by jury. That is fine, in that trial by jury is the gold standard—we are rightly proud of trial by jury in this country—but the difficulty is that there is a big backlog of such cases. The vast majority of cases in this country are dealt with on summary jurisdiction, and if we encourage people to opt for trial by jury, we will simply increase the backlog. I therefore have some difficulty with how the Bill is phrased.

I understand the reasons behind new clause 1, which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the basis for the Government’s opposition, as I understand it, to his new clauses generally—it would be disproportionate to increase the maximum sentence on indictment by so much—but as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole said, we ought to consider this anomaly, because it militates against the tactical concern that any lawyer will have when advising a client. There would be nothing to lose by going for a trial on indictment in front of a jury, which seems strange. It is also anomalous to have a 12-month sentence in a magistrates court, when, absent section 154 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 being brought into force, most other offences brought before a magistrates court carry a six-month sentence. That is odd. As I say, I support the Bill, so I take nothing away from what it seeks to achieve, but those points ought to be made quite clear.

It is important that we are clear about what we are seeking to do in the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham made an excellent point that I would like to emphasise. There is a danger of legislating for the sake of doing something. We have had innumerable criminal justice Acts over the last few years. For those of us who have practised in the magistrates and Crown courts, it can be very difficult to keep up to date with the latest criminal justice sentencing Acts, in particular, and with the guidelines, which keep changing. There is a danger that in seeking to address a wrong, we legislate to do so, rather than simply insisting that the correct charging decisions are made, which is the point that my hon. Friend made. I understand the point about how we do that, which the hon. Member for Halifax (Mr. Brokenshire) made. There is no quick, easy answer. It is partly a matter of criminal justice guidelines being toughened in appropriate circumstances, and partly of the CPS working with its lawyers and training them to ensure that the correct decisions are made. It would be peculiar if, in the example given, when a police officer’s finger was bitten off, that was not charged as a GBH offence, which it clearly is.

Philip Davies: It was not.

Robert Courts: I am not familiar with the background of the case. Perhaps there was a good reason; perhaps there was not. I simply make the point that we need to be careful not to complicate the statute book by introducing offences that cover every precise situation, rather than simply using the more serious offences that already exist. Such a point was also well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham with regard to the Sexual Offences Act.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is making an interesting and thought-provoking speech. He says that this is about sending out a message, but does he agree that this is actually about giving prosecutors an extra tool in their box by way of a new offence to deal with the problem? That offence could be enhanced by the measure on spitting.

Robert Courts: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for making that point. I was simply seeking to make it clear that while an offence that carries a greater sentence might exist for some cases, we should still have this offence, because it sends a message. As he said, an offence does not already exist for some cases, so it is right that we address that.

I wish to make a few comments about spitting, on which the hon. Member for Rhondda has tabled his amendment 1, with which I entirely agree. Spitting is a revolting act that I have both prosecuted and defended innumerable times. It seems to have become more prevalent...
over the past few years and is now a greater part of people’s behaviour when they are faced with emergency workers. It is disgusting, and people who work in the police force or the ambulance service, for example, ought not to have to put up with it.

That is quite right, but it is more important than that, because spitting is deliberately intended to cause worry and to add a psychological wound to one that otherwise is relatively short-lived, because it is not a physical injury. It is right that we mark that because, as I have seen at first hand several times, the act causes immense worry to those in the emergency services, who are understandably extremely distressed far beyond the duration of the relatively short-lived incident. The worry about any contamination that might occur as a result of spitting lasts for weeks and sometimes months. That is what we are seeking to address, which is why I wholeheartedly support amendment 1.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I am pleased to be able to make a contribution to this debate on dealing with assaults on emergency workers. Hon. Members might be pleased to know that I stand here not as a lawyer. I have been listening to the lawyers with great interest, because they put such a different perspective on things that I perhaps do not see, and I hope that I have learned a bit from them today. I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on stewarding the Bill to this stage. I should also like to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on the work she has done on protecting police officers, even before the Bill was introduced. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on his diligence and his commitment to this important Bill. He has taken a great deal of time to look into the details and to table a range of new clauses. I welcome the spirit of his new clauses 1 and 2 in particular, and his focus on police officers, but all Members will recognise the wide range of emergency workers whom we have a duty to protect through legislation to ensure that appropriate sentencing is applied for everyone. That is where I have some issues with the new clauses, in that I think they might be segmenting out certain emergency workers.

I have also listened to the arguments for the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Rhondda, and to the arguments put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who demonstrated great insight into the Bill as it stands and the possible impact of the new clauses. I will take those views into account, along with the responses of the Minister, when considering what will really work in practice. What we want from the Bill is legislation that really works. We have a duty to our emergency workers to ensure that we have a really practical Bill that will lead to fantastic results. I will expand on my arguments about the new clauses in due course.

I am delighted to stand with emergency workers in Erewash and across the whole United Kingdom as we unite in the Chamber today in condemning those who attack our emergency workers, many of whom are regularly prepared to put their own lives at risk so that we can go about our daily lives in a safe and peaceful manner. I pay particular tribute to the emergency workers in my constituency, including the great team of police officers whom I meet on a regular basis. Just last Friday, I visited one of my acute hospitals, the Royal Derby Hospital, where I met people in A&E and saw all the different aspects of their work. I met the ambulance people who work in conjunction with them, and I also went to the pathology department, but one of the great delights of my visit was to stand on the helipad on top of the hospital and look out all around Derbyshire. That was an amazing experience. We must also take account of emergency workers who go out in helicopters as we must ensure that we protect everybody.

I also have Ilkeston Community Hospital in my constituency. Tomorrow it is organising a bed-push to raise funds through its league of friends. That bed-push will be on the high street, but the high street is on a hill, so once again our emergency workers are going above and beyond. There will be teams from the fire service, the ambulance service, Rotary, the Co-op and Tesco, as well as a team from the hospital itself. Nurses will be giving up their free time to help to raise extra funds. All our emergency workers, whether on or off duty, are very committed, and we have a duty to protect them in whatever way we can.

With the support of the Government—in particular the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice—and the support of the whole House, I am certain that following today’s debate and the Bill’s safe passage through the other place, we will have achieved a practical piece of legislation that will afford our emergency workers the legal protection they so rightly deserve. However, while I commend the scope and principle of the Bill, once it receives Royal Assent, as I fully expect that it will, we should not view this simply as “job done”. Instead, the Bill should become a catalyst for wider public debate—perhaps leading to further legislation—about how we best protect all those in public-facing roles who provide vital services to society.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley for standing up for police officers through the tabling of his new clauses, but we need to consider emergency workers, and indeed all public-facing workers, as a whole. Many of the offences under the Bill are already criminal offences in existing law, as the lawyers among us have explained. This Bill differs by giving specific protections to emergency workers. I know that the hon. Member for Rhondda explored this earlier, but I must ask how I am supposed to console other public service workers in my constituency, such as the train conductor, the social worker, the teacher or even my own caseworker, whose contributions to society are just as vital but will not be afforded the same status or protection that emergency workers will receive under the Bill. That is something that we need to look at, and this is why I have some concerns about the new clauses.

I have spoken to countless people who carry out such public roles, and I am sure that all other Members have also done so in their time, both as MPs and during their previous careers. We know that they face many challenges from people who engage in unacceptable and abusive behaviour. All too often they find themselves in potentially dangerous situations, but they will be without the protection that the Bill gives to the emergency workers that it specifies. I think that we need to ensure that the Bill
covers all those who have put themselves forward as public servants. The House should acknowledge that, and examine the issue more closely to establish whether further action, including further legislation, is required. A failure to do so would leave us open to the accusation that we have prioritised the safety and the protection of one group of public workers over another.

This long-overdue piece of legislation will serve to protect our protectors. When emergency personnel have been attacked, we as politicians have been all too quick to respond with kind words and the promise of action, but no one has ever been comforted—or, for that matter, convicted—by rhetoric alone. Today we can finally deliver on that promise of action by passing practical measures that will make a real difference to our fantastic emergency workers on the ground, while also signalling the extent of our respect, support and admiration for the vital work that they all do.

**Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab):** I rise to speak very briefly in support of the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch) in introducing the Bill and piloting it through Committee. It is clear from all the evidence that has been presented by many Members on both sides of the House over the past two and a half hours or so that it has the overwhelming support of the whole House, although Ministers may question some of the nuances and some of the amendments.

As Members will know, I spent 23 years in the London fire brigade. There are several former firefighters in the House: the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and me. The fire service has not featured much in the statistics that we have heard this morning, but that is because it is a much smaller service than the others, so there are fewer incidences of assaults. It has, to an extent, a different culture. None the less, firefighters have been victims of assault on a number of occasions.

More than 20 years ago in Shadwell, which is in my constituency, malicious youths were setting fires or issuing malicious false alarms to get the fire crews to turn out, then took great delight in attacking them. As a result, the local fire station introduced an intervention scheme whereby young people, including some troublemakers, attended a five-day intensive course to enhance their skills and confidence. The young people were referred to the scheme by the police, the local authority referral service and others. Over the past 20 years we have seen fire and police cadets adding to the great work done by the sea, air and Army cadets. It is important that the service has that interventionist arm to prevent kids from going down the wrong road and getting into trouble. However, the purpose of the Bill is to deal with circumstances in which people cross that line.

Spitting is one of the problems. East London has been a tuberculosis hotspot for many years, and at one point during the past 20 years it was the ninth highest TB hotspot in the world—a stunning statistic. Airborne diseases can be transmitted in that way, and aerial transmission of TB is a considerable risk. In Tower Hamlets and Newham, “No Spitting” signs have been introduced in recent years. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda referred to London councils that have reintroduced penalty charges to act as a deterrent. He also mentioned Masuku, a member of the football team that I support, who incurred a six-match ban—not a six-month ban—for spitting. That demonstrates how seriously the football authorities take it, because such a ban is one of the heaviest punishments that can be meted out against professional footballers. The behaviour was completely unacceptable, and was deprecated by all concerned.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda that we do not want to send signals; we want action. I think he was being a little churlish, because he knows how important signalling is and how important signalling our intention is. However, he is right that it has to be backed up by action.

**12 noon**

I inferred from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda that the Government may not be totally on side in respect of his amendments on spitting and sexual assault. I will be interested to hear what their explanation is, but I assure him that if he and my hon. Friend are not satisfied with it and he presses the matter to a vote, most colleagues would, I hope, support them against the reservations of the Government. That will be determined by the strength of the explanation as to why the amendments are not acceptable.

This House is united in saying, as has been said by many hon. Members, that we need to protect those who protect us. It is positive that so many colleagues are here this morning, as was demonstrated by the number who voted on the procedural motion earlier, to ensure that the Bill goes through. I hope that it goes through with my hon. Friend’s amendments.

**Tom Pursglove:** It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who brings an awful lot of experience to the debate from his time employed in the fire service. I was interested to hear what he had to say.

I, too, put on the record my thanks and appreciation to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). He is an effective and tenacious campaigner in this House and has pursued this issue with great vigour, alongside the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). They have done their constituents and the country proud by bringing the Bill forward and getting it to this stage, and by working constructively with Ministers to get it right and reach agreement.

I was delighted to serve on the Bill Committee, where we managed to get through the Bill reasonably rapidly, because there is such support for it across the House. I will not repeat the points that I made on Second Reading, even though they are relevant to the amendments we are considering.

I would argue that a number of the points my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made about his amendments—and I have heard all the scholarly and learned arguments that have been made by esteemed colleagues—were underpinned by quite a big dollop of common sense. I welcome much of the sentiment he has expressed through his amendments.

I would certainly support extending more opportunities and powers to magistrates, because that is something we have pledged to do as a Government. Not only is it right
to empower magistrates and dispense justice as close to the people as possible; it is a cost-effective way of delivering justice and of doing so speedily. In Northamptonshire, we have had issues over the past few years with the streamlining of the magistrates bench. I therefore think that magistrates in Corby and east Northamptonshire would be very pleased to have additional opportunities and powers extended to them, so that they can uphold justice in our community effectively.

I know that all Members of the House have significant concerns about assaults, particularly on prison officers. This is a pressing issue. A very close family friend of mine is a prison officer, and he and his family are very concerned about this issue. I intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to make the point that, whatever one thinks about the rights and wrongs of early release, it must be seen through the prism of early release being a privilege, not a right. I think that if someone assaults a prison officer, they should lose that privilege. It is as simple as that. My hon. Friend made the case for that robustly. I think the case speaks for itself, because there is no starker deterrent for a prisoner than knowing that if they do it, there will be consequences. That should be the bottom line.

If the public were polled on that proposition, I know what the numbers would look like. Opinion polls can be taken with a pinch of salt, but the vast majority of people in this country would think that that was right and proper. We should send the clear message that assaults on prison officers will not be tolerated. Finally, it is my view that it is right to be really clear about sexual assault. It is right to amend the Bill along the lines that the hon. Member for Rhondda has set out. It should be an aggravating factor, and amendment 3 would deliver that.

I made a point on Second Reading that relates to these amendments and new clauses and which was about the racial or verbal abuse of, for example, a police officer within a home. There is nothing that can be done about that at the moment, which worries me greatly. A dedicated officer in Corby, Candy Liverpool, was verbally abused in somebody’s house, but nothing could be done about it. I am grateful to the Policing Minister for the interest that he has shown in the issue. He is willing to take the necessary steps, and it is right that the law takes that. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). He and I are members of a cross-party group on the IRA-Libyan terrorist issue, which I became my involved in because I have a constituent whose sister was a WPC who was murdered in the Harrods bombing many years ago, and I am always struck by the thought of anyone who is cut down in the line of duty after being called out. The crimes that relate to new clause 2, which is what I will address, are far less serious than that, but the principle is that we should support those who are serving us on the frontline and are attacked, abused, spat at or assaulted in the process. Like everyone else, I the support the Bill’s principle. This is the first time I have spoken on it, and I commend the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Indeed, when I met representatives of the Suffolk Police Federation, they specifically wanted me to pass on my best wishes to her for the “Protect the Protectors” campaign.

This debate is timely for me, and the reason why I wanted to refer to the clauses that relate specifically to the constabulary is that, while we are concerned about assaults on anybody and on all emergency staff, Suffolk has seen a great spike in assaults on police officers of late. In fact, the number of incidents increased from 193 in 2016 to 281 in 2017, and there has been a 265% increase over the past few years. Assaults with injury reported to Suffolk constabulary’s health and safety department involving broken bones, cuts, deep lacerations and black eyes more than tripled from 34 in 2014 to 124 last year. Those significant increases have caused a great deal of concern in the county and in my constituency.

I said that this debate is timely, and the headline in today’s East Anglian Daily Times is “Concern over sharp rise in violent crime”. We have seen a 29% increase in violent crime in Suffolk. We are talking about assaults on police officers, and I have been worried by an obvious, at least anecdotally, increase in violent crime, which has now been confirmed by the statistics. There were many ram raids in my constituency over the winter, particularly targeting Co-ops and other similar village shops. We had two ram raids on cashpoints in the same week in the historic village of Lavenham, and people are unsettled because many such attacks have occurred in the rural villages of my constituency. I mention that to add some context, because it seems to me that we may be entering more violent times.

The amendments and new clauses tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) are effectively deterrents. In any policy that is seeking to tighten up sentencing, deterrents should be the priority. We do not want to prosecute people for offences; we want to deter people from carrying them out in the first place. Suffolk Police Federation told me that it wants the Bill to contain greater deterrents, so that the message sent out is not just that we quite rightly condemn such attacks, but that if people commit such offences, they will suffer the appropriate penalty and will not get off lightly for serious offences.

It comes down to causality. We talk about deterrence because if criminals think they can get away with it, they will continue to carry out these offences. I have looked at this issue to try to understand why we are seeing more offences—and we do not yet have any academic studies or other expertise—and I asked local police whether there is a link with the growth in county lines: the drugs traffic coming out of London that is starting.
to hit rural areas. As hon. Members know, when the drugs trade becomes more competitive it becomes more violent. As drug gangs fight for territory, they tend to mark their territory with the greater use of force and a battle for who is, to be blunt, scarier. We have to increase deterrence in response.

Inspector Danny Cooper, who is in charge of Sudbury police, told me he cannot say for certain whether there is a link with the growth in county lines, although the most recent assault of a police officer in Sudbury, two days ago, was by a drug dealer. What assessment have Ministers made of the causes of what is happening? Is it linked to the drugs trade? Is it because of an increase in intoxication?

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about alcohol. The East Anglian Daily Times ran a story about the spate of police assaults over the Christmas period in Suffolk, with eight police officers being injured. One of the most serious incidents followed a robbery, and when the officer concerned was asked why he thought there were more assaults on officers, he said that intoxication was certainly one of the key factors. We know more people drink during the Christmas period.

When we talk about crime, I always want to try to understand the trends. Obviously there are people who make political points, which may be valid, about funding, police numbers and so on, although I cannot help but feel that, when crime was falling sharply some years ago, police numbers were also falling. We have to try to understand why that was the case.

When I was first elected, I asked the then deputy chief constable what was responsible for the trend. Obviously we would like to take great political credit, but he pointed to certain societal trends, such as fewer people going out to pubs after the crash. There was therefore less violence and disorder at clubs and nightspots, and more crimes arising in the home and online, and so on, as people were spending more time at home.

My priority is to find out why this is happening so we can try to deal with it. I support the Bill, and I hope only one modest concern. We heard earlier about the great dinner party conversation of our scholarly and learned friends. I am proud to sit with many people who have real-world experience they can bring to bear in adding value to these debates. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said that we need to understand that there are other offences that cover serious crimes against emergency service workers. We have to be sure that the message we send is not purely a gesture but is meaningful in law and adds to the array of punishments and tools that can be used so that we tighten up the available punishments and send a message of deterrence.

I do not say that politically. Our police and crime commissioner is coming to Westminster next week to meet Suffolk MPs. He is doing all he can and is going to increase his precept to provide more resources to the frontline, but these are worrying times in Suffolk and there is no point beating round the bush. We are seeing an increase in violent crime and we are seeing more assaults on police officers. I want to understand why, then I want to see the Government take effective action. If they need stronger legislation and stronger sentencing, I will be one of the first to support them. In principle, I support this Bill and I congratulate the hon. Members who have helped its passage.

Nigel Huddleston: If I may use the phraseology of my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), let me say that it is a pleasure to follow the dollop of common sense that is my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). [ Interruption. ] It is a positive thing. I also wish to congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is far from being a dollop in any way imaginable, on introducing the Bill and, most importantly, on the constructive tone he has taken in advancing it, working on a cross-party basis. That speaks volumes about his approach and the degree of respect in which he is held across the whole House.

12.15 pm

That brings me on to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who made some very valid arguments. As I said earlier, I am, surprisingly, in agreement with him. In particular, I have great sympathy with his new clauses 1 and 2 on sentencing penalties, and new clauses 4 to 6 on automatic release. I am keen to hear the Minister’s response on those new clauses. I also wish to applaud the work done by the Public Bill Committee to broaden the scope of this Bill so that it goes beyond the original intent of addressing health work to cover the whole remit of emergency workers.

That this Bill is even necessary is regrettable, but sadly the statistics on the rise in assaults against emergency service workers suggest that the current law may not be going far enough in protecting those workers and demonstrating how serious an offence assaulting one is. A GMB survey of ambulance workers recently found that 72% have been attacked while on duty and 94% were aware of attacks on their colleagues. Since 2012, there have been 1,597 physical assaults reported by West Midlands ambulance workers alone, and physical assaults on NHS staff in England increased by 9.7% last year.

As I mentioned earlier, Long Lartin prison is in my constituency, so hon. Members will understand that I have a particular interest in assaults on prison staff. I therefore have sympathy with new clause 9, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, which would mean that a prisoner serving less than 12 months who assaults a prison officer would not be eligible for automatic release. I am also sympathetic to his new clauses 14 to 18, which are similar. An average of 23 attacks on prison staff are recorded every day in the UK, and the number of assaults on prison staff in England and Wales during the last three months of 2017 was the highest quarterly tally on record.

Unfortunately, I have heard from my own constituents about being assaulted while working in Long Lartin, which is a high-security prison and, as such, contains some of the most troubled and aggressive inmates in the country. It is a sad fact that this aggression is all too frequently targeted towards prison staff, and some attacks against Long Lartin staff have regrettably gained national attention. I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the prison officers and staff who serve with such professionalism at Long Lartin, and I take my responsibility seriously as an MP to help make sure that they can work in a safe environment—that means having both adequate resources and adequate laws.

Nationally, a police officer is assaulted every four minutes. Across my region of West Mercia there has been a 10% increase in incidents involving on-duty
personnel, and on average there are two incidents each day. In an effort to counter the increasing incidents involving police in West Mercia, my local police and crime commissioner, John Campion, has launched a campaign called “Behind the Badge” and explained that he has done so because he wants “the public to see the person behind the police badge”.

Although statistics are useful in demonstrating the scale of the issue, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that each number represents an individual person. As a police constable in West Mercia, who was the victim of an assault, said, “we are human, just like everybody else, and we have a job to do. If nothing else, just remember that I have got a family that I would like to go back to.”

Jeremy Quin: I am delighted to hear what my hon. Friend is saying about his local PCC. I have spoken about this Bill to my PCC, the excellent Katy Bourne, and I know that both she and the local police federation are keen to see it progress and be put on the statute book. Like in his area of rural Worcestershire, in my district we think of ourselves as being in a very law-abiding and civilised place, but we had 28 assaults on police officers in 2016-17. He is highlighting that this is not just an urban concern; there are concerns about the safety of emergency workers right across the UK. Obviously the Bill does not deal with the whole of the UK, but it covers England and Wales, and I very much hope that he will continue to support the Bill and that we will get it on to the statute book in due course.

Nigel Huddleston: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. One challenge we face in this place is that sometimes those of us who represent the more rural areas are perceived as representing some sort of rural idyll, where there are no problems and no concerns. That is far from the case, and we need to make sure rural areas are covered adequately too.

I will not try your patience much longer, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to say in conclusion that it is my hope and that of many others in this House that the passage of the Bill will send a clear message to emergency workers including volunteers on the arrival of an ambulance, they form part of the team treating the patient. It is my understanding that the Bill will protect emergency workers including volunteers such as the North Warwickshire community first responders, as they are contracted to provide a service by the NHS, but I would be grateful if clarity can be provided on that point, as they certainly deserve the additional protection that this Bill will give to emergency workers.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on introducing the Bill and add my support for amendment 3, which is a sensible addition. I also thank all the other Members who have put work into the Bill, particularly the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), as we have heard, it takes quite a bit of work to get a Bill to this stage, and this is an important Bill.

Emergency workers are courageous and dedicated. Moreover, they are selfless in their endeavour to help people. There can be few more noble callings and no more worthwhile purpose. I see that clearly during my regular visits to the George Eliot Hospital, which serves my community in North Warwickshire and Bedworth and the surrounding area so well. I see it each time I meet local police across the constituency, never more so than recently when they responded professionally and decisively to the case of a hostage situation at a bowling alley. I have seen it when I had the pleasure to meet the North Warwickshire community first responders, volunteers ably led by Samantha Hall who give up their time because they want to help save lives. I know North Warwickshire is particularly proud of them, as am I. Samantha got married to her partner Graham a few weeks ago, and I pass on my congratulations to them, and I am sure that colleagues here today will join me in wishing them the very best for the future—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”]

The responders are volunteer members of our community, trained by the ambulance service to respond to emergency calls through the 999 system. They provide immediate care to patients who are mobilised by ambulance control. They are a part of their local community, serving an area of approximately 3 miles in radius from their base, which can be their home or place of work, so they can attend the scene of a medical emergency in a very short time, often arriving within a few minutes of the call and sometimes while the caller is still on the phone.

The team are trained to provide emergency life support and to treat patients suffering from a range of conditions. On the arrival of an ambulance, they form part of the team treating the patient. It is my understanding that the Bill will protect emergency workers including volunteers such as the North Warwickshire community first responders, as they are contracted to provide a service by the NHS, but I would be grateful if clarity can be provided on that point, as they certainly deserve the additional protection that this Bill will give to emergency workers.

It is repulsive to imagine any emergency service worker being attacked in the line of duty while saving and protecting, as their name makes clear, those most in need. However, this happens on an all too regular basis across the country. I was shocked to learn that NHS staff—those who are treating sick or injured people—recorded more than 70,000 physical assaults during the year 2015-16. It is worth dwelling on that figure for a moment, as it is the equivalent of 53 assaults per 1,000 members of staff. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members will agree that that is 53 assaults too many.

In our prisons, officer assaults have risen by more than 30% to more than 7,000 in the past year. However, I am encouraged by the fact that the Government are taking action to increase the number of prison officers. They have recruited 3,100 new officers, many of whom...
will be in place by the summer, which will help to reduce the figure. None the less, I can see the sense in new clauses 4 and 9 in providing greater protection for prison officers. As I said, I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response on that.

The Police Federation states that the latest welfare survey data

“suggest that there were potentially more than two million...unarmed physical assaults on officers over a 12 month period, and a further 302,842 assaults using a deadly weapon during the same period.”

It estimates that an assault on a police officer happens every four minutes. Those statistics are shocking and make it clear that action needs to be taken.

This crucial change in the law will send a clear message that attacks on emergency workers will not be tolerated. I welcome the cross-party work that is being done to ensure that those who are violent face the full force of the law. I draw parallels here with our armed forces, and I have previously said in this House that, to enable them to do their job and, more importantly, to give them our backing, we cannot allow spurious legal cases to linger in their minds, as that can reduce recruitment, morale and retention, and, critically, prevent them from doing the job that they have been so highly trained to do.

Similarly, we must guarantee that our emergency workers—those who are in the frontline of responding to life or death situations, or upholding the law—have full protection while carrying out their duties. Those personnel, from ambulance paramedics who are first on the scene to dedicated nurses who care for the sick and firefighters who run into burning buildings, have called for greater protection, and it is right that we deliver it for them. In February 2017, the Police Federation’s campaign “Protect the Protectors” called for a change in legislation leading to tougher sentences for those who assault emergency service workers and more welfare support.

As I said at the start of my remarks, there is no excuse for assault of any kind, but an assault on an emergency worker, who is acting in the line of duty, simply cannot be tolerated. Shamefully, such occurrences are not uncommon and are happening every single day while people are performing their duties in protecting and saving our constituents.

This Bill may not deter every criminal from assaulting an emergency worker who is carrying out their duty, but the new offence will provide increased protection under the law for emergency workers who are assaulted in the course of their day-to-day work. Encouragingly, that increased protection will also extend to situations where an emergency worker is not at work, but is acting as if he or she were—for example, when an off-duty firefighter rescues someone from a burning building. I warmly support the reasoning behind the Bill and the improvements that it will bring in protecting those who dedicate their careers and lives to helping and protecting us.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): It is a delight to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I echo the gratitude that has been expressed to the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for all their sterling work on the Bill and their work with the Government to get us here today, and I hope that the whole House will support them.

I support the Bill, and I also support amendment 3 in particular, which I will talk about later. I also echo the support of some Members for the sentiment expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). He raised some very good points regarding automatic release, but that is a broader debate that we should have in a wider realm, as it would have many ramifications. We should look at that matter separately, rather than diluting and potentially destroying the Bill. Without these amendments and new clauses, the Bill will send a strong message to emergency workers that the actions we are discussing will not be tolerated, and it will give prosecutors powerful tools. That is the message that has come from the emergency workers across my own constituency. They have spoken to me about their own ordeals and about how they recognise the importance of our passing the Bill today.

It is true that attacking a person serving the public is already an aggravating factor in sentencing guidelines, but this Bill will put on a statutory basis a specific requirement to consider assault on emergency workers as aggravated. We have heard many stories today in the Chamber of heroes and heroines whose brave acts to protect us have basically been a part of their everyday jobs and lives, yet they have faced assaults for simply trying to do their job of helping others. That has happened in the Chippenham constituency, but it also happens up and down the country every year. It is only right that we stand up for our emergency service workers in the way they stand up for us. I hope that the Bill will help us to do that. The fact that it has cross-party support sends a message to emergency workers that we are supporting them and standing up for them. It is time for us to protect the protectors—a phrase used throughout the debate today—and ensure that they have the full protection of the law in carrying out their duties. The Police Federation used that apt phrase when it launched its own campaign.

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12.30 pm

I will be supporting amendment 3, which would make a sexual attack on an emergency worker an aggravated offence. That is the right thing to do. Sexual assault is a heinous crime, as the amendment recognises. Shockingly, assaults on emergency workers are not uncommon, and assaults specifically on NHS workers have been rising, with 70,000 recorded attacks on hospital staff in 2016. According to Home Office figures, 2016-17 saw 738 incidents involving an attack on firefighters, resulting in 56 injuries. Unison and other unions have been calling for action in that respect. I echo the comments of Roy Wilsher, chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, who said that “any attack on firefighters is one too many and we cannot tolerate this continuing to happen. I am also deeply concerned by the number of attacks on our emergency service paramedic and police colleagues.”

I agree with him that one is simply too many. I welcome anything that this House can do to send a message and to provide more tools to combat such behaviour.

The Home Office has estimated that there were 24,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales in 2016-17. The Police Federation’s report suggests that there were more than 2 million unarmed physical assaults on officers over 12 months and a further 302,000 assaults using a deadly weapon. Those figures mean it is estimated...
that there is an assault on a police officer every four minutes. It is not only the actual incident but the emotional and physical long-term effects that we need to think about. An incident can happen within five minutes, but the ramifications can last for five years. The human impact on our services is the most important things.

Maggie Throup: I am aware of incidents where police officers have been attacked and those attacks have not just affected them for five years; their career has been curtailed completely. Such incidents have a huge impact on emergency workers’ ambitions and family life.

Michelle Donelan: Indeed. The other point that I was going to make is that these incidents can encourage people to leave their profession, because they are so distressed and every day is a dark reminder of the ordeal that they have been through. That is dreadful, because we need our emergency workers. If we continue to lose them because of these incidents, it will only lead to further shortages of people who play an invaluable role in society. Time is also lost when emergency workers are in hospital or when they take respite leave after an incident. Attacks on police officers between 2016 and 2017 were estimated to have caused six days of lost time on average.

Assaults on emergency workers also create an additional cost for the taxpayer. The annual estimated cost to the NHS of healthcare-related violence is £69 million, which is equivalent to the salary of 4,500 nurses. We could do a lot more with this money. A survey by the Royal College of Nursing found that 47% of its members who had been physically assaulted would not recommend a nursing career. That is the last thing we need when we are looking to recruit more nurses and doctors. A survey of violence against frontline NHS staff reported that 2% of workers a year in England hand in their notice or change their job because they have been physically assaulted.

I congratulate the Bill Committee on its work and the amendments it made, which broadened the scope of who is considered to be an emergency worker. I am delighted by that, because for too long we have forgotten or overlooked people who are on the frontline and are serving to protect and assist us every day. The provisions will now cover prison escort services and those working on the NHS frontline, and staff and volunteers will be protected by the Bill if assaulted while providing a service under contract from the NHS. As we have heard, the Bill will also cover those who are working off duty but are performing their roles. A firefighter is still a firefighter if they are assisting in a fire but not actually doing their day job.

We owe a debt of gratitude and respect to our emergency workers for the courage, commitment and dedication that they demonstrate in carrying out their duties. I am proud to support the Bill and amendment 3. Together, they will ensure that we stand up for those who stand up and protect us.

Kevin Foster: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch) in getting this Bill to Report stage. Having taken a private Member’s Bill through the House myself, I know that, even when the wind is fairly behind it, it is still quite a challenge to make sure that one gets something that can enjoy wider support.

It has been interesting to listen to the thoughtful speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Chesham and Amersham (Alex Chalk), for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) and for Witney (Robert Courts), who applied their usual level of legal analysis to the Bill and helped to shape my understanding of some of the amendments.

It was particularly interesting, though, to sit through the, as always, robust speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who brought his own sense of common sense to this debate and to his new clauses and amendments. Sadly, however, I will have to express queries and concerns about one or two of his proposals. I will be interested to hear what the Minister says in response to them.

In my intervention on my hon. Friend on his new clause 1, I said that this Bill creates a new offence that we would expect prosecutors to look to in prosecuting common assault on emergency services workers. I accept that the thrust of the new clause is the idea of having different sentencing regimes for an older offence dating from 1996 as opposed to the new offence created by the Bill. I am not persuaded that it is the best idea to alter the old piece of legislation as well, because that gets us into a debate about whether we should be reviewing or removing certain provisions. It would be more useful to see what happens when the new offence comes in. We would rightly expect prosecutors to see the intention of Parliament in passing this specific new offence that covers assaults on emergency workers and look to use it rather than the old one. I would be tempted to look to see whether the old offence becomes redundant in future. Rightly, prosecutors will look to give the courts the sentencing powers available for this offence and consider the fact that Parliament has passed a new and more up-to-date piece of legislation. I was not persuaded by the arguments on new clause 1, but I will be interested to hear the Minister’s comments.

Philip Davies: We have heard from some of our learned colleagues about how the Crown Prosecution Service sometimes makes mistakes when charging people. Would it not be absurd if it were to charge somebody under the wrong offence—the old offence of 1996 and not this one—and when it went before the court, the court could not give the person the appropriate sentence that this House thinks they should get because it will be working to an old piece of legislation? Surely it would make sense to even up the sentence for both, and then whichever offence they were charged with, the judge or the magistrate could do the job.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his, as always, interesting intervention. I think it would make sense to see how the new law works out in practice. It would be quite bizarre if we saw a trend towards charging under the old offence rather than the new one. This is not about removing the ability to charge more serious offences. We need to be clear that this is about giving prosecutors an additional tool to deal with these issues. It is not about removing other offences. If someone attempts to murder a police officer, they clearly should be charged with attempted murder. If someone commits a serious assault on a police officer, they should be charged
with ABH or GBH. This is about covering those who behave in a completely unacceptable manner towards an emergency services worker but do not trigger those types of offence, and we must be clear that Parliament’s intent is not for this to become a catch-all offence.

Perhaps in future there will be an appropriate time for a review. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley will, as always, dutifully pursue the statistics on the use of this new offence, to ensure that prosecutors and courts have the powers to deal with those involved.

I sympathise with the call to up the sentence to a maximum of two years. I was interested to hear the contribution from my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole on that point, and particularly on the issue of either-way offences. Normally, trial on indictment in the Crown court carries a higher penalty than a summary trial in the magistrates court.

The only thing I did not find particularly persuasive was the reference my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Shipley made to the proposed five-year sentence for animal cruelty. It is worth saying that that is the only charge available if someone has exhibited violence to an animal. We think of cases where animals have literally been tortured to death. At the moment, the effective maximum is about six months in jail, whereas this is not a catch-all offence. We are looking for more serious offences to sit alongside less serious ones.

I know from my experience last year of supporting Bills on that issue that my hon. Friend is a very strong supporter of appropriate sentences for animal cruelty. A sick thug who tortures a living creature to death should not be walking out of a court a free person; they should be heading down to the cells for a significant period of imprisonment. I just feel it appropriate to be clear that our intention is not for this to become a catch-all offence.

Philip Davies indicated assent.

Kevin Foster: I see my hon. Friend nodding his head.

New clause 3 suggests a review after two years. I am interested to hear from the Minister what proposals the Government have to monitor this new offence and its use once it comes into effect. I am rarely persuaded that putting a requirement for a specific review into legislation is the best thing to do, not least given the abilities of Members of the House to question Ministers, have debates, look for information and commission research from the Library. I am interested to hear how the Government propose to deal with that.

On new clauses 4 to 8, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, I am probably more of the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan); there is a debate to be had around the early release scheme. I certainly sympathise with the point made by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) that this should not be seen as a right, but should be based on the fact that someone has behaved appropriately. Similarly, if someone comes out of prison on licence, it should be a licence on their behaviour, and if they breach the terms of that licence, the remainder of their sentence awaits them back in prison.

The one slight concern I have is what supervision and requirements there are of people after they are released, having gone back to complete their full sentence or having completed their full sentence in prison. That was highlighted to me recently in a case in my constituency where someone had been released from jail on licence and had then breached the terms of that licence. They were recalled to prison to complete their sentence, and once they had done so, probation had no role on release. There is very little restriction on what they do, unless they are on the sex offenders register, which has certain restrictions. Likewise, some of the support mechanisms and things that are available to those on licence are, ironically, not available to those who have been required to complete their whole sentence.

Philip Davies: It was very lucky that the person concerned went back to serve their whole sentence, because we now have fixed-term recalls, as my hon. Friend will know. Usually, when someone commits an offence when they have been released halfway through the sentence, they do not serve the remainder of their sentence; they serve only 28 days or sometimes 14 days of the sentence. Not only are they being automatically released halfway through, but if they breach the terms of their licence, they go back in for only 14 or 28 days. The whole thing is a scandal.

12.45 pm

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughtful intervention. I agree that if someone who has been sent to prison for an offence breaches the terms of their parole, that is a good indication that they are unlikely to be taking seriously their responsibility as a citizen to follow the law. My example is of a person who came to the end of their sentence and was released, but found that no support was available. It was a bizarre situation. They were trying to access some support and found it difficult, but had they not breached their licence, support and monitoring to keep them from offending would have been in place. Perhaps this discussion is not for today, as it would require more fundamental changes to how we operate the recall to prison system, licensing, and what we do with those completing their whole sentence. Nevertheless, it flagged up to me a requirement to ensure at least a minimum period of monitoring after someone comes out of prison, whether they have been released on licence or because they have completed their whole sentence.

I welcome the inclusion of spitting in amendment 2, but it is important to send the message that Parliament does not intend to exclude spitting from the traditional offence of common assault. The amendment is to clarify that spitting is included in the initial offence. I am clear that in my constituency the use of spit hoods is a matter for the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall, and if he believes that that is the right way to protect his officers, he should take that approach. I take the same view on issuing firearms and other protections to officers—it is for the chief constable to make an operational decision on the basis of the needs of policing and the safety of his officers. It should not be a political policy decision.

Including spitting in the Bill gives a clear legal basis for an offence that carries up to a year in jail, but that can be prevented by the use of a spit hood. If someone is busy spitting at a police officer, that offence already
carries a year's imprisonment. There is a strong basis, beyond the protection of officers, for why it is right and proportionate to use a spit hood if someone is trying to spit at an officer, using the last way they can attack that officer once they have been restrained by other means.

I am conscious of time, Mr Deputy Speaker, and since I support the Bill I have no intention of trying to talk it out. I also welcome making a sexual assault on an emergency worker an aggravating factor in other sexual offences. We must be clear that Parliament’s intention—certainly my intention, and I see other hon. Members nodding—is not to say, “This is the offence to use for a serious sexual assault”. Someone who sexually assaults an emergency worker would still be charged under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, particularly given the things that come with that, such as registration and monitoring, which are so vital when dealing with this issue. The amendment would mean that a court will consider that someone has abused the good will and position of someone who came to their aid, particularly medical staff in the NHS, and that is an abuse of trust. The amendment is therefore perfectly sensible, as it makes it clear that such an offence is an aggravating factor, not a replacement offence.

I am conscious that we want to hear the Minister’s response so I will draw my remarks to a close. As always, I welcome the dogged determination of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to ensure that wrongdoers get their just desserts, that the Bill receives the scrutiny it rightly deserves, and that our courts and prosecutors know exactly what Parliament intended in passing this Bill today—intentions that I completely support.

Rory Stewart: It has been a great pleasure to sit on the Benches during this debate, and I begin by paying tribute to the extraordinary contributions that we have heard. This has been a very high-quality debate, with perhaps even more vigour and more interest than Second Reading.

I pay tribute to the strenuous, challenging empiricism of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies); the precision, energy and charm—to return to the word “charm”—of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant); the imagination, sincerity and courage of the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch); the precision and learning of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson); the rigour, eloquence and intelligence of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who is no longer in his seat; the empathy of the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin); the principled application of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts); the emphasis on widening the circle of compassion from my hon. Friend the Member for Errewash (Maggie Throup); the emphasis on the medical and epidemiological aspects of the case from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick); the emphasis that my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) put on the symbolic charge of the Bill; the emphasis that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) put on the broader themes of violence in society; the pragmatism and hard-won experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston); the focus from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on the particular obligations that we owe public servants; the compassion and indeed, the concern for public finances that was expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan); and finally, the courtesy to other colleagues and dignity displayed by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

This is a powerful Bill and we in the Government agree strongly with the principles underlying it. Nearly 20 separate amendments and new clauses have been proposed. Having listened carefully to the debate, we will be accepting one of those amendments but respectfully requesting that the other new clauses and amendments are withdrawn or not moved. That is not because we disagree in any way with the Bill’s underlying principles, which should be clear to the whole House. They are that an assault on any individual or citizen in our society is a terrible thing, but that an assault on an emergency worker is an assault on us all. These people are our constituted representatives. They protect society and deliver services on our behalf. Therefore, an attack on them is an attack on us and on the state, and it should be punished more severely than an attack simply on an individual victim.

There is also strong agreement with the spirit underlying the new clauses and amendments. It should be absolutely clear that spitting is included within common assault—it is a particularly disgusting form of common assault. It should also be entirely clear that it is completely unacceptable to attack a police officer, a fire service officer, an ambulance worker, a prison officer or anybody in the emergency services—or indeed, any emergency worker as defined in the Bill—and that sexual assault should be included in the Bill. That is the amendment that we propose to accept, having listened carefully to the debate. It has been pushed very hard by Opposition Members and should be included as one of the things for which an assault on an emergency worker should be considered an aggravating offence.

Let me move specifically and relatively rapidly through the almost 20 new clauses and amendments that have been proposed to explain why the Government believe that it would be better to withdraw some amendments and new clauses to leave the Bill in a state more similar to that from which it emerged from Committee. I will take them in turn. Essentially, these new clauses and amendments try to do three things. They try to make the offence of common assault more specific—to specify the ingredients of common assault—or they attempt to further increase the penalty for common assault on an emergency worker, or finally, they attempt to widen the scope of the things that are dealt with through the Bill. I will deal with them in that sequence.

Amendment 2 seeks to make the offence of common assault more specific by putting on the face of the Bill that spitting should be included under common assault. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham made clear in his learned speech, we can already prosecute spitting under common assault. This month, in fact, there was a successful prosecution of 23 weeks for an individual who spat at a police officer. Including it in the Bill, although an admirable intention, runs the risk of casting doubt on other cases of common assault. An ingenious lawyer might argue that the House of Commons, by saying that common assault on an emergency worker includes spitting, is implying that common assault on
somebody else should not be considered to include spitting, and that therefore someone spitting on an ordinary member of the public could not be charged with common assault.

**Chris Bryant:** I hate the idea of an ingenious lawyer, but the Minister is right—I accept that there is a danger of that. Are there other things that the Government could do to ensure that the prosecuting authorities take spitting as common assault very seriously?

**Rory Stewart:** Absolutely. In return for the hon. Gentleman’s sense and solidarity in not pressing the amendment, we will focus on making sure that the relevant authorities, particularly the CPS, are clearly instructed to consider spitting as included under common assault. I hope that in a small way this speech in the House of Commons will re-emphasise, in case anyone is in any doubt, that it is Parliament’s intention that spitting should always be included within the offence of common assault.

That brings us to the amendment and various new clauses tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, which would further increase the penalty for assaulting emergency workers, police officers and prison officers. This is a complex set of new clauses. New clauses 1 and 2 relate to the existing law—in particular the Police Act 1996, as it relates to a police officer in the execution of their duty—and seek to do two things. The first is to increase the maximum penalty from six months to 12 months. On that, we respectfully argue that if the Bill passes today, we will have already increased to 12 months the maximum penalty for such an assault on a police officer in the exercise of their functions. It would therefore be unnecessary to further amend the Police Act.

The aim of new clause 2 and amendment 9 is to double the maximum penalty from 12 months to 24 months, either by amending the Police Act or dealing with the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The Government wish to resist this approach because we have to weigh up two principles. On the one hand, we believe very strongly that emergency workers are entitled to a particular form of respect and protection because they work on our behalf—they provide services to us; they represent us. The police officer courageously confronting the criminal and the prison officer courageously confronting an offender in a prison are both acting on our behalf, and an assault on them is an assault on us. On those grounds, it is absolutely valid that the maximum penalty for such an assault be doubled. This is an important moment in English law.

There is, however, a second important principle in English common law: we are all equal, and victims are equal. The victim of sexual assault should be remembered above all as a victim of sexual assault, not on the basis of their profession or occupation, or of the function they were engaged in at the moment of the assault. That is why we believe that the proper indication of our respect for public servants should be to double the maximum penalty, but to move beyond that and quadruple it would begin to create the kind of situation that exists in Russia, which I hope will never exist in the UK, whereby uniformed officers become a caste apart and go into a category of a superior form of human being with an entitlement to a quite separate form of protection.

On those grounds, we think that moderation and proportionality would require us to stick at 12 months, not 24, and we courteously request that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley withdraws new clause 1, and does not press new clause 2 and amendment 9.

**Jeremy Quin:** I realise that this is a sensitive point. I have spoken to police officers who would like to have a higher tariff in these circumstances, but what the Minister is saying has pith, because there are other people—be they council workers, social workers or clergy—who go out of their way as part of their duty to do things in our communities that put them in a vulnerable situation. We would be sending the wrong message if we were to draw too big a distinction between our valued emergency workers and other members of society who also conduct incredibly valuable tasks.

**Rory Stewart:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many people who do things on behalf of the public in their daily lives are entitled to protection, but not all of them are covered by the Bill. There is a more fundamental point that relates particularly to sexual assault. We want to make it absolutely clear that what really matters in such circumstances is the brutal, undignified nature of that assault on anyone, regardless of their profession. That is why we have to get the balance right in sentencing.

This brings me to new clauses 4 to 18, which relate to assaults on prison officers. As a Justice Minister, I have strong empathy with the intention behind the new clauses tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley. Prison officers operate in an environment that the public are rarely allowed into. They have a dangerous and stressful job—I will touch on that a little more in my closing speech—and are entitled to a much higher degree of protection, but too often they do not receive it. We therefore think it absolutely right for them to be included among the emergency workers and for the maximum penalty for an assault on a prison officer to be increased from six months to 12 months. Beyond that, we want to do more to protect prison officers, including through the use of protective equipment and the devices they carry. We want to encourage the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to bring more prosecutions for assaults on prison officers. However, for two reasons, we do not think that this particular ingenious proposal—that someone assaulting a prison officer should have to serve twice the length of the sentence currently set out under the Criminal Justice Act 2003—represents an appropriate response.

The first reason, which is philosophical, is that if an individual has been put in prison for their original offence, they should be punished for that offence, with a subsequent offence judged and punished separately. For example, if an individual has been put in jail for 12 years for the importation of a class A drug, their punishment has been designed to fit that crime. If they then assault a prison officer, they need to be punished for assaulting a prison officer. Their initial crime of importing class A drugs should not be used to punish them for assaulting a prison officer.

The second reason, which is practical rather than philosophical, is that under the new clauses, someone who has been put in jail for 12 years would automatically get a further six years in jail if they assaulted a prison officer.
officer. However, someone who had been put in jail for six months would, under my hon. Friend’s proposals, get a further three months in jail, yet the assault that those two individuals had committed would be exactly the same.

Philip Davies: I think that the Minister might have slightly misunderstood my proposal, or perhaps he is not doing it justice. Much as I would like people to serve the whole of the rest of their sentence in full, that is not the actual proposal. I propose that they should not get automatic release halfway through their sentence, but it does not necessarily follow that they would have to serve their whole sentence. They just would not be automatically released halfway through their sentence, so they would have to spend a bit longer in prison, but that length of time would be determined by the Parole Board. I am not proposing that they would have to serve the whole of the remainder of their sentence, as the Minister seems to suggest.

Rory Stewart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification. Nevertheless, the fundamental point remains that the individual committing an assault should be punished for that common assault. They should be prosecuted, judged and sentenced in accordance with that assault. They should not be punished for that crime by the extension of a sentence designed for a separate crime.

That brings me back to the question of widening the scope of the Bill to take account of sexual assault, as is proposed in amendment 3. We have resisted such an amendment in the past because of our concern to have an emphasis on the sexual assault and the equality of all victims of sexual assault, regardless of the functions they were undertaking. However, having listened carefully to the arguments advanced, in particular by the hon. Members for Rhondda and for Halifax, both today and over the preceding weeks, we as a Government are now convinced that it would be correct to insert sexual assault into the parts of the Bill that deal with cases in which an offence against an emergency worker would be an aggravating factor, especially given the astonishing increase in the number of sexual assaults on emergency workers. As the hon. Member for Rhondda pointed out, between a third and half of all emergency workers currently appear to be reporting such assaults. On those grounds, while respectfully requesting Members not to reject that amendment, I commend the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her support for my new clauses: she proved herself, again, to be a doughty supporter of police officers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made an excellent speech, although he let himself down somewhat by saying that we in the UK send lots of people to prison, which is a myth that is constantly propagated by the liberal elite. Just for the record, the fact is that for every 1,000 crimes committed in this country, we send 17 people to prison. That is one of the lowest ratios anywhere in the world. I challenge my hon. Friend to find any country that sends fewer than 17 people per 1,000 crimes committed to prison. They will struggle to find many, although there are some—[Interruption.]

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is part of the liberal metropolitan elite. I repeat the fact—it came from the House of Commons Library, so I am sure she will not deny it—that for every 1,000 crimes committed, we send 17 people to prison. That is a fact. My hon. Friend may think that the proportion is too high; I rather think that it is too low.

Gareth Johnson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: No, because I think we want to press on.

I was also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who made the same point about the sentencing powers of Crown courts and magistrates. The Minister did not really explain why we are giving them the same powers.

Rory Stewart: I will answer that point very briefly. The process-led point that is being made about the difference between the magistrates and Crown courts is concealing the bigger issue, which is that we do not believe the sentence in respect of emergency workers should be quadruple that in respect of other citizens. It is the quadrupling rather than doubling that leads us to reject that argument.

Philip Davies: I do the Minister a disservice—he did make that point and I apologise.

As well as talking about spitting, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned the fire service. I was pleased that he did, because that allows us not only to thank him for the service he gave for many years in the fire service, but to highlight the number of assaults...
that firefighters face, which he rightly spoke about. That number is massively on the increase in West Yorkshire, which is appalling. His contribution allows us to highlight the fact that firefighters are included in this legislation, and rightly so.

I was heartened by the support I received from my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Tom Pursglove), for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), on my point about automatic early release, even if they did not all think that we should deal with it here and now in the Bill. I fear that the Minister has been slightly got at regarding this point either by his officials at the Ministry of Justice—they never want to send anyone to prison from what I can see, and certainly do not want any more people in prison—or by the Treasury. I cannot work out which, and perhaps it is both, but I hope, in all seriousness, that he will look at the issue again.

The Minister ought to be able to detect that there is widespread support in the House for not allowing people who assault prison officers to get automatic early release. If he will not do something about it as a Government Minister, I will certainly do what I did when the Prisons and Courts Bill was passing through the House before the last election and table an amendment to that effect. The Labour party kindly indicated that it would have supported that amendment, but we never got to it because of the election. The SNP kindly said that they would support that amendment to protect prison officers. I suspect that if the Government do not act on this, they will find themselves defeated if any such amendment is tabled to future legislation. I hope they will reflect on the strength of feeling that has been shown on both sides of the House to say that people should not be released from prison early if they assault prison officers. I hope he will go away and look at that issue again.

Finally, on new clause 1, which I am formally obliged to either press or withdraw, I am disappointed that the Minister has decided to leave on the statute book two pieces of law that have the same effect but carry two different sentences. He says there is no need for the new clause, but there is certainly no reason not to make the change to put both pieces of legislation in line and tidy up the law. I am sorry that he resisted such a modest proposal. Like other Members, however, I do not want to do anything to undermine the chances of the Bill getting through. It is a fantastic piece of legislation that I support wholeheartedly. With those reservations, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

AGGRAVATING FACTOR

Amendment made: 3, page 2, line 39, at end insert—
“(aa) an offence under section 3 (sexual assault) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003”.—(Chris Bryant.)

This causes the fact that the victim was an emergency worker to be an aggravating factor in cases of sexual assault.
assessments would not be efficacious.

I have heard many times today, but simply because the reason why I am so supportive of amendment 2, which I am pleased was fully discussed in the previous group of amendments.

My second problem is that, as the Minister will know, most forces have an immunisation programme to vaccinate against hepatitis B. However, due to the global shortage of hepatitis B vaccines, forces have had to follow Government advice to suspend those programmes, which means people in roles identified as at increased risk, such as police officers, special constables, detention officers, PCSOs and crime scene investigators, are already going without this level of protection.

Taking samples without consent is an invasion of the body of another person, which means we are in the territory of introducing legislation that would be neither effective nor proportionate, nor would it lead to better healthcare for emergency workers. Clauses 4 to 6 are inappropriate and, on that basis, I have tabled these amendments to remove them from the Bill, not because I have any hesitation in declaring that spitting or biting is also negligible to the point of being unquantifiable.

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“New analysis of worldwide evidence published in April 2018 by the British HIV Association and the British Association of Sexual Health and HIV shows that there is no risk of transmission of HIV or Hepatitis C from spitting and negligible risk from biting in extremely rare circumstances. For Hepatitis B, risk from spitting or biting is also negligible to the point of being unquantifiable.”

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Although those experiences are two of the most anxious and prolonged I have come across, they are not uncommon. I need to be able to look those two officers in the eye and say to them that we have not given up on them simply is not the evidence to warrant testing in the first place, yet we know that is not what is happening in practice. On Second Reading I told the story of PC Mike Bruce and PC Alan O’Shea of West Midlands police, who both had blood spat in their face as they tried to arrest a violent offender. They both received medical advice recommending that they undergo antiviral treatments, and they faced a six-month wait for conclusion test results, which confirmed that they all had the all-clear.

As I explained on Second Reading and repeat now to reinforce the point, during that time PC O’Shea’s brother was undergoing treatment for cancer. Because medical professionals deemed that the risk of passing on an infection was too high, should he have contracted a disease, PC O’Shea was advised not to see his brother throughout the intervening period. He was also advised not to see his parents, because they were in such regular contact with his brother. PC Bruce had a false positive result for hepatitis B and his young family were also then tested and faced a six-month wait for conclusive test results, which confirmed that they all had the all-clear.

Although those experiences are two of the most anxious and prolonged I have come across, they are not uncommon. I need to be able to look those two officers in the eye and say to them that we have not given up on making sure that no officer has to go through the same experience, rather that we are simply taking another approach. I look to the Government to work with us on making that happen, beyond the Bill, if we are to remove clauses 4 to 6.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. Does she agree that the clauses on spitting were some of the most popular measures in the Bill, as originally drafted, when we discussed it with our colleagues in the health service and the police? Therefore, so if we are going to drop them, we need a strong statement from Ministers today on what more can be done to tackle this problem, which she clearly highlights?
Holly Lynch: I agree entirely with that point, and I am reassured by what the Minister said about seeking to toughen up deterrence in respect of the language contained in an earlier provision in the Bill. In the event that spitting does not cease with immediate effect, we will still have to ensure that we offer those protections relating to dealing with those anxieties, and offering clarity and support. The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) is quite right: that is what I am looking to see from Ministers today.

Alex Chalk: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Holly Lynch: I certainly will—I will return the favour.

Alex Chalk: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, just at this last moment. What was striking about the point she made was that in the instance that she cited a police officer was given medical advice that there was a risk, yet that medical advice appears, statistically, to run entirely counter to the statistics that were provided by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). So part of resolving this, and giving clear protection and advice to officers, is about ensuring that consistent medical advice is given—does the hon. Lady agree?

Holly Lynch: I entirely agree. That goes back to the earlier point that we cannot fix everything through legislation. I agree entirely that where there are shortcomings with this legislative approach, even if we withdraw it, we will not fix the problem. So what alternatives—the hon. Gentleman has rightly reflected on those—do we need to put in place? I am open to any and all suggestions—but without that legislation I am looking for alternatives.

Rory Stewart: First, I very much welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has proposed that these clauses be removed from the Bill. To answer directly the case made by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), I think that at the core of this problem is a problem of anxiety. The individual who is spitting blood at the police officer is exploiting a myth—they are exploiting something that simply is not true. Public Health England is absolutely clear that the chances of contracting a blood-borne disease through somebody spitting at you is close to zero. This is unbelievably important, because the most significant way we can prevent this epidemic of spitting is, as Public Health England says, close to zero. The second problem is with the tests. The hon. Member for Halifax gave an example of a false positive, but there are also many examples of false negatives, and these tests are not timely—they cannot communicate an early transmission. Consequently, the only way in which a medical professional should respond to these cases is by focusing not on a test result, which is irrelevant because it is not reliable, but on the mode of transmission. In other words, if somebody has been spat at there should not be any post-exposure prophylaxis treatment given, regardless of an apparent result of a test.

If, on the other hand, someone has been injected with a needle, in almost every case PEP should be allocated, again regardless of the result of the test as that result might show up too late for the PEP to be effective. The proper medical procedure is therefore to focus on the mode, not the test. That means that in this case it would not be of significant use to test somebody, it would not be strictly necessary, and it would not be proportionate in balancing the benefit and the cost. The right to know would therefore not trump the right to privacy in this case.

1.30 pm

It is therefore much better for us to communicate again to public health professionals through Public Health England that there is close to zero risk of transmission through spitting, to communicate to the police officers so that they do not form this anxiety and take these drugs unnecessarily, and, above all, to communicate to the people who are spitting that what they are doing is disgusting and trivial but in no way harmful to health. On that basis, we will take away their attempt to communicate terror through this particularly revolting action. We strongly support the removal of these clauses from the Bill.

Chris Bryant: As the Minister has mentioned, there are many fallacies and the biggest area of fallacy is that surrounding HIV infection. I think many people still have in their mind the images of tombstones and the advertising campaign run by the then Government way back when, and they fail to recognise that today HIV is a very different disease. Nowadays, the viral load of the vast majority of people who have had an HIV positive test will be so low because of the good medication that they will not be infectious at all. We need to abolish the stigma, as I said on Second Reading, so I hope that all hon. Members will be happy to remove the clauses from the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.
Amendment 4 agreed to.

Clause 5

Taking of samples under the Terrorism Act 2000

Amendment made: 5, page 6, line 6, leave out Clause 5.—

(Chris Bryant.)
Clause 6

TAKING OF SAMPLES: RELATED AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: 6, page 8, line 14, leave out Clause 6.—(Chris Bryant.)

Clause 7

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: 7, page 9, line 37, leave out from “only,” to end of line 38.—(Chris Bryant.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 5.

Title

Amendment made: 8, in line 3, leave out from “duty;” to “and” in line 6.—(Chris Bryant.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendments 4 to 6.

Third Reading

1.32 pm

Chris Bryant: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I was in Morrisons in Porth in the Rhondda last Wednesday, and the chap behind me in the queue was saying “Shouldn’t you be in Westminster?” I said no, that there were no votes and so I was in the constituency, and then I started packing up my stuff, having paid, and I overheard the woman on the checkout say to the man behind me, “So, who is he? Is he someone important?” He said, “That’s Chris Bryant, he’s the MP for the Rhondda,” and she said, “Oh, not very important then.”

For the most part, we are not very important, but we do have an important power as MPs, which is to introduce legislation. I am and have been conscious in introducing this Bill that introducing a new offence should only be done after long and serious consideration. We do not want to fill up the statute book endlessly with new bits and pieces of offences, and when new offences are unnecessary one should not proceed.

I am very conscious that there have been an awful lot of lawyers in the Chamber today, and it is only a sadness that Henry IV’s injunction from 1404 that no members of the law should be allowed to come to Parliament has not been maintained ever since—[Interruption.] I think the lawyers called it the Parliament of Dunces, so perhaps we would be dunces without the lawyers. I am genuinely grateful to those who have spoken today.

Yesterday, the Minister tweeted: “1870 Declaration of the National Prison Association of the United States...It is the judgment of this congress, that repeated short sentences for minor criminals are worse than useless; that, in fact, they rather stimulate than repress transgression.” I completely agree with him, and several hon. Members have made similar points today. The aim of this Bill is not primarily to send lots more minor criminals to prison for short periods. What we want to do is send out a very clear message that assaulting an emergency worker is not a minor offence but a serious offence, and that we in Parliament take it seriously and expect the prosecuting authorities to take it equally seriously.

Why? Well, apart from anything else, there has been a very significant rise in the number of assaults in recent years. When there is a rising tide, the people’s representatives should take cognisance of that and take action. Too often, magistrates I have heard tell of have said, or implied, that somehow policing involves a bit of rough and tumble and that police officers should just get over it. That is not the view of this House, and it should not be the view of our magistrates or our judges. That kind of mentality has all too often in recent years infected people’s understanding for other emergency workers as well. There is a sort of assumption that a mental health nurse should put up with a certain amount of physical violence. I simply do not accept that.

I was in the mental health unit of the Royal Glamorgan Hospital, Llantrisant, last month. Staff told me that they had had quite a few assaults recently where the police had refused to take any kind of action, even though a doctor had certified that the person concerned—the perpetrator of the assault—knew perfectly well the distinction between right and wrong and that there was no issue of mental incapacity. We want the whole of the criminal justice system to take these issues seriously.

I fully understand that just changing the law will not change the situation overnight. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made very clear, there are real issues around the decisions that are made at the point of charge, and subsequently when it comes to discussions between either side just before coming to court. If passing a law, or creating a new offence, stopped offensive and offending behaviour, then the world would see no murders or thefts.

However, this Bill will have a tangible effect: the courts will give more appropriate sentences, the prosecuting authorities will have another tool in their box to deal with this issue; and the victims—the emergency workers themselves—will hear in court that the fact that they are an emergency worker has made a difference to the sentence that is passed down.

Of course we have to do more. Understaffing in some of our emergency services certainly does not help. When those services are under excessive pressure, it makes it more difficult to protect staff. We will have to keep a very close watch on the statistics as they develop, because, with NHS Protect having disappeared, it will be more difficult to ensure that the work that we have done has some effect.

I wish to thank some hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), I have spent so much time with her over the past few years that I feel as if I am sort of married to her. I do not think that she wants to marry me. [Interruption.] I am a practising homosexual—one day I will be quite good at it! Well, my husband hopes so anyway.

I also thank the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I have his telephone number now, so I expect that we will be co-operating.—[Interruption.] I will not tell my husband that. Obviously, we will be co-operating on more pieces of legislation. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), because he has been a very strong supporter of this Bill. I am only sorry that he is somewhat incapacitated today; he is too old to be playing rugby now and he should stop. I pay tribute, too, to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who has played a really important part in making sure that the Labour party is fully behind the measures in this Bill.

There are many organisations that I wish to thank, including Alcohol Concern, the GMB, which is my trade union, Unison, Unite, the Police Federation, and...
the British Medical Association. I also wish to thank the Welsh Assembly for bringing forward the legislative consent motion in plenty of time for this Bill to have full effect in Wales as it will in England.

I also thank the Ministers, particularly the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who is an admirably splendid chap. I know that he wants to do his best by the police, and that he has had many conversations with the Police Federation about how we can make sure that some of the things in this Bill are fully implemented. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who is not now the Minister in charge of this legislation, was very helpful in getting the Bill to Second Reading and through the Committee stages, and I am grateful for that.

I also pay tribute to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). We have disagreed in meetings on occasions, but we have managed to come to a very good accommodation today. I hope that this Bill is now in a state that means it will be able to go through the House of Lords at some speed, and I am grateful for all the support that he has provided through his officials. I also thank the Clerks of the House, who of course are always magnificent.

I could not finish without mentioning Erasure—a popular beat combo, m’lud, from your youth. “A Little Respect” was a great song, but more importantly, a little respect goes a long way in politics. All we are seeking to achieve with this Bill is a little respect for our emergency workers. It has also been a delight for us to be able to show a little respect for those on different sides of the House. I think that our constituents would, on the whole, prefer it if we were able to develop common solutions to common problems through legislation and other means, rather than by always shouting at one another. But I am not going to get too pious about that, because I do quite like shouting at Government Members.

This Bill is about saying to every single police constable, prison officer, custody officer, paramedic, nurse, fire officer, doctor, A&E consultant, lifeboat officer, A&E porter, ambulance driver and mines rescue officer, “We stand with you. We will protect our protectors.”

1.41 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in the closing stages of this important and significant Bill. We are also coming towards the closing stages of the parliamentary day. Hon. Members will be scurrying back to their many and various constituencies, and we will turn ourselves from parliamentary thoughts to constituency matters. Later tonight and over the weekend, Members up and down the country will no doubt be running around their patch and connecting with real people who do real jobs. I am sure that there is not a single Member who does not, from time to time, meet those whose mission it is to put themselves in harm’s way to intervene in a crisis, including our ambulance service, nurses, NHS staff, police and firefighters. These emergency workers are exactly that: the people who turn up and are on hand when there is an emergency.

I cannot speak for others, but I have to say that when I meet such people on a regular basis, I am filled with what can only be described as a deep sense of personal unworthiness. That is not just because my day job is pretty insignificant—squalid even—but because I really do not think that I could do what they do. People who run towards, rather than away from, an emergency are special. We need them, and we need to protect them.

I have been delighted to watch the progress of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and I join others in paying tribute to him and the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for bringing it forward. The House will know the hon. Gentleman as an experienced, astute, often entertaining and charming—I heard him call that today—parliamentarian. I have no doubt that those skills will allow him to take this Bill through Parliament and on to the statute book.

The issue is far larger than we might expect. Whichever figures we use—Police Federation or Home Office figures, or somewhere in between—it is true that an astounding number of assaults on police officers take place every year. There may be hundreds or more each day. Every day also sees something like 20 assaults—one an hour, we heard today—on prison staff and nearly 200 assaults on NHS staff. That is indeed shocking. Although we have to tackle and drill down into the reasons why such appalling behaviour exists towards those who are working in difficult conditions to help us, it is essential that there is a clear message that this is not something that our society is prepared to tolerate. In fact, the Bill will not only send a message; it will have a tangible effect on anyone wanting to test the limits of acceptable behaviour. It will mean that they can expect some increase in the sentence they are likely to get.

I am delighted to see genuine cross-party support for the Bill; it is always a joy to see that. We are showing a unanimous front for those who protect us. Raising the bar in the way that the Bill will is nothing less than a step towards a greater civilising of us all. Recognising the special place inhabited by emergency workers can set the balance a little more in the right direction—a little more in their favour.

I am sad to say that this year, because of rising incident numbers, Avon and Somerset police introduced spit guards for trained officers for use in situations where someone has already spat, is going to spit, or has threatened to spit at an officer. We have heard about a lot of incidents like that. It is, to me, utterly shocking behaviour, not just because of the particularly distressing and disgusting nature of the act itself, but because of what is implied by the act about the relationship between the aggressor and people who are there to support and protect—and also, most shockingly, because it is sometimes used by those who know they are infected, or affect to be infected, as a weapon to frighten people. Barbarism of this sort cannot be accepted, even though, as we have heard, its effects are minimal or infinitesimal—almost non-existent. I cannot find words to describe how I feel about it, other than to say that there really must be a greater deterrent and more consequences.

With regard to assaults on NHS staff, again, words fail me. I am sure that many if not most of the attacks come from people who are a little over-refreshed, but that is not any kind of excuse and certainly no justification. Again, the police and the courts must be provided with the powers they need to deal properly with such incidents. While courts currently have the option to consider attacking an emergency worker to be an aggravating factor in sentencing, the Bill will put that on a statutory
basis, making it a specific requirement to consider such assaults to be aggravated. Similarly, by extension, those thinking about assaulting an emergency worker might currently consider the fact that their target is an emergency worker, but should this Bill succeed, they will have no option but to consider that fact when they are looking down the barrel of the sentence they will receive.

There is no debate to be had about the debt we all owe to those who work to protect us. As Members of this House, we all meet our local NHS staff, our local police and our firefighters—all those who put themselves on the frontline when the chips are down—and we are all in awe of the work they do for the rest of us. We must give them our support and our protection. That is, after all, nothing more than they give us every day: their support and their protection.

1.47 pm

**Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his work on the Bill so far, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch).

I know that time is short, but I wanted to share with the House my own experience. Last year, I joined West Yorkshire fire and rescue service and West Yorkshire police the night before bonfire night, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax and the chair of West Yorkshire fire and rescue service, Councillor Judith Hughes. I was first placed in a pump and then moved to a fire car. The fire car is the unit that responds first to what can only be described as a community burning of mattresses, plastic sofas and other hazardous items all criss-crossed by unlit back alleys. Attending the incident, I saw the professionalism of our firefighters in assessing the situation. I also saw, when we were on our way back to the car, an officer shine his torch down a dark alley, where a number of masked people were moving towards us with what I can only describe as malicious intent. It is not uncommon for a fire to be set with the intention of luring firefighters and police officers into dangerous situations in order to ambush them. That appalling fact will shock us all, and it is a vivid reminder of just how necessary the Bill is.

The second incident occurred when we attended a neighbourhood bonfire. Instead of a bonfire, we found what can only be described as a community burning of rubbish that coincided with bonfire night. There were mattresses, plastic sofas and other hazardous items all set on fire. Stood around the fire were about 20 young people. We were chatting to them, and then when someone threw a firework into the fire, I was promptly ordered back into the car. While we were walking away, we were fired at with rockets placed in plastic tubing. The officer I was with sustained burns injuries across his head. The rockets continued to be launched at us in the car. We escaped without any further injuries, but the situation could have been so much worse.

I was shocked and scared, but that is an everyday occurrence for our firefighters, police officers and emergency workers. In West Yorkshire alone, there were 95 attacks on operational fire crews last year, up from 65 the year before—a shocking 50% increase. West Yorkshire police recorded nearly 2,000 assaults on employees, and there were 840 incidents of verbal and physical abuse against Yorkshire ambulance service staff.

One firefighter told me that his wife never sleeps when he works nights. I asked him what the worst thing that had ever been thrown at him was, and he told me he had once been attacked by youths throwing excrement in glass jars at him and the crew. These, I remind the House, are firefighters—firefighters who have no power of arrest; who time after time run into danger to save lives and protect the public; and who, as the campaign is aptly named, are more than a uniform and deserve our utmost respect and the full protection of our laws. These laws need to be strengthened so that our firefighters and all other emergency workers are properly protected from the attacks they face in the course of their duties, and so that those responsible are brought to justice. I am proud to support the Bill.

1.51 pm

**Stephen Crabb:** Thank you for letting me make this speech from a sedentary position, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will not keep the House long, and I am sorry that I was not able to participate in the earlier proceedings as fully as I wanted to.

As a sponsor of the Bill, I want to put on record how pleased I am to see it reach this point. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is a good friend and a great parliamentarian. When he took on the task of bringing this issue back to the House to put it on the statute book, building on the excellent foundational work of the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), I was never in any doubt that he would be successful, because he would be working with the spirit of Back Benchers on both sides of the House. We knew from when the hon. Member for Halifax brought the issue to this place that there was a lot of support on both sides of the House for increasing penalties and seeing our emergency workers get the respect on the statute book that they deserve.

I would like to commend and congratulate the Ministers, without whom we would not be at this stage. Right from the very start, they were committed to seeing the Bill get through the House successfully. They have worked with the hon. Member for Rhondda and others across the House in an intelligent and pragmatic way, and they deserve an awful lot of credit for bringing the Bill to this point.

My constituency, Preseli Pembrokeshire, is in the Dyfed-Powys police force area, which is geographically the largest police force area in England and Wales. Statistically it is also the safest part of the United Kingdom in terms of crime rates. Nevertheless, I have
been staggered over the last six to nine months, since we embarked on the passage of the Bill, by the number of personal testimonies that I have received from serving police officers in the Dyfed-Powys police force area, PCSOs, firefighters and others about their experiences while they are out there serving their communities on the frontline as emergency workers.

A number of colleagues have made the point that the Bill is not perfect. It will not answer the totality of the issue of the assaults that these workers face, the personal trauma they go through and the psychological impact on them and their families—of course it will not, but it is a really significant step forward.

Probably the biggest thing I have learned from conversations with police officers and PCSOs, and from emails I have read, is the enormous psychological impact of incidents such as these on an emergency worker. Just because a police officer or firefighter is tough and strong does not mean that the impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing is any less—quite the opposite on occasion.

The Bill sends a powerful message and signal. On Report my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said that he wants legislation to do more than just send a signal, and I agree. We do not just pass symbolic legislation in this place, and the Bill will be more than symbolic. Yes, it will send out a powerful statement, but it will make a solid practical contribution to a better statute book for our emergency workers. It makes it clear that assaults, whether violent physical assaults, verbal assaults or the disgusting act of spitting, are not acceptable in our society. Our emergency workers deserve every bit of credit, respect and esteem that we can give them, and supporting this Bill is a practical way of showing that.

1.55 pm

Holly Lynch: It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb). He has been a fantastic supporter of this campaign from the start, which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) have appreciated.

I start by paying tribute to my partner in crime fighting, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, for his work in getting us here today. He is always incredibly generous in crediting me with starting this campaign, but the truth is that without his tenacity, his leadership, and his encyclopaedic knowledge of how this place works, we simply would not have made it this far. I know that blue-light responders, NHS workers, and prison officers all over the country are truly grateful to him.

For all our political differences in this place, and what can often seem like the glacial pace of delivering change in Westminster, to go from a harrowing experience in my constituency when out with West Yorkshire police in summer 2016, to being here today, just two years later, at Third Reading for a Bill that will create a new offence of assaulting an emergency service worker, is a showcase of Parliament at its best. That does not mean that getting here was easy, and unusually the journey between Committee stage and Report was the most trying period of the Bill’s passage. It is not entirely the Bill that I hoped it would be for the reasons we explored on Report, but it is a massive step in the right direction.

We know that only a package of measures—legislative and otherwise—will bring about the societal change we want. That will involve working with the Crown Prosecution Service, the judiciary, employers, offenders, and emergency service workers to promote the reporting of such acts, ensure that appropriate support is provided, and that the consequences that follow reflect the seriousness of the crime.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to PC Craig Gallant, the single-crewed officer who I shadowed on that fateful evening in Halifax. Not only did he narrowly escape potentially serious or even life-threatening injuries at the hands of an angry mob, but nothing quite prepared him for the trauma of me thrusting him into the spotlight as the face of a national campaign to protect emergency service workers, and the merciless ribbing that he took from his colleagues as a result. Thank you PC Gallant for allowing me to tell that story. I know that your colleagues understand and appreciate that they will be better protected in future because of it.

I also thank Lambeth police because, ironically and infuriatingly, during Second Reading my flat in London was broken into and robbed. When the police came to investigate, they told me that they would normally ask for more information about my whereabouts during the time the robbery took place, but that they knew exactly where I was because they had been following the debate.

Fingers crossed that my flat is still intact when I return to it this evening. If not I will be joining the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and revisiting sentencing guidelines across the board.

My biggest regret is that we could not agree on more concrete proposals to address the fears and anxieties of a 999 responder who has been spat at by an offender. I understand the practical problems with the clauses as originally drafted, and the limitations of testing, yet unless we establish evidence-based best practice that extends to all those covered by the Bill, I fear that the problems we are trying to overcome will persist. I want to ensure that those who have had either blood or saliva spat at them receive the best possible medical advice from a specialist, within hours of the incident. I am hopeful of that becoming a reality, based on earlier conversations and the contribution from the Minister at the Dispatch Box, and I hope for firmer proposals before the Bill completes its journey through both Houses. I am grateful to the trade unions representing emergency service workers that have been with us all the way on this journey—Unison, the GMB, the Prison Officers Association and the Police Federation. Again, I join the hon. Member for Shipley in paying particular tribute to Chief Inspector Nick Smart, the chair of the West Yorkshire Police Federation. He has been incredibly important in helping us to turn one incident into a national campaign for change.

We have had a good, constructive dialogue with the Government throughout this process. While we have encountered practical challenges and differences of opinion, I am pleased that we have been able to work through the vast majority of those in as collaborative a way as possible. I am grateful to both the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) and the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) for that relationship. I also thank the shadow Policing Minister, my hon.
Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who has made a series of speeches on the Bill from the Dispatch Box. Characteristically, she always got the tone and content absolutely right.

I say to all who have shared their stories with me, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and other MPs who have supported the Bill, often when there was a difficult tale to tell, that those experiences have assisted with the shaping and fine-tuning of these law changes, and emergency service workers, NHS workers and prison officers, now and in the future, will be better protected because of it.

2 pm

Jeremy Quin: It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifox (Holly Lynch), who has done so much to push this cause over the last two years. I congratulate her on that and wish her well on her return to her flat—I trust it will be in good order when she gets back.

It was also a pleasure to hear the promoter of the Bill, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), on Third Reading. He speculated about whether he was important to his constituents, but he is certainly important to this place, and he has done important work today. It is a pleasure to be here to support him, as it was to support him on Second Reading back on 20 October. In replying to the debate, the hon. Gentleman regaled the House with his story of being locked in a police van for his own protection by the police, who then unaccountably forgot about him. All I can assume is that no policeman will ever be so remiss again following the work done by him, the Ministers and all the House in helping to progress the Bill on to the statute book.

I am delighted that the Bill has made so much progress. The measure is supported firmly by my local police federation and by my excellent police and crime commissioner, Katy Bourne. Earlier, I did my district an injustice when I said that there had been 28 assaults on police officers in Horsham in 2016-17—there were 21. However, even one assault is one too many and we are sending a clear message this afternoon.

My interest in this issue was sparked before the debate came to this House by a constituent—a police officer—who wrote to me. He had responded to a call from a man who had been stabbed. On locating him, he found him with stab injuries in the neck, face and head. My constituent provided life-saving first aid, and while he was administering it, he was spat at, as was his colleague. My constituent was in full uniform—it was clear that he was a police officer—and he wrote to me, saying that due to the man’s “aggressive nature and the risk of injury he had to be handcuffed so we could...administer first aid.”

It is a disgrace that anyone has to go through that, and we are sending a message today that such behaviour is never, ever acceptable.

I thought it was iniquitous that after that assault, although the assailant could go home from hospital, my constituent had to wait for weeks for tests to be taken and results to come in. I was sorry that clause 6 had to be withdrawn, but I understand why the hon. Member for Rhondda said that that was the case. I urge the Government to do all they can with education or vaccines to ease the situation for all our emergency workers who face these circumstances, but with that one proviso, I wish the Bill Godspeed.

2.3 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This is the first time that I have spoken in today’s debate, not because of a lack of support for the Bill, but to make sure that it receives its speedy passage through the House of Commons. I reiterate my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friends for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who have run an absolutely fantastic, speedy campaign since my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax first introduced this through a ten-minute rule Bill last year. In that time, she has brought together the House of Commons, and the shadow Minister and Ministers, which is rarely done, in supporting this legislation. Hopefully today we will see the Bill pass through— amended, but all the better for it.

We have had a fantastic debate today, conducted in a comradely and collegiate spirit, with some real expertise on all elements of the criminal justice system. All have been united in the objective of getting this right and delivering protection for the people who go out every day and risk their lives to keep all of us safe.

Throughout the passage of the Bill, the most common comment I have heard from countless police officers and emergency service workers, to whom we have all spoken, is that over the years assault and sexual assault have come to be accepted and seen as the norm within the police and NHS. While this debate has been going on, the assistant chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police, Jim Colwell, has tweeted that overnight there were 10 assaults on the officers under his care, including kicks, punches, headbutts and spitting. He asks, how the public feel about this and whether they accept it. The House is saying today that it is absolutely unacceptable. It is not part of the job that he and his colleagues do. We as parliamentarians are saying that society has zero tolerance for anyone who assaults our emergency service workers.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has made some important points, particularly about early release and behaviour, but in all his examples, as explained by colleagues, the CPS made the wrong charging decision. I accept the principle behind his amendments, but, as we have heard today, the CPS needs to be more accountable for what the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) described as lazy prosecutorial decisions, and that applies equally when the CPS decides to charge someone when it should not have. A constituent of mine was recently charged and taken to court, but the magistrates threw the case out immediately because the decision to take it forward had been so ridiculous. The CPS should be held responsible and accountable for that decision, just as the police are held accountable, and rightly so, for the decisions they make that have serious consequences for the people they protect or charge. That is another point the House has made today. I hope the Minister will say how we can hold the CPS and prosecutors to account for their charging decisions.

I must comment briefly on the strain that our emergency services are under and which has played a part in the rise in the number of assaults. Very rarely have our
Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill 27 APRIL 2018

Robert Courts: At this very moment, in all our constituencies, the emergency services are working hard to protect us. We owe them our gratitude, and we also have a duty to protect them. I have seen for myself the excellent work that the police do when I have been out on the streets of west Oxfordshire following them on the beat and visiting hospitals. On the late night shifts, I have seen some of the people they have to deal with, some of whom are drunk or violent. It is simply unacceptable that our emergency services should be treated with anything less than the highest respect.

In 2015, there were 800 assaults on NHS staff in Oxfordshire, with a conviction rate of only approximately 1%. We in this House cannot automatically control violence, but we can control some of the legislation that relates to it. It is important that we should provide that little extra protection to ensure that our emergency services know that they are being treated with the highest respect.

Kevin Foster: This is a welcome Bill, and it will make a difference. The tweet that was referred to by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is absolutely right. The assistant chief constable, Jim Colwell, has highlighted the assaults that officers in Devon and Cornwall are facing today. I hope that each of those officers will see, through their ACC highlighting that and it being mentioned today, that their experience has made some difference to changing the law to deal with those who think our emergency services workers are their target rather than people they should respect. This is a fantastic Bill and I look forward to it passing its Third Reading.

Rory Stewart: I have very limited time—less than seven minutes—and I hope that hon. Members will take the comments that I made on Report as a proper tribute to the extraordinary work that has been done by the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Wonderful speeches have also

Police and emergency services been under more pressure. The job is getting harder, and for those on the frontline it is becoming overwhelming. Our emergency services are increasingly relied upon not just as the service of last resort but as the service of first resort, as the gaps between the services that make up our social safety net and on which our communities rely get wider. The NHS is under unbelievable pressure and is struggling to cope with limited resources. Waiting times for A&E are up. Ambulance services across the country simply cannot meet demand. The police are increasingly single-crewed or inappropriately dispatched—for example, female officers being dispatched to incidents of serious and violent sexual assault. Our emergency services are increasingly dealing with people suffering from mental health issues unable to access the services they need.

In that climate, nobody would suggest that the Bill is a panacea for our emergency services. The strain, stress and complex range of factors behind this increasingly difficult climate will not be solved easily, but the Bill is important, and it is vital that it be passed today, because the right to go to work and feel safe is a right that has been too easily cast aside. Our emergency services are increasingly finding themselves in vulnerable situations, and all too often security at work is far from a reality. The offences and examples we have heard today are, as the Minister said, not just crimes against the person but crimes against our society. We ask these dedicated individuals to go out and serve our communities on our behalf, and the least we can do is afford them the protection that makes it clear that society views their being assaulted in the course of their duties with the utmost seriousness.

In conclusion, I again thank and congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda and for Halifax. The Opposition are delighted to support the Bill and to see it pass safely through its Third Reading today.

Philip Davies: I will be brief, because I think we all want the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) to be able to speak to her Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on bringing forward this Bill and on the way he has gone about achieving success with it. I must say in passing that if anyone is thinking of bringing forward a private Member’s Bill, I would advise them to go and speak to the hon. Gentleman, because he has produced a perfect template for how such a Bill should be brought forward in such a way as to ensure that we have a good piece of legislation on the statute book, rather than simply producing a good idea that ends up being bad legislation. This has been a first-class example of that.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) deserves equal praise, because she has shown that she is a doughty supporter of all the emergency services but particularly of the police, not just in word but in deed, and I know how much they appreciate that. I also want to thank the two Ministers, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). They might not have gone as far as I would have liked—they seldom do—but without their constructive approach to the Bill, we would not be here today. We should not underestimate the role that they have played in ensuring that that has happened. I should also like to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). He does an awful lot of work in ensuring that Bills such as these get to this stage. He usually works under the radar and he does not get the credit he deserves, but I know that he does an awful lot to ensure that these Bills get through.

Our emergency services are incredibly important to all of us. They put themselves in harm’s way every single day, and we are all troubled by the rising tide of assaults that they face as they carry out their jobs. This legislation sends a signal that we support them, but it does more than that. I will celebrate every time a criminal who assaults an emergency worker gets a longer prison sentence as a result of this Bill. That is the reality of how this legislation will benefit people. It will ensure a longer prison sentence for those criminals who deserve to go to prison for longer, and that is a great outcome. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda on the way in which he has brought about this legislation.

2.11 pm

Robert Courts: At this very moment, in all our constituencies, the emergency services are working hard to protect us. We owe them our gratitude, and we also have a duty to protect them. I have seen for myself the excellent work that the police do when I have been out on the streets of west Oxfordshire following them on the beat and visiting hospitals. On the late night shifts, I have seen some of the people they have to deal with, some of whom are drunk or violent. It is simply unacceptable that our emergency services should be treated with anything less than the highest respect.

In 2015, there were 800 assaults on NHS staff in Oxfordshire, with a conviction rate of only approximately 1%. We in this House cannot automatically control violence, but we can control some of the legislation that relates to it. It is important that we should provide that little extra protection to ensure that our emergency services know that they are being treated with the highest respect.

Kevin Foster: This is a welcome Bill, and it will make a difference. The tweet that was referred to by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is absolutely right. The assistant chief constable, Jim Colwell, has highlighted the assaults that officers in Devon and Cornwall are facing today. I hope that each of those officers will see, through their ACC highlighting that and it being mentioned today, that their experience has made some difference to changing the law to deal with those who think our emergency services workers are their target rather than people they should respect. This is a fantastic Bill and I look forward to it passing its Third Reading.

2.13 pm

Rory Stewart: I have very limited time—less than seven minutes—and I hope that hon. Members will take the comments that I made on Report as a proper tribute to the extraordinary work that has been done by the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Wonderful speeches have also
been made by other Members today. I hope that all members of the emergency services feel strongly the passion and support in this House for their work. In this limited time, I will be unable to pay as full a tribute as I would like to the extraordinary work that is done day in and day out by the police, the fire service, our NHS workers and other members of the emergency services. I would, however, like to focus on one service that has not received as much attention as it might have done in this debate, and I refer of course to the Prison Service.

Prison officers operate out of sight of society. They have the most extraordinarily challenging profession. It requires unbelievable resilience for a prison officer to walk into a cell knowing that, on many days, the individual in that cell might have self-harmed or even killed themselves. It takes astonishing courage for a prison officer to confront a prisoner who is coming at them with a broken broom or with a toothbrush in which are embedded nine blades. It takes astonishing decisiveness day in, day out, for a prison officer to deal with the crises and emergencies that happen in our prisons. It also takes great moral authority to act as a mentor, a teacher and in some ways a friend to help prisoners on the path to reformation. Yet these people are now being attacked more than 8,000 times a year. Their jaws are being broken, and they are being sent to hospital. They must be protected. That is why we welcome the Bill on behalf of all the other emergency services, but particularly on behalf of prison officers.

Let me say this, in the few minutes that I have left. An attack on a prison officer is an attack on the state. An attack on a prison officer is an attack on us. When an individual is attacked, it affects the entire operation of the prison. It affects that individual's willingness to take risks—to unlock a prison door, and to allow prisoners to engage in education or purposeful activity.

The response that we now have to such attacks, as a society, is much more limited than it once was. In the past, prison officers were able to depend on penalties that we would no longer want to introduce, for very good reasons. Corporal punishment has, of course, been removed. Solitary confinement has been removed. Restrictions on family visits have now been removed. The only serious sanction that remains when a prisoner assaults a prison officer is the law that we are discussing today, which is why we want to encourage the police to work with us to prosecute prisoners who assault prison officers. We have heard today that very successful cases are being brought against people who spit at police officers, but almost no cases are being brought against prisoners who spit at prison officers. Too often, I am afraid, those in other parts of the criminal justice system seem to think it acceptable to assault a prison officer, although they would not think it acceptable to be assaulted themselves.

Let the House therefore be clear that we respect prison officers for their courage, for their decisiveness and for their moral example. Let the House be clear that all our progressive liberal instincts on reforming prisoners must be accompanied by respect for basic order and discipline. We should not be ashamed to say that prison officers ought to be able to exercise order and control, and that we will need a whole package of measures if our actions are to lead to purposeful activity. That package will include proper searches at the prison gates to ensure that drugs and weapons are not getting into the prisons, and a clean and decent environment in which the windows are not broken and the floors are kept clean.

We must make it absolutely clear that we respect the safety of prison officers, through the measures that we are taking in terms of protective equipment, the right kind of restraints, and the piloting of pelargonic acid vanillylamide and pepper spray. Everyone must understand that safety, security and decency do not get in the way of education or purposeful activity, but constitute the foundation without which purposeful activity cannot take place.

If we are to work with prisoners and if we are to reduce reoffending, we must ensure that, through this legislation, we show that we respect the honour and dignity of prison officers and members of other emergency services as public servants, and appreciate the service that they provide on our behalf; that we express the deep gratitude that we feel for everything that they do; and that we demonstrate through every single action that we take—this important Bill will double the maximum sentence for an attack on our emergency service officers—that an attack on them is an attack on us. That applies to an attack on the police, an attack on members of the fire service, an attack on health workers and, above all, an attack on prison officers, whose service is all too often forgotten but who do such extraordinary work on behalf of the public.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.
Employment and Workers’ Rights Bill

Second Reading

2.19 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As a former officer of the GMB trade union, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

It is no secret that our economy and the jobs that people do have changed rapidly over recent years, particularly in my constituency of Barnsley East. Coal once provided jobs for more than 30,000 people, but the economic landscape is now very different. We have seen a substantial increase in precarious work practices, such as zero-hours contracts, the gig economy and fake self-employment, where the guarantees of secure and well-paid work that people once enjoyed are no more.

Agency work has boomed, from retail and distribution through to the teachers and nurses filling the staff shortages in our public services. It is estimated that the number of agency workers will reach 1 million by 2020. Agency workers are some of the most exploited workers in our economy, and this employment practice is simply too one-sided in favour of those who hire them.

My Bill takes steps to change that. It will close the loophole that allows agency workers to be paid less than permanent members of staff undertaking the same role for the same company. After three months, agency workers will be able to request a contract of employment and the hirer will have a duty to assess it. After two years, agency workers will have the right to become a permanent employee.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome this Bill. I read clause 5 with great interest, as it seems to give an agency worker the right to become directly employed by the hirer after two years except in exceptional circumstances. Such a measure is long overdue. Will my hon. Friend clarify that it is her intention that workers would have continuous service from the date they started work with the hirer and would therefore have rights against unfair dismissal from the moment they reached two years, rather than the clock starting again?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend is right that these measures are long overdue. She is also right about the intention of clause 5.

I would like to share some examples with the House, particularly the case of agency workers in BT call centres, including the one near my constituency in south Yorkshire, and others who take 999 calls. The majority of them are kept on continuous assignments, working for years in the same role. In practice, they are nothing less than permanent staff, but they have no job security and are on lower pay than other workers. The nature of their contracts means that the equal pay exemption can be exploited. On average, they are paid about £500 a month less than their colleagues on permanent contracts. Some do not even take annual leave, because they simply cannot afford to do so.

There is the case of the lorry driver who has worked for the same national supermarket for the best part of 20 years but could be sacked by the hirer without notice, reason or redundancy pay. They would be left with no legal recourse against the hirer to claim unfair dismissal. Take the warehouse worker in Barnsley who works up to 20 hours a day on their feet, but is constantly threatened with immediate dismissal if they do not hit their target. It even happens in the public sector. As a former teacher, I have heard of too many cases of agency teachers being paid less than those they teach alongside. It is simply unfair.

Financial security has been lost as hard-working people in my community live week to week, rota to rota, and pay packet to pay packet. Proper working rights, pay and conditions that truly benefit employees have been sacrificed in the name of flexibility for unscrupulous bosses.

The Bill is founded on the important premise that two people working in the same role, or doing the same job for the same company, should be entitled to the same fair and equal rights. It will simply level the playing field for agency workers in Barnsley East and across the country in the face of unfair working practices, and provide them with the proper workplace rights and pay that they are overdue.

2.24 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Employment rights have always been close to my heart. For example, it was a genuine honour to sit on the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Public Bill Committee earlier this year. Ensuring that parents have the time to grieve the loss of a child without the pressure to return to work is vital and will make a real difference, and I remain indebted to my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for their work in bringing that Bill forward.

As the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) made clear, her Bill has two main elements. First, it would ensure equal treatment for agency workers by ending the equal pay exemption in the Agency Workers Regulations 2010, also known as the Swedish derogation. Secondly, the latter part of the Bill would tackle the exploitation of agency workers who are used by employers effectively as permanent staff to avoid the legal obligations afforded to normal employees.

According to the independent Taylor review, which was published last July and which I recommend to Members who have not already read it, robust data on the number of agency workers in the UK is sadly lacking. It is estimated that there are between 800,000 and 1.2 million such workers. The review made clear:

“Agency work has an important part to play in a vibrant, flexible labour market and many choose to work in this way. However, there is increasing evidence that some companies are relying on temporary workers to fill longer term positions, with the same agency worker doing the same job for years. This works for some people. They have the freedom to leave whenever they want with no notice whatsoever but for many, this level of uncertainty, not knowing whether work will be terminated and having no security of income, does not work. What is more, individuals in this situation can find it hard to seek work elsewhere, especially if they fear taking time off from the current contract may count against them in future allocations of work.”

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady believe it is correct that more than 120,000 agency workers have been on an agency contract for over five years?
Victoria Prentis: I was beginning to expound my argument that we do not have sufficient information about exactly what agency workers do and what sort of contracts they are on in order for us to make decisions.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): One of the great disappointments of the Taylor review—there were many—was that it could have referred to the use of the ministerial power in section 23 of the Employment Relations Act 1999, meaning that we would not need the excellent Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). Why will the Government not support the implementation of that section?

Victoria Prentis: Of course I do not speak for the Government, but they are keen to gather further information before they take the necessary steps to implement the “Good Work” plan, about which they feel so strongly.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we do not have comprehensive research or assessments from across the country, but all Members will have been made aware of shocking examples. In my constituency, a man was forced to return to work as a lorry driver in the afternoon following an eye operation, which was dangerous not only for him, but for everyone else on the road. Are such examples not good enough for the Government and the rest of us to unite and take action now?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Lady raises an extremely serious case. It is of course important that the Government collate and evaluate the information. It is vital that people work safely, both for their own health and for the health of the rest of us.

I will now quote further from the Taylor review, because it is important to note that it “does not want to stop companies using agency staff but we propose to address situations in which companies use agency workers over a longer period of time as a substitute for effective workforce management. As such, we believe as well as a right to equal pay (discussed later in this report), agency workers should have the right to request a direct employment contract with the hirer when they have been engaged with the same hirer for 12 months.”

That does seem a reasonable expectation after 12 months, which takes us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

In the months since the Taylor review, the Government published their “Good Work” plan, which actually goes beyond many of the review’s recommendations. In seeking to set the direction for employment over decades to come, it is important that we get this absolutely right. It was for that reason that the Government launched the consultation on agency workers at the beginning of February 2018. The consultation will continue until 9 May, so all hon. Members have an opportunity to make their views known, as does everyone else. It is hoped that, in gauging the views of the industry, businesses and workers themselves—

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 23 November.

Business without Debate

HOSPITAL (PARKING CHARGES AND BUSINESS RATES) 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.

HOUSE OF LORDS (EXCLUSION OF HEREDITARY PEERS) 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.

PRIVATE LANDLORDS (REGISTRATION) 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.

WORKERS (DEFINITION AND RIGHTS) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October.

AUTOMATIC ELECTORAL 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 26 October.

TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.
MOTION

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May.

ELECTRONIC CIGARETTES (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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.

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 11 May.
Dagenham Diesel Engine Production

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.3 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): It is good to see you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I rise to make the case for modern diesel engine production at the Ford Dagenham plant and to support the men and women who work there. The Dagenham plant has a proud history. It was built in 1929 and proved vital to our war effort. The factory was turned over to producing Bren gun carriers, vans, Army trucks and winches. It produced 34,000 Merlin aero engines and 95% of British tractors.

Post-war employment at the plant peaked at some 40,000 workers in 1953. The plant doubled its capacity in 1959, becoming the biggest factory in Europe. Unfortunately, vehicle assembly stopped in 2002, by which point nearly 11 million cars, trucks and tractors had been built at the plant. The decision was made to diversify into diesel technology—this move was very much in line with Government industrial and environmental strategy at the time. The Dagenham Diesel Centre, where the engines are both designed and manufactured, was opened by Tony Blair in 2003. Today, Dagenham produces 1 million engines annually, which is more than 50% of Ford’s global diesel requirement. The engine plant and the diesel centre cover some 2.5 million square feet. We have nearly 1,800 engine plant employees, plus 650 in transport operations and 600 other contractors—this makes more than 3,000 in total.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and what he is saying rings a bell. In Solihull, we have just lost 1,000 diesel engine jobs. Does he agree that cleaner diesels are much less polluting than petrols and that the potential targeting of these vehicles by some councils with so-called “pollution charges” is wrong-headed?

Jon Cruddas: I support precisely what the hon. Gentleman has said; indeed, I was going to mention those 1,000 job losses and cover some of the issues he has raised in my remarks.

The number of 3,000 at the Dagenham plant sits alongside 1,500 UK engineers dedicated to the development of Ford’s latest and future clean powertrain technology. The total turnover stands at some £1.75 billion. Dagenham is a strong export story for this country, as 89% of these engines are both designed and manufactured, and produces engines that comply with the most stringent emissions requirements, not factory-based testing. Put simply, the plant is at the cutting edge of diesel technology and produces engines that comply with the most stringent emissions standards on the planet.

Today, however, there is a crisis of confidence in diesel vehicles and diesel technology, with many arguing that we are witnessing the demonisation of the technology. In the current climate, there is little or no separation between old and new diesel technology: between dirty engines and state-of-the-art diesel technology. If this is allowed to continue, it will have disastrous consequences.

Yesterday, it was widely reported that the number of cars built in UK factories in March fell by some 13%. The current debate—or, rather, panic—lacks both facts and nuance. The danger is that this will lead to unfair criticism of the engines built in Dagenham; will threaten many thousands of high-quality jobs in my constituency, and in others across our economy and our country; and will undermine the managed transition to 2040 and a world beyond the combustion engine.

So today I speak up on behalf of Dagenham diesel engine production. Over the past months, I have been in talks with the company, the unions the Mayor’s office and council leaders, and we all stand united on the need for new arguments for modern diesel—to push back against some of the current hostility to this technology—and to make the case for the Dagenham plant and the managed transition to 2040. This is not about defending the indefensible in terms of the older engines, which, paradoxically, the present debate might simply ensure stay on our roads for longer; it is about arguing for the most efficient modern diesel technology.

Today I am just asking the Government to join this new partnership to push back against the demonisation of diesel.

In truth, Volkswagen has not done us many favours. Diesel appears to have become a dirty word since it emerged that Volkswagen had cheated regulators and misled customers by using software to suppress nitrogen oxide emissions during testing. In 2015, VW admitted it had fitted “defeat devices” in some 11 million of its cars worldwide, with about 1.2 million of those being in the UK. This cost Volkswagen £22.5 billion. What worries me is the collateral damage now being played out across the whole sector.

Today, there is a real danger that Britain’s auto industry is on a cliff edge, with collapsing sales of diesel and the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs and dealerships. Consumer confidence is vital and Government have a key role to play in that. In Dagenham, for example, plans to recruit for 150 new jobs in 2017-18 were shelved due to the fall in demand. Over the past few weeks we have heard more bad news, with Vauxhall revealing plans to slash UK dealerships, Nissan preparing to cut hundreds of jobs due to falling demand, and, as we have heard, Jaguar Land Rover cutting 1,000 jobs as it seeks to offset falling diesel sales. European diesel share continues to decline, now at 33% of sales compared with 50% in 2011.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, which is very relevant to me. In my constituency, we have a large company called Delphi Diesel Systems, and we will lose 500 jobs in Sudbury. It points to precisely what he is talking about—the forecast falling demand in Europe because of the much tougher measures that are being introduced. To an extent, I accept some of that, but my concern is that if that is going to happen, we need to see the strongest possible strategy from the Government—much of which we will see, I think—to support the new technology and ensure that investment goes into plants such as his and mine and those all around the UK.

Jon Cruddas: That shows the cross-party agreement on some of the points I am making today. The trouble is that in the UK, Germany, France and Spain—the markets
where anti-diesel rhetoric is highest—diesel consumption is declining fastest. Sales of diesel cars have slumped as regulators and politicians announce plans for bans, levies and additional taxes in many cities.

In truth, we in Dagenham fear that diesel has become a bit of a political football. In 2001, Gordon Brown introduced a new system of car tax aimed at protecting the environment—a sliding scale to make it cheaper for cars with lower CO₂ emissions. That helped stimulate a dash for diesel after its introduction in 2001 and its extension in subsequent years. There are now some 12 million diesel cars on British roads, while back in 2000 there were only 3 million.

In recent years, diesel has accounted for around half of the new car market. In 2000, by comparison, only one in seven new cars was a diesel model, yet following a 2017 BBC report on the dangers of diesel, the Environment Secretary jumped into the debate to make political capital:

“The dash for diesel was pursued under a Labour government...This is yet another example of a Conservative government having to clean up Labour’s mess...We are taking action...ending the sale of new diesel and petrol cars and vans by 2040.”

Political game playing should have no role, given the challenges facing the sector, as reflected in the comments made by colleagues across the House today.

Since the 2015 VW revelations, cities have taken the lead over national Governments. Berlin banned the oldest, highest-polluting diesel cars from its centre, Paris, Madrid, Mexico City and Athens have said they plan to ban diesel vehicles from city centres by 2025, and Sadiq Khan ordered the replacement of the capital’s diesel bus fleet and enforced a £10 toxicity charge, or T-charge, on the highest-polluting cars as of October.

The measures are part of a wider plan to create an ultra-low emissions zone in central London from April 2019. I do not dispute the push back against older diesel vehicles—it has to be the right way to proceed—but the danger is that we throw the baby out with the bathwater and fail to challenge the wholesale demonisation of the technology.

**Julian Knight:** The hon. Gentleman is being very kind in giving way. He talks about older diesel, but actually this is about very recent diesel—my own diesel, for instance, is from 2013. It has fallen in value by 70%, which will probably mean that it is more sensible to run it into the ground, effectively meaning that a more polluting car will stay on the road.

**Jon Cruddas:** That is precisely the point that I will make; and I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about the paradoxes that create incentives to retain older, dirtier diesel technology on our roads, resulting in great harm to our economy, possibly to our future consumers, and to British workforces.

Given all this, what do we actually know? Overall, the CO₂ emissions of a diesel car tend to be lower, diesel fuel contains more energy per litre than petrol and diesel engines are more efficient than petrol engines, especially in rural environments. Modern Euro 6 diesel cars are the cleanest in history: they capture 99% of particulates and emit 84% fewer NOx emissions than in 2000. So, we know that new diesels do not compare to the older ones.

We also know from data from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders that average CO₂ emissions from cars sold in 2017 were higher than in 2016, reversing a near 20-year decline. They blame that increase on the demonisation of diesel since 2015, which means that we cannot take for granted the progress made in reducing CO₂ emissions since 2000. We are heading in the wrong direction, as diesel sales have fallen by 37% since last year.

Mike Hawes, SMMT chief executive, criticised the autumn Budget, which increased taxes on sales of new diesels. He commented that people were concerned about these tax increases and were “holding off buying new diesel cars because of the confusion and that means older, dirtier diesels are staying on the roads.” That is precisely the point made by the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight).

Nick Molden, chief executive of testing company Emissions Analytics, agreed that, rather than impose higher taxes on new cars, the oldest cars and dirtiest diesel cars should be targeted instead. His company’s real-world driving tests have shown that some of the newest diesels produced less pollution overall than petrol vehicles. He said:

“The most efficient diesel engines continue to improve while some of the worst remain on the market, meaning the confusion for consumers increases rather than diminishes. Diesel sales are falling as a result, and this may lead to cities and governments over-compensating and restricting diesels more than is justified by our evidence. The danger is that motorists who bought genuinely clean diesels—together with the manufacturers who made them—suffer the consequences of the general confusion and loss of confidence.”

I know that the Government recognise the need to act quickly to improve the UK’s air quality, but they must also accept that we cannot do so at the expense of increasing our carbon dioxide emissions. Surely, therefore, the most effective way to achieve both aims is by encouraging consumers to adopt new technologies or to update to the cleanest specifications. Clearly modern diesel has a role to play here, and, with help, we can get the old diesels off the road. For example, Ford’s “new for old” scrappage scheme enables drivers to trade in any passenger car or commercial vehicle registered before 1 January 2011. It guarantees to take every pre-2011 vehicle off the road permanently by scrapping them.

Modern Euro 6 diesel cars are the cleanest in history, and the latest generation of diesel engines have a crucial role to play in improving air quality and reducing CO₂ emissions, particularly in the commercial vehicle market. London is facing a challenge in its air quality, and it is here in London that we make the latest Euro 6 diesel engines—just down the road in Dagenham. These engines comply with the world’s toughest ever real driving emissions standards. Recent correspondence with the Mayor of London has confirmed that he gets this and that he supports the modern case for Dagenham.

Dagenham-built engines are powering the UK’s best-selling and cleanest ever Transit commercial vehicles and developing the next generation of commercial vehicles. Today I make the case for Dagenham modern diesel technology. We have to push back against the demonisation of diesel. As have I said, the Mayor of London is responding positively, and I ask for the Government’s support in making the case for Dagenham diesel. To date they have been too quiet, thereby endangering the
country’s industrial performance and the lives of my constituents. This is about planning for the future. The combustion engine will not last forever. I want to help transition the Dagenham plant to embrace future technologies, but to do so we require stability today and in the near future, and that has to be based around the most efficient diesel technology ever produced.

Speaking of the future, Ford has announced a global investment of some $11 billion to produce 40 different types of electrified vehicle by 2022. We all need to secure Dagenham’s future by transitioning into new technologies—a future beyond both petrol and diesel. To do that, we need to resist the wholesale demonisation of technologies and make the case for modern diesel.

Let me put this simply. We have made significant progress recently in reducing CO₂ emissions. The danger is that, in the current climate, we will panic, hit the rewind button, ignore the facts, harm our economic base and undermine a successful transition to the technologies of the future. Dagenham has as much of a role to play in our industrial future as it has in our past, and the Government have a role in helping to secure that future. I ask for their help today.

2.48 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) on securing a really important debate, the subject of which is very much front and centre of the discussions that we are having with industry and with colleagues across the parties? We are all trying to deal with the conundrum of how we move to a lower-emission, cleaner-air future without causing harm to an industry that, as we know, has been hugely successful.

I share in and amplify the tribute that the hon. Gentleman paid to the men and women of the Dagenham plant. The industry employs 170,000 people, who have delivered a highly productive sector and good industrial relations. Its exports in 2016 were the highest we have ever seen, and of course we absolutely want that to continue. As the hon. Gentleman said, Ford has been a good partner to the UK through times of peace and war, and remains an absolute cornerstone of our automotive landscape.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who spoke up for his constituency, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), with whom I have discussed this issue many times, and my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) who cannot speak here, yet speaks up so eloquently for his constituents in Daventry. A really important group of people have come together today.

I want to provide some reassurances and a sense of where we are going in the future. This is a concerning time. Auto companies right across the country ask us, “What does this future transition look like?” Of course, the engines made at the plant in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham are almost all destined for export; they go into Transits that I believe are assembled in Turkey. There is a Europe-wide question about the future.

It is right that we are working really closely with the industry through the Automotive Council and the company. The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have met senior management regularly to understand the future strategic direction that the company sees itself taking in the UK. We want to reassure the company that, as well as the technical transition that I will discuss later, the Government are really working with the industry in a way we have never seen before, through the industry strategy. We are co-investing with industry through, for example, the Faraday challenge to ensure that we take a leadership position in new technology. We are also working out what more we can do on a research and development basis to go forward together.

Ford has demonstrated time and again its commitment to manufacturing in Britain by regularly upgrading its investment. It is quite right that we use opportunities such as this debate to reassure the company and the hon. Gentleman’s constituents that we understand this transition and that we are not trying to demonise diesel. I will explain that a little more later.

We have set out our aspirations in the clean growth strategy for a lower-carbon future and in the clean air proposals that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is bringing forward, because it is clear that we have to tackle this problem in a sensible way. The dash for diesel that the hon. Gentleman mentioned was encouraged by the scientific evidence at the time, but it has resulted in some consequences, particularly in the least well-off parts of the country, where there are unacceptable air quality issues in playgrounds and gardens and on balconies. It is absolutely right that we work out how to create cleaner air for our families and children, and the hon. Gentleman mentioned work that is being led locally on that.

It is right that the Government continue to be on the front foot in their support for ultra-low emissions vehicles. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Budget, in which the Chancellor announced the plug-in car grant, investments in electric vehicle charging infrastructure and the £246 million that the Government are making available over four years to co-invest with industry so that we can own and create the best manufacturing base for where the world is going, which is towards having a fleet of ultra-low emissions vehicles. This country does not want to be making the last diesel engine ever sold in Europe. We want the men and women of the Dagenham plants and plants around the country to have the investment and skills to lead the manufacturing of a new generation of cars. Of course, we already make one in five electric vehicles sold in Europe.¹

The 2040 target—to have no new vehicles on the roads that are not ultra-low emissions vehicles—was carefully discussed and delivered with the industry to give it sufficient time to adapt and to make the transition calmly. We have committed substantial funds to future technology, but we are equally committing funds to the current technology. For example, we have committed more than £1 billion to the Advanced Propulsion Centre over 10 years. As the hon. Gentleman says—he may be a right hon. Gentleman, so I hope he will forgive me if I have got that wrong—this is about how we adapt to the diesel engines of today. Interruption. Well, perhaps he will be a right hon. Gentleman one day.

This is about how we invest, within the guidelines that the EU has rightly brought forward, to create the next generation of much cleaner diesel. The point was

¹[Official Report, 2 May 2018, Vol. 640, c. 3MC.]
made that this needs to be tested in a real-world environment. My concern is that consumers have lost confidence in diesel because they sometimes feel that the companies have not been straight with them about emissions. It is right that we have a medium-term investment strategy to create the lowest possible emissions from diesel engines, but we must also work with the industry to migrate these engines in the future.

Since we put in place the 2040 target and made it clear what we think the direction of travel is, we have had a whole series of positive announcements from auto companies in the UK that are reaffirming their commitment to manufacture here. PSA-Vauxhall said two weeks ago that it is going to reinvest in the Luton plant to build the Vivaro from 2019. Toyota announced in February that it is going to build the next-generation Auris at the Burniston plant. Nissan says that it is going to spend half a billion pounds in Sunderland to secure the future of the factory there. BMW has chosen Oxford as the place where it is going to manufacture its electric Mini.

We have seen a very big and ongoing increase in automotive investment. From working with the industry and representatives of the Automotive Council, it is clear that these companies understand, both in Europe and globally, that the world is going towards a much more low-emissions future, as is absolutely right. I would submit that we are probably one of the most front-footed Governments in working with industry to drive this transition. Again, I refer to the investments we have made through the Faraday challenge and in the Advanced Propulsion Centre.

To give the hon. Gentleman some reassurance, there is no demonising of diesel. There is a calm reflection that ultimately we have to phase out polluting fossil fuels over several decades, giving companies time to plan their models and invest in their production lines. He is right to pay tribute to the workforce—the men and women who work so hard in these factories and have delivered a superb success for British manufacturing—and I join him in doing so. People who say we do not make things here should go and visit the auto plants in his constituency, or the plants in Swindon near mine, to see what the workforce has delivered. We want those jobs to be maintained. We want this investment to continue. Ultimately, we all want that to result in cleaner air for our children and our grandchildren in future.
Monday 16 April 2018

[MR DAVID HANSON in the Chair]

Myanmar: Rohingya Minority


4.30 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 200224 and 200371, and public petitions P002061, P002064, P002078 and P002104, relating to Myanmar’s Rohingya minority.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Burma is a tragedy that shames all of us. Their current situation stands as a reproach to the international community, which has proved either unable or unwilling to act as the Burmese Government have violated every international norm of right behaviour. It has tarnished for ever the name of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was once a beacon for those who believe in democracy and human rights. It has led to Bangladesh, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, having to take in a huge number of refugees. Bangladesh accepted more refugees in three weeks than the whole of mainland Europe took from the Mediterranean in a year. That perhaps puts some of our problems into perspective.

Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have fled their homes, but the roots of the tragedy were there for a long time for anyone who wished to see. For years, violence has been growing in Rakhine state. By 2013, Human Rights Watch was warning of what it called the “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya. In 2015, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Early Warning Project listed the Rohingya as being at risk of genocide, yet it seems that various Governments of the world continue to give the wrong signal to the Burmese Government and military.

We relied too much on the influence of Aung San Suu Kyi. We indicated through our actions, if not our words, that the plight of the Rohingya and their human rights were not something we were terribly concerned about. To give one example, the UK Government funded the 2014 census in Burma to the tune of £10 million. The then Select Committee on International Development expressed its concerns that the Rohingya would not be allowed to take part.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend also note that, although representations were made to the UK Government and the United Nations about the census, they accepted the requirement to define Rohingya people as Bengali as part of the census? Our Government failed to take action and withdraw funding from that census.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend brings me on to my next point, which is that the UK Government continued funding even when the Burmese Government were not allowing the Rohingya to be defined as citizens of their own country.

We provided training for the Burmese military in democracy and human rights. Opinions differ on whether that was a good thing, but when I see that 67% of that funding came from the aid budget—money that should go to the poorest people in the poorest countries—it gives me pause. That training continued even as villages were being burned and looted and people were being killed in Rakhine. In fact, it did not cease until September last year. That told the Burmese military and the Burmese Government that we were not that concerned about human rights in their country and that we would do nothing to enforce those rights.

We were not the only ones at fault. In fact, while those villages were being attacked, the head of the Burmese military came to Brussels to give a speech. He toured arms factories in Europe, which again sent the wrong signal. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that, when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked police outposts and killed 12 soldiers in August last year, the reprisals were swift and brutal. The estimate of the number killed varies between 9,000 and more than 13,000, but there can be no true figures because there is no real humanitarian access to the area.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is understandable that there will be a reaction to a terrorist act—no one would condone terrorist attacks, particularly given the effect they have on civilians—but a basic principle of military law is proportionality. Has not the response of the military been grossly disproportionate? Along with the involvement of militias, does that indicate a degree of significant state planning waiting for an incident to provide an opportunity and an excuse?

Helen Jones: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, because the Burmese Government and the Burmese military have been ratcheting up tensions in Rakhine for years, sending more and more troops there. Their response was indeed disproportionate. Some 620,000 people fled their homes, and more are coming every day. There is clear evidence of the use of landmines, rape and the burning of villages. Indeed, we could all see the burned villages on our television screens. Most of those people are now in camps in Bangladesh.

While Bangladesh was very generous in opening its borders, it does not classify the Rohingya as refugees, meaning that they are denied some of their rights under international law, including the right to request resettlement in a third country. As the International Development Committee said in its very moving report, those camps are now at risk from cyclones and the monsoons. The camps are in an area prone to cyclones, but there are no evacuation procedures or shelters. The area around the camps has been deforested for fuel, weakening the ground. The camps are built of very flimsy materials. When the monsoons come, they are likely to overwhelm the sanitation systems in the camps. Sewage will flood...
the area, causing a health emergency. As the Committee boldly put it, people will die. That is why it is very important that the Government redouble their effort to convince the international community to give more immediate aid to stop that health disaster.

At the same time, we must be clear with the Government of Bangladesh that these people deserve to be recognised as refugees, for that is what they are. Bangladesh is building a new camp—an island camp, which those who saw it on “Channel 4 News” will agree looks much more like a prison camp—with the help of the Chinese. The fear is that they want to make conditions so appalling that the Rohingya will have no alternative but to return home, whether it is safe or not. It is clear that the Bangladeshi Government’s aim is to ensure that the Rohingya are repatriated. That may be a laudable ambition in the long term, but the Rohingya cannot return while violence continues in Rakhine, while they are not recognised as citizens of their own country and while there is no humanitarian access to monitor their return.

The Bangladeshi Government have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Burmese Government about the return of the Rohingya, but no one knows what it contains. While the British Government have rightly said that any return must be “safe, voluntary and dignified”, we need to persuade the whole international community to stick to that, because frankly the Burmese Government’s record on dealing with returnees is appalling. The Rohingya who were displaced earlier are still in camps that are in reality prison camps, which the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs said display “a level of human suffering…that I have personally never seen before”.

The Burmese Government are now building a new camp with money diverted, it is said, from World Bank aid. It, too, will be a prison camp. Last week, the Bangladeshi Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about returnees, including the right of humanitarian access, but Burma has not signed up to anything like that. The camps are in conditions much worse than what the Rakhine camps are in. The UN has rightly said that any return must be “safe, voluntary and dignified”, and there is no indication that it will change its mind.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever memorandum of understanding the two Governments sign, nothing will happen unless we deal with the root issue and the refugees’ fear?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That will entail the things I have listed: cessation of violence, recognition of citizenship and the right of humanitarian access.

The gender-based violence that has been used by the Burmese military also needs to be dealt with. They use rape as a weapon of war. There have been credible reports of girls as young as five being gang raped; of pregnant women being attacked and the babies cut from them; and of other women seeing their children thrown into a well or into a fire before they too are led away to be gang raped. That is a level of barbarity that the world cannot and must not tolerate. Such barbarity can happen only when other people are seen as less than human. It is not, as Aung San Suu Kyi’s website said, “fake rape”. It is happening. It is a war crime and must be treated as a crime against humanity.

Not only does there seem to be little effort to collect evidence to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, but the health services on offer to the women involved are inadequate. Many of the services are situated in the middle of the camps in public view and are run by men, so women are reluctant to go to them. Few people there speak the women’s language. If we think how difficult it would be to describe a rape even in our own language, it must be much harder to try to describe it to someone who does not speak the same language. The UK rightly funds 13 women’s centres, giving help to more than 10,000 women and girls, but nearly half a million are in need of help, and a greater effort from our partners is needed to meet that need.

There are reports of gender-based violence within the camps and of women and girls being trafficked. It is significant that when Cardinal Bo from Burma and Cardinal D’Rozario from Bangladesh recently came here, they met our anti-slavery commissioner, because they are fully aware of what is going on in the camps. There are also reports of child marriages, sometimes driven by families in such absolute poverty that they can no longer care for their children, and sometimes by a system that gives food aid to family groups rather than to individuals. That piles tragedy upon tragedy for the people involved, and yet we seem to be reluctant to collect evidence of what has happened.

The UK sent two civilians to Bangladesh to advise on how to collect evidence of sexual violence, but where is the rest of the world? Time after time when such things happen, Governments shake their heads and say, “Never again”, but that is not good enough. We said it after Bosnia and after Rwanda. We keep saying it. Neither is it good enough to ask the Burmese military to investigate themselves. They have cleared the army of any crimes, even those we can see on our screens. In the end, the only way to deal with such crimes is to ensure that evidence is collected and that those responsible are brought before a court, because that is the only way to deter people in future.

It seems the world wills the ends but is reluctant to will the means. That is true of crimes against women and girls and also true of the aid given to those in the camps. Only about 34% of the $434 million required has so far been collected. That means that those in the camps are in conditions much worse than what the world generally recognises as suitable for refugees. They are there in high densities with less than 15 square meters a person. By last December a third of the latrines had failed and 90% of domestic water is contaminated with E. coli. There have been campaigns to vaccinate against cholera and measles, for which I am grateful, but diphtheria is now rife in the camps. When the monsoon comes the health crisis will be made worse because people are so closely packed together.

I am proud that this country pledged £47 million at the Geneva pledging conference and then added a further £12 million. People complain about aid, but I am hugely proud of my country when it makes such donations because it recognises common humanity. We must work to ensure that other countries step up. Since the attack in Salisbury we have shown that it is possible to use diplomacy to get our friends and allies to act together. The Government must turn their attention to ensuring that the wealthier countries in the world, those who came to the world humanitarian summit and members
of the UN, step up to the plate to avert a tragedy in the camps. The UN must ensure that its agencies work together to provide services.

**John Spellar:** Have not the senior UN officials already declared that the actions taken against the Rohingya amount to ethnic cleansing, which is an offence in itself? Should they not act on the decisions they themselves have already made?

**Helen Jones:** Indeed, they should; my right hon. Friend is right. One of the things this tragedy teaches us, particularly when we are today talking about Syria, is that there are consequences to acting, but also consequences to doing nothing, and we ought to remember that. We now need to put pressure on Burma to accept an independent investigation into what has gone on in Rakhine. That is urgent because there are already reports that the military are bulldozing villages and destroying the evidence. The International Development Committee has suggested that that could be led by the International Commission on Missing Persons, and that is a good idea. I do not mind who does it, but it has to be done.

How do we put the pressure on? First, I hope that the UK Government will say clearly that it is right that the UN refers Burma to the International Criminal Court. I know it is argued that such a motion would be vetoed by Russia and China, but we need to be unequivocal about our position and we need to build support for it. Secondly, although the EU has imposed an arms embargo, there is no world embargo on selling arms to Burma, which is what we need to work for as a matter of urgency. We also need to take action by imposing sanctions on the Burmese military and members of the Burmese Government. Simply freezing their assets will not cut it; I am afraid; they do not have many assets here. However, making sure that firms could not work with firms controlled by the Burmese military would help. We need to do that along with saying that there will be no return for the Rohingya until conditions are safe, and until the recommendations of the Annan advisory commission have been implemented and there is full humanitarian access for the UN and other organisations.

In the longer term, the world needs to learn the lessons of this conflict. It is very easy to say, “Never intervene—never do anything”, but, as I said, there are consequences to doing nothing. If we watch while a particular ethnic group is targeted and violence increases, and we do nothing, we become complicit in that violence.

I end by explaining why we should be concerned about people half a world away: because they are human, as we are. As Cardinal Bo said:

“They are among the most marginalised, dehumanised and persecuted people in the world. They are treated worse than animals. Stripped of their citizenship, rejected by the neighbouring countries, they are rendered stateless. No human being deserves to be treated this way.”

They do not, and if we believe in common humanity, we should continue to do our bit to ensure that those responsible are brought to account, and make every effort to persuade our allies around the world to do the same.

4.51 pm

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing the debate, and on her powerful advocacy, which I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. She went through so many of the important aspects of this terrible situation.

It is a shame that more people are not here today—I know they would have been ordinarily, because every time this subject is raised in Westminster Hall or in the Chamber lots of people want to speak, get involved, share their views and keep the pressure on the Burmese Government. However, we all understand the situation in Syria at the moment. It is absolutely right that that terrible situation is being debated in the Chamber.

The situation faced by the Rohingya has been going on for many years. Kutupalong camp is the biggest camp in Bangladesh. It is now effectively Bangladesh’s fourth biggest city, because of how the camps have come together and how many people are there. It has been there for 30 years. My first question when I was elected to this place was about the Rohingya community. At that point, they were being pushed out into the sea and were making terrible boat trips.

In September last year, after the latest escalation, I was one of the first Members to go to the Kutupalong camp. I remember coming back and wanting to share the voices of the people I had met, and tell their stories, because I knew that world events would overtake what is going on in a part of the world that is relatively unknown to the west. I remember thinking at the time that something else was bound to happen in Syria that would take the world’s attention away from Burma and the Rohingya community, and indeed that is exactly what we risk letting happen. This is therefore a really opportune, important debate. Despite the fact that few of us are here, I know that the contributions will be well received by those who have been campaigning for so long for those people whose voices we cannot hear—the 680,000 people who are languishing in terrible conditions in Bangladesh, and the few who are left in Burma.

I have spoken in this place about what I saw in September 2017. The Burmese Government have called these people terrorists, but I have spoken at length about the 60-year-old woman I met who was dead behind the eyes after telling me about how her son-in-law had been stabbed and dragged away. Her 12-year-old grandson had been beheaded in front of her. Others had their genitals chopped off and their villages burned. People had gun wounds in the backs of their legs. People were describing how helicopters had been chasing them, and firing just behind them to push them across the border.

The hon. Member for Warrington North mentioned landmines. We saw videos of the landmines that had been planted, and we could track exactly where they were, because in the video that was shown to us we could see where we were standing. A lady had had her leg blown off just four days before. This is really gruesome stuff and one of the toughest things I have had to see, listen to and speak about. These people have suffered in ways that I, frankly, cannot imagine, but I must press on, as we all must, to share these stories.

As the hon. Lady said, in Kutupalong camp the people have found the one part of Bangladesh that has some hills. Bangladesh is a low-lying country, but because of its forestland the camp is on sloping ground. It has all been deforested. Effectively, a population the size of Liverpool is on an area 5 km by 5 km. The trees that
clearly nowhere near enough and they are failing to make some moves under public pressure, but that is and, unfortunately, they do not see a light at the end of the tunnel. I got that sense from the people I spoke to. However, the second time I went, I got a sense that they feel it is drifting further away. To get all those things, they need a pathway to citizenship.

When I first went to Burma in February 2016, I went through the country, including states other than Rakhine, talking about religious freedom and ethnic conflict. Many of the people I met had been in prison—it was a self-selecting audience, I suppose—and it seemed that there was a flat rate of 14 years for political sentencing. The shortest sentence I came across was seven years, and the only reason that woman—an amazing lady called Wai Wai Nu—had been in prison for seven years was that she was only 29. She is a Rohingya, and her father had been a Member of Parliament in Burma.

Imagine that—we are all Members of Parliament in this place, but within just a few years, that man was not only not a Member of Parliament, but was not able to stand for election. He cannot even vote or secure the basic rights to health and education for his family. His whole family was put in prison. What a change in a country in which we had—and I hope still have, although this is in the far distance at the moment—such high hopes. I have talked many times in this place about my Burmese heritage. My father was born there, so I am half-Burmese, and it absolutely breaks my heart to see what is going on in that wonderful country.

Will the Minister talk about his sense of what the Burmese Government are doing, even if it is in name only, to open up the visits that are allowed at the moment? In a recent speech, the new President, U Win Myint, talked about the rule of law and ethnic conflict, but he did not get anywhere near getting to grips with this situation. I know this is a controversial issue; I talk about it here and in many other places. The week before last, I was lecturing at the Britain-Burma Society, an institution made up of expat Burmese—the Burmese diaspora here—including a lot of experts and academics. The issue is controversial with the Burmese diaspora here, never mind the people who are living to the parochial, closed news cycle in Burma, which transmits the hate speech of Wirathu, the nationalist Buddhist monk who heads Ma Ba Tha—a particularly pernicious group of Buddhists, which started a popular uprising.

People in Burma are largely behind pushing the Rohingya out, and as far as they are concerned, the Rohingya are not Burmese; they are Bangladeshis or Bengalis. People use disparaging names, calling them Bengalis and refusing to accept the fact that the Rohingya are a discrete community. I do not believe for a minute that they appreciate, know about or accept our description of the violence, mutilations, rapes and killings or the burning of villages that we report on. They say it is just western propaganda, but it is well documented. The Minister has been to Cox's Bazar and spoken to people, and I have seen and smelled the smoke of the burning villages.

**Rushanara Ali:** Is the hon. Gentleman also concerned about how social media has been used for years, but especially last year? A recent report in *The Guardian,*

were there have all been taken away; the land is just a series of mudbanks. When I was there, we spent an hour and a half walking through the camp, but we did not get anywhere near the end of it. We could not see the end, the camp is that big. The rainy season is nearly upon us again, so we have gone full cycle. When I was in the camp recently with the International Development Committee, things had improved. There is now a registration camp with proper UN canvas tents where people can settle in, register, tell their story, be documented and get the vaccinations that they need. However, they then move over to the bigger camp, where there is still plastic sheeting, bamboo sheets and such things. The risk is of further landslides that will take their homes away from them.

Roads had also been built. Bricks had been broken up and hardcore laid. What had taken me 20 or 30 minutes to walk through now took me only five minutes, because the roads had improved that much. However, again, the person who was in charge of building the roads told us at length that when the rain comes it will all be washed away. All the work that has happened over the last six months is at risk of being undone by just one of the many monsoons. That is before we even get to the cyclones. If the cyclones come, there will be severe devastation. Save the Children reckons that about 120,000 to 200,000 people will be affected. Many lives will be lost, and it is not a matter of if lives will be lost, but of when and how many. Unfortunately, this is now about mitigation, not elimination.

I am full of admiration for the Bangladeshi Government for what they have taken on. This is a country of 180 million people. During the Bangladeshi war of independence, just 47 years ago, so many of them were in refugee camps. It was Bangladeshi independence day just a few weeks ago. I could see how raw the emotion was for them as they told the story of their war of independence and the suffering that they went through. It is no surprise that they are so welcoming and so open to people going through the same process.

We need to work with the Bangladeshi Government to do more. The area that the Rohingya are in at the moment is far too small. We need to work out how we can encourage the Bangladeshi Government to disperse people. As the hon. Member for Warrington North said, if the Rohingya were treated as refugees they would have a right to stay and would be able to disperse through the country. The Bangladeshi Government are not too keen on that, because they expect to come to an agreement with the Rohingya people, and for them to move back to their homeland.

Originally, that is what many of the Rohingya I met wanted to do. However, the second time I went, I got a sense that there was a hardening of opinion among the people in the camps. Previously, they were really hoping that the world was coming to their aid, and that we might be able to reach a solution. As long as it was safe, they would go back to Myanmar and build a new life for themselves. I got that sense from the people I spoke to, the second time around of a hardening of opinion, and, unfortunately, they do not see a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Burmese Government have started to change and make some moves under public pressure, but that is clearly nowhere near enough and they are failing to tackle the underlying issues. The Rohingya need security; they must have the sense that they can stay. When they get back to Myanmar, they need freedom of movement, access to work and the ability to make a livelihood. Bear in mind that their villages and homes have all been destroyed, and I dare say that there has also been some land grabbing—other people have moved in and taken the best of what was theirs. The personal safety of the Rohingya must absolutely be guaranteed, but I get the sense that they feel it is drifting further away. To get all those things, they need a pathway to citizenship.

Will the Minister talk about his sense of what the Burmese Government are doing, even if it is in name only, to open up the visits that are allowed at the moment? In a recent speech, the new President, U Win Myint, talked about the rule of law and ethnic conflict, but he did not get anywhere near getting to grips with this situation.

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**Rushanara Ali:** Is the hon. Gentleman also concerned about how social media has been used for years, but especially last year? A recent report in *The Guardian,*
based on analysis by Raymond Serrato, showed that the level of incitement to violence and hate on platforms such as Facebook is unprecedented.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Government need to take a broader international approach to how we monitor the activities of social media platforms, both in the UK and elsewhere, to prevent extremist groups from promoting acts of genocide and violence?

**Paul Scully:** I totally agree with the hon. Lady about the use of social media, which whips things up so quickly. I will leave it to the Minister to comment on what more the Government can do about the wider issue she raises. I am fortunate that I do not get anywhere near the level of abuse that other Members get on social media—especially female MPs—but I do get it every now and again from Burmese nationalists, and from Sri Lankans when I talk about Sri Lankan human rights. It is interesting that we get it from the other side of the world. As the hon. Lady says, the speed with which these things flow on social media is incredible, so it is difficult to tackle them.

I talked earlier about what the Burmese Government are doing. Also, seven Burmese soldiers were found guilty of murdering 10 Rohingya and got 10 years’ hard labour, but that is an imperfect approach. The two Reuters journalists who discovered the massacre that relates to the sentence have themselves been arrested. They have been in custody for four months so far and they face a full trial, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years. How can it be that while the Burmese Government are carrying out show trials and putting a few people in prison—we are all desperate for them to open up transparency—two people who are just doing their job incredibly well and bravely are held up to the Burmese people as enemies of the state? That cannot be right. Effectively, the crime of those 10 soldiers was not murdering people; it was getting caught.

One of the petitions talks about the need to have hard-hitting financial sanctions. I must declare an interest: I am trade envoy to Burma. I think we need targeted sanctions. We must look at the military, because the commander-in-chief could stop this tomorrow if he so decided—if he called off the dogs and appreciated that the Rohingyas are human beings with a right to stay in the place they have called home for decades, if not hundreds of years. We must target our sanctions carefully on the military and military-owned organisations, but an overall sanctions regime targeted on Burma would risk impoverishing people in other parts of the country, such as Kachin state and northern Shan state, where there is the risk of ethnic conflict opening up again. There have recently been air strikes in those states, so there is the risk of ethnic conflict opening up again. There are lots of practical reasons—it comes back to the carrot and the stick.

We need to take an holistic view of Burma, looking at each ethnic state and its economic development. We need to call upon the international community to do everything it can and make sure that the Burmese Government are continuously put under pressure. I get the idea that they are starting to realise who will be held responsible when the rainy season starts and we start getting reports of deaths. Now is the time for us to redouble our efforts and make sure that they are doing something about it.

5.13 pm

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for opening the debate and for comprehensively summarising the issues faced by the Rohingya people and what our Government need to do. I also thank the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy in Burma, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for his contribution. We have been working closely together to make sure...
that our Government provide support in the refugee crisis and to make representations at international level for more concerted action.

The Minister started his brief within days of the attacks that led to the displacement of more than 600,000 people. I am grateful to him for his time and effort in making sure that our Government’s response is stepped up. No disrespect to his predecessors, but since he has been in post, he has taken much more time in the House to report to and work with us, and to continue to highlight the plight of the Rohingya people who have been displaced internally and into Bangladesh.

As the co-chair of the all-party group, for years I have been aware of the systematic mistreatment and discrimination that the Rohingya people have endured for decades. One of the first things I came across when I was elected in 2010 was a representation from a campaign group in my constituency highlighting the persecution of the Rohingya population in Rakhine state. Many campaigning organisations, from Burma Campaign to Human Rights Watch, Refugees International, Oxfam and others have campaigned for years to highlight the treatment of the Rohingya population and of other minorities in Myanmar, ahead of the transition towards democracy. In the rush to the transition towards democracy that we all wanted, they warned our Government and the international community not to remove all sanctions outright and end up with little leverage over what we all knew would be a Government in which the Burmese military still had a dominant hand. Sadly, that warning went unheeded.

As campaigners across the House working together, we found that our Government and other Governments took too long to take the issue seriously and to make representations to prevent what happened both in 2013 and last year. In total, 1 million people have been displaced and have sought refuge in Bangladesh. It is not that our Government and other Governments could not see what was coming, but that they were too slow to see the warning signs and to listen to organisations working on the ground, trying to ensure that the warnings were taken seriously.

It is deeply saddening that it takes genocide and the ethnic cleansing of a scale that we have seen before our Government step up to the plate and take an international leadership role. Although I am grateful, like my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North, that our Government have given international aid to help those who have been displaced internally and into Bangladesh, we need to do much more. We need to make sure that this crisis is not forgotten in the context of the refugee crises faced by millions of people around the world, not least the Syrian crisis—there are more than a million people in Lebanon, more than a million people in Turkey and also in Jordan, which I have visited.

The international community is under huge pressure. Historically, our Government have had a proud record of leading the way and making sure that we support the efforts of countries that have to host refugees. Bangladesh is an emerging economy with some of the highest poverty levels in the world, which requires support from our aid project, and has to host a million refugees. That is of an unimaginable scale that our country would struggle to cope with—Europe struggled to cope with it—yet countries such as Bangladesh, Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan have to.

It is right that we continue to support our aid budget. If we do not resist the temptation to succumb to certain wings of the British media that are trying to undermine our aid efforts, our capacity to help those countries to cope with the refugee crises would be even more limited.

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):** I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady on the aid budget. It is important that we recognise that not all projects we give aid to will necessarily provide full value, whatever that may or may not mean. There is inevitably risk involved in any aid package. Aid is not a business, but we need to recognise that aspects of the business world apply to it. In other words, politicians sometimes need to take risks. I have no problem standing here or in the main Chamber and saying that we will take risks and that some aid money will not derive the benefits we hoped for at the outset. That should not dissuade us from doing the right thing.

**Rushanara Ali:** I am grateful for the Minister’s intervention. I hope that other Ministers, particularly in the Department for International Development, are absolutely confident and resolute in defending the aid budget, because it saves lives. Our contributions have saved millions of lives, lifted millions of people out of poverty and helped post-conflict societies to grow into thriving economies.

**Afzal Khan:** I hear what my hon. Friend says, but I find it troubling that developing countries carry more than 80% of the burden of the world’s refugees. Does she agree that, never mind what we are doing, we should think about what more we can do?

**Rushanara Ali:** Of course—I will come to that and the role our Government can continue to play. Although our Government have made generous contributions, we need other countries to do the same. In total, around $1 billion is required to support just the 1 million affected people in Bangladesh. We cannot expect a developing country to cope with that huge cost. There needs to be international support, and I hope Britain continues to play an international leadership role to ensure that that happens.

Others spoke about the important role that the people and the Government of Bangladesh have played in hosting close to 1 million people who have been forced out of Myanmar into Bangladesh in appalling circumstances. More than 600,000 were displaced last September, and hundreds of thousands were displaced following previous attacks led by the Burmese military. I echo the point that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made about the response of the Bangladeshi population. I am of Bangladeshi heritage. I am acutely aware that the Bangladesh public’s reaction has been positive because they have direct experience of seeking refuge in India during the 1971 war of independence. Many have experience of being internally displaced. Many of my constituents, and people across the country in other Members’ constituencies, also raise money to help, because that connection is well felt. However, this is not a sustainable situation for an emerging economy that itself has a high level of poverty, which is why it is so important that we step up and take urgent humanitarian action.
As Members have pointed out, the monsoon season is imminent. Leaving aside the refugee crisis, Bangladesh often faces huge floods, during which half and sometimes two thirds of the country is underwater. It copes relatively well, but it is not able to cope with 1 million refugees who are not in decent accommodation. Its systems are not geared up to cope. The international community therefore must work hard to ensure that the Government of Bangladesh is open to help from international non-governmental organisations as well as domestic ones to scale up support, which is urgently required, and that in turn Bangladesh gets the humanitarian assistance and funding that it requires. The situation is urgent. Lives will be lost—there will be a double catastrophe—if we do not act quickly to ensure that the Government of Bangladesh, with the support of international partners, are prepared for the monsoon season.

This week we host the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Although Burma is not a member of the Commonwealth, Bangladesh is, and other countries in the region have a vested interest in solving this crisis and ensuring that the situation does not get worse. I therefore hope the Minister can explain what representations our Government will make and what they will do to facilitate discussion not just with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh but with other Commonwealth Governments that can help to achieve a more positive result than the one we have now.

Paul Scully: The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is important, but does the hon. Lady agree that there is a clear need for an international, coordinated and systematic approach to solve the situation?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I hope the Minister will tell us what discussions he has had—and what discussions the Foreign Secretary has had, if he has had any—and the outcomes of those discussions. I hope the Minister will also explain what practical outcomes he and fellow Ministers have got from the European Council. He reported back to the all-party group, but some of the things that were reported were disappointing. I hope that he has persevered since that discussion, and that he has something more positive to tell us, particularly in relation to the arms embargo.

Although we have an EU arms embargo, our Government have not pushed for an international UN-mandated embargo. Will the Minister explain why not, and what he will do to try to get an international agreement? A number of countries—China, Russia, India, Ukraine and, until the end of last year, Israel—continue to sell arms to the Burmese Government, and there are reports that they did so even during the period of the attacks that displaced so many people. I hope the Minister recognises the urgent need to prevent the sale of arms, given that the military does not respect human rights despite Burma’s transition, albeit imperfect, to democracy. The international community continues to allow arms to be sold.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described what is happening to the Rohingya people as a military campaign in which

“you cannot rule out the possibility that acts of genocide have been committed”.

The UN team stated:

“Brutal attacks against Rohingya...have been well-organised, coordinated and systematic”.

It added that the violence by the Burmese military has been perpetrated

“...with the intent of not only driving the population out of Myanmar but preventing them from returning to their homes”.

A February 2017 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights detailed the serious human rights violations committed by Burma’s security forces, including mass gang rape, killings, including of babies and young children, and brutal beatings and disappearances. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, said:

“The devastating cruelty to which these Rohingya children have been subjected is unbearable—what kind of hatred could make a man stab a baby crying out for his mother’s milk. And for the mother to witness this murder while she is being gang-raped by the very security forces who should be protecting her”.

We must arrest and prosecute not just those who perpetrated that horrific violence but those who gave the orders.

It is encouraging that Fatou Bensouda, the International Criminal Court prosecutor, has asked for a ruling on whether the mass deportations constitute a crime against humanity. The International Criminal Court should rule in favour of an investigation and begin proceedings.

I call on the UK Government to do all they can for that to happen.

I hope the Minister addresses the recent development of the forced exclusion—deportation—of the Rohingya population into Bangladesh. As I stated earlier, we must ensure that the Burmese military Government are put under significant pressure, with both sanctions on the military and targeted economic sanctions on their interests as well as a UN-mandated arms embargo.

I hope the Minister heeds the warnings of over 100 parliamentarians who wrote to the Foreign Secretary calling on the UK Government to make a referral to the International Criminal Court. I recognise what he said on the act of making a referral, as other countries have done—because Burma is not a signatory, it needs to self-refer—but given the UK’s position and the need to hold the Burmese Government to account for committing crimes against humanity, and certainly for committing ethnic cleansing and genocide, according to the United Nations.

I appeal to the Minister to continue the effort to ensure that the Burmese military are held to account and that the International Criminal Court referral takes place in whichever way is possible. Frankly, it is not good enough to revert to saying, “It is not possible for these reasons.” I want to know how he will make it possible. When the Burmese military are put under pressure—to ensure that action was taken, we put them under pressure through that correspondence with our Foreign Secretary, the Government and other Governments on the referral, and they had negative publicity—they finally feel the heat and start to pay attention.

I hope the Government start to take action on those grounds to hold the Burmese military to account. Otherwise, once again, the international community, including our Government, will have allowed them to get away with ethnic cleansing and genocide, and that is not acceptable.

5.33 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington
North (Helen Jones) on opening this debate and her excellent contribution. The ongoing situation of the Rohingya is devastating, to say the least. For almost all of my life I have been hearing about Rohingya refugees. When I was a child in Pakistan in the '60s, I heard about tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees coming to Karachi. When I served in the European Parliament, again there was the same situation, and resolutions were passed in that Parliament. Now, as I serve here as a Member of Parliament, again we see horrific suffering. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. It has rightly been said that it is genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Sadly, the world’s response has not matched the gravity of the situation. The Burmese Government must cease human rights violations and forced displacement of the Rohingya. If they do not, the Foreign Affairs Committee’s December report sets out sensible proposals for the British Government to scale up their actions.

The UK has a historical relationship with Burma, and we owe it to them to step up and lead on this. The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting gets under way in London today, so will the Minister provide urgent assurances that the British Government will step up their efforts to galvanise international support for a robust regime of sanctions on the Burmese? We rightly applaud financial aid for refugee camps in Bangladesh, but that will bring little comfort as refugees face the prospect of monsoon floods endangering encampments and worsening camp conditions.

The Government have supported a UN advisory committee investigating atrocities committed against the Rohingya, but they have not supported referring the Rohingya crisis to the International Criminal Court. They insisted that “there is no consensus in support of an ICC referral within the UN Security Council” but that should not prevent them from leading the charge to build and secure a consensus. They can start by building momentum among UN Assembly members at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting this week.

5.36 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I apologise for arriving late to the debate and for being able to make only a brief speech on behalf of my constituents, who, I know, regard the situation as extremely distressing and appalling, and who have strong fellow feeling for the Rohingya Muslims; but I am grateful for the opportunity to bring their concerns before the House.

I want to make a few points of particular concern on behalf of my constituents. First, I support my hon. Friends in urging the Government to do all they can to bring these matters to the attention of the International Criminal Court and international mechanisms for judgment and justice. It is not enough to say that because Burma will not wish to do that and is not a signatory, we cannot find a mechanism to ensure that those who perpetrate such appalling war crimes are held to account.

Secondly, the situation that obtains in the camps is of considerable concern. My constituents are aware of the appalling conditions that the refugees are living in and of the violence—in particular, the threat of sexual violence—and trafficking taking place in the camps. The horror for those refugees of being forced to flee their land has been compounded by the vulnerability and atrocities they experience there.

While the Government of Bangladesh are to be commended for welcoming and accommodating people fleeing the abhorrent atrocities in Myanmar, they must do more to facilitate international aid agencies to come into the camps to offer support to those there. It is also not right that we should leave the Bangladesh Government in a position where they now seek either to repatriate or to place elsewhere some of those refugees in conditions that would be no more humane or safe for them. We as an international community have a particular obligation to provide support to the Bangladesh Government properly to look after those refugees in Bangladesh on the understanding that it is not in any way possible for them to be repatriated to Myanmar in the circumstances that obtain now and that, as far as we can see, will do so for a long period to come.

My hon. Friends have talked of the appalling atrocities that have been suffered: the massacre—genocide, as many seek to characterise it—experienced by the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. As has been mentioned, they are appalled and outraged by the treatment of babies and children who have been tortured and murdered, and the horror as parents have been forced to stand by and watch the slaughter of their children. They call on Parliament, at the very least, to continue to bear witness and speak out to condemn such atrocities and to ensure that, in an appalling, complicated world where we are dealing with more and more challenging conflicts, the one we are considering is not forgotten and lost. There is a fear that that is what may happen.

I apologise for arriving late to the debate and for being able to make only a brief speech on behalf of my constituents, who, I know, regard the situation as extremely distressing and appalling, and who have strong fellow feeling for the Rohingya Muslims; but I am grateful for the opportunity to bring their concerns before the House.

5.40 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as ever, Mr Hanson. I begin by thanking those who initiated and signed the petitions that have brought this hugely important issue to Parliament today, and thanking the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her eloquent and informative speech. From what I have heard today, all of us in this Chamber feel very moved, and we are passionate about continuing to campaign on the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar and, now, in Bangladesh.

As I stand here, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled across the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh, and 700,000 of them have done so since August—in a period of only eight months. Those people have arrived with virtually nothing, and they have fled unspeakable levels of violence. They continue to arrive. What they have witnessed is truly horrific. We have already heard about Government soldiers stabbing babies and throwing them into fires in the middle of villages, and gang-raping girls. We have heard about infants being beaten to death with spades, and about soldiers burning entire families to death in their homes and rounding up dozens of unarmed male villagers and summarily executing them. We have also heard that those fortunate enough to flee...
of refugees, and many Rohingya refugees worry that if they are repatriated from Bangladesh, they will be held in the camps with no rights or citizenship, and under constant threat of renewed military attack. In the camps the misery continues—not directly from the Burmese military but from malnutrition, cholera and other diseases.

The need for collective action is made even more acute by the impending monsoon season, without which the situation has the potential to spiral out of control. When I say it is impending, I mean in the next few weeks. I and some colleagues from the International Development Committee visited Cox’s Bazar six weeks ago and saw the conditions in which Rohingya refugees live. Despite the best efforts of NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh, refugees still live in makeshift shelters built only of bamboo and tarpaulins. Many of the shelters are precariously positioned on land carved into sandy, deforested hillsides. Basic services including clean water, sanitation and healthcare remain inadequate.

As outlined in the Committee’s latest report, before the monsoon season the conditions were dangerous. Now they provide the ingredients for a potential catastrophe. Rain will produce mudslides and flooding in the camps in Cox’s Bazar. An estimated 100,000 people are at risk more than the total population of my constituency—and those people need to be relocated to safer ground. Efforts are under way to move some people to higher ground, but currently they are inadequate. Basic services are also at risk. A third of health facilities and nutrition centres could be lost, which will increase outbreaks of disease, and particularly water-borne diseases: cholera, typhoid, malaria and gastroenteritis, to name a few. It will put the lives of the 60,000 women reported to be pregnant, and their babies, at risk. We must ensure that emergency action is taken to prevent a further humanitarian disaster during the monsoon season, otherwise many people will die.

The UK has been and continues to be a leading figure in the response in Bangladesh, having given £59 million to the global response. All of us in this Chamber welcome that, but money alone will not solve the immediate crisis. The UK should urge the Government of Burma to allow unhindered access to all parts of Rakhine state, as well as Kachin and Shan states, for international humanitarian aid, human rights monitors and media, and to co-operate fully with the fact-finding mission established by the Human Rights Council, allowing its investigators unrestricted access to all areas in the country.

It is imperative that the UK Government exercise every means available to stop the persecution of Rohingya by the Myanmar military and Government. The decisions by the United Kingdom to suspend training programmes for the military, and by the EU to suspend visits by senior military personnel from Burma to Europe, are welcome. The UK should now put pressure on the UN Security Council to explore all avenues to bring the perpetrators of heinous crimes under international law to justice, and to seek a resolution imposing a global arms embargo on the Burmese army, with targeted sanctions against Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—particularly a global arms embargo. Carefully targeted sanctions against the military will send a powerful message.

The UK Government must act alongside the wider international community and continue to call on the Government of Myanmar to stop the violence immediately and to take robust action against hate speech, discrimination
and incitement. There must be a clear message to all stakeholders—civil society, ethnic nationalities, religious communities and the military—to come together, put aside past hatreds, seek political dialogue, recognise and defend the basic human rights and dignity of all, and seek genuine peace with justice.

5.48 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I commend the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who clearly set out the issues—the history and the main matters that need to be addressed. She reminded us all of the terrible situation faced by the Rohingya and the great urgency of the need to tackle it, both the immediate humanitarian crisis and the underlying political issues. It is significant that we have six petitions from the public that have triggered today’s debate, showing that the British people are extremely concerned about the fate of the Rohingya and that they will not be forgotten.

Colleagues have said that the monsoon is coming. My understanding is that the United Nations and non-governmental organisations last month issued a new call for a larger aid programme of $951 million. I would be grateful if the Minister reported on how that appeal is going and how much of that money has been raised.

Many of us are concerned about the proposal to put some of the refugees on the island of Bhasan Char. Will the Minister also give an update on that and tell us what representations he has made to the Bangladeshi about it? Of course, we all appreciate that the Bangladeshi are in an extremely difficult situation. Bangladesh is a very poor country, in receipt of aid itself, and it has had an overwhelming number of refugees to deal with, but the international community must look at whether this is the best way to deal with the immediate crisis.

Paul Scully: When we talk about the island, we should call it what it is. It is actually a sandbank—something that did not exist just a few years ago. It is quite extraordinary that it is being considered, but I take the hon. Lady’s point.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman is extremely well informed and makes a useful contribution to the debate and our understanding of this matter. I am grateful to him for that intervention.

Hon. Members have spoken about gender-based violence and the rape and abuse of women and children. It is clear that that is part of the Myanmar military’s strategy. Its strategy has been to kill the men from the villages and then rape the women and children. That is not some soldiers who are out of control; it is clearly a thought-through approach to terrorise the Rohingya people. We have debated that over the last eight months and we have repeatedly asked Ministers how many of our experts dealing with sexual violence and trauma have been sent to Cox’s Bazar. I think I have asked the Minister about it four times now. He wrote me a long, very informative letter on 27 March, but he still has not told us how many of our experts have been sent to support the victims.

When the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague, announced that Foreign Office initiative, everyone was extremely pleased that we would have the capacity to deal with that kind of violence as crises arose. We have 70 people who can do that work, but the latest number the Minister gave us was that two people are there. I would like to have from the Minister today an update on that number.

Mark Field: If I may, I will give the number now, not least because the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) also pointed it out. We have now deployed four members of the UK Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative response team of experts directly to Cox’s Bazar, most recently the additional two members in March who are delivering training in evidence-gathering for local partners on the ground. I appreciate that, compared to the large number of 70, not all of whom are specialist experts in the field, that seems like a small number. We are trying to get some more training on the ground with other NGOs and the like. At the moment, we regard this as a reasonable level; obviously, we would like to be able to deploy more and we will deploy as many as we feel is appropriate in this particular case. One of the issues at stake, which the hon. Lady raised earlier, is trying to get as much testimony as possible to hold people to account.

Helen Goodman: I am sorry, but I do not think it is acceptable to send four people. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North pointed out that 13 women’s centres have been set up and that the British effort can help 10,000 people. We have that resource for a purpose: let us now deploy it in significant numbers, because it will make a significant difference not just in helping people to cope with this trauma, but in bringing to justice those who perpetrated the crimes and those who ordered them. It is central to that. My hon. Friend said that we should learn the lessons, but we will not get people in other wars to learn the lessons unless, on previous occasions, those responsible have been brought to book. We can bring them to book only by putting in the resource to secure the testimony. I could not urge the Minister more strongly than I do now to increase that resource.

Kate Green: One of the lessons of previous conflicts is the very long-tail implications for people’s mental health. The trauma does not end with the crisis, but sits with them for decades afterwards. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful to know whether our Government can help to train partners on the ground to provide that long-term mental health and psychotherapeutic support as well?

Helen Goodman: I think that is what the Government are doing, but given that we have the resource, we should deploy it on a much greater scale.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) spoke about the CHOGM conference this week. CHOGM is an opportunity for Ministers to do two things: encourage our Commonwealth partners to put money toward the $951 million and build support for stronger action in the UN. I would like to know what is going to happen at CHOGM this week to strengthen that process.

Last week, the shadow Foreign Secretary and I went to New York and had some meetings at the UN. We saw the person on the Myanmar desk, and I understood from her that the UN Security Council itself intends a visit to the region. That should be useful, because it
should be an opportunity to build, among a wider group of nations, some sense of the enormity and seriousness of the crisis and the reasons we want it to go up the UN agenda. The UN secretariat also explained to us that the UN is trying to appoint a special envoy.

One block to progress has been the fact that the Chinese have regarded this as an internal matter in Myanmar, not an international crisis. That seems somewhat incredible to me, when almost 1 million people have been forced over the border into Bangladesh. I hope the British Government are challenging the Chinese at both ministerial and official level on that interpretation of what is going on. It is not really a credible posture.

[Phil Wilson in the Chair]

Another opportunity for multilateral action is represented by the European Union. My understanding is that, while we are having this debate, there is a meeting of European Union Foreign Ministers in Brussels. I do not know which of the Minister’s colleagues is in Brussels, but it would be interesting to know whether this matter is on the agenda and what progress he anticipates in strengthening the will to take action among European colleagues. Of course, Europe has imposed sanctions, but we need the support of our European colleagues in the United Nations to raise this to a new level.

Turning to what else we can do multilaterally with our colleagues, we have debated the use of sanctions. My hon. Friend the Member for Tower Hamlets—

Rushanara Ali: Bethnal Green and Bow.

Helen Goodman: I beg my hon. Friend’s pardon. How could I make that mistake?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) has been pressing the case for stronger sanctions for some time. There are three elements to this, which I hope the Foreign Office will carry forward. The first is the Magnitsky sanctions, which are sanctions on individuals for gross human rights abuses. We debated them before Easter when considering the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. When we began considering that Bill, the Government’s position was that they did not want to go down the Magnitsky route. After consideration in Committee, I had fruitful discussions with the Minister’s colleague, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, and the Prime Minister later said that Magnitsky-style sanctions will be implemented through the Bill. The Americans already have such sanctions available, which has enabled them to sanction Maung Maung Soe, who is one of the people in Myanmar responsible for those gross human rights abuses.

In fact, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 already gives us the power to impose sanctions on individuals for gross human rights abuses, by freezing their assets and preventing them from putting money through London. Ministers could do that, and I really do not know why they have not been doing it for some of the people we have heard about. Min Aung Hlaing is another candidate for these financial sanctions.

If we had the sanctions available that we want to have in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, we could put travel bans on those people as well. I do not know why, having agreed between those on the two Front Benches to implement the sanction powers, Ministers did not come back and get consideration on Report done before Easter. We could have done it. We are ready
to do it. We are ready to help the Government. We want to crack on with this, but we still do not know when we will consider the Bill on Report. Those measures would be an important additional tool in our box.

The second element, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, is extending the financial sanctions to that part of the economy controlled by the military. That has been the Opposition’s position for some time now, and Ministers should look at it. The third is extending the arms embargo from Europe to the rest of the world.

Ministers might say that there could not get such a resolution through the UN Security Council. I do not know whether that is true, but in the past week we have seen Ministers supporting other draft Security Council resolutions that had a much lower chance of getting through than that resolution would have, so I cannot see that the risk of it not working is a good reason not to support it. Britain is the penholder on Myanmar, and as soon as the UN Security Council permanent representatives come back would be an opportune moment for the British Government to give a new push to this piece of work and to get something more to happen. I urge the Minister to do that.

One thing the petitioners want is to stop the genocide. We all understand that we do not want to validate the exodus of the Rohingya; we want their safe, dignified and voluntary return to Rakhine state. That means UN oversight, but it also means, as other hon. Members have said, the implementation of the recommendations on citizenship that were put forward in the Annan commission report. That must be the basis for the long-term settlement.

Finally, I will talk about the International Criminal Court and what might happen there. The ICC is important in bringing these people to book, but also important in deterring future such crimes in other places and in other conflicts. I understand that Myanmar has not signed up to the ICC, but I note that, last Monday, ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda asked the Court’s judges to rule on whether the ICC could exercise jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

This is essentially an attempt to assert jurisdiction over deportation, which is one of the well-documented crimes, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out. It is based on the ICC’s ability to assert jurisdiction if the “conduct in question” for a deportation was committed in the territory of a member state. It looks as if the ICC is beefing up its approach. I would like to hear the Minister’s interpretation of what is going on there and also how he is going to support that important measure.

6.6 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing the debate. I pay tribute to her industry and—at times, I am sure—patience as Chair of the Petitions Committee.

The debate was inspired by six public and e-petitions that attracted some hundreds of thousands of signatures, and that demonstrate the British public’s heartfelt concern for the desperate plight of the Rohingya. Hon. Members will reflect that the overall lack of contributions—quantity rather than quality—does not reflect the strength of
feeling of the House. Everyone will realise that the debate on Syria that is going on has unfortunately resulted in a clash. I very much hope that those hundreds of thousands of British citizens who signed these petitions will not believe in any disparaging way that there are not strong feelings.

Some motion and energy has taken place, and I am happy that I will spend much of my speech reporting the progress we have made. I will be honest: any progress that we make diplomatically and politically is not enough, which is a great frustration. I very much agree with the kind words from the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) about my involvement. This takes up a considerable amount of my time, not just in the House but wherever I go abroad. I will come to that in a moment or two.

Only last month, I saw for myself the intensity of the domestic concern—I ought to make an apology while I am here, because that happened in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow. I met representatives from a network of British Rohingya communities and the British Bangladeshi community at an exhibition of photographs from the refugee camps held in Spitalfields. Some of those present had family in the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar and were able to pass on day-to-day details. Others had been brought up here in the UK as refugees from previous waves of Rohingya flight over the decades. They were understandably very close to despair.

What was hopeful was the sense of a network of people together. The network is promoted in part by the Home Office to try to ensure that there is a constructive approach towards their work—not just their campaigning, but their work within that community. We do not want an approach that could in any way lead to the militancy that many have been very concerned about ever since this crisis reached a new point on 25 August last year. I reassured them on that night and I reassure Parliament again today that the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development will not ever forget their plight.

I shall set out what action we have taken so far in response to the crisis, on which many contributions have been made today, and what we plan to do. Understandably, many of the petitions have called first and foremost for an end to the violence. Needless to say, we would like that too. In so far as there has been a reduction in violence in recent weeks and months, I fear that it is only because there are fewer people in Burma to whom violence can be meted out. As I have said, we keep a very close eye on the sexual violence taking place across the Bangladeshi border.

I share the sense of horror felt by many hon. Members at the accounts from survivors of what they have experienced at the hands of the Burmese military in Rakhine state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) pointed out, that unspeakable violence includes rape and savage assault. It is appalling, and all hon. Members call for it to end. I wish we could do more than just express words, but words sometimes matter. One pledge I will make to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is that I will do all I can to try to discover in my Department whether there is any way in which more resource can usefully be implemented by the sexual violence team. One of the most important aspects of our work is training other people on the ground—non-governmental organisations—because of my Department’s expertise. I understand that on paper it looks as though the resource for specialists in this field does not seem anything like enough to take account of the day-to-day problems that continue to occur in Cox’s Bazar, albeit that it has doubled in the last month or so. The hon. Lady’s words and those of the hon. Member for Warrington North have not fallen on deaf ears: I will do all I can in the Foreign Office to try to find out more about exactly what is happening and whether we can, as a matter of urgency, put some more resource in place.

It is obvious that while the violence continues, there can be no hope of reassuring the Rohingya that they would be able to return safely, voluntarily and with dignity. As I said in my statement to the House last month, the violence that broke out in August 2017 was only the latest episode in a long-running cycle of persecution suffered by the Rohingya in Rakhine. As the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) pointed out, in many ways it existed even pre-1982. The truth is that, from the moment the Burmese state came into being, the Rohingya were regarded at best as second-class citizens or non-citizens, as the case may be. The 1982 issue only brought into sharper focus the way in which that sense of statelessness was underpinned.

We have urged the civilian Government of Burma to take action to stop the situation deteriorating since they took office two years ago, and we will continue to do so. The UN estimates that since last August more than 680,000 people have fled from Rakhine into Bangladesh. Our Government have repeatedly condemned the violence, as have this Parliament and the British people. We shall and must continue to work tirelessly with our international partners to seek a lasting solution to this terrible situation.

Last September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs convened in New York a meeting of Foreign Ministers, calling on the Burmese authorities to end the violence. In November, the UK proposed and secured a UN Security Council presidential statement on Burma, which called on the Burmese authorities urgently to stop the violence, to create the necessary conditions for refugee returns and to hold to account those responsible for acts of violence.

I continue actively to address this crisis with counterparts across Asia. Last week, I was in Malaysia and Japan. A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, pointed out that there is potentially a role for ASEAN. He knows, and hon. Members will understand, the tensions and conflicts within ASEAN. It rightly does not like to wash its laundry in public. On the one hand, Malaysia has been one of the strongest supporters, and Brunei has worked well and perhaps more quietly behind the scenes with some of the aid it passes into the area. On the other hand, there are countries such as Thailand, which is fundamentally a Buddhist state.

One of the broadest concerns I have about the region is the sense in which so much is becoming atomised. Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka are predominantly Buddhist nations, and concerns have been raised by some about Hindu nationalism in parts of India and elsewhere. There is a dangerous sense—dare I say it?—that that will lead to a backlash from predominantly Muslim
nations in the area. It is a very dangerous state of affairs. I will say a little more about social media in the concluding part of my speech.

Tomorrow, the Foreign Secretary will co-chair a meeting on the Rohingya crisis with fellow Commonwealth Foreign Ministers. We will urgently explore how to support Bangladesh and how to ensure that Burma responds to international concerns. I have had to deputise for the Foreign Secretary—he is the relevant Minister but was in Brussels and had to rush back and go straight into the main Chamber—in a number of meetings at CHOGM, including a very fruitful meeting with my counterpart, the Foreign Minister of Brunei. We talked at length and in constructive terms about the progress being made behind the scenes. Unfortunately, as a result, I did not have a chance to speak to David Miliband, the president of the International Rescue Committee, who had wanted to speak with me. He has a letter in the Evening Standard today, setting out what I suspect he wanted to talk to me about. He rightly says that there is an opportunity at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting “to mobilise much needed support for the Rohingya crisis. Economic and cultural ties between Commonwealth countries should be the basis for increased international solidarity with Bangladesh”.

As we know, it is currently hosting almost 1 million Rohingya in various ways. David Miliband has a plan afoot. I hope to speak to him later in the week and will pass on the comments made in this debate. There will be continued meetings. I make this pledge: I will do all I can at every meeting with any Foreign Ministers from that region and ASEAN to make the case that the international community needs to hold together.

To be frank, one difficulty is that too few of the Rohingya are entrepreneurial enough to have a similar situation to the one that applied to Syrian refugees in Jordan, where businesses that were already up and running and had existing supply chains were able to keep going. I do not despair. There is more we can do to develop economic connections.

The Foreign Secretary will discuss the crisis at Sunday’s G7 Foreign Ministers meeting, which I expect will send a strong and united message to the Burmese authorities. At the end of this month, the UK will be co-leading the visit of the UN Security Council to Burma and Bangladesh, which has been referred to. We are confident that the very act of visiting the camps in Bangladesh and seeing the situation in Rakhine will further strengthen council members’ resolve to find a solution to the crisis. I have not been able to get out to the frontline in Bangladesh, although a number of other Ministers have, but going to Rakhine was a salutary lesson. Some camps had been up and running for five or six years, and what struck me was the thought that the conditions there are as good as it gets for any Rohingya who return anytime soon. Things were barely acceptable. It was a guarded camp. The education and health situation was dire. It opened one’s eyes to the magnitude of the problem.

I hope that the visit from the leading lights in the UN Security Council will prompt the Burmese authorities to accelerate the implementation of the presidential statement’s call for urgent action. There are not too many European nations other than ourselves and France. I believe that the Dutch, at the moment, are a member of the Security Council, but there are a number of—

**Mark Field:** Sorry; the hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Swedes have actually been some of the most active members. I barely seem to go anywhere without bumping into Margot Wallström, and she always laments the fact that she has only one other Minister in her Department rather than the array we have in the Foreign Office.

A number of the e-petitions refer to the violence as genocide. The UK Government have recognised that there has been ethnic cleansing and that what has occurred may amount to genocide, or at least crimes against humanity. I have to say to the House again that genocide has a legal definition that can be declared only by a court of law, not by politicians or Governments.

I will go into some detail. As Burma is not a party to the Rome statute, the ICC would be able to consider a case of genocide only if Burma were to refer itself to the ICC, or if the UN Security Council refers Burma to the ICC. I am not suggesting for a minute that we will not go down the path that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland has suggested, but I am afraid that the reality is that our calculation is that a Security Council resolution application would certainly be vetoed by China and perhaps by Russia. The UK and its EU partners will continue to call upon Burma to refer itself to the ICC, but so far it has not.

I can report today, however, that there has been some movement on accountability, as was referred to earlier. I recognise the frustrations of a number of hon. Members.

**Afzal Khan:** I am trying to understand what the Minister is saying. Why does he think Burma will agree to this referral?

**Mark Field:** We do not expect Burma to agree. I am just trying to go through the process. Bangladesh has ratified the Rome statute and, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, that could be the trigger for the ICC prosecutor asking the court to rule on whether it would therefore have jurisdiction over the forced displacement of Rohingya into Bangladesh which, if proven, would constitute crimes against humanity. We await the International Criminal Court’s ruling with keen interest and are very supportive of that move. Ultimately, it is a legal matter until we know. The UK stands ready actively to support the ICC should it decide that it has that jurisdiction.

Last week, the Burmese military announced the conviction of seven of its soldiers, who were sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment. I do not regard that as a show trial. That is an important lesson, not necessarily just in this theatre but elsewhere. I will come on to the plight of the journalists in a moment. We know that the Burmese military have not had a particularly good record of prosecuting and convicting their own soldiers, but ultimately it will be more powerful if it has UN and international community support. In the meantime, we will continue to support those efforts to collect and collate evidence that may be useful in any future prosecution.
I have continued to press at umpteen meetings across the region for the immediate release of the two Burmese Reuters journalists facing trial for investigation into the Inn Din massacre. We will also try to make the case to our counterparts elsewhere that they should raise pressure internationally and whenever they have any dealings with Burma.

Ultimately, we want the Rohingya to return to their homes in the voluntary, safe and dignified manner to which I have referred. The Foreign Secretary raised that issue strongly with the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, when he visited Burma in February. He subsequently wrote a personal note to set out what needed to happen for the international community to sit up and listen. He called on Burma to allow the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in this important process.

I can report further progress since then. The Burmese Government have proposed a memorandum of understanding to agree how the UNHCR will be involved. The UNHCR is preparing its response. If and when that is finalised, the UK will push for transparency of the full form of that agreement. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow was rightly concerned that we would like to see exactly what the memorandum of understanding contains. More importantly, we would like to see the swift implementation of any practical agreement once it has been finalised.

Rushanara Ali: Can the Minister explain how the UNHCR’s oversight of any form of so-called safe and voluntary repatriation will prevent the kind of treatment that he has witnessed in Rakhine state in the internally displaced persons’ camps? He and others have mentioned that the Burmese Government are trying to construct new camps. How can he believe that the people in those camps will be treated any differently from the people who have been internally displaced over recent years, who are living in appalling conditions?

Mark Field: I accept those deep concerns. Again, many people from the UN will watch this. This has been an episode, over recent years—from 2012, and indeed before that, when large numbers of Rohingya were being put into camps—that the world did not know very much about. I hope that the conditions will be made apparent and therefore the UNHCR will be in a position, if a memorandum of understanding is agreed, to insist at the outset on much higher standards for the individuals concerned. If we can keep a lot of this work under the auspices of the UN and other non-governmental organisations, as opposed to it simply being for the Burmese authorities—the Burmese military—to control any future returnees, we can push for much higher standards. However, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow makes a valid point. It is not enough for there to be a memorandum, and for the memorandum to be agreed. It is important that this is properly policed for many years to come.

We will be examining in detail how we can support the longer-term change in Burma that the Rohingya and other persecuted minorities so desperately need. The hon. Member for Dundee West rightly pointed out that although the Rohingya are, by a long way, the largest and most long-standing of the persecuted minorities, other groups have equally fallen foul of the Burmese military and their existence has been perilous.

I am overseeing a review of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s conflict, stability and security fund for Burma. We are preparing to launch new pilot projects this year to help to catalyse the democratic transition and strengthen the laws and protections that the Rohingya and other minorities in Burma so urgently require. That work is in progress, as I am sure the House understands. We will, no doubt, speak more about it in future statements.

The issue of sanctions was raised in several of the e-petitions. To date, we have not advocated sanctions on particular sectors or entities in the Burmese economy and its financial system. It can be difficult to predict or control the effect of financial sanctions on other parts of the economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam made some wise points. There is a danger that the targeting of companies and sectors will lead to a greater isolation of the Burmese economy. Doing so would strengthen the relative power of the military and, potentially, of its one reliable world neighbour, China. I think that would be counterproductive, in the circumstances. Although I understand the concerns that have been expressed, the notion rests uneasy with me. I know that in his trade role, my hon. Friend has focused more attention on Thailand and Brunei than on Burma. I cannot imagine that many existing international companies in Burma see it as a market that they wish to exploit to any greater extent at the moment. We will continue to work in that regard.

Rushanara Ali: Has the Foreign Office done any work to find out how many British businesses operate in Myanmar and which ones have a direct relationship with the military and military interests? We need to know the answer to that question.

Mark Field: I understand that. I do not think that a huge amount of work has been done on that yet. We have been looking at the targeting of military figures and at sanctions in that regard. I should perhaps report that EU sanctions are under way, and we hope that they will be adopted within the next couple of months. The UK has led that work. In so far as it is a relatively straightforward process, I undertake that we will try to glean some more detail along the lines of what the hon. Lady has said. That will be a valuable next step, and I suspect that we can make some practical difference, working with our EU partners. As a number of people have mentioned, it is probably going to be difficult. Although in an ideal world we would like a global sanctions regime, we will need to do that at an EU level first and then make the moral and ethical case.

At the heart of the question of sanctions is the fact that we want to avoid inadvertently making the lives of ordinary Burmese people ever more difficult. They have a terrible enough time as it is. That is not to suggest that we will rule out sanctions. Far from it—we have been, and will continue to be, proactive in advocating sanctions that restrict the finances and freedom of movement of senior military commanders who were directly involved in atrocities in Rakhine last August and September. We have secured agreement on that from all other EU member states, and we expect full implementation in the next month or two.
We should remember that this crisis is, above all, a human catastrophe. I commend the generosity of the Government and people of Bangladesh in providing refuge for so many people who are in desperate need, as several Members mentioned. The UK is, and will remain, a leading donor to the humanitarian effort in Bangladesh. We have already discussed the £59 million that has been committed, including the £5 million of match funding for public donations—individuals making small donations at a personal level—to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal.

As virtually every Member in this Chamber has made clear, the monsoon and cyclone season is almost upon us. We are doing everything we can practically do to support Bangladesh’s efforts to improve its disaster preparedness and to protect the refugees. Last month, my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and for International Development wrote to Bangladesh’s Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, to reiterate the UK’s offer to help, and to call on her, as a matter of urgency, to prioritise the release of more land for refugees.

The UK alone is supplying reinforced shelter and sandbags for 158,000 people, safe water for a quarter of a million people and 5,000 toilets. Obviously, one hopes that other members of the international community are contributing as well. We continue to have an active dialogue with the Bangladeshi authorities to ensure that aid can get through during the rainy season. We have already made efforts to improve drainage, maintain access to roads and reinforce embankments and walkways. I recognise the deep concern that a severe monsoon season will potentially make this catastrophe far worse. We continue to work with a range of UN and other agencies to make site improvements to the refugee camps in preparation for the heavy rainfall that we all anticipate.

We also actively engage in vaccination campaigns against cholera, measles and diphtheria, and UK aid is training healthcare workers to vaccinate as many children as possible before the rainy season. As everyone knows, if there is going to be an inoculation programme, it needs to be a full one. It is pointless to do it for 20% or 30%, because the problem becomes fairly acute.

I want to touch on two points made by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is considering the UK’s response on humanitarian funding. We will remain the leading single donor to the relief effort. There has not been a clamour for another pledging conference. The UK pledged £5 million of match funding through the Disasters Emergency Committee at the pledging conference got us through, more or less, to this point.

As virtually every Member in this Chamber has made clear, the monsoon and cyclone season is almost upon us. We are doing everything we can practically do to support Bangladesh’s efforts to improve its disaster preparedness and to protect the refugees.

The UK alone is supplying reinforced shelter and sandbags for 158,000 people, safe water for a quarter of a million people and 5,000 toilets. Obviously, one hopes that other members of the international community are contributing as well. We continue to have an active dialogue with the Bangladeshi authorities to ensure that aid can get through during the rainy season. We have already made efforts to improve drainage, maintain access to roads and reinforce embankments and walkways. I recognise the deep concern that a severe monsoon season will potentially make this catastrophe far worse.

We continue to work with a range of UN and other agencies to make site improvements to the refugee camps in preparation for the heavy rainfall that we all anticipate.

We also actively engage in vaccination campaigns against cholera, measles and diphtheria, and UK aid is training healthcare workers to vaccinate as many children as possible before the rainy season. As everyone knows, if there is going to be an inoculation programme, it needs to be a full one. It is pointless to do it for 20% or 30%, because the problem becomes fairly acute.

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The single most worrying thing is how atomised everything is. If one felt that individuals were engaging with social media across the board to get a balanced view, that would be one thing, but the actual situation is the worst of all worlds. Young people, in particular, are getting very active on social media, but they are reading only one set of websites to get one totally partisan view. However, I think we should tread very carefully when it comes to legislating to try to prevent that.

**Rushanara Ali:** To put things into context, the Rwandan genocide was, in part, instigated by propaganda that was spread through the use of radio. It is important to recognise that although social media can play an incredibly important and positive role across societies, the negatives need to be understood and addressed, because social media is much more powerful. Often people are breaking the law, whether in our country or other countries. It is about enforcing the law online, as well as looking at what needs to be done pre-emptively to prevent very powerful media from being misused to create unrest in societies and leading to the atomisation of which the Minister speaks. That is why it is important that he speaks to his counterpart in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about how we can ensure that social media is used properly and appropriately for benefit, rather than harm.

**Mark Field:** I understand that. In a way, the issue is worthy of a much broader debate. We will need collectively, as a Parliament, to debate the issues and look at whether we need legislation or global protocols. I am also very aware that it is easy for us to criticise fake news, but when our Russian counterparts or President Trump do so, people are derisive. One person’s fake news is another person’s valuable contribution to public debate. I am not trying to trivialise the issue; it is much more important than we can recognise in this debate. Even in a developing country such as Burma, the malicious use of social media has made a massive difference. Social media has accentuated not only the problem, but a lot of the terrible divisions that have been laid bare within Burmese society.
To conclude, the petitions that we are debating have demonstrated the depth and strength of the British people’s feelings about the plight of the Rohingya. I hope that the debate and my response provide some reassurance to the petitioners that their MPs, their Parliament and this Government feel equally strongly about these matters. We are doing all we can to keep refugees safe in the camps, but in the longer term—I do not dismiss the humanitarian aspect—the important thing is to keep up the pressure on the Burmese authorities to hold the perpetrators to account and to enable a safe and dignified return of the Rohingya to their home. I cannot deny that the progress we have made is much, much slower than any of us would like, but the British public and the Burmese authorities should be in no doubt about our determination to stay the course.

6.39 pm

Helen Jones: In many ways, this debate has been difficult to listen to—the atrocities committed against the Rohingya people are so appalling—but we need to confront them. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken, particularly the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who has a wide knowledge, and his co-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

I hope the Minister has heard clearly what has been said. I am grateful for his personal interest and for his work so far, but hon. Members have been clear that they want stronger action against the Burmese military and Government. We want a referral to the International Criminal Court and we need an arms embargo on Burma.

Those things will be difficult to negotiate and to achieve, but the Minister has gone part way along that road. After listening to the debate, I hope he will take on board the almost unanimous view of hon. Members and go further. In doing so, he will have our support and, I am sure, the support of all those who signed the petitions to show how deeply they feel about what is happening to the Rohingya people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petitions 200224 and 200371, and public petitions P002061, P002064, P002078 and P002104, relating to Myanmar’s Rohingya minority.

6.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Fly-tipping

9.30 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the matter of reducing fly-tipping.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank everyone who responded to the House of Commons post on fly-tipping and the Commons staff who have offered their time and support for this important debate.

Fly-tipping is bad for the environment and bad for public health. It is not a victimless crime, and it has been on the increase since 2012. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimates that the clean-up operation alone cost the taxpayer some £58 million last year. Local authorities cleaned up more than 1 million fly-tips last year—a 7% increase on the year before. Private landowners and farmers are seriously affected, too. Nearly two thirds of landowners have been affected by fly-tipping, including farmers and charities such as the National Trust, which experienced 232 fly-tips last year alone.

It is not fair that private landowners are held responsible for somebody else’s crime and have to clean up. Several landowners got in touch with us to emphasise that, and I am sure Members here this morning had lots of people contacting them. Waste is tipped in small quantities or sometimes on an industrial scale, with lorry loads, and it is the responsibility of the farmer and the landowner to clean it up. It then becomes their waste, and that is the problem. The National Trust has found that cleaning up fly-tipping forces it to divert money from projects aimed at protecting and enhancing the environment on its land. On average, it costs landowners more than £800 to clear up an individual fly-tip, and in some cases—if a huge lorry load has been dumped in the countryside—it costs much more.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, which is important to my constituents. He is right to highlight the impact on landowners, but does he also accept that the problem exists in urban areas and local streets? In Old Trafford in my constituency, we have a big problem of fly-tipping in alleyways, which impinges on local householders.

Neil Parish: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I accept that that is indeed the case. Fly-tipping can involve anything from a mattress or a sofa to large quantities of rubbish. Around our big conurbations, certainly in the midlands and other areas, there seems to be what I would call industrial tipping, involving lorry loads of waste, perhaps from hospitals or wherever. Everybody thinks it is being taken away legitimately, but it is tipped. The closer one is to larger conurbations, the worse the problem, especially for cases involving large quantities.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree with me that there is a correlation between what local authorities charge for disposing of waste and the incidence of fly-tipping? Nottingham City Council cut all charges for small items in 2013 and has seen a drop of two thirds in fly-tipping in its area.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. When it comes to small-scale fly-tipping, if people can go to a tip and not be charged, it encourages them to dispose of waste properly. It seems to have had an effect in Nottingham, and I shall have a series of asks for the Minister at the end of my speech. However, it might not reduce industrial tipping, where people have to pay quite a lot for disposal because of the cost of landfill. That is where there seems to be a major problem.

If we could find who has carried out the fly-tipping, we could impound their lorries and take away their means of operation. That would also send a message to others that it is a dangerous job. We do not need to catch many people operating on an industrial scale if we are prepared to take really tough enforcement action.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The opportunity for tipping should be reduced. I have been working with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) in Walsall. Our tip is not open all week. Walsall council staff collected 108 fridges in a single day, as reported in our local paper, the Express & Star, so I am working to ensure that our tip is open all the time to make sure the opportunity for fly-tipping is reduced and people can dispose of their waste appropriately.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, because dumping fridges is dangerous and the gas in fridges needs to be recovered. Dumping fridges is not only unsightly, but very bad for the environment. If the waste-disposal site was kept open, there would be more chance for people to get there. We must give people every opportunity to do things the right way. Some people will still choose the wrong way, because it is easier to simply throw something on the ground. Some of my own land is miles from anywhere, and I wonder why people take so much trouble to go so far to tip waste when they could probably go to a waste-disposal site. Some places take it free of charge and yet some people still dump it out on the fields.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On the specific point about how far people go, in some cases they do not go far at all. They simply dump their stuff in their front garden, blighting neighbourhoods for years on end. Does he agree that perhaps more should be done in those cases as well?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Such cases are probably down to the local authority, which can take action in the case of a local authority property, but if it is not such a property it is much more difficult. It is amazing to see what people dump in their gardens, and then the grass grows up through it and it is
made an interesting point. I understand that local authorities clear-up cost. If everything was taken in the round, it is counterproductive to cut back on the number of collections. Later, but she raises a really good point. Sometimes it is more chance of people fly-tipping. I shall go on to that they cut the frequency of collections, because there is a penny count, but sometimes it is a false economy when are strapped for cash and have to try to make every.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Does he recognise that cuts have consequences? In York, since 2015, the fly-tipping service to pick up the rubbish has been cut from monthly to quarterly cycles and the number of complaints has doubled. In 2016, York Civic Trust’s annual report complained that York’s streets face decreasing standards of cleaning and rubbish collections.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend—I will say hon. Friend—has made an interesting point. I understand that local authorities are strapped for cash and have to try to make every penny count, but sometimes it is a false economy when they cut the frequency of collections, because there is more chance of people fly-tipping. I shall go on to that later, but she raises a really good point. Sometimes it is counterproductive to cut back on the number of collections. When the local authority has to collect it later, there is a clear-up cost. If everything was taken in the round, it might be more cost-effective just to collect it in the first place.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. Fly-tipping is a real problem for my constituents in Barnsley East. It is not just a financial problem, but one that scars the environment. Does he agree that local authorities should be given more resources? Also, to pick up on a point that he made earlier, does he think that we should have a zero-tolerance approach to fly-tipping and be much harder when we catch those responsible?

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is about the resources that local authorities have, but it is also about how local authorities choose to use those resources. Like many people in this House, I came up through district and county councils, so I know that there is a series of choices to be made even when times are hard. As I said in answer to the previous intervention, local authorities should look at whether it might be more cost-effective to do more collecting, even if money is tight, because the cost of clearing up is probably greater. I therefore put some of the onus back on to local authorities, but I will ask at the end for the Government to work much more closely with local government to try to stop fly-tipping.

Current enforcement rules are not working, as the increase in fly-tipping demonstrates. Fines need to be more severe so that they act as a real deterrent. Jane said that littering should be a crime with instant fines and names recorded. Persistent offenders should be made to pick up litter, and more needs to be done to enforce current laws—I think we would all agree with that. We also need more anti-fly-tipping education. We have many campaigns, but we probably need even more. If we can get to our schoolchildren and young people we have a greater chance of ensuring that the situation gets better.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency should be given powers to remove vehicles belonging to fly-tippers. That is a really good point, because if we can capture and fine people who have done it, and we can take away vans, lorries and other vehicles, that would send a real message. At the moment, it is too easy to fly-tip, and people feel that the fines they get if they are stopped are outweighed by the fact that they have been able to dump a lot of material that they may have had to pay to put into a waste disposal site. Local authorities should consider reducing or scrapping charges to take away large or bulky items such as white goods—we have talked about fridges—which are among the most fly-tipped items. That would take away some of the incentive to fly-tip in the first place.

When South Staffordshire Council increased civic amenity site charges, the entire area was blighted by fly-tipping, including dumping of rubbish in woodlands, lanes and ditches. If councils scrapped charges at waste disposal sites for people bringing in trailers, and reduced charges for commercial waste disposal, it would encourage people to do it the right way. Local authorities should also consider making waste and recycling centres more accessible to everybody. The point has been made that such sites are not always open, and not everybody can get there on a Saturday morning, or whenever the waste site might be open; sometimes they are open during the week but not at the weekend. There are all sorts of ways we can make it easier. We have to give people every opportunity to do it the right way, and then come down heavily on those who do not.

There is constant fly-tipping in many areas, which undermines the sense of community pride and the community’s efforts to look after their area. Does the Minister agree—I am sure she does—that we need to prevent fly-tipping? Will the Minister increase the fines? I am not sure that it is her direct responsibility, but will she ensure that local government and others in Government take the opportunity to introduce extra fines?

To what extent are Ministers working with other Departments on addressing the problem? Naturally, a Minister from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is here this morning, but other Departments involved include the Home Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Ministry of Justice. Will the Minister work with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to create an anti-fly-tipping education campaign? We need to talk to the Department for Education, because this all needs to work across Government.

Will the Minister encourage local authorities to work more closely with private landowners so that we can identify fly-tippers and ensure that they are penalised? We need to be on the side of the innocent. That is a really important point. Very often it is left to landowners and farmers to pay large amounts of money to dispose of rubbish that was not theirs in the first place. Will the Minister encourage local authorities to open up access to waste disposal and recycling sites, so that people are not incentivised to fly-tip in the first place? Will the
Minister encourage local authorities to stop charging people to have larger items, such as white goods, taken away?

We must ensure that all parties—local authorities, police, landowners, and the Environment Agency—work together. What can the Minister do on a national level to increase the consistency of the fly-tipping response across the country, so that people who fly-tip know that they have a reasonable chance of being caught? At the moment, people do not feel that they do. What can be done nationally to encourage more local partnerships to clean up fly-tipping? Finally, would the Government support a scheme to allow any landowner affected by fly-tipping to dispose of his or her waste free of charge? Landowners and farmers do not invite fly-tipping, and it is a huge cost to them to clear it up.

9.46 am

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Fly-tipping is a problem that affects communities the length and breadth of the country, including in the area I represent. That is why I welcome today’s debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing it.

Levels of fly-tipping are spiralling across Coventry. The problem is particularly acute in the Foleshill and Stoke areas of my constituency. Those areas are blighted by domestic and commercial fly-tippers targeting streets, shared communal areas and open green spaces, often leaving them strewn with all types of waste. Alleyways are blocked with old mattresses, shopping trolleys and even bathtubs. Streets are scattered with litter and bags of rubbish, and our parks are blighted by abandoned sofas and old electrical goods. I have witnessed the impact of fly-tipping on my local communities in Coventry. It is a scar on the local environment, and causes misery to law-abiding residents, affecting how they feel about the place they call home. Moreover, fly-tipping is a financial burden on our local authority that diverts money away from crucial services such as adult social care.

Coventry City Council takes the problem of fly-tipping seriously and is determined to tackle it head-on. It works hard to deter such criminal acts, to investigate and clean up incidents of fly-tipping when they occur, and to penalise those who engage in it. Last year the council prosecuted 35 people for fly-tipping, and it is pursuing 15 cases through the judicial system this year. None the less, the council recognises that more needs to be done to tackle this growing problem, which is why it has earmarked the £100,000 for this year.

Coventry City Council is a very well-run authority and has been for many years. One of the things we used to do many years ago was provide a bulk lift; every single resident would clear out their attics, gardens and sheds and the council provided the money and the transport to take away the goods. We could not possibly think of doing that anymore. More anti-fly-tipping legislation, or campaigns to prevent fly-tipping or to provide free removal of white goods, are all admirable things, but it does not matter what we do; we need the money to do it. All of those things cost money and that has to come out of the rates. I beg the Minister to look once again at funding for local authorities so that they can carry out these important services for their residents.

9.51 am

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this important debate and echo many of the points made by Members across the Chamber. We certainly do need tougher police action and tougher penalties for people who are caught fly-tipping, and we need to support local authorities. I am sure we would all welcome more funding if we can find it.

I want to make a suggestion that I have not yet heard mentioned by any of the organisations campaigning on this issue—I alert the Minister to the fact that I am that dreaded thing: a Back Bencher with a plan and a scheme. I would welcome her comments on this, as I have been giving the matter a great deal of thought, because this is an issue in Monmouthshire. I fully support the measures that have been set out and want to add another thought.

A particular problem, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned, is that the liability for any fly-tipped waste lies with the landowner. I suggest changing the liability and pushing it back towards the people who produce the waste in the first place. I started thinking about that after reading an article a couple of weeks ago—I think it was in Farmers Weekly, although I could not find it again—about a farmer who had had waste tipped on his land. He went through it and was able to establish where it had come from, then went back to the originators of the waste, who were able to say who had received the waste. As a result, a prosecution was brought against the cowboys who had taken away the waste. That made me think that there is room for some kind of voluntary licensing scheme, a little bit like that in force for anyone who wants to be a door supervisor.

In other words, we would give an organisation like the Security Industry Association the power to accredit anyone who wants to move away waste. Those who want to take away waste can apply for a licence—there would obviously be a charge for it—and would be able to establish themselves as legitimate operators. They would have to undergo training. They would not be able to breach any health and safety rules or tip waste illegally or they would lose their licence.
[David T. C. Davies]

What about the people who produce the waste? Under a voluntary scheme, they would have the choice of going either to an accredited waste tipper or somebody not accredited, who might be cheaper. To make the scheme effective, anyone who chose to use a non-accredited company to remove waste would then become liable if that waste ever turned up somewhere it was not meant to be. It would clearly also be possible to make this a mandatory scheme, but that would involve a certain amount of extra paperwork and bureaucracy.

That is not a panacea, of course, but it is one of a number of moves that we could think about. It would get people who produce waste, whether small businesses or householders, thinking about whether they use one company that is a bit cheaper or another that is accredited. Using the accredited company might cost a little more, but they would not run the risk of having somebody knocking on the door in the months to come and demanding payment of a bill of thousands of pounds in order to remove waste that has been illegally tipped. It would quickly raise public awareness of the problem, because any company that had paid for a licence to get itself accredited would be making that very clear in its advertising, whether on websites or elsewhere. It would alert the public to the fact that, frankly, there are a lot of cowboys out there going around breaking the law. I commend all of that, but I maintain that we still have a gap in understanding what is happening.

Anne Marie Morris: That is a very interesting point.

That goes into the litter category, which the Minister has already begun to legislate on, and I would expand the category to cover that. In a sense, it is largely about intent. I think that littering is generally about being careless, which such a van owner would be, whereas fly-tipping is driven by economic gain. The formal sites are in a different category all of their own, as licensed operators. I urge the Minister to look at this more sensibly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) has indicated, an important part of this is making the public aware.

A point about the responsibility and liability for those who create the waste was raised earlier. They are already liable and responsible under section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. They are responsible for using those who dispose of waste in an appropriate and legal way. If they use an unlicensed organisation, they are responsible and can be fined. The problem is that waste ever turned up somewhere it was not meant to be. It would clearly also be possible to make this a mandatory scheme, but that would involve a certain amount of extra paperwork and bureaucracy.

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Anne Marie Morris: That is a very interesting point.
extremely high, and making them impossible to dismantle would be a real challenge. It is a great idea for cities, where they can be put in inaccessible places, but the challenges in rural areas mean that it is not a viable solution.

The Minister should also review the licensing scheme. At the moment there is a grey area: it is unclear who has to license and who does not. The Minister ought to look at increasing the number of bodies that are required to have licences. It should not just be those disposing of a certain quantity or type of waste; we should require any vehicle capable of disposing of waste to have some sort of licence.

There is also an issue relating to tracing the vehicle and the material being dumped. Currently we use tachometers and a number of other things to track commercial vehicles. It seems to me that if we issue a licence to a vehicle, we should include something to record where they have gone in a central system, so that when there is tipping we can check the recording. Nowadays, screwing metal barcodes to white goods is pretty common, so there must be a way of tracing the origin of white goods that are dumped. We should look at that for the future. Perhaps we should do what we do with cans and bottles: people should get their money back if they take their white goods to the tip.

One of the problems for most farmers is that insurance is prohibitively expensive. At the moment, something like 17% of farmers are insured, and the rest are not. The consequence is that the clear-up of fly-tipping is extremely costly. It seems to me that the insurance companies have a part to play in resolving that problem and making insurance much more achievable.

I have given the Minister a couple more ideas since the last time I spoke on this matter, for the residents of Devon and Teignbridge, in particular. I would very much like her to look at creating a new licence specifically for fly-tipping, rather than for litter louts, which I think she has done a grand job of dealing with, and formal waste disposal sites.

10.4 am

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate on fly-tipping. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing it. Fly-tipping is a blight on many of our communities, both rural and urban. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that it is counterintuitive for local authorities. This is about local priorities, and I am afraid that it was not a priority for the previous Labour administration on my council.

My constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South have seen a number of incidents of this nature in the past, but I am pleased to say that the now ever-diligent city council is taking a stand and has a zero-tolerance approach to environmental crime. Although far too many alleyways and open spaces are blighted by this horrific behaviour, I am delighted to report that the recent results show vast improvements locally. The perpetrators face swift justice and are taken to court.

I do not plan to speak at length, but I want to bring the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) has done a considerable amount of work on this subject with the excellent Staffordshire fire and rescue service. She asked me to mention the Slitting Mill waste fire in her constituency, which took many months to extinguish. This issue affects many constituencies around the country, and I hope we can secure another debate on it soon.

The case of the Slitting Mill fire throws into sharp relief the huge problem that fly-tipping on a commercial scale can cause. There is a huge risk of fire and environmental damage, and it blights the aesthetics of our communities. Those risks are amplified when the dumping takes place close to critical infrastructure, where any fire is likely to compromise vital services—not to mention the devastating economic implications and disruption that can follow.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is talking about the aesthetics of areas, and very serious matters including the health and safety implications. Does he agree that it is imperative that local authorities and Departments realise the economic implications? The old adage that we never get a second chance to create a first impression applies when we are talking about visitors, tourists and potential inward investors. We need investment to ensure that local areas benefit.

Jack Brereton: I totally agree. This is about inward investment and tourism, too, and fly-tipping detracts from that. It is important that we have a zero-tolerance approach to this unacceptable behaviour.

Stoke-on-Trent has experienced the dire consequences of waste being stored illegally. Hanbury Plastics—a site that never held an environmental permit to store waste—went up in smoke initially in February 2017, with a subsequent fire in November. I should declare a personal interest; the site is only about 600 yards from my home. At its peak, the site contained about 10,000 tonnes of waste. The Environment Agency continually issued legal notices to reduce that to a safe level of about 1,500 tonnes. The situation has been ongoing since 2014, yet the various agencies involved are seemingly powerless to act. Clearly, it is too late to prevent what happened at those sites, but many other waste sites around the country continue to operate above the law.

Julian Sturdy: My hon. Friend is making a really good point. The term “fly-tipping” seems to cover a huge variety of waste—from black bin bags thrown out of a car on to the street, to the industrial waste that my hon. Friend is talking about. Does he agree that industrial fly-tipping is part of a wider criminality, which needs to be tackled? We need to ensure that local authorities work much closer with our enforcement agencies such as the police.

Jack Brereton: I totally agree. A black market is emerging around fly-tipping, with links to numerous other crimes. It is helping to fund other criminal activities.

The former Twyford factory in Stoke-on-Trent is another such site. I have corresponded with the Minister about it previously, so she knows about it. It poses a huge risk, with former industrial buildings now overflowing with flammable waste. This is a site right next to the west coast main line and the A500 trunk road. If it were
to be set alight, there would be untold consequences right across the region. On further inspection, Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service has gone to the lengths of saying that, in that scenario, it would probably be far too dangerous to attempt to firefight it. That is not to mention the likely damage that a fire would cause to the railway. Services would be disrupted and the smoke plume could even result in the closure of the M6.

The current legislative framework is far too complex, with responsibilities often split across competing agencies such as the Environment Agency, local authorities and the fire and rescue service. Clearly, there is a vital need for improved legislation to combat the increased number of illegal waste sites and inevitable fires, and for measures to deal with the consequences. As the situation stands, the complexity of the law leaves holes for underhand behaviour. The current scale of the problem was not envisaged by the existing legislation, which is particularly concerning given the organised nature of illegal waste sites, with frequent links to more extensive crime networks.

The Government have already made significant progress to ensure that action is taken, but more is needed to beef up these powers and to ensure that more robust powers are available to those agencies and decisive action can be taken. It is important to consider what more can be done to ensure that the cost burden of the extensive emergency response and the eventual clean-up of those sites does not continue to be felt so significantly by those agencies and by the Government, who can ill afford it. It would be encouraging to hear how the Government can help agencies to recover some of the costs from the rogue businesses that perpetrate those crimes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Could the two remaining speakers be mindful that I will call the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30? I am sure that there will be ample opportunity for them to make their case. I call Kirstene Hair.

10.11 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for bringing to the floor a problem that is a big issue in my constituency.

In Scotland, more than 26,000 tonnes of litter are illegally fly-tipped every year. There are around 62,000 separate fly-tipping incidents every year, costing Scottish taxpayers more than £11 million. While the maximum penalty for this crime is substantial in both England and Scotland, the use of a scale means that it is rarely meted out. In truth, the minimum fine on both sides of the border is typically less than £500. As such, although there is still a criminal penalty, on the rare occasions that a fly-tipper is caught, they can often escape with a slap on the wrist, even though a much stronger punishment is required.

In Angus in a five-year period, 1,870 incidents were reported, but only two prosecutions were made. Fly-tipping makes our communities less clean, less attractive and less pleasant places to live. It lowers people’s enjoyment of their own communities through no fault of their own, reduces house prices and can even pose a safety hazard.

It should be a basic responsibility of local government to ensure that communities are kept clean and that any fly-tipping is dealt with swiftly. Simply taking note of some fly-tipping and leaving it to be dealt with at a later date is not good enough. Local authorities owe that to the residents they serve. We have heard that different councils face different fly-tipping challenges; for example, Angus is a rural area that has to have a different approach to fly-tipping from that of a more urban area. Larger rural areas such as Angus naturally have more remote spaces where fly-tippers might choose to dump their rubbish. It is easier, therefore, for fly-tipping to go unnoticed for longer periods of time.

The residents of Angus have risen to the challenge of tackling this issue. I have been deeply impressed with the efforts of constituents such as Mrs Jacqui Steel who, along with groups such as the Angus Litter Summit, has selflessly organised community groups to pick up litter along rural roadsides. Additionally, through initiatives such as the adopt-a-street scheme, Angus residents assume responsibility for a specific part of their town and tend to it diligently.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very good point, and I agree with a lot of it. Increasingly, local people take it upon themselves to try to help in their community. Does she agree that enforcement alone will never be the sole answer to change behaviour, and that we need more prosecutions to be seen through?

Kirstene Hair: I will come on to that point. Many hon. Members have said that we need visible prosecutions on a regular basis to discourage others from partaking in such activity.

To a significant degree, the fight against fly-tipping is about area, and rural councils simply have larger areas to patrol and to clean. That is why it was absolutely right for Angus Council to keep recycling centres open across the county. Our party took the right approach—Angus Conservative councillors were key in delivering that decision, whereas Scottish National party councillors wanted to close centres and reduce services, which undoubtedly would have increased fly-tipping in my constituency. Rural councils also have to consider larger areas that are relatively secluded and have no CCTV, reducing the possibility that an offender might be caught in the act. Fly-tipping relies in large part on the assumption that there is next to no chance of getting caught. We need to correct that assumption so that, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) mentioned, fewer people will take the risk.

Rubbish that has been dumped by fly-tippers often includes evidence that could lead to an offender being caught. Police must seek out that evidence insofar as is practicable. We can and should take a more proactive attitude to fly-tippers. That would lead to more offenders being punished and, given the right amount of publicity, less rubbish being dumped around our communities. A preferable step would be to establish a specific hotline for those in rural settings, to ensure that offenders can be pursued swiftly. Only through rapid prosecution will we deter others from partaking.
I strongly believe that we must start at the beginning, by changing our culture of litter. We must tackle this issue in our schools, making sure that children know from a young age that this type of behaviour is entirely unacceptable, what and how to recycle and how to make more conscious decisions about how we consume and reuse everyday products. Moreover, the less unnecessary packaging we have, the more recyclable packaging and items we have and the more we encourage people to recycle, the less rubbish there will be for people to dump illegally. I am pleased that the proportion of rubbish that is recycled is increasing both in Scotland and in the UK, but there is still more to be done.

I commend this UK Government’s commitment to reducing plastic pollution, which is particularly important for the marine environment in coastal communities such as Angus. The impact of plastics is high on the political agenda, as it should be if we are the generation to tackle the issue. A serious joined-up effort that includes all levels of Government and the police, taking a range of different approaches to the issue, can reduce fly-tipping and make all our communities even better places to live and more appealing for tourists to visit for many generations to come.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for providing us with the chance to discuss a hugely frustrating issue.

My constituency marks the point at which London’s metropolis turns to beautiful countryside. As such, it has become the victim of fly-tipping on an industrial scale, as I am sure is the case in many other outer-London constituencies. There is money to be made in the business. Waste management licences are given to what look to innocent customers like legal waste contractors but turn out to be cowboys or organised criminals who dump materials from the city’s building sites into our environment.

Since my election, I have been talking to Conservative council representatives in Havering to discuss what we can do as a team to tackle this problem, which continues to be raised by local residents. In October, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published figures from 2016-17 that showed that local authorities in England dealt with around 1 million fly-tipping incidents—a 7% increase on the previous year. During this period, my borough dealt with more than 4,000 such incidents. The total cost of fly-tipping to Havering residents and businesses between April 2016 and March 2017, including collection and disposal costs, is estimated to be well over £500,000. We now fear that the overall cost is closer to £1 million, which represents a huge burden on the local ratepayer.

I have been working with Councillor Jason Frost, the deputy cabinet member for the environment, to push for increased local authority fines. I met the Minister at one of her Tea Room surgeries to discuss the problem further, and I was encouraged that she and her Department are taking it seriously. The maximum penalties for fly-tipping on summary conviction are a £50,000 fine and/or 12 months’ imprisonment. However, although sentencing guidelines for environmental offences were reviewed in 2014, the maximum fixed penalty notice that local authorities can issue remains only £400 for small-scale fly-tipping. Councillor Frost believes that the fines need to be much more substantial to act as a proper deterrent.

Havering already uses to the maximum existing anti-fly-tipping measures, including joint police operations with covert officers, round-the-clock monitoring of roads, and surveillance cameras. However, as Steve Moore, our director of neighbourhoods, has advised us and a number of Members mentioned, much fly-tipping is now carried out by serious organised criminal gangs, not just casual chancers. Those gangs use false plates and stolen trucks, so traditional means of combating fly-tipping, such as CCTV, are not effective. Therefore, although increased penalties might help, we may well need to go further. If this is an issue of organised crime, it requires an equally organised response by police and other authorities such as the Environment Agency.

New regulations have given the Environment Agency and councils more effective tools to investigate and prosecute waste crimes, including the power to seize vehicles for a wider range of suspected offences. However, I should be grateful if the Minister advised us what further analysis has been undertaken of police operations to ensure that we understand who is behind such crimes, and what work the Environment Agency is doing to make its waste licensing regime much more robust. Will she also say why she thinks there was such a substantial increase in this problem in the latest year for which we have figures? Was that increase driven in any way by changes to environmental regulations or the cost of processing rubbish? Is it possible that well-intended changes to environmental regulations or the cost of processing waste disposal so expensive that people are cutting corners? I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, and I look forward to learning more about the Minister’s strategy to tackle this scourge.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this topical and important debate, which has been extremely interesting and informative, with many excellent contributions. The hon. Gentleman pointed out that the cost to the National Trust of dealing with fly-tipping diverts funds from more worthy projects. That illustrates the general point about fly-tipping across the country. I strongly agree with him about impounding vehicles, which could be done fairly simply. He made the good point that we need to be seen to be on the side of the innocent, and everyone here should agree with that measure.

Many Members made interesting points while discussing concerns about fly-tipping in their local communities. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) expressed serious concerns about whether cuts to local authority funding are a false economy. I believe that prosecutions in England were at a record low in 2017. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) illustrated well the problem in her area and reiterated the real cost of austerity to her communities.

The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) has obviously given the problem a lot of thought, and the interesting accreditation scheme he mentioned seems worthy. What the hon. Member for Newton Abbot
The Scottish Government and Zero Waste Scotland published their strategy for improving waste data in Scotland. Tackling fly-tipping is a key priority for Zero Waste Scotland, which is the Scottish Government’s resource efficiency delivery partner. The charity Keep Scotland Beautiful—I know many of its great staff—also works tirelessly in the community to educate and nudge people into good behaviour and awareness. If we feel frustrated, that must seem like a never-ending battle for them. How do we and those organisations get the message across that we all live in a common home and that as individuals we must realise that our actions count and that every right step we take will lead to positive change?

With Zero Waste Scotland, the Scottish Government have developed a communications toolkit for delivery partners, with the aim of improving understanding of how products and materials flow through our economy—waste flows—from the point of production to the final destination. We hope that that will raise awareness among everyone involved in the waste industry. In 2013, the Scottish Government set up a national environmental crime taskforce, which co-ordinates the efforts of local authorities, regulators, police and other stakeholders to tackle environmental crime, including waste crime. The tools and guidance on offer include FlyMapper, an app that Zero Waste Scotland made for local authorities and land managers. Importantly, that lets stakeholders report and map fly-tipping and identify growing problem areas in real time. There is also a behavioural change marketing campaign to discourage fly-tipping and littering, and we have introduced legislation to increase fixed penalties for both littering and fly-tipping.

We could do more, and I would support measures by any Government, Department or public body to issue fixed penalty notices. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has new powers to discourage large-scale fly-tipping, and both SEPA and Revenue Scotland are taking action to recover landfill tax from illegally deposited waste. In addition to the FlyMapper app, the Dumb Dumpers website and helpline allow fly-tipping to be reported 24 hours a day.

Scotland is slightly different from the rest of the UK, in that I believe the figures used to make estimates in England in Wales are more than a decade out of date and do not include waste dumped on private land. Will the Minister confirm whether that is true? The Scottish Environment Protection Agency for Tiverton and Honiton to rid us of this scourge.

10.29 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Select Committee, on hitting the jackpot so early on in our recovery from the Easter break. Next to potholes, this is one of the more popular topics on which people engage us, more than anything because of the unfairness of it—if fly-tipping takes place on their land or next to them, it becomes their problem. He is right to highlight it, and I know the Select Committee will continue to look at waste as a major topic of interest.
I will not go over the facts and figures, but we have had good contributions from the hon. Members for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Hornchurch and Upminster (David T. C. Davies), for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Breerton), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher). Others contributed through interventions, which will be on the record.

Fly-tipping is a major problem. We start with people dumping stuff casually, thinking they can get away with it. That is wrong, but at the other end of the scale, this is a major billion-pound criminal business. Next to people trafficking, the drugs trade and, dare I say, a little around the meat trade—we will pass over that quickly—this is the big business of the criminal underworld. People make millions out of it, so we cannot pretend it is something to ignore.

We have heard some of the facts and figures on how local authorities are affected, and there is the implication that, with the cuts and so on, they have found it difficult to up their game, but I will concentrate for the moment on the Environment Agency, which has also faced cuts in this area. I understand that it deals with 1,000 illegal waste sites a year, taking enforcement action, cleaning up and trying to prevent it from happening again, but it has been said to me that it is a bit like whack-a-mole at the fairground—I am a great animal lover—because every time the mole is hit, it comes up somewhere else. That is because of two things: the amount of money to be made out the business, and the way we deal with it in terms of fines and action, which is far too limited nowadays.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) sent me something she would have spoken about if she could have been here—she sends her apologies; she had a prior engagement—about a firm in her constituency that effectively set up a mini-incinerator, burning all the waste. It took a lot of action to get it shut down. When the firm came to court, a sentence of a £750 fine was effective set up a mini-incinerator, burning all the waste. It took a lot of action to get it shut down. When the firm came to court, a sentence of a £750 fine was imposed for one offence—the second offence could not be prosecuted—which was reduced to £562, with £374 costs, and the director responsible was fined £199. According to her, the nonsense went on for weeks and weeks, and the penalty bears no resemblance to the inconvenience caused. That shows how limited the fines and ability to do anything are.

First, I will start with a question to the Minister—she has plenty of time to think about it. At a private briefing that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and I went to, I was surprised when she said there is no prosecution—which was reduced to £562, with £374 costs, and the director responsible was fined £199. According to her, the nonsense went on for weeks and weeks, and the penalty bears no resemblance to the inconvenience caused. That shows how limited the fines and ability to do anything are.

First, I will start with a question to the Minister—she has plenty of time to think about it. At a private briefing that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton and I went to, I was surprised when she said there is no evidence of an impact on the level of fly-tipping when local authorities put charges on collections for larger items. It would be good to get some empirical evidence, because it is a big criminal business at one level, and it is really annoying for a lot of people. We are therefore willing to help in whatever way we can to make that Act fit for purpose, with a new Bill.

That is important, because certainly in England the recycling rate has begun to stall—in fact, in some parts of the country it is beginning to decline. I do not see the rush to incineration as anything other than the wrong solution, but there is a real requirement to recognise the problem of waste. I get countless emails from people saying, “We’ve got to do something about plastics,” and we have got to do something about waste overall. I therefore ask the Minister to take up that offer and, through the DEFRA team, see if something can be done in the next Session.

This issue exercises not just individuals and areas but organisations. We have had excellent contributions from the Country Land and Business Association, the Local Government Association, the Countryside Alliance and the National Farmers Union—and, as always, a good paper from the House of Commons Library—which all indicate how big a problem it is and how much we need to do.

I will conclude by giving the Minister an awful lot of time to respond—no doubt, she has an awful lot to say, because this is a big topic. I hope we can see this not just as ad hoc misbehaviour—bad as it is—that needs to be dealt with. We must also look at the other end: the criminal and the organised, where people are making serious money and we are not bringing them to justice. Last week, I made a visit in my area to look at some of the notorious sites. Even if we do bring individuals to justice, the fines regime and penalties are so paltry that people can build up for them as a matter of course, and they get away with it time after time. People may build genuine businesses from that—that may be good or bad—but it is not right to use illegality to get there. I hope the Minister sees this as a good opportunity to be forthright about the ways in which we can move forward. The Opposition will help the Government in any way we can.

10.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing the debate. We have heard wide-ranging contributions from other hon. Members, recognising some of the work that has been done and some of the challenges still before us. I welcomed the opportunity to discuss fly-tipping with my hon. Friend at a recent event.
hosted by the CLA, which led me to take action to investigate the issue further. He will be aware that this is a long-term issue that needs to be tackled.

Fly-tipping really affects our country. That is why we have done more, and will continue to do more, to stamp out this anti-social crime that blights not only our countryside but our urban streets, and costs our economy greatly. My Department works closely with organisations across government to tackle fly-tipping, including local authorities, the Local Government Association, the Environment Agency, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We also encourage strong collaboration between local councils, the police, the Environment Agency, and local landowners and communities, to tackle this issue.

My officials recently met a number of fly-tipping partnerships to discuss and review their models. We will work with the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group to disseminate the information and increase collaboration and intelligence sharing on a local, regional and national scale. My officials are engaged with the police at a national level through the National Police Chiefs’ Council, and with police and crime commissioners. Indeed, tomorrow my officials will discuss fly-tipping with the police and crime commissioner for Dorset, who is the fly-tipping lead for the National Rural Crime Network. A representative from the National Police Chiefs’ Council rural crime team also sits on the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group, which is chaired by my officials.

I am aware of the difficulties faced by individuals and businesses when fly-tipping occurs on their land. Landowners have a legal responsibility for their land, which is why we encourage them to secure it against fly-tippers, always to report incidents of fly-tipping to their local council and the police, and swiftly to clear fly-tipped waste so that the site does not become a known dumping ground. Through the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group we publish advice for landowners of all types of private land, from farmland to industrial estates. The potential use of cameras was mentioned, and although a national CCTV network is unlikely, I am conscious that many landowners use CCTV to try to tackle and identify individuals who are dumping waste.

Neil Parish: Cameras that are easily portable and can be put in trees are not so expensive now. We must catch many more people doing this because there is still too much pressure on the landowner and farmer to clear up the mess. They did not create the mess, but they end up with the cost of maintaining the environmental condition, and that is what infuriates everybody. We should do anything we can to encourage people to have some sort of camera, and to work more with the DVLA and others to catch the people driving the vehicles and bring them to book.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend mentions the DVLA, and of the clearance reimbursed. I encourage councils and other agencies to keep going with attempts to convict, and to try to help private landowners.

Dr Drew: Does the Minister accept that satellite technology now means that it is difficult to hide the things that people used to be able to hide? That is something the Department could consider more seriously. Such technology is already used in some parts of the United Kingdom, but that would be a good venture for DEFRA to take up.

Dr Coffey: I do not know whether satellite technology would help us in this case, and I am not an expert on how best to present evidence to get a conviction. However, I will certainly ensure that the point is understood by my officials, so that they can raise it with the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group and the police.

Local councils, as the responsible authorities, have a significant role to play in tackling fly-tipping on private land. Fly-tipping gangs dump waste irrespective of whether the land is publicly or privately owned, and all local councils should therefore investigate fly-tipping incidents on private land. If there is evidence, they should prosecute the fly-tippers, and they can then recover clearance costs via the courts, as I have just outlined. However, not all councils are minded to do that, and only about half are actively trying to tackle the issue.

I am very alert to the challenges regarding council resources. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) praised her council but was concerned about the available resources. I gently point out that although Coventry City Council’s website states that support from central Government has fallen—in 2010-11, £153 million came from the revenue support grant and business rates, and that is now £122.5 million—that is not quite a reduction of the level that I thought I heard the hon. Lady describe, which was considerably higher. I emphasise, however, that councils have many more powers and the opportunity to recoup costs, and it matters that they use those powers if the issue is a local priority. However, the national Government cannot force councils to do so.

I encourage all councils to be alert to fly-tipping and to use their powers. When councils ask us for powers, we will try to ensure that they get those powers in the future. Councils currently have more than 20 powers to choose from to tackle fly-tipping, and we have recently spent time working in Committees to give them more. We have strengthened a council’s ability to search and seize the vehicles of suspected fly-tippers, and we have introduced a fixed penalty notice for small-scale fly-tipping. An additional 20,000 fixed penalty notices were issued in 2016-17, but not all councils have decided to implement those powers. Again, I strongly encourage them to do so.

David T. C. Davies: Will my hon. Friend look at my suggestion to move some of the liability towards people who produce waste? Virtually every Member present agrees that whatever we are doing is not currently enough to deter people from committing this crime.

Dr Coffey: I heard what my hon. Friend said, and he will appreciate that this matter is devolved to the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government have already carried out a consultation to make it easier for councils to fine
householders who do not check how their waste is disposed of, but those powers have not yet come into effect. We require a further consultation, because I am conscious that householders may not realise that websites are available—such as that of the Environment Agency—on which they can look up the names of the firms that come around touting for business. There is an obligation to use the appropriate procedures, because otherwise people can be convicted. Fixed penalty notices were introduced because they tend to be a more straightforward way for councils to deter people. Through this debate and other consultations, I am keen to continue to raise the awareness of householders who must look into who is disposing of their waste, and who it is being passed to. Our current assessment of fly-tipped waste in England is that two thirds of it comes from private households. That is why we are doing what I hope my hon. Friend believes we should be doing. I am happy to hear any more ideas he might have and to share them with the Welsh Government—I am sure he will also do that through his own political links.

Let me single out and praise certain councils across the country that are excelling. In Hertfordshire, for example, funding from the police and crime commissioner has enabled the county council to set up an effective partnership group that is starting to see results. Buckinghamshire County Council is another great example. It decided to make this issue a priority, and its dedicated enforcement strategy has halved fly-tipping incidents over the past 15 years—it is now prosecuting more than one case a week. In Cambridgeshire, a local council is making use of section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which requires landowners to clear waste when the amenity of an area is being significantly affected. That has helped to tackle fly-tipping hotspots, such as the front gardens and alleyways that become dumping grounds, as has been mentioned by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton. I appreciate that councils have to decide whether to invest resources in tackling this, but there are powers that they can use to great effect.

It is often asserted—several hon. Members mentioned this, including the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew)—that there is a connection between charging at household waste recycling centres and an increase in household waste being fly-tipped. There are anecdotal reports suggesting a connection, but the evidence remains inconclusive. The waste and resources action programme undertook a survey last year, but it did not show a strong link between the two issues. I am happy to write to hon. Members present and share that information with them. I know that there are calls for fly-tipped waste to be disposed of for free at household waste recycling centres. More generally, enabling waste tipped on private land to be disposed of free of charge would not provide the right incentive to deter fly-tipping or to secure land. I stress that it is up to councils to determine whether to charge, in line with legislation.

Neil Parish: The Minister makes an interesting point about landowners acting to stop fly-tipping, but we must be careful. If people have to put huge boulders, or all sorts of things, in gateways just to stop people getting in to fly-tip, that is unsightly. I do not want the onus to be put back on to the landowner and farmer. It is the wrong way to do things. We must concentrate on the people who have illegally tipped in the first place.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that much of the approach to tackling crime is to do with prevention. I understand what he said about the unsightly effects if we get landholders to try to reduce the opportunity for fly-tipping, but many people put extra locks and burglar alarms in their homes to deter people from targeting a particular home. That is an example of how people take an active interest in making their home robust against entry and crime. I understand my hon. Friend’s point and do not blame landowners. I am trying to be helpful.

I recognise that more can be done. The Government are hosting a roundtable on fly-tipping on private land next week. We will consider further what we can do. A key point is knowing the scale of the issue. Currently we cannot quantify the extent of fly-tipping on private land, as there is no established easy way for people to report it. However, we are changing that. We are learning from Natural Resources Wales, which has created a mobile app to record incidents. We will shortly be rolling out a similar app for England, with many benefits. The app will link through to the local council so that its enforcement team will instantly know when an incident has been recorded. It will also automatically plot the incidents on a map so that hotspots can be targeted. Such sharing of information will help the police, in particular, to identify issues quickly.

In response to a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), I would point out that we have just concluded a consultation on giving local councils and the Environment Agency the power to issue a fixed penalty notice of up to £400 for householders who do not take reasonable measures to ensure that their waste is provided to an authorised person such as a local authority or registered waste carrier. People can check online. The consultation closed on 26 March and we are considering the responses to determine exactly what proof a householder would need to provide to show that they had complied with the regulations. I want to make it clear that the approach is not about duffing up victims, but there are laws in place and we need to try to ensure that people obey them, rather than taking shortcuts. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, we intend to lay regulations in the autumn.

As to the broader question of tackling more forms of waste crime, we brought in regulations in February to strengthen the Environment Agency’s powers to tackle problem waste. It can lock site gates and require all the waste at a site to be cleared. We have just concluded a consultation on tightening the requirements to hold a waste permit and reviewing the waste exemption regime. As I have pointed out, there will be quite a lot more in our resources and waste strategy later in the year.

We will set out proposals to review the brokers and dealers regime. That is an important step to crack down on organised gangs who collect waste under the veil of legitimacy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) highlighted, there are a lot of cowboy operators. We will be working closely with the waste industry to determine how best to ensure that those who are part of the trade fully understand their duties and responsibilities.

Much has been said about sentencing and we are reviewing it so that people who fly-tip will be punished appropriately. In 2014 we worked with the Sentencing Council to strengthen the guideline for environmental offences. The level of fines for organisations found
At one stage in the debate, and that was after a late sitting last night, straight after a recess, which shows how important the subject is to many people. I thank everyone for their contributions to the debate, which was good-tempered and informative. We talked about making those who dispose of waste in the first place more responsible for their actions, for example through the DVLA, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). There were points about keeping waste sites open for people to dispose of waste rather than fly-tipping it, and about putting the onus back on those who are caught by having heavier fines. We must remember that those who fly-tip need to be prosecuted. Otherwise, landowners and farmers have to clear up, and there are many costs that are often unrecoverable.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), made an interesting point about satellites. On the Select Committee I have learned that it is amazing what those satellites can pick up—from an electric fence to goodness knows what. If they can do that, why can they not pick up lorries and vans going into the countryside? That might give us a clue as to who the people are. It is interesting and probably worth pursuing. We need to do all we can and bring everyone together, from local authorities to Government, to crack down so that we can have a countryside that is beautiful. We talk about greater access to the countryside, and we need to sort this issue out, otherwise farmers and landowners will understandably be concerned. Will greater access mean greater opportunities for people to take rubbish out and tip it into fields in our great countryside?

I welcome the debate and all the Members who took part, including the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally), who had some good ideas from Scotland. We need to take all the ideas—I do not think that anyone has an instant panacea—and work together to reduce fly-tipping so that we have a greener, pleasant land.
Health Services in Essex

11 am

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered health services in Essex.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I am grateful to the Speaker for granting me this debate. I thank the Minister for his time, and I welcome him; I suspect that he may already be familiar not just with the great county of Essex but with many of the issues I will give an airing to. I am grateful for this debate and for the opportunity to raise a number of issues that I have discussed previously in the House relating to health services in Essex.

Before I go into the details of the way in which health services are working in my constituency and where improvements are needed, I pay tribute to the NHS staff who work tirelessly to save lives and help people to get better—not only my constituents but constituents across the county. I have naturally visited our local hospitals and general practitioner surgeries and had the privilege of joining our ambulance service at both its headquarters and its new base. I have been impressed with the staff I have met and I pay tribute to them. They have obviously had a great deal on with the winter pressures. I also pay tribute to the staff and leadership I have met in the local NHS, and to the Government for investing in our NHS.

I say that because, since I was elected in 2010, it is fair to say that we have had a number of issues. In that general election of 2010, the Labour party was talking about cuts to the NHS. Ever since then, it has sought to weaponise the NHS and to frighten and scare my constituents and the public about local service provision and the services available to them. The Conservatives in government have invested in the NHS, and the result, in Essex, is more patients being treated by more doctors and nurses.

I welcome in particular the recent announcement, of which the Minister will be aware, of investment in Anglia Ruskin University’s school of medicine, which will provide training places for 100 more people. My fellow Essex MPs, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and I made strong representations in support of the university’s bid.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in praising the new school of medicine to train the next generation of doctors in Chelmsford. I heard from the vice-chancellor last week that more than 400 people have already applied to be among that first intake of 100. Does she agree that investing in the next generation of doctors, especially GPs, is crucial to delivering better health services in the future, and that giving our bright young Essex kids that opportunity is key?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to the primary care side and GPs, because we face strong pressures on GPs, especially in relation to succession planning.

I also welcome the new investment to support the transformation and improvement of hospital services, including £69 million to support the Colchester and Ipswich merger. The NHS in Essex has also done remarkably well in cutting enormous swathes of bureaucracy. When I first spoke in Parliament about the NHS, I highlighted the enormous growth in the number of bureaucrats and managers in the primary care trusts and strategic health authorities under Labour, which took precious resources away from the frontlines. We need only go back to some of the records and even some of my own comments in this House to see the horrific numbers. Hundreds of millions of pounds were spent just on recruiting managers. We should be pleased that that bureaucracy has now been cut out, but there are challenges in the NHS that need addressing.

My constituency is served by two clinical commissioning groups, Mid Essex and North East Essex. The two hospital trusts are Mid Essex, which runs Broomfield, and the Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust, which is about to merge with Ipswich. The recently established Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust provides mental health services, and we have the East of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust, which has also seen enormous change over the last seven to eight years.

Representing a constituency in the east of England, my hon. Friend the Minister will be familiar with some of those challenges. My constituency does not have a hospital of its own, but he will be relieved to hear that I am one Member of Parliament who is not calling for a hospital in my constituency. Colchester general hospital provides acute services to residents in the north-eastern part of the Witham constituency, and Broomfield hospital in Chelmsford provides acute services to residents in the rest of the constituency. Some services are provided in Braintree community hospital, but in Witham town itself and the whole constituency there is no NHS hospital and no significant out-patient service, just GP practices.

My part of Essex received no significant investment under Labour—a point worth labouring, particularly in light of the points I made earlier on. We now need new investment to meet the growing demand brought by a population increasing in age and in numbers. The area I represent is increasing in population and, in terms of demographics, the proportion of the population aged over 60 is increasing and the number aged over 85 will double. Across Essex as a whole, the proportion of residents aged over 65 is now 21%, higher than the 16% national average, which naturally adds pressures to health and social care services.

The three local planning authorities that cover parts of the constituency are Braintree District Council, Maldon District Council and Colchester Borough Council. Local plans adopted by those councils or going through public examination could add a total of at least 37,000 new dwellings by the early 2030s. In Witham town the population of 26,000 is set to grow by 20% over the next 20 years, and sites have rightly been identified in the town that will accommodate more than 2,000 dwellings, but the increases in population seen in recent years have not been matched by proportionate increases in the health economy. As a result, there are naturally strains on primary care.

Branch surgeries in Tolleshunt D’Arcy and Birch have closed. In both instances, leases on premises were expiring and, even though the local community proposed alternative options to maintain some GP coverage in
those villages, a solution could not be arranged. Notification of closure plans was made fairly late, which limited the time available to find a solution. I encourage the Minister to review how branch closures are managed and to ensure that sufficient time and effort is put into finding alternative facilities to provide a regular GP presence, particularly in rural locations.

The Sidney House Surgery in Hatfield Peverel is one of the Minister may know about, since we have corresponded over it. It is full and over-subscribed, yet as new development is planned for the village the NHS simply asks for a sum of money for capital improvements based on a mathematical formula, which has no regard for the real costs involved in upgrading GP services to meet demand. Ultimately, that means that developer contributions will either be used elsewhere in the NHS or not used at all and returned.

In Tiptree, a growing village that the Minister may know of because it is where the world-famous Wilkin & Sons is based, we can see what happens when housing growth is simply not matched by new GP provision. The ratio of patients to GPs is over 3,500:1, which leads to severe difficulties with patients waiting for appointments. In fact, not a day goes past when I am not contacted by a constituent in that village highlighting some of the pressures on waiting times and the difficulty in making appointments.

I hope that the Minister will consider how the NHS can secure developer contributions that genuinely reflect the costs involved in delivering new GP provisions that are relative to local needs. This is a really important point. We are not against growth in our villages—we understand that they need to grow—but it increases pressures, and our GPs and local surgeries must be supported in planning that growth in this part of Essex with existing communities, because they need to be confident that investment will be provided to ease the pressures that they experience.

We also need to see action on expanding hours so that people can access GP services, and on reducing the number of vacant GP posts in the county. That is why a new university is vital; it will help in securing and ensuring that sufficient time and effort is put into finding alternative facilities to provide a regular GP presence, particularly in rural locations.

The national average ratio of patients to GPs is around 1,700:1. The average in mid Essex is around 1,800. In Witham town, we have four surgeries and more than 30,000 registered patients covered by only 13 full-time equivalent GPs. That gives a ratio of 2,300—a third higher than the national average. The pressures are pretty stark and clear, and residents who are seeing new homes built obviously want to see this new centre built.

Our district council is being supportive and making funding available. Mid Essex CCG has put resources in place to develop a business case, and to its credit is working with me and all stakeholders to deliver the centre. We are now at the final hurdle. We want to get all GPs on side and ensure that they are all signed up so that we can get bricks on the ground. It would be helpful if the Minister and the Government backed the project, which would also give all local GPs the confidence to sign up to the healthcare centre.

I will quickly raise two other issues. First, on mental health services, the Minister will be aware of the situation with Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, which was established last year from a merger of two separate mental health trusts covering north and south Essex. Some legacy issues have recently been well documented in the media, but I have a constituent, Mrs Melanie Leahy, who lost her son, Matthew, in the most tragic circumstances while he was being treated by the trust. I have raised this case over a number of years, and the Government will know all the background to it. Police inquiries are being made into his death and into several other deaths as well. I urge the Minister to keep the historical cases under review, so that affected families are supported, we learn from past mistakes and robust action takes place where there has been neglect.

Winter led to unprecedented demands on the East of England Ambulance Service. Five years ago the trust suffered from poor leadership, but I pay tribute to everybody in the ambulance trust. It has been an absolute privilege to meet the paramedics in Witham and on the frontline who every day do amazing and brilliant work. The events of the winter remind us that the pressures are severe. The county council has helped with reducing pressures on social care and getting people out of hospitals and living independently back at home. I would welcome some words from the Minister on the action that the Department is taking to support our quite remarkable East of England Ambulance Trust to improve preparations for future winters and to give it the support that it needs.

Finally, although reforms, working practices and innovation have really helped to reduce pressures in the NHS, it is fair to say that, when it comes to funding, Essex has been historically underfunded compared with other parts of the country, which is down to challenging and changing funding formulae. I welcome the great deal of work undertaken by the Department of Health and Ministers to review funding, but I want to see more support, more reform and more investment in greater performance. Better performance should be rewarded through investment. I hope that the Department and the Minister will work with me to secure local funding and to secure a new facility in Witham. I thank the Minister for the time and attention he has given to discussing healthcare in Essex.
The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) on securing the debate and on her wider commitment to championing Witham and the health issues within her constituency, particularly her work on the health centre in Witham. I am pleased that she is not calling for a new hospital in the constituency, but she is absolutely right to highlight the changing demographics within her constituency—in particular, a growing elderly population—and how that requires local health services to adapt. As both an east of England MP and an MP representing a rural constituency, I recognise many of the issues to which she referred.

I thank my right hon. Friend for acknowledging the importance of developer contributions. As the Government meet the challenge set by the Prime Minister to increase the amount of housing, it is right that developers contribute to meeting health needs. Following a constituency case of my own that brought this issue to light, I commissioned a paper in the Department to ensure that we look again at how NHS England and CCGs secure the right contribution from developers into local health services. My right hon. Friend also mentioned a specific constituency case. I absolutely agree that we need to learn from past issues where they arise. As she will know, the Secretary of State has given great leadership on patient safety. It is something that he has personally challenged within the NHS family, and he is rightly putting it at the heart of the Government’s agenda.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the ambulance trust. A huge amount of work has gone on to support the East of England Ambulance Trust after issues were raised by a number of our colleagues over the Christmas period, including by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). Members from all parts of the House will wish him a speedy recovery from his recent minor stroke. He held an Adjournment debate on the East of England Ambulance Service and raised issues that we have been addressing, including the risk summit, which I know is a priority for NHS England and NHS Improvement. I have met ambulance bosses, and my own constituency is served by the East of England Ambulance Service. It is right to put on the record that, under this Government, there has been a 30% increase in the number of paramedics, which signals the commitment that we have made to the ambulance service. However, it is also right that we look at issues such as the handover of ambulances and how we get that process working better.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her support for the Witham primary care centre, which will strengthen Witham’s primary care services. I understand that site options appraisals have been completed and agreed by the Mid Essex CCG and discussions are ongoing with the developer and local practices to secure agreement. The CCG is hoping to finalise the business case by the end of June, although I understand that it is subject to final agreement by the local practices involved. She is absolutely right that local practices need to recognise the way that the constituency and Witham are developing and to adapt with that development in order to meet the growing needs of the town.

The health hub will offer primary care services, community health provision and elective care activity, replacing the majority of current GP facilities in Witham. The hub will use a greater skills mix, which has been identified as key to releasing capacity in general practice. The Government are committed to recruiting more GPs, but we are also looking at the skills mix that supports GPs—those who work with GPs—so that we address the way patients now present. They often present with a number of conditions, which requires a multitude of support and intervention. What matters, therefore, is the recruitment not just of GPs, but of physician assistants, the wider nursing team and the other support alongside GPs that is part of addressing the health needs of constituents in Witham and elsewhere. That is at the heart of what I understand is my right hon. Friend’s vision for the health centre, and is exactly where the Government are trying to take primary care—offering a broader suite of support and services to patients, who, as I said, often present with more than one condition. That requires a wider team.

I understand that the Sidney House and The Laurels practice has expressed a desire to be operationally involved in the scheme, although that option has yet to be fully explored. Funding support has been made available for the Sidney House and The Laurels practice, through the Mid Essex CCG’s primary care sustainability fund, to go towards the cost of additional staff to alleviate pressures. That funding is assisting the practice with a range of initiatives: training clinical staff, increasing the number of clinical staff and providing an additional 20 hours a week of administrative support. That additional support should enable the practice to increase capacity and access for patients. I understand that the new triage appointment system introduced at the practice has been well received by patients and is helping the practice to manage demand. That funding will continue, alongside more funding made available by the CCG through the recently established Primary Care Foundations programme. Mid Essex CCG is also supporting work across mid-Essex to alleviate pressures. That includes the roll-out of decision-making software designed to remove blockages in GP practices’ workflow.

My right hon. Friend raised the issue of GP access more widely in her constituency. We recognise that an ageing population and more people living with long-term conditions mean that primary care is under more pressure than ever, and we are taking steps to address that. That includes the additional funding to which my right hon. Friend referred. Funding will increase by £2.4 billion by 2020-21, going from £9.6 billion in 2015-16 to more than £12 billion by 2020-21. That is a 14% increase in real terms, which has been put in place by this Government. We have announced our ambition to expand the medical workforce, with an extra 5,000 full-time equivalent doctors working in general practice by 2020 as part of a wider increase to the total workforce in general practice of 10,000. We recognise that that is an ambitious target of double the growth of previous years, but it shows the commitment of this Government to our NHS.
As both my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham said, Anglia Ruskin University’s new school of medicine will have 100 publicly funded student places following the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 20 March. The £20 million school of medicine, currently being built on the Chelmsford campus, is the first in Essex. It not only is a physical representation of the effective lobbying by my right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend and other colleagues from across Essex and the east of England, but shows the physical commitment of this Government to addressing the health needs of constituents in Essex. The building, which is nearing completion, will feature state-of-the-art skills facilities, specialist teaching space, a lecture theatre and an anatomy suite.

Nationally, Health Education England has made 3,250 places in GP specialty training available per year since 2016. A suite of measures is being taken to assist primary care, sitting alongside the work my right hon. Friend has spoken about. I am talking about how we look at the health estate, how we bring services together and how we do that in a hub that adapts to the changing needs of communities such as the ones that she represents. Nationally, 52% of the population are benefiting from extended access to general practice, including evening and weekend appointments. That reflects the fact that many people in Witham and across Essex work and want greater flexibility of access to primary care. In the old model, people might be at home during the day and have time to go to the GP; today, people need a service that is adapting to the current workplace and the way families live and wish to access primary care.

The “General Practice Forward View” committed to investing £45 million in a national programme, to run over three years, to stimulate uptake of online consultations systems for every practice, and taking actions to support practices to offer patients more online self-care and self-management services. The issue is not just the hours of access to primary care, but the channel of access. That may be through the improvements in clinical service offered through the 111 helpline—the doubling of the number of clinicians answering those calls—but it is also about primary care having different ways of serving their constituencies through online platforms.

NHS England and Health Education England are working together to boost recruitment, to address the reasons why GPs are leaving the profession and to encourage GPs to return to practice. Furthermore, the Government have committed to developing the wider primary care workforce and supporting improved access in terms of both GP numbers and how patients can access those services. In Essex, the Witham primary care hub is expanding access within the community for patients, integrating care within the community setting, and the Sidney House and The Laurels practice is using CCG funding to improve its primary care appointments system and IT.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham for raising these issues. She is absolutely right to recognise that, as Witham grows and its health needs evolve, it is important that primary care in the town adapts to the changes in her constituency. In putting these issues on the record today, she has signalled the importance of that to Witham, and how the investment that this Government are making in medical school places at Chelmsford, in primary care nationally and in the ambulance service is addressing the needs that she has articulated today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.
Leaving the EU: Tourism and the Creative Industries

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on tourism and the creative industries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to have the opportunity to debate the effect that Brexit could have on tourism and the creative industries in the UK. These are two vital and vibrant sectors of our economy, which I believe have largely been overlooked and underestimated in the Brexit debate. Their annual contribution to our economy needs to be acknowledged and protected. If Brexit goes ahead—I believe it is an “if”—these sectors will need special measures to prevent jobs from being lost and income draining from the economy.

It is no exaggeration to say that tourism and the creative industries are linchpins of our economy, which we cannot allow to be sacrificed on the Brexit altar of Conservative party self-preservation. Many of the millions of jobs and livelihoods that these industries support could be lost if we do not stop this dangerous economic self-harm. While they are significant separately, they also come together in some of our most iconic popular and cultural events, such as Glastonbury, the Proms and—for me, in my constituency, the most significant example—the Edinburgh International Festival and its Fringe. The Edinburgh festival is the biggest and most successful event of its type in the world, and has experienced seven decades of success—unending, growing success. It is a fantastic and awe-inspiring month-long festival of music, theatre, arts, books, comedy, street performers and now politics, but even it will not be immune to the threat posed by Brexit. You do not have to take my word for it, Mr Bone. The director of Festivals Edinburgh, which leads efforts to promote the city’s flagship events around the world, has said:

“...a sense of threat and risk and making sure that Brexit doesn’t put us in a worse position.”

There are plenty of figures that illustrate the argument for both industries needing protection, but I will look first at tourism. Tourism encompasses about 250,000 small and medium-sized enterprises across the UK, and its growth is on a par with that of our digital industries. It supports approximately 3 million jobs, which are spread across every single local authority in Britain; this is not a problem that affects only one part of the country. Tourism brings in about £127 billion a year to the UK—9% of GDP. Around 37 million visitors come here every year, and in 2016 almost 70% of those visitors are from other EU countries. Eight of our top 10 in-bound tourist markets are other EU states. Those visitors may now worry about their ability to stay and work in this country. The ripples of a decline in visitor numbers will reach far into other sectors of the economy—for example, aviation.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. As a remain voter, I am sympathetic to her position, but does she agree that sometimes one of the main drivers of tourism is the exchange rate, and one thing we have seen is increased tourism as a result of decreased value of the pound against the euro and other currencies, perhaps as a direct consequence of that Brexit vote? I know she will go on to develop this point, but does she also agree that the main concern is the workforce in the tourism industry—that so many workers in tourism are from Europe and overseas—and that, as in agriculture, that is a big problem that needs to be considered by the Government?

Christine Jardine: I do not agree that the decline in the value of the pound solves the problem, because it creates other problems elsewhere in the industry, as it suffered its biggest slump since the devaluation under Harold Wilson. However, I do agree that our main problem in this industry will be the workforce and how we will replace the workers who in parts of the country outside Edinburgh make up 20% of the workforce, but in Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland make up almost 50%.

Aviation is one of the UK’s success stories and supports 500,000 jobs in the tourism industry. The current ease of transit to and from the EU enables tourism to contribute £500 million a week to the economy, but 85% of the UK’s air traffic is through our EU membership.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): On the first point, I think we are seeing record levels of tourism in this country, because the pound has dropped—I think that is more or less indisputable. On the aviation point, does the hon. Lady agree that abolishing air passenger duty would give a bigger boost to the UK economy with no cost? A number of studies show that if air passenger duty were abolished, Treasury income from other sources, because of increased economic activity, would benefit the UK as a whole.

Christine Jardine: While air passenger duty might have an economic impact, it cannot overcome the biggest single problem: it will not allow planes to take off. We need a deal on coming out of the EU that will allow our flights to continue to take off and land in Europe, and travel across Europe with the same ease that they do today.

For the creative industries, the figures are, if anything, even more impressive: these industries are worth an estimated £90 billion to the economy and account for one in every 11 jobs. That is something we often overlook. Those jobs are in fashion design, video games, television, theatre, furniture design, radio and many other sectors. International broadcasters alone invest more than £1 billion...
[Christine Jardine]

a year in Britain. It is our fastest growing sector and the UK is currently a world leader in the field, with creative exports from Stormzy and Shakespeare to “The Great British Bake Off”, which define what the UK is to visitors we want to attract from across the globe.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of what the hon. Lady just listed and the importance of the creative industries to our wider economy, does she think it will be pertinent for the Government to appoint officials from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the Department for Exiting the European Union?

Christine Jardine: That is not a point that I had previously considered, but I think it is well made. Perhaps that would help to alleviate the problems those industries might face and actually draw attention to some of them.

As I said, international broadcasters contribute about £1 billion to the economy. All of that economic strength—jobs, growth and potential—is undermined by Brexit. If our creative industries are not protected, world-class events such as the Edinburgh festival, Glastonbury and many others, will find that for musicians and artists who used to tour Europe freely, with no issues over EU crew, equipment licences or visas, the whole process will become slower, more expensive and in some cases not possible at all. Fashion, lighting and furniture designers will lose the benefits of cross-EU design rights. The video games, advertising, publishing, television and film sectors will lose access to the talent that is their lifeblood. Funding from Creative Europe is at risk.

If the UK’s creative industries are threatened, there will be an impact on tourism. As I said, the Edinburgh International Festival is the biggest event of its kind in the world. To put it into context, if we imagine the FIFA World cup coming to the UK every summer, we begin to understand the value and impact on the country’s economy that the Edinburgh festival has. In 2016 it was estimated that festival audiences accounting for around 4.5 million ticket sales generated £300 million for the economy, and that is not unusual.

The festival is the biggest, most high profile and most diverse in its scale and scope, with everything from street theatre to major orchestral concerts. Because of that, it offers a unique insight into why organisations representing our musicians, hotels, venues and performers are campaigning hard for protection against the potential damage of Brexit. The festival is regarded as one of the most important cultural events in the world. The Fringe in its own right is the world’s largest arts event, and there are affiliated events in film, art, books, science and television. Together they guarantee that throughout the summer my city is awash with tourists, often visiting the festival as a gateway to the rest of Scotland and the UK. Only the Olympics and the FIFA World cup are bigger attractions.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on an excellent speech. Does she agree that sharing art, music, sport and culture enriches people’s lives and our communities? In St Helens, we have had a twinning arrangement with Stuttgart for 70 years. We are very proud that people from there come to visit us, we visit them and we work together. Brexit should not put any of that in jeopardy. It is important we work together to ensure those partnerships endure.

Christine Jardine: I absolutely agree. The value of the creative industries to our economy is not simply in the money they bring in; it is in creating our culture and events for young people to enjoy, as well as bringing tourists to the country and maintaining that industry. The problem we face is that people might opt to take up opportunities on the continent or elsewhere after Brexit.

Music development organisations and other cultural groups might also find themselves without funding streams. That is the immediate effect, but collateral damage could be seen in other industries if the creative industries and tourism cease to be the cash cows the economy has come to depend on. Without freedom of movement, many of those who take part in these festivals may not wish, or be able, to stay. It is absolutely clear that if we are to protect those areas, which are central to not just our economy but our social and cultural wellbeing, our creative industries need changes now.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady makes a very good point about those working in the creative industries. Does she agree that without the right to work being protected, organisations such as Scottish Ballet in my constituency, which has a large international ensemble currently touring Scotland with the wonderful “Highland Fling”, might not be able to continue to attract the audiences it has or the talent it needs to put on such big performances?

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. It would not be stretching the point too far to say that not only Scottish Ballet, but Scottish Opera and every single arts event staged at the Edinburgh International Festival and other festivals in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK may face that problem.

The hon. Lady is from Glasgow. It is interesting to consider whether Glasgow would have benefited from the cultural renaissance that it has since 1990 if it had not been able to host the capital of culture that year. I was brought up in Glasgow. The difference that that single year of cultural events and the gathering of the creative industries in the city made cannot be overestimated.

We need to look hard at what the industries are asking for. Measures such as touring passports for musicians, special equipment licences and support for art development are all ways that they can be helped. The creative industries must be at the top table. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) suggested that they should be represented in the Brexit Department. Indeed, they should. Membership of Creative Europe and Erasmus must be maintained, and the UK Government must agree to replace EU funding sources. Access to talent must be protected, touring performers must have a single EU-wide work permit, and mutual recognition of qualifications must be protected—the list is long.

There is a much simpler way of protecting not just the creative industries and tourism but every single industry in this country: taking the first opportunity we have to rethink the Brexit position completely. We must consider whether it is in fact better for all our industries for us to take an exit from Brexit and to allow the
British people to decide whether it is what they actually want. The control that they desired might give them the opportunity to say, “Yes, we want to stay within the European Union.”

2.45 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is a great pleasure to appear under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this important debate. Let me begin by echoing what she said about the Edinburgh International Festival: it is indeed the world’s largest festival of its kind, and the oldest. It is incumbent on us to remember that it was started just after the war, at a time of austerity. It is worth recalling that throughout our recent history we have invested in the arts, even at the most difficult times.

This debate gives us the opportunity to put on record how important the creative industries are to the whole of the UK economy and to raise issues as we approach Brexit. Much as I would love to reverse Brexit, I am not sure that I can agree with the hon. Lady that that is a likely outcome. We sad remainers are now focused—I certainly am—on making the best we can of a very unfortunate situation.

As a former Minister with responsibility for the creative industries, may I take this opportunity to welcome the current Minister to his position? I think that this is the first debate I have taken part in where he has been in his role. I can tell him privately, because I know that no one watches proceedings in Parliament, that he is already extremely popular because of how he has hit the ground running. It has been a great pleasure to me to see the importance of the creative industries rise up the policy agenda.

The creative industries were, in effect, put together by Chris Smith in 1997 when he became the Culture Secretary. He was the first to define what is quite a disparate sector, ranging from architecture to fashion, television and film, and to start to show the huge impact it has on every aspect of our lives. I am glad that under the previous Government we made great strides in supporting the creative industries. Some of that was basic policy infrastructure, such as the creation of the Creative Industries Council, which brought together the Departments responsible for business and for culture with the creative industries to look at policies. I am very pleased to say that it has been carried on by the current Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with the publication of an industrial strategy for the creative industries.

The introduction of tax breaks for many of the creative industries has had a huge impact on their contribution to the economy. I was struck by statistical analysis showing that the service economy contributed the most to our economic growth in a recent quarter—although I cannot remember which quarter it was, but it was two or three quarters ago—and that the second biggest contributor from the service economy was the film industry. The film tax break now sees something like £1 billion of investment coming into the UK.

It was always my mission—I am glad to say that I succeeded, although I did not meet too much resistance—to persuade the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor to visit a film set occasionally as well as a factory. That recorded the fact that film sets often contribute a significant amount to our economy. We have seen studios and employment grow, and that tax break ecology has now been extended to video games, visual effects and animation, as well as the arts, through theatres, orchestras and exhibitions. It has made a real impact.

I was privileged recently to attend the opening of a new animation company in London, Locksmith Animation, which has been started by two distinguished people from the film industry, Sarah Smith and Julie Lockhart. They are using the latest technology that combines 3D computer animation with live-action stop-motion animation to rival Pixar. No one can be in any doubt about the contribution of the creative industries to our economy.

Graham Stringer: I am following the right hon. Gentleman’s speech closely. I do not share his pessimism about the impact of Brexit on the creative industries. Sometime in the early 1980s, the number of people employed in the creative industries in Manchester and Lancashire surpassed the number of people employed in the traditional cotton industry, so it is an important economic generator in the north-west. As the former Minister, does he agree that this country does not invest in the creative industries in a fair way when it comes to the regions? Far too much goes to London.

Mr Vaizey: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When I was the Minister, I was struck by how regionally diverse the creative industries were, particularly in the video games industry. There are companies engaged in that pursuit in Leamington Spa, Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle. It is a challenge. Sometimes it is straightforward economics: people want to base themselves in London to have access to the widest possible range of services, but it is incumbent on us—I am sure the Minister will respond to this—to recognise the diversity and talent in our regions. The recent merger of Tech North with Tech City UK has created a UK-wide tech quango, which is focused on highlighting tech success stories across the country. Different parts of the country have different specialisms in tech—I am moving slightly away from the creative industries.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) makes a valuable point, and the same criticism is often levelled at cultural funding. I am chairman of Creative Fuse North East, a project led by Newcastle University, which analyses the symbiosis between tech and culture. It is important to remember that culture is often a generator for success in the creative industries, so we must maintain a strong focus on investing in culture outside London. I am glad that the Arts Council has made great strides in doing that in recent years. We are very successful, and the creative industries are now high on the policy agenda. I should give credit to the Creative Industries Federation, which was created two or three years ago to lobby on their behalf.

Tourism is a hugely important industry—the fourth or fifth most important in our country—that depends to a great extent on culture and heritage. By investing in and supporting culture and heritage, the Government support our tourism industry. We launched the tourism strategy in 2010, when the then Prime Minister gave a speech supporting tourism. One of my great bugbears is that far too few Prime Ministers—that is, none—ever make speeches about the arts. I hope that the Minister
will continue to press the case to our Prime Minister that she should give a speech about the importance of culture and the arts in this country.

Despite the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton trying to cheer me up, I am thoroughly depressed about Brexit. The small silver lining, which is worth recalling, is that our biggest export partner outside the EU is the USA, with whom we do not have a trade deal. A lot of that export investment depends on the creative industries, such as the film industry and the video games industry. Many of those creative industries are global service industries that will not necessarily be hugely affected by Brexit, such as advertising, architecture and publishing, where we lead the world. It is incumbent on us—including depressed remainers—to continue to beat the drum for the global success of the UK’s creative industries.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is very much missed from his former role, but during that time we had many discussions about the difficulties that artists, and musicians in particular, have in getting visas for the US. Does he share my concern that after Brexit they will have similar problems across Europe? What can we do to ensure that does not happen?

Mr Vaizey: Yes, I do share the hon. Lady’s concern, but I must correct her: I do not think I am missed, because the new Minister is doing such an incredible job that he has wholly erased the memory of me. That is slightly irritating, but I am pleased that somebody as talented as him has taken on the role.

That concern goes both ways. The hon. Lady is incredibly perceptive, and I have worked with her very happily on many different issues. Talent is at the core of the success of our creative industries. If someone walks into the office of any successful business in any part of the country, they will hear a smorgasbord of different voices and meet people of a range of nationalities who have all been attracted by the success of the UK’s creative industries.

We simply cannot have a situation in which we make it as difficult as possible for talented people with the right skills to come to this country, and we must not find ourselves in a situation in which it is difficult for our successful companies to send their people abroad, whether that is a band of musicians or a team of people from an advertising or architecture firm. That must be at the front and centre of the Government’s thinking.

I was struck by an email I received today from a constituent, which is slightly tangential to the core subject of the debate. He runs a Brazilian management consultancy, which has an office in London because it believes in the openness of the UK economy. He cannot get a particular person with a speciality that would enhance the London business over from Brazil, and he has been trying for 12 months. It is a pathetic situation when the Home Office makes it so difficult for skilled people to come to this country and boost our economy.

The Minister should also keep an eye on the audiovisual media services directive. One of the UK’s success stories is that we have hundreds, if not thousands, of broadcasters based here, which can be regulated by Ofcom, the best communications regulator in Europe, and, as a result, transmit their services across Europe. As I was watching my BT Sport app in Europe last week, I was struck that, sadly, we cannot continue to take advantage of the digital single market, which allows portability for paid content. We will have to see what happens with that, but it is absolutely crucial.

The final hurdle—hon. Members will be pleased to know that I am coming to an end—is the French. They have carved culture out of every third-party free trade agreement between the EU and other countries. That was their No. 1 priority when the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership was negotiated. As sure as oeuils is oeufs, the French will try to carve out culture in any free trade agreement between the UK and the European Union, and Ministers will have to be vigilant about the impact of any French agenda on the future of our creative industries.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Bone, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). He and I are veterans of long standing of such debates, and we still bear the scars of the Digital Economy Act 2017, in which we both took a great interest. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this important debate. I was intrigued to see how she would combine tourism and the creative industries, but she did it in such an elegant way that we can all forgive her for bringing together those awkward-sitting issues.

I will confine my remarks to the creative industries. I want to be as blunt as I can. Leaving the European Union will be an absolute and utter disaster for our creative industries. We cannot start to comprehend the predicament that we will soon find ourselves in. The sharing, collaboration and enjoyment of creativity is practically the antithesis of the central tenets of withdrawal, isolationism and the ending of free movement that are at the heart of the Government’s Brexit.

The creative industries are quite particular—they are industries like no other—because they are fired by imagination, talent, creativity and invention. They exist worldwide without regard to border or territory. For success, they require the maximum conditions for international exchange and co-operation, which will allow them to develop and continue to thrive.

When it comes to supporting creative endeavour, our job as legislators is simple; indeed, it is only one thing. It is to try to create the maximal and optimal conditions for creativity to continue to develop, thrive and succeed. Pursuing Brexit is almost the opposite of that objective and that endeavour.

Let us just have a little, casual look at what is at risk here. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West said it—£92 billion is now generated by the creative industries for the UK economy. That is more than the automotive, life sciences, aerospace, and oil and gas industries combined. The creative industries are perhaps the fastest growing sector of our economy and I always like to say that these industries, and the growth we see from them, are like growing our economy on the imagination, the invention and the creativity of the British people.
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Is it not the case that the UK is a world leader in intellectual property and will remain so after Brexit? If we choose to, we can join the European Patent Organisation, which already has non-EU countries as members.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning that point, and I will come on to discuss it, because I chair the all-party parliamentary group on intellectual property and I have a few choice words to say about where we are going with all this.

I want to say first, however, because it is important, that we are in the top three of all recognised sectors worldwide when it comes to the creative economy and creative industries. The hon. Lady is right that that has been achieved because we have a huge reservoir of talent and ability in these islands. However, we are not unique in that respect; the UK is not exceptional in having large swathes of talent. Lots of other nations have that, too, but we have harnessed that creativity, to ensure that it is supported, developed and allowed to thrive. We have created the conditions that have allowed creative endeavour to succeed.

As the hon. Lady suggested, one of those conditions is the environment that we have created. We have intellectual property arrangements, ensuring that copyright is protected and that our artists are able to secure a return for their endeavour, their ingenuity and their ability. We have created an effective business and support environment that has allowed our artists to develop and flourish. We have innovated, we have developed international relationships, we have collaborated and we have recognised and valued the international dimension of creativity. Brexit? It could make you cry, with the damage that it will do to all that.

The creative sector is very concerned about the impact of Brexit on our creative economy. The Creative Industries Federation has found that 96%—I repeat, 96%—of its members believe that Brexit is a fundamentally bad thing that will critically impact on the sector.

I listened to the Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech. There were lots and lots of things that I deplored in what she said, but the thing that sickened me most was the casual way she dismissed the digital single market, as if it was some sort of Brussels wheeze that got in the way of our national liberation. The digital single market is all about harmonising arrangements across the European Union. As the largest creator of content in the whole of the European Union, we designed the digital single market for goodness’ sake, and now we are joyfully leaving it. We will now be a third party when it comes to European arrangements, which is a profoundly bad position to be in, and we will not be looked at favourably by a European Union that we have so recently rejected.

Already, European nations are rubbing their hands and carving up all the institutions that they will acquire. The French are at it; the Germans are at it; and the eastern Europeans are practically gleeful about the opportunities that their content markets will now have, because we are leaving the European Union.

However, the biggest issue and the biggest threat that this ridiculous, chaotic Brexit will pose for our creative industries is the ending of freedom of movement. The creative industries probably need freedom of movement more than any other sector within our economy, the Department for Exiting the European Union itself found that, when it looked at all this sort of thing. For investment, harmonisation and collaboration in developing markets, we require the type of arrangements that exist within the EU, and to casually walk away as if the digital single market did not matter a fig is something that we should be appallingly ashamed at.

I believe there is only one thing we can do. We will never get back to the optimal arrangements of the European Union, of the digital single market, of harmonising across Europe and creating the conditions in which our creative industries can develop, thrive and grow markets. But what we have to do, Minister, is to stay as closely aligned as possible to the European Union. Even though we are now a third party, and it is likely that we will be rejected and treated poorly, the Minister must ensure that whatever the EU does in the digital single market is replicated within the United Kingdom, because if he does not, we will be in some serious trouble.

The Minister must also ensure that the creative industries and intellectual property are at the heart of any bilateral trade arrangement that is put in place. As I said, I chair the all-party parliamentary group on intellectual property and I have seen the report from the Alliance for Intellectual Property that warns, once again, of a “cliff-edge” Brexit and the impact that it would have on IP rights, reciprocity and all the things to do with our audio-visual sector, with portability and all the good things that we have been able to secure. We will lose all that. It is not going to come back, but we have to make sure that we are properly aligned.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I want to put a question to the hon. Gentleman, not on IP but in his capacity as a well-known musician. Here, I am not talking about Runrig or Big Country, but—obviously—MP4. As a musician, he will probably know that only 2% of the music industry workforce has said that it feels Brexit will have a positive impact on their chances of work; 50% feared that it would have a negative impact. Does he agree that the Government should listen to their concerns and consider seeking a live music touring passport, which is one of several measures being discussed by the industry?

Pete Wishart: What we are now in the business of doing is finding solutions to mitigate the damage. The Minister will have to try and find ways to mitigate the loss of the optimal arrangements that we have in place now as members of the European Union. The touring passport is an example of how we can mitigate it. We are not going to get back to the ideal conditions. They have gone; for some reason, this Government are determined to pull us out of what is working for us, and is fundamentally and profoundly good for this sector. So arrangements will have to be put in place.

The hon. Lady will have seen the reports from UK Music, the Musicians’ Union and the Performers’ Alliance, which are all telling us that we are now in the position of trying to redress some of the damage.

Kerry McCarthy: What is important to consider when it comes to musicians and other creatives is that not everyone is from a huge money-making enterprise that
can afford agents, lawyers and managers. It is the smaller musicians and, I would argue, the musicians in the better bands—rather than the Coldplays, Mumfords and Adeles of this world—who will really struggle with this extra bureaucracy, any extra cost and any difficulty that is put in their way.

There is also a particular concern about the European Health Insurance Card and people’s access to healthcare when they are travelling around Europe, which may also go out of the window. That is something else that may not be the most obvious thing for musicians, or actors, to worry about, but it will affect them.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The ending of freedom of movement will not impact that harshly on some of the bigger, multinational companies—the big tech giants that dominate the sector now. What it will impact on are the small and medium-sized enterprises within our creative sector. It will also have an impact on start-up businesses and it could result in impeding risk and innovation in the medium and long term, thereby hobbling the very drivers of our creativity.

It is profoundly disappointing that we are leaving the European Union. We will have to look for measures that will mitigate that, and that will ensure that we are aligned as closely as possible with EU partners. The thing that depresses me most is that we have carefully crafted and created this environment that lets our artists, creators, inventors and musicians succeed worldwide, and be the best in the world, and how we can so casually throw that away for nothing—absolutely nothing—disappoints me. It is something that I still hope we will have the opportunity to consider once again.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): It might help the remaining two Members who wish to catch my eye to know that we have to start the wind-ups at 3.30. By my calculation that is about 10 minutes each. If there is a Division at 3.45, do not worry because we can add time.

3.39 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate. It is also a pleasure to follow such a passionate speech from my fellow musician, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). It is unusual for us both to be on the same stage as we have been exchanging places in MP4 recently.

The United Kingdom is a powerhouse when it comes to the creative industries and tourism; we punch far above our weight and we lead the world with some of the most innovative and advanced thinking that is out there in the creative sector. In 2016 the creative industries contributed a staggering £91.8 billion to the UK economy. The sector grew by 7.5% compared with growth of 3.5% for the UK economy as a whole. The sector provides for 6% of all UK jobs, and the total employment in the creative economy is around 3 million people. That includes around 76,000 jobs in Scotland and rising, contributing more than £4.5 billion to the Scottish economy. We in Scotland are proud to be a major contributor towards those figures.

Scotland saw the fastest growth in creative industries employment of all nations in the UK from 2015 to 2016, at about 13%. That is almost three times as high as in England, and more than England, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. A report commissioned for Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen in 2014 found that the creative industries in the north-east of Scotland, where my constituency of Banff and Buchan is located, employ around 6,000 people in more than 1,500 businesses. In the north-east of Scotland alone the sector generated annual revenues in excess of £600 million. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West has called this debate to discuss the future of our creative industries and tourism after the UK leaves the EU. I agree that there are challenges to overcome.

The creative industries rely on cross-border working, and many people in those industries travel regularly for work in the EU. As just as European citizens come here. We know that around 7% of people working in the creative sector are non-UK EU nationals, roughly in line with the average across all industries, but a significant number none the less. I ask the Government to keep the needs of this industry in mind when designing a future immigration system, whether that be the needs of the creative industry, tourism, hospitality or indeed those of the fishing and fish processing sectors and food and drink in general, which I have spoken up for in this place on several occasions.

So far I have talked mostly about the creative industries, but I also want to talk about tourism. For those who have not visited—I highly recommend that they do—my constituency of Banff and Buchan has 48 miles of stunning Scottish coastline, with one particular stretch, between Portsoy and Pennan, having been voted as one of the top 20 most iconic coastlines in the world. That stretch of coastline is interesting. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) talked extensively about the film industry. Portsoy was the site for the recent remake of the film “Whisky Galore!” and the old 17th-century harbour was almost a character in itself. Going back to the ’80s, “Local Hero”, a movie with Burt Lancaster, was set in Pennan. That goes to show how dramatic the coastline between those two villages is.

Also worth a special mention is the famous Aberdeenshire castle trail, which runs through my constituency via Duff House, Delgatie Castle and Fyvie Castle, among all the others across the north-east of Scotland. Banff and Buchan is also home to excellent heritage museums that highlight our traditional industries of fishing and farming. I should note that those museums show a living history, because those industries are far from dead in Banff and Buchan.

Golf is a popular pastime across Scotland—across the world, in fact—but Fraserburgh in my constituency has the seventh oldest, still operating, golf course in the world. National Geographic referred to the Banff and Buchan coast as “one of the world’s outstanding coastlines”.

The local tourism board markets the area as “Scotland’s dolphin coast.” It is home to around 130 bottlenose dolphins, as well as 15 other species of cetaceans, including minke whales in the summer and autumn months. On a recent visit to Portsoy I saw someone with a telescope looking out to sea. I thought they were looking at dolphins, but it turned out they were looking for a bird
that I had never heard of: the white-billed diver, which apparently comes south of Norway only very rarely. Portsoy is one of the few places south of Norway where that bird can be seen.

I very much hope that we can use Brexit as an opportunity to grow the industry and attract more visitors to our stunning shores. One example of this opportunity can be found in VAT rules. European VAT law currently limits the discretion of member states, including the UK before our exit, to set lower rates of VAT on some goods and services. That means we are limited in our ability to reduce so-called tourism tax below the current 20%. After we leave the EU, the Government will have the opportunity to reduce tourism VAT and make the UK an even more attractive destination for foreign visitors. I hope that they will consider seizing this opportunity and use Brexit as a springboard for our tourism industry.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome what the hon. Gentleman has said and congratulate him on painting a very attractive picture of his constituency. On the opportunities after Brexit with regard to VAT, as he knows, we have been promoting that issue in respect of Northern Ireland, but there can also be opportunities right across the United Kingdom. We have heard a lot of pessimism, but there are opportunities to be grasped, particularly in tourism, and I commend him for what he said about VAT.

David Duguid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that we have an opportunity to be a lot more positive about Brexit.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the possibility of varying VAT once we have left the European Union, but is he aware that 25 members of the European Union currently vary VAT on the tourism industry? In France, for example, it is only 9% for a hotel or a tourist attraction. It would be possible today for the UK Government to vary VAT on the tourism sector.

David Duguid: I have no reason to doubt the hon. Lady. That was not my understanding, but I will definitely look into that.

To conclude, we can be exceptionally proud of our creative and tourism industries in this country. I fully understand the concerns put forward by hon. Members as a result of Brexit, but I gently suggest that perhaps erring too much on the side of caution and pessimism is not necessarily the way to go. We are a world leader in this area, and that will not disappear overnight—far from it. The Government rightly speak about building a new global Britain after Brexit. Why not build it on the back of our sensational creative talent and beautiful destinations?

3.17 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing the debate and on a fantastic opening speech. I also want to express my disappointment that the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) is not in the Cabinet. He was overlooked on several occasions by Prime Ministers and, as we heard in his speech, he speaks from a position of experience and understanding of the industry. I think I speak for a lot of people who said they felt they had a friend when he was the Minister. I also want to congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is one half of the famous parliamentary rock band MP4: a classic line-up for a passionate speech. Once MP4 decide to go on that long-awaited British tour, we look forward to welcoming them to Blackwood Institute and Newbridge Memo and one of the larger venues that we can book.

Mrs Hodgson: Tickets cannot be stout.

Chris Evans: We have to pay them.

Last month I met Gail Renard, chair of the Writers’ Guild. She was one of several people who came to meet me to talk about concerns about the impact of Brexit on the creative industries. Gail is a very interesting character. She met John and Yoko at one of their famous bed-ins. As I am a big fan of the Beatles, our meeting went on from half an hour to two hours while she told me everything about John and Yoko and their fantastic life together. But the one thing she wanted to get across to me was the real concern about freedom of movement.

The Creative Industries Federation has recommended that the Government implement sufficient structures to replace freedom of movement. The problem for those of us who were remain Members of Parliament in leave constituencies is that when we knocked on doors we were told that the No. 1 issue was freedom of movement—we were going to take back control of our borders. As we have seen, not only in the creative industries but in others, we were told that there were simple solutions to complex problems. Many people did not know about access to the single market or the customs union. The issues were not properly explained, and that was the problem with the Brexit debate.

That is why we are where we are. The problem is that selling freedom of movement to our constituents will be difficult. When they see “freedom of movement,” they think about immigration. They worry about immigration, and that is a problem for a British success story. Let there be no doubt: the creative industry is a growing sector of the economy. It is worth £92 billion—up from £85 billion in 2015. The sector makes more than 5% of the UK’s gross value added product. However, all that would be impossible without European funding. If we are to lose funding from streams such as Creative Europe, as well as part of the workforce, when there is no more freedom of movement, the future of the creative industries looks bleak.

Earlier this year, entertainment industry leaders expressed concerns about freedom of movement and other post-Brexit uncertainties at a House of Lords Committee sitting. It is high time the Government listened to them. The chief executive of One Dance UK has said that freedom of movement is a vital part of its business model. Its members travel to the EU for work eight times a year, on average. A poll conducted by the Musicians Union when it held an event here a year ago with Equity found that only 2% of the music industry believed that Brexit would be good for them. An industry that produced the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and countless other bands that broke America is worried about the future. However, the key issue expressed across the industry is that, because of unique working patterns that involve a lot of travel, freedom of movement is necessary for its continued success.
I agree with the right hon. Member for Wantage that Prime Ministers have not discussed the arts very seriously. The creative industries seem to be a bolt-on. They are not taken as a major contributor to the British economy. The sector provides a wide variety of jobs and career opportunities for people across the UK and Europe. Harry Potter, James Bond and Marvel films have been some of the highest grossing productions of the past decade. Only this week Robert Downey Jr. was welcomed to south Wales for the filming of a new Marvel film. We want to welcome more people like him. Many of those productions have been filmed primarily in the UK and across Europe, with a significant British and European workforce. In 2016 alone there were 131,000 EU nationals working in the British creative industries. Freedom of movement for workers in the creative industries is key to the success of those projects.

If we lose freedom of movement, we run the risk of limiting the production of international projects in the UK. Can you imagine, Mr Bone, if that situation affected the banking, construction or manufacturing industries? I am sure that the debate would be packed with speakers, but the creative industries seem to fall to the back of the queue. It can go on no longer. If international film production companies or musicians using large European workforces believe that it will be too difficult or costly for EU nationals to enter the UK to work, they will simply go elsewhere. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West. The Minister and I will probably bump into each other in the hallway tomorrow, as we are neighbours, and perhaps I can discuss the matter with him then. I would like the Government, if they take the creative industries seriously, to make two announcements. As I explained earlier, I would like officials from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to be seconded to the Department for Exiting the European Union. I would also like the Culture Secretary to set up a Cabinet working group on Brexit, given the importance of the creative industries to the economy. Outside Parliament, I would like representatives of the creative workforce to be on the Creative Industries Council, which is currently chaired by John McVay of Pact. No creative trade unions are on it. I would like Equity, the Musicians Union and other creative industries unions to be invited on to it. The issue is too important. We are now perhaps 18 months away from Brexit. As in other areas, there is a need for certainty, and I look to the Minister to provide it.

Kerry McCarthy: Is my hon. Friend aware of the EU quota rules by which at the moment TV broadcasters are required to invest 20% of their revenues in making or commissioning original content, and to spend at least 50% of their time showing European works? If British works are no longer included in that 50% quota, companies with a choice as to where they make productions will not come to Britain. They will need to make sure they are made in a European country.

Chris Evans: That is an extremely important point. What do we want to see on our television screens: low-budget foreign television productions or the high-quality drama and film productions we currently enjoy in this country? My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) will know that Wales has become a hub for BBC drama productions and for film, just as Scotland has—and Northern Ireland, with “Game of Thrones”. There is a real concern that we are almost gutting the industry.

There is also a knock-on effect. Music tours and festivals have a huge impact on larger companies but also on cafés, bars, hotels and other hospitality industries, and they attract huge crowds. We seem to be cutting our legs from under us. If limits are imposed, local enterprises will suffer. The Government need to ensure that there are either exemptions or sufficient structures in place to ensure continued employment and career growth for British and European workers in the entertainment and creative industries. The Government’s recent report on the creative industries gave absolutely no information on their plans for the sector’s future. The sector often has to plan out its projects far in advance, so it needs assurances now that its projects and workforces will not be hindered by our leaving the European Union.

There should be no doubt: there is a lot of money in the creative industries. Netflix and Amazon are competing for the same space; it is a great time for the industry. We must realise how important the creative industries are. Performing and visual arts, and film, TV and video are second and third respectively only to the IT, software and computer services sector. In 2015 those two sectors combined employed 517,000 people—20% of the entire creative industry workforce—and their economic outputs amounted to £24.4 billion, or 28% of the entire output. We cannot pretend that Brexit will not affect that. Many of those projects rely on freedom of movement. The Government should bring clarity to that.

I intervened earlier on the hon. Member for Edinburgh West. The Minister and I will probably bump into each other in the hallway tomorrow, as we are neighbours, and perhaps I can discuss the matter with him then. I would like the Government, if they take the creative industries seriously, to make two announcements. As I explained earlier, I would like officials from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to be seconded to the Department for Exiting the European Union. I would also like the Culture Secretary to set up a Cabinet working group on Brexit, given the importance of the creative industries to the economy. Outside Parliament, I would like representatives of the creative workforce to be on the Creative Industries Council, which is currently chaired by John McVay of Pact. No creative trade unions are on it. I would like Equity, the Musicians Union and other creative industries unions to be invited on to it. The issue is too important. We are now perhaps 18 months away from Brexit. As in other areas, there is a need for certainty, and I look to the Minister to provide it.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for keeping to time. The House is expected to divide at 3.54. That may help Front-Bench spokesmen.

3.27 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing this important debate. As she said, tourism and the creative industries play a hugely significant part in the UK and Scottish economies. She is right to point out that Brexit could have hugely damaging consequences for both those sectors. It is incumbent on the UK Government to ensure that tourism and our creative industries are not damaged by Brexit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who made an excellent speech, hit the nail on the head when he said the creative industries are like no other. They are fired by imagination, talent and invention, and they exist to be appreciated, enjoyed and transferred across audiences, without regard to frontiers or borders. I fear that he was right when he said that leaving the European Union will be an absolute disaster for our creative and tourism industries. As has been said often in the debate, my hon. Friend speaks not just from a wealth of political experience but as...
someone who enjoyed a highly successful career as a musician in two of Scotland’s finest bands—Runrig and Big Country—although his credentials are perhaps now in question as he is a member of MP4, along with the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). I suggest to both of them that they may want to get their European tour in sooner rather than later.

My hon. Friend and I, and indeed all SNP Members, desperately want Scotland to remain inclusive, tolerant outward-looking country that it is, and we are firmly of the opinion that that can best be done by protecting and maintaining our existing relationship with Europe. The free movement of people within the European Union—we have heard much about that today, including in the good contribution from the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans)—enriches the cultural life of everyone, not just in Scotland or the United Kingdom, but across the European continent. Anything that threatens that is, in my opinion, to be deeply regretted and is a backward and retrograde step.

Scotland’s creative community has benefited enormously from four decades of support and collaboration with our European partners. As well as culturally enriching us and bringing the welcome free movement of people, it has brought access to the European funding from which Scottish cultural and creative organisations have benefited over the past 40 years. It is entirely understandable that fear of losing access to that enormous pool of talent and vital pool of EU funding is causing huge concern in the creative sector. With restrictions likely to be placed on the free movement of people, including artists and performers, when asked before the EU referendum in 2016, 96% of members of the Creative Industries Federation stated that their preference was for the UK to remain in the European Union.

The latest figures released by the federation show that the concerns felt two years ago about Brexit are as strong as ever. In the most recent report, published in January, 80% of respondents said that they were not confident that Britain will maintain its leading global reputation post-Brexit—indeed, 21% said that a “no deal” outcome would make them consider moving part or all of their business out of the UK, and 40% said that a “no deal” outcome would be harmful to their ability to export. Grave concerns about the ability to continue to attract the best and brightest to work in the UK post-Brexit were laid out at the end of last year, with three quarters of firms surveyed saying that they employed EU nationals. A remarkable two thirds of those firms believed that they could not currently fill those posts with UK workers. Indeed, almost 60% of companies in the Creative Industries Federation survey said that they were already facing a skills shortage, even with current access to EU workers.

Those findings are not isolated examples of the grave concerns in the industry about Brexit. The significant skills shortages in the UK creative industries was also highlighted in a report by UK Music. As the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) highlighted, when UK Music asked its members what impact the UK leaving the EU would have on them, only 2% thought that Brexit would have a positive impact on their chances of work, whereas 50% feared that leaving the EU would have a negative impact. Such findings are repeated across the sector. Equity, the trade union that represents more than 42,000 performers and creative workers, conducted a survey that showed that 46% of UK bids for European funding are accepted, making the UK second only to Germany. It also showed that the UK receives 24% of all European Research Council grants. The message coming loud and clear from our creative sector is that the UK benefits from being a full member of the European Union. There is consensus across our creative industries that Brexit will be very bad for business, and I urge the Government to listen, engage fully, and act on the well-founded concerns and well-documented reality facing our creative sector as we approach Brexit.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West skilfully and rightly highlighted the link between tourism and the creative industries, and specifically the Edinburgh International Festival which, as she rightly said, is a gateway to the rest of Scotland and the UK, as hundreds of thousands of visitors disperse from Edinburgh to every corner of the country. Along with others, their presence has a massive impact on our hospitality sector. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) spoke about tourism in his constituency, which has 46 miles of coastline. I do not want to get into a debate or argument about whose coastline is bigger, but the coastline of Argyll and Bute is longer than the coastline of France. We know what we are talking about when it comes to having a coastline; we know what it is to have an important tourist industry.

Like much of Scotland, my constituency relies heavily on tourism, not just for the visitor pound, but for employment. We have some of the most breathtaking and unspoilt scenery anywhere in the world, and we are investing heavily in whisky tourism because massive numbers of European visitors come to Argyll and Bute every year to visit our vast range of distilleries. Indeed, whisky tourism is so great, and the whisky industry booming to such an extent, that no fewer than a dozen distilleries have opened across Scotland in the last few years and no fewer than 40 are in various stages of planning and construction, and hoping to come on stream in the next couple of decades. As we speak, tourism is booming. We in Argyll and Bute need those tourists to come, but I fear that Brexit will do nothing to help, and indeed will be hugely detrimental.

Just this week there was another significant investment in whisky tourism. That is welcome, but let us remember that there is hardly an hotel in Scotland that does not rely on the hard work of our EU nationals. Although it is not a patch on Argyll and Bute, Perth and North Perthshire is also a particularly beautiful part of the world, and my hon. Friend will be aware of the contribution made by the tourism industry and our highly valued EU nationals to the economy of his constituency. I commend him on his passionate defence of the digital single market, and I agree that the Prime Minister’s seeming delight at abandoning that vehicle for investment, harmonisation, collaboration and market development was bewildering to anyone who has ever engaged with the creative industries. I share the concerns of the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) about leaving the digital single market, and I sincerely hope that his voice will be heard by those on his side of the House.

The UK’s creative and cultural industries have benefited greatly—economically, creatively, and culturally—from being part of the European Union for the past 40 years. Nothing will improve the arrangements that we currently
enjoy as a member of the EU, and the Government must redouble their efforts to ensure that this world-class sector is not destroyed by Brexit. It is glaringly obvious that remaining a member of the single market at the very least is the best way to do that, so that this country is still able to attract and keep the creative talent that is vital to allow people in that industry to work, perform and exhibit in this country, free from unnecessary barriers. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s explanation for why leaving the single market could ever be good for the creative industries.

3.38 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I apologise to the Minister and the House, but because the SNP spokesperson spoke for 11 minutes that leaves only 16 minutes before the Division, two of which must be devoted to the person who secured the debate, so it looks as though we will have to come back after the vote.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing today’s debate. She rightly pointed out the huge workforce challenges that Brexit presents to the creative industries and tourism and she made important points about musicians and the need for a single EU work permit. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) who in his characteristically self-deprecatory, tongue-in-cheek speech made some serious points about the importance of the creative industries. Quite rightly, he spoke about the film tax relief in which he played a big part, as well as the importance of protecting the single digital market post-Brexit. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend—I shall call him that—the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). He described tourism and the creative industries as sitting awkwardly together. I rarely disagree with him, but I do on that point because much tourism is driven by culture and our creative industries, including the music industry, which he knows well, theatre and television. In my constituency of Cardiff West, the production, such as “Doctor Who” and “Sherlock” has drawn tourism into the area. I recently visited Belfast and saw the “Game of Thrones” studios, and although I cannot tell Members anything about the studios because I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement, I can say that they have brought many visitors into Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire also rightly pointed out that the creative industries are the fastest growing sector of our economy, and he made a startling revelation. I have always wondered what makes him cry, and we now know it is Brexit that makes him weep when he is alone at home. He made a substantial case for our creative industries and rightly mentioned UK Music, ably led by its chief executive Michael Dugher, and the Musicians Union, under Horace Trubridge’s new leadership. He was rudely interrupted—or intervened on—by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who continued her vendetta against Coldplay. I think she should remember that many people are employed in our creative industries as a result of Coldplay’s success and be careful not to tarnish one of our strongest performing bands, lest she cause unemployment in those industries.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who, as he pointed out, has recently been super-subbing in MP4 on television, told us about his constituency, with its golf and its beautiful coastline and how it is the home of the white billed diver. His description made it sound like the garden of Eden, but if “Whisky Galore” was filmed there, it might also have been the place where they invented original sin. I congratulate him on a very good speech and on making the point about VAT—although, as was pointed out to him, that is actually within the gift of the Government, whether or not we are a member of the European Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) mentioned the Blackwood Miners’ Institute—I was there with him at the Manic Street Preachers homecoming gig a few years ago—and made some very important points about freedom of movement and about arts and the creative industries. It is important not to make a distinction between the subsidised arts and the creative industries. One of the strengths of what has happened in recent years is that those two things have been brought together into one viewpoint. The film industry receives tax credits, as the right hon. Member for Wantage pointed out, and yes, some of our theatres receive subsidies via the Arts Council, but they are all part of the same ecology that produces our fantastic creative industries and makes us a world leader in music, theatre, film and so on. The right hon. Gentleman also made the very important point about ensuring that the Creative Industries Council has workforce representation on it, which I have been campaigning for from the Front Bench for some time. The Government said that once they had published their creative industries strategy they would encourage the Creative Industries Council to have that representation, and I hope to hear from the Minister what he now intends to do about that.

I will respond to the debate more broadly by saying that the creative industries obviously face a real challenge from Brexit, as does the tourism industry. Like many in this room, I voted remain—unlike you, Mr Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that when I sit in this Chair, I have no views about anything other than about keeping him in order.

Kevin Brennan: And if you believe that, Mr Bone, you are an impartial Chair at all times. I completely accept that.

I also voted against triggering article 50, partly because of the huge challenges it presents to our creative industries. Just recently I met with a major broadcaster which, because of the loss of the status of licensing across the European Union single market, is moving 700 jobs out of the UK, to Amsterdam, Luxembourg or Dublin. It has already decided to do that because it needs to be sure that if it is licensed in one country it is licensed right across the European Union.

Since 2007, according to the Government’s own figures in an answer from the Minister, the creative industries sector has received something in the realm of £190 million in European Union funding from the European regional development fund alone, most of which has been spent in the nations and regions of the UK, including about £60 million in Yorkshire. That is much more redistributive spending on the creative industries and the arts sector that we often find from other sources of funding. Local authorities have suffered huge disproportionate cuts in
the arts and in tourism. In tourism, the biggest cuts have been in local authorities, with more than 50% of cuts in tourism employees since 2009 being in local authorities. That is a huge issue.

My critique of the Government is that their recently announced sector deal for the creative industries is insufficient. They claim that it amounted to a £150-million package, but only £25 million or so is not money that has previously been announced. That is not the scale of ambition required. Also, announcements have been made recently about continuing with funding in relation to the music and dance scheme, the dance and drama awards, cultural programmes and so on, but none of that money is genuinely new either— it is just a continuation of what is already happening. The Government need to step up with greater ambition, along the lines of the Bazalgette report that was released last year. They need to do more on the workforce, on free movement, on skills and on freelancers. Lots of people working in the creative industries are freelancers; how about getting hold of the Bill that has been introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) to give freelancers shared parental leave? That is a great campaign. The Government have said that they are reviewing that, and I urge the Minister to think more about it and talk with his colleagues, in order to make it a reality. The Government could do more by having a cultural capital fund, as the Labour party promised in our manifesto. They could do lots more on all those sorts of issues.

On tourism, I will obviously say that Cardiff is the most beautiful part of the country and encourage right hon. and hon. Members to visit but, on a serious note, I have been travelling around the country to different tourist locations to talk to the industry about Brexit and the issues faced. The industry was unanimous in that devaluation is not the way forward as a policy on tourism. Britain will not become the most successful tourism sector it can be simply by relying on devaluing the pound and going for a cheap offer. We must ensure that we have quality, and that includes investment in skills, in our cultural heritage and in the workforce.

It is also about time to look again at the idea of social tourism, which was so interestingly and ably promoted by an all-party parliamentary group back in 2011. Its report, called “Giving Britain a break: inquiry into the social and economic benefits of social tourism”, was about ensuring that we use up the spare capacity in our domestic tourism industry to help those families who most need a break. It would be good to see the Government introduce a social element in to their tourism policy, to ensure that families really benefit and our tourism industry benefits from being able to use up its spare capacity.

I do not want to take up much more time, because time is pressing. If we are going down this road to Brexit, a road that many of us in this particular debate do not seem to have supported, we must ensure that the Government show a great deal more ambition in relation to our creative industry and tourism sectors.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. We probably have about four or five minutes before the Division bell goes.

I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and congratulate her on calling this important debate. I do not think I can do as well as the shadow Minister in name-dropping various pop groups and organisations that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) might have been a member of in his earlier and current days, but I can certainly say that Brexit is happening. The people have spoken in the referendum.

I am much more optimistic than the hon. Member for Edinburgh West and many in the Chamber at the moment. We have heard a good deal of negativity and pessimism this afternoon, but I much prefer the view taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), who is no longer in his place, who spoke about the opportunities and the optimism. It is always helpful to see glasses as half full rather than half empty.

I welcome the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, and thank them for stimulating a lively debate in which the crucial role of the UK’s creative and tourism sectors has been recognised—I think that on that subject we are all in agreement. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) made his address to the Chamber—with his usual charm, if I may say so. He is certainly missed in the sector, contrary to his self-deprecating remarks. He was Minister for some six years, and I think I am right in saying that the industry wrote a group letter to a national newspaper saying just how very much he would be missed. Frankly, his departure provoked an extraordinary letter of appreciation.

My right hon. Friend and others mentioned supporting arts in the regions. In this coming financial year, 75% of Arts Council England’s funding will be going outside of the London area. The Department is supporting the cultural development fund and the northern cultural regeneration fund. A lot of money—rightly so—is going out of London and into the regions.

As the Minister for the arts, heritage and tourism, I am responding to this debate on the effects of the UK leaving the EU on the tourism and creative industry sectors. We have created the best in this country, as many Members from all parts of the House have mentioned. In my view, we had the best before 1973, and we will have the best after we leave. I am also happy to say that my Department already works across Government, including with civil servants at the Department for Exiting the European Union, and there is no reason to think that we will not continue to do so. In fact, we always look to work together.

I will make some overall points about the sectors and the challenges of EU exit, and I will then respond in turn to some of the key issues raised by colleagues. I recognise that there is particular interest in the devolved arrangements for both sectors following EU exit. I am keen that the future arrangement works for all sides. I am particularly looking forward to meeting colleagues from the devolved Administrations this Thursday in Edinburgh to discuss their particular concerns about tourism in more detail. I want it to be an ongoing discussion. If I do not have time to talk about that ongoing discussion in the limited time available this afternoon, I will be pleased to follow up in writing.

Members will be aware that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee recently published its report, “The potential impact of Brexit on the creative industries,
tourism and the digital single market”. Some of the points raised in this debate echo the conclusions of that report. I have noted those conclusions, and the Government will submit our response in due course in the normal way.

To set the scene, Members will be aware that the sectors that DCMS represents are an absolutely huge success story for the UK—there is no doubt about that—and tourism and the creative industries are no exception. To a large degree, their success has gone hand in hand: tourism helps the creative industries thrive, as the shadow Minister mentioned, and vice versa. As an example of the close relationship, UK Music’s “Wish you were here” report for 2017 stated that there were 12.5 million music tourists in 2016—that is music tourists alone—and nearly 50,000 full-time jobs were sustained by music tourism. It is huge. In 2016, tourism was worth more than £65 billion to the economy, and it is still growing every year. In fact, it is growing exponentially. Provisional figures suggest that 2017—we have most of the figures—was a record-breaking year, with just under 39 million overseas visitors to the UK. That was an increase of 3% on 2016, which was itself a record year. The situation is extremely promising.

The creative industries are also a major cultural and economic success for the UK. It is a high-value, high-growth sector that was worth nearly £92 billion to the economy in 2016. These sectors play an important role in showing the world the very best of Britain and in strengthening global relationships. We are No. 1 in the world for soft power. There are many reasons for that, but one of the main ones is the strength of the sector. The sectors also play a role in demonstrating that we are open for business.

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I am sorry, I do not have time.

We are not resting on our laurels. As Members will be aware, DCMS recently published its sector deal for the creative industries. That important piece of work sets out an ambitious proposal on how Government and industry will work together to accelerate growth and productivity. The sector deal is a landmark document, and I urge Members to look at it if they have not already. It recognises the critical importance of the creative industries to the UK’s economy, society and global influence. We intend to publish a similar deal for the tourism sector in due course.

I would now like to focus on the freedom of movement point that was raised by one or two Members, as it is a key issue that colleagues and stakeholders have raised. The UK tourism and creative industry sectors have strong ties with the European Union. There are a large number of international workers in both sectors and they regularly move across the EU. EU nationals form a significant proportion of the domestic tourism market.

3.55 pm
Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4.10 pm
On resuming—

Michael Ellis: As I was saying, the UK’s creative industries likewise require access to skilled workers from the European Union. It is important that UK and EU workers can quickly and efficiently transfer across member states on time-limited projects such as film co-productions, or as touring musicians and performers.

I have spoken to a number of tourism industry leaders since taking on this role, to build a strong understanding of the challenges and opportunities on freedom of movement and to ensure that the sector can continue to have access to the necessary skills. We are working closely with the Home Office, Revenue and Customs and the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that they are well informed of these issues. The new immigration system will not come into place until 2021, following the agreed implementation period. During that time, existing arrangements will broadly continue to apply to EU citizens coming to the UK to visit, work or study.

I turn now to the UK’s reputation as a tourism destination. Tourism continues to be a significant success for the UK. In 2017, the World Economic Forum found that the UK had the fifth most competitive tourism market in the world. Europe is our key market. The projected figures for 2017 are that, of the 39 million visits to the UK, nearly two thirds were by EU residents. Outbound as well as inbound visits are important and, similarly, of the 71 million visits overseas by UK residents, it is projected that three quarters were to other EU countries. Clearly, it is in both the UK’s and the EU’s interests to maintain this ease of travel and smooth entry at the border. We are also working closely with industry partners to promote transparency for consumers, and internationally to promote open global markets.

We are pressed for time, but another matter that I want to mention is access to EU funding streams for tourism and the creative industries. To provide some certainty for our sectors in the near future, Members will know that at the joint press conference between the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and Michel Barnier on 19 March this year it was confirmed that UK organisations could continue to bid for EU programmes until December 2020. Details of the next multiannual financial framework are expected later this year, and that will provide greater clarity on our position. We will seek to stay beyond December 2020 in programmes that are mutually beneficial to the UK and EU and will continue to actively investigate the funding streams that support our sectors.

On the regulatory framework, the UK and EU already have close regulatory alignment built on trust in one another’s institutions. That co-operation will continue. Discussions include European legislation on consumer protection as well as regulations on temporary working arrangements.

Brexit presents both challenges and opportunities for these sectors, as it does for the whole of the United Kingdom. Although much of the public debate focuses on the challenge, I have huge confidence in the tourism and creative industry sectors and in their abilities to capitalise on the exciting opportunities. I am keen that the Government should continue to support tourism—they will, so long as I am Minister in this Department—and the creative industries at this very important time, listening to the views of our stakeholders. I would likewise be pleased to stay engaged with parliamentary colleagues.
on this topic. I firmly believe that tourism and the creative industries will continue to be a major economic driver for the UK and will only grow in importance in the years ahead. There is no reason to believe that the upward trends will not continue as we exit the European Union. Our culture and creativity play a huge role in making the UK a highly attractive place to visit and work.

4.14 pm

Christine Jardine: I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in this debate for rehearsing all the arguments and laying out clearly why tourism and the creative industries need protection and special measures to help them through the challenges they are going to face if Brexit goes ahead—everything from the impassioned plea from the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for our creative industries as world leaders, to the argument that I confess I did not mean to spark between the hon. Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) about who has the most beautiful constituency. I would not like to comment on either of them, except to say they are both wrong—it is Edinburgh.

I hope the Minister will take on board everything he has heard from this side of the Chamber today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
said to be fuming at his behaviour. Luckily, he had no immediate health problems as a result. However, had he drunk any more, it is possible that it could have caused cardiac arrest or other serious health problems. There are currently no protections or measures to limit the amount of these drinks that a child can purchase. It is a danger to young people and something that needs to be addressed.

One of the biggest problems is the way these drinks are promoted and advertised to children and young people. They are marketed as giving boosts to physical or mental performance, which means that children are purchasing and drinking them before school or sports, in the perverse belief that they are somehow improving their mental or physical health.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend might be aware that Ross High School in Tranent in my constituency introduced “fizz-free February” in 2017, stopping the sale of energy and carbonated drinks. They carried it on, with the consent of the pupils, and all the high schools in East Lothian joined fizz-free February in 2018. It is a voluntary action taken by the schools and children. Does my hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to empower schools?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I congratulate those schools on showing leadership and having a beneficial effect on children’s ability to learn in school. He is absolutely right that the key is Government policy. There is too much confusion, and we should not rely on schools and shops preventing children from accessing energy drinks.

Studies show that regularly consuming large quantities of caffeine can result in increased blood pressure, sleep disturbance, headaches and stomach aches. Energy drinks have also been proven to affect children’s mental health, causing self-destructive behaviour, insomnia, problems with behavioural regulation and poor lifestyle behaviours, such as a poor diet and the consumption of fast food. It has also been shown that children who drink energy drinks are more likely to consume alcohol, smoke or take drugs in later life. Governments of all parties have introduced important and much-needed measures to tackle childhood obesity and poor dietary health, but I believe that if we leave this avenue open, children will be at risk of poor health impacts, both now and in their future life.

I am sure that many companies will say that they do not directly market their products to children, but energy drinks are highly sweetened and are often sold for as little as 30p, and the packaging sometimes contains marketing techniques such as video game rewards. In addition, studies have found that children perversely associate these sometimes unhealthy drinks with sporting activities. Many of the larger energy drink manufacturers sponsor extreme sports events such as the Red Bull cliff diving series, or major sporting occasions such as the Carabao cup.

Energy drinks are often associated with children’s favourite sports or a general culture of glamorous, adventurous, risk-taking behaviour. Many carry names such as Relentless, Monster and Boost, which often look thrilling and risky to children and have associations with danger and excitement. Young people report that they see such products advertised on television, in video games and through sports sponsorships, despite pledges from advertisers to reduce such advertising. In a recent study organised by Teesside University, in conjunction with four other universities in the north-east, one child said:

“If you’re playing on your tablet or something and you’re playing a game, an advert pops up for Relentless.”

Will the Minister promise to look at ways of strengthening the rules on how those companies advertise and promote themselves to children?

Consuming energy drinks affects not just children’s health but their education. Many teachers, teaching unions and school staff have expressed the view that students should not be able to purchase such drinks. A survey carried out by the NASUWT found that 13% of teachers and school leaders identified energy drinks as the main contributor to poor behaviour that they had witnessed. Teachers have previously said that such drinks are a contributory factor to classroom violence and falling asleep in class.

Many schools have already prohibited energy drinks from school grounds, but that is not enough on its own. Teachers need Government support. Banning energy drinks from schools does not prevent students from drinking them off site and then coming into school. A study commissioned by the Scottish Government found that one in four 13 to 15-year-olds purchased an energy drink when they went out of school at lunch time. Will the Minister commit to supporting teachers and schools by joining them in prohibiting children from buying such drinks?

I am sure that many Members have seen in the press that retailers such as Waitrose, Tesco and WHSmith, and many cinema chains and petrol garages, have already stopped selling energy drinks to under-16s. I welcome those steps and agree that they are important, but they are not enough. The Association of Convenience Stores estimates that 53% of independent convenience retailers do not sell energy drinks, but the lack of clarity about how often children can purchase and drink them means that there are still hundreds, if not thousands, of outlets where children can buy such drinks with no protection.

I recently heard of an offer that enabled children to buy four cans of an energy drink for £1. I heard that one child was going in, buying four drinks and splitting them among his friends. They are readily accessible and very cheap, and there is not enough clarity or regulation, so retailers do not know how to handle it.

It is not enough for the Government to leave it to retailers, because only responsible retailers will take the responsible steps. That would leave children’s health to the lottery of whether their local shop will sell the drinks to them. When asked about this issue previously in Parliament and in written questions, Ministers have said that they will follow it and look at any scientific evidence, but there is already ample scientific evidence—at least 11 qualitative and quantitative studies have been carried out on the subject.

Teesside University has recently joined four other universities in the north-east to carry out research on this subject. It found that such drinks are readily available in many local shops, and that own-brand energy drinks are among the cheapest drinks available—nearly always
cheaper than water. It also found that branding, marketing and social norms are important factors in shaping children’s consumption choices. Children have found that the information on the packaging is sometimes confusing. One child taking part in the study said:

“Some younger kids, they read the label but say they don’t know what….4 x sugar means. They don’t know what it means—is that a lot or is it not a lot?”

The Government must take further steps to better educate young people about food choices and the effect that sugar, caffeine and other substances can have on the body. When asked about this topic previously, Ministers have referred to the upcoming childhood obesity plan, which the Minister is taking forward. Will he clarify whether the Government envisage changes to the sale of energy drinks being part of the obesity strategy, or will there be separate measures? Will he meet me to discuss this issue further?

We know that consuming energy drinks is not healthy for children, that teachers and parents want them prohibited, that many retailers do not believe it is right that children can purchase them and that, given that the packaging carries a warning, energy drink producers themselves do not think children should be consuming them. The Government have said in the past that they are willing to look at the issue, but will the Minister commit to listening to parents, teachers, manufacturers, retailers and health campaigners such as Jamie Oliver and implement a full ban on the sale of these highly caffeinated and, frankly, highly dangerous energy drinks to children?

4.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): All good things come to those who wait. After the delay, here we are.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing the debate. I know that there are competing pressures on Members’ time today, but I am surprised that there are not more here for this debate on a big, emerging issue that is gathering momentum. My ministerial colleagues and I have been asked about it at Health questions previously—perhaps that is what the hon. Lady did. I thank her for introducing the debate and for setting out the case very clearly.

We all agree that the regular consumption of energy drinks by children is not appropriate at all. I say that as one who has young children. That applies especially to those under 16, as energy drinks often contain a lot of caffeine and sugar—I will talk about both. They are often coupled with other sources of caffeine and sugar in children’s diets. Too much of a good thing, or too much of a bad thing in this case, can lead to difficulties sleeping and headaches—I have heard stories about that—and there is obviously an effect in terms of tooth decay and weight gain. In addition to the health and wellbeing impacts of the risk to children of consuming large volumes of energy drinks, there is anecdotal evidence, notably from schools, that their consumption has a very negative impact on children’s behaviour and, in turn, their learning. The hon. Lady gave an example from her constituency, and I have heard about countless cases as a constituency MP and through the media. It is right that we are having this debate and that we continue to examine the issue of the consumption of energy drinks by children, but this is not just about children: adults should also look at the small print on such drinks, because too much is not good for anybody.

The hon. Lady gave some figures, and I will give some of my own. A 250 ml can of an energy drink usually contains about 80 mg of caffeine, which is similar to two or three cans of cola, a mug of instant coffee or, as the hon. Lady said, an espresso. Some of the smaller energy “shot” products contain twice as much caffeine.

EU food information regulations require specific labelling for high-caffeine drinks and foods where caffeine has been added for a psychological effect. Such labelling helps consumers to identify foods with a high caffeine content where they may not expect to find it. The British Soft Drinks Association’s code of practice states that high-caffeine soft drinks should not be marketed, advertised or promoted to children under 16. It is right about that, of course. Amid growing public concern, and in line with that voluntary industry code, we have recently seen major supermarkets banning the sale of such products to under-16s. When companies do the right thing, I always think it is worth putting that on the record. Asda, Aldi, Co-op Food, Lidl, Morrisons, Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Waitrose have all voluntarily decided to ban the sale of these products to under-16s and they deserve credit for that action.

It is important that the Government remain open-minded and continue to look at any new evidence that emerges. I promise the House that we certainly are and we certainly will. The European Food Safety Authority published an opinion on the safety of caffeine less than two years ago, in May 2015. It derived safe daily intakes for adults and children and concluded that, when consumed at those intake levels, caffeine raises no serious concerns for the general healthy population, but based on current evidence on caffeine safety, the Food Standards Agency, for which I have ministerial responsibility, advises that children or other people sensitive to caffeine should consume caffeine only in moderation. That advice has remained unchanged up to this point. The hon. Lady may be aware that in March, the Science and Technology Committee launched an inquiry into the consumption of energy drinks. We welcome the inquiry very much and we recently submitted our evidence on behalf of the Government—I know she will look for that.

In the light of renewed, obvious and justified public concern, recently the Food Standards Agency has undertaken a literature review to identify if any new robust scientific studies have been conducted since the 2015 EFSA review that I mentioned. On 20 March, the results of the review and the information provided by the #notforchildren campaign were presented to the UK’s committee on toxicity of chemicals in food, consumer products and the environment, for consideration. In particular, the committee is now considering whether a review of caffeine consumption in children and adolescents is required to ascertain whether the studies published since the EFSA opinion add significantly to the body of evidence.

Retailers have acted to restrict the consumption of energy drinks. I am pleased to note that alongside all the supermarkets that I mentioned, other prominent retailers such as WHSmith and Boots, which have a significant high street presence in my constituency and, I am sure, in the hon. Lady’s, have also voluntarily acted
to restrict their sales to under-16s. She mentioned this but it is worth repeating that many small retailers, which may be seen as the villain in the piece—I do not think that the facts bear that out—restrict the sales of energy drinks to children. I understand that around half the Association of Convenience Stores’ nearly 50,000 shops have implemented a voluntary ban on the sale of energy drinks to under-16s. Good for them and thanks to them.

In schools, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the hon. Member for Redcar, energy drinks are not permitted within the school food standards. Schools have the power to confiscate, retain or dispose of any item that is banned by the school rules, which can include energy drinks. Some schools already do that. I was very interested to hear about fizz-free February—I will google it later and see where it takes me.

The school food standards came into force in January 2015. They define the food and drinks that must be provided, those that are restricted and those that must not be provided. They apply to all food and drink provided to pupils on and off school premises. I am due to see the Schools Minister shortly about another matter, but I will discuss this issue with him and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it.

Martin Whitfield: Does the Minister have any comments about the advertising of high-energy drinks through computer games and on social media?

Steve Brine: That is an emerging policy area that I am taking very close interest in, as the Public Health Minister and someone with an interest in the public health and child obesity agendas. In the same way that the major retailers that I put on the record have shown what I suggest is a great deal of corporate responsibility, I suggest that the producers of these drinks might also take a long, hard look and consider their social and moral responsibility, so that they can stay within the spirit of the guidelines.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): In the spirit of co-operation, because there was a mention of the Scottish Government’s study, what engagement has the Minister had with Public Health Ministers in the devolved nations? Does he agree that sharing ideas, approaches and policies across the UK and beyond will be the best way to tackle this issue?

Steve Brine: I completely agree. Personally, I have not had that engagement, but I will check with my officials and I will be surprised if they have not. If the hon. Lady wishes to facilitate that engagement, I would be very happy.

I want to touch briefly on sugar. Many energy drinks contain high levels of sugar. Studies conducted in children and adolescents indicate that higher consumption of sugars, including the sugar-sweetened drinks that we are talking about, is also associated with a greater risk of tooth decay, weight gain and all the other health impacts—look at the challenges that we have in the health service with type 2 diabetes. Latest figures continue to show that our childhood obesity rates remain far too high. Almost a quarter of children are overweight or obese when they start primary school in England, rising to around a third by the time they leave. That is not good enough and the Government and I are far from happy about it. Intakes of sugar are currently more than double the recommended amount across all age groups. Teenagers are consuming just over 14% of their energy from sugar, and over a fifth of this sugar intake comes from sugar-sweetened soft drinks.

Key measures in what I think was a well received, world-leading childhood obesity plan, launched in August 2016, include the soft drinks industry levy, which seems to have been around for ages but came into force less than two weeks ago, on 6 April. We are already seeing improvements—a number of soft drink manufacturers have announced that they have or they will reformulate their products to reduce sugar levels. I have mentioned many times in this House the manufacturers that I think deserve credit for doing that and I hope more will follow. More than half of all drinks that we estimate would otherwise have been in scope of the levy have reduced their sugar content to below the levy threshold, which was the intention of the policy.

The sugar reduction and wider reformulation programme is being led and run by Public Health England, for which I have responsibility, and applies to all sectors of industry: retailers, manufacturers and the out-of-home sector, which includes restaurants, takeaways and delivery companies, cafés and the good old-fashioned pub. Public Health England will shortly publish an assessment of progress on sugar reduction, which I eagerly await. We will use that to determine whether sufficient progress has been made in our view and whether alternative or additional levers need to be considered.

The hon. Member for Redcar mentioned the possibility of revision to the child obesity plan. We always said that the child obesity plan was the start of a conversation, not the end. She mentioned Jamie Oliver; I pay great tribute to his work and that of his team, who I met recently just before the Easter recess when we discussed this issue and many others. We have always said that if we need to go further we will, and that assessment that PHE is carrying out on the initial impact of the industry soft drinks levy will be part of the determination of whether we need to do that. I have said in the House before and I will say again that the hon. Lady should watch this space.

In conclusion, the actions that we have talked about and the stuff that we look to cannot entirely eliminate the sale of energy drinks to under-16s. However, I assure hon. Members and the public that this is a matter that the Government, the Secretary of State and I are looking at very carefully. We will monitor the situation extremely closely in the light of the emerging scientific evidence and public concern—I understand that we have to take both into consideration. If we conclude that further Government action is needed to restrict the sale of energy drinks to children, we will not hesitate to act. Our actions have shown in the past that we never hesitate to act when the evidence points us in that direction.

Question put and agreed to.
Leaving the EU: Future Trade Remedies

4.39 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered future trade remedies after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to introduce this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. If our future trade proves as free and fair as I know you will be, we will be making progress.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the hugely important and wide-ranging issue of the trade remedies that will be employed by global Britain after we leave the European Union. To bring focus to the debate, I will mainly address the position faced by the modern ceramics industry and other advanced manufacturing businesses in Stoke-on-Trent, but I am sure that other Members will be able to draw parallels with relevant trading sectors in their constituencies.

In 2017, the UK’s total trade in goods and services deficit was 1.4% of GDP. Importantly, that looks to be the lowest annual deficit this century. Indeed, I checked the Office for National Statistics historical data series, and it looks to me to be the lowest deficit as a percentage of GDP since 1998 and less than half what it was in Labour’s economic meltdown of 2008. I am not sure whether the Department for International Trade has made much of that fact, but perhaps it should. That, combined with the record foreign direct investment into the UK in 2017, shows that something in our trade policy is strengthening our international position. It is imperative that we identify what that something is—what works in our trade policy while we are an EU member—and look to continue what works after we leave the EU or replace it with something at least as effective, and preferably even more so.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that we need transparency about how we calculate duties, not least in the steel industry, where we could do with great transparency about how we calculate the level of dumping, for example?

Jack Brereton: I agree that it is important that we have a transparent and open approach. It is certainly important to ensure that there is transparency through an independent trade remedies authority.

Most pressingly, I seek assurances from the Minister that we will have effective anti-dumping measures which ensure that there is a level and fair playing field on which free trade can be played out. Our job is to embrace the opportunities of Brexit and use Britain’s position as a leading member of the World Trade Organisation to push for free and fair trade globally. We need the same level and fair playing field globally that we pushed for on the regional stage in the single market as a member of the European Union.

Thanks to this Government, global Britain starts from a solid economic base, underpinned by a world-renowned and hugely attractive legal system with sound governance rules that have been hard built over centuries. The UK is a great place to do business. In a competitive world, it needs to be. I do not argue that we should reinvent the corn laws—far from it. British industry must continue its efforts to be more productive and innovative. Although our modern industrial strategy will create an environment from which winners can emerge, it will not pick winners, and it will not prop up or bail out those who fail to satisfy their customer base, diversify their product range or provide the right value for money with products that are worth every penny of their competitive price.

I am hugely encouraged that manufacturing productivity increased by 2.6% in the fourth quarter of 2017, not just because that might be a signal that we are finally resolving the productivity puzzle but because it shows that the renaissance of British manufacturing and export success is, unlike what some people claim, built on more than the current low trading range of the pound. It is true that the lower pound helps with finding new markets in the short term, but achieving longer-term competitiveness will be key to keeping those markets and expanding them when exchange rates change again. Getting domestic policies right, keeping taxes and the regulatory burden down and getting skills and the entrepreneurial spirit high is every bit as important to our future trade as the adoption of remedial measures sanctioned by the WTO.

By getting both domestic policies and international rules right, and having free and fair rules-based markets guiding both, we can continue to boost the number of UK firms that engage in export markets. That is not just theory; it is happening in practice. City A.M. reported only yesterday that, according to Lloyds bank’s latest business barometer, two in five businesses in the UK are planning to export for the first time or enter a new market within six months. The prospect of increased profits and turnover is the main reason why firms are looking to expand their business abroad. Almost one fifth explained that they were looking to export due to existing demand overseas, while only 13% were driven by exchange rates. There are big growth markets out there, and the Prime Minister is right to highlight and drive the amazing opportunities for trade across the Commonwealth.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, but it seems to me that we are entering a global trade war, largely driven by the protectionist policies of the United States. Is it his view that domestic industries are better protected within the EU customs union or outside it?

Jack Brereton: I do not think it needs to be. We should pursue opportunities globally. As I said, there are real opportunities out there in the Commonwealth—and, yes, with the United States, too—to improve our trade links and the opportunities of trade for British businesses, such as those in my Stoke-on-Trent constituency.

We need more businesses to be confident exporters. For that, they need the right skills, the right support from DIT, the right trading opportunities and trade agreements negotiated by Britain in the British national interest. We need of course to ensure that, as a nation, we make full use of digital technology and use the internet as a worldwide exports showroom and sales platform. But we also need to guard against material retardation of the establishment of new industries in...
the UK, either from barriers to entry due to costs or regulation here at home, or from imports that are unfairly and illegally dumped or subsidised by those who wish to nip competition in the bud.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate, and I apologise that I have to leave shortly to be on the Front Bench in the main Chamber. Does he agree that it would help to ensure free and fair trade if the calculation of dumping were stated transparently in the Trade Bill, which is due to come back on Report? That would give a lot more confidence to industries that need confidence, such as ceramics and steel.

Jack Brereton: As the hon. Gentleman says, there are a number of issues, and I will come on to more of them.

Looking forward to our global future, although there is necessarily some uncertainty about the final Brexit deal because negotiations are still under way, I welcome the Government’s acknowledgement that free and fair trade must operate within a rules-based system and that options must be available for countering those who break those rules. That is to say that fairness means everyone playing by the rules—or, as Nigel Lawson once said, “Rules rule: OK?” However, those rules need to be clear, fair and consistent. If they are not, we risk pent-up grudges feeding economic nationalism, full-scale protectionism and eventual trade decline. I therefore hope that the Minister will give us additional assurances that will soothe industries that look for as much clarity and transparency as possible from the Government when making their investment decisions.

The British Ceramic Confederation, which is a founding member of the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance, is keen to maximise confidence in the sector that the UK’s framework for post-Brexit trade will be effective and open to the full range of remedies allowed under WTO agreements. Those agreements allow for three types of trade remedy: anti-dumping measures, countervailing duties and safeguards. I will focus on anti-dumping measures, because there are genuine concerns among BCC members and others that measures that the UK has previously actively supported may fall short of the proposed new economic interest test. Part of the concern is that it is not clear how that test would apply. If the complaint is successful, the investigation will take place while we are still in the process of leaving the EU, so for clarity the industry would surely welcome any indication the Minister can give that the conclusion of any EU anti-dumping measures that might result from any expiry review will also apply in the UK market.

In addition, the ceramics industry is keen for Ministers to reflect on how difficult it can be to counter dumping if the definition of dumping is too narrow. Unscrupulous actors who seek to dump their goods will be unscrupulous in exploiting any loopholes they see. For example, it may not be appropriate to rely on the price in the home market from which imports come when those imports originate from heavily distorted economies—that is to say from countries where market situations are distorted by the interventions of the state, which is usually an undemocratic state working outside the norms of transparency and governance that we take for granted.

On dumping calculations, I am therefore eager to learn what view the Government take on ensuring that the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill makes it clear that there are circumstances in which the difficulty in determining normal value in the presence of state distortions means that provisions should be made for when it is not appropriate to use the domestic price. By clarifying how the Trade Remedies Authority would, in anti-dumping investigations, calculate the level of dumping for cases
in which the domestic price of the alleged dumped imports cannot be used, there will be legal certainty and greater confidence in the ceramics industry.

I also wish to raise the Government’s proposed use of a minimum market share in relation to the acceptance of dumping—or indeed subsidy—complaints. I would be grateful for clarity on this point. Will a de minimis level be set and, if so, at what level? What rules for flexibility might there be in that level? For example, will there be flexibility if an industry has evidence that it is being materially retarded from achieving the minimum market share by dumping or subsidies, if previous injury from dumping has reduced an industry to the de minimis level, or if an industry plays a peculiarly important role in a particular area of the UK, though not across the UK economy as a whole?

As we leave the EU, almost everyone now agrees that the Brexit process should not be some sort of sharp shock; it should be a growing opportunity, with a smooth transition period in which to adjust to the new reality of global Britain. Will that transition include the retention of existing trade remedies for the ceramics sector, followed to their full course and renewed if necessary? Such an assurance from the Minister would be extremely welcome.

While the Department for International Trade will rightly be proverbial carrots in seeking free trade deals for global Britain, in terms of opening access to the UK market, it should also let it be known that we will keep some big sticks in our trade policy array should tit-for-tat measures prove necessary. Brexit is a great opportunity for us to be a leading independent force in the WTO, and the champion of free and fair trade across the world. It will take time to convince all other members of our case, and in that time we will have to be ready to combat egregious distortions. However, the direction of travel should be clear: freer markets, freer trade, and an empowered and liberated entrepreneurial British spirit, with more of our world-class manufactured goods reaching global markets, all of it underpinned by a sense of enforceable fair play. That is the Brexit that my constituents voted for, and that is the direction in which I hope the Minister will be pleased to travel.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.45 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 5.23 pm. The guideline limits are: five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister, and two or three minutes for Mr Brereton to sum up the debate at the end. Until 5.23 pm there is time for other contributions.

4.58 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this timely and valuable debate. I am optimistic about the prospect of the United Kingdom having an independent trade policy after Brexit. That policy will rely in part on us having an effective trade remedies framework, as he mentioned.

The UK Government’s call for evidence, which ran between November and March to identify interests with respect to existing EU trade remedy measures, was a welcome development, and I look forward to the response. I doubt that the EU’s approach to trade remedies has been entirely perfect. The UK can formulate a better policy, more tailored to our interests as an independent trading nation.

As my hon. Friend said, different constituencies have different issues. In my constituency it is very much about oil and gas, agriculture and the service sector. Trade remedies are important to my constituents and the businesses that create the jobs on which the constituency very much depends. We are concerned about anti-dumping policy, because agriculture and trading in commodities are particularly exposed to that risk. The EU’s protectionist approach to agriculture has naturally discouraged countries from reducing barriers to agri-food from the EU. I hope that we can chart a different course, but we need to be careful that we open up opportunities with the rest of the world. The same goes for subsidies in agriculture, which is a heavily subsidised industry worldwide. We need a level playing field and we must be very conscious, if the EU carries on with its levels of subsidy, of the need to ensure that we do not allow that to distort our own agricultural output.

Oil & Gas UK has said that if the UK can get minimal tariffs with the EU and improved tariffs with the rest of the world, that could save the oil and gas sector £100 million a year. The sector will be worth something in the region of £1 trillion over the next 20 to 30 years, according to Oil & Gas UK’s own figures. It is an absolutely enormous sector. However, free trade does not mean being a doormat. When other countries’ subsidies go beyond what is reasonable and start threatening our industries, we should not be afraid to step in. Energy is a heavily subsidised industry in the rest of the world.

I will point out a couple of recent developments in the north-east, because it is important for our future trading opportunities and because I am conscious of the Department that is responding to this debate. I recently visited a social organisation called Elevator, which drives entrepreneurial opportunities, predominantly in the north-east of Scotland. The north-east of Scotland is the engine room of the Scottish economy, with 7% of the population and 15% of the economy. When the oil industry turned down in the north-east of Scotland, it had a huge effect on the Scottish economy and a significant effect on the United Kingdom economy. Many of the start-ups that Elevator is involved in are export-driven, and I encourage the Department to open an office—in Aberdeen, surprisingly enough—to develop those opportunities.

The global Britain opportunity is huge. In terms of future trade opportunities, it is important to note that the north-east of Scotland is a dollar-driven economy, where 60% of the service sector in oil and gas is exporting outwith the EU. The vast majority is outwith the EU. It has a target of doubling in size, and the natural areas in which it will look to grow will be the middle east, the far east and other oil and gas production areas.

Much has been said about the negative effect of Brexit and of changing our trading arrangements with the EU, but a recent survey found that over 50% of companies said they were not worried about Brexit causing a talent shortage. However, 33% were worried, so we need to ensure that we get the policy right.
I look forward to better trading agreements on Scottish fishing. Norway already has a better trading arrangement with Japan and the far east than we do, and there is an enormous opportunity to develop, since 80% of fish from British waters is eaten outwith the UK at the moment. We need to have a seamless deal with Europe and to develop new opportunities in the rest of the world. Taking back control of our waters will necessitate new trading deals and opportunities.

I am optimistic about the future. There is a balancing act to be achieved, and I firmly believe that the UK Government can do it better than the EU, and have a tailor-made deal that works for Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.

5.3 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this debate on future trade remedies. He is ahead of the curve on this issue, because amid the wrangling over Brexit we have rather overlooked the profile that this issue will have. I believe that it will become ever more pressing as we chart a new path beyond the EU. It is therefore important at this stage, as we draw up our Trade Remedies Authority, that we get its basic structure right.

As I have said before in this House, we are lucky to be among the first generation of politicians in more than 40 years to be drawing up our own independent trade policy, but that means we are also very green as a nation in fully grasping trade legislation and its implications. None the less, these are issues of enormous relevance to consumers and to businesses of all sizes in our constituencies. It is all well and good for us to be free traders in principle, but in practice many of those principles can be sorely tested when producers in our own constituencies are challenged by international competition. Indeed, they can be tested to breaking point when that competition is able to undercut domestic businesses due to the state subsidy or economic structure of their own countries.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the capacity of Chinese pottery firms to undercut domestic industries, with a speed that can pull the rug from under industries that have been carefully developed over many years. Equally, however, cheaper products from abroad can be a boon to other industries, for instance by providing cheap steel for car manufacture, helping to retain production on these shores and delivering cheaper prices for consumers. These are not simple issues and they must be carefully considered.

As a member of the International Trade Committee, which has been closely examining the Government’s plans to set up our own Trade Remedies Authority, I have been encouraging the Government to study the arrangements of respected trade authorities in other nations, particularly the US and Canada. Throughout the TRA process I have been concerned about the amount of power being vested in the hands of the Secretary of State, including over appointments to the TRA’s board. I am also concerned about whether the TRA will be sufficiently skilled and resourced for what can be extremely intensive investigations.

In the US, the body responsible for injury investigations alone, the United States International Trade Commission, has several hundred employees. Given the difficulty that the Select Committee has securing sufficiently knowledgeable domestic trade panellists, we have a considerable recruitment challenge on our hands. As we leave the EU, there is the chance to produce a more flexible and responsive trade remedies model. UK Steel sees the EU’s decision-making process as monolithic, with too much power in the hands of the Commission and a heavily politicised system. We have opted for an approach similar to Australia’s, but in a recent Committee session one of our panelists expressed concerns that producer interests are beginning to take a much stronger precedence in that system.

I still believe that we would do well to consider the bifurcated model of the US and Canada, with subsidy and injury investigated separately to avoid politicisation and bias. With our TRA’s chair and non-executive members all appointed by the Secretary of State, and with the Secretary of State retaining the ultimate say on the imposition of a trade remedy, I must confess that I am uneasy about the concentration of power in ministerial hands, given the prospect of a much more interventionist Opposition taking power.

Our new regime must be open and transparent, and have integrity and credibility. I therefore suggest that we try to take steps to ensure that the executive board of any TRA is open to independent scrutiny, perhaps through the Select Committee, rather than being only a matter for the Secretary of State to decide. I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s concerns about dumped and subsidised produce, and the issue of transparency on the economic interest and public interest tests. Trade remedies are currently a highly political issue, and it is vital that our own desire to secure trade deals does not prevent us from imposing trade remedies if we need to in the event of dumping.

It is also necessary to flesh out the appeals mechanism for trade remedies. There is much that remains up for grabs, with a lot being allocated to statutory instruments by the Secretary of State, and details remain patchy. I would be grateful if the Minister could use his contribution to the debate to assure us further of his Department’s progress in establishing a robust TRA in time for March 2019, if we are unable to secure the deal with the EU that we seek.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady makes a number of points that I find myself agreeing with. I am sure that I will get the opportunity to say this in my own contribution but, given what she has said about the Trade Remedies Authority being a transparent and fully representative body, does she agree that the amendments put forward by the Scottish National party and Labour, with the support of Plaid Cymru, to have representatives from all the devolved nations are vital?

Julia Lopez: I might be sympathetic to that, but there is a real concern that all those on the board of the Trade Remedies Authority should be able to rise above particular interests. Those particular interests could be strong industrial concerns in particular regions of the UK. Board members will need to be able to look at the UK as a whole and weigh up different arguments made to
them. I would have concerns about being very prescriptive about exactly who should be on any board. None the less, there needs to be independent scrutiny of the Secretary of State’s decisions in making the appointments. On that note, my contribution has ended.

5.9 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I agree with other hon. Members that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) has brought this debate to the Chamber in a timely manner. I can only hope that the Government will bring the Trade Bill to the Floor of the House on Report also in a timely manner. We all await it with great anticipation and bated breath. Those of us who sat on the Trade Bill Committee had a good and robust debate.

I share some of the concerns expressed by previous speakers, and I know they are shared by several sectors and organisations. As the Member for Livingston, I represent a constituency that has been at the forefront of Scottish manufacturing. The Minister and I have worked directly and personally on some challenges in my constituency, and I pay tribute to the work he has done in his ministerial role. I cannot reveal the details of the company or the organisation involved, but I know him to be extremely hard working and willing to work across parties. While we may not agree on the current approach and wording of the Bill, I know that he shares my determination to support Scottish manufacturing and to ensure that companies that face problems when trading abroad are supported. I wanted to briefly say that.

I feel that, in a recent debate on the Floor of the House, the Scottish National party’s position was somewhat misrepresented by the Secretary of State, which I am sure he did not mean to do. Our opposition was not to the notion of the Trade Remedies Authority—we accept that it will be needed, for the many reasons already outlined—but to the detail and the way it is to be set up, and the lack of engagement with the devolved nations and the lack of opportunity for them to have a say and to be represented. I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) about special interests, but surely we in this place can recognise that many membership organisations are set up with representation at UK level and fair representation for each of the devolved nations. As we leave the EU, knowing the way that Scotland and other parts of the UK voted in that referendum and the importance of trade to our economy, surely the Minister recognises the importance of Scotland and the other UK nations having a permanent seat and a commissioner. To reiterate, the SNP position is to have a commissioner in the TRA and—very much in line with what the hon. Lady said, and about it not being a London-centric Whitchurch Department—to have TRA offices in the TRA and—very much in line with what the hon. Member for Livingston said, and about it not being a London-centric representation for each of the devolved nations. As we look at the TRA and the many challenges that face us post Brexit, devolving more power and opportunity to other parts of the United Kingdom is extremely important. I hope that the Minister will look again at the amendments we proposed—we will table further amendments on Report—and give them serious consideration.

The British Ceramic Confederation, which has been mentioned, has raised several legitimate concerns, and I hope that the Minister will give some more detail and indicate his views. One concern raised with me in a number of meetings with organisations and businesses is the lack of clarity and detail about the Government’s approach and about putting meat on the bones of the TRA. That is something we all feel strongly about.

The BCC is concerned that there is no indication that the TRA will use any special methodology when investigating countries with distorted local prices. That is crucial, as China and Russia, where domestic prices are not decided by market forces, are the main dumping culprits. I know that dumping concerns us all. It would also be interesting to hear how injury will be calculated. Some of these are very technical terms, but the BCC feels it is crucial, as that is how the UK will set its anti-dumping duties because of the decision to adopt the lesser duty role. It also raises the point of presumption, with the economic and public interest tests not being clear. It suggests that special consideration should be given within the tests to the need to remove injurious dumping subsidies.

ActionAid also gave me an excellent briefing recently, and I pay tribute to it for raising concerns about human rights and gender inequality. Those matters have been championed and challenged through the EU. I know that the Government always have warm words on human rights and on making sure that imported goods meet the highest standards, and I hope that that will be very much at the heart of the TRA and that it will take the opportunity to consider that.

I also hope that the Trade Bill will come back as soon as possible; perhaps the Minister will give a potential date. I would not like to press him too hard, but hopefully he has some thoughts on that. It is extremely important that we have clarity, because businesses are asking for it and want to know. In terms of the vision that he wants to set out, we have a clear view on Brexit and on the EU and remaining within the customs union and single market. However, as we set up these organisations, it is fair to say that there is an opportunity, in the sense that something new will have to be created.

There are major risks across all sectors of the UK and across all the devolved nations, and it is my firm belief that significant damage will be done to fishing, farming and manufacturing. However, the Government must be absolutely certain that, when setting up new bodies and organisations, those warm words are lived up to, that that promise of devolution to the devolved nations is taken as seriously as possible and that we are fully engaged in that process.

I go back to my point about looking at the amendments, having discussions and looking at the good work that was done on things like the UK Green Investment Bank. The Minister should give serious consideration to how the devolved nations will be involved in the TRA and how it will serve the nations and their sectors,
because there is no doubt that the devolved nations of the United Kingdom have distinct sectors and deserve the opportunity to play their full part. I hope that he can give some hope and certainty to my constituents in Livingston and to businesses in my constituency, across Scotland and across the UK.

5.17 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). He made some extremely important points, which I shall touch on. I will also mention some of the comments from the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez).

Trade remedies are a key element of our future trade policy. Without adequate trade remedies, we will become the dumping ground for not only Europe but the rest of the world. That point was made to us by Gareth Stace of UK Steel when he gave evidence to the Trade Bill Committee. Trade remedies are the means by which we protect our industries and our economy—meaning producers and consumers. What that protection looks like is very topical, given the imposition of tariffs of up to 25% on steel and aluminium imports into the US—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South is not the only one struggling with his words today.

Those tariffs have been imposed by President Trump on the spurious grounds of national security. The danger exists that United States-bound steel will now be dumped in the UK instead, as we saw China do just a few years ago, which led to a crisis and the appalling news for the people of the north-east with the closure of SSI in Redcar. That is why an international, co-ordinated approach on anti-dumping is essential and why a common approach is needed to trade defence.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this very important debate. I want to touch on the things that my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) has just said about dumping. In 2015-16, when the steel crisis was a huge issue, there were 92 EU trade remedies and those covering steel were vital in stemming the flow of under-priced Chinese steel, but ever since, the Tories have pushed back against any new measures in the EU to defend our industries from that arising again. I would like to know whether the Minister will give some assurances, particularly at this difficult time in the steel industry’s history, to reassure the manufacturers, the workers and UK Steel, which has been mentioned, that their industry will get the protection that it deserves and will survive the latest crisis.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the intervention. I was about to make the same point. She is absolutely right to say that we need to hear from the Minister what his intentions are.

The EU does not want the UK to be swamped with dumped goods, whether that is steel, ceramics or washing machines, because if that happened, such goods could enter the EU market from the UK. Equally, UK businesses do not want dumping, because it is unfair competition. Lack of protection in the UK risks thousands of jobs in the UK. It is no good the Minister’s saying that it means cheaper goods for consumers—as I have heard him say on countless occasions—because the workers whose jobs are at risk are consumers as well. No job means no wage to buy the goods. A lack of trade defence is bad for producers, workers and consumers, yet that is what there has been far too often. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) is right to highlight exactly what happened in the steel industry, because when the Government failed to support EU trade defence measures against Chinese steel dumping and acted too late to intervene and save SSI, it was the Conservative group of MEPs, at David Cameron’s prompting, who were the cheerleaders in the European Parliament against Europe-wide action. That included their blocking attempts to end the use of the lesser duty rule.

However, protection and the use of trade remedies is not the same as Trump-style protectionism. Trade remedies should be about the creation of a level playing field that defends domestic producers against unfair competition from dumped goods. They are an essential policy tool to correct multilateral distortions. Failure to use anti-dumping measures, in the name of free trade, misses the point that for trade to be free, it also has to be fair. Adjustments are needed in the event of Chinese or Russian state subsidies or distorted pricing of raw materials, or to address Trump’s tariffs. The European Commission is due to vote soon on higher anti-dumping duties to tackle raw material distortions, so it is incredible for the Government to say, as the Minister has, that they will vote against those measures.

That brings us to the customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border) Trade Bill—and the Trade Bill. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, we should be debating the amendments to the two Bills on Report in the main Chamber, not having a general debate in this Chamber, but as we are, let us look at what the Bills will do.

The Government are planning to give themselves the power to decide not to act on behalf of UK industries, in favour of the consumer interest. That will be a political decision, balancing the interests of jobs in one area of the country against the interest of consumers—a point made to us by George Peretz, QC, when he gave evidence to the Trade Bill Committee. Trade remedies are essential to protect British industries, whether that is steel, ceramics, tyres, chemicals or pharmaceuticals. The Minister will no doubt say—he has said it before—that the lesser duty rule has been effective in tackling unfair trade. He wants to continue to apply it at the very moment when the EU is moving away from it, so tell us: where is the evidence to support that approach? I am glad that he is nodding, because I am looking forward to hearing his answer. Ask workers who used to work at SSI. Ask the MTRA. Ask industry and workers. They believe in strong trade remedies and they want to know the reason why the Government are taking a different approach.

The continued application of the lesser duty rule will see dumped goods diverted to the UK, and as we leave the EU, divergence in trade remedies will add to the damage done to the UK economy. The Minister is fond of saying to me and my colleagues that we are against
the creation of a trade remedies authority. He knows that that is not true, of course, but that does not stop him saying it. The difference between him and me is that I want the Trade Remedies Authority to be effective. I take seriously the importance of trade remedies in creating a level playing field for our producers so that they can compete in international trade in a fair market. That is why we tabled a reasoned amendment on Second Reading of the Trade Bill that stated categorically our support for the creation of a trade remedies authority, but we believe that the Trade Remedies Authority should be representative of all sides of industry; it should include representatives of producers, trade unions and each of the devolved Administrations. We tabled amendments to that effect in Committee, as did the SNP. In addition, the chair of the TRA should go through parliamentary scrutiny of their appointment, rather than being placed in post by the Secretary of State; Parliament should also have its say on the membership and non-executive appointments. I totally agree with the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster that the Select Committee on which she serves should be scrutinising all these appointments. The Government are using ministerial discretion in the establishment of the TRA before the legislation has been passed that sets it up, and the Minister should explain why, as ministerial discretion is usually reserved for matters of disagreement on spending within a Department.

British industry needs a strong, robust and independent Trade Remedies Authority that will use international best practice. Our amendments to the customs Bill and the Trade Bill will be designed to achieve the objective of giving our industry a level playing field. The Minister and his hon. Friends should support our approach or introduce their own amendments to do just that; otherwise, workers in the Potteries and many more across the country will face the possibility of the same fate as steelworkers faced in Redcar just a few years ago.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister would be kind enough to finish his remarks no later than 5.42 pm, that would give Mr Brereton time to sum up the debate.

5.27 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing the debate. As you will know, Mr Hollobone, it is relatively rare, so far, for the Department for International Trade to be in Westminster Hall, so I welcome this opportunity to set out some of our proposals on trade remedies. I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words about recent UK trading success, the record levels of investment and the UK’s role in supporting the global rules-based system of trade, which is extremely important at the moment—it is important that we get that on the record right away.

I know well that my hon. Friend is passionate about his constituency and about defending manufacturing in Stoke. He was the first MP from the region to approach me, very soon after his election in June 2017, to talk about the importance of trade remedies to his constituents. He also introduced me to the British Ceramic Confederation, whose representatives I have now met three times in connection with trade remedies, as well as the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance.

I also thank the other Members who have contributed to the debate. I will get through as many of the points that were made as I can. I thank them all for their contributions in a short debate—perhaps it could usefully have been longer. I will try to reply to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), even though he is no longer here, but first let me say a few things about the actual contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) made a number of important points. He of course is passionate about oil and gas in Scotland—as are we in the Department for International Trade—and about the capabilities and the future of fisheries exports from his constituency. We are working very closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to pursue that. I heard his call for a DIT office in Aberdeen. I can tell him that the majority of DIT’s oil and gas team is based in Glasgow and spends significant time in Aberdeen. I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that there are significant opportunities in the future. Only yesterday I was speaking to Wood Group, which, as my hon. Friend will know, is headquartered in Aberdeen, about the significant opportunities that the Commonwealth markets offer them, which he also referred to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horncchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) is an active member of the International Trade Committee. I gave evidence to her Committee—it must have been in early March—on the Trade Remedies Authority. It is a little bit early to say exactly how big this new organisation will be. We have yet to appoint the chair, let alone any members of it. However, I think an early indication of the sort of budget we are looking at is in the region of £15 million to £20 million a year. I referred at the Committee hearings to the size of the EU’s operation, which is about 100 people working on trade remedies within DG Trade. That will give some early indication of the sort of size we are thinking about for that body.

I thank the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for her kind words. We have worked together on two or three issues with companies in her constituency. I have worked for their interests abroad, particularly on recent cases. She and I have a constructive relationship. I will answer a few points she made upfront. We talked about representation across the UK and not just within the UK. I referred at the Committee hearings to the size of the EU’s operation, which is about 100 people working on trade remedies within DG Trade. That will give some early indication of the sort of size we are thinking about for that body.

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Greg Hands: I very much agree with the hon. Lady. It is perfectly possible and quite likely that of those nine members, one or more will originate from the devolved nations. The point is, however, that they should be...
appointed for their expertise in assessing some of these quite technical aspects, such as the determination of dumping, the calculation of injury and so on. The point is not to appoint them to represent a nation, region or particular stakeholder of the UK, but to have an interest across the board. She mentioned the possibility of satellite offices. I gave an indication of the likely size of the body.

Bill Esterson: I am puzzled by the Minister’s answer, as I was when he said the same thing in the Bill Committee. I do not understand why he does not see the benefit of having a mixture of independent members, who quite rightly have the expertise that he sets out, and a number drawn from different interest groups. There could be a balance of the two to reflect the needs of the different parts of the economy and the United Kingdom.

Greg Hands: I feel that I have already answered this. We want a set of people who have expertise in the subject matter, rather than who come from a particular perspective, body, nation or region. That is the most important thing. Returning to the question of location, I think satellite officers would add cost, but I stress to the hon. Member for Livingston that we have yet to make a decision on where the location of the body should be. Again, that will be driven by where we can access the expertise that would be needed for this Trade Remedies Authority. I mentioned earlier that the Department for International Trade has placed a significant part of its operation in Scotland, for example through the oil and gas team in Glasgow, so as a Department we are not averse to placing something in one of the devolved nations of the UK.

I do not want to labour the point, but the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) goes on about his reasoned amendments. Mr Hollobone, given your long years in the House, you know perhaps better than anybody that when you put down a reasoned amendment, it normally means that you wish to vote for the reasoned amendment, because you wish to propose some way in which to improve the legislation, but you would not normally vote for a reasoned amendment and then vote against the Second Reading of the Bill. My point is that by voting against the Second Reading of the Bill, the hon. Gentleman showed that he disagreed with the central core of the Bill, part of which, of course, is to set up the Trade Remedies Authority.

This Government firmly believe in the benefits of free trade—I will come back to some of the other points raised in a moment—for consumers, earnings and jobs. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South spoke powerfully about the importance of the ceramics industry for his constituency, which is a huge UK success story as an industry. Other hon. Members have spoken about their own local industries as well. Our manufacturers benefit from trade. Manufacturing makes up 8% of our economy, but most of our exports. I think we all agree that free trade does not mean trade without rules, whether product safety or IP protection; some of the most important rules will be our system of trade remedies.

WTO members are permitted to take action where their domestic industry is suffering harm as a result of unfair trade practices such as dumping, where foreign companies sell their products in the UK for less than they are sold at home, or subsidies, which let foreign companies sell goods in the UK at a lower price than they would otherwise be able to. Members can act in response to harm caused by unexpected surges in imports. In such cases, members can introduce safeguard measures to give industry time to adjust against unexpected surges in imports. Well-functioning trade remedies can level the playing field for domestic industry, by counteracting any unfair subsidies, dumping or unexpected import surges. They can also deter dumping and unfair subsidies from happening in the first place. It is important to have these first and foremost as a basic matter of fairness. Our industries should not lose contracts and our workers should not lose jobs because a foreign company has gained an unfair advantage. It would also be unfair if jobs were lost that could have been saved if only industry had been given time to adjust. That is why we are introducing a rigorous and robust system of remedies, which provides for the full suite of powers offered under WTO rules.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South raised points about existing EU trade remedies. He should bear it in mind that we have just finished a call for evidence on the existing EU trade remedies. That call for evidence closed on 30 March. The response was good. We will be looking at our response to that in due course. We have been clear that when we operate our own trade remedies system, we will transition those measures in the EU system that matter to UK business. We received over 70 responses from producers and other interested parties in that consultation. Most importantly, I can assure hon. Members there will not be one day when a UK industry that needs protection from unfairly traded imports will be left alone.

I will quickly answer the point made by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe about a transparent approach. The Government will use secondary legislation to set out the details of the TRA’s framework. That is very important. Mr Hollobone, you will know from your years in the House that secondary legislation is not on the face of it particularly welcomed by legislators, but it is important in this case to be able to have a dynamic body of law that particularly reflects recent WTO case law, rather than write all of these details on to the face of the two Bills that are currently passing through the House of Commons. In particular this secondary legislation will include the different dumping methodologies and the level of remedy required to address injury to UK industry. We are meeting trade bodies in the coming days to talk about some of those details. In the future, the TRA will set out the way in which it has carried out its calculations in any investigation as part of a commitment to transparency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South asked about the de minimis threshold. At what level would an investigation simply not be taken on, because the amount of product produced in the UK was below a particular amount? If UK producers have a negligible share of the total UK market, the TRA would not initiate an investigation, as it would be unlikely to result in measures. For example, a company could be the only producer of widgets in the UK and therefore meet the WTO requirements to bring a case, but if that company produced a negligible proportion of the widgets actually bought in the UK—in other words, the total market
that is there—putting duties in place would have a disproportionate effect on the rest of the market, much of which would not necessarily be consumers, but could be other businesses and industries purchasing that product. That is why we will have a de minimis threshold.

In special cases, the TRA could choose to waive the threshold, which, by the way, we have not yet set. That would help to avoid a scenario in which an industry’s market share is negligible precisely because of the impact of dumped imports, or in cases involving an emerging UK industry struggling to establish itself in the face of dumped or subsidised imports. I assure my hon. Friend that it will reflect a de minimis level, but there will be exceptions. The TRA will be able to overrule.

My hon. Friend asked whether EU measures will be transitioned for the full five years. We have agreed that EU trade remedy rules and regulations will continue to apply during the implementation period. We will assess which EU measures matter to UK industry, which the call for evidence that closed last month did, and maintain those measures at their current level until the TRA reviews them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon mentioned agricultural imports. Our trade remedies framework will enable the TRA to investigate unfairly subsidised imports where they are injuring UK agricultural producers and to take action where appropriate. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working on a safeguards regime for agricultural products to address the issues that my hon. Friend identified.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster asked whether the TRA should consist of two bodies. There are, of course, always different views. There is not an exact parallel. We have looked at systems across the world, as she knows from the evidence I gave to the Committee. However, I believe that we are setting up the TRA with the right level of independence to allow it to reach informed and objective conclusions, which includes clear projections for the TRA's independence, impartiality and expertise. Other countries that use a single-body trade remedy system include Australia and New Zealand.

It is standard practice for the chair and the non-execs to be ministerial appointments. The other members would typically be appointed by the chair. That is the practice we have followed in relation to the Trade Remedies Authority.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No, I am going to finish. I have perhaps not been able to answer every single point. Obviously, this is a matter for legislation that is still continuing its passage through the House. I hope that I have outlined some of the strengths of the trade remedies regime. We look forward to further engagement during the passage of the Bills.

5.42 pm

Jack Brereton: I would like to thank all Members who have taken part in the debate, and the Minister for his response.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) for his important responses about industries in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) also made important points about the challenges of unfair international competition and the setting up of the TRA. I am pleased that the Minister has referenced the importance of the TRA's objectivity in the actions that it takes.

I do not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, but I certainly agree with her points about the Minister. He is exceptionally diligent and very hard-working.

Hannah Bardell: I will just ask the hon. Gentleman this question, as I did not get the chance to make the point to the Minister. I think it is great that the hon. Gentleman secured this debate, but does he agree that we need to have the Trade Bill back on the Floor of the House on Report, to have a substantive debate and get more information on the Trade Remedies Authority as soon as possible?

I love the Library staff and their briefings, particularly when they are as direct as this one. In the “Comment” section, it says:

“The Bill establishes the TRA but says relatively little about its functions or the Government’s approach to trade remedies.”

I could not put it better myself. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that business and all the nations of the UK need more information on this as soon as possible?

Jack Brereton: The measures that the Trade Remedies Authority will set out will be set out in the customs Bill, so I encourage the Government to introduce that Bill as soon as possible.

I did not agree with everything that was said by the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, but I agree that it was Conservatives who previously put forward these points in the EU and were the strongest advocates for the current trade remedies. It is about creating that level playing field and not about protectionism. I agree with that.

I thank the Minister for his responses and the clarity he offered about the transitioning. I am very pleased that it will include transitioning measures across from what is in place in the EU to the UK’s trade remedies regime. I also thank him for the clarity around some of the secondary measures.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
That is why it is so important across our continent, as well as the rest of the world. the rule of law, freedom of expression and tolerance would work towards the establishment of democracy, proposed the establishment of a council of Europe that is still a long way to go, even some decades after we across Europe, they would think, "Goodness me, there I strongly believe that if Winston Churchill or Clement comparing the situation today to world war two. However, terror of world war two. Make no mistake: I am not of Europe in the aftermath of the destruction and the great leaders of the past who set up the Council and the Windrush generation. today's newspaper headlines regarding anti-Semitism we will tell the rest of Europe and the world what to do. the UK saying that we have everything right, and that politics today. That statement is a fundamental aim of conscience of greater Europe, which I think is true. I am That is the purpose of today's debate. the important work that the Council of Europe does. We all need to think about how we can raise of it is probably even more limited, which is no criticism of Europe was limited. The British public's understanding that my understanding of the work of the Council of been in this House for 20 years and, to be frank, before that my understanding of the work of the Council of Europe was limited. The British public's understanding of it is probably even more limited, which is no criticism of them. We all need to think about how we can raise the profile, not only in this country but across Europe, of the important work that the Council of Europe does. That is the purpose of today's debate. The Council of Europe calls itself the democratic conscience of greater Europe, which I think is true. I am not a cynical person—cynicism is the great enemy of politics today. That statement is a fundamental aim of the Council of Europe. Let us be clear: this is not about the UK saying that we have everything right, and that we will tell the rest of Europe and the world what to do. We have our own challenges, as we can see from some of today's newspaper headlines regarding anti-Semitism and the Windrush generation. Let us reflect on Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee and the great leaders of the past who set up the Council of Europe in the aftermath of the destruction and terror of world war two. Make no mistake: I am not comparing the situation today to world war two. However, I strongly believe that if Winston Churchill or Clement Attlee were alive today and could see what is happening across Europe, they would think, "Goodness me, there is still a long way to go, even some decades after we proposed the establishment of a council of Europe that would work towards the establishment of democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression and tolerance across our continent, as well as the rest of the world." That is why it is so important.

Sometimes such rhetoric—stating and restating the principles in which we believe—is seen as remote, and not dealing with the practical realities of the modern world. I say that we should never take for granted the way in which the Council of Europe stands up for and speaks out on the principles on which democratic societies must be based, which it does exceedingly well.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday I wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the proposed Polish holocaust law, which revives history and is clearly anti-Semitic. Does my hon. Friend agree that it needs to be raised in the Council of Europe with the Polish Government, as do the issues with the Hungarian Government regarding anti-Semitic tropes in the recent election?

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He is absolutely right about those issues in Poland and Hungary, but there are numerous other areas in which the Council of Europe continues to stand up and speak out. We should not shy away from that, which is why the statement that the Council of Europe acts as the democratic conscience of Europe is important. When the Council of Europe was established by Churchill and others with great words, they believed that within 20 or 30 years, some of those problems could be defeated. Yet my hon. Friend reminds us of something that all of us who participate in such debates, both here and abroad, know: battles that we thought would be won are having to be refought. Things that we thought would be taken for granted are having to be fought for again.

Some of this is difficult, and there is so much to discuss. The Minister gave us an exposition of his efforts with Turkey. We in the Council of Europe would think that much of what happens in Turkey is not right, but what did the Minister do? He did not shy away from it. He went there, talked to them, and tried to say, "You are a democracy and part of NATO, and you were talking about becoming a member of the EU. We know that there are difficulties, but you cannot fight what you regard as terrorism or prejudice by resorting to measures that we regard as authoritarian and anti-democratic." Such measures, however, do not mean that we turn our back on those countries. My hon. Friend reminds us of something that all of us who participate in such debates, both here and abroad, know. He is absolutely right about those issues in Poland and Hungary, but there are numerous other areas in which the Council of Europe continues to stand up and speak out. We should not shy away from that, which is why the statement that the Council of Europe acts as the democratic conscience of Europe is important. When the Council of Europe was established by Churchill and others with great words, they believed that within 20 or 30 years, some of those problems could be defeated. Yet my hon. Friend reminds us of something that all of us who participate in such debates, both here and abroad, know: battles that we thought would be won are having to be refought. Things that we thought would be taken for granted are having to be fought for again.

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As a body, we are looking at and dealing with many issues of real difficulty. I cannot believe that in 2018 I am speaking in this Chamber about how it is still important for the Council of Europe, which may become particularly important post-Brexit as an inter-parliamentary assembly where we can come together, to stand up for democracy and freedom under the law. From research by Amnesty International, we can see how in individual countries across Europe political sanctions are being introduced, people are being imprisoned for what they say, and people are being denied freedom of expression, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and gender equality. I am not saying that we all ought to live a life of gloom and pessimism, but part of the role of the Council of Europe is to talk to those countries and stand up for the principles that we hold dear.
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and agree with everything he has said. Does he agree that one good way to raise the profile of the 36 Members of this House and the other place who go to the Council of Europe would be, at the very minimum, an annual debate on the Floor of the House and in Government time to showcase what we are doing as a nation, among the very large number of nations that make up the Council of Europe and its observers?

Vernon Coaker: I could not agree more. The right hon. Lady makes an excellent suggestion. I hope that the Minister can take the idea back and talk to his Whips Office—I am sure that ours will also be agreeable to that. We should all continue to think what more we can do in this country and across Europe to reflect the importance of the work being done. For example, the Minister might like to make a statement to the House after the annual meeting of the Committee of Ministers. I am sure that he would enjoy that.

The truth is that this is important work. To give an example, one of the challenges of our time is the migrant and refugee crisis. Whatever our view on its causes, who is to blame and so on, the Council of Europe reminds us that in the end we are talking about people, in particular children, and that whatever the rights and wrongs of individual foreign policy decisions, it cannot be right that tens of thousands of unaccompanied children are struggling across Europe, often with no prospect of being resettled or relocated.

I went to Jordan recently as part of the Council of Europe delegation. What a phenomenal example Jordan is to the rest of the world in the way it tries to deal with refugee and migrant problems. It is a country of 10 million people. It is not one of the poorest countries in the world, but it is not one of the richest either. Two million of those people are migrants or refugees. I went to the Zaatar refugee camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border, where there are 80,000 people. Hundreds of thousands have been through that camp, which was established in 2012. It is now a small town, as the Minister will know, as I think he has been there as well. The Jordanian people are an example to the rest of us in the way that they have supported the needs of the people in that camp and the rest of the country, and helped them to integrate into their society. They are a reminder and a wake-up call to us all to see children as children, with rights, who need others to speak up for them. It is not their fault that they are fleeing war, that they are unaccompanied or that they do not know where they are going to go. Surely, as the Council of Europe has reminded us time and again, we have a responsibility to stand up, work with them and do what we can.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful speech. He and I are both members of the Council of Europe’s Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, and there is no better example of why the Council of Europe is about not just the history of our relationship with Europe, but its future. It behoves every nation to address these challenges. Only by being able to talk to our colleagues in other countries will we ever be able to find solutions. What the Council of Europe and that Committee allows us to do is start that process.

Vernon Coaker: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has been one of the Members of this House at the forefront of championing the rights of children. That is one example of what the Council of Europe seeks to do. Helped by the hon. Member for North Thanet, I have put down my own resolution on trafficking and slavery, which we hope will help us to make progress.

Is it not also great that we have a body in Europe that has many of the former countries of the Soviet Union as members? We talk to and discuss with them and they are part of a democratic process. There are still issues in some of those countries—I know Members will have been to some, observed elections and seen some of the problems—but we are trying to help and support them and build their democracy. It is just not possible to expect a country that has no democratic traditions or history of inclusion and tolerance, and that still has ethnic clashes, suddenly to pass a constitution and the next day become a beacon of democracy for the world. That is not the real world. The important point is that those countries need help, support and challenge and the Council of Europe can provide that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Talking of countries of the former Soviet Union that have problems with democracy, one must not forget Russia. Does the hon. Gentleman share my view that jaw-jaw is better than war-war, and that one of the advantages of bringing Russia back into the Council of Europe, however much one disagree with its present Government, is that we could at least engage them in some way and perhaps encourage them into better behaviour?

Vernon Coaker: I think that it is really important that the Council of Europe has standards and says that it will not compromise on its principles. I also believe that it is extremely important to continue to talk and discuss with people. I agree absolutely with that, but not with saying, “We will not worry about that, on the basis that we want to keep talking to you.” We have to be tough and say, “This is what we believe,” but that does not mean it is impossible for us to continue to have dialogue with people even if we do not agree with them. That is what I think about Russia.

It is astonishing that even in Europe—this continent that holds itself up as an example to the rest of the world—there are still examples where we have to defend the principle of freedom of expression. It is astonishing that in some countries in Europe journalists have been imprisoned simply for criticising the Government of the day. It is hard to believe. When the Council of Europe was set up in 1949, would those who went to its first meeting believe that we would be here in 2018 and that there would still be people locked up for what they say or write? I do not believe that they would have. The Council of Europe says to the Governments of its member states that they cannot lock people up simply because they criticise a Government, however much they disagree with what has been written or said. It is a fundamental principle that people can organise, write and demonstrate peacefully for something they believe in. Here again, the Council of Europe is standing up and demanding that.

I do not want to speak for too long, because I know that others want to contribute, but I have a couple of further remarks to make. The challenges that the Council
of Europe has faced and is facing should not hide its achievements. Sometimes it is criticised for being a talking shop. There is a lot to be said for talking shops. Where else would we bring that collection of countries talking shop. There is a lot to be said for talking shops.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival to the debate—I was detained by a constituency issue. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and making such a powerful speech. I am a very new member of the Council of Europe, so it is fantastic to hear. Does he agree that, given the current geopolitical situation and what we are facing in Syria, talking is one of the most important tools in our armoury?

Vernon Coaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her apology—of course that is fine. I agree that it is about talking, but the Council of Europe also tries to help us understand. Ignorance is not bliss, and in order to solve the problems facing Europe and the world we have to try to understand what is going on. That does not mean that we abandon our principles; it means that we have to try to understand why people are doing what they are doing. I agree with her that that is really important.

The Council of Europe has helped to establish democracy and certain other principles. We should celebrate the fact that it is now a “death penalty-free zone”, as it puts it, which is of huge significance. One of the Council of Europe’s great achievements is the European convention on human rights and the establishment of the European Court of Human Rights. It is important for the country to recognise that, although we are leaving the EU, the European Court of Human Rights is not part of the EU. When we look at some of the cases that have been heard at the European Court of Human Rights, even those relating to our country, we see a body standing up for the universality of a principle and holding even Governments to account. That is not necessarily the most popular thing to say, but I fundamentally believe it. I make that argument in my constituency and tell people that we should celebrate the fact that we have human rights and bodies that stand up for them; we should not abhor them or use populist rhetoric.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As I discussed with the previous Lord Chancellor, we have a magnificent success record at the European Court of Human Rights. Well over 90% of our cases are dropped or turned away. We should celebrate that to ensure that the ECHR is not seen as a vehicle for attack by organisations such as the Daily Mail.

Vernon Coaker: I agree. The hon. Gentleman will remember that it was the European Court of Human Rights that ensured that thalidomide victims got the justice they deserved.

Whether it is ending the death penalty, fighting for freedom of expression, strengthening human rights, tackling discrimination, standing up for refugees and migrants, campaigning for and championing gender equality, introducing new laws and conventions, or acting as a forum for debating difficult and controversial issues, we can all be proud of the Council of Europe. I have talked about the challenges that we face in Europe today, but let us remember the challenges that those who established the Council of Europe faced in 1949. We do not face the same challenges, but let us not be cynical. Let us be hopeful and optimistic. Let us believe that by talking to and challenging other countries in the environment that the Council of Europe offers us, we can make progress. In the end, ordinary people’s common decency and desire to achieve what they can for themselves, their families and their countries will move them to believe it is possible to overcome the racism, intolerance and discrimination that still scar our continent today. It is possible to do better. The Council of Europe gives us a real opportunity to make that more of a reality than it is.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Ten Back Benchers wish to speak and we have 35 minutes. If they take three and a half minutes each, they will all get in; if they do not, some will not.

9.54 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I will do my best. Mr Hosie, but I may take a little longer than three and a half minutes.

I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), on securing this debate, on his robust presentation and on his kind personal remarks. He said that we work together, and indeed we do. In that context, I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), the leader of the Labour group, and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), the leader of the Scottish National party group, for their unqualified support for the work we all try to do. We are collegiates, we work together and we bat for Britain: this is team UK. It is our collective and proud boast that we do not allow our domestic party political differences to interfere with the work we try to do on behalf of the country within the Council of Europe.

I also thank, because they are not present, the Members of the other House, who make a significant contribution to the work of the Parliamentary Assembly as part of our team. I would be failing in my duty if I did not put on the record our collective appreciation for the tireless work of our ambassador, Christopher Yvon, and his team from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Strasbourg. Their wisdom and support is absolutely invaluable.

Finally on the list of thank yous, and on a purely personal note, during my brief time as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, under rather bizarre circumstances, I was fortunate enough to have the service of Mark Neville, the chef de cabinet in the President’s office, and his team. Again, the support they offered was superb.

The difference between the UK delegation and some others is that we are not mandated. In the Parliamentary Assembly, we see people rushing out and telephoning ambassadors, Foreign Secretaries and others to take instructions about how to vote. That is not true of this delegation. We make up our own minds and try to work together. We do not always agree—you will find out in a moment, Mr Hosie, that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I have a...
slightly different opinion about Russia—but part of the principle of British parliamentary democracy is that we have the right to disagree with each other and still respect our friends, and we do. For that we should all be grateful.

When I joined the Parliamentary Assembly for the first time in 1987, there were some 20 members. When Winston Churchill and Jean Monnet founded it in 1947, there were only 12 members. There are now 47 member states. The Council of Europe territory stretches from Azerbaijan to Spain, and from the northern shores of the Mediterranean to Iceland. It has as observers Canada, Japan, the United States, and the Holy See and Algeria, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Tunisia and the Palestinian Legislative Council are partners for democracy—a status introduced in 2009.

The Council covers a population of some 820 million people. It is consistently confused and conflated with the European Union, which in some quarters does us no favours whatever. The European flag was created by the Council of Europe in 1955 and borrowed by the European Union subsequently—as was the “Ode to Joy”, the European anthem. For all that, as my hon. Friend for Gedling said, and I say that advisedly, there is no other organisation in the world that deals in the way the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly do—the Council is made up of the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly—with torture, racism and the trafficking of human beings. He mentioned, absolutely correctly, the need to give children a voice and protect them from sexual abuse. The Council of Europe tries to do that. It deals with violence against women, the rights of minorities within countries, and the freedom of the press, which at the moment is very significant indeed in the context of countries such as Turkey, where I fear a significant number of journalists languish in prison as political prisoners.

Of course, we should not forget that the Council also deals with election observation. It provides election observation missions to very many countries, to seek to underpin democracy and to ensure that proper democratic processes are followed and that elections are free and fair.

The hon. Member for Gedling said that sometimes we are referred to as a talking shop. That is true; unfortunately, the popular press also describes us as a dining club. In fact, a great deal of work is done by all groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly to the development of the Assembly. That a voided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this very important debate. I, too, want to start by paying tribute to the fact that we all work together so very well. It is a real privilege to be part of a UK delegation that has agreed jointly to sponsor an exhibition at next week’s Assembly to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for his amazing work and how he has worked with me and all of us to make sure that the exhibition goes ahead. I am very proud of that piece of work.

There was a practical example of how we all work together at the Assembly in January, when a monitoring report on Bosnia and Herzegovina was very critical of Serbian activity in Bosnia. There was an attempt by Serbian representatives from Bosnia at the Assembly to weaken the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries. We weak the report. It was the strength of the UK delegation voting as one that helped to defeat those amendments. That avoided the sending of a very negative message back to Bosnia that it is acceptable to indulge in intimidation and aggression towards other ethnic groups. That totally underlines the importance of the Council of Europe for all of those countries.

I want to echo all the thanks that have been given so far, but I also want to draw attention to the staff who work in the Council of Europe office here in Parliament.
They do a fantastic job. Jonathan Finlay in particular has dedicated a great deal of time to putting together the exhibition that we will all enjoy, I hope, next week in Strasbourg. I echo entirely the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker)—or is it right honourable?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): He’s getting there!

Angela Smith: He is getting there. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which we are all very pleased to participate in. I will not repeat his comments about the history that led to the foundation of the Council of Europe in 1949, but I do want to say that the Council has certainly played a vital role in defending democracy, human rights and the rule of law since that time. I absolutely echo his comments that it is important at this stage, when we are at a crossroads and face potentially fundamental changes in Europe, that we do not take for granted the values that underpin the Council of Europe. I am concerned about that. It is all too easy to take those values as given, but we must continue to defend them.

We have heard a lot today about the rights of minorities and the need to tackle the problem of political prisoners, LGBT rights, women’s rights, refugees and children. We also need to remember the rights of lawyers—I mention that because I am sitting next to one—to defend their clients effectively, because they are really important, especially when it comes to freedom of expression and dealing with the problems relating to the states that imprison people for speaking out.

I want to talk briefly about some of the problems with member states. Hungary and Poland have elected Governments that are troubling in their attitudes towards minorities. We need to make sure that we keep a very careful eye on what is happening in Hungary and Poland. I also want to mention Armenia, which, under pressure from the Council, signed up to around 70 Council of Europe conventions and reformed its electoral code to ensure that seats in elections were allocated to national minorities. But I read today in The Times about the unrest emerging in Armenia. The President has retired from office and has taken on a prime ministerial role. It looks as though, in effect, he will transfer the powers that he had as President to his new role as Prime Minister.

Clearly, Armenia is one of those states that the Council of Europe will have to continue to monitor very carefully. What is happening in the country gives me reason to believe absolutely that the Council of Europe has a crucial role in ensuring that it does not waver from the path that leads it to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I echo entirely the comments of the hon. Member for North Thanet—I nearly called him “my hon. Friend”, as I think in this context he is—about Russia. We have to be firm in the Russian situation. We cannot be blackmailed by a state that has, in effect, decided that it does not want to abide by the rules relating to international law. It is threatening to undermine financially the work of the Council of Europe. We must stick firmly to our values and send Russia a clear message, but I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling’s comment that the door must always be open to dialogue with states such as Russia and Turkey.

Let me mention the Council’s electoral observation work. I was in Azerbaijan last week for the presidential election, which was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. Ilgar Mammadov, the leader of the main Opposition party in Azerbaijan, is a political prisoner, and many of the main Opposition parties boycotted the election on that ground. Eight candidates were allowed on the final list, and a number of them actually endorsed Aliyev. This was not a free or fair election. There was widespread intimidation, there were widespread crackdowns on free expression, and on election day I observed the stuffing of ballot papers. Some 20% of observations at polling stations reported irregularities, and irregularities were reported at 50% of the counts observed. On those grounds, the Council of Europe, at its meeting the following morning, determined that the election was not free or fair.

That is only the second election observation mission I have participated in—I went to Armenia last year—but election observation is one of the most important aspects of the work of the Council of Europe. As the hon. Member for North Thanet said, it is one of the key means by which we underpin our values and our belief in democracy and free and fair elections. Although, when we observe elections, we cannot stop corruption or the failure of member states that are monitored to observe free and fair play, it is nevertheless important to continue that observation work and to continue to report abuses of electoral processes. For me, that is one of the key means by which we make progress.

I will finish by endorsing the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) that we should have an annual debate on the work of the Council of Europe. I also like the idea of an annual statement on the work of the Committee of Ministers. That is a really good idea and would be a key means for Members of this Parliament to be made more aware of the important work of the Council of Europe.

10.12 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). Colleagues have called him their hon. Friend and, given the spirit in which we have talked about the Council of Europe, I completely agree. I find the Council a most relaxing and agreeable place to speak: one can be assured of speaking for three or four minutes without interruption. [Interruption.] I see that the Minister is about to leap to
I repeat the comments I made about the European Court of Human Rights. During the Brexit campaign, I think many people thought we were arguing about the European Court of Human Rights when we were actually arguing about the European Court of Justice. There is a tremendous amount to be done to ensure that those Courts are seen to be separate. We should make a point of communicating strongly our success rate with the European Court of Human Rights.

I agree that not everything is lovely at the Council. It has two major problems, both of which we can deal with internally. The first is corruption, which we saw with the previous President of the Parliamentary Assembly. New rules have been introduced that will apply to the Council, and there are more to come: I understand that a 200-page document on corruption in the Council has been prepared. The second problem stems from the Russians’ withdrawal of funds: we need to look at the Council’s finances as a whole. It is no use continuing with the same means of funding. We need to concentrate on what the Council does best and ensure that it is adequately funded to do that. On those notes, I shall leave the floor to others.

10.16 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this timely debate.

I will focus on the Council of Europe convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, which is also known as the Lanzarote convention. The convention requires states to: implement legislative measures to prevent and combat the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children; protect the rights of child victims without discrimination; promote national and international co-operation; collect and store data on convicted offenders; co-operate with relevant bodies across international borders; protect children; and support victims. There is no doubt that ratifying and implementing the Lanzarote convention would reinforce the UK’s efforts to prevent British sex offenders from sexually exploiting and abusing vulnerable children at home and abroad.

The 10th anniversary of the Labour Government signing the Lanzarote convention is 5 May. Sadly, we are still waiting for this Government to ratify it. The convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the Government told me, a mere 10 years on, that they are managing to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK. In January, the convention has been signed by 47 countries, and 42 have managed to ratify it—but not the UK.

ECPAT UK has documented more than 300 cases of British nationals abusing children abroad. UK offenders continue to pose an acute threat to vulnerable children overseas, and we need to strengthen our laws to prevent that. Ratifying the Lanzarote convention would help to promote greater international co-operation, information sharing and use of extraterritorial legislation. I urge the Minister to do all he can to ensure that ratification happens.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (North Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on calling this debate.

I begin by paying tribute to my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who, in his three days as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, did more for the United Kingdom’s international relations than Her Majesty’s Government often do in 12 months. That is no reflection on the Minister.

Sir Roger Gale: When we thank people, we always miss somebody out. Before I get into terrible trouble, I should say that it would be remiss of me not to thank, through my right hon. Friend, our secretariat here: Nick Wright and his team, in particular Jonathan Finlay, who, as she said, has done so much to promote our cause. We are indebted to them all the time.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: In making a list, there is a danger that we will miss someone out, but I had that on my list. As I will mention later, the redoubtable Nick Wright and his team really look after us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), who leads the European Conservatives, has worked tirelessly to make the European Conservatives—surprisingly enough—now the third largest political group in the Council of Europe. I also pay tribute to all other Members from the other parties, because we truly are UK plc. We are a really good team, not managed by mission control—although we are well served by Christopher Yvon and his team, who provide us with advice.

I do not think that people fully realise what the achievements of the Council of Europe are, so it is worth repeating them briefly. It was responsible for ending the death penalty in Europe by making it an accession condition, which is one of its proudest and best achievements. We are a death penalty-free zone thanks to the Assembly’s efforts. After 1989, it also helped the ex-communist countries move to democracy. When we really think about what has happened over the European territory in that time, what this fantastic institution has contributed is remarkable.

We have already mentioned the hijacking of “Ode to Joy” and the flag, which is a great shame. The organisation has also inspired a host of national laws, pressing for new conventions. It provides a forum to debate timely, really hot and controversial social, political and international topics. It has sought to hold debates on major social issues that have divided Europeans, including advancing the rights of minorities such as the Roma and the LGBT
community, and dealt with painful issues such as the relationships between Russia and Georgia and some of the crimes of communism. It is certainly leading the way in terms of gender balance as far as the committees and its operation are concerned.

I do not want to repeat everything that has already been said, but I do want to mention the system of rapporteurs. We have nine committees, and I am pleased to be the vice-president of the Political Affairs and Democracy Committee. In fact, for my sins I am currently the rapporteur on the commitment to introduce rules to ensure fair referendums in Council of Europe member states. I have to say, I achieved the rapporteurship with help from Lord Foulkes, a member of the Labour delegation. I sometimes think it may be a poisoned chalice, but I am honoured to be working with the Venice Commission and with an expert, Dr Alan Renwick, from the Constitution Unit.

Hannah Bardell: I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing that role. I and those in my party very much look forward to working and engaging with her on that issue.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Every cloud has a silver lining. The issue is important, particularly because of the referendums we have had in this country, and the Catalanian referendum and others. The rules need updating.

The rapporteurs’ work is broad and far-reaching. For example, we are evaluating the status of the Kyrgyz Republic and Morocco and Jordan as partners for democracy, and we are looking at strengthening our co-operation with the UN, the political transition in Egypt and the dialogue with Algeria—I could go on. There is a really impressive list, and I hope the Government will take that on board and read the reports as they come through, because they contain valuable information.

In addition to calling for an annual debate on the work of the Council of Europe on the Floor of the House in Government time, I will sow another seed. The last time I was at a plenary session, I asked the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority if I could take one of my researchers with me, because it is quite difficult to explain how the Council of Europe operates. It is completely different from here, exceedingly complex and full of layers—and controversies, as it happens, at the moment. Of course, as Members of Parliament, we now have limitless travel in Europe, which is a great improvement, for which we thank IPSA, and our researchers can travel for us, if necessary, on parliamentary business anywhere in the UK.

I ended up supporting my researcher to come for four days to the Council of Europe. I think—I hope—she found it really interesting and rewarding. It was good to work with Nick and the team here and to meet the ambassadorial team and all the Members, and it gave her a greater understanding to support my work as a parliamentarian. I hope the powers that be will look at that, because it is not unreasonable for full-time members of the Council of Europe to be allowed at least one trip for a member of their research team to come with them—to enable us to do a much better job, Minister, on behalf of UK plc.

That said, the UK delegation punches above its weight, because it really is the epitome of a national team from our four constituent nations and both Houses of Parliament working together in harmony in the interests of UK plc—and, more importantly, in the interests of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. I am proud to be a member of the delegation.

10.25 am

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing the debate. I will not take up much time—I have cut my speech back so that we can get other people in—but I want to make a couple of points.

The Russian Federation joined the Council back in 1996, but it does not send a delegation at the moment because of the imposition of sanctions on it over the invasion of Ukraine, another member state. Russia has stopped its payments to the Council and threatened to leave the institution completely, denying its 140 million citizens access to the European Court of Human Rights. Russia accounts for more than a third of the Court’s case load. That is another example of Russia’s systematic attempt to bully and undermine multilateral institutions, and it is testing the boundaries of what is acceptable in international relations.

We know about Russia’s hybrid activity, which is trying to sow division in other countries, but I want to quote from a journalist from Ukraine—whose name I will pronounce wrongly—Roman Skaskiw, who wrote of the nine lessons of Russian propaganda. I will not quote them all, but we can understand four of them. The first is: “Rely on dissenting political groups to deliver your message abroad: far right is as good as far left.”

Others are:

“Destroy and ridicule the idea of truth...Pollute the information space”

and

“Accuse the enemy of doing what you are doing to confuse the conversation.”

That is exactly what is happening at the moment, and we should consider that.

I have been on the delegation to the Council for a couple of years and have observed that the countries that seem to have more interest in it are the eastern European, former Warsaw pact countries. Whenever a session in the hemicycle finishes, it is their media there; we do not see the BBC or ITN. They seem to have a thirst for the debate. I also understand that the sessions are shown live on the equivalent of BBC Parliament in about a dozen countries around Europe. The idea of a debate on the Floor of the House and a statement on the Council of Ministers is exactly right.

The problem we have at the moment, and the lesson for me in all this, is that the members of the generation who fought the second world war are becoming fewer in number. As a new generation who did not live through the cold war matures—perhaps as a consequence they may experience a new one—perhaps we should remind ourselves of these words: the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

10.29 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am proud to be a member of the Council of Europe, especially as I have been reincarnated. I wear it as a badge of honour that I was sacked by David Cameron for voting for a fair referendum and purdah. Let me say to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that I want to
[Sir Edward Leigh]
nail the lie that the Council of Europe is used by the leadership of various parties to dump people who disagree with them. That is an outrageous slur.

The Council of Europe is a noble concept. As we know, it was founded by Winston Churchill, who was clear that although he wanted continental countries to join some sort of justiciable entity, he did not think that appropriate for Great Britain. We are proud of the work that we have done right through the ’50s, and particularly in the 1990s with bringing eastern Europe back into democracy. However, I think that the Council of Europe and the Court of Human Rights have lost their way, and the Court in particular has become too intrusive. It was founded to counter fascism and extremism, but as we have seen, particularly with the row over prisoners’ voting rights, it is becoming too intrusive in the internal workings of democracies. In a sense, the Council of Europe has also lost its way, and we have heard about the corruption scandals and money problems.

Where do we go now? I am not in favour of just letting Russia in after all its depredations in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria. Of course the Council of Europe is not for sale, but it is not just a question of money. Other countries in eastern Europe, and particularly Turkey, have also been playing games with money. It is not just Russia; a lot of people should be criticised for this issue. The trouble with expelling a country such as Russia is that eventually it has to be let back in. The Council of Europe is not like the European Union; it is primarily a parliamentary assembly that enables countries that come from different directions, with different forms of democracy and different problems, to talk to each other. Many countries in the Council of Europe, especially Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are not shining lights of democracy. Indeed, Azerbaijan and Armenia in particular have really been engaging almost in a state of war.

Where do we go from here? I do not have any obvious solutions, but the Minister is present, and the Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers is attended—the Russians do turn up. It is not quite true that we have expelled the Russians from the Council of Europe. They do turn up, and I know from speaking to our ambassador that he engages with them. It is a conduit of discussion. I do not know what the solution is, but I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) that the Russians are sending a representative to the Parliamentary Assembly next week. There are wheels within wheels, and ways—without forgetting our principles—to try to bring them back into some kind of democratic assembly. I shall leave it there, because that is what the Council of Europe is surely about: whatever our disagreements, it is better to talk than to make war.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, who have about nine minutes each. I apologise to those who were not called.

10.33 am

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hosie, and I apologise again for my lateness. It is somewhat unfortunate to be presided over by a member of my party and to be late, but constituency matters held me back.

Like others, I pay tribute to Nick Wright, Jonathan Finlay, and the staff who serve us so well. As a new member of the Council of Europe, I lead the SNP group together with my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). We were well served by our predecessors, Alex Salmond and Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, and I pay tribute to their work. Unfortunately, the press were not very kind to them at times, but those who served with them at the Council of Europe know the incredible power of work that they did, and how hard they worked on behalf of the SNP and Scotland. It is important to put that on the record.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this debate, and for his passion and verve. His speech was fantastic, and I hope that people will watch this debate and understand the work of the Council of Europe. When I was asked to take on this role by our group leader, I took it very seriously. I admit that I was not prepared for the volume of work and the complexity of the issues raised, or for the amount of time it would take up. The suggestion from the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) about staff is sensible. We are accountable to our constituents for the use of public money, but we can only promote and do our best in the Council of Europe—and, indeed, with all our work—if the right resources are available to us. The promotion of such work is extremely important.

I wish to reflect a little on what others have said, and on my recent experiences at the Assembly’s first sitting this year. At the Irish ambassador’s reception, he made a powerful speech about the work of the Council of Europe and its importance post-Brexit, particularly for trade and international relations, as well as the continuation of campaigns for human rights and democracy. Many people do not realise that the Council of Europe brought an end to the death penalty in Europe, or that the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights have allowed people to take forward many cases. A number of those cases have been very high profile, particularly on the rights of service personnel who have suffered injury or death, and the rights of LGBT people.

As we leave the EU, we must reflect on what our role in Europe will be. The SNP has a clear position of maintaining membership of the single market and customs union, but as many have said we put politics aside when we come to the Council of Europe and we work together. Towards the end of our time at the Council of Europe, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I had a very interesting discussion about deaths abroad—that is an issue on which I have been working on behalf of my constituent, Kirsty Maxwell, and a matter that I hope to raise at the Council of Europe. The hon. Gentleman and I could not be at more opposite ends of the political spectrum, but we had a shared interest on a shared issue, and the Council of Europe gave us the opportunity to have a discussion about that. He gave me his personal support, for which I was grateful, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him and reflect that the Assembly gave us space to have that discussion.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that one important point that has not yet been mentioned is that each member of the Council...
of Europe is a parliamentarian who has been elected in their own country? That cornerstone of democracy is so important to the Council of Europe.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree, and our being able to return to our constituencies and report on the work done by us and the Council of Europe is important. We must look for as many opportunities as we can to do that within this place, and in the media, and there is an opportunity to engage more positively.

I remember returning home on the tube one evening and reading a declaration in the London Evening Standard that it had a new Brussels correspondent. I thought, “Well, isn’t that ironic? Where have they been for the last 10 years?” There was a recent report about the reportage not just of the EU and its institutions, but of Europe in general, and the UK came very near the bottom for quality of reportage and coverage. I do not wish to diverge or digress too much, but the sad truth about Brexit is that people are learning about the EU, what it brings to them and its benefits, only as we leave. We will continue to be a member of the Council of Europe and, for the many reasons that people have highlighted, its work will be extremely important.

Let me reflect briefly on some of my observations from the Hemicycle during the initial days that I spent there. It is completely different from the Chamber of the House of Commons. There is electronic voting. Voting takes merely a few moments; I could not help reflecting on that and thinking, as I put my fingers into the black box and pressed the buttons, how much quicker and more efficient this place would be if we had a similar voting system—[HON. MEMBERS: “No! No!”] I know there will be many dissenting voices, but I will press on.

It was also incredible to see the Danish national girls’ choir sweep into the Hemicycle and sing for the Members. It would be difficult to imagine something like that happening in the Chamber of the House of Commons—although perhaps we should consider putting it to Mr Speaker—with people taking pictures of each other and engaging in a lively, democratic way.

The hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) mentioned the breadth of coverage of the Council of Europe, and the number of people: 820 million people are incredible. He leads us ably and I have enjoyed working with him very much. He has spoken of the breadth of issues dealt with and challenged there, including torture, racism and trafficking. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke about child trafficking and her work on that. As to the fact that the UK Government have not ratified the Lanzarote convention, it is important that we continue to press the matter.

Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps I can put the hon. Lady’s mind, and that of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), at rest by confirming that our assessment is that we are now compliant to ratify the convention. We laid the means of doing so before Parliament last week, on 12 April, so the hon. Member for Rotherham can dance a little jig of joy.

Hannah Bardell: That is excellent news and testament to the work of the hon. Lady, as well as the work done and pressure put on by the Council of Europe.

For my part, the work of the SNP in the Council will be very much about putting forward Scotland’s voice about its place in Europe, as well as working with colleagues on issues of common interest. I look forward to working with the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham in her role as rapporteur on referendums. She will know that, whatever side of the argument—if any—people took in the 2014 referendum in Scotland, it has been held up as the gold standard in terms of process. I hope that we can work together.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: As the hon. Lady may know, I also had the pleasure of holding a referendum that went without any hitch at all, in Wales.

Hannah Bardell: I am glad to hear that. It sounds as if the right hon. Lady has the right expertise and credentials. Hers is an important role, and we look forward to working with her on it. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House in our future endeavours at the Council of Europe.

10.42 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Hosie.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this debate, whose importance is testified to by the fact that it has been attended by the leaders of the Labour and Conservative groups, and the leader of the UK delegation, as well as other hon. Members. The people that I should like to thank for supporting me during my period at the Council of Europe are Terry Davis, who was the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, and who became the Secretary General of the Council of Europe; Sir Alan Meale, the former Member for Mansfield, who also did great work and supported me; and two current Members, Lord Foulkes and Lord Anderson. They ably supported me while I was there, and they deserve a mention.

Since the day of the EU referendum, almost two years ago, the Government’s approach to Brexit has often been light on substance, but it has rarely been short of a good slogan or two. Hence we hear a lot from Ministers about global Britain, and they reassure us that while we are leaving the EU we are not leaving Europe. If we take the Government’s word for that—and I hope that we can—a post-Brexit renewal of our commitment to the Council of Europe would be a good place to start. Of course, as an institution it is quite different from the EU. It is a much less formal grouping of countries, based on shared values rather than a legal or political union, but it is none the worse for that.

In what I believe was her first speech on the theme of global Britain, the Prime Minister spoke of her belief in the UK as a country with the “self-confidence and freedoms” to embrace our international responsibilities and play our “full part in promoting peace and prosperity around the world”. Surely one of the best examples of the UK playing such an independent leadership role is our history as a founding member of the Council of Europe, and going hand in hand with that, as a lead author of the European convention on human rights. Important as that historic legacy is, it is not enough by itself to guarantee our
continued status as a respected leader and staunch upholder of the values enshrined in the European Court of Human Rights. That is especially true given how clear it is that we have not yet reached universal adherence to the Court, even among the membership of the Council. We must continue to strive for that. There may still be some distance to go, but that should not be considered as evidence of the failure of the Council of Europe or the convention itself. The very fact that the membership of the Council remains so large and diverse is testament to the enduring appeal of what we may proudly call European values.

Of course it is true that member states, including, at times, the UK, have not always embraced the implications of membership when they take the form of Court decisions with which we may not entirely agree; but the integrity of the Council and of its membership surely depends on our willingness to lead by example in honouring our obligation to respect both the convention and the Court that enforces it. Only then can we make a forceful action is what the Council of Europe is based on, and I will continue to do that, because it is important. Such confrontation the Turkish Government and I hope that he will continue to do that, because it is important. Such action is what the Council of Europe is based on, and I commend the Minister for the work that he has done.

I have some questions for the Government. Can they give an unequivocal commitment that they will not attempt to undermine, unpick or water down our commitment as a country to the European Court of Human Rights or the Council of Europe? Will they instead seek a stronger, more active and more prominent role for the UK within the Council after we leave the EU? If so, can the Minister share with us any specific plans that the Government may have for us? I wonder whether he would also be prepared to consider the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) about an annual debate, and respond to us formally. This debate is on an important subject, and I commend the Minister for.at work that the house has done.

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10.49 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), as I think we all are, for securing the debate and launching it with such an excellent speech. I hope that I will not embarrass him too much if I say that I think it is the best speech I have ever heard in Westminster Hall. His enthusiasm is infectious.

I welcome this opportunity to put on the record my appreciation not just of the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, but of the contributions and work of all the other members of the UK delegation, and of all the things they have achieved and will achieve. For instance, the hon. Gentleman has made a significant impact on the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, and I was particularly grateful for his work in inspiring the Parliamentary Assembly’s motion in October condemning trafficking in human beings. As hon. Members are well aware, there is a great coincidence of passion and effort here, as tackling modern slavery is a major priority for the Prime Minister personally and for the Government more widely.

I am also grateful for the contributions of other hon. Members in the debate. I will set out the UK’s commitment and contribution to the Council of Europe, and share our vision of how, together, member states can overcome the challenges it faces. I will try to respond to some of the points raised, but I am pleased to have already been able to respond to my genuine friend, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), on the Lanzarote convention. I am sure that the House will endorse that without question and very rapidly.

The Government are committed to enabling people to realise their potential. Protecting and promoting human rights is central to that objective. More broadly, it is an essential aim of our foreign policy. That is why the Council of Europe is so important to the UK. We recognise and appreciate the valuable role it plays in advancing work on human rights, democracy and the rule of law across Europe.

As the UK prepares to leave the EU, the Council of Europe will be just as important to us. Indeed—perhaps this is the main point of the debate—it will become more important to us. Our continuing commitment to the Council of Europe is one of a number of examples to which I could point that give meaning to our message that, as we have heard this morning, although we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe. We will have the same friends and the same objectives, but a different structure. Our membership provides a platform to pursue common values and aspirations, alongside our many and continuing European friends.

We were, of course, a founding member of the Council of Europe; we were there from the very start. We helped to shape and draft the statute, which originally was the treaty of London, and we were at the centre of efforts to draft the European convention on human rights. Since those early days, as we have heard, Council of Europe membership has increased from 10 to 47, encompassing almost all of Europe. Its core activities of setting standards, monitoring compliance and providing assistance help to advance human rights and democracy across all those member states. It will and it must continue to do so.

A multitude of Government experts support the work of the Council of Europe, and its numerous bodies, including the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Parliamentary Assembly, play a vital role in ensuring member states take account. I am grateful for all the work of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, which is a wonderful example of cross-party
co-operation and shows the strength of our commitment. I hope that all those who are involved feel that there is a good working relationship between the Council and those of us who are Ministers taking an interest in the work being done.

The bedrock of the Council of Europe is of course the European convention on human rights. There have been questions, here and in Strasbourg, about our commitment to the convention. As my ministerial colleagues have made clear in recent debates in the House, the Government have absolutely no plans to withdraw from the ECHR. As I assured Secretary-General Jagland in November, we remain committed to the Council of Europe.

The European Court of Human Rights has raised human rights standards across Europe. In the UK, few of us would question its rulings in cases such as Dudgeon or Tyrer, which turned the tide on the criminalisation of homosexual acts and on corporal punishment respectively. However, to protect the long-term credibility of the Court, we must enable it to concentrate on the most serious human rights violations. The Danish Government, who currently chair the Committee of Ministers, share that vision. We worked closely with them on the recent Copenhagen declaration, which advances reform of the convention system, building on our own Brighton declaration of 2012.

There are also conventions covering areas beyond human rights and the rule of law. As part of our anti-corruption strategy, we intend soon to sign two new sports conventions on match fixing and safety at football matches and other sporting events. UK experts played a major role in shaping those conventions.

The Council of Europe, as we have heard, deploys a range of monitoring mechanisms to assess implementation of the standards that members have signed up to. It also assists member states to meet their commitments, including through the work of the Venice Commission, the Commissioner for Human Rights, expert groups and co-operation programmes. Working through multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe addresses the sensitivities of some member states about receiving foreign assistance.

Through our Magna Carta fund for human rights and democracy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has supported a number of Council of Europe projects. Those include projects supporting judicial reforms in Ukraine, countering violent extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and strengthening the ombudsman service in Russia—perhaps a slightly more challenging task. Through our conflict, stability and security fund, we have contributed almost €600,000 to a Council of Europe project to strengthen human rights standards in the armed forces in Armenia, allowing it to meet its obligations under the ECHR and to help its army attain modern standards and values. We have also provided £150,000 to support Council of Europe work on strengthening the cyber-crime convention. The UK-supported convention moves us further away from calls for new treaties that would regulate cyber-space in a way that was unacceptable to the UK.

As we have heard, however, there are a number of challenges facing the Council of Europe. For instance, for many years the organisation has had difficulty in allocating its budget to core priorities. It has also struggled to keep up with the bulging caseload of its Strasbourg Court. Some will want to put pressure on Turkey to strengthen its judicial system, and we have heard some compelling arguments why. One of the advantages of doing so is that it will avoid a wave of new applications that might put further strain on the Strasbourg Court.

I share the secretary-general’s goal of keeping Turkey engaged. As we have heard, I have personally been working on that pretty well since the first day I became a Foreign Minister, which coincided with the attempted coup in Turkey. Indeed, I will be there next week representing the former entente powers at the 103rd annual commemoration of the Gallipoli campaign—a significant moment illustrating that, whereas a century ago we were enemies, today we can look across at each other as friends. I look forward to continuing to work with Turkey through the Council of Europe to support its judicial system, not just because that is the best way to minimise further strain on the European Court of Human Rights, but because it matters in itself.

It is not just the Court that is under pressure; so too is the Council’s budget. While it is disappointing that Turkey has rescinded its grand payeur status, it continues none the less to pay its basic contribution, as it is obliged to do. However, Russia’s withholding of its budget since July last year, in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the Parliamentary Assembly following the annexation of Crimea, looks much more intractable. That failure will be a long-standing issue that we must resolve in the context of our opposing Russia’s overall belligerence and aggression. I understand the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about the importance of engaging in that context. The significant budgetary pressures faced by the Council of Europe increase the urgency on the secretariat to implement the necessary reforms and efficiencies to deliver a more efficient organisation, focused on core activities. The UK Government stand ready to support those reforms.

I can assure the House that the Government will remain fully committed to the Council of Europe. I urge all my hon. Friends on both sides of the House to continue in the very good work that they do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.
Leaving the EU: Veterinary Profession in Wales

11 am

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the veterinary profession in Wales.

Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Hosie. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the future of the veterinary sector in Wales, and particularly the impact that leaving the European Union will have on it. It is a profession that does not always receive due attention, but it is nevertheless hugely important, not only to my constituency of Ceredigion and other rural areas in Wales but to the whole of the country.

I begin by emphasising that, regardless of one’s opinion of the UK’s membership of the European Union, we can all agree that that membership has significantly shaped the veterinary sector in several ways, including through legislation on animal health and welfare standards, the invaluable contribution that freedom of movement has made to the veterinary workforce, and the accessibility of safe, rigorously tested veterinary medicines to name but a few. Those are key pillars of the sector and will undoubtedly be impacted by the Government’s decision to leave both the EU single market and the customs union. As such, it is important that the Government address these challenges, to ensure that preparations are thorough, so that the veterinary sector is in robust health and is able to operate effectively in a post-EU-membership climate.

I know that those of us here acknowledge the importance of the veterinary profession and its particular contribution to making rural communities sustainable. A strong veterinary workforce is vital to maintaining high animal health and welfare standards, food safety standards and overall public health in Wales. We should not underestimate the role that local vets play in their communities.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I should declare an interest: my wife works for Carmarthen Veterinary Centre and Hospital back home in the motherland. I was recently at a leaving do for Mr Phillip Williams, who founded the practice 40 years ago. One of the farmers—Mr John James of Ty Llwyd, Felingwm, who is a very famous farmer in Carmarthenshire—made a tribute speech and said there are only two people he trusts in the world: his GP and his vet. Does that not show how important vets are to rural Welsh communities?

Ben Lake: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It illustrates what important pillars of communities vets are, particularly in rural areas.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): On that point, there was always a theory that if something was doctored it was slightly suspicious, but if it was vetted it was generally considered to be sound.

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman succinctly makes the same point. It is true that, in rural areas, whether in Wales or any other part of the UK, the vet is very much a pillar of the local community. Whether by bringing solace to weary pet owners, safeguarding standards in the meat processing sector or supporting farmers to rear healthy livestock, they perform a crucial service.

We often hear about the function of the financial services sector and how it helps to keep the economy of London and the south-east ticking, but just as important, although seldom commented on, is the role played by the veterinary profession in rural areas and how it keeps the very heart of those areas beating. Whether in times of tranquillity or turbulence, the local vet is the very foundation of the agricultural community—a constant and dependable figure, as perhaps best conveyed by the books of James Herriot. I must declare that I was not alive to witness at first hand the scenes depicted by those books; in fact, I was not around to witness the first TV series based on the books. However, the role that vets play in sustaining communities in Wales—as the backbone of the rural economy—is just as indispensable now as it was in the 1930s.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for bringing the debate. I know about the veterinary profession not from books but from having managed a veterinary practice employing 14 vets before coming into this place. On the basis of what I have so far heard from the Government about their plans to allow vets into the country, if I was still running that practice I would not be concerned. However, he is right: it is a vital industry.

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for his intervention. I very much hope that I will today be as reassured and convinced as he is that the Government’s plans to ensure a robust future for the veterinary profession are well founded.

It is true that, given the volatility that the agricultural industry all too often faces and the likelihood that further changes are on the horizon, safeguarding the veterinary profession must be a priority. Plaid Cymru has consistently maintained that continued membership of the single market, customs union and other EU agencies would be the most constructive way forward to do that. I will elaborate on that later.

The agricultural and food sectors are underpinned by veterinary services—I know I am labouring the point, but it is important—which contributed £62 million to the economy of west Wales alone and £100 million to the economy of Wales in 2016. In Wales, 3,500 people are employed in the sector, almost 1,400 vets having graduated in the EU and settled in Wales, benefiting from the ability to live, work and study in 28 countries as part of single market membership.

The veterinary sector is not the only one in Wales that is supported by a workforce from the EU, but leaving the single market, and potentially losing the ability to easily attract the vets that we need, will have serious repercussions. The profession is relatively small, but its reach and impact are significant. The ramifications of losing just a small percentage of the workforce could be substantial. For example, the British Veterinary Association has detailed the profound consequences of losing official veterinarians from slaughterhouses, where up to 95% of vets registering to work in the meat hygiene workforce graduated overseas. That would
potentially increase the risk of food fraud and animal welfare breaches and would undermine a level of public health reassurance to consumers at home and overseas, which could indirectly jeopardise our trading prospects.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing the debate. I note the contribution that vets and farriers make to our home lives, and possibly the contribution they have taken from my bank account in the past as well. Does he welcome past comments from Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that emphasise that technological methods of oversight, such as CCTV cameras, can in no way replace official veterinarians in safeguarding animal welfare and food standards in our abattoirs?

**Ben Lake**: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes an important point—it is not an either/or situation; it is a matter of enhancing confidence in animal welfare and animal hygiene standards. It is not a matter of having one or the other; it is about having both. These are serious concerns, so I would welcome reassurances from the Minister that they are being addressed, and that measures will be in place in good time before the UK leaves the European Union.

Another, perhaps more long-term challenge that we face in the veterinary profession, and one that has a particular relevance to Wales, is our capability to educate and train our own vets. Given that Welsh agriculture is overwhelmingly constituted of animal husbandry, it beggars belief that we still do not have a centre for people to undertake veterinary training in Wales. Rather like traveling from north to south Wales by train, for somebody to become a vet in Wales, they have to go through England first.

I am pleased that plans to bring veterinary medicine training to Aberystwyth University in Ceredigion are being discussed with the Royal Veterinary College in London. Unsurprisingly, I wholeheartedly support that endeavour, and I hope that the agricultural industry and Welsh Government support the realisation of these ambitious plans. I strongly believe that doing so would ensure a continuous supply of high-quality vets in Wales and would also encourage more individuals from areas such as Ceredigion to enter the profession.

**Chris Davies**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. I should put it on the record that I am delighted and honoured to be an honorary associate of the British Veterinary Association. On this particular point, I was in Hong Kong last week, and when I quizzed Hong Kong’s Minister of Agriculture on veterinary services, she said Hong Kong and China and many other parts of the world look up to our academia and services, she said Hong Kong and China and many other parts of the world look up to our academia and services on veterinary training for veterinary surgeons in this country. Those people who come over to our country as regular visitors to our veterinary schools do so with the greatest respect and admiration. It is a real asset to the United Kingdom that we have such high-quality veterinary training and research. I just hope that Aberystwyth University can, in the very near future, contribute to that revered status and reputation.

Research conducted recently by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has shown that nearly one in five EU vets are now actively looking for work outside the UK. Fulfilling demand for veterinary surgeons will be essential not just to maintain animal welfare standards and hygiene, but to our trading prospects. The BVA has warned that in the short to medium term, it will be impossible to meet the demand with UK nationals alone, so the profession does face the possibility of a workforce shortage and Wales faces a significant new barrier to trade.

The import and export of animals to third countries requires veterinary certification, and that in turn depends on having sufficient numbers of adequately trained vets. Official veterinarians both certify and supervise the import and export of live animals and provide official controls at food exporting premises and border inspection posts. Should the UK leave the single market and customs union and subsequently fail to enter into a form of customs union with the EU, administrative checks would apply to UK imports from and exports to the EU, as well as to any other countries that the UK trades with. The demand for veterinary certification is already increasing, and if that becomes our default trading position, the demand will only grow exponentially.

Nigel Gibbens, the UK’s former chief veterinary officer, recently warned that such a scenario could mean that the volume of products requiring veterinary export health certification would increase by as much as 325%, at a time when our ability to recruit the very vets that we need to issue certificates was significantly hindered. I therefore urge the Government to maintain the working rights for non-British EU vets and registered veterinary nurses currently working and studying in Wales, and the rest of the UK, and that the veterinary profession be added to the shortage occupation list—a call that the BVA itself has made.

Before concluding, I must stress the importance of a strong veterinary profession to the continuation of Welsh agricultural exports. Any prospect of a thriving agricultural export market will be realised only if we have enough vets to maintain the high standard of Welsh produce. Confidence in animal welfare and hygiene standards bestows a premium on Welsh products, and we cannot allow that to be undermined.

**Liz Saville Roberts**: I appreciate my hon. Friend giving me the opportunity to raise something that is a particular source of concern in Wales. We suffer from the fact that 70% of Welsh cattle are exported to England for slaughter. We need to maintain our slaughterhouses, our abattoirs, as effectively as possible, with veterinary backing, but the side effect of exporting 70% of Welsh cattle is that we are losing out on the Hybu Cig Cymru red meat levy, which is currently going to England. That needs to be addressed; it has been waiting to be addressed for a number of years now.

**Ben Lake**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a very important point, which has been under discussion and close scrutiny in Wales for quite some time. Successive Welsh Affairs Committees have raised it as an important point to be addressed quite urgently by the Government. I hope that perhaps it can be addressed now, before we leave the European Union, because a considerable amount of money is going out of the pockets of Welsh farmers, essentially, that could otherwise go towards marketing the premium product that they have to offer.
It is a strong veterinary workforce that minimizes the risk of food fraud, promotes animal welfare and provides public health reassurance, making our produce attractive and thus helping to preserve the viability of Welsh agriculture. To conclude, therefore, the role of the veterinary profession in facilitating trade and protecting public health, food safety and animal welfare is essential. The immediate challenges facing the workforce require the Government to ensure the continued flow of trained professionals from the EU and overseas. To prevent future shortages, however, we must also increase the number of UK veterinary graduates. As I have said, I very much hope that Aberystwyth will be considered as a location for one of those centres. The value of the local vet to our communities, and of the veterinary profession to our agricultural and food industries in particular, mean that we cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges facing the sector. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that whatever agreement the UK reaches with the EU, the role that the profession fulfils to enable trade, protect animal health, safeguard animal welfare and retain consumer confidence is recognised and addressed.

Diolch yn fawr, Mr Hosie.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate on what I agree is an important issue.

In Wales, and indeed the rest of the United Kingdom, EU nationals make a significant contribution to the veterinary workforce, and the Government are committed to ensuring that EU nationals can continue working in the UK post EU exit. This debate is therefore timely, as preparations continue apace towards our exit from the EU in March 2019. As the hon. Gentleman points out, the work of the veterinary profession is crucial in so many aspects to our economy and society. Whether they are working in private practice, industry, research, government or a host of other roles, members of the profession play a vital role in protecting animal health through surveillance and treatment to prevent, detect and control disease outbreaks, and in safeguarding public health by similarly addressing the threat of animal diseases that affect humans and by encouraging and supporting the responsible use of antibiotics in animals to reduce the spread of antimicrobial resistance.

Vets maintain, improve and assure our world-leading animal welfare standards. As has been eloquently pointed out, vets also facilitate trade and, we hope, the growth of trade in animals and animal products through the process of certifying, verifying and inspecting export and import consignments. Finally, they ensure food safety, especially by carrying out statutory official feed and food controls, which guarantee consumer confidence.

The Government recognise that certainty and continuity are of great importance as we leave the European Union and are keen to seek a constructive and beneficial working relationship with the EU as we go forward. I am talking about certainty on the high standards of animal health and welfare and on the ability to trade animals and animal products, the continuity of a thriving veterinary profession and continuity in our world-class research and development. We will look to enhance existing animal health and welfare standards and international commitments on food safety, transparency and traceability while securing our position at the forefront of the global agri-food industry. We are a nation that trades on a reputation for reliable, good-quality and fairly priced products, and we have an opportunity to enhance that.

In all areas of veterinary work, I fully recognise, and want to place on the record, how much we owe to members of the profession from outside the UK. A fundamental part of ensuring the future success of the veterinary profession in the UK and the successful delivery of the vital roles that I have outlined is ensuring that we continue to have access to a talented workforce, both in Wales and in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman will know that almost one quarter of all practising vets in the UK are from the rest of the European Union, as are 50% of all new vets joining the RCVS register to work in the UK. I can assure him that the Department is fully aware, in relation to veterinary public health roles, that about 95% of the official veterinarians who are contracted to work in meat hygiene roles are non-UK EU citizens. For Government, industry and the profession itself, it is vital that after we leave the European Union non-UK nationals currently based here continue working in veterinary roles in the UK; we want them to continue to do so. That is particularly important because, based on current numbers, we cannot rely solely on our domestic graduates to fill the demand for veterinary surgeons.

A key point that we want to ensure the House is aware of is that we are absolutely focused on mutual recognition of professional qualifications. The Government are seeking a negotiated deal with our European partners within which we want to continue arrangements for mutual recognition of those qualifications. As part of that, two significant agreements have recently been reached. First, agreement was reached at the December 2017 European Council that existing rights under the mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive, under which EU nationals can register to work as vets in the UK, will be retained, so that existing EU nationals in the UK veterinary workforce will be entitled to continue working in the UK after withdrawal, and vice versa.

Secondly, agreement was reached at the March 2018 European Council on the transition—the implementation period—until the end of December 2020. That means that between the end of March 2018 and that date, EU nationals will continue to be registered to work in the UK as vets, in accordance with mutual recognition arrangements that will be incorporated into UK law. Those two agreements, if incorporated into the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, will go a long way towards securing a veterinary workforce that meets existing requirements. However, that will depend, understandably, on the continued desire of EU nationals to remain in the UK and to seek to come here to work after we leave the EU.

As I have already indicated, the Government’s long-term aim is to build a sustainable, thriving, diverse and modernised UK veterinary infrastructure, which is resilient to workforce impacts and able to take opportunities upon leaving the EU. To achieve this, the veterinary capability and capacity project has been established as a
collaborative initiative in which the Government, through DEFRA and the Animal and Plant Health Agency, are working in close co-operation with the Food Standards Agency, the devolved Administrations, including the Welsh Government, and key stakeholders, specifically the regulator of the veterinary profession, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and the representative body of the veterinary profession, the BVA. We want to develop a flexible and skilled workforce that meets the UK’s needs to fill essential roles in Government and the private sector.

The chief veterinary officer for Wales, Christianne Glossop, represents the Welsh Government on the board of this partnership, along with the chief veterinary officers for the UK, Scotland and Northern Ireland Governments. This ensures that issues specific to Wales can be addressed, although many of the same concerns about vet shortages and reliance on EU national veterinary surgeons are shared. The FSA uses the services of 258 such vets in meat inspection roles, and around 40 of those are in Wales. I pointed out earlier that 95% of officials across the UK are non-UK EU citizens, but in Wales all 40 are non-UK EU nationals. Wales also relies on EU national vets as part of its bovine TB eradication programme. We fully recognise that any future restrictions on EU migration could therefore have implications for the functioning of the food supply chain in Wales and bovine TB eradication measures. The partnership is looking at a range of initiatives, in addition to ensuring that processes are in place to secure non-UK veterinary resources, including strengthening retention of existing vets in the workforce and increasing the longer term supply of UK-qualified vets.

On the question of increasing the number of home-grown graduates, I am aware—the hon. Member for Ceredigion is too—that there are currently no university veterinary schools in Wales that are accredited by the RCVS. However, I am very pleased—I am sure that he is particularly pleased—that Aberystwyth University has been exploring possibilities for achieving such accreditation with the RCVS. A few years ago, a small number of universities had veterinary graduates or courses. That is gradually increasing, but I am very conscious of the substantial costs in creating new courses to achieve that. I really hope that this partnership, which Aberystwyth University is progressing, succeeds. Encouraging more people into the veterinary profession is not a new issue, particularly into the farmed and agricultural environment, rather than the domestic animal environment, but together we recognise the challenges and we will keep working at it.

I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. It is a really important aspect of our withdrawal from the EU.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister briefly comment on what the British Government are doing to work with European partners on disease surveillance post Brexit? At the moment, data can be shared across the EU. How will that function after Brexit, to ensure that our livestock are protected?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the laws we have in place and the reporting lines, although some of those might have a slightly different agency responsible for them straight after leaving the European Union. It is in our collective interest, where we want to have free and straightforward access to each other’s markets, to continue that collaboration. I am not in a position to provide a detailed assessment of where that is, but in all the relationships I have had with EU member states, at ministerial and commissioner level, the issue of biosecurity and animal safety is absolutely paramount. I believe that there is good intent to ensure that some of those issues that could become a barrier do not do so. The hon. Gentleman might wish to contact Lord Gardiner in order to get further details on that issue.

In closing, I hope that the hon. Member for Ceredigion and the House recognise that the Government are focused on the issues, challenges and opportunities that the veterinary profession faces. I again thank him for bringing this important matter to Westminster Hall. I assure him that the Government are actively involved and committed to ensuring that these challenges will be addressed and resolved.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.
UK Digital and Tech Industries

[SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

2.30 pm

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK digital and tech industries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. This is an important debate on a sector of the economy that has been incredibly vital for this country and will become even more important in future. The UK’s history as a global leader in technological and digital innovation is well known. From the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in the 1800s, and the creation of the television by John Logie Baird in the 1920s, to the relatively recent introduction of the world wide web in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee, the UK has always been at the forefront of technological advancement for the rest of the world. Today we continue to see incredible innovation and growth across the country, which puts the UK at the forefront of global technological advancement.

The turnover of digital and tech business in the UK has reached £170 billion. That is an increase of £30 billion over the past five years alone. We should recognise that the digital sector is creating jobs twice as fast as the non-digital sector. It is important to note that this is not just a London-centric industry, as many seem to think it might be. We have seen incredible growth in this sector all across the UK. There are digital clusters thriving in Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle, Cardiff and many other places in the UK. In mentioning all those regions, I thought that people from them might feel urgent to jump up and say “amen.”

Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will save his ammunition for later. We should welcome the huge growth in the number of individuals setting up businesses online, many from their own homes.

One of the many benefits of the digital industry is to take advantage of the opportunities for business and trade that exist online: the ability for people across the country, and the world, to be connected at just the press of a button. The aim of my speech is to push the Government for assurances that, alongside the recent digital strategy, we will continue to invest and encourage this sector of the economy to grow and, crucially, strive to be world leaders in this industry—tech UK.

Imagination Technologies in my constituency is at the cutting edge of this exciting sector. I visited its offices a couple of weeks ago and witnessed at first hand some of its fascinating, advanced work on computer chips and artificial intelligence. As I am sure the Minister knows, Imagination was recently acquired by Canyon Technologies in my constituency is at the forefront of global technological advancement. To save her from that deviation, I will say today that the Minister will be more than welcome to my constituency to see what the world can learn from St Albans.

There has been so much good news coming out of the tech industry in recent years and months. The UK ranked in the top three in KPMG’s 2018 global technology innovation report. The report detailed the record level of venture capital investment into UK tech firms, which totals $4 billion. That is more investment than the combined amounts in Germany, France, Spain and Ireland. The UK is mopping up more of that vital investment than those four countries combined. KPMG’s report also highlighted the strength not just in large tech firm investment and growth in the UK, but in the investment going into emerging UK tech firms. However, we cannot rest on our laurels. We must see the UK emerge as the No. 1 location for global tech innovation in the near future—not just in the top three, but No. 1.

**Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is remarkable and commendable that 99.8% of all new digital firms are small and medium-sized enterprises, and that this is a reflection of the organic strength in this space in the UK?

**Mrs Main:** I absolutely agree. We are having to look to a model where the great big factories and industries of the past are not necessarily going to be the voice of the future. Many of these companies are set up in people’s bedrooms. Mark Zuckerberg might have a few issues of his own at the moment but, as he said, who would have thought three geeks in a bedroom would set up a company that would become so big? That is the future. Many of these companies start off small and then grow. That growth is part of the success, but also part of the issue that I want the Minister to address.

Funding Circle, a FinTech company founded in the UK, is another great example of success in the UK tech sector. Established in 2010, Funding Circle is now the world’s largest lending platform for small businesses and has offices across Europe and in the United States. In such a short space of time it has come to be a global leader. Lending from Funding Circle loans has supported the creation of approximately 80,000 jobs in the UK. It is a wonderful example of the thriving FinTech industry that we now have.

Across Europe, the UK is leading the way. The latest European digital city index ranked London as No. 1 for supporting digital entrepreneurs. The UK is also No. 1 across Europe for inward investment into the digital sector. We should be incredibly proud of that. As we look to the future, the Government must do everything they can to support the continued growth of this industry. That includes listening to its concerns and planning for potential regulation.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Lady is painting a very rosy picture of the current situation. I suspect that she will soon move on to some of the challenges. As a representative of a city that is a well-known tech hub, I will just ask: does she agree that many of the people who work in the tech sector come from other countries, particularly European Union countries, and that it is important that the Government bring forward their proposals on migration and immigration as soon as possible so that we get some certainty for the future?
Mrs Main: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman about getting certainty on migration. Other companies I have spoken to recently say that they want to be able to bring in the brightest and the best. I absolutely understand that. Interestingly, many of the brightest and the best who are coming in, including Dr Li, who has taken over as the chief executive of Imagination Technologies, are from outside the European Union. Many are saying to me that they want a level playing field on the ability to bring in the brightest and the best, and not just because someone happens to have a blue passport. It is important that we recognise that this is a global industry with global resources that may wish to come to the UK.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to get our immigration strategy fit for purpose, but we also need to ensure that we have people in our own country who are entering the tech industry. Another company I visited in St Albans said that it was bringing in many highly qualified technicians. It had not employed a single person from the UK in the past three years. Why? Because it could not get them; they are in such demand. There are issues we need to address with ensuring that we are growing home talent for the future, as well as those around immigration. It is a double-sided issue that we need to be looking at.

As we leave the European Union, we will be able to set our own immigration policy, with fuller control over who can come into the country to work. The Government must ensure that any future immigration policy is agile and flexible to allow that international talent to come to the country and support growing industries, such as the tech sector. I would be glad to hear what preparations the Department has made to ensure that the tech sector can access that international talent after we leave the EU. Given that there are many small businesses in the tech sector, I would like to ensure that there is a conduit for their voices and concerns in future.

Finally, our education system is crucial to the future success of our tech and digital sectors. With the best will in the world, the brightest and best talent comes and wants to work in the UK tech sector, but I would also like our young people to want to join it—not to say it is not for them. It is important to welcome foreign talent, but we must grow our own.

Policy Exchange reported that 65% of today’s students will end up working in jobs that do not even exist yet—that is 65% of future jobs that we cannot even imagine. By 2022, 500,000 highly skilled workers will be needed to fill digital roles, which is three times the number of UK computer science graduates in the past 10 years. That shows the amount of upskilling we have to do and the need to make tech a sector that our young people go into. That huge mismatch must be addressed.

Educators must provide children and young adults in the UK with the skills and training needed for the jobs of the future. We need a curriculum fit for the future, access to teaching staff to inspire our young people, and careers guidance that narrows the gender gap. Women and girls can and do flourish in the tech industry, but we need greater encouragement. When I visited Imagination Technologies, I asked a lady there how many women go into that sort of industry and she said, “Not enough.” It is not enough.

I am encouraged by recent Government announcements about the digital strategy and the Department for Education’s announcement that a further £177 million will go into maths education, which is a crucial STEM subject for the jobs of the future. However, we need to do more to encourage our brightest and best to enter the world of teaching. Teaching is at the core; to get young people enthused and motivated, we must get the teachers in. There are some difficulties in recruiting teachers for certain subjects, and I would like to see a strategy to address that.

When I met Dr Li, the new chief executive of Imagination Technologies, he spoke about the significant support the industry receives in China. Rather cleverly, I said that we are in the top three, but China is No. 1. I will give hon. Members some reasons why—to say that the state is helping is to put it mildly. To promote talent in the industry and, crucially, to retain it, the Chinese Government provide subsidies for teaching tech subjects and offer financial incentives around pay and housing for those working in the sector. Although I am not advocating that approach, it shows that our competitors are determined to win the global tech race. They will not export their talent to other countries if they can possibly help it.

We need to ensure that tech UK is heading for the winning line, but with that exciting world of opportunity comes a dark side. Online security and safety are extremely
important issues for the industry to deal with. The protection of the personal data that is being used by online companies is a current issue. For people to have confidence in the programs and applications they use, they need to know that their personal data is secure. I hope that the Government will continue to put pressure on companies to safeguard user data, and to consider how we can future-proof personal security and police industry behaviour.

UK businesses are increasingly subjected to cyber-security threats, which is another topical issue. A recent report by the National Cyber Security Centre found that more and more businesses are being threatened with data breaches, ransomware and cloud theft. Unfortunately, the criminals of this world—the malcontents and ne’er-do-wells—are one step ahead of the game. What are we doing to ensure that we are getting ahead of the game in cyber-security?

The growth of the internet of things, in which many household devices and other objects are interconnected, presents a worrying openness to hackers, as many of those devices lack even the most basic security defences. Some hon. Members will have seen the horrific case of a driverless car being hacked into. The idea that the machines could suddenly take over is horrific, but of course it is not the machines; it is the hackers behind the machines. The exploitation of data in attempts to influence other countries’ elections is another current topic.

As we migrate more of our lives into the digital world, we need to ensure that rogue companies and rogue states are prevented from corrupt or sinister behaviour. I hope that the Minister will touch on what the Government are doing to strengthen our cyber-security and to increase public awareness about safety in a high-tech world.

The industry has incredible potential. Some recent technological advancements are staggering and the UK is proudly at the forefront of that success. On my visit to Imagination Technologies, it was inspiring to hear from those in the industry about how technology will improve our lives in future. The ability for artificial intelligence and the internet of things to combine to assist with basic tasks, although there will never be a substitute for interaction with people.

To conclude, tech can improve our future lives in many ways: not just through healthcare or social connectivity, but by making everything in our lives easier. Tech UK is the future for us all. This country has an incredibly exciting digital industry and global Britain should strive to be not just in the top three, but No. 1.

2.47 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. When I mention my constituency of York, hopefully hon. Members think about the city walls, the minster, the Vikings—

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Steam trains!
and standing alongside other industries—is so cross-cutting and how the skills acquired around video-gaming can then be applied right across the curriculum. Education is certainly at the forefront of that. I saw programmes that provided individualisation of tutoring. For instance, I undertook a French course; I will not say how I got on. Such programmes can track an individual’s learning, taking them back over their weaknesses, improving their skills and ensuring that they are the best that they can be at that particular skill.

I also saw how the Yorkshire Museum has embraced virtual reality, to take visitors into a Viking village and enable them to experience life in that settlement. I saw 3D modelling technologies, pioneered in the games industry, that now help companies such as Rolls-Royce to design better engines. I saw artificial intelligence—machine learning—and how that work is advancing and the technology is progressing. This is in my city, this is in our country and we must be so proud of that.

The academic world around this work is so strong. Along with other cities, York hosts the Intelligent Games and Game Intelligence—IGGI, for short—programme, which hosts 60 PhD students. An absolutely global standard is being set around academia and looking at the future technologies that will drive our country’s engine forward. Gaming will be really important to us, and not just for the sake of playing games; there is also the application of the skills that many people working in the industry will go on to develop.

What is going on before us—spread across the country, including in my city—is a quiet revolution that is transforming all our lives, with massive opportunities for the future of our country and my city. However, there are some issues that I want to talk about today. First of all, there is skills. We have good skills in our country, but we need some changes. The narrowing of the curriculum is not helping, particularly with regard to the digital creative sector. The arts have been downgraded and yet they could really be at the forefront. I ask the Minister to go back and have a look at that and make sure that the creative subjects are at the heart of our curriculum, too: it is when the technical and the creative join that we see this explosion of opportunity coming to our economy.

There are also the tech skills of kids to consider. We narrow people into boxes around a traditional learning curriculum, which is fit for a different era. We need to ensure that our children are embracing the new technologies of the future, because children are doing so elsewhere in the world and we really need to ensure now that we embed digital and technical skills right into the heart of our curriculum.

**Liam Byrne:** In the 19th century, it was the marriage of design and engineering brilliance in York that ensured it was the centre of the railway industry. Does my hon. Friend take inspiration from that?

**Rachael Maskell:** My right hon. Friend makes an absolutely excellent point, because that is our heritage—how we drove our economy forward through the Victorian years. We have that opportunity again today. The digital signalling centre in our city—the rail operating centre, or ROC, as it is called—is now at the heart of how trains are driven. They will not be driven in the cab of a train any more; the digital tech sector is now driving forward, so it is like having a train set in front of a screen. That is completely radicalising the way that our country works. It is cutting-edge, 21st-century technology, and we have to see more of it in the future.

As I was saying, whether someone studies history, literature, medicine or maths, the digital and technical industries will play a vital role in their future. Just last week, I had the opportunity to take a tour of another York University department—the archaeological department. Archaeology digs into the past, but I also saw how the department is using technology to provide access to artefacts, by displaying them in a unique way, so that people can explore them and manipulate them on screen, to connect with artefacts dug up all over the world. They are put into context and it is possible to understand the history surrounding them: the experience was mind-blowing. That is because through technology the past has met the future, and there are very exciting opportunities in that regard.

The tech industry will also provide the breakthrough for telehealth, which will improve all our health. Again, I was exposed to some of those opportunities when I looked around the University of York, but so much more can be done, even when it comes to issues such as our mental health. We are massively struggling for resources in our health sector, but it is also so to have technology that can support us—technology can work against us, but also support us—and improve our wellbeing, we must embrace that technology as we move forward. It is so important that we consider the scope of where this technology is leading us and understand why the investment in our schools and education is so important.

I turn to research and innovation. We are talking about a very disparate sector, with lots of different companies scattered around. They do not have the capacity to build up much resource to get funding for research. We need to find a breakthrough on research, so that companies can network, to come together and draw down research funding, because we have a real future in this area, not least in the field of artificial intelligence, where we can really drive that technology forward. Of course, such technology is not about replacing humans; it is partly about doing things quicker, but also about pioneering breakthroughs in how we work. However, we need support for that.

I want the technology to have a social impact as well. York itself is brilliant in every stretch of the imagination, but it is also a very divided city. Some of the most deprived areas in the country are in my city and we are seeing exclusion being built in around it. I ask the Minister to consider whether the digital and tech sectors can be used to reduce the inequality in our country, not only through opportunities and skills but through the outcomes that the sector can bring. For me, that will be the win-win of the sector.

Finally, I want to say that the arts enrich all of us. In closing, I want to talk about Mediale 2018. Will the Minister meet me to discuss it? It will run from 27 September to 6 October, and it will be the nation’s creative digital festival. It is a platform for innovative art and technology, showing what can be done in this modern age, providing art to everyone as an enhancing experience. Mediale will be a springboard for this sector of our economy and how the arts are projected across our country, blending the old and the new. I am sure the Minister will want to ensure that the sector has a major footprint not only in York, but in the whole nation.
3 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for calling this important debate. I will talk briefly, but first I want to put in context the importance of the digital sector to our country’s economic output. We must bear in mind that the digital industries make up 4% of all employment and 7% of economic output, which is remarkable and represents remarkable growth in recent times.

One successful growth story is UKCloud, a very large company in my constituency. Just a few years ago, it was a start-up of six people. Under the amazing leadership of Simon Hansford, it has grown to now employ nearly 200 people. This month, it will take on another 50 employees. It has been remarkably successful, and it represents some of the recent explosive growth we have seen across the sector. As the name would suggest, UKCloud is a cloud storage business. It has successfully delivered cloud solutions for: central Government, including UK Cloud is playing an important role in our country’s having a direct impact on our national security at the highest level, the intelligence cannot achieve its best effect in a manner, the intelligence cannot achieve its best effect in cutting-edge approach to the handling of intelligence and data, given the recent domestic challenges we have faced with our national security in Manchester with the atrocity just a year ago and the recent developments in Salisbury. UKCloud is playing an important role in our national security.

Another significant thing about UKCloud is that it has a very important offer when it comes to national security. This year it is establishing a high-assurance cloud platform, which will basically be a secret facility known as UKCloudX. It will enable the Government to fulfil an important intelligence function, which is the ability to share intelligence across a number of different Government bodies and achieve the doctrinal intent of fusion. It is all very well when different intelligence agencies or bodies have information and intelligence, but unless they can share and fuse it in a highly secret manner, the intelligence cannot achieve its best effect in support of our national security.

UKCloudX is an important development, which has a direct impact on our national security at the highest level. I am delighted that that work will be taking place in Farnborough this year. No one in this room needs reminding of the importance of this country’s having a cutting-edge approach to the handling of intelligence and data, given the recent domestic challenges we have faced with our national security in Manchester with the atrocity just a year ago and the recent developments in Salisbury. UKCloud is playing an important role in our national security.

The other important aspect is data sovereignty. Due to recent developments, especially with regard to Facebook, which has already been mentioned today, the importance of the secure handling of data is clear to us all. Whether it is Government data or the personal data of citizens, the way that is handled and the total control we need to have over that to guarantee security are of the utmost importance. Data sovereignty should be a strand that runs through the Government’s approach to the industry as a whole, but particularly when it comes to the procurement of cloud storage facilities. I would be grateful for the Minister’s reassurance that when the Government consider procuring future cloud storage for their work, they will guard against any tendency to prefer US hyperscale offers—the big US providers—and instead prefer British SMEs, which not only offer 100% data sovereignty, but also offer the immediate economic benefit of the jobs and growth we have discussed today. I commend the Government for their attitude in terms of the G-Cloud, which has been a great success, but I would welcome the Minister’s reassurance on preferring UK SMEs in procurement.

Various invitations have been mentioned today. The Minister would not forgive me if I sat down without warmly extending an invitation to her to visit Farnborough and UKCloud. It is extremely convenient, being just off junction 4 of the M3. I am sure we can provide a very good lunch. I know she does not need that kind of incentive, however, because her commitment to her brief is such that she will want to see things at first hand. On that note, I conclude my remarks.

3.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Ms McDonagh, and to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and on passionately setting out the issues that we all subscribe to and wish to speak about.

The UK’s digital tech industry turned over an estimated £170 billion in 2015 and is growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy. It is key to boosting the UK’s wider economy, making a contribution of £97 billion in 2015. The hon. Lady clearly set out the situation in relation to the digital tech industry. She was confident on the way forward and Brexit. I will be equally confident, and I also want to say a wee bit about what we have done back home, which has been excellent for job creation and for boosting our local economy.

The digital tech industry generated a further 85,000 jobs between 2014 and 2015, going from 1.56 million jobs to 1.64 million. It is creating jobs at double the rate of the rest of the economy. That indicates how important the sector is. All the contributions so far have mentioned that, and I am sure those who follow will do the same. Since 2012, there has been a 13% increase in the advertised salaries of digital tech posts, compared with only a 4% rise in those of non-digital jobs. Tech investment in the UK reached £6.8 billion in 2016, which is more than two times higher than any other European country and significantly more than its closest rival, France, which secured some £2.4 billion of investment. That is about as much as much, which indicates the strength of our digital tech industry.

“Tech Nation 2017” shows that the average advertised salary for digital tech jobs has now reached just over £50,000 a year, compared with £35,000 for the average non-digital salary, making it 44% higher than the national average. Again, not only are we creating jobs; we are creating well-paid jobs. Along with the well-paid jobs we have to provide the quality employee as well.
As a Northern Ireland MP, I look to the Minister, who I know has a particular interest in this subject, not just because she is a Minister but because she has a personal interest. I am sure the replies to our queries and questions will be positive, as I am sure the shadow Minister will think of some similar things to say as well. Tech City UK’s “Tech Nation 2016” report found that the digital and tech sector in Northern Ireland was burgeoning, and outside of London and the south-east made the largest contribution to the regional economy.

Mrs Main: The real purpose of this debate is to show that although London is key in many eyes, it is not a bar to young people finding work because they can find such high-paid jobs in their own areas, and that is really exciting.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is tremendously exciting. I discussed it with Invest Northern Ireland, which was given the task of finding new jobs. One of the things that it was able to describe—I will come to this shortly—was the quality of graduates that we have in Northern Ireland, which is one of the attractions of Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people do not have to go to London to get a big wage. They go for different reasons, whatever they may be, but people can have a job back home and they can stay there. That is what it makes it so exciting.

In the words of my party colleague, Simon Hamilton, in his role as Economy Minister:

“From the North West Science Park in Londonderry through to the Enterprise Zone in Coleraine and down to Newry, the home of some of our leading high-tech companies, with Belfast—Europe’s leading destination city for new software development projects—at its heart, bit by bit we are building a Northern Ireland-wide tech industry that we can be proud of.”

That is what we are doing in Northern Ireland, and that is what we hope to continue over the next period of time.

In Belfast and other cities in Northern Ireland, global tech names such as Citi and Allstate, working in the sector with Silicon Valley firms such as BDNA, are all recognisable. Each of us here will speak passionately about our own constituencies, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) did, and as other Members will as well. As MPs we love our constituencies and want to do the best for them, so the opportunities need to be there. Not only is our highly skilled workforce attracting global investment, but we have indigenous tech firms such as Kairos, Novosco and First Derivatives growing in size and becoming global leaders in our region of Northern Ireland. We can be excited about what is happening across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I often say to my hon. Friends in the Scottish National party, “Better together”: all the four regions doing all the same things together day by day and making things better for everyone, and we should continue to do that.

It is clear that much of our attraction is the skills base supported by international-standard research facilities, such as the Centre for Secure Information Technologies at Queen’s and Ulster’s Intelligent Systems Research Centre; education, and big business working together. We have done that very well through Queen’s University. The Minister might respond to that because that is a key factor to our moving forward. We will have the education, the big business, the opportunities, the quality of graduates and all those things together. We have a range of support and programmes in place, such as StartPlanet NI and Propel aimed in particular at early-stage and high potential technology-based start-ups. Perhaps most crucially, we have a fast developing ecosystem including the likes of Catalyst Inc., Digital DNA and Immersive Tech NI, which combine to create a vibrant tech community across Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is consistently the top-performing region of the UK in national exams at age 16 and 18. The fact is that we have the graduates. People want to stay and the technical and digital firms want to invest because the skills base is there. We have the highest percentage of qualified IT professionals in the UK and Ireland, with more than 77% holding a degree-level qualification. I say respectfully to all the other regions that Northern Ireland as a region is leading the way—from a small base of 1.8 million people, we are up there with London and other parts of the United Kingdom. Some 77% of high school graduates, post A-level, go on to further and higher education compared with the UK average of 71%.

Government, industry and academia have implemented collaborative initiatives in training and education, such as cyber and data analytics academies, to ensure that the workforce continues to meet the needs of the global ICT industry with competitive salary costs, low employee attrition rates and lower operating costs, including low property costs. All those things make it attractive to come to Northern Ireland. Labour and property costs for a 200-person software development centre in Belfast are 36% less than in Dublin, 44% less than in London and 58% less than in New York. It is clear that we are an attractive place to do business and we must sell that more globally.

I will conclude with this, Ms McDonagh. I am conscious of time and there are two others to follow me. I read an interesting article in the Belfast Telegraph in which David Crozier, part of the commercial team at CSIT, was quoted. I want to cite his comments because it is important to have them on the record. He said:

“Belfast has a strong hi-tech industry as it is and cyber security is a subsection of that so you have transferable skills in terms of software engineering roles that can transfer over into cyber security. We’re working towards a target of about 5,000 jobs by 2026.”

While other sectors are facing uncertainty following Brexit, Mr Crozier is bullish about its impact on cyber-security investment:

“It’s really high-value stuff, companies have a demand for it globally and to a certain extent that does make it”—

I use these words; I know the hon. Member for St Albans will be happy—

“Brexit proof.”

We are looking forward to good times.

“It’s not going to have a detrimental effect for sure, it may actually lead to more demand if you see a hardening of UK national positions around trade tariffs and those sort of things that’s naturally going to drive investment into types of technologies to protect sensitive information, sensitive networks. It possibly produces even greater opportunity.”

An industry that is yet again embracing the opportunity Brexit presents, an industry that is able to compete globally, is an industry that we must invest heavily into, and the benefits will be deeply beneficial. Brexit-proof: what could be a better reason than that?
3.16 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is my absolute pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship today, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. I declare my interest, as set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The United Kingdom punches above its weight in the global digital marketplace, with £170 billion of turnover and £7 billion of tech investment—twice the amount of any other country in the European Union. However, as we have heard, this is not just about profits; it is also about good-quality jobs, with the average advertised salary for a digital job 44% higher than for a non-digital average. That benefit is shared by an enormous 1.6 million workers in the UK’s digital sector, and it is a benefit shared by those seeking work, either young people or those in retraining, to get access to higher pay and higher quality jobs.

Such jobs are good, but much more needs to be done both on gender equality and class inequality in the technology and digital sectors, with many start-up businesses pioneered by those with the safety net of a family who can provide for them when inevitable failures occur. I do not criticise them for having that safety net, but the stark reality in my constituency of Bristol North West is that I have some of the most affluent and some of the most economically deprived suburbs in the city right next door to each other. Many of the young people have fantastic ideas but are not confident enough to take on the risk to try them. We need to try to find solutions to ensure that there is an equality of access to the opportunities and excitement of the digital market.

As we have seen recently, there are still gender inequality issues in some aspects of the technology and digital marketplace, so gender bias is as important an issue in this space as it is in others. I absolutely agree with the comments made today about the digital skills needed for young people. It is also important to show why the basics around science, maths and engineering can lead to such exciting jobs so that young people can see what they are aiming for and understand why getting that maths GCSE, which they might find slightly boring at the time, is a really exciting route through to some fantastic jobs. It is also about reskilling. An example that I gave in the House in the debate on autonomous vehicles was about when all of our taxis become driverless taxis and we have a load of taxi drivers who will need to find new work. This is not just about young people; it is about reskilling older people to access the marketplace.

On the whole, the Bristol and Bath region does really well. We have £8 billion of digital turnover. We had 87% growth from 2011 to 2015, which now accounts for 35,000 jobs in our region in the west of England. That is an enormous part of our economy. I will take this opportunity to pay tribute to the likes of the Engine Shed, TechSPARK, Business West and others in Bristol who have been pioneering for many years.

One key aspect of driving the regional presence is access to finance. That has been one of our problems in Bristol, which it has been getting better at. However, start-ups that want to scale up and get financial backing through seed money and other overheads need to come and have a presence in London. The networking that they need to do is in London. The people who have done this and know how to do it are in London. In my view, we need Government action to take that knowledge and experience out to the regions so that companies are able not only to start up in incubator spaces, but to scale up their businesses in the region.

That is why our industrial strategy is important, and why significant efforts should be made not just in relation to the vast productivity gains that digitisation can make, and not just in the digital economy, but in standard industries and public services. There is also a need to continue to push the benefit out to the regions, creating incentives and environments that allow digital businesses to start and be staffed. Opportunities to work in those businesses are important, given the skills deficit outside London and the major conurbations. That cannot just mean DFLs—“down from Londons.” Bristol is pleased to welcome, on average, 80 families a week from London. It causes a bit of an issue with house prices, but apart from that they are very welcome. But we must remember that young people born and raised in Bristol, and especially in Bristol North West, need access to those jobs too.

There is no denying that London benefits from being the digital capital of Europe. That position is put at risk by the Government’s approach to Brexit. Our access to talent from across the European Union, the attractiveness of London and other parts of England as a place to call home, our access to capital through our dominance in financial services, and the regulatory harmony and access to the European single market that come with being able to sell digital goods and services to one of the largest trading blocs in the world, are all potentially being thrown to the wind by the Brexit strategy, which is a great shame. The digital single market that the European Union is pushing is part of that situation. It will take time to resolve, but it will be a lost opportunity if we do not have access to it, through at least maintaining our position in the single market and customs union.

On the disagreeable basis that we leave the European Union entirely, we must turn our minds to maintaining Britain’s digital strength in a global digital marketplace post Brexit. In many other areas of industry, such as law, which was my profession before I became a politician, Britain has a reputation around the world for playing a fair game, with clear rules and enforcement. That is a British brand that is trusted and reliable. Britain is renowned as a country that people want to come to in order to do business and reduce risk—and, as I said, to get access to the European Union. We should seek to build that recognition in our digital marketplace too. Our historic geopolitical position between the United States and the European Union will be relevant to the digital market. As we have seen from the Senate hearings on Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, United States’ legislators are now looking to the European Union to see how to regulate technology and digital business.

That is an area where British MEPs and British commissioners and staff have played an important role in defining such things as the general data protection regulation, the network and information security directive, and components of the digital single market. In building that trusted global brand as the best country in which to start and run digital businesses, we now need to be much clearer about how we will apply the old rules in the new, modern digital world—how we will protect consumers who are buying goods and services that are digital.
We have made good progress, in the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the implementation of European legislation such as the digital content directive, but there is more to do, not least with respect to making citizens and consumers aware of what is happening, and their rights, and how we regulate dominant companies in uncompetitive marketplaces. In the old world of utilities there are regulators to ensure consumer fairness. In the new world of the ownership and control of data Ofcom plays an enforcement role, but what is the competition role in that space? That is something we need to talk about more. We also need to deal with how we guarantee old civil liberties in a modern setting, including the role of the state and public services, the use of big data, and ensuring the cyber-security that we have heard about today.

That is why yesterday I was thrilled to kick off a scoping event, here at the House of Commons, on a new parliamentary commission on technology ethics, building on the work of colleagues in the other place—the report of the Lords Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence came out this week and it is very good. The Minister’s new data ethics body in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is excitedly anticipated. Also there are issues such as the control, security and monetisation—with patient consent—of assets such as NHS data sets, as identified by Sir John Bell in the life sciences industrial strategy as new ways of funding public services.

Working with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), my Conservative co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on technology ethics—the parliamentary internet, communications and technology forum—and others, we shall engage with all stakeholders externally, and with the Minister and her Department, to create an environment in the United Kingdom that is good for digital businesses and consumers in the digital world, and hopefully a beacon for best practice around the world. There is a balance to get right, between the vast opportunities that come with driverless vehicles, the internet of things and digital public services, and the risks. It will be important to build trust with consumers and citizens, partners around the world, and hopefully a beacon for best practice around the world. There is a balance to get right, between the vast opportunities that come with driverless vehicles, the internet of things and digital public services, and the risks. It will be important to build trust with consumers and citizens, partners around the world, and businesses, to create a digital economy in the UK that we can all be proud of.

3.25 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this important debate.

A couple of months ago I was in this Chamber debating ethics and artificial intelligence, and I suggested a code of ethics for people working in data, perhaps to be named the Lovelace code of ethics. I was delighted, two months later, to see that the Nuffield Foundation recently set up an Ada Lovelace Institute to look into data ethics. That is a think-tank with £5 million of investment, so I have new respect for the power and reach of Westminster Hall debates.

I was also delighted to see the House of Lords report on Artificial Intelligence on Monday. It is right for Parliament to discuss those new technological frontiers. In fact, they should be at the forefront of our debates. I want to touch briefly on data, accountability, skills and inequality. There is a huge issue about who owns our data.

The new general data protection regulation is welcome in helping to give consumers control. When I was Consumer Affairs Minister, a fledgling project called “midata” was all about the principle that people’s data should be their own; if they wanted it from companies, they should be able to get access to it in a machine-readable format, so that it could be used for their benefit.

The world has obviously moved on somewhat in five years, and that was a fledgling effort, but the issue of data as currency will become more important in years to come. The Consumer Rights Act 2015 recognised that data could be treated as consideration: if someone had exchanged their data to get a product, they should still have some consumer rights and protections, for example if the product damaged their equipment. The business models that we are talking about in the tech sector require a greater level of consumer choice and transparency about the transaction that people make when they hand over data. The current model is one where people give their data away willy-nilly for free services, often with little control for the individual. In the future, initiatives such as private data accounts could be a mechanism giving people more control over their data. I am interested not just in whether the public sector can monetise large data sets, but in whether individuals might be in a position to have their own data monetised much more explicitly.

As for accountability, there have been all sorts of scandals, from fake news to online abuse, and the polarisation of debate coming from social media companies. Yet Facebook is only 13 years old, and Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram are all younger, so perhaps it is no surprise that innovation has outstripped regulation in that area. However, those platforms are changing much about society and need to be held to account. Many of those companies have huge monopoly power, and the network effect makes that almost automatic and inevitable for new platforms that are set up, but I do not think the Competition and Markets Authority has yet grappled sufficiently with the issues. The European Commission is perhaps one of the few organisations to have been able properly to stand up to those corporate giants, whether on tax, data issues or competition.

We need to do more about skills, in schools and through retraining. I agree with the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) about diversity in the technology workforce and that situation leading to bizarre decisions, because it is even less representative than most other sectors. I also agree about constraints on skilled workers coming to the UK. That is a problem that I fear will get worse after Brexit. We have just seen the cap for tier 2 visas for skilled workers from outside the European Economic Area and Switzerland reached for an unprecedented fourth month in a row. Until last December, that quota had been reached only once. There is concern about whether companies in the UK can get the skills they need. I declare an interest as a very minor shareholder of a data start-up, Clear Returns, on whose board I served while I was out of Parliament. I can attest, from that experience, to how difficult it is for tech companies to get access to the skills of data scientists and analysts that they need.

Finally—I am conscious of the time, Ms McDonagh—I want to speak about inequality. Inequality in technological skills needs to be addressed, as does inequality in access to broadband in different parts of the country. I am still...
astonished that a new development in my constituency, which was built in the last few years in Woodilee, does not have adequate broadband. That was entirely predictable, and I have written to Ministers about it. There is also a wider issue of the huge opportunities that technology provides for solving problems in society, and the real risk that will entrench existing inequalities, particularly economic ones. If we do not do something about it, those with capital to invest in tech companies will be those who reap the rewards. Instead, we should be using automation to take drudgery out of jobs and strenuous heavy lifting out of the care sector, so that we leave more time for humanity and for those job areas to which we as individuals can contribute with creativity and higher skills.

We must also allow people to build more relationships outside work. Given the way that taxation works with the larger, global tech companies, and the way that the benefits will be accrued, I fear that we could risk driving serious increases in inequality, and that those who lose out by losing their jobs will not be compensated in appropriate ways. That risks division in wider society more generally.

I know that we have little time in this debate, so I will bring my remarks to a close, but I hope I have flagged up some key issues that the House will return to when discussing these matters, which I hope we will do more often in future.

Jo Swinson: I will now call the Front-Bench speakers. If they each speak for eight or nine minutes, that will allow Mrs Main some time to sum up the debate.

3.31 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh.

I must congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on three things. First, I congratulate her on securing a debate on this important topic. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) is right to say that we do not speak enough about this issue, and we need a lot more discussion about the sector in this place. Secondly, I am pleased that the hon. Member for St Albans began her history of creative thinking in the UK by mentioning two Scotsmen: Alexander Graham Bell and John Logie Baird. Thirdly, I congratulate her on securing a debate on the future of the digital and tech industries while Cambridge Analytica and its various chums are busy whirling away, trying to pretend that there is nothing to see, and Mr Zuckerberg is singing “je ne regrette rien”. I am in awe of that forward planning, and I congratulate her most heartily on that.

The hon. Lady mentioned the spread of digital clusters around the UK. I welcome that, and it was excellent to hear about various cities, such as York, that contain those important clusters. There is still a considerable concentration of elements of the sector in London and the south of England, however, and I hope that is noted by the Minister and the continuing pull to that area resisted; the substantial benefits of this industry must be shared around the nations and regions of the UK. We boast tremendous talent, and opportunities need to follow.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the importance of the free flow of data between the UK and Europe in the forthcoming negotiations, the express desire of companies in the tech sector for access to international talent, and the part that the immigration system must play in that. Topically, she also mentioned cyber-security and education—a few Members have said how essential it is for STEM subjects to be pushed to the forefront, and I commend the Scottish Government for their STEM strategy, which is now starting to reap some benefits.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a tremendous contribution and mentioned many things that I did not know about York. I knew some of them—I have been there—but the fact that it is UNESCO city of media arts was news to me. She spoke at length about many exciting developments in her constituency. For me, however, the most important part of her contribution was her talk of that essential marrying of creative arts and technology.

I once sat on the board of Creative Edinburgh, an umbrella organisation for creative industries in Edinburgh, and that point was made time and again: one cannot have a computer game, for example, that people want to play if the story is boring. The contribution of writers is essential, and creative thinking is so important in those industries. We must remember that and be clear that neglecting the arts is very short-sighted when trying to push the sector forward. The hon. Lady also touched on telehealth and the importance of inclusiveness in the development of the tech sector, and I entirely agree.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty)—he is no longer in his place—reminded us of the explosion of growth in this sector, and it still staggers me when I reflect on that. I hate to age myself, but to someone whose house possessed only a small black and white TV for most of their formative years, the sort of digitech on offer today is still a little mind blowing. He emphasised the importance of security, particularly with cloud storage facilities, which is certainly worth noting.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave his constituency an impressive plug, as always, and mentioned the high quality and pay of the jobs on offer in this sector. I recently visited two cyber-security firms in my constituency. They moved there not simply because of the lower living costs that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, but because of access to high-quality graduates from Edinburgh’s variety of universities, and in particular the informatics centre at Edinburgh University. They also spoke about the shortage of qualified graduates across the UK, and the fact that as a result, salaries in the sector are higher than average and conditions are excellent. We must make more of that to our young people when they are choosing what professions they wish to enter.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke about the extra support needed for equality of access, which is important, and about the equality of opportunity that must be made available to everyone. He also mentioned STEM subjects, and reminded us of the importance of reskilling employees—the Scottish Affairs Committee also considered that in some depth in our most recent inquiry into future work practices in Scotland. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned the transactional nature of data, which was extremely interesting, and raised the possibility of privacy data accounts, which is certainly worth considering. She also spoke of innovation outstripping regulation.
Let me return to my important point about Cambridge Analytica, Mr Zuckerberg, and so on. It is natural that people’s suspicions rise when they hear of potentially nefarious deeds and the questionable morals of companies operating in that sector, but we must take time to remember that good things also come from the digital and tech sector, and that they outweigh the bad. Even the bad lads have done many good things: Facebook helps to keep families and friends in touch across oceans and continents, for example, and it is one of the few things for which I do not have to ask my daughters for advice on how it works.

Youngsters are, of course, far ahead of the game when it comes to dealing with new technology—that has been the case since a woman invented the wheel—and we look to them for much of what we understand about how the sector will develop. I often worry that many younger folk do not appreciate how often they are the product rather than the consumer in the virtual world, and I am concerned that many do not appreciate the dangers of sharing too much of their lives online. Why would they? They are young, and I suppose they can get old and cynical in their own time.

The public alarm often raised about how our youngsters interact with IT is that too often they are cloistered in their bedrooms playing games on the computer. Adults previously worried about TV, rock music, radio—in my father’s case, his father worried about him listening to jazz—and, for all we know, books. Although we should take such concerns on board, it should not make us believe that video or computer games—I will focus on them, although I am not always certain of the terminology—are, in and of themselves, bad or corrupting. Scotland has a vibrant computer gaming industry, and my constituency boasts not only creative incubators and tech centres for digitech companies, but a number of people employed in the computer gaming industry. We can be sure that they have been in frequent touch.

The creativity involved in making a game is intensive. It is no longer just the classic “space invaders”, and it involves multi-disciplinary working. Someone writes that music, someone creates those images, someone programmes the game, and someone writes the storylines, as I mentioned. That is an industry that grew itself. It has simply moved too fast over the years for the Government to catch up. Government can at times be engrossed by such games. We all have a stake now.

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now the most advanced digital society on Earth. The Government need to put in place those important foundations of trust.

The second point is on infrastructure. It is not just here in the Houses of Parliament where the digital infrastructure is appalling. I do not know about you, Ms McDonagh, but I certainly cannot get a mobile signal in my office, on the fifth floor of Portcullis House, and I know that frustration is widely shared, but it is not just a problem here. In fact, the areas of this country that Brexit will hit hardest are those where download speeds are slowest. The parts of the country that will be hurt most by Brexit are therefore the least prepared to prosper in the new digital society that we are all so much looking forward to.

Other countries are racing ahead of us in terms of the targets that they are putting in place for broadband access. I was privileged to visit South Korea last week, where they have 60% fibre to the premises. What is it here in Britain? It is 3%. Not only do they have much greater penetration of fibre than we do, they have not one but three mobile networks delivering 100% broadband access, and they will commercialise 5G not in 2020, but this year. That is why the Government should be far more ambitious about universal service obligation for broadband access. We proposed 30 megabits per second, and proposed putting £1.6 billion behind that. The Government should be more ambitious than they are today. We will soon go to consultation on what it would take in terms of public investment to commercialise widespread 5G. We hope that the Government will look closely at our results.

Jim Shannon: Through the confidence and supply arrangement that the Democratic Unionist party made with the Conservative party, we secured £150 million for broadband to take us up to that level, so we can continue to be the leader in regions across the whole of the United Kingdom for economic development and delivery.

Liam Byrne: Well, lucky you! If the west midlands had enjoyed a per capita bung on the same level as Northern Ireland, an extra £600 million would be coming into my region; I know I am not the only one to look at the deal that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues skilfully struck with some jealousy.

The final component is skills. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned, older workers are also crucial. By the age of 52, a working-class man in this country that Brexit will hit hardest is more likely to lose his job than the wider economy. I took note of the statistics that my hon. Friend quoted about her constituency. St Albans has access to more than 400,000 digital and tech jobs in and around the surrounding areas and clusters. She mentioned Imagination Technologies in King's Langley. I am delighted to accept her invitation to visit it to learn more about that exciting new company.

In the Budget, we unlocked more than £20 billion of capital funding for digital enterprises through the enterprise investment scheme and the British Business Bank. I very much take on board the point, raised by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), that it is not just a problem here. In fact, the areas of this country that Brexit will hit hardest are those where download speeds are slowest. The parts of the country that will be hurt most by Brexit are therefore the least prepared to prosper in the new digital society that we are all so much looking forward to.

Young people are at the sharp end of the jobs risk of automation—that was confirmed by the International Monetary Fund yesterday, and by the OECD a week or two ago. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned, older workers are also crucial. By the age of 52, a working-class man in this country has paid £103,000 in national insurance. What happens if he loses his job? He gets sent down the job centre like everybody else, with no extra help, retraining or reskilling for the digital economy. Yet this is the country of the Open University, the Workers' Educational Association, Unionlearn, and great education entrepreneurs such as Dr Sue Black and Martha Lane Fox. We should be bringing those players together to create a different kind of lifelong learning for the 21st century.

This is a nation of scientific genius. We have been burying our sovereigns with our scientists since we interred Isaac Newton over the road in Westminster abbey. We are the only country in the world that could make films about great scientists such as Turing and Hawking. We are the nation of the industrial revolution, but if we do not change course soon, this foundation of the industrial revolution will not be the leader in the fourth industrial revolution.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and on her interesting, comprehensive and inspiring speech. The impact of the digital and tech industries on the UK economy is a vast subject. I will try to respond to as many points as possible.

We heard from many Members about the staggering growth and exciting opportunities that the sector offers our country. The digital economy here is growing 32% faster than the wider economy. I took note of the statistics that my hon. Friend quoted about her constituency. St Albans has access to more than 400,000 digital and tech jobs in and around the surrounding areas and clusters. She mentioned Imagination Technologies in King's Langley. I am delighted to accept her invitation to visit it to learn more about that exciting new company.

In March 2017 we published our digital strategy, which set out the key pillars of a healthy ecosystem for technology. The foundations can be met when we achieve nationwide access to world-class digital infrastructure. Although London is the capital of European tech investment, almost 70% of that investment is in regional clusters outside London. I find that an encouraging statistic.

In the Budget, we unlocked more than £20 billion of capital funding for digital enterprises through the enterprise investment scheme and the British Business Bank. I very much take on board the point, raised by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), that it has been easier for start-ups or scale-ups to raise capital if they are located in London. We want to build on that for the regions, so that SMEs no longer have to keep coming to London to raise capital. We announced a further £4.7 billion for the national productivity investment fund, which will benefit the sector; and £75 million of investment to take forward recommendations following
the independent review on artificial intelligence and the artificial intelligence grand challenge, which was announced in the industrial strategy.

Several Members mentioned the huge importance of data ethics. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) mentioned the debate that she secured a few months ago. I hope the newly announced centre for data ethics and innovation will have discussions with the Nuffield Foundation and will benefit from its Ada Lovelace centre for ethics. Such measures are vital to ensure public trust, which, as the shadow Minister said, is a vital plank of success.

A number of hon. Members mentioned cyber-security and safety. The safety of our citizens and businesses is absolutely crucial. There is an increasing number of risks, which can have damaging implications, as we live and operate online. The digital charter aims to increase public confidence and trust in new technologies and create the best possible basis on which the digital economy can thrive.

Our work on keeping the UK’s cyber-space safe is clear. As we stated in the “Internet Safety Strategy”, Green Paper, what is unacceptable offline should be unacceptable online. I look forward to bringing forward the response to that consultation in the next month or two. All users should be empowered to manage online risks and stay safe. Technology companies have a responsibility to their users. We fully understand that it is vital to have strong data protection laws and appropriate safeguards in that area to enable businesses to operate across international borders, as well as empowering citizens with full control over their personal data.

Several hon. Members mentioned digital skills, which are crucial, particularly as we approach Brexit. We need to build a digital economy that works for everyone, and we can do that only if we equip people with the skills that are needed. We are not only looking at training and skills in schools and among the older population, but we want to maintain our position as a go-to country for new talent, so we announced a doubling of the number of tier 1 exceptional talent visas last year. We have introduced an entitlement for adults who lack basic digital skills to enable them to undertake fully funded basic digital skills training from 2020.

I was struck by the statistic about salary levels that the hon. Member for Bristol North West offered. He said that in the digital sector people can expect to be paid 44% more than the average for other employment. We want to open that up. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) also made the point that the hon. Member for York Central said, it is also known for fibre. TalkTalk is investing hugely in connecting fibre to premises in the whole of the city of York. A very interesting piece in the Financial Times just this morning said that York is taking the lead in piloting the use of digital technology to map traffic congestion in real-time, so that traffic signals can be adjusted to improve the flow of traffic, with all the additional benefits that that brings. I was interested to hear about the digital creative labs there and about the importance of the gaming industry, which is absolutely crucial. That industry engages young people, so it has a double advantage. I shall endeavour to visit it while I am there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) talked about procurement opportunities for UK SMEs, which are very important. In some respects, it will be difficult to secure a preference for UK SMEs in contracting. It will depend on the final terms of our relationship with the EU when we leave, and on any new trade deals that we are successful in negotiating. With that proviso, I certainly share his desire to see better opportunities for SMEs in procurement.

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans is at the centre of a great number of exciting developments in technology, and it is terrific that she is taking the lead in her constituency and making her contribution to the rest of the UK’s development. The Government are committed to making Britain a world leader in the digital and technology sector.

It is fantastic that so many colleagues made excellent contributions this afternoon. I apologise for running over slightly.

3.59 pm

Mrs Main: I am delighted that the Minister is coming to St Albans. I shall be ruffling through the diary with Imagination Technologies. This debate was so valuable because, apart from the odd barb here and there, everybody was in agreement. I completely agree with the shadow Minister—I do not usually say such things—that broadband access is vital; it absolutely needs to be rolled out. We have to lose the concept that everything is London-centric. I am delighted that this is the way forward. This is the world of the future. I am pleased that so many colleagues took part in the debate. I thought their speeches were excellent. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about learning online. We will have to have some new excuses to replace “The dog ate my homework” in a digital world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the UK digital and tech industries.
Fishing: East Anglia

[Mr Ian Paisley in the Chair]

4 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Renaissance of East Anglian Fishing campaign.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Paisley. I am very pleased to have secured this debate, as it provides an ideal opportunity to highlight the work getting underway in Lowestoft, in my constituency, and along the East Anglian coast to launch the campaign to deliver the renaissance of East Anglian fisheries. I am delighted that my neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), is responding for the Government.

REAF was launched last month, on 15 March, at the East Anglian fishing conference at the Hotel Victoria in Lowestoft. Up to 150 people attended, predominantly local and many from the local fishing industry. Many of the speakers were local, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), gave a keynote speech and we had a productive workshop in which some very good ideas were put forward for how best to revitalise the industry. Brexit provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do that—to start again with a clean sheet of paper and to have a complete rethink of how we manage these fisheries.

Fishing has taken place along the East Anglian coast for more than a thousand years. Lowestoft was previously the fishing capital of the southern North sea and was the hub of an industry that included many other ports, such as Kings Lynn, Cromer, Sheringham, Yarmouth, Kessingland, Southwold, Aldeburgh, Orford, Felixstowe Ferry, Maldon, Colchester and Southend. East Anglia sits next to one of the richest fishing grounds in Europe, but today little local benefit is derived from that. Most of the UK vessels registered in East Anglia and fishing off our coast are smaller than 10 metres and many of them target shellfish or fin fish in the inshore areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me permission to intervene beforehand. The bottom line is that, while UK vessels land 40% of their catch from UK waters, Norway and Iceland land 83% and 90% respectively in theirs. That shows the indisputable fact that the European Union has never given us our fair share and never will. As such, does he agree that it is imperative that we regain full control of our waters and do not accept anything that does not bring the control of fishing in British waters back into the hands of the MPs here and the people who we represent?

Peter Aldous: The hon. Gentleman’s point is well made.

It is important that our region derives the maximum possible economic benefit from Brexit. REAF is seeking to achieve that goal, with the local industry taking the lead in planning the future of East Anglian fishing. The intention is to set out our stall, and to work with Government, to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. That approach is consistent with the Prime Minister’s desire for the Government to work with the fishing industry to secure a better deal for coastal communities.

I shall briefly outline what I believe are the three ingredients to deliver REAF. First, East Anglian fishermen must be given the opportunity to catch more fish. The region’s catch sector predominantly comprises the inshore fleet, which, as has been well documented, does not get a fair slice of the cake. The six vessels in the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation land their catches in the Netherlands and Peterhead. We need to be in a position whereby fish caught in the exclusive economic zone off the East Anglian coast are landed in local ports, thereby benefiting local people, local businesses and local communities.

If the quota system is to continue, there needs to be a radical reallocation in favour of locally based fishermen, so that they can earn a fair living and the full benefit of their hard work, which often takes place in extremely harsh conditions, can be secured for the ports and communities in which they live and work and for allied industries, such as local processors, merchants, ship repairers and maintenance services.

Secondly—this goes hand in hand with landing more fish in East Anglian ports—there is a need to invest in infrastructure, skills and supply chain businesses in those ports and their surrounding areas. Although in many respects it is surprising how much of the supporting sector remains in Lowestoft and other East Anglian ports, there is concern that it does not have the capacity to cope with a significant increase in landings. There must be a whole-industry approach from the net to the plate.

Thirdly, a new management system must be put in place that has the full confidence and respect of all those working in the industry. The system must be based on science and be local, sustainable and collaborative. Being based on science means making decisions that are established on scientific evidence, not political expediency. The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, which has its headquarters in Lowestoft, should be at the heart of that locally, nationally and internationally. The Government are to be commended for their foresight in investing in the redevelopment of CEFASS’s Lowestoft headquarters, which is now getting under way.

The system must be truly local and tailored to ensure the bespoke management of individual fisheries—a bottom-up approach to replace the top-down strategy. The new system must have sustainability ingrained in its DNA, it should guard against unsustainable practices such as electric pulse fishing, which is having a particularly devastating impact on local fisheries in the southern North sea, and it should ensure that those working in the industry can plan and invest for the future. Fisheries management must be a tripartite partnership of fishermen, scientists and regulators, collaborating and working together. We must do away with the current “them and us” approach that pervades much of the current regulatory system. That will mean fishermen taking on new responsibilities and regulators working with them.

People left the conference of 15 March in an upbeat mood. The following week, the Government published the implementation agreement for leaving the EU, which provides for the UK to leave the common fisheries policy on 31 December 2020, rather than at an earlier
date, as so many had hoped. As a result, that positive outcome was replaced by anger and despair. Helpfully, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State subsequently have made assurances that on 31 December 2020 the UK will resume full control of the seas in our exclusive economic zone, that we will decide who can access those waters and on what terms, and that no deals will be done beforehand that use fishing as bargaining chip as part of the wider Brexit negotiations.

That said, there are issues arising from the implementation agreement that need clarifying. Notwithstanding the wording of article 125 of the implementation agreement, which sets out the specific arrangements on fishing opportunities during the implementation period, there is a real worry that the best interests of the fishing industry will be irretrievably compromised during this period. We will be subject to the common fisheries policy and the landing obligations with the maximum sustainable yield target, but we will have a significantly reduced influence on the annual negotiations. The discards ban will be implemented during this period and its negative impact on the inshore fleet will be significant, yet we will have a very much diminished opportunity to promote measures to alleviate its impact. In effect, we will be bound by the CFP during this period, but only consulted on fishing opportunities in UK waters.

There is also a concern that the provisions of article 125 may set a precedent for future policy and negotiations with the EU. There is a worry about paragraph 4 of that article, which refers to maintaining “the relative stability keys for the allocation of fishing opportunities” during the implementation period. The main challenge for East Anglian fishermen is that they are unable to land enough fish to earn a fair living or supply the local processing industry. “Relative stability” in many respects underpins the status quo, and it is important that, after we leave the CFP, we start again with a clean sheet of paper for allocating fishing opportunities. If we do not, any gains will be enjoyed by the few, not the many.

As I mentioned, the East Anglian fishing fleet is predominantly inshore, comprising what have become known as the under-10s. That part of the industry is hanging on by its fingertips, and there is a worry that it will struggle to survive to the end of the implementation period. Action is needed to address the situation. It is important that we use the additional preparatory time wisely, and I make the following suggestions for how we might do so.

First, on 29 March 2019, the UK will become an independent coastal state with duties and obligations under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. We must be fully prepared to discharge those rights and responsibilities. Secondly, the fisheries White Paper and fisheries Bill should be published as soon as practicably possible so that the industry and parliamentarians can help shape a future policy framework, which should have the flexibility to respond to local needs and demands.

Thirdly, East Anglian fishermen need to be able to land more fish so they can earn a fair living. In the short term, that can be achieved by reallocating a share of existing quota to the inshore fleet. In the longer term, we need to tackle the situation that fish caught in UK waters are not landed in UK ports. Much of Britain’s quota is currently held by overseas businesses. The economic link requirements of vessel licences must be reformed and then enforced. Fourthly, the UK will withdraw from the London fisheries convention on 3 July 2019, providing us full access rights to our fishing grounds in the zone between 6 nautical miles and 12 nautical miles from our coast. Consideration should be given to how best to take advantage of that opportunity.

Last Friday, Waveney District Council submitted REAF’s application for a European maritime and fisheries fund grant to the Marine Management Organisation. The proposed project will enable us to develop a long-term strategy for the future of the East Anglian fishing industry. It is a bottom-up initiative with widespread local and industry support. It is an exciting, innovative and compelling proposal that is a beacon of positivity at a time when the fishing industry is under intense pressure and there is anger and disappointment about the Brexit transitional arrangements. The project is designed to help shape a positive and profitable future for the industry as a whole, from the net to the plate. Its objective is to establish how the economic and social benefits of the fishing industry in East Anglia can best be captured and optimised locally and regionally.

There are three elements to the project: data and information gathering and analysis; a forward look at the prospective changes and the development of possible options for bringing benefits to the region’s fishing industry and coastal communities; and the preparation of a regional fisheries strategy. The project will examine why, despite the profitability of the UK fleet overall having increased year on year for the past 10 years, that improvement has bypassed Lowestoft and East Anglia. It will analyse the fishing fleets across the region to provide a starting point for developing a regional strategy. At local level, it will look at how a new management system can be put in place that takes into account the different sections of the fleet and ensures that they are managed in the most efficient and effective way. The project will assess the catch potential for East Anglian vessels and what changes should be made to the economic link requirements, and analyse the whole supply chain to establish how best to maximise the opportunity presented by Brexit.

In short, this is prudent and long-term strategic planning at its best. It is estimated that the project will cost approximately £160,000 and take nine months to complete. The application is for 75% of the cost of the project to come from the EMFF, and we are looking to the Government to contribute the remaining 25%. There is sound justification for them to do so, as the proposal has collective interests and beneficiaries and is highly innovative. We have looked at other sources of funding, such as councils, the coastal communities fund and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, but those options cannot be pursued, either because the money is not there or because a bid would not satisfy the various eligibility criteria.

The bid is compelling. It is exactly the sort of sensible long-term planning that should be done as we leave the EU to open up new and exciting business opportunities. It would be unfortunate if this highly innovative project stalled at a time when the industry is badly bruised.

Special thanks are due to the local community champions who came together to form REAF, some of whom are here today. There are many of them, but I pay special tribute to June Mummery and Paul Lines, whose passion and determination have been so important. REAF provides...
a great opportunity to revitalise a uniquely East Anglian industry for the benefit of local communities that feel they have been dispossessed and ignored for too long. In policy terms, the Government need to provide a national framework for fishing that has the flexibility to respond to different local demands and allows the industry to flourish all around the coast. REAF is looking to provide the cornerstone for that in East Anglia, and I hope that the Government can work with and endorse its locally derived, innovative and well thought-through initiative, which has strong local backing.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), on securing this debate. I know that our fishing industry is of huge importance to him, his constituents and the many other coastal communities around the UK. His has been an important voice in the wider fisheries debate, particularly at the recent REAF conference in Lowestoft.

Unfortunately, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), cannot be here because he is in the Faroe Islands discussing potential future fisheries arrangements. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney pointed out, the Fisheries Minister spoke at the recent REAF conference. As the MP for an East Anglian coastal community—there are fishermen along the Suffolk coast—I am delighted to be able to reply to this debate about the REAF campaign. As my hon. Friend knows, this issue is not only of great importance to my constituents, but arguably one of the most totemic issues following the decision to leave the European Union.

The Government absolutely recognise that leaving the EU presents us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the future of fisheries in the United Kingdom. I am encouraged by the passion and enthusiasm of people throughout East Anglia to build up the industry for the benefit of their communities. The REAF campaign is strong and inspiring evidence of that passion.

I congratulate the applicants on submitting their initial bid for EMFF funding to support the REAF campaign, and I understand that it will be considered through the normal processes. I hope my hon. Friend understands that I cannot make any commitments to funding in this debate—most of all because I would probably have to declare some kind of constituency interest. However, I am sure he will be aware that the bid will be considered carefully. I understand the apprehension of some hon. Members during this period of uncertainty, but we recognise that the drive of the people in Waveney and other fishing communities around the country will be one of the main determining factors that will result in a thriving and prosperous local industry.

I know the outcome of the implementation period negotiations was not the one that many hon. Members of this House wanted; it was certainly not the one the Government sought, either. We were clear at the outset of negotiations that specific arrangements should be agreed for fisheries during the implementation period. We pressed hard during negotiations to secure the outcome, and we were disappointed that the EU was not willing to move on that point. When the UK leaves the EU on 29 March 2019, we will no longer be a member state, and we will formally leave the common fisheries policy. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, under the agreement current fisheries rules will continue to apply during the implementation period.

In regard to the annual negotiations of fishing opportunities, the agreement clarifies that the UK’s share of quotas will not change during the implementation period and that the UK will be able to attend international negotiations. That means we will continue to follow existing CFP rules for technical conservation as well as total annual catch and quota. Furthermore, the agreement includes an obligation on both sides to act in good faith during the implementation period. It is really important to recognise that while there may be a perception that all of a sudden UK fishing will be done down, we should not accept that assertion—not least because there is a dispute resolution mechanism where we can make a challenge if we feel the EU is not acting in good faith. However, I stress again that such arrangements will apply only to negotiations in 2019.

By December 2020, we will be negotiating fishing opportunities for 2021 as a third country and an independent coastal state, and at that point we will be completely outside the common fisheries policy. Any decisions about giving access to our waters to vessels from the EU and any other coastal states will then be a matter for negotiation.

The Government’s future vision for fisheries will be laid out in a White Paper, to be published in due course, which will be followed by a fisheries Bill that will give us the legal powers necessary to manage our fisheries in the future and enable us to develop a truly UK fisheries policy, in particular by controlling access to our own waters and setting fishing opportunities. Arrangements are well under way to put in place domestic preparations to ensure that we are ready to take advantage of the opportunities from leaving not only the EU but the London fisheries convention.

In general, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will ensure that that we will have the necessary rules in place on the day after exit. That provides the maximum possible certainty and continuity to businesses, workers and consumers across the UK. The fisheries Bill will then enable us to develop a truly United Kingdom fisheries policy—in particular, as I said, by controlling access to our own waters and setting fishing opportunities.

When we think about the future, it is important to ensure that we have a sustainable fishing industry. It is helpful to reflect that overall many aspects of the UK marine environment are improving. About 30% of fish stocks are now at sustainable levels, and the proportion of large fish in the North sea has climbed steadily since 2010 to levels not seen since the 1980s. That is a valuable reminder of what we can achieve to help build a sustainable resource for future generations.

While our role in fisheries management will change, we remain committed to working with the EU and other coastal states to manage those shared fish stocks sustainably, in line with our international commitments. We want to be a responsible coastal state and to develop a collaborative working relationship with our international
partners. We are proud of our record of championing sustainable fisheries and the end of wasteful discarding. However, we fully recognise the need to ensure that the future UK discard policy has the necessary flexibilities to avoid the problem of choke with species such as cod and saithe.

As I pointed out, we will shortly set out our vision for sustainable fisheries management in our White Paper. During that time, the Government and the Marine Management Organisation will work together in closer partnership with industry, scientific organisations and other stakeholders as well as our colleagues in the devolved Administrations to help shape our future management strategy and ensure it is evidence based. That is a strong point that my hon. Friend affirmed is necessary.

My hon. Friend pointed out concern about the article 152 precedent and relative stability. Our advice is that the implementation period and what is agreed then will not set a precedent for the future. I assure him that we are committed to ensuring that, as I have set out, we will be able to shape our future management strategy and negotiate on who is in our coastal waters and the fishing opportunities there.

We absolutely want to safeguard the long-term profitability of the industry. Through the ongoing negotiations, we will work hard to ensure the best deal for the whole of the UK fishing industry and support the needs of inshore fleets and coastal communities such as those in East Anglia. Since 2012, to help support the under-10-metre fleet, the Government have realigned quota that had not been fished, leased, gifted or swapped by processor organisations and was considered unused. My hon. Friend will be aware of the huge court battle that ensued, but the Government won, and that has delivered a 13% increase in quota for the under-10-metre fleet. In 2016, that equated to almost 700 tonnes of additional quota.

Our new fisheries policy must be forward looking, responsive, sustainable, resilient and competitive. We should all look towards the innovation and diversification taking place in other coastal communities in order to help build a profitable and stable career choice for a new generation of fishing businesses in East Anglia. As well as changes in quota, I agree that investment in vessels, infrastructure, skills and the wider supply chain will be needed to improve fisheries management and the sector’s profitability.

In October 2016, the Chancellor announced that all projects funded from the EMFF approved before March 2019 will be fully funded, even after the UK has left the EU. It is expected that the EMFF will continue to be open for new projects until 2020. I am aware from my hon. Friend that the valuable information he gathered at the conference in his constituency will be used to shape the design of any possible future funding schemes.

I am conscious of the local community where fishing is totemic. It is more than that; it is the livelihoods of many people there. It is about people who fish, people who process and the ongoing economic security that brings to their families. I am aware that alternative careers have been developing at Lowestoft and surrounding ports to support the offshore wind farm, but my hon. Friend and I agree that that should not be at the expense of a secure future for fishing in East Anglia. We want to ensure that.

With more than 10,000 miles of mainland coastline—quite a lot of it is in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend—the UK has some of the most varied marine habitats of any coastal waters. He is right to pay tribute to CEFAS, which undertakes a strong role, and I am pleased that investment is under way.

Our habitats in coastal waters make a critical contribution to biodiversity. Our seas support the national economy and our local economy with jobs, providing us with food, raw materials and beautiful, irreplaceable recreational destinations. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that in leaving the European Union we must take the opportunity to create a world-class fisheries management system based on the principle of maximum sustainable yield and help to restore and protect the marine ecosystem. Both ends are compatible. It is our ambition to take the opportunity presented also to reflect our proud maritime heritage in policies that create a stronger, resilient, more productive fishing industry—for the next generation in East Anglia, and for generations to come.

Question put and agreed to.
Austerity: Life Expectancy

4.30 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered austerity and changes in life expectancy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Life expectancy is the statistical analysis of that most basic feature of health, life itself. Through these linear annals, since the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, the health and wellbeing of this nation have been catalogued. Life expectancy serves as the statistical testimony of the social history of our country. Through it are revealed the national crises and epidemics, the giant leaps forward in public health and the great workplace, environmental and social reforms that have marked the last two centuries of change.

In the first collection, published in 1841, the English life table gave female life expectancy as 41 years and male as 40. The changes that followed in the subsequent 180 years have seen those doubled. The turn of the 20th century saw a dramatic drop in infant and childhood mortality as sanitation and living standards improved. Improvements in the treatment of infectious disease, the creation of the NHS, the Clean Air Act 1956 and improvements in maternity care, living standards and incomes followed, and with them rises in life expectancy that were sustained for almost a century. Neither wars nor global convulsions could stem the inexorable upward rise.

That was the great era of a remarkable revolution in public health. By 2011, women’s life expectancy had reached 83 and men’s 79. With three months added with each passing year, a little girl born in Sheffield in 2011 had every right to expect to live to be 100 years old. Those assumptions were not based on any great improvements or medical discoveries, but simply on the fact that our health was improving and would continue to do so.

However, since 2011, something unusual and, in modern British history, unprecedented has happened to life expectancy: it has flattened. For the first time in well over a century, the health of the people of this nation has stopped improving. It is of course axiomatic that life expectancy cannot increase forever, and that a slowdown in growth would eventually occur, but it is the sudden and sustained rise in mortality rates that has so concerned public health professionals and should concern us as parliamentarians.

The period from July 2014 to June 2015 saw an additional 39,074 deaths in England and Wales, compared with the same period the previous year. While mortality rates fluctuate year on year, that was the largest rise for nearly 50 years, and the higher rate of mortality was maintained throughout 2016 and into 2017. Provisional figures on the number of weekly deaths indicate that winter mortality was higher than usual in early 2015, 2017 and 2018.

Those recent trends contrast starkly with the long-term decline in age-specific mortality rates throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Now, research published in The BMJ has revealed the shocking fact that 10,000 more people died in the first seven weeks of 2018 than in the same period in 2017. The study finds no external factor that might have caused the 11% rise: no unusual cold snap, natural disaster or flu outbreak outside normal expectations. The Office for National Statistics has gone so far as to revise down its official life expectancy projections by almost a whole year, compared with the projections of just two years ago. That means 1 million further earlier deaths are now projected over the next 40 years.

The Financial Times has reported that the deceleration of previous rises in life expectancy has cut £310 billion from future British pension fund liabilities. As Professor Danny Dorling of the University of Oxford has noted, “is no longer being treated as a temporary decline; it is the new norm.”

Dorling and Dr Hiam have looked at other extraneous factors to explain those projections. A rise in birth rates? No—birth rates are falling. More migration? The ONS now projects less inward migration over the next 40 years.

How then to explain an increase of 40,000 deaths on what was projected for this year, and an extra 25,000 deaths for next year? We can only conclude that there has been a sharp deterioration in the collective health of this country. Dominic Harrison, Director of Public Health for Blackburn and Darwen, and an adviser to Public Health England, has said that the figures are a “strong and flashing” amber light that, “something is making the population more vulnerable to avoidable death.

We know that in some areas the picture is even more concerning, with higher death rates and life expectancy falling. Research has pinpointed 29 areas where we see falling life expectancy for women; chief among them are seaside towns and post-industrial areas.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Barnsley, the area I represent, has one of the lowest life expectancies in the country. Does she agree that post-industrial towns such as Barnsley need more funding and resources to tackle the inequality between north and south?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. She makes an important point, because it is exactly those post-industrial towns and regions that were invested in so heavily under the last Labour Government and have seen a fall in life expectancy over the last seven years.

Regional and class inequalities in health, as we know, are nothing new, but there is a more distinct change now taking place. In my city of Sheffield, the healthy life expectancy for women of 57.5 years has dropped by four years since 2009, while healthy life expectancy across the country has basically held steady. There are already too many areas in our country where healthy life expectancy is unacceptably low. The average baby girl born in Manchester between 2014 and 2016 will live to be 79, but only until age 54 will she be healthy. That is almost one third of her life spent grappling with health issues that will not affect the average woman born on Orkney until she is 71 years old.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One of the factors, if not the sole factor, is that when we look at the past recession, most of the burden has been inflicted...
on women generally. We all know that. That is an anxiety factor, and there are good examples of it. One good example is the women of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. A lot of them were due to retire and had plans; those plans have gone now, because they will not get their entitlement. There are a number of factors that affect women more than men, particularly during a recession.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It has particularly hit older women, and I will come on to that disproportionate impact shortly.

Something is adversely affecting the health of our population, and as my hon. Friend has just said, none of it is happening in a vacuum. The observation is unavoidable that these patterns coincide with the era of austerity. It is simply inconceivable that the state of our public realm, welfare system, housing, fuel poverty, child poverty and our NHS have nothing at all to do with it. The number of NHS trusts with budget deficits has increased sharply since 2015, as have waiting periods for elective surgery and waits for urgent care. Hospitals are now warning of an “eternal winter”, as records show the number of patients receiving urgent care within four hours fell to a record low in March 2018. Almost half a million patients waited longer than 18 weeks for planned care.

This week, the Royal College of Physicians raised the alarm, writing to hon. Members to tell us that hospitals are “underfunded, underdoctored, overstretched”. That will not be news to anybody who has been anywhere close to the NHS in recent years. However, the shortage of doctors and consultants revealed by the RCP is systematic and shocking; 43% of advertised consultant posts last year in Yorkshire and the Humber were not appointed to. In acute medicine, only five out of 26 posts were successfully appointed to. The RCP concludes that these workforce shortages have direct implications for patient safety. Although our hospitals still provide expert care, relentlessly drawing on the good will of staff—who often do upward of 25 care visits every single day—there is not a chance, even by unsustainably drawing on the boundless good will of those care workers, that they are able to provide the best possible care when under such pressure—is unsustainable.

Issues within the NHS are being compounded by problems with the provision of adult social care. According to the King’s Fund, in 2016-17 there were 380,000 cases of a delayed transfer of care due to patients’ awaiting a hospital assessment. A similar number were waiting for a place in a nursing home. It is little surprise that the sorry state of our social care system should be linked to a fall in the life expectancy of older women living in the poorest parts of the UK, because that cohort has seen a disproportionate fall in their life expectancy. For the first time, health inequality is rising because the most deprived are suffering with poorer health.

I have often heard it said that the elderly have been protected from the worst ravages of austerity, but the elderly who live in deprived communities have been hit many times over. Relevant to this debate, they have been hit first by the cut in pension credit for lower-income groups and then through the funding pressures on adult social care. Of course, it is in the local authorities serving the most deprived areas that these effects have been felt the most.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, especially on the impact on the elderly. However, does she agree that more and more children are now being impacted by austerity? Slough Foodbank has noticed an increase in the number of families attending its food bank, saying: “When we checked the vouchers, we discovered that there had been an increase of 16% in the number of children we helped in 2017 compared to 2016.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that child poverty is addressed now? There are lifelong implications for those who grow up in poverty, such as poorer academic results, employment prospects and life expectancy.

Louise Haigh: I am glad that my hon. Friend raises that important point, because I am not able to address all the factors behind declining life expectancy. The British Medical Association raised that point this week, saying it is very concerned about the 5 million children growing up in poverty and the implications that that will have in the future on life expectancy.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I do not want to divert my hon. Friend from the main course of her speech, but she knows that, over the past 30 years, infant mortality has fallen by 60%, yet from 2015 onwards it has risen in England and Wales each year. Holywell Central and Flint Castle wards in my constituency have child poverty rates of 43% and 42%. We have seen an increase of 100 children in poverty in my constituency in the last year. This is a long-term issue, which we need to address.

Louise Haigh: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: these are long-term issues, which need addressing. They are all the more heartbreaking because we have seen decades of progress, and we all assumed that that would only go in one direction; little did any of us imagine that we would see a rise in infant mortality in the sixth-richest country in the world. These figures are, quite frankly, inexcusable.

On social care, care homes in deprived communities often no longer receive enough to cover the costs of care, which inevitably compromises the quality that they are able to provide. For those in such communities who cannot afford private care homes, that reduction of quality, and in some cases the lack of any available residential care at all, has had a punishing effect.

All Members present will have received casework regarding those still in their homes in the community who rely on care packages. Their care is simply unacceptable, relying on care workers who are paid far too little and who often do upward of 25 care visits every single day. There is not a chance, even by unsustainably drawing on the boundless good will of those care workers, that visits could last for 30 minutes, as defined by official guidance. It is beyond the realms of possibility. Those millions of hours of lost contact time for the 470,000 vulnerable—predominantly elderly—people who use home care will have undoubtedly compromised their long-term care and support needs and the management of multiple conditions.

It perhaps should not be a surprise that the rise in mortality and the fall in life expectancy came from precisely that cohort—older women living alone in poorer areas. In many senses, they were the early-warning sign of the deeply troubling trend in increasing mortality. This cohort, more reliant than any other on a functioning, effective, compassionate state providing quality support,
have been badly let down in recent years. It should be a source of national shame that elderly women in some of the most deprived areas of our country are living in isolation, not properly cared for, and are losing their lives because the state has not supported them. However, it is not just that cohort of women. Some 7% of the extra deaths in 2016-17 were of people aged between 20 and 60. Almost 2,000 more younger men and 1,000 more younger women have died than would have if progress had not stalled.

I am sure that the Minister cannot look at the evidence presented here today, or at the research undertaken over the past two years, and not want to take steps to tackle those shocking statistics and to prevent those lives from being cut short. It is therefore critical that Ministers and the Government take seriously the fall in life expectancy and the evidence behind the growth in mortality. Up to now, Public Health England has regrettably tried to attribute it to the greater prevalence of flu. However, as Loopstra noted in her report:

“If Public Health England’s attribution of rising mortality to cold weather and flu is correct, then it should lead to an elevation of mortality in regional swathes across the nation. However... trends have varied considerably across local authorities, with no apparent geographic patterning consistent with regional outbreaks.”

The rise in unexpected mortality and the concurrent fall in life expectancy represents a significant moment in the history of public health in this country, yet the Department of Health has so far rejected the call from public health professionals for an inquiry into the sharp rise in deaths. I repeat that call today, and ask the Minister to look very seriously at the evidence presented on the link between life expectancy and austerity.

I will end on the words of Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten, who have undertaken so much of the research in this area:

demography is not destiny. Projections are not predictions. There is no preordained inevitability that a million years of life need be lost... but only through politics comes the power to make the changes that are now so urgently needed.

The Minister has that power in her hands, and there can be no more pressing question for her than to ask why the citizens of our country are dying sooner than they should. I hope she leaves no stone unturned in pursuit of that answer.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I do not intend to put a formal time limit on speeches. However, there are two Opposition spokespersons as well as the Minister, and I would like to start calling the Opposition spokespersons just after the hour, so if Members could speak for about five minutes each, that would be helpful.

4.47 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for bringing this important matter before the House.

I will start with the economics, because the debate relates to austerity and life expectancy. Government Members would probably talk about living within our means and would put to the hon. Lady the argument that the consequences for the poor and the vulnerable of a country continuing to live beyond its means are very grave. Economic history tells us that when countries lose control of their finances, it is not the well-to-do or the comfortable who suffer, but the poor and the vulnerable. That needs to be put very firmly on the record.

It is also worth noting that the Commonwealth Fund, which is an independent body, last year pointed out that our NHS was the best health system of the 11 different health systems it looked at. If we look at our outcomes on strokes, heart attacks and cancer, we see that they are getting better—there are 7,000 people alive today who would not be alive had we not seen that improvement in cancer outcomes.

Looking at the data across Europe, we see that what is happening in the UK is part of a trend, because life expectancy is also falling in Italy, Spain, France and Germany. Some of those countries spend quite a lot more on health than we do. France and Germany spend one percentage point of GDP more on health than we do, yet they have also seen that downward trend.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: I will in a moment. There has been no austerity in Germany, because the Germans live within their means and run a big budget surplus. They have a trade surplus with China. However, life expectancy is falling in Germany as well. We need to look at these wider factors and at the European context. I will now of course give way, with great pleasure, to my former colleague on the Health Committee.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise from the data that there is not a similar fall in life expectancy in the Scandinavian countries and that it is wrong to look narrowly at health services, because the biggest driver in relation to life expectancy is poverty?

Andrew Selous: I will come on to those very important public health issues and what we need to do about them, because I care passionately about them, as probably everyone in the Chamber does. As the hon. Lady is from Scotland, it is also worth looking at what is happening there, because Scotland offers free adult social care and spends a higher amount on healthcare per head than England, yet still has a lower life expectancy than England. We need to get those issues firmly—

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am going to make a bit of progress, because I am mindful of your admonition, Mr Paisley, not to take too long and I want all the Opposition Members to have their say as well.

What do we need to do about this situation? We have 25% more nurses coming into the system—that training has started—and 25% more doctors coming into the system. We will get the social care Green Paper in July; we cannot get it a second too soon. I for one, as a Conservative Member on the Government side of the House, put up my hand: I want to see increased spending on health and social care, probably through a hypothecated tax. I think that is necessary. If we want quality, we have to pay for it.
We also need to consider issues such as obesity, exercise, air quality and housing quality. If we look at the obesity epidemic in our country, we see that it is now the poor who are much more obese than other social groups, and we know what a massive impact obesity has on health through diabetes and so on. We have to do better there. Why are only 2% of journeys in London made by bicycle? In Amsterdam, it is 30%. The children there cycle, there is much less childhood obesity, and that feeds into better health outcomes and better life expectancy. I chaired the Health Committee’s Sub-Committee that looked into air quality. We need to do a lot better on air quality, and we need there to be good-quality housing.

I salute the intentions of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley. She is right to bring this issue before the House. But I would tell her to think of the broader economics and to look at the European comparisons and those important drivers of public health as well.

4.52 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. The issue of stalling life expectancy, and indeed of falling life expectancy in some areas, is very serious. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about living some areas, is very serious. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about living within our means, but people in my constituency are dying early without their means.

We must reach out across the party political divide on this issue, because the constituencies affected are in poorer areas of the country, as has been mentioned, but they are not anomalies; many different parts of the country are affected. I will give an example. Life expectancy for females at age 65-plus has fallen over the past five years by 0.8 years in Stevenage and by 0.6 years in Cheltenham. Life expectancy for males at birth has fallen in my county of Denbighshire by 0.6 years and by 0.9 years in Bromsgrove. This issue affects a great many of our constituents, across the political divide and across the country. There must be the political will for us to understand the root causes of what has resulted in this debate.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is responsible for this situation is not just the restraint in spending, but the way in which spending restraint and austerity have played out on the frontline? The issue is the withdrawal of mental health services for people living at home. It is the teaching assistants who have all but been removed. In particular, it is the impact on services that help people to stay at home and manage conditions and the cuts to frontline policing that have led to the evisceration of not just life chances, but life expectancy itself.

Chris Ruane: I agree. All those issues are part of the mix as to why we are seeing a decrease in life expectancy. It is a complex issue that needs further inquiry.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Ruane: I am afraid that I must move on, because I have been getting eyes from the Chair and I do not want to upset Mr Paisley.

The Government have said that the situation is a blip because of flu or the cold weather. The Department of Health has seemed to downplay fears about life expectancy, pointing out that smoking rates have gone down and cancer rates have gone down, but that is all the more reason to be worried. If those indicators are going down and life expectancy is going down, what is causing that? Those are good indicators, but there are some bad outcomes for certain people in certain areas.

A report by Professor Martin McKee, whom I had the pleasure of meeting yesterday, notes that the most recent period “has seen one of the greatest slowdowns in the rate of improvement” in life expectancy “for both sexes since the 1890s”.

The relative data on life expectancy today is comparable to a time before workers’ rights, advancements in medicine and technology, and the welfare state. That slowdown, as reported by the Office for National Statistics last July, shows that the increases in the previous period, before 2010, meant that for every five years that a woman was living, she could expect to live one year extra. Now it is the case that for every 10 years that a woman is living, she can expect to live one year extra. The rate has been halved.

Let me add to those figures some of my own, which I received through parliamentary questions that I tabled in January. Between 2009-11 and 2014-16, 19.8% and 20.3% of local authorities reported a decline for females at birth and at 65-plus respectively. There are certain areas of the country, certain demographics and certain genders—women—who are feeling this the most. That is no surprise, because 80% of the austerity cuts made since 2010 have fallen on the shoulders of women. The link between life expectancy and cuts to social care budgets has already been highlighted.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned Scotland. I do not want to stick up for the Scots: they can do a good job themselves, especially the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), with her medical background. However, there are national and regional variations within the United Kingdom. If we look at local authorities in England, we see that 22% of them have seen a decrease in life expectancy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Gentleman draw his remarks to a conclusion?

Chris Ruane: In Wales and Northern Ireland the figure is 18%. In Scotland it is only 6.2%. In the north-east of England, 27% of local authorities have seen a decrease in life expectancy. There are regional differences. What we can draw from that is that where there has been devolution and kinder, gentler Administrations, there has been a less sharp decline.

Hope is a powerful motivator in the way we make decisions. Messages of hope won historic victories for my party in 1945 and 1997 and denied the current Government their majority last year. What the Conservatives proposed at the last election, after seven years of austerity, was another 10 years of austerity. There is learned helplessness out there. People are sick and tired, and they are dying because there is no hope. They have lost income—£2,000 for most people and £5,000 for teachers. Austerity is biting, not just in
medicine but in social care, and affecting mental health and physical health. In the short time I have left, Mr Paisley, it is worth noting—

**Ian Paisley (in the Chair):** Very little time.

**Chris Ruane:** There is very little time, so I will draw my comments to a close by saying that Professor Martin McKee and other academics, from Oxford and other universities, want the Health Committee to have an inquiry on this issue. It is complex. I have mentioned some of the causes, and other MPs, from both sides of the Chamber, have mentioned some of the other causes of the decline in life expectancy. It is a complex mix of issues and deserves an inquiry by the Health Committee.

4.59 pm

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I shall keep my comments brief because many other Members wish to speak. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing a debate on this important matter.

When people think of the rolling hills of west Oxfordshire, I appreciate that poverty is not one of the things that immediately springs to mind, but that is to ignore some of the very real issues present in my constituency. There are real factors and pockets of deprivation, and rural poverty in particular is a real concern, so the issue is very live for those of us in the green shires, as well as for those in urban environments. I would like the House to bear that in mind.

The hon. Lady made some important points today, but I suggest that it is simplistic to look at a straightforward line between necessary control of public spending and an impact on life expectancy. As we have heard, a whole range of factors affect life expectancy and mortality—quality of life, mental health, obesity, housing, air quality—and simply to draw that straightforward causation line is to make things far too simple, when in fact we are dealing with a complex issue.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talked about it being simplistic to talk about the cuts, austerity and so forth, but let us talk, for example, about the cost of a pupil going to a pupil referral unit being 10 times more expensive, or the cost of someone in prison being £35,000 per year. If we invested such money earlier in education, mental health support or support for our young people, we would save money. Indeed, he is the one coming out with the simplistic argument.

**Robert Courts:** The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with her. She made a number of points, but I am simply suggesting that the issue is complex. Saying simply that necessary control of public spending leads to an increase in mortality, as is being suggested, is too simplistic.

Let us look at the example of Scotland—this is a simple and important point—where free adult social care is offered and more is spent on healthcare per head than in England. However, life expectancy there is still lower than in England. That simply underlines my point, which I make in response to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, that it is too simplistic to say that that link between spending and outcomes is as straightforward as she would make out. That cannot be the case, or the situation in Scotland would not be as it is.

For that matter, let us look at the outcomes across Europe. The Public Health England figures are quite striking, particularly in graph form. They show that not only do we have a slight dip in life expectancy figures over the course of the past year or so, but so too do Italy, Spain and, strikingly, France—a dip almost identical to what we have seen in the UK, despite the fact that I understand the French spend the highest amount in Europe on healthcare. We are clearly dealing with a much more complicated situation, and lifestyle factors are crucial. Those are not restricted to the UK.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley has accepted that life expectancy cannot be expected to increase forever. That is of course common sense and a point that she readily accepts, but the point bears repeating and remembering. For a number of reasons we have had extraordinary success in increasing healthcare over the past few years, but we are now faced with the results of that—an ageing and increasing population, therefore with increased complexity of morbidity factors.

I therefore applaud the approach being taken by the Government. We are not only investing as much as possible within the constraints of sensible Government spending, but ensuring that we address the lifestyle factors that can affect life expectancy in the round. However, as I continue to speak, I can see you looking at me with concern, Mr Paisley, so I will confine myself to those remarks.

5.3 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), whom I commend for securing the debate, spoke a lot about the impact of austerity on health and social care. To pick up on that, I should say that austerity has a triple impact. Spending on health and social care ends up being strangled, as we have seen: the reduction of the annual climb in expenditure from 3.5% to approximately 1%.

Of the two other impacts, one is the economic impact that we have faced ever since the crash at the end of the 2000s and which has been felt throughout Europe—I have a German husband, and I can tell you that while Germany itself may have a surplus, there are people there who are struggling and have not seen the wage rises that they would have liked. Also, in this country especially, we have seen welfare cuts, which have removed social security from people, creating particular areas and populations of poverty. That has particularly hit the disabled, children and pensioners.

There has been a lot of talk about healthcare. After 33 years as a doctor, I have to say that we can have far too much faith in what medicine can do to change overall life expectancy. We have some impact, but the biggest driver of ill health and the biggest impact on life expectancy is poverty and deprivation. That is something we have seen increasing in this country.

For example, over the past 20 years the rate of pensioner poverty dropped 28% to 13% by 2011-12, but it has now come back up to 16%. Twenty years ago in England, child poverty started out at 33%, got down at best to
27% in 2011-12, and is now back up at 30%. In fact, Scotland has the lowest rate in the UK: we started at a similar level, got down to 21% in 2011-12, and are still the lowest, at 24%. However, we have seen the same uplift, and that is because of aspects of social security and the impact of things such as the removal of child tax credits or the cuts to all the various social security supports. Over the past few years, similarly, poverty in general has risen slightly in England, Wales and Scotland, although Scotland has the lowest poverty rate, at 19%.

Important impacts of poverty on health include housing and fuel. People in the lowest 20th will be spending a third of their income on housing and, in the north of Scotland, another third on fuel. People are literally being squeezed and are struggling to eat well, which of course impacts on their health. We can see big differences in wealth across the UK. There is approximately twice the wealth in Kensington and Chelsea as in Glasgow—as well as more than 10 years’ difference in life expectancy.

As has been mentioned, the improvement in life expectancy has halved, from three months to approximately six weeks, although in Scandinavian countries the improvement continues, because social support and the social fabric is something they invest in. In Scotland the life expectancy deprivation gap has narrowed from 13.5 years to nine. That gap can, in the raw sense, be influenced by healthcare—we manage to keep people alive—but we are not keeping people healthy. They are surviving but accruing more and more diseases. In Scotland, therefore, the healthy life expectancy gap has increased from 22.5 years to 26 years. People are struggling with all of that, and it results in a much higher health spend and much more pressure on the NHS. That is exactly what Members have been saying: there is no sensible saving of money if it ends up being spent somewhere else.

Infant mortality is a measure of the impact of poverty on health that is used right across the world. For three decades, infant mortality had been dropping; it has now taken a small uptick. In Scotland, again, we have the lowest infant mortality rate—0.5 per 1,000 live births lower than in England—but it too has gone back up. Look at the contrast between the wealthiest and poorest areas: in the wealthiest areas, just over 2.5 babies per 1,000 live births will die within a year; and in the poorest areas the rate is more than double that, at 5.9 per 1,000 live births. Read Professor Marmot, and we cannot escape what we have known for 20 years: that the biggest impact on survival, quality of life and outcomes is poverty—and the biggest driver of poverty is austerity.

5.9 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing this important debate and for her excellent and well-informed speech. It is of great interest—not only to me, but to the public, who I am sure will be listening closely to the Minister’s response today. I also want to thank the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for Witney (Robert Courts), my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) and the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for their thoughtful and passionate speeches, even though I do not necessarily agree with all the things that were said.

As we heard, life expectancy has always gradually increased. Between 1920 and 2010, it increased from 55 to 78 years for men and from 59 to 82 years for women. However, the improvement began to stall in 2011 when the coalition Government came in. That cannot be just a coincidence. Since then, for the first time in over a century, the health of people in England and Wales has stopped improving, and has flat-lined ever since.

I must emphasise that researchers do not believe that we have reached peak life expectancy. The Nordic countries, Japan and Hong Kong all have life expectancies greater than ours and they continue to increase, so why is life expectancy flat-lining in the UK? Why is Britain being left behind and fast becoming the sick man of Europe? I know that the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire said that that was not the case, but academic research by Danny Dorling, published in November 2017, which I have here, said:

“Life expectancy for women in the UK is now lower than in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Often it is much lower. Men…do little better.”

I think the hon. Gentleman needs to check his facts.

The life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest in this country is nothing less than shameful. According to the Institute of Health Equity, the longest life expectancy in the country is, not surprisingly, in the richest borough: Kensington and Chelsea. Men in Kensington and Chelsea can expect to live to 83 and women to 86. Unsurprisingly, you will find the lowest life expectancy in my part of it: the north and Scotland. In Glasgow, life expectancy for men is 73 and in West Dunbartonshire it is 79 for women—10 years of difference for men and seven years for women. The difference within the richest borough, Kensington and Chelsea, is even more stark. Despite living in the richest borough in the country, the most disadvantaged within it can expect to live 14 years less than their most advantaged counterparts. Does the Minister agree that this is completely unacceptable?

The north-south divide remains as relevant as ever when we look at healthy life expectancy—the years that people can expect to live a healthy life. In the south-east, the healthy life expectancy is 65.9 years for men and 66.6 years for women. However, people can expect a shorter healthy life expectancy in the north-east, where men have a healthy life expectancy of 59.7 years and women 59.8 years. That is significantly lower than the England average. Looking after those people during that unhealthy part of life means a huge cost to the NHS. It also means that the inequality gap in healthy life expectancy at birth between the south-east and the north-east is 6.2 years for men and 6.8 years for women.

What will the Minister do to address the life expectancy and healthy life expectancy gap between the rich and poor, and the north and south? It is simply unacceptable that the least advantaged in our society bear the brunt of this Government’s policies—wherever they live. Austerity is not a choice. It is a political ideology, which harms the poorest and the most vulnerable in our communities.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Rubbish!

Mrs Hodgson: It is not rubbish. Professor Sir Michael Marmot warned:

“If we don’t spend appropriately on social care, if we don’t spend appropriately on health care, the quality of life will get worse for older people and maybe the length of life, too.”
Sadly, we have seen this across the board. Despite the growing pressure on our health and social care service, the Government are responsible for spending cuts across our NHS, social care and public health services. While demand continues to increase, the Government have taken away vital funding, which could close the life expectancy gap.

Since local authorities became responsible for public health budgets in 2015, it is estimated by the King’s Fund that, on a like-for-like basis, public health spending will have fallen by 5.2%. That follows a £200 million in-year cut to public health spending in 2015-16. Further real-term cuts are to come, averaging between 3.9% each year between 2016-17 and 2020-21. On the ground, that means cuts to spending on tackling drug misuse among adults of more than £22 million compared with last year and smoking cessation services cut by almost £16 million. Spending to tackle obesity, which the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire mentioned as a cause of shorter life expectancy, has also fallen by 18.5% between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and further cuts are in the pipeline. These are vital services for local communities and could benefit their health and lifestyle, but sadly they continue to be cut due to lack of funding.

How does the Minister expect to close the life expectancy gap without investing properly in vital public health services? An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. The Government must invest in public health and prevention services, as that could play a significant role in closing the life expectancy gap that we are discussing.

When the Prime Minister made her first speech on the steps of Downing Street—the Minister is nodding, because she knows the quote—she said: “if you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others.”

We were all pleased that the Prime Minister highlighted that issue, but I have been left disappointed with her Government’s lack of response to tackle it. We on this side of the House are committed to ensuring that our health and care system is properly funded, so that all children are given the best possible start in life and older people are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve. I hope that the Minister will clearly outline what the Government will do to close the life expectancy gap.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I thank all hon. Members for complying so obediently with the timing that I requested.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed. Clearly, we all want the best possible outcomes for all our constituents, and it is in that spirit that we approach this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. I know her constituency well. Actually, looking at hon. Members opposite, I know the constituency of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) well, also. That really brings into stark relief some of the issues we are talking about, because at the heart of the issue of life expectancy is the issue of inequality. I can speak from personal experience in my own constituency. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) talked about the differences between north and south, and rich and poor. Within my constituency there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy in the two-mile trip from the north of my constituency to the south, where it is poorest.

We are all acutely aware that inequalities lead to lower life expectancy. It would be a poor Minister for Health—indeed, a poor Member of Parliament or anyone involved in public life—who did not think that was important. It is important that we address it and we are determined to do so. I will run through some things, which tell a better story than the stark figures we have heard today. I will also address some of the points made about those figures, because I think it would be premature to draw too many conclusions at this stage about the causes of those and whether this is a long-term trend.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) also made some wise points. Ultimately, we can only spend what we collect from taxpayers. We are having an active debate on the extent of the funding we need to make available for health and social care. In this 70th anniversary year of the founding of the NHS, it is appropriate to focus on that. We will continue, notwithstanding the fiscal challenges that we face, to prioritise spending on health.

It is important to emphasise that this dip in life expectancy is not unique to the UK. We have seen it elsewhere in Europe. We need to be circumspect about drawing too much by way of conclusion.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned the Prime Minister’s speech. I want to supply the context of the Government’s approach against the background of that speech. The Prime Minister made it a priority to fight injustice and inequality. Ultimately, we know that by focusing actions on the people, communities and localities with the greatest needs, we will achieve the best health outcomes. As the hon. Lady said, we will also reduce long-term demand on the NHS and social care services, so it is smart to focus our strategy on tackling inequality.

We need to be honest about facing up to what the sources of inequality are. Sometimes, those will make us uncomfortable. One of the most disadvantaged groups in our society is those with learning disabilities. They will live 20 years less than the rest of us. For me, that is a very uncomfortable truth to live with. Successive Governments have tried to direct resources to help that group of people, but it is still not working. That leads to the realisation that this is as much about behaviour and leadership as it is about money.

David Hanson: Putting that aside for one moment, could the Minister explain to Members of the House why infant mortality rose for the first time in 30 years in 2016 and 2017? If it is not linked to the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) mentioned, what is it linked to?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The right hon. Gentleman knows that we have made tackling that a priority. It is too early to draw any conclusions. It is the case that poverty is a big source of inequality, but we need to do more work before drawing conclusions. Having developed the evidence,
we will act. There is a reason that we have developed a national maternity safety strategy. There is a reason we are focusing resource on the perinatal phase, because we recognise it is critical. We will also continue to spend money on the healthy living supplements to give children a better start in life and to tackle some of those inequalities.

Dr Whitford: The Minister accepts in her speech that poverty is a big driver of these changes and talks about doing more, but she expect that over the next few years another quarter of a million children will be driven into child poverty. It is not a matter of doing more. In fact, the policies at the moment are making the situation worse.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not accept that. The real issue for us as a Government is being able to make those interventions that address the sources of inequality. It is about giving practical steps, which I will come to in more detail.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley referred to the article in The BMJ by Hiam and Dorling about the spike in mortality and winter deaths. She was absolutely right to highlight that. We must pay attention to emerging studies. However, using the total number of deaths can be misleading and needs to be put in the broader context. It does not take account of the ageing population and the fluctuations in population numbers. We use the age-standardised mortality rate as the accepted measure, which looks broadly stable. Clearly this is not something we should be complacent about, and we should continue to keep a very close eye on trends in those numbers.

I mentioned people with learning disabilities living for 20 years less than the rest of us. It is good that that figure has come down since 2000. Their life expectancy has risen by seven years since the millennium. We must encourage that direction of travel by supporting them to live full, healthy and independent lives. That goes to show that having better health is not just an issue for the NHS and health services, but is about having more support to get people into work and to help them to live in the community. We need to use every interface with the state to achieve that.

If we take a lifestyle approach to securing the best possible health outcomes and tackling inequalities, an individual’s start in life is the beginning of that. We are focusing on pregnancy through early years and into old age to ensure that every child gets the best start and journey through the rest of their life. Public Health England is leading programmes to ensure that women are fit during pregnancy. It is leading programmes to ensure that children are ready to learn at two and ready for school at five. We want to continue to support smoke-free pregnancy, which leads to better health for children. Central to that is local commissioning driving best-quality service and interventions as appropriate.

We are obviously very concerned about childhood obesity. If we do not tackle it, it will set people up for poor life expectancy in the longer term. It is worrying to see the number of children entering school at the age of five who are already obese. We need to leave no stone unturned to achieve early intervention. Broader public health education about the impact of sugar is helping, but there is much more we can do to encourage people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

Louise Haigh: Could the Minister confirm what the net change in investment in early intervention has been since the Conservatives came to power?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I cannot give the hon. Lady that information now, but I will write to her.

Alcohol is a source of poor health outcomes, so we are also doing much to tackle that. I am in dialogue with Members on both sides of the House about supporting the children of alcoholic parents, recognising that they are a particular need group. I thank those hon. Members who have been associated with that.

Dr Whitford: With Scotland having been the first place to ban smoking in public places, and now moving forward with minimum unit pricing for alcohol, will this Government consider following that lead for England to tackle alcohol?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful for that point, which consideration is being given to in the Department. There are any number of tools that we could use to tackle alcohol. Probably the most important thing is to give the message that unsafe drinking is bad for the health. It is always interesting to learn from Scotland’s experience, and we will keep an eye on that.

Tobacco is a major cause of poor health. It is worth noting how much progress we have made over decades to reduce the prevalence of smoking. That should lead to better health outcomes, but that has yet to be seen.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Rates of premature deaths in Hartlepool and the north-east are among the highest in the country. Other issues such as poor-quality housing, food poverty, fuel poverty and unemployment are also factors. Does the Minister agree that those factors also need to be taken into consideration?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree. That is exactly the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). Housing is probably the single most important ingredient in good health. We often talk in this place about there being a housing crisis and about the need to fix the broken housing market and get more supply. Amen. The fact that we have failed to manage the supply of housing effectively for decades is bringing bigger health challenges. We really need to crack that if we are to tackle some of these issues.

I could go on, but we are running short of time. We are seeing very good rates of improvement in health for things such as cancer, and much better outcomes for people. The direction of travel means that there are good things to report. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have approached this debate with real thought about the very serious issue of the decline in life expectancy. I am sure that we will revisit the issue, but my lasting message is that we see the method of tackling this being tackling inequalities. That is what I pledge to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered austerity and changes in life expectancy.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 19 April 2018

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

UK Oil and Gas Industry

1.30 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK oil and gas industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate. I am grateful to hon. Members for attending on such a glorious, hot day—it is particularly lovely and warm in this room. It is difficult to sell the oil and gas industry on quite such a hot day, but I am assuming that the air conditioning is running on electricity.

Oil and gas is a massive part of the UK economy. Since 1964, 44 billion barrels have been produced, resulting in £330 billion of production taxes for the Exchequer. Since 1964, 44 billion barrels have been produced, resulting in £330 billion of production taxes for the Exchequer. At its peak, tens of thousands of offshore workers were transiting through Aberdeen International airport, which is in my constituency. They came from many destinations, such as Liverpool, Manchester, Humberside, Portsmouth, Norwich, Newcastle, Southampton, Exeter, East Midlands, Birmingham, Bristol—that is not naming all of them—and the south-east of England, as well as from further afield, including Dublin and Belfast and with connections to Norway, Holland and the rest of Europe.

This is a global industry—the UK at its best. Only this week I discovered that Mozambique has the third biggest discovery of gas in the world and Scottish companies have been involved by the Department for International Trade.

The main point to make today is that this is not a dying industry. Production will decline from the peak of 4.5 million barrels in 1999-2000—it is now down to the south, are also very involved. The industry is spread throughout the rest of the United Kingdom but has a particularly large footprint in Scotland. Some 59 UK constituencies have a major oil and gas presence, from the northern isles, Shetland and Orkney, all the way down the east coast. Apart from Aberdeen, major industrial cities such as Dundee, Glasgow, Newcastle, Hull, and Norwich—to name just a few—are very involved in the industry. It employs more than 300,000 highly paid, highly trained people, with internationally employable skills. People from all over the UK work in the sector. It is a truly national industry linking every part of the UK.

At its peak, tens of thousands of offshore workers were transiting through Aberdeen International airport, which is in my constituency. They came from many destinations, such as Liverpool, Manchester, Humberside, Portsmouth, Norwich, Newcastle, Southampton, Exeter, East Midlands, Birmingham, Bristol—that is not naming all of them—and the south-east of England, as well as from further afield, including Dublin and Belfast and with connections to Norway, Holland and the rest of Europe.

This is a global industry—the UK at its best. Only this week I discovered that Mozambique has the third biggest discovery of gas in the world and Scottish companies have been involved by the Department for International Trade.
to about 1.5 million barrels—but it is still an incredibly important industry for this country.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Would my hon. Friend agree that oil and gas is not a transitional industry on the journey through to a decarbonised world? There are many industries and many people who will be using oil and gas as an energy source, and for other reasons, for many years to come.

Colin Clark: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I am a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, which took evidence from Lord Turner, the former chairman of the Committee on Climate Change. I asked him for how long he saw oil and gas being a major source of energy, heat and power, and he said at least into the next century, which is well over 80 years. He went on to say that in terms of an industrial raw material, we just do not know—we could be looking at hundreds of years. It is important that we realise that we probably cannot bring all the hydrocarbons we have to the surface, but that we certainly have to use them better and in a much cleaner way. I know that is a big consideration, particularly in the City of London.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I want to reassure my hon. Friend. That I, the Government and many industry commentators absolutely see a role for oil and gas in the mix going forward, with a shift towards gas. Technologies such as carbon capture and storage, which I have had the great pleasure of debating with the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and others in this House, are part of the way to extend the industry’s life even further. The Government are committed to gas—it is not just me; it is other international parties as well—but finding ways that can help us take carbon out to keep the energy supply flowing is also part of that mix.

Colin Clark: I thank the Minister for that intervention. It is very important that we are careful that this industry is not demonised and is not seen as something of the past. It is a constructive industry and it is important that we do not suggest it is a stopgap until we move on to something else. We have to recognise its importance. How we use hydrocarbons responsibly is something we have to get right for generations to come, while reflecting on how we have got it wrong in the past.

Alex Cunningham: There is also the legacy industry from the parts of the industry that have changed. A huge decommissioning industry is growing up. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that contracts around decommissioning should be subject to even greater regulation in order to protect not just the environment but the interests of British workers who need to train to carry out this decommissioning work, which could create thousands of jobs for Teesside?

Colin Clark: The hon. Gentleman must have read my mind, because I am coming on to decommissioning. It is interesting that Hartlepool has already set itself up to take the topsides of rigs. That is pretty remarkable, because I remember that when I was standing for another election back in 2015 I was told that large vessels come and take the topside off, and then take it away to Turkey or the middle east to be broken up. I was told that, apart from a bit sub-sea, decommissioning was not going to be done in the UK. I am delighted that we are going to carry out decommissioning. This is about how ambitious we are to be involved in it. There are huge opportunities.

Alex Cunningham: There is the opportunity not just to decommission the rigs, but to bring them in, reconfigure them and put them back out on to the Dogger Bank to provide platforms for the people servicing the offshore wind industry. Would the hon. Gentleman support that?

Colin Clark: That is a very valuable point, and I know that the Oil and Gas Technology Centre in Aberdeen is looking at that. The initial idea was that everything would have to be taken down to the seabed, including the concrete installations on the bottom of the seabed. The industry is starting to look at the opportunities. The Oil and Gas Technology Centre is particularly active in thinking about what we can use again and what has significant value. There is a real opportunity with renewables, whether solar or turbines.

The current estimates put the total decommissioning spend at about £60 billion, but the Oil and Gas Authority is targeting a 35% reduction in that cost. Decommissioning has a big effect on the Exchequer, so it is important that we come up with an efficient way of doing it. Companies such as Well-Safe Solutions, based in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, are coming up with industry excellence to ensure that we do not learn a new lesson every single time we do this. We want much of the decommissioning industry to be in the United Kingdom. Apart from anything else, morally we should do as much decommissioning in this country as we can and in a way that fulfils what we want to do. We should not simply offshore our responsibility to developing countries.

Although there are opportunities for the UK supply chain, it is important to know how much of the cake we will get and what our ambition is. The biggest part of the decommissioning spend is the technical side—the technology and the design. We are already well positioned to do that in the north-east and the rest of the country.

The ambition of the industry, and the vision of people such as Sir Ian Wood, is to extend the North sea’s life with small-pool and late-life development. The industry can report growth; it is showing resilience. Oil and Gas UK’s “Business Outlook” report, released on 20 March, said that more new investment is expected in 2018 than in the past three years, so things are starting to tick up. Production in 2018 is set to increase by 5%, making it 20% higher than it was five years ago. That is resilience; the industry is not going backwards. Unit operating costs, which were a huge problem in the North sea and got completely out of hand, are now down to about $14 or $15 per barrel, compared with a barrel price of $70. That is not the total cost, but it means that we are now internationally competitive, which is very important.

The supply chain is still under enormous pressure, but revenues will stabilise in 2018. Cash flow and, most importantly, profitability remain a challenge. The service sector is telling companies in the oil and gas sector that they are being squeezed far too much. The problem is
that if the tier 1s and tier 2s put them out of business, they will not be there for tomorrow, and that will be an economic disadvantage to the country.

More exploration is needed to realise the basin’s full potential. Transferable tax history, delivered by the Chancellor last year, is expected to remove barriers to late-life investment. The problem was that the tax advantages that a tier 1 company built up may have prevented other investors from getting involved in the oil industry, because they are unable to use the decommissioning tax breaks. That is very important, and it demonstrates the UK Exchequer’s broad shoulders.

Maximising the potential of existing fields is key to sustaining production at current levels to 2050. Oil and Gas UK estimates that “between 12 and 16 oil and gas developments could get the go-ahead this year”—as the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said—

“unlocking investment of around £5 billion.”

It goes on to say:

“That’s more than the new oil and gas field approvals sanctioned over the last three years combined and promises a much-needed business boost for the supply chain”.

It is important that the supply chain starts to negotiate contracts that will sustain it into the future. There is excess capacity, and if the oil producers squeeze too hard we could see a depletion in the number of people involved, and in the long term that will be very bad news.

Norway is always cited as an example. Exploration is tax-deductible in the Norwegian sector, and there are vast reserves. However, when companies find oil, they pay up to 78% tax, compared with the UK sector, for which it can be 20%. The industry reports that the greenfield and major brownfield developments set to be approved this year could yield more than 450 million barrels of oil and gas over time, although that still falls short of the level required to sustain long-term production at current levels.

We cannot underestimate this; the industry is not out of the woods. Oil and Gas UK said:

“The project landscape for 2018 is the healthiest the industry has seen… greater exploration success and maximising the potential within existing assets are essential for the future”.

Oil and Gas UK is not pulling its punches. It is saying that we see green shoots in the industry, but if this does not happen they could dampen back down. Oil and gas companies make decisions about investing money, and they are very tough about where they do that. They will invest in the UK continental shelf if it is the right place, but if there is somewhere better to invest, they will do that. It is important that the UK continental shelf remains fiscally one of the best places to produce oil. We must applaud the sector, because it has learned to be leaner. The UK continental shelf is more efficient, and optimism is returning to the sector.

To blow the trumpet of the north-east for a minute—there are several north-east MPs here—

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman means north-east Scotland. We use “the north-east” to refer to north-east England.

Colin Clark: Quite right. I mean the generic north-east.

The north-east of Scotland has 7% of the population, but 15% of the Scottish economy. I am sure that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) will agree that it is the engine room of the Scottish economy. The policies of Her Majesty’s Government and the Scottish Government must encourage companies to thrive, and not be damaging. The cost of living in the north-east of Scotland is higher—house prices were driven up by the boom years, so we have the highest council tax bills—and employers feel penalised by what they see to be very high business rates. The empty business property rates have unfortunately backfired and are encouraging landlords to take buildings down. It is important that we invest in the north-east of Scotland—this is a ple to this place as much as it is to Holyrood—and that the money we raise there is spent there.

Over the lifetime of this Parliament, as much as £500 million of extra rates will be raised in the north-east of Scotland. My plea is that we spend that money in the north-east of Scotland, whether on roads, schools, hospitals or other facilities. It is important that we make the north-east of Scotland not only the right place to invest, but the right place to live. If somebody flies in from Houston or comes up from London or Europe, they have to come to somewhere they really want to live, so it is important that we invest in the area.

Andrew Bowie: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a general feeling in the north-east of Scotland that the region has been undervalued and underfunded by Governments over the past few years?

Colin Clark: Yes, but many parts of the country feel they are underinvested in. The engine room of the Scottish economy is taxed that much more than other areas—if we do not invest in it, we risk killing the golden goose. That is the important thing. I am not saying that other areas are not deserving; I am saying that if we do not invest in the north-east of Scotland and the surrounding area, it will not be an attractive place to live, and it will be very difficult to attract people to work there.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the same concepts apply to the £330 billion of oil revenues that came to the Westminster Parliament?

Colin Clark: I will not disagree, save that the principle is that that £330 billion was to the UK Treasury, which invested for many years throughout the United Kingdom. As the hon. Member for Stockton North will remind me, not only the original Scottish sector has oil, but the islands, the rest of the UK east coast and now the west coast of Scotland as well.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I wanted to make this point earlier; it came up in conversation with a Treasury Minister last year. We had to remind that Minister that oil and gas exist not only off the coast at Aberdeen, but all down the east coast, on the west coast, to the west of Shetland and the Northern Isles in general, off Morecambe bay and all around the UK. That is why we call it the UK continental shelf and not just the North sea.
Colin Clark rose—

Claire Perry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Colin Clark: I shall.

Claire Perry: I wanted to do two things, briefly: first, I remind everyone of the wonderful page 218 of the industrial strategy, which shows the productivity gains that the industry has delivered to the north-east—productivity gains driven by a UK Government-wide fiscal policy that supported the industry through the 1970s and ’80s. Secondly, I remind hon. Members that the carboniferous formation that has delivered the offshore extraction has also allowed us to explore, in a sensible, environmentally safe and robust way, onshore extraction of such incredibly valuable resources. The formation runs underneath us as well.

Colin Clark: I thank Members for that plethora of interventions—it is good that everyone is so interested on such a hot day.

As I was saying, this is an enormously important industry, which has been the bedrock of the manufacturing industry of the United Kingdom. That is why Her Majesty’s Government have invested in it and made this country one of the best places fiscally to produce oil and gas. With the transferable tax history, the UK Government have delivered a massive incentive to invest—other Members campaigned for that for some time. However, it is important that the companies now investing in the industry understand their future responsibilities and that the companies that invested in the past, which have already had the tax benefit, realise that they still have a responsibility.

Fiscal policy makes the UK continental shelf one of the best places to produce oil and gas, and the lower corporation tax of the United Kingdom means that the bigger part of the industry, the service sector, is well compensated when operating in the UK. To produce more revenue and grow the whole economy is what we are trying to do. For “business sector” read “jobs”, because employment in the oil and gas industry is picking up, and there is a huge spin-off from the industry. It has been reported that more than half of the companies surveyed expect employee numbers to rise this year. That is a big change.

The north-east of Scotland and the rest of the country involved in oil and gas have seen numbers heavily depleted. As we discussed in a Westminster Hall debate on social mobility a few weeks ago, some businesses are reporting difficulties in recruiting people with certain skills and competencies. That is a worry; perhaps our technical colleges and universities are not producing enough. I had not realised that that could be the case—I expected that Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen or Aberdeen University would be completely focused on the oil and gas industry, but there is already concern about skills shortages.

The oil and gas industry reminds me of the space programme in the US in the 1960s: when oil was $120 a barrel, the industry could not spend money fast enough—probably throughout the entire world, but particularly in the UK continental shelf. Since the oil price has dipped, the industry has obviously pulled back from training, which is probably the reason for our skills shortage.

We saw a massive dip in training, although it is beginning to pick up again. Government should do everything possible to encourage training and investment in training, because the industry will continue to be important.

In the north-east we have the highest concentration of technicians and engineers in the United Kingdom—in both north-easts—and all sides can recognise that that is hugely valuable all over the UK. It is also important at the Oil and Gas Technology Centre that STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—learning is an important part of what the oil industry offers.

Recently, the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce carried out an industry survey including employment and attitudes. I shall give a few of the numbers because it is important for us to understand where the industry is. The picture is a mixed one, but 80% of firms believe the industry has hit the bottom of the cycle and is now starting to go back up. That means we will start to see investment again—and we are. Fifty-four per cent. of the companies expected to be growing, which is very important, because we are clearly coming out of what was a major recession.

Companies also predicted that they will grow new opportunities, as came up in an earlier intervention by the hon. Member for Stockton North. I visited Sparrows, which builds complex cranes. It had a £10 million order for cranes to put on turbine platforms, to lift parts on and off: 105 of those automated cranes at between £50,000 and £100,000 each. That is a huge investment, and there is the industry diversifying out. More than 80% of companies expected to be involved in decommissioning, where the spend will probably be about £40 billion—that is not to be sniffed at and will sustain an engineering industry for a long time. Many sectors in the United Kingdom would like a £40 billion investment.

On Brexit specifically, the survey covered the issue of recruiting talent in future. The figures are worth mentioning: 47% of the companies surveyed believe that there will be no effect; and 33% were worried. I accept absolutely that we have to get immigration right because this industry employs such highly skilled people.

The Oil and Gas Technology Centre, funded by the city region deal to the tune of £180 million, combines academic research, including that of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon Universities, and industry to create value: to unlock the potential of the UK continental shelf, to anchor the supply chain in the north-east—predominantly the north-east of Scotland, in this case—and to create a culture of innovation that attracts industry and academia. The centre is trying to bring all that together.

For a long time, the oil and gas industry operated in silos, with independent commercial organisations. Sir Ian Wood, with one organisation, has been brilliant at encouraging companies to come together. I have to say—I am sure that all Members involved would agree—that the basing of the Oil and Gas Authority in Aberdeen has been an enormous success. I would be delighted were other Ministries to consider basing anything related to oil and gas in Aberdeen as well.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again and for indulging me so thoroughly, because I have to leave the debate early. He has made a
There is obviously significant concern about the Airbus 225, parliamentary group met Airbus and the unions involved. The British offshore oil and gas industry all-party accept the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that we must important to the future of the oil and gas industry, so I cannot be done by boat; it can take two and a half you think they get back and forward? The journey because there is no other way to supply oil rigs. For Transport. It is important for us to have confidence, back in, and that is very much an issue for the Department for Transport. It is important for us to have confidence, because there is no other way to supply oil rigs.

When we had a visit from the Secretary of State for Transport, one or two of his advisers said, “This is brilliant, flying out in a helicopter.” I said, “How do you think they get back and forward?” The journey cannot be done by boat; it can take two and a half hours to fly offshore on a helicopter. Helicopters are important to the future of the oil and gas industry, so I accept the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that we must restore the confidence of people who work offshore.

Alex Cunningham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of that could be an open and transparent public inquiry? Everyone would be able to see, which would instil the level of confidence that workers are demanding.

Colin Clark: Also, the trade unions and their representatives have to be very careful that they base what they are saying on science, not anecdotal evidence. I have heard one or two things said that made me very worried; I will not say that it was scaremongering, but they undermined people’s confidence in what is absolutely essential. The people who work in the oil and gas industry do not want to see helicopters grounded; they want to be safe and they want to be confident about how they get back and forward from the rigs. I would like to mention two projects by the Oil and Gas Technology Centre. It has a great ambition for an underwater innovation centre, which is very important to the sub-sea sector. That is a very big part of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who is newly announced decommissioning centre in Newborough, in my constituency, which is trying to be the centre of decommissioning technology and ability, so that the UK plays a key part in it and we do not move it elsewhere.

In monetary terms, Vision 2035 aims to create £1 trillion of revenue over the period to 2035 only. The Oil and Gas Authority has a potential upper level of 20 billion barrels of oil, and that expectation is based on barely a quarter of what there could be. We want to see the supply chain double to £500 billion over that period. That is an absolutely enormous part of the UK economy, paying tax, contributing and investing in people. Through collaboration, the maximum economic recovery that has been developed by the industry could provide £400 billion. Again, that is just up to 2035. The collaborative effort between Her Majesty’s Government and the Scottish Government shows that when we work together, businesses and jobs benefit. That is pretty well what all our constituents would expect us to do.

The private sector is beginning to have tremendous confidence again in the oil and gas industry. In 2017, there was a staggering $8 billion of merger and acquisition activity in the sector; Chrysaor invested $3.8 billion to purchase Shell assets, and that was before transferable tax history. There was also activity in the supply chain that included Wood Group and Amec, which together are to become a FTSE 100 company, and GE and Baker Hughes, which plan to float on the New York Stock Exchange. They are mammoth businesses investing in a lot of people. The variety, size and type of M and A deals last year signal confidence in the UK continental shelf.

We live in a free market economy where Government must create the right conditions for growth, which is why we are here today to address the Minister. Anti-business rhetoric of demonising job creators, overregulation or punitive taxes all damage growth, as does demonising hydrocarbons by suggesting that they are somehow a thing of the past that we should not be getting involved in. Achieving inward investment requires a dynamic economy with flexible labour laws, hence our historically low unemployment. High taxes destroy investment and job opportunities.

Government must be very conscious of what they are doing. We need to grow the whole economy, not just take more slices out of bits of it. Past Conservative Governments have made mistakes on that very point, particularly in the oil and gas industry. Deirdre Michie said:

“We need more exploration if we are to get close to recovering the three to up to nine billion barrels” of oil.

Whenever we speak of oil, the figures are absolutely enormous, as is its economic impact: as I said earlier, 1 billion barrels of oil is £50 billion of contribution to the economy.

The UK has signed up to significant carbon reduction. Hydrocarbon production is presented by parts of the media and politicians in this place—I have heard them on many occasions—as part of the problem. Renewables have become a large part of electricity production, but there is twice as much energy transferred by the gas ring than there is by electricity because, apart from on a hot day like this, this is a country that needs heating in our homes. Natural gas produces half the greenhouse gases that coal does. The UK continental shelf industry is part of the solution, not the problem. Each and every one of us gets up in the Chamber as often as we can to remind people that the industry is a very valuable part of the economy.

As the Minister mentioned, the Oil and Gas Technology Centre sees the future being hydrogen and carbon focused, with unmanned facilities and reusable structures. Already,
BP in the Quad 204 is putting into practice sub-sea automated structures and vessels, as opposed to rigs. This is a rapidly changing industry—we are changing skills.

I would like to mention a Government elsewhere with a lot of Scots people who moved there many years ago: New Zealand has announced that it will not allow any new offshore development. They are simply offsetting their responsibilities to overseas. They are somehow going to oversee their responsibility for energy, so they are just moving it to a different jurisdiction, where they will have no idea what the ethical and safe practices will be. That is simply pushing away their responsibilities.

Oil and gas are part of the transition, but they are part of our economy, potentially for centuries. They are an incredibly important raw material. As somebody said to me, “You don’t make electric vehicles with wood”—not yet at least. Hydrocarbons, oil and gas and plastics are a major part of those industries. I want people to remember that it is our throwaway culture that polluted our seas, not the existence of hydrocarbons. Already, the UK has slashed emissions by transferring to gas.

I heard recently in a Committee that some would suggest that oil and gas should not be part of the so-called ethical pension funds, should not be considered for green finance, and that somehow we should just turn off the taps and stop using hydrocarbons. Not only is that unrealistic, it is a fairy tale and completely luddite. Hydrocarbons have driven the industrial and green revolution. We would not be where we are if it were not for our use of hydrocarbons. That does not mean that we did not mistakes.

Life would be a lot harsher and the population would be a fraction of what it is. I worry when environmentalists say that, because I wonder whether they are basically saying that there are too many people on this planet and we cannot sustain them. I do not quite know how they will work out which economies should carry on developing and using hydrocarbons, and which developing and third-world economies will somehow be deprived of the development that the western world has enjoyed. Oil and gas has been pivotal in transforming the carbon intensity of the power sector, with cost-effective emission reductions achieved through a significant switch from coal to gas.

I would like to briefly mention fracking, without being overtly political. Everybody should remember that hydraulic fractioning of rock formations has been used in the North sea for 30 years. It has been done very safely and under the jurisdiction of Governments of various parties, who have been very careful how it is delivered. I do not really want it to get into the general narrative that somehow that is not safe, because that would suggest that what we are doing offshore, perhaps thousands of feet below the rig, is not safe.

Well construction and the UK continental shelf has been absolutely at the top of the industry. Directional drilling and hydraulic fractioning has been developed in the North sea, so we should not just discount it. I ask the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government to remember that there is a science and a very good background to what we have done in the North sea. However, I respect the right of communities to say that they do not want onshore fracking. I also respect the right of communities to say they do not want onshore wind. But let us be frank: it is about nimbyism. They do not want it in their backyards. That is what it is about, rather than a denigration of the science and technology of those sectors.

Deirdre Michie said recently:

“As we move to a lower-carbon economy, the UK needs to meet as much of its domestic demand for oil and gas from indigenous resources”. I would like to thank UK Oil and Gas, Deirdre Michie, the Oil and Gas Authority, the Oil and Gas Technology Centre, and also local organisations and companies that have fed into what we are speaking about. We can see the importance and scope of the industry, which has the potential to produce more than £1 trillion of revenue for the Scottish economy and to all economies of the north-east and the rest of the UK continental shelf. That is absolutely enormous.

The industry has longevity and huge strategic importance. Particularly at these times in the world, when we consider where our energy is coming from, our own gas supplies are of incredible importance and we should be investing in them, if for no other reason than to give us energy security. We must remember that the basin still employs 300,000 people in highly paid and highly technical jobs that drive other areas of research in the economy.

Will the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ensure that we have an energy policy that recognises that, on the Department’s own figures, oil and gas will still provide two thirds of total primary energy by 2035? Oil and gas must be a vital component of that policy, which should consider affordability, security of supply and environmental sustainability.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I assume that the hon. Gentleman also supports the call for an oil and gas sector deal as part of the industrial strategy.

Colin Clark: The hon. Gentleman must have read my speech—ah, there is a camera behind me! Yes, there should also be a sector deal focused on transformational technology, underwater engineering and decommissioning that drives technology with spin-outs to the wider economy. That is so important with regard to STEM subjects alone. It worries me that young people—students and kids who are still at school—say, “Has the oil and gas industry got any future?” One young man said to me that he was going to work in the car industry, building cars with steering wheels. I said, “Nobody will be driving cars with steering wheels.”

My third ask of the Department is to support the high-tech and highly productive supply chain, which has the potential to double its share of the global services market. I ask Departments more broadly to ensure that the UK continental shelf remains fiscally competitive and that we have UK frameworks that strengthen the UK internal market, which is essential to oil and gas.

BEIS has long supported the industry, and we appreciate that one of the Minister’s first visits in her current post was to Aberdeen.

Claire Perry: It was my first visit.
Colin Clark: It was her first visit. She clearly recognises the importance of the sector. Given her unique position, which covers energy and clean growth, I am sure she agrees that natural gas in particular has played a transformational role in reducing greenhouse gases, and I look forward to her continued support.

2.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a delight to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. It is always good to have a debate focused on oil and gas; we have not had enough of them recently. I am also delighted to be in Westminster Hall—I feel like I have not been here for some time—and I am thankful for the air conditioning, which is incredibly useful today.

I will not spend an awful lot of time disagreeing with my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), because I agree with most of what he said, but I will start with a slight disagreement about helicopters. I agree with what the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said about people’s nervousness. We and the companies involved ask people to undertake dangerous helicopter journeys just to go to work. In conversations with Airbus and other organisations involved with the helicopters, I have said, “It is not me you have to convince that the aircraft are safe; it is the people who are asked to fly on them.” To do that, those organisations need to have as many conversations and answer as many questions as possible. That is the only way they will possibly regain the confidence of people in the industry.

Alex Cunningham: On that basis, does the hon. Lady support my call for a public inquiry so that we have full transparency about exactly what happened and what is being done to rebuild confidence in particular models, which are still yet to come back into service?

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s question. To be perfectly honest, I am not clear that an inquiry is widely called for; an awful lot of information has been published. If lots of individuals from my constituency and from the industry more widely asked me for such an inquiry, I absolutely would look at that. I am not saying no, but that is not something that I would have preferred them to happen more quickly, particularly recognising the issues with infrastructure. I was not involved in the bidding process for the city deal. Working together on that was really important. I am pleased that we got a city deal. Anyone who has read anything I have said about the deal will know that I was unhappy about how low level it was—I would have liked significantly more money for my city, and I am not sure that many people in the north-east of Scotland would disagree—but the process was very beneficial, as was the direction that the city and the shire took. I hope that we keep hold of that.

Colin Clark: The hon. Lady is gracious in giving way. Does she worry that there is a perception that the north-east of Scotland is relatively wealthy and therefore will take care of itself, and that sometimes that affects investment in the region?

Kirsty Blackman: I certainly worry that the city deal that was signed was looked at on a different basis from some other city deals. The Scottish Government have put in significant additional funding to the city deal, particularly recognising the issues with infrastructure. I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman talk about looking at additional infrastructure projects and so on. The Aberdeen western peripheral route will make incredibly positive changes. No one can wait for it to come—I think we are expecting it in the autumn. It will be hugely positive and will make a big difference, and I think that will help encourage people to come to the north-east.

Let me turn to where we are now. Companies are working together like never before. I was at the forefront of calling for changes to transferable tax history, but other parties supported them; the Conservative party was behind the call, too. I very much appreciated the Chancellor making those changes in last year’s Budget. I would have preferred them to happen more quickly, but we cannot have everything. We are looking forward to their implementation later this year. I could not be clearer about how important they are, and I am sure the Government recognise that.

Just for a bit of information, if a big company owns a number of rigs and one of them is nearing the end of its life, the company has a choice: it could put a lot of work, capacity and people into that installation to try to get the maximum out of it, or it could say, “Look, this is not a priority for us. We are focusing on other things.” That is completely understandable, but the transferable tax history allows a new company—a
new player in the market—to take over that asset to ensure that the maximum recovery is made from it. That is really positive, and I am pleased that it has happened. That is a helpful measure in terms of maximum economic recovery, which we are fully behind.

Where are we going? I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Gordon mention Vision 2035, because it is incredibly important and people do not talk about it enough. It is the vision for the future of the Oil and Gas Authority, which so far seems to be doing a good job. It focuses in particular on the north-east of Scotland, but also on the wider industry across the whole of the United Kingdom. Vision 2035 is about ensuring that we get maximum economic recovery, extract oil and gas from the small pools and have a supply chain that is anchored—particularly in the north-east of Scotland—so that once we get to the stage when no oil and gas is coming out of the North sea, everyone will know that the very best supply-chain companies for oil and gas are in the north-east of Scotland and parts of the wider United Kingdom. Then, rather than seeing those companies lifted and based in the US or other countries, they could continue to sell their expertise, with a tax take continuing to come in and be spent here—preferably in Scotland.

We must anchor the supply chain now for the future, and there are a few ways to do that. In relation to small businesses, all too often such businesses in oil and gas come up with a great concept, start working on it, grow the business to a point and then they are sold. I get that that is a way forward for some, but both the Scottish and UK Governments are beginning to ensure that if such companies have the potential to grow, they do not get sold and their concept lost within a bigger international company but can access the finance they need to anchor themselves and have that next step of growth, whether that is through beginning to export or ensuring that their intellectual property is turned into something real that can be sold. That is really important for the supply chain, rather than seeing companies sold on to somebody else who may not pay as much tax here because they are not a wholly owned United Kingdom company.

On maximising economic recovery and exploration, even though we have a super-mature basin we should still be doing exploration; there is more that we can do. I think someone from Statoil said to me, “You’re most likely to find oil and gas somewhere you have already found oil and gas.” We should do exploration in those areas. We have better ways of surveying now than ever before, and of trawling through and understanding the data from that surveying, which will be important going forward. Anything the UK Government can do to ensure that exploration continues, even in a super-mature basin, would be welcome.

Claire Perry: I am really enjoying hearing another perspective from the hon. Lady’s fine city. Could I put on record that I am a little mystified about the Scottish Government’s decision to refuse to allow exploration for gas onshore when we know it is there because it is a geologically identical strata? Ultimately, the same operators would be looking to extract it. We can do it safely and in an environmentally secure manner, because that is what we do in Britain, as we have done demonstrably in the North sea basin. I find that an ideological rather than a practical decision.

Kirsty Blackman: What Governments do in any decision is look for best value—the good things and bad things that would come out of it. The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament decided that fracking will not happen onshore in Scotland, and it is within that Parliament’s rights to take that decision.

Claire Perry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: In a moment.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. The Minister will get a chance to respond to the debate, and I would appreciate it if she would—

Claire Perry: I am trying to keep us awake.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I will send you another bottle of water.

Kirsty Blackman: Thank you, Mr Sharma. In terms of ideological decisions, the onshore wind decision, taken on a blanket basis across the whole United Kingdom, could be applied flexibly to Scotland, and we would very much like that. There would still need to be a planning process, but it would be great if the blanket ban was not there.

Colin Clark: Almost 50% of turbine applications called into Holyrood to the reporter are then given permission. The hon. Lady just said that the Scottish Government have decided not to allow fracking—as I said in my speech, I think it is nimbysim, frankly, but fair enough, because that is their right—but if local communities and local councils say—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is not responsible for the Scottish Government. Rather than directing questions to the Scottish Government through her, it is better to ask her a relevant question.

Colin Clark: Thank you, Mr Sharma. I will keep my question to the hon. Lady. Does she agree that there is a contrast between the two positions? Can one give permission for turbines that people do not necessarily want in their local community when one may not believe in having fracking in Scotland? Perhaps she does believe in having fracking onshore.

Kirsty Blackman: I do not believe in having fracking onshore in Scotland, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would not expect that. The benefits of fracking are not as big as they are made out to be. Were it to be allowed, it would bring very little in the way of jobs or tax take, and the loss to our communities and the upheaval caused in them would be so significant that it would not balance out those jobs and tax take.

I am incredibly pleased to hear the Minister talk so positively about carbon capture and storage. What happened previously in relation to that was a train wreck—it was horrendous. It was awful how the rug was pulled out from under it; I could not be clearer in my condemnation. I recognise that it was not the Minister’s responsibility at the time and I do not blame her in any way for that. I am pleased that she is being so positive.
We need to ensure that, whatever we do on decommissioning decisions and changes to allowances made by the OGA, we do not prejudice future carbon capture and storage opportunities. For example, we should not prematurely decommission a pipeline that could be useful for carbon capture and storage. As we do not yet have a full grasp of what carbon capture and storage technology will look like, it is very difficult for such decisions to be made. However, I ask that whatever is looked at is considered carefully in those terms and that carbon capture and storage is considered when any decommissioning decision is made. Any decision on any of that needs to be made very carefully.

I am also of the opinion that decommissioning, if done right, can bring some jobs and some revenue. However, I do not think it will be the biggest windfall in the entire world. I appreciate the action that the UK Government have taken on decommissioning through the OGA, and I also appreciate what the Scottish Government are doing through the decommissioning challenge fund. All those things are positive.

When I spoke to the Oil and Gas Technology Centre, which I will move on to in a moment, it said something interesting about decommissioning. On some rigs, there is an ability to do enhanced extraction techniques, but it is not possible to do them because of all the stuff on the rig that is doing the current extraction techniques. There is a need for a level of enabling decommissioning; taking off some of the widgets currently on the platform in order to put on new widgets so that the platform can be used to do things, but with different technology on it. There are smart things we can do on decommissioning that will ensure that we have jobs, but also that we have a positive way forward and get the maximum economic recovery out of the North sea.

The issue of STEM, which the hon. Member for Gordon mentioned, is important. I have been concerned as an Aberdonian, feeling the pain and seeing the changes and the negative atmosphere in the city, that we would have a situation in which young people would come through school saying, “No, I don’t want to go into oil and gas,” exactly as he said. The Oil and Gas Technology Centre is encouraging young people to get into STEM. Aberdeen Science Centre is doing similarly, which takes place every autumn. Those are all positive things that are supporting young people into STEM.

We do not have the same problems with the numbers of engineers that the north-east of England does—I have previously been told that it is much more difficult in the north-east of England to find some of the engineering skills that are required, but I could be wrong. That is something we could probably work together on quite positively, sharing the information and the positive things we have been doing on that, to ensure that best practice is shared and lots of people are encouraged into engineering.

As the hon. Member for Gordon said, some of the digitisation skills are important. One of the things I talked about with the Oil and Gas Technology Centre was the transferable skills that people get from studying something such as gaming, with the advanced interfaces they use, and how the virtual reality that can be created from that is incredibly positive and useful.

I have a couple more things to say—I am probably beginning to try your patience, Mr Sharma—and a couple of specific asks for the Minister. First, there is the oil and gas sector deal. I know that she is probably being heavily lobbied on that, but it could not be more important for the industry. We recognise that the Government have been working with the industry on that, and we look forward to that coming through.

Secondly, on the industrial strategy challenge fund, I understand that the bids for wave 3 closed at some point this week. Concern has been raised with me about the length of time the decision-making process will take. That is not so much the time in which funding will come through, but the decision-making process. If no shortlist is created until November, and we are looking at having a shortlist at some point late this year, no decision will be taken until a bit later than that. In reality, the chance that people can employ people and get up and running at the beginning of April next year becomes slimmer and slimmer. The quicker the decision can be taken—not necessarily the quicker the funding can come through—the better for projects being ready to go as soon as possible.

There are a couple more challenges. It is the case that Brexit is a challenge for the industry and that varying suggestions have come out about how much Brexit could cost the industry. I am still concerned about how visas are operating. I do not think the current situation works particularly well. I make a plea for post-study work visas to be brought back for the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University. That would be a huge positive change for us. I know that the pilot took place in three universities in England and has been broadened out slightly, but it still has not come to the two universities in my city, and it would be incredibly positive for our industry.

On another specific offshore industry-type issue, I had a constituent come to me recently who is an EU citizen, but is not eligible to apply for the right to remain because he has spent so much time out of the country working for his oil and gas job that he cannot fulfil the residence requirements. He is a high earner, he pays tax and he is a good contributor to our city, and I am concerned that in these individual cases the Home Office’s policies are obstructive to ensuring that those highly skilled people are able to stay in our city. That is a specific plea.

The centre is doing similarly. Aberdeen Science Centre is encouraging young people into STEM. It is important for the industry. I hope that whatever the Financial Secretary is saying are not the same.

On another specific offshore industry-type issue, I have a constituent who is an EU citizen and is working offshore. He has a specific plea for the oil and gas industry. I have requested a meeting with the Financial Secretary of the Treasury and I hope that will happen in the near future. There is a major issue brewing around customs, because there is something called the shipwork end-use relief that is heavily used by oil and gas operators. Basically, it is a customs relief that occurs for stuff that is going offshore; the stuff is not eligible for the same customs fees that it currently would be, because it is going offshore. I received reassurance from the Financial Secretary that that would continue to be applied post-Brexit, but the action that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is taking contradicts that.

There is a similar issue on manifests. Currently, paper manifests are okay for making a customs declaration, but we are looking at moving to a situation where electronic manifests are required. I understand that is because of changes in EU rules, but post-Brexit, the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Bill is not the same as the EU customs code, so they will possibly be able to revert to paper manifests, but we are not clear. There is an awful lack of clarity around that, and I am concerned that what the Financial Secretary is saying and what HMRC is saying are not the same.
That is becoming really important, because the changes have to be made in the early summer of this year. Companies are gearing up to make changes on the basis of HMRC guidance that is being contradicted by the Financial Secretary. Any assistance that can be given to ensure that those meetings take place and that clarity is given to companies would be incredibly useful.

The industry is in a good place, which is surprising after everything it has been through. There is a positive future. One of the amazing things it is doing is focusing on decarbonisation. That seems a bizarre thing for the oil and gas industry to do, but it has more of a need to do it, and more of a responsibility to do it, because it is the oil and gas industry. I am pleased that that has been written into what the Oil and Gas Technology Centre is doing, and that all the oil and gas companies, working together in ways they never have before, are positive about looking toward decarbonisation.

There is a positive future for the oil and gas industry. We must get it right. We must continue to encourage companies, we must continue to support and work with organisations such as the Oil and Gas Technology Centre and, when industry bodies and companies come to us and say, “This specific issue is a blockage,” we must look at those specific blockages and ensure that we do what we can to get rid of them, listen to industry and make the changes that are required.

2.38 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) on securing the debate, and it is an honour and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

In the last four years, the oil and gas industry in the North sea has come under considerable pressure, and tens of thousands of jobs have been lost. The industry has adapted and, while challenges remain, it continues to be a vital component part of the UK’s economic base. It still supports hundreds of thousands of jobs and delivers more than half the nation’s oil and gas. There are up to 20 billion barrels of oil and gas still to recover, and the UK supply chain continues to be a world leader, with unrivalled experience in maximising economic recovery from a mature base. The industry makes a consistent contribution of around £1 billion per annum in tax revenues, and the wider tax contribution from across the supply chain is immense.

The Vision 2035 document confirms that the extraction of oil and gas on the UKCS is not a sunset industry. It has a vital role to play in adding to the UK’s energy security, ensuring a smooth transition to a low-carbon economy and creating highly skilled jobs that we can take around the world.

I will first provide a short overview on the national outlook, its successes in the face of adversity and the immediate challenges that need to be addressed. I shall then focus on the southern North sea off the East Anglian coast, where there are specific and exciting opportunities, although work is required if their potential is to be fully realised for the benefit of both the local and national economies.
That will continue as the driving investment programme is delivered. However, while Government policy is supportive, member of decisions by HMRC—the hon. Member for Aberdeen North touched on—have been taken without full and proper consideration of the impact on the oil and gas industry.

A particular example, as the hon. Lady mentioned, is HMRC’s decision in January to end long-standing exemptions for shipwork end-use relief from July of this year. For the oil and gas sector, this exemption—known as CIP33—provides relief from customs duties for equipment that is destined to be used in offshore installations, such as spare parts. The decision was taken at short notice, with no consultation with the industry.

**Kirsty Blackman:** The other thing that particularly concerned me about this was that I received a letter from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury that directly contradicts the decision taken by HMRC, which confused the issue further. The two appear to be giving totally different guidelines on this. It would be great to have clarity.

**Peter Aldous:** I thank the hon. Lady for reinforcing that point. It is difficult to attract investment, and the Government have worked very hard to make this basin one of the most attractive in the world to invest in, but these sort of noises coming out of HMRC reverberate around the world. A solution needs to be found very quickly.

While much of the industry’s focus in recent decades has been on Scotland, when exploration started on the UKCS in 1960s it did so in the southern North sea. That area is now on the verge of a renaissance, with the opportunity of reinventing itself as an all-energy basin, which, with the right policies in place, can play a significant role in the UK’s future energy strategy.

The southern North sea is at a critical juncture. For more than 50 years, the basin has developed and delivered strong gas production through a diverse network of offshore platforms, pipelines and onshore terminals. The basin has been well exploited, and the opportunity to identify and develop large, landmark discoveries is increasingly limited. There is potential with both marginal pools and tight gas, but they are increasingly expensive and complex to access, the technical and commercial risks are high and opportunities can often be quickly disregarded as uneconomic.

The challenge for the southern North sea is now to search for innovative business and technical solutions. This challenge is made more difficult by depressed commodity prices, aging infrastructure and increasing unit transportation costs, as production from existing developments continues to decline. The selection of projects is based on their ability to have a big impact, their prospect of success and the potential to achieve it within a reasonable timescale.

There are currently five priorities in the southern North sea. The first is to realise the full potential of decommissioning opportunities for the benefit of the East Anglian region, which I will come on to in more detail in a moment. The second is to unlock potential tight gas developments. The third is to realise the full potential of the synergies between renewables and oil and gas. The fourth, in the light of Brexit, is to find the best way to work across borders with the Dutch sector. The final one is to minimise production losses due to salting.

It is estimated that 40 platforms in the southern North sea are to be decommissioned by 2022; as I said, it is the oldest part of the basin. That business is worth several billion pounds, with significant job safeguarding and enormous earnings potential for the East Anglian region. However, there is a real and present danger that we will lose much of that work to our European neighbours, where port infrastructures have received investment from their Governments.

East Anglia does not have a level playing field on which to compete with our main competitors in the southern North sea—as I said, on the other side of the sea. Locally, the councils, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership and other supporting agencies, such as the East of England Energy Group, stand ready to support the industry, but there is a need for central Government to get involved and back them if we are to realise for the region the full potential of that significant opportunity.

We need a decommissioning challenge fund similar to that in Scotland, to help to establish a cluster of expertise, as is happening in Dundee with the Tay cities deal. We need to have an aspirational UK local content policy, as already happens with offshore wind. That would help to ensure a return to UK plc, as the Government are already funding between 50% and 75% of UK decommissioning. It would focus operators’ attention on using the local supply chain and would help to support the supply chain action plans that have recently been introduced for decommissioning projects. As I said, EEGR is willing—it is indeed eager—to lead and to host a taskforce to spearhead that initiative. It would be match-funded by other local agencies, although it would need funding from central Government to establish and then help to maintain it.

The other opportunity in the southern North sea with exciting potential is closer collaboration and working between the oil and gas, offshore wind and offshore transmission sectors. If that can be achieved, a significant contribution can be made to addressing the UK’s ongoing energy trilemma of keeping costs to consumers affordable, ensuring security of supply and smoothing the transition to a low-carbon economy. We need to integrate energy production activities—for example, in respect of oil, gas and electricity—and share common infrastructure for distributing energy. Doing that will achieve significant economic benefits. The co-location of gas-powered electricity generation with gas production hubs would help to maximise the economic recovery from gas fields. The better utilisation of common infrastructure would improve the economic value of both the associated renewable and the hydrocarbon production assets. Collaboration between those sectors is slowly improving and could be accelerated by facilitating and enabling Government policies.

Two main issues are inhibiting more effective collaboration between the sectors. First, the regulatory regimes are quite separate; some of the regulators are not used to working together and they have different policy objectives. Secondly, cross-sector collaboration is not incentivised, as Government policy is highly sectorised.

A possible starting point for improving the situation and promoting cross-sector collaboration would be consideration of the UKCS as an energy basin, rather
than a series of separate energy sectors. That integration could be the specific responsibility of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, albeit delivered through parties such as the OGA, National Grid, Ofgem and the Planning Inspectorate.

The three sectors would also benefit from incentives to work more collaboratively. Sector deals provide an opportunity to make it more attractive for the different sectors to work together, at both the developmental and the operational stages. That could include financial support for cross-sector innovation, improved regulatory cohesion, facilitating the movement of workforce skills between the sectors, and research and development. It may well be that a pilot could be set up for such innovative cross-sector working in the North sea. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss that with my right hon. Friend the Minister, along with industry representatives.

During the past 50 years, oil and gas extraction on the UKCS has brought enormous benefits to the UK. It has created hundreds of thousands of well-paid, highly skilled jobs, attracted significant inward investment from all over the globe and provided a huge annual dividend to the Exchequer. The past four years have probably been the most difficult in the basin’s life, yet notwithstanding a great deal of pain and personal anguish, it has come through this tough period in better shape than could reasonably have been hoped for and is ready to continue to play a full and leading role in the post-Brexit economy.

Since 2012, the Government have given the industry a very fair hearing and backed it, both fiscally and with the creation of the Oil and Gas Authority. Exciting opportunities lie ahead. It is important that the spirit of co-operation in the oil and gas supply chain continues, improves and, as I have outlined, extends to cross-sector working. It is said that if you go to any oil and gas basin around the world, you will hear Scottish, Geordie, Suffolk and Norfolk accents. We must ensure that that continues for at least 50 or—dare I say it?—100 more years.

2.55 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) for securing this important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

Before I was elected to this place last year, I myself spent 25 years working in the oil and gas industry, as many of our constituents still do. This is still a hugely significant sector for employment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon mentioned. It still employs 300,000 people around the UK. Many of those people, from around the UK and, indeed, the rest of the world, have made their home in north-east Scotland. As a result, even with the downturn in recent years, unemployment in that part of the country is still very low, at about 1.2%. That sometimes creates an issue for businesses and industries in general when they wish to expand, but for local society it is a nice problem to have.

Many people rightly think of Aberdeen as the oil capital of Europe. I spent the best part of 10 years of my career working in Aberdeen—most of which while living there, but some while commuting from my hometown of Turriff, 35 miles away, where I grew up and where I returned to live after working overseas in the oil and gas industry in the countries of Azerbaijan and Angola. That illustrates the global nature of this industry and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney finished by saying, reminding the world of the expertise that this country still has to offer and will continue to offer is very important.

Many people still commute to Aberdeen from around north-east Scotland. They commute from major towns in my constituency—Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Banff, Macduff and my own town of Turriff—as well as from everywhere in-between. In some cases, people travel up to 50 miles from around north-east Scotland to Aberdeen. Of course, in many occupations, which are often office or desk-based, there can be the opportunity to work from home—a practice that is becoming more and more common, but which often relies on a dependable broadband signal: sadly, not always available in rural north-east Scotland or elsewhere around the country.

The idea of working from home has traditionally seemed strange or been difficult for some people to get their head around. The same thing applies to much of the “new” technology mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon. In many cases, the technology itself is not particularly new; what has taken longer to change is the culture and behaviours required to get the most out of the technology.

For example, the technology to operate sophisticated offshore installations from onshore has existed since the Forties field came on-stream in the mid-1970s. In fact, it was originally designed to be run from onshore, but that was never quite made to work. Only in recent years has that technology been made to work practically and effectively. That illustrates the recent developments and the developments that we hope to see in the near future.

The oil and gas industry is a major employer in Banff and Buchan, as is the supply chain that supports it. Peterhead is famous as a fishing port, of course; hon. Members have no doubt heard me mention that many times before. However, it is also a major supply port for offshore oil and gas. The Forties oil pipeline, supplying 30% of the UK’s oil, comes ashore at Cruden Bay in my constituency. Also in my constituency is the St Fergus gas terminal, through which 25% of the UK’s gas is received. North sea gas also supplies the power station in Peterhead.

Peterhead power station was a proposed site for the development of carbon capture and storage, but of course one of the many reasons why that was, unfortunately, abandoned, was the absence of surrounding infrastructure. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Stockton North is not here to intervene at this point, because Teesside has the surrounding infrastructure that we do not necessarily have in north-east Scotland, unfortunately.

Peterhead is also the location of the Score Group headquarters. Score Group is one of the largest employers in my constituency—across the north-east of Scotland, indeed. It consists of 20 different companies across five continents and is one of the biggest employers of apprentices in the whole of Scotland.
The future of the oil and gas industry is positive, as many hon. Members have said, but there needs to be flexibility and openness to change. The Government have supported that, which I commend. Transferable tax history was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon. That was a great good-news story from last year’s Budget and shows how important it is that we continue to speak up for the oil and gas industry.

It is also great to see support for decommissioning, which is a growth industry with huge potential. As my hon. Friend mentioned, it is like the original installation to begin with, but in reverse. It is like manufacturing: the biggest and most expensive part of it is in the design and strategising. However, we do not need to go looking for the raw material. It is there and we know where it is. It is a great opportunity for Aberdeen, the north-east and the UK in general to become known as a global centre of excellence for decommissioning. I was pleased to hear Maersk recently announce that it is establishing a new, dedicated decommissioning company, with offices in Aberdeen, to make the most of the opportunities our North sea assets provide. That could be a great boost for the Aberdeenshire economy, with close to £40 billion in decommissioning projects up for grabs over the next eight years.

While decommissioning opportunities are inevitable from the more than 400 fields that have ceased—or will cease—production, the industry is far from dead. For example, I found out yesterday that 27% of BP’s new exploration is taking place in the North sea. I formerly worked for BP and I remember a time when BP felt that it was looking for the least expensive basins around the world to operate in. It had the economies of scale to be able to do that at a large scale. However, BP also always described the North sea and the UKCS as a whole as its own backyard. It is great to see it coming back. Unit operating costs have reduced significantly since 2014 from $30 a barrel equivalent to around $15 in 2017.

The UKCS is still one of the most expensive basins in the world to operate. However, investors and the industry are relatively comfortable investing in North sea oil and gas for other reasons, such as security, stability and access to some of the best, brightest and experienced talent in the industry. Other hon. Members have mentioned other aspects that make this basin more attractive to invest in and how we should make it as attractive as possible.

The Oil and Gas Technology Centre, partly funded by the Aberdeen city and region growth deal, is a great example of how the industry is coming together, not only to fix the inefficiencies and maximise recovery, but to transform the industry for tomorrow. Last year £37 million was co-invested in industry-led projects by the OGTC, with £22 million of that coming from industry partners—more than three times what had been originally expected when the OGTC was set up. Much of that contribution from industry partners has been in kind, as well as direct cash funding. The industry has provided resources such as personnel, as well as access to rigs and platforms for the important field trials to test and optimise the new technology.

The partnership between OGTC, Oil and Gas UK and the OGA—all of which have been mentioned—as well as the different operators and suppliers in the industry, would have been almost unthinkable not that long ago, in my experience. Since the recent downturn, the industry has experienced a modest, yet encouraging recovery, but the industry has been forced to look inwards and across, including across sectors such as renewables, which my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney mentioned. In my experience, there was always a need for greater collaboration across the industry and sectors. I am glad to say that this is becoming more evident.

I hope that mistakes made in previous recovery phases from previous downturn cycles are not repeated. Too often, we have not gone beyond seeing the green shoots, but when we are actually back in full recovery mode and the pendulum has swung right back to the triple-figure oil prices, we have gone back to the same old inefficient behaviours. Again, we are seeing more evidence that through recent collaboration and Government support, there is a lot less chance of that happening.

Partnering with the industry and bodies such as Oil and Gas UK and the OGA, the OGTC is looking to use the latest technology to transform the oil and gas industry for our low-carbon future. I would like to see the Government do all they can to support this transformation for tomorrow. I understand that the OGTC applied for the industrial strategy challenge fund, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, as recently as yesterday. As she mentioned, we hear that decisions on that are not due until November, but I take this opportunity to encourage the Minister to look closely at what it is proposing and accelerate that decision, if at all possible. Even if only a decision of additional funding can be made well in advance of the funding being made available, it would allow planning and budgeting to take place in the nearer term.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the contribution of North sea oil and gas to our economy is not a spent force. Oil and Gas UK has predicted that hydrocarbons will still be providing two-thirds of the total primary energy by 2035. It represents a huge economic opportunity for the UK, particularly in Scotland, but requires industry and Governments to work together to foster the partnership and collaboration I have mentioned, and in many ways continue to develop new and innovative ways of thinking, not just new technology.

Finally, it should be noted—it has been already—that hydrocarbon exploitation is not just about providing energy, although that is an important factor. The UK Government are doing great work in reducing the amount of single-use plastic that the nation uses, but we still have a need for oil and gas as a feedstock for multi-use plastics in the foreseeable future.

3.6 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. There have been only three speeches by Back Benchers and several interventions by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). Perhaps it would have been better if more people could have been here to participate; I suspect that the fact that it is Thursday afternoon has something to do with it. However, the good thing is that that has allowed much more informed speeches to be delivered, without time constraints. That is to the benefit of what we have heard today. I never seem to get the luxury of speaking from the Back Bench without a time limit and not having to use my red pen.
First, we heard from the hon. Member for Gordon. There was not much that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and I would disagree with. Typically for a Westminster Hall debate, everybody spoke in unison about the importance of this sector and its bright future. However, I do not think the hon. Member for Gordon had to defend himself for using the phrase “the north-east”. He should not have to stand up and clarify that he meant the north-east of Scotland. If he wants to call it the north-east, he should stick with that and not defend himself.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the skills gap and the need for training, so I am sure he will welcome the fact that the Scottish National party provided an apprenticeship guarantee while the industry was going through a hard time, as well as a £12.5 billion innovation fund. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North both mentioned the issue that people leaving school and looking into future careers might be concerned about moving into the industry. I echo what they said: there needs to be a drive for the educational understanding that there is still a bright future—an engineering future, with actual opportunities. That is true not just in the UK, but in other countries, as we heard from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who undertook employment abroad and saw the different cultures and experiences that that brings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North and I disagree with the hon. Member for Gordon on fracking. I also clearly support the SNP Government’s taking the decision to ban fracking. It must be remembered that it was done on a cross-party basis. The Labour party and the Lib Dem party support it, and on a wider basis the Green party supports it as well. The hon. Gentleman said that our position is nimbyism, but I would suggest that it is not. The fracking ban has widespread public support in Scotland, and lobby groups elsewhere in the UK would like to see fracking banned. That is before it comes to their doorsteps, if it even does, so that is not nimbyism—it is about people who have concerns about fracking.

I understand that there are some similarities between fracking and the technologies used in the offshore oil industry, as the Minister highlighted, but they are not completely the same; I got a briefing paper from the Library when a constituent raised concerns about why we were banning fracking while still allowing offshore extraction. There are differences. The modern fracking technology was developed from 1999 onwards in Texas—that shows it is different from the offshore technology; they were developed at different times. Interestingly, it was developed in Texas, but Texas has now banned fracking. That tells us that there are widespread concerns across the world. The Minister said this is ideological, but it is not. The Scottish Government took an evidence-based decision, and they stand by it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North agreed with most things that the hon. Member for Gordon said. She highlighted that one aspect we have seen with the dip in the oil price is that the fat in the system has been trimmed out, and that that needs to be captured. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan touched on that as well, while also speaking about the work of the Oil and Gas Technology Centre.

My hon. Friend, like other hon. Members, highlighted the importance of Vision 2035 and of allowing developing companies to grow further and to retain their expertise and investment in the UK, rather than being sold off. That is a very important point. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) spoke about resilience in the supply chain. Helping these companies to grow would clearly help the supply chain and the industry’s sustainability.

My hon. Friend finished with what she said were a couple of asks of the Minister. I am a wee bit concerned that, as our economy spokesman, she miscounted the number of asks. It was more than couple! I counted that she asked for: support for a sector deal for the oil and gas industry, which every other hon. Member mentioned; the challenge fund decision; post-study work visas; and consideration of the right to stay regarding the residence of some people who are working abroad. She also highlighted the issue with customs. I think that was more than two asks, but I support her in them.

The hon. Member for Waveney said that there are still half a billion barrels to recover. He highlighted the importance of Vision 2035, and that there has been a drop in development drilling. We need to ensure that picks up for the future. He supported the sector deal and understandably focused on the East Anglian coast and what he called the “southern North sea”. It was a thoughtful contribution regarding the possible collaboration between the different sectors—oil and gas, offshore wind and transmission—and the co-location for generation. That should certainly be looked at. I like the concept of seeing that area as an energy basin and a resource. I would support that.

It was good to hear that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan has experience of working in the industry. There is nothing better than parliamentarians who can share expertise and insider knowledge of an industry to help to do policy development in a more informed manner. He touched on Peterhead power station in his constituency and said that one of the issues with the carbon capture scheme was not having the surrounding infrastructure. To me, that suggests a policy deficiency. Allowing the development of a potential carbon capture and storage scheme in that location and then pulling the plug without getting to the end, capturing the knowledge and developing the technology that could be applied elsewhere, is a weakness of the Government. They should reflect on that. He highlighted the benefits of not returning to inefficient working practices. I am sure the industry wants to ensure it does not do that.

As other hon. Members have said, there is no doubt that oil and gas has been a success story for both Scotland and the wider UK. There has been a long history with onshore oil. It was first discovered and extracted in Scotland in 1851. Then in 1896, England discovered natural gas. I would just like to point out...
that, yet again, Scotland was ahead of the curve when it came to hydrocarbons. In fact, fracking was invented in Scotland. Towards the end of the 19th century, fracking was used to extract natural gas from the Firth of Forth; but that is a bit further in the light and changed our ways, and I support the Scottish Government’s ban.

I will concentrate my remarks on the offshore oil industry in the North sea and Aberdeen area. It has been developed since the 1960s and has been a great success story, which has turned Aberdeen into a global city. It has provided well-paid careers for people and has allowed many, such as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, to seek adventures and opportunities abroad. It has also allowed Scottish and UK companies to develop their expertise here and then move abroad. They then develop that expertise abroad, which channels money and resources back to the UK.

The oil and gas industry has been so successful that it has generated approximately £330 billion in production tax alone for the UK Treasury. However, at this point I will bring a bit more negativity to the debate. Some of that money has been better used. We do not have the legacy from it that we should. Aberdeen’s infrastructure is a case in point.

My hon. Friend mentioned the construction of the western bypass. That could have been done years ago. We could have channelled some of this money into that years ago. If I was to start with a blank sheet of paper and plan how to exploit the natural resources of the North sea using Aberdeen as a hub, a motorway network extending to Aberdeen would be built. That is money going to the Treasury that could be spent better. I am sure that Members from the north-east of England would say the same. The motorway network up the north-east of England took too long to develop. Meanwhile, while oil was generating significant money, we built the channel tunnel to France and a high-speed rail link from London to the channel tunnel. Yet the infrastructure in the north of England and in Scotland was sadly lacking. There was a deficiency, with the money going to the Treasury but not being distributed across the UK.

We should also have had an oil fund. The answer to that request has been a consistent no from the UK Government. Yet Norway’s oil fund, which was started in only 1990, sits at £780 billion. That is a fantastic legacy. Norway is also using and investing it wisely. It has the highest proportion of electric vehicles in Europe. It has invested massively in the renewables sector. It is decarbonising the economy while still wisely managing its oil and gas resources. That is forward planning that the UK Government could still do. We need to look at that.

Colin Clark: The hon. Gentleman has to recognise that the population of Norway is 3 million, 4 million or 5 million people. He also has to recognise that the economy is significantly smaller. The whole of the United Kingdom—the different parts of it—has benefited from the moneys that we have made from the North sea. Those have been invested, predominantly economically, and have paid for the downturns while the British economy was not doing so well. I think that it is a bit unfair to make that contrast. Blessed Norway has almost twice the reserves that we have, so there is a contrast in terms of population and investment.

Alan Brown: I will come to the management of the downturn, but I think the hon. Gentleman has helped to make the case for an independent Scotland, so I thank him for that. I was not going there; I would not have touched on an independent Scotland, but I thank him. I still stand by the fact that, in my opinion, the money was going to the UK Treasury and was not distributed to the areas that were generating the wealth.

Interestingly, when it comes to fracking, in 2015 the UK Government promised a shale wealth fund of up to £1 billion for the north of England where fracking is proposed. Perhaps that is a lesson learned. It reinforces the omission of not setting up an oil fund for the benefit particularly of Scotland and other areas of the UK that extract oil and gas.

In Scotland we became used over the years to the scare stories about oil running out before yet again we discovered new oilfields. If we want to talk about not seeing it as a stopgap measure, we obviously need to watch how politicians talk about oil reserves. I certainly appreciate that everyone in this room has been very positive about the reserves that are there, the amount that could still be extracted and the future of the industry. However, other politicians sometimes try to exploit the concept that oil is running out, and we need to be careful about that.

David Duguid: It should be recognised, as I tried to point out in my speech, that it is fair to say that the easiest oil and gas low-hanging fruit to get has been got. There is a future for oil and gas, but, as I said, we cannot use the same behaviours and technologies as before, which is why it is important for Governments and industry to pursue the developments in technology and changes in behaviour required in future to exploit what is left, which is not so easy to get as what came before.

Alan Brown: I do not disagree. Clearly, the industry has shown a lot of innovation over the years and will continue to do so, and obviously it needs to do so to get additional extraction. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North gave the example of partial decommissioning to allow the technology to be input for enhanced extraction. That is something that industry is looking at now, and I am sure it will continue to innovate.

We know that prices can be volatile; we have had to deal with that over the years. Oil bottomed out at just under $12 a barrel in 1997 before rising rapidly to $91 a barrel by 2008. That was under a UK Labour Government. If I go back to legacy issues, I wonder what happened with that money, because there was no way oil projections at that time were going to be based on the oil price increasing dramatically. It was such a windfall with that massive increase in price, but I do not think we have seen the benefits of that, either.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan about managing the downturn, we have been consistently told that we need the broad shoulders of the UK, but if we look at the support that the UK Government have implemented in the past few years, the spring 2016 Budget reduced the supplementary charge by 10%, which was a welcome measure. The Red Book predicted that that would cost £1 billion, and yet nearly three times that was given away in inheritance tax to millionaires. That shows skewed priorities.
3.26 pm

[Alan Brown]

In the spring 2017 Budget, there was nothing specific for the oil and gas industry, except one paragraph promising another discussion paper. However, it did confirm the lowering of corporation tax. Despite what everybody says about how it grows the economy and creates more tax, the Red Book predicted that that would cost the Treasury £24 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament. That was the Government’s Treasury prediction. Let us think what could be done with that £24 billion in terms of infrastructure investment or additional support for the oil and gas industry. In my opinion, it was a lost opportunity.

In the November 2017 Budget, a measure was introduced: transferable tax history. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North said, that was genuinely welcome. It is predicted to bring an additional £70 million in revenue to the Treasury, so it was not a difficult decision. That decision supports industry, but it helps the Treasury, so it should have been taken long before. We are still awaiting the appointment of the oil and gas ambassador first promised by David Cameron in January 2016, so the Government really need to provide additional support for the industry.

Yesterday I raised this matter in the debate on industrial strategy. The oil and gas sector deal has been supported by every colleague here today, but I was disappointed that the ministerial response from the Despatch Box yesterday never mentioned the oil and gas industry or Scotland and did not pick up on the point that I had made, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). I hope today’s Minister will respond. I am sure she is working on the oil and gas sector deal and is positive about it, but it would be good to have that confirmation.

I must repeat my disappointment about the pulling of the CCS fund. That must be a lesson for the Government going forward because it scared the industry and scares away other people trying to make private investment. Again, the Minister has spoken positively about the future of CCS, so it would be good to hear her reinforce that when she sums up.

I appreciate time is moving on, Mr Sharma, so I will try to hurry up, but I want to mention another renewable energy project that has been developed at Grangemouth and would support the Grangemouth refinery: the Grangemouth renewable energy project, which has been successful in the CfD auction. Because it contains biomass, the whole premise of the project is based on securing renewable heat incentive funding as well. The UK Government are looking at retrospectively capping the amount of RHI funding available to projects to 250GWh. That would put the Grangemouth renewable energy project at risk, so I urge the Minister to reconsider, because the project is so innovative. It is a world leader, it would support the Grangemouth refinery, and it could develop industry for export and help grow the UK economy.

We have heard some impressive contributions. All have concluded that the oil and gas industry has a bright future, and I certainly echo that. I look forward to hearing the Government’s response.

3.26 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I concur with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) on securing the debate, which has been informed and thoughtful, with excellent contributions. Although we have had a not overwhelming turnout this afternoon, as the Minister reminded me on a previous occasion, there are still two speeches to go, so I hope that my contribution will be up there with those who have already spoken this afternoon.

On where the oil and gas industry is right now, I heartily concur with hon. Members that the outlook at the moment looks much better than had been thought possible a few years ago. Indeed, looking at Oil and Gas UK’s “Business Outlook” for 2018, there are substantially more greens and yellows than there have been for a long time, particularly in relation to production, new field approvals, liquids production, capital expenditure and so on. That is a credit to the way in which the industry has cut its costs, increased its efficiency and got itself much better organised in terms of what will be a very different future for the UK continental shelf than has been the case in the past. That change in approach heralds a brighter future not only for 2018, but for a longer period, because of the change in approach. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) reminded us, the circumstances will not be characterised by, to put it bluntly, hoping for another Brent find.

The future is going to be different. It is, as the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, going to be about looking at small pools, at how exploration can advance without there being a bonanza of new fields, and at consolidation of what already exists. As the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan reminded us, it is also a question of decommissioning, and how thoughtfully we go about the process. Oil and gas is not an industry where we can just talk about various spending estimates—£35 billion, £50 billion, or whatever. There is a question of decommissioning in such a way that the process for the possible future exploitation of small pools is maintained, rather than taking all the infrastructure away and feeling bad when it comes to getting on with things subsequently because, lo and behold, the infrastructure that could help is gone. The emergence of the OGA and the success that it has already had is an important element in getting some of those issues right for the future, with a greater sense of co-ordination and understanding within the process in the next period.

In other circumstances I might have said that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North had stolen a lot of what I was thinking of saying, but I know it is a coincidence because anyone who knows my office will also know that I am the only person who knows where my notes are, among the huge pile of papers. Nevertheless, she has articulated many of the themes that I wanted to talk about, particularly how we can ensure that the UK continental shelf has a bright future not just because of oil and gas but beyond them. That includes what we are doing to ensure that carbon capture and storage can be advanced. I believe that could happen in the UKCS, not just with a UK repository but also possibly, in the future, a European one. That would also mean being very careful about what was done in decommissioning, to facilitate rather than downgrade that future industry.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous)—I keep wanting to call him my hon. Friend, but convention in this place does not quite allow me to go that far—made a thoughtful contribution. He will know from the various
Committees and other bodies that we have both been on that the opportunity for carbon capture and storage in different forms of gas use has the potential to be important for the future of the UKCS. His suggestion that we can see the UKCS as an entity for energy as a whole was an important thought, and I hope that we shall pursue it. Indeed, my actual hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned that there are other practical things to be done by way of decommissioning to produce not just opportunity but infrastructure for industries of the future in the North sea.

I want to give the hon. Member for Gordon an assurance. I do not think it was deliberate, but he chanced on a characterisation of some of those who consider the climate change debate to be an imperative in considering the future of oil and gas in the North sea—that those people would suggest that oil and gas should not have a bright future there. That is not the case. I regard the climate change imperative as encompassing all that we do in connection with energy, as I think does the Minister. However, that does not mean there is not a long-term need for oil or gas; there is a need for both. The question is not whether we have the need, but what we do with the stuff once we have got it, and what sort of responsibility we take for its subsequent use.

An example, which the hon. Member for Waveney will well recall, is the future arrangements that we might have for decarbonising the gas system. One way might be to develop a hydrogen gas economy—a green gas economy—for heating our homes. The cheapest and most efficient way to produce the necessary hydrogen would be through a steam methane reforming system, and that of course needs gas. We can envisage circumstances in which we would take gas from the North sea and make hydrogen from it—possibly in the Teesside cluster that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North described—and, to make sure that it would be climate-efficient, the process would need CCS as well. The carbon captured in the hydrogen-making process would be put back into the North sea repositories, which would have been saved by efficiency in the decommissioning process. By a variety of devices, we could have different ways of using what we had to secure a bright future for the North sea, but it would not necessarily be the bright future that we envisaged hitherto.

It is important to be clear about our intentions for what we extract from the North sea—that what we use should be domestically sourced as far as possible. That would be good news for the UK as a whole, but we would also have the wider responsibility of the climate change imperative behind us. We need to think through what we will do with our North sea products and, on that basis, how we shall sustain the industries that have served the UK so well in the past 40 years or so. I am not one of those who says, “The North sea is finished; it is a mature basin.” There is quite a lot more to get out of that basin. We must do that in rather different ways, with rather different responsibilities, but provided we take that approach the bright future for the North sea and the oil and gas industry there is assured. I hope that we can work together on achieving that in the coming years.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I also thank the members of the Backbench Business Committee and its Clerks, who have provided us with an opportunity for an excellent debate. I agree that this was a quality debate, not a quantity one, and perhaps if we had more of those we should all be the better for it. I heartily congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark)—and he is a friend—on securing the debate, and on an exemplary speech. It was thoughtful, detailed, clear and extremely well informed. Clearly he and other hon. Members in the Chamber have a strong constituency interest, and we debate the issue frequently because we are all passionate about the oil and gas industry and agree about the great value that it brings to the local and national economies.

I asked for and was able to keep the oil and gas brief when I became the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth because I think it is an integral part of the transition to a lower-carbon economy, as well as an enormous provider of productive employment and benefits to the economy, historically and in the future. It was striking to hear the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who perfectly combines those two interests, given his chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for renewable and sustainable energy and his frequent strong support for the industry.

We also heard excellent speeches from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who cares passionately about the issue and speaks up for it frequently; from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who I was delighted to hear, because it is always wonderful to hear from somebody who actually knows what they are talking about—we all know what we are talking about, but some of us know more than others—from the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who gave a typically doughty defence of Scottish independence and managed to slip in some telling points that I will respond to; and from the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who I seem to spend a lot of time debating such matters with.

I will not detain hon. Members too long, because it is a lovely sunny afternoon, but I will make a couple of important points. I and the Government fully recognise the importance of the industry to the UK, historically, currently and in the future. It has been an enormous provider of revenue to the Treasury, of centres of excellence in terms of innovation, and of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

It is striking that in the past few years, we have stopped talking about the industry as a declining force, and started to talk again about the opportunities for it in the North sea and other areas. We have now realised that we can integrate those fuels into a lower-carbon economy. There are also incredible opportunities, such as decommissioning, which we in the UK can own as the world faces the same questions about the future of the industry.

There are encouraging estimates of what is left. Vision 2035 has led industry to say that there are between 10 billion and 20 billion barrels of oil equivalent left in the continental shelf, which could be worth up to £1 trillion. If we continue to responsibly explore and extract those hydrocarbons, use them in the most economically effective and responsible way, and work on decarbonisation, there is a great opportunity for north-east Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.
The challenge of the security of supply has been interesting in the past few months. The beast from the east, the changes to storage facilities in the UK and the discussions about diplomatic relations with other major gas-producing nations have led to conversations about the security of supply that we have not heard in the past few years.

In fact, indigenous gas production meets 46% of our gas demand and contributes to the balance of trade. We are clear that we have robust gas security for the future, but we may be able to increase the effective extraction of gas from the UK. I do not want to make the debate about hydraulic extraction, but I am convinced that we must soberly test the science, as we are doing through the exploratory phase, to understand the size of the opportunity and whether it can be extracted, not in a wild west, Texan sense—that is not how we do business in the North sea base or anywhere else—but in the most environmentally responsible manner in the world. We want to test that. We have to be clear that that makes an important contribution to our energy security and our future economic prosperity.

As has been mentioned, I jumped on a plane as soon as I could and went straight up to Aberdeen—I did not drive up the motorway network, because it was not there, and it would have been a long way from Devizes even if it was. Aberdeen is a wonderful city and an amazing place to visit. Looking at the productivity map of the UK, the contribution that fishing, originally, and now this extraction have delivered is clear.

It was heartening to sit down with people from the Oil and Gas Technology Centre at the Oil and Gas Authority and talk to them about what they have been through. It has been a very tough time. They would say that they perhaps took decisions a little hastily—unfortunately, there have been job losses in the local economy—but as a result of going through that trial, the industry is in a better place than ever. It has the resilience to face any future changes in oil prices and an understanding of what it needs to do to build a more sustainable supply chain, and the co-investment that is coming together around the technology institute is very exciting.

It was also heartening to talk to the people from the OGTC about operational decisions, such as how they pulled together through the Forties pipeline interruption to deliver that back on stream more quickly. Of course they will always be competing, but the recognition of what co-working can mean is incredibly impressive.

The OGA has been a driving force for that. I pay tribute to its work, and to that of the offshore petroleum regulator for environment and decommissioning, which places the UK CS in the top quartile globally in terms of post-tax returns.

In total, the Government have provided £2.3 billion of fiscal support to the sector so far. We also committed another £40 million for new seismic acquisition, which has been managed by the OGA, and we co-funded the Oil and Gas Technology Centre through the Aberdeen city deal. I echo the point that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North made about that; it was a brilliant example of co-working. When we put aside our national, local and political boundaries, it is incredible what we can deliver in local areas. That has been a real success.

In response to the debate, I will announce three further things. First, I understand the comments about an ultra-deep water port, which we talked about in our manifesto. We are immediately commissioning a UK-wide scoping study, which will work closely with my Scottish Government counterparts, because they have kicked off a piece of work in Scotland and we want to ensure that we incorporate it. It is important that we look across the UK. If we can get an ultra-deep water port that is economically effective, it could have a material impact on our ability to attract decommissioning business.

Secondly, not for the first time, I listened with concern to the issues about helicopter safety. I understand that it is the only way for people to commute to work, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said. I will write to the Civil Aviation Authority to ask it for reassurance that the measures it introduced on helicopter safety are the only way for people to commute to work, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon said. I will write to the Civil Aviation Authority to ask it for reassurance that the measures it introduced on helicopter safety are working, and for what further assurances it can give.

Thirdly, on the issue that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North and others raised about customs treatment, I will write to our colleagues in the Treasury and to the industry and to all hon. Members present by the end of the month, so there can be no lack of clarity about what is required.

We have talked a lot about the industrial strategy. Trevor Garlick has done a fantastic job in getting the sector together and pulling together a series of interesting proposals. As I have said before, we must not define a Government’s willingness to work with an industry on the basis of there being a big-bang sector deal landing on people’s desks. Much of the financial and fiscal
support that we have given to the sector is part of a broader sector partnership that we are committed to taking forward. However, there are some very interesting specific proposals in the deal. One that strikes me is for the decommissioning opportunity, which I am very keen to explore quickly and to bring forward. The House has my commitment that we will do that.

I believe we all share the view that environmentally rigorous extraction of oil and more particularly gas, and the use of that fuel, absolutely has a place in our low-carbon transitions. Our current assumptions are that we will continue to use gas. I understand the question of carbon capture and storage; we have debated it before and I will not run through the debate again. I will only say that we now have private sector partners with very deep pockets who are prepared collectively to invest in that technology through the oil and gas climate initiative; we did not have such partners before.

We also understand that we not only need to decarbonise generation; we also have to put that work within a cluster, so that dealing with industrial emissions can be put into the same infrastructure and framework. There are only five places in the world where CCS plants associated with generation are running purely on subsidy alone, which is effectively what we have been asking for. The other 16 places rely on enhanced oil recovery as a revenue source. Even the Norwegians, who have the sovereign wealth fund that we have talked about, find it very difficult to get pure subsidy for CCS through their Parliament. That is why I have set up the carbon capture council, which is headed by the best brains, including some of our friends from north of the border, to try to work out how we improve the technology in a cost-effective way. What is the irreducible core of cost and risk that Government have to take in order to move this technology forward?

The CCS cost reduction task force is specifically looking at cost reduction proposals and also committed £100 million for innovation, because without that we also think carefully about how we use this fuel in a low-carbon economy, and make the appropriate investments in the future. And once again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon for raising this matter in the House.

I have described it as being down to the last drop—but that we also think carefully about how we use this fuel in a low-carbon economy, and make the appropriate investments in the future. And once again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon for raising this matter in the House.

3.53 pm

Colin Clark: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman, for calling me to wind up.

I am delighted that a few of us managed to come along on such a hot day; usually, in anything above 10°C, the Scots melt. We have managed to hold things together today.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) spoke about helicopters, as did the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and I was glad to hear what the Minister said about that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) realises the longevity of hydrocarbons, which is important to his constituency and to many of our constituencies.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North also discussed the city region deal, which has been very important, and the Oil and Gas Authority, which has been very successful to date. We also spoke about carbon capture and storage opportunities. And she is quite right that we have to be very strategic about the infrastructure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) spoke strongly for the opportunities in the southern North sea, and as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the offshore oil and gas industry, he is living proof that this is a national industry.

Back in the days when my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) had a real job in the oil and gas industry, he made a contribution to the industry, and Banff and Buchan, where so much of the oil and gas is brought on shore, also makes a real contribution.

I very much appreciate the support for the industry from the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, from the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), and from the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who spoke for Her Majesty’s official Opposition. I am glad of the support for domestic production of oil and gas, which can be part of the solution for protecting the environment.

Also, I thank the Minister for her input to and support for the industry in her dual role for energy and clean growth; it is tremendous that oil and gas are part of her responsibility. We must be clear that we can protect the environment while developing hydrocarbons.

The oil and gas industry is growing, it needs inward investment and I appreciate the support both of the Government and of Members here. It has been a great pleasure working under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma; thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK oil and gas industry.

3.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Privatisation of NHS Services

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 205106 relating to the privatisation of NHS services.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I pay tribute to a young constituent of mine, Connor McDade, whose father, John, is a friend and a former work colleague. Connor was run over in Newcastle last weekend, but despite the most excellent care provided by NHS staff in the critical care unit at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, his life support was switched off yesterday. On 14 May, he would have been 22. He passed in the early hours of this morning. The standard of care delivered by staff at the RVI was second to none, so it is fitting that I pay tribute to them and all hard-working NHS staff at the beginning of my speech.

Privatisation in the NHS is not new. When the NHS was founded in 1948, agreements had to be thrashed out with GPs, doctors and consultants to allow private practice to continue and sit alongside the new national health service. Private healthcare insurance has been around for longer than the NHS. The British United Provident Association—BUPA—was founded in 1947, and it currently has about 15.5 million health insurance customers and 14.5 million people in its private clinics and hospitals.

The NHS itself has always had a private treatment offer, although between 1974 and 1976, Barbara Castle, the Labour Secretary of State for Social Services, campaigned to abolish pay beds in the NHS. That was achieved after her tenure in 1977, but the Tories repealed it three years later in the Health Services Act 1980. On abolishing pay beds and separating out private and NHS facilities, Mrs Castle said:

“The existence of pay beds, with the opportunity it gives to a few senior doctors to make private gain and the opportunity it gives to patients with money to jump the queue, is seen as a bitter affront to those thousands of other staff who are dedicated to the principle of a free Health Service.”—[Official Report, 21 November 1975; Vol. 901, c. 355.]

Tens of thousands of health workers, citizens and patients would echo that opinion today. It is also the opinion of the British Medical Association, which believes that the NHS should always be free at the point of use and have given Conservative Health Ministers, including the Secretary of State, the opportunity to talk to me on a number of occasions about Virgin Care’s many failings, some of which were very dangerous, but they have never taken up that opportunity. Does my hon. Friend share my concern?

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Many Members know that I worked in the NHS for more than 10 years. That service was privatised and taken on by Virgin Care, which destroyed it. What concerns me is that I have given Conservative Health Ministers, including the Secretary of State, the opportunity to talk to me on a number of occasions about Virgin Care’s many failings, some of which were very dangerous, but they have never taken up that opportunity. Does my hon. Friend share my concern?

Mike Hill: I certainly do share my hon. Friend’s concern. Ironically, in my patch, sexual health services are delivered by Virgin doctors.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Is it not the case, as the two previous examples show, that we are not comparing like with like? The supposed savings are actually achieved by an immediate reduction in service or by the service becoming unviable, which means that the Government have to pick up the pieces. If anything goes wrong with a private healthcare operation, the patient has to go into the national health service, which has to bear the burden.

Mike Hill: I entirely agree. The forecasts for the next three years indicate that £10 billion-worth of NHS work will go to the private sector.

A settlement reported to be in the region of £330,000 was paid to Virgin Care in December 2017, following a procurement process in which an alliance between a foundation trust and local social enterprises won a contract to provide children’s services across Surrey. Such interventions and the ability of private companies to challenge NHS procurement provisions are precisely why there are fears about the transatlantic trade and investment partnership—a proposed trade agreement between the European Union and the United States. Many fear that our separate post-Brexit trade agreements with the United States will mean that NHS services will be exposed to the competition and might of the American private care market.
Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Hundreds of my constituents in Crewe and Nantwich signed this petition because they want their Government to put people before profit. Fourteen hospital trusts have had to trigger emergency contingency plans and delay hospital building because of the collapse of Carillion earlier this year. Given that Capita’s annual losses are rocketing, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s response shows that they remain dangerously obsessed with privatisation in our NHS?

Mike Hill: I agree. As I said, it is estimated that, over the next three years, up to £10 billion-worth of NHS contracts will go to the private sector, including the provider that my hon. Friend mentions.

Are such fears irrational or are people right to be concerned about the privatisation of NHS services, given the fact that the influence of private healthcare providers has risen sharply in recent decades? The use of the private sector has been progressed by successive Governments over many years. The present Government blame Labour for introducing private finance initiatives, which they say have burdened the NHS with eye-watering debts, but the Government compounded the problem through PF2. They also blame Labour for opening up the NHS to marketisation by splitting primary care trusts into commissioning and provider arms, and introducing the concept of “any preferred provider” in its transforming community services programme, even though the Secretary of State at the time, Andy Burnham, expressly stated that the NHS would always be the preferred provider of services. Yet from 2010 onwards this Government extended that model, creating clinical commissioning groups and pursuing competition and commercialisation with renewed vigour. Today, therefore, many traditional public health services are run by private providers such as Virgin Care and GP consortiums in their own right—services such as out-of-hours urgent care, sexual health and mental health residential care.

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 was designed to bring in a far greater private sector element to the NHS through expansion of the internal market. Since then, the privatisation picture has been more mixed than had been feared, not only as a result of campaigns by Unison, the GMB and others, but because various Government initiatives to boost privatisation fell flat. Unison, the GMB and others, but because various Government initiatives to boost privatisation fell flat. However, there is still significant evidence of increasing privatisation, with companies such as Virgin, Serco and Spire continuing to prosper.

John Spellar: My hon. Friend mentioned the care sector. Is there not a fundamental flaw in that sector, because it is based on offshore location of ownership of the assets and on heavy leveraging and gearing of the companies? That has meant that many of them are on the brink of bankruptcy, and they seek either to be bailed out or to throw many thousands of very vulnerable and elderly people straight back to the Department of Health and Social Care. The Government have no real plan, as far as we can see, to deal with such a contingency.

Mike Hill: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case for how it is wrong in principle to privatisethe national health service, and he has alluded to the major risks the fact that private sector provision sometimes fails—the business fails—so there is a complete and, in the short term, irreplaceable loss of capacity in the healthcare categories catered for by such a company?

Mike Hill: I am on my last two paragraphs, but I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way? I know he has just said, “One more time”, but perhaps he will make it two.

Mike Hill: I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned such issues, and dementia in particular—mental health care needs to be looked at for investment.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He has made a powerful case for how it is wrong in principle to privatisethe national health service, and he has alluded to the major risks the fact that private sector provision sometimes fails—the business fails—so there is a complete and, in the short term, irreplaceable loss of capacity in the healthcare categories catered for by such a company?

Mike Hill: I cannot disagree with such a well made point.

The impact of austerity has been a double-edged sword, according to the union Unison. On one hand, less money can be made from the NHS, so some firms have shrunk away. On the other hand, the NHS has opted increasingly for short-term fixes as it struggles with insufficient funding, and that has created opportunities for the private sector. For example, the Carter review includes the threat that hospitals that cannot make sufficient savings in their support services or pathology functions might have to use outsourcing instead. Most recently, the development of wholly owned subsidiary companies has brought a whole new set of fears for the NHS, and for health staff in particular.

The old fears from the 1980s and 1990s are beginning to resurface. When we add social care into the mix, those fears multiply. The NHS is one of our proudest achievements, and we need to protect it, not privatisethe. To do so, we need to revoke section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act.

4.44 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this important debate, Sir Graham.

Let me say at the outset that I very much support our national health service, paid for out of taxation and available for all at the point of need, irrespective of the
ability to pay. The NHS saved my life when I was 24—it was there for me when I needed it, and I always want to be there to defend it for all those who will need it.

I have the privilege of serving on the Select Committee on Health and Social Care. Given that advantage, because some of these issues have come up recently at our evidence sessions, I want to quote some of what people who know an awful lot about the NHS have said about the alleged privatisation of the NHS, and particularly about sustainability and transformation plans, which the Government are rightly introducing to give us proper, integrated place-based care.

Simon Stevens is the chief executive of NHS England, and on 20 March he gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee. In particular, he responded to some of the claims made by Professor Allyson Pollock. I have met her only the once, when she came to give evidence before the Committee, but I have no doubt that Professor Pollock is sincere about what she believes. Members, however, should listen with an open mind to what Simon Stevens—first appointed to a senior position on Health and Social Care Committee. In particular, he responded to some of the claims made by Professor Allyson Pollock.

Talking about some of the comments made recently about the issue, he went straight on:

“Having had a chance to look at some of the evidence that you received from one of the panels of activists”—

Professor Pollock—

“I have to say that, frankly, some of the claims that were being made are made year in, year out, almost regardless of what is happening in the national health service. Indeed, I came across an article talking about how the NHS was being turned into an American health system, which it is not.

The article talks about the fact that the Government’s reforms are going to ‘move the NHS towards an insurance model,’ where ‘primary care groups could sound the death knell of equity, universal coverage and care free at the point of need in the NHS.’ That privatisation and Americanisation article was written 20 years ago by Allyson Pollock. Then I see in the British Medical Journal in 2001 an article by Allyson entitled, ‘Will primary care trusts lead to US-style health care?’ The answer is no, and they did not. We look forward to 2010 and see another article from the same author saying that the NHS in England is to be dismantled, and instead healthcare will be run on US healthcare lines. That is not true.

We see a subsequent article saying that Brexit is in fact going to lead to the destruction of health as a human right in this country. We see the really curious claim that ‘the Health and Social Care Act 2012 abolished and dismantled the NHS in England.’ The million patients who are being looked after by their GPs, in A&Es or as hospital outpatients, let alone the 1.3 million staff who are working in the NHS today, will find it a curious claim that the NHS was in fact abolished four years ago.”

I am grateful to Simon Stevens for giving us a bit of historical perspective on some of those claims, which have been doing the rounds for 20 years or more.

Let us move on to some respected, independent observers of the health scene. Those who follow health will probably agree that one of the most respected is Professor Chris Ham of the King’s Fund. On 6 March he said to the Health and Social Care Committee:

“If you look at what is happening in the partnerships—places such as Salford, Northumbria, Wolverhampton, Yeovil and south Somerset—there is absolutely no evidence of privatisation. These are public sector partnerships based on collaboration between NHS and local government organisations working around their populations and places.”

Mike Selous: I am not aware of where exactly that income came from. The Royal Marsden is a world-leading hospital; perhaps some of that was from foreign patients who had come to the United Kingdom and would not have been entitled to NHS care.

Professor Chris Ham of the King’s Fund went on to say:

“In some of these areas”—

sustainability and transformation plan areas—“we are actually seeing previously privatised services coming back in-house.”

I will not quote any more from that session of the Committee, but Nigel Edwards of the Nuffield Trust and Professor Katherine Checkland, a professor of health policy and primary care, gave evidence—much respected, independent witnesses who also agreed with Professor Chris Ham.

I have to say to Opposition Members that a number of Labour MPs have a slightly different take from some of the remarks that have been made today. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who serves with me on the Committee and is a former Health Minister, said in question 24 of our session on 27 February:

“The other advocates of these integrated models are not just people such as Chris Ham”—

of the King’s Fund, who I have just spoken about—“but people we have spoken to on the ground, trying to deliver a service for their local population. First, it helps them overcome the purchase-provider split, which has already been referred to, and, secondly, it makes it less likely that they are going to be private contracting.”

A lot of the accusations have been around for a long time. It is important that we look at what happened to those previous accusations: did they have a basis in fact? Often, that was not the case. Let us just be fair, because to me, STPs are about taking a sensible approach to integrated place-based care to join up health and social care and to get the world-class health service that we all want to see.

4.52 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the petition and the petitioners for instigating a very worthwhile debate.

I will speak briefly, because I know that many Members want to speak, about fragmentation, accountability, privatisation, and how the NHS in Lancashire is going
backwards. We will hear from across the United Kingdom—or certainly England—about the fragmentation of the NHS. It is not providing the services that patients expect.

The Health and Social Care Act was introduced in 2012. It was a top-down reorganisation, although it was promised that it would not be, that cost £3 billion and has caused chaos in Lancashire. That was a promise made by David Cameron that he broke. It has fragmented the NHS: we have lost accountability, we have opened the door to privatisation and we have reintroduced the purchaser-provider competition, which has been mentioned. In the 1990s, that was implemented in social care—it failed, and there was a U-turn.

In Lancashire, we have the high-profile case of Virgin Care’s £104 million contract signed by the Conservative Lancashire County Council, which has been blocked by a High Court judge for reasons of “considerable cost and disruption.” We are seeing the fragmentation of our NHS through the desire to privatise and move towards the purchaser-provider model. There has also been the removal of the Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust from Calderstones. The trust has been involved in taking up contracts and being relieved of contracts. The Walton jail mental health service unit is in crisis. It is an important service because we are trying to tackle the issue of mental ill health, yet there is a significant problem at Walton jail. Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust picked up the contract from somebody else, but it is struggling; it is underfunded, and the provider keeps changing. That fragmentation is having an impact on those who require these services.

At Calderstones, there was a very large mental health unit on the fringes of my constituency—in fact, it was just inside the constituency of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans). The unit was rebuilt in 2007, costing £11 million, to provide a cutting-edge mental health service. It was rated “good” by the Care Quality Commission, but it was closed in 2016. How can the £11 million Calderstones unit, which was rated good and moving towards outstanding, be closed in this age and only nine years after that refurbishment? Calderstones Partnership NHS Foundation Trust itself will cease to exist, to be replaced by the Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, which will provide services. One service provider is being swapped for another. We are not getting continuity, and there are problems in NHS services, particularly mental health services, in my area.

The public want to say no to the Health and Social Care Act—do they not like these changes. GPs were told that they would hold budgets; I will come to that, but first I want to talk briefly about STPs. Again, there is little democratic involvement; the changes are being ushered in across the north-west and across Lancashire.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions what the public want; is he aware that a slight majority of the public are in favour of third-party private providers providing care in the health service, as long as they demonstrate better value for money?

Graham P. Jones: I think the public are primarily concerned not with better value for money but with better healthcare, and they are not getting it.

Paula Sherriff: Going back to my hon. Friend’s point about fragmentation, the service I worked in had pathways to the acute trust, so that if somebody came to us with something that looked malignant, we could refer them to the acute trust and the patient would have an appointment within two weeks. When Virgin took over the service, there was no aspiration or desire from the people at the top to create those pathways, so the patient had to go back to the bottom of the waiting list. Ultimately, it is a lose-lose situation for patients.

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point and states the case well. My caseload of NHS issues is rising, and often they are about the gaps in service because of that fragmentation. Sometimes it is about poor service, or privatised services that are not providing what people once received when they were under the NHS. It is a complete disaster for my constituents. I have yet to meet a constituent who says that the changes since 2012 have improved the health service and are for the better. Everyone who comes to me—from all parties, of all types and from all walks of life—says exactly the opposite. The fragmentation, the lack of accountability and the cuts need to be looked at again. Healthcare inflation is outstripping the money going into the NHS, resulting in cuts and the STPs.

We are getting a different provider model for our local walk-in centres—it is starting to be swapped again. Our centre is a much-valued service but it is being closed, despite 23,000 people signing a petition. Its 42,000 patient visits will be transferred somewhere else—perhaps off to the second busiest A&E in the country. At the same time as all the fragmentation and chaos, we found out this week that in Clitheroe, the out-of-hours GP service is about to be closed, with patients being told to go to Accrington.

The fragmentation of our NHS is a complete and utter disaster. We are trying to outsource and privatise services or shift them to another trust and shuffle them around to try to save some money, but that will not save money. A patient visit at Blackburn A&E costs £120; it costs £60 at the walk-in centre. The change is a false economy. We shift more patients at the walk-in centre, but it is going to close. Where in all this is a system that is not fragmented, that is holistic and that thinks about the patient and puts them first? I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool: it is about time that we revoked section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act.

4.59 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate. It is important to get the facts out in the open and to ensure that erroneous arguments about the use of third-party companies in the NHS are put in context and understood. It is also important that the 1.3 million people who work in our NHS are assured that they will continue to do so and that they are not about to work for a private company.

We have all turned to the NHS for help at one time or another, and I think it is safe to say that we are all proud of our doctors, nurses and community carers. However, our healthcare system, which is regularly rated the best in the world, will have to adapt as we all demand more
from its services. This change may include the use of third-party companies—they are already used to build their hospitals and sometimes to transport patients, or in key services such as dentistry and GP practices—all of which are private.

The NHS faces significant challenges. In tackling them, we must adopt a collaborative approach among all sectors to ensure that patient outcomes remain the driving force and that the health service remains a patient-first system. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary recognises that better integration of health, social care and community care services is a big part of improving our health system. If we achieve more integration, we will improve services, save money and reduce some of the fragmentation that was referred to, which is a function not of who runs the service but of how the system is designed.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady not recognise that if parts of the service are in competition with one another for their financial survival, it is very difficult to integrate them and that that causes fragmentation?

Gillian Keegan: I recognise that as a challenge. It is not just competition but organisational ownership—organisations sometimes want to control things themselves. We certainly saw that in West Sussex when we tried to put together two public sector pieces under an accountable care organisation. At the moment, we are going to have to find a different model to do that. That is not to do with finances or competition, although that can occur; it is to do with the will of the leadership to work in a more collaborative way. I accept that we face many challenges in the future that we must go towards.

Integration has a worthwhile prize: improved services that are delivered more effectively. When I served as a governor at my local hospital, St Richard’s, I saw at first hand acute beds being occupied by patients who, in medical terms, were perfectly fit for discharge but who still needed care. There were not sufficient community care services for patients to be discharged to. That situation would be exacerbated if private community bed options were removed as a result of petitions such as the one we are debating.

It has been the ambition of all major political parties to implement a modern health model that is fit for purpose and fully integrates community and acute care, but I think we can all agree that, despite our best intentions, that is easier said than done, for some of the reasons we have discussed. It is like someone trying to change the tyres on a car while they are driving—it is difficult because the system is operating.

In my constituency, we have capitalised on the support offered by this Government, such as the public health grant and the better care fund. West Sussex County Council is working on preventive action. Chichester is home to one of seven wellbeing hubs across the county. That hub, which is run by the district council, supports people one to one to reduce their risk of developing diseases such as heart disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes through sustained lifestyle changes. It helps people to lose weight, to be more active and to develop techniques to reduce their risk of falling, to name but a few things. Those services are provided in conjunction with local community and voluntary organisations, and with third-party companies, which provide a wealth of different expertise.

More than one quarter of my constituents are over 65; so adequate social care integration is vital. West Sussex County Council, in partnership with Coastal West Sussex CCG, has connected local authorities, GPs, voluntary and community sector partners, third-party companies, primary care services and our community foundation trust to form two local community networks. That list spells out some of the complexity there is even today, with many services delivered through the public sector. Those networks divide the more populated south, where there is a city, and the more rural areas in the north, recognising that needs are different in each locality. A social prescribing project has been formed as part of that work: a team of community referrers will be co-located in GP practices across the district to find community-based solutions to non-clinical issues.

The charitable sector is heavily involved in the delivery of many of our healthcare services. I recently visited the Sussex Snowdrop Trust, which works with children who have life-threatening illnesses and is funded in part by the NHS and in part by charitable donations. Its nurses give specialised care at home and teach parents how to care for their seriously ill children. The impact of its work is clear, and we should not underestimate the importance of working with such specialist community partners. The corporate structure of those partners is less relevant than the importance of the work they do. The Government have set out not only to better integrate the entire healthcare system but to allow local commissioners to dictate health provision to suit their populations. In cases such as the Sussex Snowdrop Trust, which provides specialist local services to a very small and specific portion of the population, the outsourcing funding model is effective and provides an invaluable service to families.

I fully support the work that is being done by local authorities in Chichester. They have already put plans in place to tailor services to different parts of the population—rural and urban—with different needs, and to focus on prevention and adult social care, in line with the Government’s five year forward view. Those changes are long overdue and will take time to bear fruit, but they are key to achieving a truly integrated health service. Being overly prescriptive about who can be involved in delivering services would limit options as we move towards integrating health and social care, using technology more widely and placing a bigger emphasis on preventive treatment, much of which will be new. It is important that the right level of patient care is delivered quickly and efficiently, and that it is free to all citizens who need to rely on our wonderful health service.

5.7 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on bringing the petition forward for debate.

I thank the 237,462 individuals who signed the petition and gave us the opportunity to raise the issue of NHS privatisation, which is important for many of my constituents. I know that the same is true for all Members present. The petition was signed by 442 of my constituents,
and I was proud to join 200 of them outside Warrington Hospital in February to protest against NHS privatisation. The level of public concern about this issue shows just how important the NHS is to our country and its citizens.

The NHS is our most sacred and treasured institution. It was founded 70 years ago on the fundamental principle that everyone is entitled to free healthcare, and it does not discriminate on the basis of wealth, gender or race—it does so only on the basis of need. Every day, thousands of lives are saved by NHS staff at NHS hospitals, and we are extremely grateful for their extraordinarily hard work. The Government have a duty to protect the NHS and its staff, and to ensure that they can continue to provide world-class healthcare to the British public, free at the point of use.

We all use the NHS, and we all have a vested interest in ensuring that it is run effectively and efficiently, but let us be clear: privatisation and outsourcing do not do that.

Privatisation forces NHS hospitals to outsource vital services to private companies, which are often more interested in making a profit than helping sick people. That is a fundamental conflict of interest. The NHS has a duty to its patients, whereas private companies have a duty to their shareholders, but shareholders care about profits, and often the only way to make a profit is by cutting corners. That compromises the quality of care.

The Government claim that private sector outsourcing is good for the NHS and that it allows patients access to treatments based on the best quality of care and value for money.

Paula Sherriff: My experience is that we used to offer one-stop surgery shops, so that when patients came in they could have minor surgery on the same day. We were stopped from doing that. Patients had to come in on two occasions, and we were told explicitly by the management of Virgin Care that it was because it generated two tariffs, and made more profit. I should be interested to hear the view of those who defend the privatisation of healthcare about that.

Faisal Rashid: That supports my point, and is a great example.

The Government view of outsourcing does not reflect the reality of privatisation. Did patients receive the best quality of care from the private firm Circle when it took over management of Hinchingbrooke Hospital in 2012, making it the first privately run NHS hospital, only to withdraw from its contract two years later after it was placed in special measures by the Care Quality Commission because it had found serious failings in its emergency and medical care services? What about the 2013 Public Accounts Committee report on Serco’s running of GP out-of-hours care in Cornwall, which accused the private company of bullying employees, providing a short-staffed and substandard service, and manipulating data to hide the truth? Were patients receiving the best quality of care then? What about the imposition of financial penalties on the same company by NHS commissioners in Suffolk in 2014, after it missed key targets in its community health services contract? In 2012 Haroni, a private provider of NHS out-of-hours GP services, having put in place an aggressive cost-cutting agenda, faced allegations from senior doctors that its service in London was so short-staffed that its patients were unsafe. I could recount many more examples of failed healthcare privatisation, but we do not have time.

The Government also claim that outsourcing allows the NHS to save money, but that is not necessarily true. The process by which private companies bid for contracts allows them effectively to cherry-pick the most profitable forms of treatment—usually low-risk elective surgeries. That allows the private sector to benefit from the predictable, and usually low, cost. That is far from providing the best quality of care for patients.

Why, then, do the Government insist on continued NHS privatisation? Since 2010, under successive Conservative-led Governments, the private sector’s involvement in NHS services has more than doubled. Evidence shows that that has seldom made the situation any better for staff or patients. The NHS is in crisis. Chronic underfunding compounded by a growing and ageing population has put an unbearable strain on the NHS and resulted last year in yet another winter crisis. My local NHS Trust, the Warrington and Halton Hospitals Trust, is on track for a forecast financial deficit of £16.8 million, and in December 2017 only 73.8% of A&E patients were seen within four hours, which is well below the target. Yet the Government’s only answer to the crisis is more privatisation.

Let me review the facts. Privatisation is bad for quality, budgets and the NHS. More privatisation is not going to help the NHS. The only way to help it is to give it the funding that it needs and that it has been telling us it needs. If we truly love the NHS, we will stop privatisation.

5.15 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con):Perhaps we should start with what we agree on, which seems to me fundamental for all of us in Parliament: the NHS is more precious than perhaps any institution except our monarchy and democracy. We all agree that it is and should remain a public institution available to everyone, no matter what they earn, and free at the point of delivery. We absolutely agree on those tenets of the NHS and the health services that our constituents benefit from. However, there are also things that we disagree on.

I suggest that the debate has frankly more to do with imminent local elections in London and elsewhere than with the health of the national health service. It is at least the fourth time in my short eight years in Parliament that the left, or some of the left, have tried to weaponise the NHS. When I hear Labour MPs talking as the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) did about the “dismantling” of the NHS, I say to them that if the Conservatives had ever intended to privatisethe NHS it would have been done by now, for the Conservatives have been the party of government for much longer than Labour since 1948. Secondly, privatisation of the NHS has never been in a Conservative manifesto. I defy any Opposition Member to find a single Conservative Member of Parliament who would want it, although it is normally possible to find one MP to sign up to most things. There is a challenge to Labour MPs, and particularly to those new ones who have known only the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as their leader. If anyone really believes that real privatisation is
anything more than a fantasy threat, I ask them please to go and find a single Member of Parliament from the Conservative party Back Benches who would support it.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have huge respect for the hon. Gentleman and have come to admire him over the years, but clearly he has not visited a hospital lately and seen privatised portering services, privatised catering services, privatised nurses being provided by privatised banks, privatised doctors being provided by privatised agencies, and patients being delivered by privatised hospital car services. I suggest he should pop down to Ealing Hospital while it is still standing. I will show him the true horror of privatisation. It is prevalent, endemic and everywhere.

Richard Graham: That is an interesting point, but the hon. Gentleman may not be aware that I volunteer in my local hospital, and have done for the past eight years. I have not only seen porters in action; I have worked alongside them—and ditto for a variety of wards. The situation he paints about what goes on in Ealing is completely different from what happens at the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital in my constituency, where those services are carried out by employees of the NHS—and will continue to be, whether they are in a subsidiary company or not—effectively and well. I pay tribute to all four of the NHS trusts in my constituency, one of which, Gloucestershire Care Services, received a good rating, alongside the already highly rated 

gather mental health trust. I shall put that issue to one side, but the hon. Gentleman is a distinguished Member of the House and knows better than to scaremonger about privatisation. Real privatisation is what happens in America, as he knows. It does not exist here in the United Kingdom.

The narrative today is, I am afraid, about scaremongering, with the favourite Labour bogeyman, privatisation, to the fore. There is one sentence from the petition that in a sense gives it away:

"Companies should not be profiteering from NHS contracts".

The logic of that is that every single provider of equipment or services to the NHS, from pencils to EpiPens to imaging machinery to software, should do so at a loss. They should not. It is crucial that businesses make profits, invest and innovate for the future, reduce paperwork, increase scientific solutions to all sorts of difficult health issues and improve the life chances of our constituents. The opposite logic, of businesses making no money at all and going bankrupt, and the state trying to do everything, has been tested to death—literally—in both Russia and China. If Opposition Members, as socialists, want to understand why China has been so successful, I commend to them joining my all-party parliamentary China group, to visit China and understand what socialism with Chinese characteristics looks like and means.

Graham P. Jones: I hope the hon. Gentleman takes up the opportunity to visit Ealing Hospital. He argues that this is not the USA, but that is not the point being made. Of course the current NHS is not the US healthcare model. Does he accept that we are not privatising purchasers with insurance policies, as in America, but that what is happening in the United Kingdom is the fragmentation and privatisation of providers? That is the issue we are discussing. Does he agree?

Richard Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. That is part of an issue that he is certainly keen to discuss, and part of what is in the petition.

The point I was going to make, which is relevant to that, is that there is a difference between sensible, profitable and innovative businesses and profiteering. There has been, in my view, one clear example of profiteering taking place in the NHS since 1948. It came with the private finance initiative policy during the new Labour period of Blair and Brown, which brought capital into the NHS that was off balance sheet and not recorded in the public finances, at exorbitant cost. It saddled hospitals around our country with interest rates that they could not afford to pay back, and it was the Conservative-led coalition Government who did what was legally possible, although not as much as any of us in this House would wish, to dismantle those contracts.

I think I am right in saying that we took out about £2 billion of costs a year by renegotiating the PFI contracts that could be renegotiated—somebody may know the precise figure. Opposition Members, some of whom were here at that time, should be ashamed of their complete responsibility for introducing the only obvious example of profiteering that has happened in the NHS since it was created.

Paula Sherriff: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is attempting to remove the architect of privatisation within the NHS, who I understand was Sir John Major. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about PFI; there have been some arrangements where it is difficult to argue that value for money is being achieved. But we must remember history, and it was Sir John Major who introduced the PFI scheme.

Richard Graham: I am happy for the hon. Lady to correct the record on John Major’s introducing PFI, but the point about PFI and all private financing is that the devil is in the detail. The principle of bringing private finance into the public sector is fundamentally a good one and approved of by, I think, all major parties. I am afraid that what went wrong during the 13 years of new Labour, as she knows and has implicitly agreed, was rampant exploitation of the NHS, with public servants signing agreements that frankly should never have been signed.

That is in the past—the fairly recent past, but the past. We have moved on since then. Since the petition was written, other things have also moved on. The most important is the issue of pay, with the Government committing several billion pounds from taxpayers to give 1.1 million NHS staff significantly higher pay over the next three years. I think we all strongly applaud what has happened—we know what an enormous job the NHS does in all our constituencies.

I will briefly raise what matters more in the longer term about the NHS, a subject that this petition could have tackled. The real issue is the long-term funding of the NHS. As a nation, we cannot lurch from year to year with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care effectively giving cap in hand to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for more cash to bail out the NHS. We need a longer-term, agreed basis on which to fund the NHS; I suggest at least five and ideally 10 years, so that everyone can plan ahead on what is needed to fund our NHS, with cross-party consensus. That way, never again
can we face a situation in a general election of leaflets saying, “24 hours to save the NHS”. It is an old bogeyman that we must do away with.

I believe that the only effective way to do that is by bringing in equal contributions from the self-employed as well as the employed, and from those still generating income over a certain limit in retirement, through a dedicated source of funds or a hypothecated fund. The most obvious of those is national insurance, which does not really insure anybody for anything. It should be renamed the NHS fund. I put that proposal to our party before the last general election; understandably, there was not really enough time for it to be seriously considered. It would be a major change of direction and one not entered into lightly. There would be huge challenges with it. For example, what would we do in times of high unemployment, such as 2008 to 2010? Could the Budget effectively top up the NHS fund in such times?

That is why I am so pleased that the King’s Fund is researching that very issue now—would it be possible to have a hypothecated fund to fund the NHS? Would national insurance be a good starting point? What sorts of hazards and potential would that throw up? The King’s Fund report will be an important guide to hon. Members on both sides of the House about whether we have a hypothecated fund to fund the NHS? Would it effectively top up the NHS fund in such times?

I intend to make a brief speech that is really only about subsidiary companies, because that is particularly apposite in Gloucestershire. However, I make one rejoinder: we actually defeated the PFI deal in Gloucester. We were offered one, but I thought it was very bad value for money, and I was one of those who spoke out against it. I think we did the right thing. We now have two fit-for-purpose hospitals, even though to get to this stage we have had to go down a pretty rocky road.

I will devote my comments to the setting up of a subsidiary company in Gloucestershire, about which the hon. Member for Gloucester made an aside. It was something I opposed, because I felt that it was the wrong direction to go in. More than anything, I felt very strongly that it was not properly scrutinised. It is the only time I know of when there has been a major change in the structure of our hospital provision in Gloucestershire, including to staffing, and the public and their representatives—including the health and care overview and scrutiny committee, which was effectively told to take its nose out of its interest in the change—have been excluded from the consultation.

The big change is that up to 700 members of staff will be taken out; there is an argument about exactly how many. I have met the chair and the chief executive of the trust, and I know why they have done it. It is about money and about trying to make good the real funding shortfall that has affected us in Gloucestershire because of the deficit that we have built up over quite a long period of time, and which we at least have to be seen to be talking about.

I will concentrate on a number of issues. I hope the Minister listens, because I will ask him several questions specifically about where we will go as a result of the changes. I resent the fact that representatives from Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust are going around the country as snake oil salespeople and telling trusts how they can save money. I and other Members have asked parliamentary questions on this subject, and my first question to the Minister is this. Can we have it on the record that the setting up of subsidiary companies will not be financed by some sort of VAT exemption? That is where the proposal initially came from. Although I have had assurances from the NHS, the Health team and the Treasury, the message does not seem to have gone back to those who still propose the idea. Can we have it on the record that there will be no VAT opportunities because of these new so-called subsidiary companies, in Gloucestershire and elsewhere in the country?

The second point I will look at is where the benefit of this change will be. I would have liked to see the full business case, but we were precluded from seeing it. We saw, dare I say it, a fairly anodyne version that looked as though it was all things to all people, but that did not really say how the change would be better—initially for the staff but also for the people of Gloucestershire—given that a large number of staff who worked for the hospitals trust are now in a different company.

Does the change preclude tendering? One of the advantages sold to the staff was that they would not have to face any tendering, because they would join a subsidiary company that was part of the NHS but that was necessarily different from the NHS because of the changed terms and conditions. My second question to the Minister is: is that fair, or could this company at some future date be passed over—I will not say sold on...
My worry is that we— the proverbial we— have sold people an idea that they can get more money now and it will not affect their future prospects, yet we know from what has been suggested that it will have an impact on pensions. I know we do not have an NHS pension scheme any more; there is a series of NHS pension schemes, some of which are much more generous than others. However, it seems that those who are now in a subsidiary company must end up with a worse scheme, because how can they have a 15% pay increase and the same pension provision as those in existing pension schemes? It is the same for job protection and some other elements of the way in which the NHS looks after its workforce. I know the Minister is a fair person—we have discussed things privately—but I genuinely do not understand how this will all add up.

I worry that we are offering people something in the short run that may be beneficial and may get them out of working in supermarkets and into working in the NHS—that is a good thing—but, worryingly, they may come out of working in the care sector to work in the NHS, and that will not solve our problem. Our problem is that there are a lot of staff who are underpaid and very mobile, and we need those people to be brought into the NHS, to stay with the NHS and to be secure in the NHS.

My last point is one that I am, if you like, quizzical about. Gloucestershire’s sustainability and transformation plan, which has now been published, was seen as the overarching way in which our NHS would develop. However, all these changes, including the merging of two trusts—a mental health and learning disability trust and a community trust—and the setting up of the subsidiary company, happened in advance of the implementation of the STP. What is the point of the STP if many of the changes have already been made? It would help me if I am talking to my constituents, who feel quite worried about what is going on, to know what these things genuinely mean and what they will result in. At the moment there are a lot of questions but very few answers.

I do not want to see fragmentation. We can make the argument about privatisation, but fragmentation weakens the bond that the NHS is about. It is the national health service, delivered free at the point of delivery. We do not want to see that eroded. We should have had a full-blown consultation so that these questions could have been asked, not just in Gloucestershire but elsewhere in the country in the places that have been mentioned. It is our duty as parliamentarians to make sure that we ask those questions and to try to get the answers.

The Minister has heard what I have said. I could go on about other aspects of the healthcare system in Gloucestershire, but the subsidiary company is of primary concern at the moment. We have one in Gloucestershire. We do not know who will run it, how it will be run or what the future implications are. If the Minister hears what I am saying and can answer some of those questions, it would help us in Gloucestershire and people much further afield.

5.39 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak while you are in the Chair, Sir Graham. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on his introduction of the debate. May I start by clarifying a point in his opening remarks? He conflated, I think, paying for healthcare and outsourcing, which to my mind are two completely separate things.

Let me explain something that informed my thinking on this subject many years ago. When my son, who is now 21, was only one, my wife and I went to Menorca as new parents, and our son took ill on the last day, after a lovely week there. He deteriorated quite badly in the middle of the night, and we were told by the doctor to take him to a hospital. We went to a lovely, shiny steel-and-glass hospital and rushed him in. By the time we got to the hospital, he was barely breathing, and new parents panic so much in those situations. We carried him to reception, thinking that he was only a few gasps from passing away, and we were asked, before they treated him, to present our credit card. We waited for 20 minutes while that was dealt with, and those were the longest 20 minutes of our lives, so I think that any Government Member or, indeed, anybody in the Chamber today who would consider moving the current system from a system of taxpayer-funded care to one in which people pay at the point of delivery would be misguided, to say the least.

This debate is not about whether we pay for care, and let us be clear: healthcare in this country is not free; it is taxpayer-funded. But the foremost principle—the foremost thing we must get right—is what is in the best interests of the patient. That is the principal thing that we should be discussing. The second thing that we should be discussing is what is in the best interests of the taxpayer, who funds the care of all the people who need care in this country. The third thing is who provides that care. This is patient first and certainly profit second. No ideology about private sector interest or involvement, or purely public provision, should get in the way of that. This debate should be about how we deliver the best service most effectively and efficiently. The question we should be asking today is how we provide a world-class service to get the best outcomes for patients and the best deal for the taxpayer.

To me, what the evidence points to is clear, despite the very good points that Opposition Members make about fragmentation. I accept that there are at times problems with commissioning that we need to resolve and get right, but to me a blend of public and private sector interests—a partnership between the two—would provide the best outcomes. Indeed, a report by the World Health Organisation emphasised the value of competition and the incentive structures of private organisations as spurs.
to good performance, while recognising the need for a public role in resource allocation. That, to me, says everything about how we should manage our health system.

As has been said, there are a number of different private providers. I do not think that anybody is arguing that GPs, for example, should not be involved in our healthcare system, or community care or residential care, and they are all private sector providers. It is also fair to point out that the rate of growth for private sector provision over the last seven years, since the coalition Government of 2010, is very similar to that for private sector provision before that time. This issue should not be party political; those are the facts. The figure went from 2.8% in 2006-07 to 4.4% in 2009-10 and then, I think, to the current 7.7%, so the rate of growth is very similar. Those facts are from Full Fact, which is an independent fact-checking organisation.

Mike Amesbury: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the great battle of ideas in the past resulted in something that seemingly we now all take for granted and claim to love—the NHS? Historically, the NHS was opposed; in fact, it was opposed 22 times on a three-line Whip by the Tory party, so the idea of the NHS, which is free at the point of delivery and based on need, is of course politically driven. My political party helped to create the NHS. It was a key driver in that and will certainly save and grow the NHS.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with that point entirely. We all love the NHS and respect so much the work of the people who work in that service, so congratulations on the fact that Labour introduced the NHS, but that is not the point. This debate should not be about ideology; it should be about what works.

Richard Graham: Just on a point of fact, about two weeks ago it was the anniversary of the first White Paper on a national health service, which was presented to Parliament by the wartime Conservative Health Minister, Willink. The thinking behind much of that came of course from civil servants, of whom Beveridge was undoubtedly one of the more important, and he was a well known Liberal. I therefore suggest to my hon. Friend that before conceding the historical point, which is an independent fact-checking organisation. which brought in a new funding formula, have completely broken the NHS? I am talking not only about the fragmentation, but also about the fact that the funding fights against itself, and therefore it is a complete distraction from providing a planned NHS service, which is the solution that is needed in the system.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention. I absolutely think that funding needs to be fair. There are certain instances we can look at as to whether the funding for certain CCGs in York and north Yorkshire is unfair. We need to ensure that the funding is got right wherever people are. It is incredible that we have a postcode lottery for healthcare in this country: things differ in different parts of the country, based on many of those issues. They are issues that we absolutely need to resolve.

Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: May I make some progress? I have taken three or four interventions in a row.

Dr Whitford: It is on the point about a postcode lottery.

Kevin Hollinrake: Okay.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. During the 33 years that I spent working in the NHS, the main aim was to get rid of postcode prescribing. He must recognise that the CCG system enshrines postcode prescribing.

Kevin Hollinrake: As I said, there are concerns. I have concerns: some of my constituents have difficulties. The overall quantum of healthcare funding—I will return to this at the end of my remarks—is putting pressure particularly on rural areas that I represent. We need to tackle a number of different issues. With regard to the future of healthcare funding, my perspective is similar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham): we should be working on a cross-party basis to deliver the solutions.

In terms of private or public, the public are absolutely behind the point that they have no preference. A greater number of people express no preference, in terms of a private sector or public sector provider, as to who provides their healthcare. Yes, of course the public are massively in favour—89% are in favour—of a taxpayer-funded healthcare system, but on the question whether the care should be delivered by private or public providers, it is a very different picture.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Gentleman has been extremely generous in giving way. I am reluctant to wander too far down memory lane, but when the NHS and I were born at the same time, in July 1948—[Laughter.] Two great institutions, both in need of considerable support! The NHS was born out of compromise. I spent 10 years working in the Middlesex Hospital. We had a private patients wing. The entire GP facility within the NHS has been private. GPs have always been self-employed. There has been compromise. The issue is not the fact that there is a compromise and private practice within the NHS, but the fact that there is a creeping expansion of privatisation, which my constituents and, I would suggest, those of every right hon. and hon. Member...
here feel is corrosive to the heart of the NHS. Yes, there is privatisation within the NHS, but we have to stop it. We must not expand it. We must return to core principles.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** It is only corrosive if it is not in the patient’s interest. There are clear commissioning rules that it must be in the patient’s interest for this commissioning to take place. The key is what is right for the patient. I do not doubt that the hon. Gentleman may be right that some of the commissioning is wrong, but whether it is private or public should not be the overriding principle; it should be what is right for the patient.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Kevin Hollinrake:** I will make some progress today, having given way a number of times. Some years ago, when I first became an MP, I met the chief executive of York Teaching Hospital Trust, Patrick Crowley. He talked about the fact that private providers are providing care in York—indeed, they are in my constituency—just as they are in the German system of social insurance for social care, in which people make a small payment from their monthly salary on a pay-as-you-go system. When they need care, instead of suffering the catastrophic cost in later life, on the basis of an independent assessment, that support can be provided through third-party care, or they can draw down the money and pay it to relatives to look after them in their own home, which can have a positive social consequence.

I want to make some key points. According to *The Health Foundation’s* report, more than 50% of people said that the NHS often wastes money. That is not a criticism but a reality in an organisation with 1.7 million people working for it. The way to try to reduce waste—again, this is our responsibility to the taxpayer—is to ensure that we eliminate it wherever we can. The public sector does a brilliant job in the NHS. I am not calling that into question. However, in my view, good businesses—I have been in business all my life—can have a positive impact on healthcare provision. Good businesses focus on the customer first, and therefore the patient first. They make the most of their most precious resource, which clearly is their people. They are good at innovating and reducing waste, and they should deliver at the best possible value. After all those things have been taken into account, a good business should then consider whether it can still make money, and if it cannot it should not enter that field. The principle should be what is right for the customer, or the patient.

I met one of the nation’s most successful and prominent business people, who told me—to illustrate how we can drive out waste and bureaucracy from a service—that he was approached in 2007 or 2008 by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and asked to look at reshaping the NHS—in the hon. Lady’s constituency—just as they are in my constituency. He was very comfortable with the relationship between the public sector provision at York Hospital and the private sector provision at Ramsay Health Care, where I have experienced treatment. It was incredibly efficient, and the people I spoke to who worked for that organisation spoke very highly of it. There should not be this ideological rejection of the private sector.

I want to make some key points. According to *The Health Foundation’s* report, more than 50% of people said that the NHS often wastes money. That is not a criticism but a reality in an organisation with 1.7 million people working for it. The way to try to reduce waste—again, this is our responsibility to the taxpayer—is to ensure that we eliminate it wherever we can. The public sector does a brilliant job in the NHS. I am not calling that into question. However, in my view, good businesses—I have been in business all my life—can have a positive impact on healthcare provision. Good businesses focus on the customer first, and therefore the patient first. They make the most of their most precious resource, which clearly is their people. They are good at innovating and reducing waste, and they should deliver at the best possible value. After all those things have been taken into account, a good business should then consider whether it can still make money, and if it cannot it should not enter that field. The principle should be what is right for the customer, or the patient.

I met one of the nation’s most successful and prominent business people, who told me—to illustrate how we can drive out waste and bureaucracy from a service—that he was approached in 2007 or 2008 by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and asked to look at reshaping the health service to make it more efficient. He came back to them and said that he would be prepared to take this project on. He said that the first thing he wanted to do was to give all nurses a 30% pay rise—this is a private sector business man; I am not saying that Brown and Blair were going to privatise the NHS—but that he wanted no more money from central Government. He would put matrons back on the wards. He would put in a clinician-first approach, with admin and management second, and strip away the bureaucracy, which must be music to the ears of every nurse and doctor working in the health service. He planned to reduce admin and management by 20,000 people. He was also going to look at the purchasing system in the NHS.

Clearly, the private sector can look at these issues and drive out waste in whatever capacity as long as it is in the interests of patients. Waste in purchasing is a key element. John Abercrombie, the consultant who looked at purchasing in the NHS, established that one trust was paying £126 for a wound protector and another was paying 36p. There clearly are private sector providers that could come into this sector and help to reduce waste, delivering a better deal for the taxpayer.

My final point is about the long-term funding settlement. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester. We need a long-term funding settlement not just for the NHS, but for social care, because they are inextricably linked, although we need different funding settlements for the two different elements. Unless we have that long-term funding settlement, whatever we discuss today, because of demand—and more money is going in—we will just be shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic. It should be cross-party and take into account rural needs. I have constituents who have seen services centralised to the point where they have to travel long distances to access healthcare. An elderly couple in Scarborough have to go to York for treatment because heart treatment has been centralised into York from Scarborough. They do not drive, so they have to take a bus to York and stay in a hotel overnight to get to the consultation appointment on time. The quantum needs to be greater and we need to ensure that we keep delivering our services right across the country, including in those rural areas. I agree with my hon. Friend that we should look at a hypothecated tax—either direct or indirect taxation—to increase the quantum of money to a significant degree.

The Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government looked at the German system of social insurance for social care, in which people make a small payment from their monthly salary on a pay-as-you-go system. When they need care, instead of suffering the catastrophic cost in later life, on the basis of an independent assessment, that support can be provided through third-party care, or they can draw down the money and pay it to relatives to look after them in their own home, which can have a positive social consequence.

We need to look at these things in detail and on a cross-party basis. I believe in a taxpayer-funded system on the basis of the best outcomes for patients and the best deal for the taxpayer, and that we should move towards a long-term funding solution, so that ultimately we can let the clinicians get on with the job.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank all those who signed the petition, including the 512 signatories in my constituency. I spoke at a “Save the NHS” rally a couple of weeks ago, and privatisation was one of the top issues for people who attended that rally and spoke to me afterwards. I will make some of the points I made when I spoke at that rally.

Week after week, people stop me, come to my surgeries and write to me asking why their local GP has left and why the services they rely on are...
[Alex Sobel]

verging on unsatisfactory and in some cases negligent—
I have some negligence cases running. The short answer
to those questions is a lack of money in the system. The
more complex answer is that the decline in NHS funding
has placed strong pressures on healthcare providers
right across the NHS to adopt new practices and governance
structures. Many of those changes have taken place
beyond the public eye and without sufficient scrutiny.
The benefits from those changes are far from evident.
My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew)
asked many of the questions I had intended to, which
will reduce the amount of time I will take in this debate
—so I thank him for that—but that allows me to make
some broader points. I support all the questions he
asked the Minister. However, there is one point, which I
will come to, on which I have a slightly different point
of view from my hon. Friend.

The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, in an
try to balance its books, has proposed to take
1,000 NHS workers out of the public sector and place
them in a wholly owned subsidiary company. There was
a meeting on 29 March to make a decision. After
interludes by myself, four other colleagues in Leeds,
the trade unions, campaigners and members of staff,
there was a stay of execution on that decision and it will
be looked at again. Therefore we are not quite in the
situation that my hon. Friend has in Gloucestershire,
where the change has already happened, but we are
approaching it, which makes it all the more important
for us to have the debate and to engage with the Department
of Health and Social Care and its Front-Bench team.
The wholly owned subsidiary company would take staff
who have spent their entire career in the public sector
and place them in a highly uncertain position regarding
their working conditions, salaries and pensions—all
points that my hon. Friend made.

A wholly owned subsidiary company structure has
already been implemented elsewhere in Yorkshire—in
Airedale and Barnsley—and the primary driver is financial.
Once the subsidiary company is in place, it can recoup
VAT and make significant savings. What is the solution?
My hon. Friend suggested that the Treasury close the
loophole, but my suggestion is quite different: the NHS,
at trust level, should also be able to recoup VAT. Let us
create a level playing field in which the NHS has the
same rights and benefits as a wholly owned subsidiary
company. That would effectively just be a technical
change. I hope the Minister will talk to his Treasury
colleagues and look at whether those same benefits can
be given directly to an NHS trust.

I am not asking for that change for ideological reasons,
although I have heard a lot of ideology today. Rather, I
am speaking up for the porters, cleaners, lab technicians,
receptionists and administrative officers who work in
the trust and in other trusts that are considering going
down that road or have done so. They tell me that they are
motivated to work above and beyond at the trust
because they are part of the NHS. They work the hours
that they need to work because they are part of a family.
They and their colleagues are born of the NHS—an
NHS born alongside my hon. Friend the Member for
Ealing North (Stephen Pound) in 1948. They do not
want to be seen as a moveable commodity. They view
themselves as a core part of the NHS, just as much as
the clinicians. We need to recognise that.

Rachael Maskell: York Teaching Hospital is going
down the same lines in creating a wholly owned subsidiary
company, yet the staff want to belong to the NHS—that
is their ethos and that is what drives them. It is also
important for full integration across the whole service,
because people who work as porters and cleaners are as
much about patient care as anybody else in the NHS.
Does my hon. Friend agree?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely. When I go into our local
hospitals as an MP or as a patient, I see that they are the
beating heart of the NHS.

I ask trusts, such as Leeds, that are considering
setting up a subsidiary company to put a halt to those
plans and to work with their staff, representative trade
unions and local MPs prior to making the decision. I
ask them to do what is best for all involved, whether
patients, staff or the community.

Cost pressures create perverse incentives for people
to consider privatisation. We have rehearsed that argument
quite well. They affect not just NHS hospital trusts but
clinical commissioning groups for primary care services,
NHS England and other NHS bodies. We need to take
those perverse incentives out of the system so that
privatisation does not happen by the back door—instead
of being done by the Government through statute—which
is what is happening.

6.3 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure
to serve under your chairmanship in this important
debate, Mr Hosie. Many people who signed the petition
have genuine concerns about the NHS. I make it clear
from the outset, just in case my remarks are deliberately
misconstrued, that I am opposed to privatising the
NHS, like my hon. Friend. My family and I rely on it.
I support keeping the service free at the point of need,
whatever the individual’s circumstances.

We need to establish what we mean when we talk
about privatisation. To me, it means what we did in the
1980s with British Telecom, British Gas and so on—
selling the shares to the public. We sold their assets
lock, stock and barrel and handed them over to the
private sector. That is not what is happening when
we talk about an individual service in the NHS being
privatised.

It is important to remember that having private providers
in the NHS is not new. As other hon. Members have
said, there has been a role for private provision since the
service was established 70 years ago, most notably in
the form of GPs. Other private engagement includes
businesses, charities and independent contractors.

Just under 8% of NHS spending goes to the independent
sector, which is money spent on supporting NHS patients.
That includes spending on elective surgery, diagnostics
and pathology services, clinical home healthcare and
community and primary healthcare. In many cases,
private providers are used to cut waste and provide
essential services, such as catering and cleaning. To use
a trivial example, would the Opposition recommend
that we prevent private sector companies from running
the coffee shop in a hospital? If we say no to any private
sector involvement, that is what we are doing. The local
window cleaner could not come to clean the hospital
windows. It would be a nonsense.
Stephen Pound: I respect the hon. Gentleman, but the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) was about the added value brought by people who work in the NHS. When I was a porter for 10 years at the Middlesex Hospital, we finished at 10 o’clock on Saturday night and started again at 6 o’clock on Sunday morning. We worked a rotating three shift system.

The Middlesex Hospital is now a hole in the ground, but when I last went to see former colleagues from the ancillary staffs council, I was told about the agency workers who turn up to do a day’s shift. They have no emotional connection with the hospital, or any feeling for it, so they simply cannot make the same commitment. Surely the hon. Gentleman, who is far from being a fool—he is actually a humane man—recognises that some people bring an immense amount of added value by working for the NHS rather than for an agency that works for the NHS.

Martin Vickers: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am not arguing for privatisation. I am arguing that privatising some services improves patient care, which is surely what we are all interested in.

Dr Whitford: Having graduated in 1982, I know that the first services that were outsourced were the cleaners. That has been blamed for contributing to later hospital-acquired infections such as MRSA.

Martin Vickers: The hon. Lady is obviously very knowledgeable, as we heard earlier. I cannot compete with 33 years’ experience, although I recognise those faults and I can recall the stories of dirty hospitals, which may have had something to do with poor procurement and bad management.

However, the reality is that the private sector has a role to play. Are we seriously suggesting that we should inconvenience people by forbidding Boots, Superdrug or a supermarket from administering prescriptions? Obviously not. Should we preclude social enterprise operations from taking part in NHS services? Surely not, because they can be extremely valuable and improve patient care.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend makes some good points. Does he agree that the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) makes a different argument from that of his colleagues, who argue against companies that are subsidiaries of the NHS by definition? There is a considerable difference between someone who works for an agency that works for the NHS and someone who works for an NHS subsidiary company.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for that timely and helpful intervention.

The King’s Fund report, “Is the NHS being privatised?”, determined that the gradual increase in the use of private providers has improved the choice and service for patients. That must be for the good of everyone. It is the patients who are important; scaremongering does not help them. A focus on the process rather than patient outcomes is unwise and a distraction from the real issues. The best interests of the patient are what matters. We must ensure that as much as possible of the resources that are made available goes into patient care.

The Leader of the Opposition has made repeated pledges to “save the NHS”. Frequently, those on the left whip up hysteria about how the Government of the day are doing something that will fundamentally alter healthcare in this country and bring the NHS to an end, but when exactly have these warnings been accurate? Were they accurate in April 1997, when Tony Blair famously declared that we only had “24 hours to save the NHS”, or when union leaders have spoken out about the NHS? Such reports have always proved false. As was said earlier, the reality is that the Conservative party has led government for 43 of the 70 years that the NHS has been in existence, so if the aim was to destroy the NHS, we have done a pretty poor job. The reality is that the Conservative party is as committed as any other party in this House to the continuation of the NHS.

What we see is outrageous hyperbole that is designed to prey on the worries of those who rely on the NHS, which—let us face it—is virtually all of us. That is irresponsible and in some cases cruel. Furthermore, it adds to a climate in which we cannot have a sensible discussion about the future of healthcare in this country. Within our politics, there is a paranoid conspiracy theory surrounding the motives of the Conservatives in relation to the NHS. It goes something like this: “Conservatives hate the NHS for ideological reasons, but given the toxicity of the subject and the reverence with which the public quite rightly regard the NHS, they realise the only way to implement privatisation is by stealth.” That is absolute and complete nonsense.

Let us face it, there have been changes to the NHS throughout its existence. We have had mention of fragmentation; I suggest that some of the fragmentation took place during the Blair and Brown Administrations. We spend around 8% of our GDP on healthcare, which is in line with countries such as Belgium and more than is spent by the likes of Australia and Canada, which have large private sector involvement. If, as we are told, we are underfunding healthcare to undermine support for the public system, what would be the motive for the apparent underfunding of healthcare systems elsewhere?

The NHS turns 70 this year. Of course, it has had its ups and downs, but the Conservatives have been in power for the majority of that time. There is no masterplan to replace the NHS with a privatised alternative.

There is also the question of what we mean by “privatisation”, which I mentioned earlier. “Privatisation” is a buzzword for ideologues to spread fear and embed an inefficient system that fails patients. Is Germany a private system, or is Switzerland? The answer is no. However, Germany and Switzerland embrace the market, while ensuring that no one slips through the net. The German system shows that a healthcare system can be fully funded in the style of a pension system. The situation in Switzerland proves that even considerable levels of out-of-pocket patient charges need not be regressive. We can trust people to choose from a range of health insurance plans and identify the best option for them. Throughout Europe, healthcare systems offer universal high-quality care that is free at the point of use. In many cases, they make use of a greater number of private providers than our own NHS.

Social health insurance does not have to clash with the principles of the NHS that are so greatly entrenched in our society. We can still have a universal system of healthcare that is free at the point of use. We may have
been the first country to establish a healthcare system based on those principles, but we are no longer unique in that respect. Virtually every developed country has some form of coverage.

The United States is an outlier in this regard. Canada offers universal healthcare that is free at the point of use. Germany offers universal healthcare, and while patients there may have to pay a small amount to see a doctor—around £10—the poorest in society are often reimbursed.

**Dr Whitford:** My husband is German and we lost his sister at this time last year, so I can point out that actually the German insurance system covers only 80% of costs and the bills continued to arrive for about six months after her death.

**Martin Vickers:** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. My understanding, and she will correct me if I am wrong, is that that 20% of costs could be reimbursed, depending on the individual’s circumstances.

**Dr Whitford:** If a member of the public in Germany wants to cover that other 20%, they take out additional insurance to cover it.

**Martin Vickers:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and for her correction, which I am very happy to acknowledge.

The debate over healthcare in this country is insular and inward-looking. It is ruined by a counterproductive tendency to pretend that the only imaginable alternative to the NHS is the American system. That is the go-to response for the vast majority of those who oppose reform. In reality, opposition to the US system is the one thing that unites us all. We can deliver meaningful NHS reform while maintaining the principle of universal coverage, as well as ensuring that the NHS remains free at the point of need.

Another area in which there has been considerable scaremongering relates to accountable care organisations. These organisations are hugely important in ensuring that patients have access to high-quality care that is orientated around their individual needs. While a different name for them would have been helpful, it is the substance that matters. Again, we are often told that ACOs are a move towards the US system of healthcare, but other than the name they have little in common with the US system.

ACOs will not alter the universality of healthcare in this country, nor will they prevent services from being free at the point of use. To suggest otherwise is dishonest and unfair on patients, and causes needless worry for those who are in difficulties and worried about their future healthcare needs. Claims that sustainability and transformation partnerships and ACOs are vehicles for NHS privatisation or the Americanisation of the health service have been refuted by all the key health organisations, including the King’s Fund and NHS England.

Only 10 days ago I visited the excellent St Hugh’s Hospital in Grimsby, which serves patients from my neighbouring constituency. It is a private hospital, but 83% of its patients are from the NHS. Ashley Brown, the hospital’s director, explained to me how private providers are held to at least the same standards as public providers, and often—as in his hospital’s case—to higher standards. Private providers are subject to the same rigorous inspections as public ones and they receive ratings from the Care Quality Commission, which holds all providers to the very highest standards. As a result, 70% of independent hospitals are rated by the CQC as “good” or “outstanding”. Furthermore, the punishments for failing to meet targets are far stronger in the private sector. I was told that if St Hugh’s Hospital missed its 18-week target for referral it would face a significant fine.

Another concern that is frequently raised regarding the NHS is about profit. We are told that no one should profit from someone being ill. However, if someone needs an urgent operation, do they actually care whether the person carrying out that operation, or indeed the hospital that it is being carried out in, might make a profit from it? They have provided the capital costs of the investment. What matters is the quality of care for the individual. As I have said three or four times, patient care is absolutely critical.

Across the UK, about 10 million NHS patients are treated by the private sector every year. If we were to remove the private sector from the NHS altogether, there would be an additional 10 million people on NHS waiting lists, which, as we know, are strained to the limit already.

People value the benefits that private provision can allow. The British social attitudes survey found that there were more people—43%—who did not have a preference between receiving care from the NHS or from a private company than people who would prefer NHS treatment. Furthermore, at a time when mental health has finally reached the top of the political agenda, it is worth noting that more than one third of acute in-patient psychiatric beds are provided by the private sector. There are calls to strip back the private sector, but that would have a detrimental effect on patients in that area.

Not enough is done to publicise the fact that patients now have a legal right to choose where they receive treatment. They can choose any NHS or private hospital in the country. If they opt for a private provider, they will not have to pay a penny. That places the power in patients’ hands, giving them the opportunity to make personal healthcare decisions, as well as helping to keep NHS waiting times down.

The NHS can benefit from working with the private sector. That should not be viewed as providers competing in a zero-sum game. If the two co-operate and realise how they can spread the burden of work, they can radically improve patient outcomes overall. Provided that the service delivered is of the highest quality and remains free at the point of use, who provides it is irrelevant to a patient in urgent need. We are rightly proud of the NHS and the excellent service it provides, but if it is to remain sustainable as a service that is free at the point of need for our children and grandchildren, we must acknowledge that we need a sensible debate about how we achieve that.
I suggest that with our electoral system there are only four possible outcomes of elections in the foreseeable future—a Conservative or a Labour Government, or one of them in coalition with the Lib Dems. I can guarantee that none of them would be elected if they included privatising the NHS in their manifesto. It may have escaped everyone’s notice, but Governments quite like to be re-elected, so if, during their administration, they had made moves towards privatising the NHS, they simply would not be re-elected. Those who signed the petition need have no fear of privatisation from this Government. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, privatisation is a myth peddled for party political advantage, and nothing more.

6.20 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for securing the debate. It gives Members such as me the opportunity to talk about how the privatisation of NHS services affects us all and, in particular, our own constituents.

I will make three points about privatised healthcare, from commissioning right through to practice. First, it lacks transparency; secondly, it is removed from adequate accountability; and, thirdly, it prioritises shareholder gains over patient care. It only takes a glance at the situation over the past two years in my constituency, where privatisation is not creeping but galloping in, to witness numerous examples of those three points.

After NHS West Lancashire clinical commissioning group announced in February 2016 that it was liaising with two private companies, Optum Health Solutions and Virgin Care, to deliver urgent care services—among two private companies, Optum Health Solutions and Virgin Care, to deliver urgent care services among them walk-in centres, out-of-hours and acute visiting services and community health services, including district nursing—it quickly became clear that the process would leave residents, healthcare professionals and, indeed, me in the dark, unable to see the details of the selection process and the contract and now unable to see performance figures against that contract. At the time, Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust was delivering those services, yet the CCG excluded it from bidding, amazingly without any real explanation from any of the bodies involved.

When I attempted to question the CCG, NHS England and NHS Improvement about the situation, the phrase “commercially sensitive” was frequently deployed to avoid answering. The people of West Lancashire and the people of this country fund those services, so I ask the Minister to explain why there are not more stringent procedures in place to ensure that the taxpayers know where their money goes and why.

I also ask the Minister to consider an investigation into the phrase “commercial confidentiality” and its very frequent use by CCGs. It should be stated clearly that the lack of transparency and accountability among private healthcare providers is a trend that continues nationally, and not just within commissioning. As many of us are aware, the British Medical Association has long warned the Government that there continues to be no obligation for private providers to report even on patient safety incidents and performance data. Although the Care Quality Commission requires non-NHS providers to abide by a duty of candour, there is no obligation to make publicly available any information about the nature or severity of any such incidents, and the CQC does not publish the information either. Additionally, private providers are not required to regularly update the CQC on less serious safety incidents and, according to the think-tank, the Centre for Health and the Public Interest, only 63% of hospitals do so.

Will the Minister address how the CQC, NHS England, NHS Improvement and Members of Parliament are meant to hold CCGs and private providers to account if information, including that relating to patient safety, remains behind closed doors, without the possibility of scrutiny, let alone action being taken about it? I understand that regulators may request some of the information, but that is simply not good enough. The regulators are not always on top of their game, as evidenced in Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust, where, as the Minister knows, every regulator missed the poor services delivered to patients, as evidenced by both Capsticks and Kirkup—and that is an NHS trust, not a secretive private provider. Openness, transparency and accountability should be an integral part of a democratised healthcare service, right through from commissioning to practice. The extent of the secrecy surrounding the process in West Lancashire led to me raise it with the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office. Does the Minister think it should have got to that stage at all? What does he recommend we do in the future?

Without scrutiny, we risk events happening such as the recent one in which a company operating one of the first integrated NHS 111 and GP out-of-hours services was forced to hand back its contract to the NHS just seven months into a three-year contract. In 2016, CCG board papers rated the proposed transfer of services as “red”. The deal went ahead anyway. Where is the accountability, and where was NHS England? Were other regulators on the missing list yet again? A similar event was recently about to happen in Liverpool, where the CCG wanted to award the contract to run the majority of community services to Bridgewater Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. That would have been a disaster, as anyone looking at the current state of that trust would have been able to see. Yet all the detail was hidden from the public. Incidents involving GP out-of-hours services like that send shivers down my spine.

Fewer than two weeks ago, it was announced that Totally plc, a private provider of out-of-hospital services, had been awarded a four-year contract with Virgin Care for 18 GP out-of-hours services in West Lancashire. It then transpired that Vocare, a subsidiary of Totally, was going to run the services on its behalf. In case Members got lost in that little trip, I will outline the process in full: NHS England devolves commissioning to NHS West Lancashire CCG, which contracts to Virgin Care, which subcontracts to Totally, which hands its contract over to its subsidiary, Vocare. You really could not make it up, could you? I have to ask the Minister: does that constant subcontracting between private companies not further dampen our abilities to hold private providers to account? Where does the increasingly complex and inward-looking operation end? Perhaps I already know the answer, because Totally’s chief executive, Wendy Lawrence, commented in a press release on the recent contract award:

“also ensuring we create value for our shareholders by securing important strategic contracts such as this one”.

Selina O’Grady
Does that explain why, in 2017, constituents of mine who received urgent care from Virgin were informed that wounds could be dressed only once and my constituents would then need to go to the local chemist and purchase further dressings? Will the Minister explain how that is healthcare free at the point of delivery?

In 2017, the operating hours of the Ormskirk urgent care centre were 8 am to 8 pm. It used to be open from 8 am to 10 pm. The initial contract was to allow the centre to be open to enable my constituents to go to the urgent care centre when GPs surgeries were closed and to ease the burden on A&E. The opening hours do not meet that need, and it transpired later last year that Virgin does not always have a GP on site. When there was a computer problem at the walk-in centre, my constituents were simply told to go home or go to A&E.

Since the Health and Social Care Act 2012, CCGs and private contractors have promised us that patients would receive quality treatment and care, but the reality has often been starkly different. With privatisation rising year on year, Ministers must ask why Members of Parliament, regulatory bodies and, worst of all, health service patients have been unable to hold private contractors and those who commission services to detailed account. They have dampened or refused transparency. There is a lack of accountability, and the service people receive can prove inadequate. Taxpayers are not being offered the high-quality patient care they expect and deserve. Many Members on the Government Benches blindly follow statements made to them and think that the situation is okay everywhere. It certainly is not. We have proved that regulators are not regulating. If we cannot get the information from private providers, Government Members cannot assert that everything is great, because we do not know.

6.31 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to say a few words in this important debate about healthcare. Only this morning I had the pleasure of visiting Charlton Lane Hospital in my constituency. It treats people with functional mental health problems and dementia. It was striking to see so many dedicated nursing staff who work in such a challenging field, but show such consistent humanity and dedication.

NHS outsourcing to private providers is a sensitive topic, but that is essentially because it has been dressed up as a threat to the NHS’s guiding principle—namely that treatment should be provided free at the point of use and regardless of ability to pay. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. That principle is fundamental, inviolable and enduring. It is all those things because it reflects so much about the kind of country we are and want to continue to be.

This point has already been powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), but it bears repetition. When a member of the public is rushed into hospital needing emergency care, we take pride in the fact that the ability to pay is irrelevant. NHS staff are interested in vital signs, not pound signs. That is why it was no accident that the NHS featured so heavily in the stunning opening ceremony for the London Olympics in 2012. It did so because it reflects our nation’s values. While it is perfectly legitimate to have a debate about the precise mechanics and arithmetic of how to deliver the principle of providing care free at the point of need, it would be wholly wrong to pretend that the principle itself is in play, because it is not. There is simply no appetite for the Americanisation of British healthcare. Even if there were, I could never support it, and I am entirely confident that my colleagues on the Government Benches could never support it either. It is vital that we do not conflate the word “privatisation” with Americanisation or fragmentation. It is neither of those things.

Dr Whitford: What is the hon. Gentleman’s view of patients who are being asked to provide co-payments of more than £800 to have a second eye cataract surgery or to pay for their second hearing aid? That has been creeping into NHS England. Patients are being asked to pay for more and more items.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I respect her past record and her contributions to the House. There is an ongoing debate among clinicians—no doubt colleagues of hers—about what the NHS should cover. Most of the clinicians I speak to would welcome a more open, non-partisan and grown-up debate about the full extent of the NHS, but the guiding principle should not be confused. Whatever it is that the NHS can provide, the core principle is that it will provide it to individuals in our country regardless of their personal circumstances. I am at pains to emphasise that, because from listening to some of the contributions of Opposition Members—no doubt made entirely sincerely, but made none the less—one could be confused into thinking that that principle was under attack. It is not, and it never will be.

The debate is about the delivery of a common goal. Many take the view, with some justification, that we should be open to solutions that deliver that goal most effectively for patients. Last year, the respected and politically independent King’s Fund wrote in its report:

“Provided that patients receive care that is timely and free at the point of use, our view is that the provider of a service is less important than the quality and efficiency of the care they deliver.”

When debating this important question, we should not rewrite history. As the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) has conceded, it is a fact that certain services have been provided independently since the NHS’s inception 70 years ago. Most GP practices are private partnerships; the GPs are not NHS employees. Equally, the NHS has long-established partnerships for the delivery of clinical services such as radiology and pathology, and non-clinical services such as car parking and the management of buildings and the estate. To give an everyday example, the NHS sources some of its bandages from Elastoplast. That is common sense. It would be daft if public money was diverted away from frontline patient care to research and reinvent something that was already widely available. It would be just as daft if the NHS had to do the same for its water coolers or hand sanitisers.

As the King’s Fund put it in its 2017 report:

“These are not new developments. Both the Blair and Brown governments used private providers to increase patient choice and competition as part of their reform programme, and additional capacity provided by the private sector played a role in improving patients’ access to hospital treatment.”
Throughout Europe there are healthcare systems that offer high-quality care, free at the point of use, and make use of far greater numbers of private providers than the UK.

I want to say a few words about the impact on my constituents in Cheltenham. I will give three brief examples. First, Cobalt is a Cheltenham-based medical charity that is leading the way in diagnostic imaging. It provides funding for research, including into cancer and dementia, which it does as part of a research partnership with the other NHS Foundation Trust. It assists with training for healthcare professionals, and it even provided the UK’s first high-field open MRI scanner, which is designed for claustrophobic and larger patients. Are we seriously suggesting that is an affront to patient care in Cheltenham? Not a bit of it. Are we seriously suggesting that getting rid of it would be a good idea? Emphatically no.

Secondly, we have the Sue Ryder hospice at Leckhampton Court, which is a 16-bed hospice that delivers truly excellent care in the Gloucestershire countryside. It also provides hospice-at-home services. It also supports, as I know, family, carers and close friends. It is part-funded by the NHS and by charitable donations. It shows astonishing compassion, but also creativity and innovation in how it delivers care. The third example is Macmillan and its nurses. I need say no more about it—it is a fantastic organisation. To suggest that these independent providers and charities are somehow not good for patient care is to stretch a political principle beyond breaking point.

We also need to slay the myth—there was just a glimmer of it today, but it was not really developed—that somehow different types of providers are held to different standards. All providers are held to the same standards and given rigorous Ofsted-style inspections and ratings by the Care Quality Commission. For my constituents in Cheltenham, I want to see resources allocated as effectively as possible to free up resources for facilities such as A&E at Cheltenham General Hospital, which can only be delivered there. There is growing demand for A&E in Cheltenham, and the service needs to be 24/7.

It is right to say, however, that there are some legitimate concerns that can be properly addressed. The experience of Carillion has laid bare the chaos that can be caused when private providers take on significant contracts and then fail to deliver. We have to recognise that the consequences of failure in health services would not simply be an unfinished construction project, important though that is, but could be a decline in the quality of patient care. I mention that only because community services are disproportionately served by independent providers, but let us keep this in context. Based on a survey of 70% of CCGs in 2015, Monitor published analysis in its report, “Commissioning Better Community Services for NHS Patients”, showing that independent providers were responsible for just 7% of contracts. We should be vigilant, not dogmatic and quasi-religious in our approach. The NHS as a whole must ensure that no contract ever becomes too big to fail and that contingencies are always in place to cater for such an eventuality.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the point that I wanted to make. Where we can have a private provider that provides treatment efficiently and effectively, freeing up resources to go elsewhere on the frontline, that is fine, but we have to be extremely vigilant to ensure that when we enter into such a contract, it is not set up to fail. Were it to do so, that would resonate for patient care rather than simply being about a building waiting to be constructed. We must ensure that the principle is applied responsibly and intelligently, as I am sure it will be.

I want to see the best possible care for my constituents, and I know that every single person in this room wishes the same. We all wish to see the NHS free at the point of need. I want to see precious public resources go as far as possible to honour the founding principle and drive it forward. With careful scrutiny and sensible limits, charities and independent providers can play a part in a joint endeavour.

6.41 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate but I was serving on a statutory instrument Committee. I am grateful that you are allowing me to speak in today’s important debate about our NHS.

I felt motivated to speak when I entered Westminster Hall and listened to the debate, particularly on the assertion that privatisation is not such a bad thing. I want to draw out the issue of NHS funding. The funding system is broken. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me recently to discuss the real challenges in York’s funding system. I look forward to hearing that progress has been made as a result of that, but there are real challenges within the funding system and I want to challenge some of the assertions made about that.

We must understand that the NHS was designed to work as a whole. The types of services that move to the private sector are low risk and high volume, such as hips, knees and cataracts. If we add those together, someone can cream a profit—I would prefer a reinvestment—off the top of providing those services. The NHS used to take the additional money and reinvest it in the more expensive parts of the NHS, such as intensive therapy units, the renal service, for which the drugs are very expensive, and A&E. The fine balances of NHS finances worked. However, when we remove those opportunities, because the hips and knees are being delivered by another organisation that makes a profit out of the NHS, although the risk is left with the NHS, NHS finances collapse because the cross-funding is not going into those services, which is exactly what we are seeing at the moment. I first had that debate with Andrew Lansley when he put his proposals forward, and it has come to pass that NHS finances are not working because that balance has been taken out of the finances. The opportunity for the NHS to generate the resources that are vital for the critical care parts of the NHS is removed.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady makes a good point, but the reason the NHS is under pressure is hugely increased demand. There is more money going into the NHS, and we would all concede that we need to put more money in, but demand is the essence of the problem. It is not because we have private sector companies operating within it.
Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is right that demand on the NHS is huge, which takes me to a further point that I will raise shortly. We recognise that we need more resource in the NHS, but the fragmentation and the fact that so much money is taken out for contract management as opposed to reinvestment into health services creates challenges. We now have lawyers and managers managing those contracts in the NHS instead of the money filtering through to healthcare, as it would in a planned health system. Of course, when we have fragmentation, we have to work with multiple systems across multiple agencies, and trying to get the organisations to talk to each other also puts pressure on the system.

We have a growing ageing demographic and increased pressures on the health service, but, because we now see a disconnect between some of the NHS’s other services, such as prevention and public health, we do not have the levers in the system to drive better health in the community, and more risk therefore ends up back at the door of the acute services. As the situation escalates, the acute system is more and more challenged, not least because of the different funding mechanisms and interests of the CCGs and the acute trusts. If we look at a tariff system versus the CCGs’ interests, we see that they clash with each other, which then means we have a waste of resource.

I can give examples of how the funding is broken and not working within York. I have had discussions with the CCG and the acute trust. The CCG has to fund tests and other services that are not picked up elsewhere in the tariff system. Where do those services go? They go out to the private sector, so there is a cycle of decline and trying to manage a system where the fundamentals of how NHS funding works are not addressed. I suggest to the Minister that if we brought together a planned health service with proper funding, the rest of the system would fit in place, but we have to take out the private motive within the NHS, which is clearly why many organisations are involved.

We have only to look at some of the services that are provided. I think of the Serco contract in Cornwall, where one GP was in service for the whole of the county. I think of Serco again in Suffolk, and how it provided community services. When it was not generating a profit, it said, “We’re off. We’re not interested in this service any more”, leaving some of our most vulnerable people in the community high and dry, with the NHS of course picking up the cost every single time and picking up the pieces. That is no way to run a critical health service in our country. That is why we need to move to a fully planned health service in public hands.

I want to draw on one other example of a private company; Virgin Healthcare. It was first of all an incubator within the forerunners to CCGs, seeing what was coming along the tracks and the opportunities there. I can cite many services provided by Virgin Healthcare and how it has looked to profiteer and cut services. I was head of health at Unite overseeing sexual health workers. Virgin cut sexual health services and as a result there was a rise in the prevalence of sexual disease. The services also became fragmented. The community was not provided with a service, and there was a complete failure to achieve the objective of the service.

Elsewhere, we see Virgin suing the NHS because it is not winning contracts. The business of Virgin is about generating as much money out of the state as it possibly can. Private companies use the NHS for their own interests to fill the pockets of shareholders as opposed to supporting patients. We must take the profit motive and private companies out of the NHS because that model is completely broken. I will move on to two other issues. The first is staff in the NHS. I worked in the NHS for 20 years, so I know what it feels like. People do not want to work for private companies. They want to have one set of terms and conditions, and to engage with one set of training. They want one set of rules, and most of all they want the pride of working for the NHS.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: No, I will make some progress. People want to work in the interests of patients. It is important that we maintain that, because it is healthcare workers who give all the hours of unpaid overtime that nobody ever talks about. Why would they want to do that for a private company? They do it because of the sense of public service that comes from our country’s greatest pride: the NHS. We therefore need to listen to what our NHS staff say. That is why I take issue with the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who spoke about union leaders shouting off. They represent more than 1 million people working in our NHS. They are the voice of people working in the NHS.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: As a union leader who spent 20 years working in the NHS, I certainly spoke up for all my members, who were deeply concerned about the destruction of the NHS because of the privatisation and fragmentation that was happening across it.

The second issue is what is happening to NHS buildings. We know that buildings were moved into NHS Property Services, which is a wholly owned company with one shareholder: the Secretary of State. He is looking through the Naylor report, which is not included in legislation at the moment, to reduce the estate. There may be some good cases for that, but profit should not be at the head of the argument. We should look at how the estate can be reinvested for the benefit of the community.

Parkland at Bootham Park Hospital in my constituency would make a fantastic public park and would address some of the mental health challenges in our city, which was the purpose of the hospital. I ask the Minister to take a further look at that opportunity. Under Treasury rules, the building and the parkland have to be sold to one private provider. Clearly, that would not work for my city. With regard to the rest of the estate at Bootham Park Hospital, it would be great to see the old mental health hospital converted into key-worker housing to support the rest of the NHS. York is in real crisis with regard to recruiting staff, because they cannot afford to live in the city. If we had key-worker homes on that estate, it would create a sea change. That is about putting public interest at the front, not private profit.

Finally, I want to talk about the future, because I am aware that time is wasting on. I truly believe that the only way forward for our NHS is to have one planned public service, with full integration of mental health, physical health, public health and social care, provided in the interests of the community. We need play-space
to look after the community, and no more fragmentation. It is ridiculous that we have so many regulators and so many different providers. The whole system is fragmented and fighting against itself. If we had one planned system, it would not only simplify the system, but ensure that the money is invested back into the heart and needs of patients.

Andrew Selous rose—

Rachael Maskell: That is exactly how we should move forward, whether with consensus across all parties, which of course I would like to see, or just by putting forward what is logical.

Gillian Keegan rose—

Rachael Maskell: NHS staff are calling for it, managers are calling for it, and I trust that the Minister has heard the call in today’s debate.

6.54 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. In the scope of the history of the NHS, I would like to make a little punt for the Highlands and Islands Medical Service—a forerunner of the NHS that was founded in 1913, a long time before the UK NHS.

To make a gentle point to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), I will read the World Health Organisation’s 1995 definition of privatisation. Privatisation means “a process in which non-government actors become increasingly involved in the financing and provision of health care, and/or a process in which market forces are introduced into the public sector.”

Patients who attend any of the four UK health services will receive amazing care, but that is predominantly due to the dedication of the people who work in them, some of whom are working against much harder pressures than others. Government Members talked about outsourced cleaning and car parking as a good thing. There was evidence that it was the outsourcing of cleaning, and poor-quality cleaning, that led to the rise of hospital-acquired infections.

Kevin Hollinrake rose—

Andrew Selous: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Dr Whitford: No, because there is very little time.

Andrew Selous: We have 35 minutes left.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady will decide what interventions she wants to take.

Dr Whitford: I have only just started, and there is not much time left. It is repeatedly mentioned in this House that patients and carers in England have to pay significant car parking charges. That should not be seen as a benefit.

The Conservatives introduced the internal market in 1990. That introduced competition between NHS hospitals, and even at that point created an “us and them” mentality in my local area. It created divisions between the GPs and the hospital through the purchaser-provider split. Sometimes, if a patient was sent to me but had a problem that I diagnosed as pertaining to a different department, I could not refer them on, because the GP would not fund it. They had to go back to the GP and start again. That was both inefficient and, at times, dangerous.

Unfortunately, I have to criticise official Opposition Members, because I remember in 1997 when Labour got in and talked about going back to one NHS. Those of us who worked in the NHS were delighted. Sadly, we soon started to hear about foundation trusts and, in essence, we were back to the same policy. It was Labour that introduced independent treatment centres, initially with block contracts for common operations such as those on hips and knees. Most of those contracts were not met, and were therefore of incredibly poor value. GPs were being pushed to refer their patients to the ITCs. That was eventually recognised, and the move was made towards payment by results, which eventually led to the tariff. Capital funding was also kept off the books, leading to the private finance initiative, which we have discussed many times in this place. PFI has been shown to result in between £150 million and £200 million of profit per year for the companies that hold the contracts. That is putting a huge strain on many trusts.

In the 2010 election, the Conservatives promised no top-down reorganisation. Unfortunately, just a couple of years later, with the introduction of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, we saw that that was not true. The Act came into force in April 2013, and section 75 in particular pushed commissioning groups to put contracts out for tender. That has created relentless pressure to bring independent sector providers into the NHS. As the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned, it has risen from £2.2 billion in 2006 to £9 billion in 2016-17, more than 10 years later. That is approximately the same cost as providing all GP services, so it is not a minor cost; it is significant. The independent treatment sector in 2015-16 won approximately 34% of contracts—a figure that rose to 43% in 2016-17. However, as the independent treatment sector has moved towards more community services, it is now winning approximately 60% of contracts. There is no question but that there is greater involvement of private companies in providing healthcare.

We hear all the time about waste in the NHS, but we have had circular reorganisation throughout my career—from 100 health authorities to 300 primary care trusts, to 150 primary care trusts and to a little more than 200 clinical commissioning groups. CCGs were described as putting power into GPs’ hands, but less than half of CCGs have a majority of clinicians on them, and less than 18% have a majority of GPs. We are now going to go through another change, with the introduction of 44 sustainability and transformation plans or accountable care organisations. The costs associated with the redesign, the redundancies, the new organisations, the external consultants and the change managers are all described as one-offs, but this has been repeated relentlessly over the past 30 years and has resulted in huge waste. Much smaller organisations, such as hospital trust and ambulance trusts, are now run by very senior managers with multi-million pound salaries—the same size as those received by the people who ran health authorities at the start of all this. That is a waste.
Then there are the running costs of the market itself—the contracting design, the tendering, the bid teams, the corporate lawyers, the billing and the profits. The costs of the system are utterly opaque. It is not possible to penetrate the veil of commercial sensitivity, and the Department of Health does absolutely nothing to show where public money is spent. It is estimated that the cost of the English healthcare market is between £5 billion and £20 billion—no one really knows. We have no evidence of precisely how high the costs are, and there is absolutely no evidence of a benefit, so it is not possible to do a cost-benefit analysis.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is talking about the efficiency of the system, but is she aware that the Commonwealth Fund report, which addresses some of the issues she is talking about, described the NHS as the most efficient healthcare system in the world?

Dr Whitford: The 2014 “Mirror, Mirror” report was actually based on the years before the Health and Social Care Act 2012 came into force—2010 to 2013—and at that time the NHS was No. 1 in eight out of 11 markers. That was due not to privatisation, but to easy accessibility. One of the key things is that patients can access the NHS quickly and easily. That ranking is not based on the system of reform that the Health and Social Care Act introduced.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady seems to be implying that the internal market is a problem, but it has been in place since my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) was the Chancellor. Efficiencies have been driven, and she must take into account the internal market reforms that are in play.

Dr Whitford: The difference is that the original market was an internal market; what we have at the moment is an external market, which means that money is leaving the NHS and going to external companies. That is quite different from competition among hospitals.

To tackle waste, we should start with the cost of the market. Even if it is at the lowest end—£5 billion—it would help to clear the debt and pay for the hole in social care. It would make a significant difference.

In the five years leading up to 2013, the NHS always somehow managed to find money down the back of the sofa, and it scraped out with about £500 million at the end of each year. In 2013-14, it was overdrawn by £100 million. The next year, the figure was £800 million, and in 2015-16, it was £2.5 billion. People sometimes say, “There’s this little bit of efficiency, and this little bit has been saved”, but when I started the UK spent 4.5% of its GDP on health, and the highest it reached was 9%. Imagine if all that money had gone to frontline care, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton talked about, and was used to pay nurses properly, get rid of bureaucracy and actually deliver care. We can do that only if we have a planned single system; we cannot do it if we create an entire bureaucracy.

Scotland diverged in 1999 when we got devolution. We abolished hospital trusts in 2004 and primary care trusts in 2008. We have place-based planning in the form of health boards, which have led to the integration of primary and secondary care. We now face the difficult challenge of the integrated joint boards for integrating health and social care. Look at our success: in-patient satisfaction is up to 90%, delayed discharges have been down every single year and Scotland has had the best accident and emergency performance since March 2015. In February, emergency department performance in Scotland was 90.3% in four hours; in England, it was 76.9%. Look at how the challenge evolved: it literally started in April 2013, when the NHS in England came under pressure.

I have frequently welcomed the plan to move to place-based planning. I agree that the term “accountable care organisations” is unfortunate, but the model contracts put out in August still make it clear that independent sector providers could bid to run an entire accountable care organisation. There is no statutory structure. The basis must be that there absolutely has to be accountability and a statutory responsibility. I believe there should be a presumption of a return to the NHS.

It is crucial that we reform the perverse incentives. Hon. Members have mentioned the tariff. Hospitals earn money only if people are admitted. They make money out of those who are not that sick and lose money on people who are incredibly sick. How will a hospital take part in this if keeping people in the community, which we all want, means that they lose money? That should be reformed in this place. Section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act caused the Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust to waste £500,000 preparing a bid for the Nottingham Treatment Centre against Circle, which then just pulled out. Hon. Members have mentioned that Virgin has sued six Surrey CCGs, one of which leaked that it is paying £328,000. Multiply that by six, and we are talking £2 million. The idea that outsourcing to private companies has brought benefits simply does not stack up. We are putting money into care. Get rid of outsourcing and fragmentation. I support the idea of place-based planning, but patients, not budgets, have got to be in the middle of it.

7.7 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on the eloquent and knowledgeable way in which he introduced the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He took us through a brief history of the health service and private sector involvement in it, and talked about the fears that have been expressed about the future of private involvement, particularly through the tendering process and the potential trade deals with other countries. I was very sorry to hear about his constituent, Connor McDade, and I would like to send my condolences to his family. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the staff who looked after Connor and to all staff in the NHS, who make it the institution we feel passionately about.

That passion is demonstrated by the fact that, by the time we finish the debate, more than 20 Members will have spoken. Unfortunately, because of the number who have spoken, I am not able to go through every single contribution, but I want to draw attention to some of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) made an excellent speech in which he told us in detail how Lancashire has fragmented under the Health
and Social Care Act 2012, and said that a High Court judge has blocked a £4 million Virgin Care contract. Later, I will talk about some of the adverse consequences of the 2012 Act in terms of litigation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) rightly raised concerns about the fact that the pursuit of profit can put patient care at risk. He gave a number of examples of the litigation that has been forthcoming, and he was ably assisted by my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the wholly owned subsidiary that is proposed for his area. He is right that such a major change should not be proposed without being referred to hon. Members or members of the public. He asked a number of pertinent questions, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s replies.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked about the wholly owned subsidiary company in his constituency. I was pleased to hear that his trust has at least responded to hon. Members’ concerns and is taking stock before moving on. I agree that there needs to be equality across all trusts in respect of the funding base upon which they make such decisions. He was absolutely right to say that it is not only clinical staff who make the NHS what it is today. Sometimes we do not recognise the valuable contribution that those who work behind the scenes make to the smooth running of our services.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) gave a tour de force of a speech. She is a greatly experienced health campaigner and described three fundamental problems with how the health service is run at the moment: transparency, accountability and the prioritisation of shareholder gain. How can it be right for a publicly funded service to refuse to answer questions from an hon. Member on the basis of “commercial confidentiality”, a phrase that can cover a whole range of things? I shall say no more at this stage, other than that I think it is important that we look at that matter seriously in future.

Later, I will talk about some of the adverse consequences of the pursuit of profit in the health service. However, on the contribution of the hon. Gentleman himself, I have to say that I disagree with him—this debate is about not a local election or weaponising the NHS, but about the 240,000 members of the public who signed the petition, which was launched some five months ago.

The hon. Gentleman also challenged us to find Conservative Members in support of privatisation—they may not express that support publicly, but we need only look at what has happened to the health service under a Conservative Government to see that privatisation has accelerated since 2010. There is also the famous 2005 pamphlet that advocated privatisation of the NHS. The Health Secretary has, I know, disowned his comments as one of the co-authors, saying that the pamphlet no longer represents his views, but at least five other current Conservative Members were co-authors, so there are questions to be asked about it of those on the Government Benches.

As other Members have said, private sector involvement has of course always been an element of the NHS, but since the Health and Social Care Act came into force there has been a step change in that involvement. After the Act became law, the amount of cash going to private sector partners went up by a staggering 25% in the first year alone. That is part of a broader trend identified by House of Commons Library research—the equivalent of £9 billion a year of NHS funds now goes into the private sector, which is double the figure under the previous Labour Government.

As we have heard, there are also huge problems with litigation arising from the 2012 Act. Money should not be spent on lawyers, procurement processes, tendering and court cases; it should be spent on patients. Given the longest and most sustained financial squeeze in the history of the NHS, we can ill afford money to be used in that way. The financial squeeze has also had consequences for how NHS hospitals are forced to use the private sector. Elective procedures in the private sector have gone up by 58% in the past year alone.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Justin Madders: I am sorry, I shall take no more interventions, because I am struggling for time.

Patients are voting with their feet. Owing to the deterioration in waiting times, over three years the number of patients going abroad for treatment has trebled to 144,000 last year. With the Government abandoning the 18-week waiting time target, and the widespread rationing of some treatments, that figure will surely get worse. Does the Minister accept that those figures are a matter of concern, and does he expect them to increase or decrease in the next 12 months?

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on a matter of record?

Justin Madders: Okay.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful. The hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong, but I think he said that the growth rate in outsourcing has increased under this Government and the coalition. Full Fact, however, states that the growth rate was similar under both Governments—the Governments since 2010 and the previous Government.

Richard Graham: I was struck by how the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), as always, gave a formidable speech about the issues affecting our national health service. She set out many areas.

Richard Graham: Furthermore, she made no recognition of the fact that issues such as subsidiary companies and so on are separate from the points she was making and absolutely not about privatisation.

Justin Madders: Members are indicating that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central did take interventions. It is not for me to comment on that, but I thought her speech was superb, and it came from many years of experience in the health service. However, on...
Justin Madders: I am familiar not with those particular figures but with the House of Commons Library research, to which all Members have access and which was available in the brief for this debate.

A number of Members talked about wholly owned subsidiaries, and how they can undermine terms and conditions and open a back-door route to potential privatisation of the NHS. So far, the Government have kept that back door open. There are no guarantees that such companies will not end up in private hands in future, or that the recently announced and much welcomed pay rise for NHS staff will apply to those employed by those subsidiaries. Will the Minister agree that, as a matter of fairness, staff working in the subsidiaries should also receive the pay rise proposed by the Government?

In recent years many NHS trusts have set up those private companies, and up to 8,000 posts could potentially be affected—some reports have suggested that up to 40 trusts are now considering such arrangements. If completed, that would represent one of the biggest transfers of NHS staff and resources. We know the financial pressures that trusts are under, and some have sought to justify such moves as a way of saving VAT, so we can understand the dilemma facing trusts—the funding restrictions in the NHS have been some of the most difficult in living memory.

The overall position, however, is that there would be no saving to the taxpayer—although individual trusts may make a saving—because whatever is lost to the Treasury has to be made up elsewhere. It is incumbent on the Minister to take action to ensure that all trusts are on a level playing field. The fact that they have done nothing so far adds to the suspicion that they are allowing, whether by accident, design or indifference, the fragmentation and privatisation of the NHS. I have some sympathy with the trusts making those proposals, but when one looks at the amount spent on management consultants, one starts to wonder whether the money could be better spent on other priorities.

Near my constituency, for example, the Clatterbridge Cancer Centre has spent more than £661,000 establishing a wholly owned subsidiary. The figures show wholly owned subsidiaries to have been extremely profitable for consultants in recent years and, despite a 2010 ministerial pledge to reduce managerial costs by 45%, annual expenditure on management consultants increased by 104% between 2010 and 2014. A study by the University of Warwick evaluated the expenditure, and the principal finding was that the use of management consultants was associated with a small decrease in efficiency. Has the Minister considered that report by Professor Kirkpatrick, and will he look again at the role of management consultants in the NHS?

I appreciate that I am running up against the time limit, so I will conclude. The people who have signed the petition are clearly articulating a concern about a hostile environment created by this Government. They wish to see a return to a properly funded, comprehensive, reintegrated and public NHS that is of course free at the point of use. It is time for there to be a Labour Government to deliver that vision.

7.18 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure once again to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank all Members who have contributed to this wide-ranging debate, in particular the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) who, as a member of the Petitions Committee, introduced today’s debate on the petition.

I join the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in expressing our condolences for Connor McDade, the constituent of the hon. Member for Hartlepool, especially given Connor’s tender age. That must be extremely traumatic for his family.

“As the NHS moves from a public sector monopoly to a truly patient-led service, exciting opportunities are opening up for hospitals and other providers, whether public, private or not-for-profit”— those are not my words, but the words of a Labour Secretary of State for Health in 2007. Perhaps, however, I am looking too far in the past and we should look to a more current Labour politician, such as the Mayor of Manchester, who was the last Labour Secretary of State. He said:

“Now the private sector puts its capacity into the NHS for the benefit of NHS patients”.

which I think most people in this country would celebrate. Indeed, the other of the three most recent Labour Secretaries of State, Mr Milburn, joined PwC in 2013 as chair of its UK health industry oversight board, whose objective was to drive change in the health sector and assist PwC in growing its presence in the health market.

As the hon. Member for Hartlepool recognised, from the outset, the NHS had always had a private treatment offer—I think he used those words. The key issue is where the care remains free at the point of access. That is enshrined in the 2012 Act and is reflected in many of the remarks made by Conservative Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) addressed the question of whether, alongside care being free at the point of access, there had been a step change in the number of private providers—that seems to have been the suggestion— notwithstanding the clear support from the last three Labour Secretaries of State for Health for such provision. It may surprise you, Mr Hosie, to learn that in the last year for which financial data is available, NHS commissioners purchased 7.7% of total healthcare from independent providers. In 2010, the figure was just under 5%, so the rates of growth in the use of private providers under this Government are not the same, as my hon. Friend suggested; they are lower than those under the previous Government. We need to put into a degree of context some of the scaremongering that there has been in this debate about privatisation and weaponisation of the NHS.

The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who is not in her place, talked about privatisation—in that context, several Members mentioned Carillion. Again, it may be helpful to remind the House that of 13 PFI contracts signed with Carillion for facilities management, 12 were agreed prior to May 2010. The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) suggested that she was keen to talk to Ministers about her concerns with Virgin Care. I accept that, just as with care within the NHS, there are lessons to be learnt in care from a private provider. The hon. Lady is not her place, but I am happy to accept her offer to meet her to learn from any past experience she has. The hon. Member for
Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) referred to PFI deals; as I said, many of those were signed by past Governments.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), in a first class, wide-ranging speech, referred to one of the key themes that came out of the debate: the importance of integrated care. Again, the weaponisation of this debate is highlighted by the fact that sustainability and transformation plans—as he said, they were endorsed by non-political bodies such as the King’s Fund—were characterised at the time by people such as Mrs Pollock as secret Tory privatisation. Indeed, the same person previously characterised Labour’s foundation trusts as privatisation. We have seen this privatisation badge given to successive changes as they have been applied. My hon. Friend is quite right that Simon Stevens was appointed as a special adviser by a Labour Government. His evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee was quite clear when he highlighted how many of these issues have been cited before.

The hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) spoke of his concerns about fragmentation. I hope that he will welcome the shift to place-based commissioning and a focus on greater integration between commissioners. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) identified the fact that patients’ outcomes are uppermost in the approach. That is very much reflected in the example she gave of the better care fund, which is all about how we bring health and social care together. An example of that is the change that the Prime Minister made by bringing the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), into the Department to look at how we can better integrate.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) suggested that the role of private firms had doubled since 2010. As I said, that is just not correct—the figure has gone from 5% to 7.7%, so the facts dispute that. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), in a very good speech, correctly highlighted the poor value for money of many PFI deals. That is why the Treasury changed the terms by which those Labour PFI deals are now contracted. It is right that we learn many lessons from them.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) raised a number of very fair, genuine and worthwhile points. I will quickly try to address them, although I refer to a previous debate in this Chamber on subsidiaries, where we aired some of the points that he raised. Subsidiaries are 100% owned by the NHS, so any financial benefit they gain is retained within the NHS family. They are an alternative to having to contract outside the NHS family, so they help to keep money in the NHS. It is also worth bearing in mind that the staff surveys often show, contrary to some of the remarks, that many staff have welcomed them—there was a 15% increase in staff survey responses in one hospital. To take another, Barnsley saw a six-fold increase in the number of applicants to roles, because the better flexibility and up-front salary offset against pension is one of the attractions that many staff feel that subsidiaries offer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Andrew Selous) made by a number of my hon. Friends: the absolute, rock-solid commitment on this side of the House to treatment being free at the point of use. He gave the example of waiting for care—a critical point and something that none of us wishes to see; under this Government we will not see that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) very correctly identified how private provision can, when correctly commissioned, bring quicker care. A good example of some of the subsidiaries is diagnostic care, where clearly it is in the interest of patients to get the results of their tests quicker.

I recognise, as the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) highlighted, that there needs to be transparency in respect of outsourced contracts. When I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee, a phrase we often referred to was “following the taxpayer’s pound.” That stood then and it stands now. I am very happy to work with the hon. Lady on how we can ensure that we are able to follow the taxpayer’s pound and address areas of variance. Variance applies in the NHS family, but it also applies in the private sector. I am very happy to work with her, just as I am looking forward to a visit, on a cross-party basis, to look at some of the specific issues at the Liverpool Community trust that she correctly identified and brought to the House. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachel Maskell) said that no one wants to work for subsidiary companies; as I said, patients’ survey data suggests that is not the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) highlighted how outsourcing is dressed up as a threat to treatment being free at the point of use; he is right to highlight the way that is being misportrayed and his pride in the fact that there is no payment requirement for treatment. He also highlighted the diverse mix in hospices, with charities such as Macmillan, which are not part of the NHS. No one would suggest that that is privatisation; this petition, which likens all outsourcing to privatisation, is deeply misleading.

I want to allow a minute for the hon. Member for Hartlepool to make his concluding remarks, so I conclude by reaffirming the absolute commitment of this Government to maintain treatment free at the point of use, but also always to put the needs of patients first and to respect value for money for the taxpayer. That has been reflected in many of the remarks from hon. Members across the House, and it is the essence of this Government’s approach.

7.29 pm

Mike Hill: I thank all hon. Members for their powerful contributions, and I thank the petitioners, whose numbers helped to secure this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 205106 relating to the privatisation of NHS services.

Sitting adjourned.
Street Homelessness

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thought I had had the most interesting February recess, but in fact you were sailing through the south Atlantic to South Georgia in rather hazardous circumstances, so I will defer to you.

In the February recess, I wandered into Covent Garden, armed with some cardboard that I had taken from outside a store, and I bedded down for a night under the awning of St Paul’s church. I was there with a very friendly Italian man and a Romanian couple, who were busy checking their phones before going to sleep. My idea was to spend as many days as I could updating myself on the situation of the street homeless in London. I first did that 27 years ago as a much thinner and fitter ex-Army officer, who had only just left the Army and who was trying to become a television reporter. In February, 27 years later, I was doing the same thing as a much fatter Member of Parliament.

I wanted to understand what the Government strategies are to end street homelessness. The Government and the Prime Minister herself have said that they want to eliminate it within 10 years. I wondered how we will do that and whether it will really be possible. I also wanted to look at what effect the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is likely to have.

I emphasise that, from my perspective, this debate is about street homelessness, which is the obvious problem. There is, however, also the much bigger problem of sofa surfing, which I am not covering at all, although I acknowledge that it is very much there.

Some things have changed, and some things are the same. Things that are the same are the kindness and compassion of members of the public and of the charities dealing with this problem.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. One of the most profoundly moving things I have heard—possibly he heard it too—was after the recent passing of the Rangers and Chelsea footballer Ray Wilkins. On the radio, a moving tribute was paid live on air by a homeless man, who said that, when he was outside a tube station in London, the person who came to him, took him for a hot drink, gave him some money and changed his life was Ray Wilkins. That man said in his tribute that the world might remember Ray Wilkins the footballer, but he will remember the man who saved his life.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered street homelessness.

The other thing that has changed is that the Mayor of London, Westminster City Council, councils across the country and indeed the Government—I do not speak for the Government; I wish I did, but I am just a passed-over Back Bencher—are taking this problem extremely seriously, and I genuinely believe that. The No Second Night Out programme is a good example.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Earlier he mentioned voluntary organisations, and I am sure he agrees that we should pay tribute to those in Coventry, such as the Cyrenians. They are underfunded to a certain extent, which we could have a debate about, but the serious issue is what to do about the problem. We need go less than 100 yards from here, across the road, and every morning we can see someone sleeping rough just under cover where the bookshop is. It is a serious problem, so how do we tackle it? I understand that a private Member’s Bill became law last April—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Adam Holloway: What a lovely story—I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Adam Holloway: I have not come across the Cyrenians, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that across the road is an excellent sleep spot.

The No Second Night Out programme is a good example of an early intervention service. It was launched in 2011 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), now the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and it aims to ensure that no one, once identified, spends a second night sleeping rough in central London. More recently, Sadiq Khan has gone further and set up the No Nights Sleeping Rough Taskforce, trying to come up with new solutions. The taskforce brings together boroughs, voluntary organisations and central Government.

Apart from the proactiveness of the agencies that are helping, I noticed some other differences. In February 2018 the majority of the people I came across living on the streets were foreign nationals. One evening, at a soup kitchen on the Strand, there were—I will not exaggerate this—certainly 200 people. Various church groups—from Maidenhead, I think—and some Ahmadiyya Muslims, a Sikh group and an evangelical group were helping out. I wandered about while shawls and brand-new trainers were handed out, and I honestly did not hear English being spoken by anyone. I heard east European languages, Arabic and Italian.

The statistics seem to bear out my anecdotal evidence. Information collected by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network—the joint agency of people working with rough sleepers that is run by the excellent charity St Mungo’s—records that, in 2016-17, of the rough sleepers in London for whom nationality information was available, 30% were from central and eastern Europe. The figure for non-UK nationals overall was 52.6%; that does not include those who do not wish to give a nationality, and other sources put the figure nearer 60%, which was certainly my experience.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I note that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that those figures relate to London. Does he accept that, UK-wide, only 4% of rough sleepers in England are non-European Union
national and 16% are EU non-UK nationals? Will he join me in thanking those faith groups who go out to serve all communities, regardless of background, and to help people who are in the direst of straits if they are rough sleeping?

Adam Holloway: Well, of course—the hon. Lady need not even have bothered asking the latter question, because it is a no-brainer, isn’t it? As for the numbers for the rest of the country, I do not know—I have not looked at them—but they are very interesting. There are many different people with different sets of figures, and I am sure that hers are correct. With the example of the numbers of foreign nationals living homeless in London, we can take our pick, but the CHAIN figure is the most reliable—I do not think that the figure is much more than 60%, but nor do I think it is much less.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Adam Holloway: I will in a minute, but I have only got to page 3 of my speech, and I have quite a few more pages, some of which will go on to cover voluntary organisations, for example, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier.

Mr Cunningham: I have another slant on this.

Adam Holloway: Go on.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. One of the things that the figures mask is that some people are asylum seekers with no status, going from home to home. In fact, on Monday, I met a group of people who are concerned about this. The figure of 4%, or whatever it might be, belies the real figure. Does he agree?

Adam Holloway: Yes. As I said at the beginning of my speech, this debate is about street homelessness, and I totally accept that there is a much bigger and much less visible problem of people sofa surfing. Indeed, tomorrow morning I will be seeing an asylum seeker without recourse to public funds who is in exactly the position that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

Going on to the reasons for rough sleeping in 1991 and now, the demographic of the people I met on the streets recently is clearly different, because of the foreign nationals, but the reasons for people being there are as sad and complicated as they always were. Once again, I met that seemingly intractable group—the mentally ill, the drug addicted and, in particular, people suffering from mental health issues. Of the what one might describe as “genuinely” street homeless, the overriding majority had some sort of mental health issue, which is compounded by living on the streets and by drug or alcohol addiction.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I had the privilege of being involved in a similar project in Cheltenham. I was aware of nine rough sleepers, often with complex needs relating to substance misuse or poor mental health, as he indicated. Does he agree that, in those circumstances, there can be no substitute for qualified expert and intensive support, such as that provided by P3 in Cheltenham, and that we should continue to fund that generously?

Adam Holloway: I do not know P3, but I am aware that it does great work. I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to that point. How we deal with the mentally ill and the drug addicted, how quickly they have access to support, and how the money goes to the teams on the ground is a very important part.

Some of the street homeless I spoke to were ex-soldiers. One had separated from his German wife, whom he had met during our time in the Rhine. She had taken the children back there, and he had been living in a forest in Germany for four months. He had come back to London before trying to head back down to the west country.

There are also ex-offenders, some of whom leave prison with £46 in their pocket, although I did not meet any of them. I am sure that there are also those who lost their homes as a result of benefits sanctions, financial problems or the breakdown of relationships, although despite speaking to many dozens of homeless people, I did not come across any of them. But, of course, there are many of them, and there will be many more in the sofa-surfing sector, which we discussed.

The most common theme was mental illness of some kind. If hon. Members have walked along the road to Victoria station, they will have seen all the people zombified out of their heads on this horrible synthetic cannabis, Spice. I spent a night sleeping there, round the back of the “goods in” entrance to McDonalds. I was looking for a suitable place to sleep, and I found a guy sitting on his own. I wandered up to him and had a bit of chat. He was an alcoholic and quite lonely, and he was quite nervous of all the Spice guys in the area. He said that I could bed down next to him, which I did. He was 30, from the north of England and quite anxious for company. As we lay there in our sleeping bags—him drinking beer—he told me that he had a flat outside London; in fact, he showed me the keys. But he said that when he is in the flat, he just sits there, getting wasted, and sees nobody. I found it terribly sad that he was so lonely that he preferred to be out on the street. That guy illustrates the complexity of rough sleeping and why the problem persists, even when money is being poured into the system and huge numbers of different services exist.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and going on to the streets to find out the realities for himself. I have to respond to the point about pouring money into the system. That is absolutely not the case; money is being poured into the system to react to a crisis. The crisis is caused by the breakdown of our public realm—the decimation of frontline public services and the lack of mental health services and drugs and alcohol services. On the one hand, the Government are pouring in ring-fenced money to tackle the problem, but the breakdown of the social fabric of our society—like in the ’80s and ’90s—is the reason we have such a high level of rough sleeping.

Adam Holloway: As I said, I would like to be in the Government, but I am not. We will hear from the Minister, who I think will confirm that enormous amounts
of money are being poured in. The hon. Gentleman may have a case in terms of sofa surfers, but for the hard-core rough sleepers, I cannot agree with him. I did not come across the sort of people that he characterised. I accept that, in terms of the other group, he may well be correct, but I think that the number of rough sleepers has much to do with the very high levels of eastern European immigration over the last few years. But he is absolutely right that we still have the intractable problem that, whether or not people think we are pouring in money, we are not getting to the people at the very bottom—I will come to them in a minute.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his initiative to put focus on this issue. Over the Easter recess, I did the 6 am shift with police community support officer Steve Hart, in Sheffield, where I met all the people sleeping in doorways and stairwells. None of them were foreign nationals—they were all British—and they all had the sort of complex problems that he describes. I talked to the agencies that worked with them; the reason why those numbers have gone up each year over the last few years is surely that, whether or not people think we are pouring in money, we are not getting to the people at the third person—“him” or “her”.

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab) rose—

Adam Holloway: Thank you, Mr Gray. I can only go by my own experience. I am very keen that we should get to the people who are in real need and that we should start treating people as individuals rather than lumping them all together and suggesting that everyone has the same need. I am trying to be honest; I can only go with my experience of three months back in the ‘90s.

Adam Holloway: Again, I do not want to be a cop-out, but I will throw that to the Minister. If someone is fit and of sound mind, there are all sorts of services, although not quite 24 hours a day, that make it possible to sleep out. I am 52 years old and I was in the Army; to be honest, sleeping rough in central London is a lot more comfortable than going on exercise when I was in the Army. For those who are mentally ill, drug addicted, old or personality disordered, it is a very different thing.

Laura Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Adam Holloway: Can I go on a little bit, unless the hon. Lady is desperate on this point?

Laura Smith: I will hold on.

Adam Holloway: We have to accept that some people are able to sleep rough in our cities because there are the resources to do so.

Laura Smith: Sorry, I cannot hold on. I have been out with homeless people in Crewe and Nantwich, and I do not relate to what the hon. Gentleman is saying at all. Does he agree that an area that needs to be looked at more closely is the high rate of benefit sanctions among homeless service users and the impact of those sanctions?

Adam Holloway: As I said at the beginning, this is a debate about street homelessness. I accept that is probably true in that other sector, but I did not come across it, and I am here to talk about my experience, so I do not know.

The hon. Lady said that she does not recognise what I was saying. I am not saying that even a large minority of the homeless are there because there are resources for them. I am trying to say, and I will develop this later, that we will get nowhere in solving the problem and getting to the people who are most needy if we just continue to talk about the homeless and feel sorry for everybody. We have to focus on the people in real need. Come out with me some time, and I will show you.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I go and help the homeless in my community; we have great volunteers who also help them all the time. Thank you, but we are interpreting the issue completely differently. It worries me that you are not recognising some of the real, ingrained problems. I do not think that anybody would choose to sleep rough—I do not buy that.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman replies, I must make a couple of boring points. First, interventions are getting terribly long—Members must make short, one-sentence interventions. Secondly, any Member who says “you” means me. If Members refer to another Member, they must use the third person—“him” or “her”.

Adam Holloway: Thank you, Mr Gray. I can only go by my own experience. I am very keen that we should get to the people who are in real need and that we should start treating people as individuals rather than lumping them all together and suggesting that everyone has the same need. I am trying to be honest; I can only go with my experience of three months back in the ‘90s.

James Gray (in the Chair): No, I have not.

Laura Smith: Sorry. As the hon. Gentleman just said, we should not lump all homeless people together; rather, we should look at them individually. Does he agree that, based on his own experience, he is taking a broad-brush approach to all homeless people, and that is incorrect?

Adam Holloway: Well, I am not—actually, I have just turned the page, and I am now on page five of 14. I hope I do not give that impression, because I certainly do not think that. People are on the street for a reason. The problem is not homelessness—although of course that is a problem—but whatever reason someone is on the street. I do not think we disagree at all, but I will get to the hon. Lady’s point.

What was my experience with No Second Night Out? That initiative is based on the idea that once someone is identified, they will not spend a second night out. That happens in cities up and down the country. I reported myself to the StreetLink helpline, and I was woken up at about 2 o’clock in the morning by two outreach workers and asked whether I would like to get in an Addison Lee taxi to go to the No Second Night Out south hub in Hither Green. No Second Night Out has three hubs in London—one in the east, one in the north and one in the south. I had a 3 am interview with a charming, extremely competent and razor-sharp member of staff, and I was then taken into an L-shaped room
about a third of the size of this Chamber where about 30 people were camped out on the floor with their own bedding. I squeezed into the one remaining space between a refrigerator and some French windows. I got up the next morning, had a Pret A Manger sandwich and some coffee, and later had an assessment interview. Not wanting to take a valuable place, I made my excuses and left.

To be honest, I was quite relieved when I left. The thought of spending days or weeks sleeping on the floor in a cramped room between the refrigerator and the French windows did not appeal to me much. I can completely see how, for someone able-bodied and of sound mind, it would be much more appealing to sleep under the awning of St Paul’s church in Covent Garden or at the “goods in” entrance round the back of McDonald’s in Victoria, because people have freedom in those places. Also, if I were a drug addict, I do not think I would find it hard to put in terms quite how extraordinary the staff of St Mungo’s are. Having made my excuses and left, I was walking down the street, and I had gone round the corner from the hostel when its manager ran left, I was walking down the street, and I had gone round the corner from the hostel when its manager ran out and said, “No, no, no—you don’t have to do this yourself. Come back and we will sort you out.” It was quite remarkable.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Prior to becoming an MP, I worked for YMCA Birmingham dealing with homeless young people. Will my hon. Friend join me in celebrating the £2.2 million it was recently granted by the Government to refurbish its 72-bed hostel in Northfield, creating facilities for organisations such as Mind to provide support to formerly homeless people?

Adam Holloway: Absolutely. Indeed, I experienced that. For another programme I made some years ago, I pretended to be a homeless mentally ill person in Birmingham. When I was discharged from Queen Elizabeth psychiatric hospital, I went to that very institution and the people there arranged to look after me. That was 30 years ago.

Laura Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Adam Holloway: Yes, of course—I love the outrage.

Laura Smith: I find it unbelievable that the hon. Gentleman would pretend to be a homeless mentally ill person. That just shows how detached he is from the situation. I find that insulting.

Adam Holloway: All I can do is suggest that the hon. Lady watches that “World in Action” series from 27 years ago and draws her own conclusions about whether that was a good thing. Let us have a chat about it when she has done that.

Let us carry on with some realities. It is very depressing, after 27 years, to look at streets with the same cohorts of mentally ill and drug-addicted people on them—the people who fall through the cracks in the system. Although the police are more able to intervene when a mentally ill person is on the streets and local authorities have particular duties to those who are vulnerable due to mental illness, the reality is that someone who has had serious psychiatric problems is extremely unlikely to maintain a tenancy or stay off the streets for some time. Indeed, I had not appreciated the churn of people—even when people are engaged, the system does not seem able to keep them for the time that it needs to.

Let us be honest about the correlation between immigration and the rising number of street homeless. It is no surprise to me that, in 2016-17, 1,950 rough sleepers were migrants from Romania, Poland and Lithuania. Obviously, homelessness is a much greater risk when people are far from home and from familial support structures. It became clear to me that some migrants sleep on the streets by choice, preferring to sleep rough than to pay for accommodation. It is a no-brainer that years of high immigration and of successive Governments not building enough houses will have a knock-on effect for people at the bottom of society. Of course that will make rents unaffordable.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Scottish National party Scottish Government have presided over a decade-long slump in Scottish housing? We went from almost 26,000 new builds in 2007 to almost 17,000 in 2016. That is totally unacceptable, and it has fuelled homelessness in Scotland.

Adam Holloway: The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), will attest to the fact that I am not well enough versed on what is happening in the rest of the country, so I cannot answer that question, but if my hon. Friend says that, I imagine it must be true.

On people from eastern Europe, perhaps it is time to ask ourselves whether it is exploitative to build an economy on cheap labour provided by those who can barely afford to accommodate themselves in our country. We could of course argue that those people are not strictly homeless, because they might have a home back home, but that is their reality when they are here.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) alluded to the housing crisis. We must face up to the inevitable impact of that crisis, and of the related issues of lack of supply and affordability, on homelessness. It is estimated that between 2010 and 2016, population growth, including net international migration, was around 1.58 million. The number of rough sleepers has increased by 169% since 2010. In 2016-17, the housing stock in the UK increased by around 217,000 residential dwellings—an increase of 15% from the previous year, but short of the estimated quarter of a million-odd new homes required to keep up with household formation.

It is not difficult to see that the sums just do not add up, including under this Government. Although the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 strengthens the duties of local authorities to provide advisory services to people threatened with homelessness and encourages pre-emptive action where house building has not kept up with population increases, it is absurd to think that that will not impact the people at the bottom of society who are often the most unseen—not those on the streets but those on sofas.
We must address the fact that homelessness impacts men and women in different ways. Rough sleepers are overwhelmingly men. During my recent stint on the streets, I saw only a handful of women whom I unscientifically judged to be street homeless—the big giveaway is people carrying bags and suitcases. CHAIN data for 2016–17 shows that only 15% of rough sleepers in London were women. Part of the issue must be that those who care for young children—typically women—are rightly prioritised in the allocation of social housing. However, somewhere along the line we seem to have forgotten that men who live on the streets were once part of a family unit.

Laura Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Adam Holloway: I would love to give way again; the hon. Lady is so informed.

Laura Smith: Again, I am astounded by the misogynistic comment that it should be women who look after the children. I know that is a different issue to the debate, but I cannot let it go by.

Adam Holloway: I will read what I said again: part of the issue must be that the allocation of housing priorities goes to those who care for young children, who are typically women, and rightly so.

Laura Smith: “And rightly so”!

Adam Holloway: Yes, absolutely. It is right for housing priority to go to people who look after children, and typically they are women. Again, I am just stating the reality. If it is different, the hon. Lady should tell us.

Let us move on. We must recognise the particular challenge of mental health issues that affect men, and the way that men who battle for many years with the perceived stigma of mental health problems can be particularly susceptible to a sudden crisis that can lead to homelessness. I also learned about the ways homelessness affects women. Some women in London ride the bus for 24 hours a day to stay off the streets, and some go from place to place in return for a bed to sleep in.

We must also address the issue of how people’s generosity can sometimes be as much part of the problem as the solution. The man I met near Victoria station spent the night drinking beer bought with £30 that kind members of the public had come up and given him that evening. St Mungo’s staff told me of a client who had addicted drugs for many years and had a leg amputated as a result, but who finally managed to get clean. This man told them that if he had not been given money by the public for so long he would have sought help much sooner. Begging is part of the problem—an able-bodied person can make quite a lot of money from begging on the streets of London. Generosity by members of the public is a factor in this; generosity can be enabling and mask those in real need.

Fiona Onasanya: Will the hon. Gentleman please clarify whether he seeks to assert that people would rather be homeless and hope for public generosity than in a place where they can have their own income?

Adam Holloway: No, and rather like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), the hon. Lady is not listening. I am not saying that; I am saying that if someone is a drug addict, the generosity of members of the public can enable their addiction. I just gave the example of a guy who was on the streets for years and had a leg amputated, and who now believes that if the public had not been so generous, he might have sought help much sooner.

Fiona Onasanya: I recall the hon. Gentleman said that people can make money in order to buy drugs to feed their addiction—that point was pretty clear in what I said.

An added complexity is that there seems to be a perception among some of those involved in helping the homeless that in order to access services someone needs to sleep on the streets. Surely we should be helping people earlier. The endless churn of people entering the system—many of whom could and should have been helped earlier—makes the job of organisations who are trying to care for those vulnerable, and trapped, people even more difficult.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about the trapped nature of many homeless people. I recently visited a homeless shelter in Glasgow and I discovered a vicious cycle for people who might get a job, but they cannot then secure it because they do not have a bank account, and they cannot get a bank account because they do not have a job or permanent address. That puts people into a spiral of despair, which may well lead to them having addiction problems—no wonder they have addiction problems given the cycle of despair they are in.

Adam Holloway: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s overall point. I think the business of not having an address has been dealt with by quite a lot of charities, but it is clearly much harder to hold down a job for someone who also has the complexity of sorting themselves out every night and living on the streets. I definitely agree with that.

How should we tackle the problem? From my experience of sleeping rough in 2018, I would say that our priority must be to ensure that we do not make the mistake of lumping all rough sleepers together. That stops us recognising people’s problems, and often means that we do not have a job or permanent address. That puts people into a spiral of despair, which may well lead to them having addiction problems—no wonder they have addiction problems given the cycle of despair they are in.

Outreach workers also speak about their frustration at the lack of emergency mental health assessments, and the desperate need for help at the right time and in the right place. A supervisor at the No Second Night Out hub in London said that sometimes when someone arrives who is obviously suffering from a mental illness, the charity has to hold that severely mentally ill person
in the hostel for up to three weeks before they get a mental health assessment. During that time the support workers, who are not psychiatric nurses, have to try to contain the situation, which is hugely challenging. If the person is accepted into an NHS mental health unit—that does not always happen, particularly if the person is a drug addict—more often than not, as has been said, they are simply released on to the streets a few weeks later.

Clearly there is an urgent need for mental health teams to be embedded with outreach teams so that they can look at the needs of an individual and refer them without any delay for the treatment they require. Homelessness charities say that there is no point putting enormous amounts of money into general mental health budgets, where it just disappears. The money has to go to the tip of the spear and stay with those people as they go through the system, so that we do not get the churn I have spoken about.

Thankfully, the problem of homelessness seems to be higher up the political agenda than ever before, and the Government’s 2015 Budget increased central Government funding for homelessness programmes to £140-odd million over the following four years. However, it is important that that money is used correctly, at the tip of the spear, focusing on the immediate needs of those on the streets and getting them the help they require, rather than being wasted on intervention that comes too late or does not tackle the root cause of someone’s homelessness.

If we are serious about this issue—I think the Government’s target is potentially over-ambitious—we must see people as individuals not just as homeless people. We must differentiate between different groups and have the courage to look at whether the provision of service is enabling some people to live on the streets, but obscuring others from the help that they need. We must think carefully about whether public kindness is enabling some addiction, and whether by lumping everyone together we are masking those in real need. In this country where we spend gazillions of pounds on a welfare state, we must try to rescue the people at the very bottom of our society from roaming the streets of our cities.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front-Bench speakers in 20 minutes, and seven Members wish to speak. My rough arithmetic makes that three minutes each. I do not intend to impose a formal limit, but as a matter of courtesy to each other please speak for three minutes if at all possible.

10.8 am

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) on securing the debate and on his extraordinary account of what he learned.

I care passionately about this issue, as do other Opposition Members, because homelessness is the ultimate symbol of the gross inequality that scars our country and, in my case, the city region of Greater Manchester.

We are proud of the renaissance of Manchester, but we cannot celebrate the cranes in the sky, which represent growth and development, while so many people are sleeping in shop doorways before our eyes. This issue also matters to me because in the 1960s, a middle-aged woman was found sleeping in a Manchester park with her young twins. The police officer who found her said, “You can sleep here, madam, but the children can’t,” and they were whisked into care. That middle-aged woman was my grandmother, who was a war widow battling mental health problems, and the twins were my uncle and aunt. The point that I want to make is it that can happen to anyone, and anyone’s family.

Why do we face such a shocking situation—one that in my view is a repeat of the “no such thing as society” ’80s and ’90s? The hon. Member for Gravesham listed the range of people who could be rough sleepers. It is important to underline the need to look at things on an individual-by-individual basis, as there are many causes. Two points I want to make are that, first, many foreign nationals are of course not eligible for public funding, which creates a range of problems for the system and, secondly, that I do not think that the hon. Gentleman meant to say that someone is better off sleeping on the streets than being in the military. That would, I think, be a great indictment.

Adam Holloway: I just said that sleeping in central London, if someone is able-bodied, is no worse than being on exercises in the military. It certainly would not be the case for someone who was mentally ill or drug-addicted.

Mr Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification.

I want to talk about the consequences of the slash-and-burn approach that has decimated public services as a consequence of the Government’s policies. The rhetoric is about a shift to prevention and early intervention, but the reality is that slashing and burning local authorities’ budgets has reduced them to providing their minimum legal responsibilities. Prevention and early intervention go out of the window. As for voluntary organisations, we no longer hear the term “the big society”. The reason why that was killed—that it was dropped and never mentioned—was that at the same time as the Government were talking about the growth in the importance of voluntary organisations, they were slashing the funding that they depended on. It is nonsense to talk about the big society. The alleged commitment to localism has proved to be complete nonsense. If you were running a business, Mr Gray, and you had a 50% cut in your budget over four years, you would go bankrupt or would be likely to go out of business. That is what is happening to local authorities under all political direction throughout the country. We are paying a heavy price for that.

I welcome the ring-fenced money that the Government have made available to tackle the issues, especially in Greater Manchester, but the irony is that the money, which is not adequate, is necessary only because of the impact of their social policy failures and cuts. It is right, therefore, that in a debate of this kind we do not say, “Take the politics out of it.” There is a rough sleeping epidemic as a direct consequence of political decisions. However, it is incumbent on an Opposition to offer
creative and positive solutions, and Greater Manchester deserves tremendous credit for the innovative approach it is taking under the leadership of its Mayor, Andy Burnham, working with the 10 local authorities, the voluntary sector, faith groups and the private sector. The Mayor’s ambitious and morally right commitment is to end rough sleeping by 2020—seven years ahead of the Government commitment. They are committed only to ensuring that no one has to sleep on the streets of this country by 2027. I argue that that is a massive lack of ambition, in view of the humanitarian crisis.

Eddie Hughes: Mayors across the country have a role to play. We have heard about Sadiq Khan, and the hon. Gentleman has talked about Andy Burnham. Andy Street, in the West Midlands Combined Authority, chose homelessness as the first thing to address in his time as Mayor.

Mr Lewis: I congratulate Andy Street on making it a priority, but if the hon. Gentleman were to meet all the Mayors they would say the problems are the consequence of the breakdown of frontline services that many of the people we are talking about have traditionally depended on. I agree that Mayors have an important role to play, and I am proud of the groundbreaking approach that Andy Burnham is taking, which everyone acknowledges.

The first key element of a successful approach is high-level political leadership. It is of absolute importance that the people at the top should care about rough sleeping and homelessness and make that a priority. Another is that solutions should be co-produced with people who have lived experience of rough sleeping, and frontline organisations. The issue should never be about top-down solutions. There should be a clear strategy and plan, focused on reduction, respite, recovery and reconnection. As the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) said, there should be a personalised approach across organisational boundaries, with key workers, support plans and personal budgets. Also, we need innovative, imaginative public services. I am really proud of the innovative work being done by the NHS and the fire service in Greater Manchester. Expanded housing provision will sometimes need to involve specialist provision. The hon. Gentleman said that the issue is mainly about men, but what about specialist provision for women, who, often, are fleeing domestic abuse, and for young people?

There is a dearth of that provision.

There is also a key role for business. The corporate sector in most communities wants to help, and it is important that the statutory authorities find a vehicle to enable businesses to make a positive contribution, through their expertise and skills, and their willingness to make financial resources available. In Greater Manchester the Mayor’s fund and Big Change have been successful in putting together resources from a variety of sectors on a ring-fenced basis.

I agree with the hon. Member for Gravesham about the importance, in addition to support services and a rebuilt infrastructure, of tackling Spice. That is another epidemic, and I do not think that society is yet clear about how to tackle it. I also agree with him that it is of course appropriate, when we have succeeded in minimising the number of people on the streets, to take on the issue of begging on the streets by people who are not actually homeless and who have addresses. However, that is not the place to start. Public support should start with minimising the number of people who are sleeping rough.

Our society reached a post-war consensus that every citizen in this country should have access to free healthcare and universal education, and it is about time that in the same way we offered every citizen the right to a decent, affordable home.

James Gray (in the Chair): That was nearly nine minutes, squeezing out two colleagues.

10.17 am  
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for securing the debate.

In Penzance we have a problem, and across Cornwall two years ago we had the third highest level of rough sleeping in the country. When I ask people why, they say because it is the end of the line. People get on the train and get off when it stops in Penzance. There are rumours that local authorities buy people tickets to Penzance, but they are yet to be proved. I also know from personal experience about family breakdown, including instances when a new member of the family moves in and younger members feel they can no longer stay. Eviction for debt and so on has recently been a factor.

The problem is not new. In a previous job, many years ago, I worked for a local charity, and we supported homeless people. Long before food banks existed we set up help for them, providing food given by local people and tents and sleeping bags, as well as trying to get them better accommodation and support. Many years ago, under the Labour Government, there was a significant problem in Penzance, while I was on the district council. It was right that the council tried to address it, but unfortunately it caused extreme problems. The approach caused a lot of anxiety for those concerned and for the local communities, and cost several million pounds. The local authority just did not handle it correctly. I was concerned at the time for those who were homeless. It was right to help them, but things were poorly and ineffectively handled. That is why I am so encouraged by the efforts being made now; but we must proceed with caution.

Before I was married I invited a homeless man called Stan to come and live with me. It was quite funny as other people who came to the house were curious as to why there were two toothbrushes in the bathroom, and it started all sorts of rumours. What I learned was that more is needed than a roof over someone’s head, which I think is the point that has been made. In Penzance we have great services. Various meals are available throughout the day and there is support. All sorts of charities and other groups provide support, assistance and therapies.

Members on both sides of the House recognise that homelessness is a complex issue and can be solved only by everyone working together—including the police, local authority, voluntary sector, health and social care providers and landlords. It is true that house building must take place. We have not seen a significant amount of house building, and I am not yet aware of any scheme that is deliberately looking at how we can provide suitable housing for people who, as I have said, need more than just a roof over their head.
I will give three recent examples that have come into my casework folder of people who, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, could have been helped earlier. There was one family whose business went bust; their house was tied to their business and they lost their business and their home. The council knew well in advance, but the day they left their business they had nowhere to go. More recently, there was the eviction of a tenant where there had been lots of work previously to pursue and achieve the eviction, but very little support, and she had nowhere to go on the day. There was also a young man I met recently who wanted to be close to his family and his children, but the only option available to him was at the other end of the county.

Those are examples of people who become homeless, rough sleepers or sofa surfers, yet none of those cases was a surprise. There was plenty of warning for all those concerned to have helped them. Excuses and reasons given to me included that the property had a section 106 agreement and it was not available for their situation. Another public sector organisation said, “This is not our responsibility.” Another said, “We offered him temporary accommodation,” but, as I have described, it was miles from home. An email I received yesterday described a hostel in Cornwall—it is a hostel for ex-service personnel, with eight beds in the room, mixed sex and miles from home. The individual is “terrified and cannot sleep.” There is no doubt in my mind that more can and should be done.

I am encouraged by the fact that we recognise the issue and that significant money and effort are being put into it. Cornwall Council is receiving £648,000 this year and £846,000 next year to address the issue. My colleagues and I will be asking how it intends to ensure the money goes where it is needed. I welcome the opportunity to debate this big and complex issue, which will not easily be resolved.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief. It is clear that everyone has a backstory; it is certainly clear, from spending time with the homeless in York, that if decisions had been taken elsewhere in the system we would not be in the situation we are in. We have multi-agency failure due to the austerity measures and the harsh decisions of the council, which has resulted in homelessness exploding on the streets of York. In 2010, just two people were recorded as sleeping rough, but today the picture is completely changed.

The chief executive of Changing Lives, which provides one of the services in York, said that rough sleeping is now, “highly visible and we believe the numbers that will be counted later on in the year will be alarming.”

Even though he runs a service himself, he was “visibly shocked” at the levels of street homelessness in York and, of course, homelessness across the board is in an even more desperate situation.

The reasons for that are complex, but it is clear that some decisions can be made to change the situation, not least looking at the housing situation in York itself. It is absolutely hopeless for the council to say, “Go to the private rented sector,” because people cannot afford to live there. The broad rental market area for York does not match the true cost of housing in the city, due to the broad area it covers. Therefore, the private rented sector is not an option, yet people are still sent there by our service. I would like the Minister to look at that.

I would also like the Minister to look at the term “intentionally homeless”. I do not believe anybody makes themselves intentionally homeless. It is the council that intentionally makes people homeless. While we know that people have complex needs, there need to be alternative strategies for missed rental payments or antisocial behaviour, rather than people ending up intentionally homeless.

I also ask the Minister to look at what is happening with York’s local plan. The council is resubmitting it, seriously under-marking a number of housing types, particularly social housing. We need to disaggregate the terms affordable housing and social housing, but we need to put housing first for homeless people, as Nicholas Pleace at the University of York has more than adequately described. We need to look at what happens, because there is currently a punitive system in place around much of housing. We need to get it right, because people are really struggling in my city—local people, I stress.

The words of Sheila McKechnie will always stay with me. As a teenager, she fiercely held politicians to account to ensure they did not bypass the issues of homelessness. We need to ensure that no politician sits comfortably, even if strategies have been put in place, because it is a matter of such urgency. Different solutions are needed in different areas, and I ask the Minister to work with all of us to make sure that we find them.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I have scribbled out a lot of my speech, so I will try to crack on, with your best wishes, Mr Gray.

Homelessness is one of my key local campaigns, and something I have worked on consistently since being elected last year. I have visited most of the relevant services in Mansfield and brought both the previous Minister for homelessness, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and the Home Secretary to meet the public sector charitable organisations and businesses to look at various aspects of things we might do better locally.

It is fair to acknowledge that the Government has taken some important steps to tackle homelessness. The recently introduced Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is an important move in the right direction and can potentially help to reduce the number of people becoming homeless in the first place. Through my investigations over this year, I know that that prevention aspect of support was previously lacking. The flexible homelessness support grant is also welcome, providing £250,000 to Mansfield over three years.

In Mansfield, we have some brilliant supported housing associations, not least Framework Housing Association, the Nottingham Community Housing Association and others, that help to get people back on their feet after times of crisis. They would love to be able to offer ongoing support to the people who rely on them, but they struggle to access the funding to do so. Those
providers are experienced in the issues surrounding homelessness and are often best placed to offer local support and tailored services.

In my constituency it is not the housing itself that is the real challenge, but the complexity of need, including mental health difficulties or addiction. Providing support in managing those things, with financial management, can make all the difference. Too often the way is blocked by bureaucracy or protectionism over different organisations’ priorities and budgets. People cannot get support for a mental health problem if they are on drugs, but they cannot get support for their addiction if they have an obvious mental health problem. The problems are clearly interrelated, but the services are not.

Addressing mental health issues, providing tailored local support and a joined-up approach between housing, health and local social services is key to addressing the issue of homelessness. Most local stakeholders would agree that in Mansfield, our acute services are pretty good. If someone finds themselves homeless, they have a good chance of getting accommodation and support fairly quickly. The numbers of street homeless in Mansfield have fallen over recent years.

We have some amazing local groups and charities such as The Hall, the Beacon Project and the Soup Kitchen that provide excellent care and support, and most importantly link in with key services. What we do not have is a low-level ongoing support or prevention service, to help people to manage their money and maintain a tenancy as they move on, and to stop them ending up back on the streets. For an entrenched population of long-term homeless, that is key.

It is important to note that a significant number of people, as has been mentioned, might not feature in the rough sleeping statistics because they have hostel accommodation or another form of temporary accommodation. While as a first step hostels can provide useful accommodation for homeless people and help to provide shelter, they are not a long-term solution. The use of drugs and alcohol, threats of violence, theft, bullying and other issues can mean they are not the safe space that people deserve.

It is frequently acknowledged that bed-blocking is a significant problem in the NHS. There is also an increasingly problematic form of hostel bed-blocking, where former rough sleepers in hostels are ready to move on but there is no move-on accommodation or support to help them do so. A joined-up effort to look at the ways in which we can continue to make progress in reducing homelessness will need to involve all levels of Government, the NHS and social care, charities and voluntary groups. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; we must take a range of different approaches to deal with the problem.

I have argued over the last year that tackling homelessness must remain a priority and that the funding should reflect its importance. That funding should not just be based on numbers. London obviously gets a lot of cash because the numbers are incredibly high, but I will argue for Mansfield, where the numbers are comparatively small but we have a deeply entrenched population of long-term homeless, who simply will not be able to get back on their feet without some intense long-term support.

Finally, can the Minister tell us when we are likely to have an assessment of the impact of the Act and the success of the various trials of different services, such as Housing First in Manchester, that have been brought forward by Government? Are more proposals are likely to be brought forward to look at those prevention services that I mentioned, with a view to meeting the target of eradicating homelessness by 2027?

10.29 am

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Like others before me, I thank the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for securing this vital debate.

Homelessness affects probably every Member, not only of this Parliament but of the devolved Administrations and their respective Parliaments, who work side by side with local authority councillors and officers to help to resolve this huge issue. In my constituency of Falkirk, I work with a variety of other local organisations that willingly give their utmost to resolve this terrible situation, which too many of our constituents find themselves in.

Many interesting points have already been made. I have to praise the hon. Member for Gravesham for again getting out of his comfort zone and going to live with the homeless, some 27 years later. I read his report in The Daily Telegraph and thought it was extremely interesting on how different things are—or not—after such a long time. He asked why the problem still persists. It is a great question, and I would like some answers. He made some interesting observations in his report on that point, many of which have been mentioned. The two I noted were the No Second Night Out initiative, which I thought was excellent, and how all people cannot just be lumped together. That is extremely important.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in rural areas such as the one I represent, the difficulty is that, while we have always had hidden homelessness—people have slept in the woods and so on or have sofa-surfed—it is now street homelessness. We have to look at the dilemma of whether we provide a shelter or whether we try to find other ways of coping with these people. I would obviously prefer the latter. That shows the difference.

John Mc Nally: Hear, hear. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I come back to a point made earlier by the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who is not in her place. She mentioned the Scottish National party Government. I will quote Shelter Scotland to her, which warned, in evidence submitted to the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee, that the combination of universal credit and the UK Government’s benefit cap reduction and the cap on housing benefit, all “directly threaten tenancies and risk pushing more people into homelessness.”

None of us should tolerate that situation.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) impressed me with his points on the new Mayor’s ambitions. That is an extremely important development for these new powerhouses; taking decisions locally is vital for all areas. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) described the effect of austerity measures on increasing homelessness in her own area.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There has been a 32% increase in homelessness in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, contrary to popular belief, homelessness is not restricted to people who sleep rough? It encompasses a much wider range of individuals in a variety of circumstances—particularly those with mental health issues.

John McNally: I absolutely agree. I will come on later to describe some things I have already managed to do this year. I will first make other Members aware of what the Scottish Government are doing in relation to our own homelessness problems, and I will end my speech by taking the opportunity to mention two initiatives I recently had the honour of being asked to visit, to witness the innovative work being undertaken there to reduce homelessness in a very practical manner.

In Scotland, the SNP Government are taking action to end rough sleeping for good. Scotland has some of the strongest rights for homeless people in the world. A major change was made in the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003: from 31 January December 2012, the priority needs criteria were abolished. This was described by Shelter as providing “the best homelessness law in Europe”.

That is praise indeed. It was also described as very ambitious, and required 10 years of preparation between receiving Royal Assent in 2003 and coming into force at the end of 2012.

Everyone found to be homeless in Scotland is entitled to housing. Most people are provided with settled, permanent accommodation. Last winter—I hope it is now finished—the Scottish Government increased the capacity and capability of homelessness services in three Scottish cities, to meet the challenge of the harsh winter. As part of that strategy, the SNP Scottish Government set up the homelessness and rough sleeping action group to bring forward recommendations on how to eradicate rough sleeping, and also announced £150,000 of funding to extend some projects that had already been assisted in the winter.

Another great example of the Scottish Government’s commitment is the creation of the ending homelessness together fund of £50 million over five years from this year. Importantly, this focus on prevention has already contributed toward a significant fall in homelessness applications—a 38% reduction when compared with the number of applications between April and September 2007 and April and September 2017.

New recommendations to ensure the eradication of rough sleeping have been set out by the Scottish Government’s homelessness and rough sleeping action group. Some of the measures include a national system of rehousing, involving integrated support from frontline outreach services and, importantly, our own local authorities. For example, that includes moving to a Housing First model for those with the most complex needs, whereby people move straight into a permanent, settled home, rather than temporary accommodation.

The Scottish Government invested £320,000 to support additional capacity for night shelters and extra staff, to help more people into accommodation over the winter. More money—some £150,000—will be committed this summer to continue some services going forward.

Jon Sparkes, chair of the homelessness and rough sleeping action group and chief executive officer of Crisis, said he was very pleased that the Scottish Government have “given in principle support to all of the recommendations on ending rough sleeping from the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Action Group”.

That group has to be praised for the manner in which it has dedicated itself to bringing the right recommendations that will have the biggest impact on the way people sleeping rough can access and receive services. The new recommendations have also been welcomed by Annette Finnan and John Mills of the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers, who said: “ALACHO members will welcome these new recommendations, they reflect much of the good work that is already going on in local councils across Scotland.” That is praise indeed, and it is a good example of how Government and partners can work together.

As has been mentioned by many MPs when discussing Tory policy, welfare cuts are causing major hardship and housing insecurity for far too many people.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Between 2010 and 2015, funding to homeless services was cut by 45%. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that could be one of the main reasons for street homelessness?

John McNally: I absolutely and totally agree. That figure is in your face and unavoidable. The impact those cuts are having on our streets is unavoidable; how could anybody not see it?

The Westminster Government must scrap the punitive cuts that have pushed people into destitution. Other charities and organisations are left firefighting these decisions. I will mention some action that has been taken by way of education into employment—life-changing measures for the vulnerably housed and homeless.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the hair industry, I was honoured and privileged to attend a wonderful example of a community working together, in Exeter in Devon. Hair@theAcademy provides professional barbering courses for the homeless and vulnerably housed. A truly remarkable project, the academy has successfully piloted a level 2 certificate in barbering qualifications for six homeless adults. Those adults, who have issues, are all moving into full-time or part-time employment or self-employment. Before starting, all participants must complete a two-week citizenship course with Learn Devon, to ensure that they are clean and ready to begin learning.

The barbering course has the built-in flexibility to run over six months, recognising that there will be difficulties and issues. I would call it a magna vitae. It shows great, creative thinking from Learn Devon and from Mary Pugsley from Hair@theAcademy, who put the project together. What a great vision she has to help others who are more needy. The course is delivered with one-to-one tutoring, and as the learners become more confident, they are encouraged to become more independent in their learning journey. The courage of the businesses that support the course needs to be recognised. They have allowed these people to enter into life and have changed their lives and their way of living and their own communities are all the better for it.
10.39 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for securing this very important debate. The turnout of colleagues goes some way to demonstrating how important this issue is to so many representatives throughout the country. I am only sorry that more colleagues have not had more time in which to share their views and discuss issues affecting their constituents.

Street homelessness is just one part of the ever-increasing problem of homelessness, but it is one that shames the country, so we must welcome the Government strategies to tackle it. I am referring to piloting the Housing First schemes in mayoral areas and bringing in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. However, I must enter a small caveat. Housing First has worked incredibly well in Finland and areas of Canada, and St Mungo’s, which the hon. Gentleman has spoken to and worked with closely, has also been undertaking this work for quite some time outside the pilots, so we should take this opportunity to congratulate those organisations that have already been undertaking this good work for some time. I also need to raise my concerns about local authorities’ ability fully to implement the range of facilities in the Homelessness Reduction Act without the funding properly to support the requirements of that Act.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I, too, feel that those are exactly the problems, so does my hon. Friend agree that local authorities up and down the country face these difficulties? In my own city of Manchester in 2010, we had only seven people in this situation, but in 2017 the number was 94. Manchester City Council is giving £3 million to tackle homelessness, but it is also fighting the tide of crippling cuts to local authority budgets, an historical housing crisis and punitive welfare reform—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Afzal Khan: So the Government need to do more.

James Gray (in the Chair): I call Melanie Onn.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is absolutely right, and I could not support him more. I congratulate Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, on the action that he has taken to ensure that homelessness is at the top of his agenda and to tackle this issue for his city, including by putting some of his own funds into the task group. The rise in homelessness in Manchester and other areas has not simply happened by chance; it is a result of Government choices.

Faisal Rashid: The figures show that almost 5,000 individuals are now sleeping rough on our streets. That is a 15% increase on 2017 and a 169% increase since 2010—a massive increase. Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot help the homeless if we do not provide the homes that they require?

Melanie Onn: Absolutely, and I will come on to that issue shortly. This problem is not insurmountable. When Labour was in government, there was an unprecedented drop in homelessness, but since 2010 it has worsened by every measure. As the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) made clear, the doubling of rough sleepers since 2010 is a problem of the Government’s own making. Home ownership is at a 30-year low. The average home costs eight times the average salary. Today in England there are 120,000 homeless children. The building of social rent homes has plummeted, with fewer than 1,000 last year—the lowest level on record.

The Minister, who has responsibility for homelessness, recently said that she did not know why homelessness had risen. I find it very hard to believe that anyone in this place cannot immediately see some of the main reasons for homelessness increasing. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly recognised some of them: a lack of social and council homes; disproportionately high rental increases making homes unaffordable for those on lower incomes; reductions in council funding meaning less for drug and alcohol services; crippling welfare reforms that have cut too fast and too far for those who were genuinely just about managing; and difficulty in accessing mental health services as the thresholds for those services get ever higher.

I shall take the opportunity to highlight some of the innovative work that NAViGO mental health services is undertaking in my constituency. It has worked closely with the local housing association to purchase properties and then uses them as step-down accommodation to support the service users who come to it for help, to ensure that they have wraparound care. That is the principle of Housing First in action in measures being taken by innovative organisations around the country.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend gives very good examples of people who are homeless being given assistance. I wonder whether she will share my dismay at a letter that I received from Eleanor Wilson, a medical student in Glasgow, last night. She said that she witnessed, in a branch of Starbucks in Glasgow, a homeless man who was just queuing for a cup of coffee being told to get out of the premises. That is one of a litany of issues with Starbucks in the city of Glasgow. Starbucks cannot pay its taxes—does not contribute to helping the public purse—and is also ostracising homeless people on our streets who need help. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is totally unacceptable for a corporate citizen of the UK?

Melanie Onn: Absolutely. I think that we all have a responsibility. The hon. Member for Gravesham talked about a society that is enabling homelessness, but I think that there is room for compassion when dealing with people who have myriad social, economic and personal issues driving them to be in this situation.

A sensible welfare state provides security to those in society who need it. That has been eroded over the last eight years, creating an underclass to the extent that the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has stepped into the Government’s shoes with its report published yesterday in the New Statesman and identified 78 homeless people who have died this winter. That is 78 human lives lost, 78 people without a place that they could call home, 78 lost people. Why do I call them “lost people”?

Because the Government do not collect these figures centrally. Because in response to my written questions and those from colleagues about deaths associated with rough sleeping, the Minister has repeatedly brushed that question off. There was no acknowledgement that
the central collection of data would prove to be of discernible use—that it would better inform the Government of the scale of the issue at hand and provide some evidence and a means by which Government initiatives could be measured.

The Minister’s Department seems similarly unaware of which local authorities have commissioned adult safeguarding reviews in the event of homelessness-related deaths in their area, so we cannot know which local authorities have good practices and which need improvement. Will she agree today to start collecting centrally data in relation to deaths from homelessness? For everyone’s information, at least 59 men and 16 women have died. Their ages ranged from 19 to 68, and 14 of those who died were under the age of 35.

I congratulate them on their assiduousness, but it should not take investigative journalists calling round councils, charities, coroners’ offices and police forces to establish a full picture of how many people are dying on the streets of our country. And it is not just those figures that matter. The Government should be doing better in collating general information about people who are rough sleeping, because the accuracy of those figures is wholly insufficient. In the official figures, the estimated figure for rough sleepers in my constituency sits at around 22, but the list that I get every single month from my local outreach services shows more than double that number.

Mr Ivan Lewis: My hon. Friend is making an excellent contribution to the debate. Does she agree that there is a case for reviewing the nonsensical, arbitrary headcount that takes place once a year, in November, and leads to completely misleading statistics? We actually need a personal profile of each individual so that we know what their needs are and how to address them. The headcount once a year is completely misleading and unhelpful.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly valid point, and I hope that the Minister is listening. I see that the hon. Member for Gravesham, who initiated the debate, is nodding: he thinks that what has been referred to would be of great use.

It is shameful that in 2018 we have experienced such a rise in homelessness in all its guises, from families left in supposedly temporary accommodation for up to two years, to those without even a roof over their heads. There must be action. Now is not soon enough, let alone 2027, especially for those who have lost their lives without the security of their own home.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) on securing a debate on this extremely important issue. Tackling homelessness in all its forms is a priority not only for me, but for this Government. I understand his interest in this subject. As he mentioned, he has seen what it is like to sleep rough.

I am also thankful for the other experiences and expertise shared here today, whether it comes from a constituency or wider perspective. I am grateful to hon. Members for their speeches and questions, but I will, I hope, answer them as I work through my speech.

It should never be the case that someone finds themselves without a roof over their head. That is why, as hon. Members will be aware, the Government have committed to halving rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament and to eliminating it altogether by 2027.

Faisal Rashid: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I will not. There is not enough time, because I have to give time to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham at the end.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, who initiated for his kind comments about the ambitions of this Government. Hon. Members will be aware that at the beginning of this month we implemented the most ambitious legislative reform in decades, the Homelessness Reduction Act, which transforms the culture of homelessness service delivery. For the first time, local authorities, public services and the third sector will work together to actively prevent homelessness for any people at risk, irrespective of whether they are a family or a single person, of what has put them at risk or of whether they have a local connection to the area. To deliver the new duties under the Act, we know how important it is to provide local authorities with the requisite support to build the homelessness workforce. To help this, we have funded the London Training Academy, which will provide current frontline staff and apprentices. I am exceptionally proud of the work that has gone into delivering these changes and the work the Department has done. As ever, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for all his endeavours in bringing this Act to pass.

On rough sleeping, hon. Members will be aware that we are publishing our strategy in July, setting out the measures that we will take in order to achieve our manifesto commitments. Overseeing the development and delivery of the strategy will be the ministerial taskforce, chaired by the First Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), and comprises Ministers from key Departments with responsibilities in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping. It is supported by the rough sleeping advisory panel, which I chair, with Mayors Andy Burnham and Andy Street sitting on it. The panel brings together key figures from local government, central Government and homelessness charities. We have met three times so far. Sub-groups of the panel have also been established to look at a range of themes, such as prevention, intervention, recovery, data and long-term social change for the strategy. Good progress has been made on the development of the strategy and I look forward to sharing our plans with hon. Members this summer.

We are, however, determined to take action to tackle rough sleeping right now. I am sure hon. Members will have seen the recent announcement on what we have called the “rough sleeping initiative”, which lays the foundations for the strategy. The measures contained in the initiative are based on tried and tested measures, which have previously had significant and immediate impact on bringing down rough sleeping. The measures
include setting up a rough sleeping team, made up of rough sleeping and homelessness experts, drawn from and funded by Government Departments and agencies, with specialist knowledge across a wide range of areas, including housing, mental health and addiction. There is a £30 million fund for 2018-19, with further funding agreed for 2019-20. This funding will be targeted at local authorities with high numbers of people sleeping rough. The rough sleeping team will work with local areas with higher pressure to support them and deliver bespoke local interventions to immediately reduce the number of people sleeping rough on the streets. A further £100,000 will be made available to support the frontline rough sleeping workers across the country, to ensure they have the right skills and knowledge to work with vulnerable rough sleepers.

In addition, the Department is working with the National Housing Federation to look at providing additional co-ordinated move-on accommodation for rough sleepers across the nation, to ensure that they can stand on their own two feet once they have received help. As well as the support provided by other Government Departments in developing the strategy, this new package of measures will be supported by a range of Departments across Whitehall. For example—this will answer many colleagues’ questions—the Department of Health and Social Care will make available experts in mental health and drug treatment services to help support the new outreach teams, including those in hostels, and the Ministry of Justice will focus on prison and probation work with local authorities and outreach teams, in particular to identify short sentence prisoners and offenders serving community sentences who are at risk of sleeping rough. These measures build on existing action we have already taken to tackle rough sleeping. For example, as announced in the 2017 Budget, we are piloting the Housing First approach to support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers in our society. I have personally seen the good that Housing First can do, especially for those struggling with addiction, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham mentioned. I saw that when I visited the Housing First projects in Glasgow last month. The Minister for their speeches, and the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) asked about.

Charities and volunteers carry out vital work across the country. Their work is key to ensuring that rough sleepers get the help that they need and they help us in meeting our manifesto commitment, particularly charities such as St Mungo’s and Homeless Link.

I understand the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham that people sleeping rough might be migrants. To be clear, we have always worked closely with councils and homelessness outreach services to ensure that the genuinely vulnerable receive the care they need. The Government also provide funding for local authorities for specific projects to tackle rough sleeping by non-UK nationals. This fund helps projects to secure regular employment and accommodation for non-UK nationals, or facilitate voluntary return to their country of origin.

The Government have allocated more than £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the spending review period. This includes—this is by no means exhaustive—£617 million in flexible housing support grants, £316 million of local authority prevention funding and £100 million to deliver low-cost move-on accommodation places to enable people leaving hostels and refugees to make a sustainable recovery from the homelessness crisis. There is a further £215 million for a central Government programme, which funds a range of innovative projects across the country and a £20 million fund for schemes that will enable better access in the private rented sector for those who are, or are at risk of, becoming homeless, which the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) asked about.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I thank the Minister for her contribution to the debate. I ask her to look at a report published today by the organisation Justlife, which shows that there are ten times more people in temporary accommodation than Government figures suggest and that there is a direct correlation between unsupported temporary accommodation, welfare reform and rough sleeping. These people are living in appalling conditions in bed-and-breakfast hotels and guest houses. Will she study that report and will she be prepared to visit one or two of the Justlife projects in Greater Manchester with me, to see for herself the realities on the frontline?

Mrs Wheeler: I heard about that report yesterday. It is devastating to see the quality of the property that certain people are being asked to stay in. That is not acceptable in this country. I had a meeting arranged in Manchester. Unfortunately, it was cancelled by the people in Manchester, but I am sure there will be another time when I will come up.

In conclusion, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate, which has been truly worthwhile. I reiterate that this Government are truly committed to achieving our manifesto targets and we will have further updates in the near future on what we will do to ensure that we meet them. Rough sleeping and homelessness is a scourge on our society. We will do everything in our power to sort it out.

10.57 am

Adam Holloway: I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their speeches, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for his excellent intervention. It was fascinating to hear about the grandmother of the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). Thank God we have moved on some way from that. I would love to hear more about Stan at some point.

We need to think about the realities of homelessness and see it for what it is, rather than how we would like to characterise it. Homelessness is of course a problem, but it is only a symptom. We will get nowhere if we do not get to the underlying problems these people face. As we have seen from this debate, if we cannot discuss this honestly, without the degree of ignorance and prejudice that we saw from a couple of hon. Members, we will get nowhere. We have to treat homeless people as individuals. We have to segment people to some extent, so that we do not mask the problems of the people at the very bottom of our society, who—at the moment and for generations—we have not managed to reach.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered street homelessness.
Independent Financial Advisers: Regulation

10.59 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered regulation of independent financial advisers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I put on record my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, which is primarily concerned with the business banking scandals that have devastated many viable businesses and ruined the lives of many business people and their families. The debate does not directly relate to those issues, but does have connections with the regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority, and its willingness and ability to hold those it regulates to account.

Whether as a consequence of malpractice, incompetence or deception, there will always be situations where innocent investors lose money through the failings of financial advisers. I will refer to the cases of two constituents. For the purposes of confidentiality, one would prefer to be known simply as Helen, and the other is Andy Mohun-Smith. The only connection between them is that they used the same financial adviser, Scott Robinson, who owned and operated a company called TBO Investments until 2016. He also owns a company called Mount Sterling Wealth.

Those cases and the supposed regulation of Mr Scott Robinson are truly astounding because nine years after an initial complaint was made to the FCA, seven years after the financial ombudsman ruled that he had provided unsuitable advice and ordered him to pay compensation, six years after an expert witness concluded that the investments advised by Mr Scott Robinson that were made on behalf of Andy Mohun-Smith were completely unsuitable, four years after it was established that he was providing advice without the required professional indemnity insurance, four years after Mr Mohun-Smith was awarded damages of £2.2 million, three years after Companies House issued a compulsory strike off order, two years after the FCA eventually cancelled TBO Investments’ permission for Mr Robinson to provide regulated advice. Most incredibly, four years after it was established that he did not cover the investments he was making, but he did not reveal that to Mr Mohun-Smith until June 2014. In March 2013, Mr Mohun-Smith issued a legal claim against TBO Investments and Mr Scott Robinson. In June 2014, when the trial took place, the judge struck out the defence, because Mr Scott Robinson did not appear at the trial, and awarded damages of £2.21 million.

A court of appeal effectively decided that Mr Scott Robinson could have a rehearing, but before that could take place, in August 2016, he placed TBO Investments into voluntary liquidation. That thwarted any opportunity for my constituents to take legal action to cover their losses, and left his own lawyers out of pocket. He then transferred all his clients to his other company, Mount Sterling Wealth, which he still trades in, for a sum of £28,613, despite the fact that the company’s directors earn six-figure sums from their provision of investment advice to those clients.

I understand that the insolvency practitioner for TBO Investments is taking legal action against Mr Scott Robinson to return moneys to the firm, on the basis that he breached insolvency rules by way of those asset transfers. For Helen, the financial services compensation scheme may help, as her losses are below the £50,000 threshold. For Mr Mohun-Smith, that is of little help or consequence.

To this day, Mount Sterling Wealth continues to operate. Its website features Scott Robinson, and it states above his photograph:

“We will help you to create, build, and protect your wealth, and tax efficiently pass it through the generations.”

According to Companies House’s records, however, Mr Scott Robinson’s directorship was terminated by his resignation from that company four days ago, after nine years of directorships. Perhaps that is coincidental, perhaps not.

Crucially, what is the FCA’s role in all this? On the question of TBO Investment’s lack of professional indemnity insurance, it simply states that “it remains the responsibility of the firm”.

That is despite going on to say that it requires firms to report on that every six months and despite the fact that the FCA eventually cancelled TBO Investment’s permission to undertake regulated activity due to non-compliance. Despite all that, Mount Sterling Wealth continues to be authorised and regulated by the FCA. It says it will consider outstanding complaints when future applications for authorisations of individuals are made, but it continues to designate Mr Scott Robinson as an approved person.

According to the FCA, an approved person needs to be able to demonstrate that they are a fit and proper person for the purposes of providing advice. Shockingly, once they are approved, there is no ongoing re-approval process or requirement. The FCA has the power to levy fines and to impose banning orders on individuals, but it has thus far decided not to.
I have met Mr Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the FCA, and I have spoken to other senior executives there. Incredibly, the only justification I can get for Mr Scott Robinson's continuing designation as an approved person is that they are concerned that they may be "depriv ing an individual of their livelihood". That is this individual, with their chequered record. What about the deprivation of my constituents' livelihoods? What about their income, their investment and their hard-earned money? Is that not what the FCA should be principally concerned about?

I turn to the solutions. The FCA must take action. It must take a more proactive oversight role of the financial advisers that it regulates; it must surely instigate a re-approval process for financial advisers; it must be willing to hold financial advisers to account where there is clear wrongdoing, and impose fines and banning orders; and it should work with the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, and with Ministers if required, to revise and raise the level of the compensation scheme from the current level of £50,000, which is totally inappropriate.

For my constituents, Andy and Helen, this has been a most traumatic experience. In Andy’s words: “This has had a devastating effect on my life...the damage to my health has been considerable. The enormous stress my wife and I were subjected to as a result of Mr Robinson’s disastrous investment decisions was undoubtedly a major factor in the breakup of our marriage.” Those words say more than I ever could.

The FCA, the regulator that we entrust to make sure that our consumers, investors and businesses are fairly treated, has many questions to answer. It needs to take a long hard look at itself, and it must prove to those it is accountable to—the Treasury and Parliament—that it is able to carry out the role that it is required to perform. I, for one, am very sceptical that it is capable of doing so.

11.11 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing this important debate. I also thank you, Mr Gray, for chairing it.

I am aware that this debate has been prompted by the constituency cases that my hon. Friend has highlighted today—those of Helen and Mr Mohun-Smith. As my hon. Friend will no doubt appreciate, I cannot comment on the specifics of the cases, although it has been most traumatic experience. In Andy’s words: “This has had a devastating effect on my life...the damage to my health has been considerable. The enormous stress my wife and I were subjected to as a result of Mr Robinson’s disastrous investment decisions was undoubtedly a major factor in the breakup of our marriage.” Those words say more than I ever could.

The FCA, the regulator that we entrust to make sure that our consumers, investors and businesses are fairly treated, has many questions to answer. It needs to take a long hard look at itself, and it must prove to those it is accountable to—the Treasury and Parliament—that it is able to carry out the role that it is required to perform. I, for one, am very sceptical that it is capable of doing so.

Consumers depend on good advice from honest and reliable individuals to manage their life savings properly, to help them make life-changing decisions and to ensure their security in retirement, especially following the implementation of pension freedoms. We want people to access help to make those important decisions, from simple guidance and information to regulated financial advice.

To ensure that the market for financial advice functions effectively, we have to protect people from unscrupulous advisers, and we also have to protect the majority of reputable advisers from those who would do down their industry and their jobs. The independent FCA has set out the rules for the market, and it has been tasked by us to enforce those rules robustly to ensure that consumers are always treated fairly.

Firms and advisers have to be authorised by the FCA, they have to be qualified to provide advice and they have to ensure that such advice is suitable for an individual’s personal circumstances. As in any walk of life, there will always be individuals and firms out there who try to bend the rules or even to commit fraud and other forms of criminal activity. The FCA has the ability to take swift enforcement action to ban individuals from providing financial advice, although that does not appear to have happened in the cases that my hon. Friend has mentioned, and I will give thought to the point he made about ongoing re-appraisal. More action may be required in that regard.

In other cases, advisers might not provide suitable advice, leading to financial loss for consumers. In those cases, consumers can refer to the Financial Ombudsman Service for compensation, which is usually up to a maximum of £150,000 per individual. The advisory firm is then legally required to provide that compensation. Sadly, it is often the case that firms go into liquidation and cannot provide the compensation that individuals deserve. There is then a second tier of protection through the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, which is mainly funded by an annual levy on the financial services industry. Since it was founded, the FSCS has helped millions of people and paid billions of pounds in compensation.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the current limit for compensation from the FSCS for people who have received bad advice is £50,000 per person. Hon. Members will be pleased to know that the FCA has recently consulted on raising that compensation limit to £85,000, with an intention to introduce the new limit from 1 April 2019. We would strongly support such an increase. A limit of £85,000 would mean that—based on historical data, at least—only 2.5% of claims relating to investments and only 3.8% of claims relating to pensions advice would not have been fully compensated. Clearly, there will be individuals who have invested and lost far greater sums, perhaps including my hon. Friend’s constituents, but the vast majority of consumers would be protected.

Of course, when setting a compensation limit for the FSCS, the FCA has to strike a balance, providing an appropriate level of compensation to enough claimants, without placing an undue burden on the reputable financial advisers and firms that pay the levies—of course, those costs would be passed on in the end to consumers.

That is why it is mandatory for firms to be covered by professional indemnity insurance, which brings us on to another point raised by my hon. Friend. Such insurance
should cover many claims, reducing pressure on the FSCS. The FCA published its consultation paper on the FSCS in October 2017, and it is considering whether to go further, to prevent firms from buying professional indemnity insurance that does not allow claims when the policyholder or a related party is insolvent. The FCA will issue a paper on this matter shortly, and we will welcome the decision that it makes.

The FCA has to remain vigilant in cases where firms go into liquidation to avoid paying compensation to consumers before re-forming as “new” firms. Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the FCA, whom my hon. Friend referred to, has recently said that this practice, which is often called phoenixing, is actively being examined by the FCA and that the FCA is also considering whether the existing rules are sufficient or the creation of new rules is required.

For example, the FCA placed asset sale restrictions on eight advice firms last year in an effort to clamp down on phoenixing. That was done to prevent the common practice of transferring assets that belong to the collapsed firm, including from the client bank, to its former directors, who of course go on to set up a new firm.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for addressing so accurately and so well the points that I made. Is he surprised, as I am, that what he referred to as professional indemnity insurance beyond an insolvency, which is commonly known as run-off cover, is required in many other sectors but not currently in this sector? Is he also surprised that the FCA countenances a situation whereby an adviser it licences as an approved person is able to carry on activities with professional indemnity insurance even though that insurance does not cover the activities they are advising people about?

Robert Jenrick: I am surprised by both the points that my hon. Friend has raised. He and I both worked in professions before coming to this House—I worked as a lawyer, and he worked as an estate agent—and it is surprising that, in the profession of financial adviser, those practices are permitted. I hope that answering such questions will be part of the scope of the FCA’s inquiry and the work that it will subsequently do.

To return to phoenixing, we will work with the FCA to ensure that appropriate rules are in place. I intend to ensure that action is taken in this area. Phoenixing in these circumstances is wrong. It leaves consumers and taxpayers out of pocket and tarnishes the reputation of the industry. Just as with phoenixing in other businesses, these practices can be deeply corrosive to public confidence and to trust in the system, and the effects are, in time, passed on to the whole economy. We want an economy and a society that understand that entrepreneurs and businesspeople can fail—and often do so on the road to later success, wealth, job creation and flourishing new businesses—but those who fail deliberately or recklessly damage our economy and public faith in capitalism, and they must be stopped.

I would like to use this opportunity to raise some additional critical points. The Government have been implementing other policy areas to ensure that we have a better-functioning market for financial advice that benefits consumers. The first of these is the retail distribution review launched in 2006, which drastically altered the current charging market for independent financial advisers, encouraging them to charge set fees and prohibiting them from receiving commission from product providers. That was an important step forward, reducing incentives for advisers to recommend investments in which they had a financial interest, and improving the overall quality of financial advice. It has been welcomed by the sector and those who rely on it.

More recently, under this Government, the Treasury and the FCA launched the financial advice market review in 2015, with the goal of improving the accessibility and affordability of financial advice. Research we have done shows that those with high incomes generally—although not always—have access to quality advice, but those with moderate or low incomes, who arguably have the greatest need, have found decent advice far less accessible. The final report, which we published in March 2016, set out a package of 28 recommendations, which the Government and the FCA have now implemented. Although the recommendations of that review will take time to take effect, we have had encouraging feedback from market participants that the work we have done, which the FCA must now take forward, will make a real difference to consumers, and we are already seeing some tangible results in that respect.

I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this discussion on a very important topic here today. I will raise the points he made with Andrew Bailey at the Financial Conduct Authority again—I appreciate that my hon. Friend has already been to see him. I will highlight the cases he has brought to my attention and will ask for further explanations. He does not bring cases to this place lightly. He has a great deal of experience in business. He and the constituents he has talked about deserve answers and actions, and others in his constituency and across the country deserve to be protected.

The issue is not static; the Government and the FCA are committed to ensuring that it remains under constant review. I will urge the FCA to step up its efforts, particularly in respect of phoenixing, which is a wider problem and a challenge for all of us who believe in a free economy and who want to see its reputation protected. Like all Members of this House, I want to see consumers and members of the public protected, and the reputations of those who choose to pursue careers as financial advisers protected, not tarnished by the actions of the few.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.
Dieter Helm Energy Review

2.30 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of the energy review by Dieter Helm.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. The motion has a slight ambiguity as to whether we are considering the cost of producing the report or the contents of the report itself, and I want to make it clear that we are considering the report itself, and not the £500 a day paid to Professor Helm for producing it.

The report is a devastating critique of Government policy over the past 10 years or so. That is not just this Government, but the coalition Government and the previous Government. The report’s extraordinary headline is that we will have paid £100 billion—that is one hundred thousand million pounds—more than necessary by 2030 for current energy policies. Consumers are paying 20% more for energy than would otherwise have been necessary. Thinking about the debates, rows and discussions we have about major infrastructure in this place, High Speed 2 will cost £40 billion or £50 billion, which is half as much. Some of my hon. Friends are against that highly controversial project, and many Government Members are in favour of it. Cost is a crucial issue, but it looks as though, for no real infrastructure benefit whatever, by 2030 we will be paying twice as much—£50 billion more—for an energy system that is, in the words of Professor Helm, “not fit for purpose”. One could also argue about the marginal differences in cost that people see for remaining in or leaving the EU.

The sheer size of this £100 billion figure leaves many such arguments in the shade.

Professor Helm’s report is long—240 pages long—but if people want a simple version of his views, I recommend reading the transcript from when he was quizzed by Members. The transcript is much easier to digest and more to the point if people want a simple version of his views, I recommend reading the transcript from when he was quizzed by Members. The transcript is much easier to digest and more to the point than the 240 pages of dense, well-argued points.

One can agree or disagree with the report, but it is logically coherent. One surprise is that, given the sheer magnitude of the figures involved, the Government have not responded in detail to it. I am sure there are responses that could be made. There could be disagreements on much of the detail in it, but it is a real failure that the Government have not responded to such an important report, which they of course asked for.

One thing that the report emphasises is how the energy market is working and has been set up. The Government have tried to pick winners, but as often happens, they have not. We would all like to pick winners; we would all like to win on the Derby or the Grand National, but most of us are not very good at it, and Governments by and large are not much better at picking winners in industry and energy. The people who are good are inefficient businesses—losers, rather than winners, if you prefer, Mr McCabe. They are good at picking weak Governments and lobbying and arguing for subsidy for less-than-competitive industries. The report says that they have done that, and it is devastating in its analysis.

Not only have the Government—as I said, I am not making a particular charge against this Government; this charge is levelled at the last three Governments—been subject to lobbying and wasted money, but in the background of the process are many lobbyists and green groups whose acquaintance with the truth sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. We not only have industry with vested interests, but groups such as Greenpeace lobbying in the background, many times dishonestly, to support policies that fit their ideological preference.

Mr McCabe, you may remember walking into the House of Commons before Christmas and seeing big signs outside sponsored by Greenpeace that said the cost of wind had been cut by 50%. That was an outright lie. It was challenged at the Advertising Standards Authority, and Greenpeace was made to take those adverts down. When Greenpeace and others were asked to justify their position, they said that they were using projected costs for wind farms in the North sea that had not yet been commissioned, let alone built. That is the background to a controversial policy area that the Government should by now have responded to.

I said that Professor Helm was coherent, which he is, but—this will come as no surprise to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead)—I do not agree with the objectives that Professor Helm has always agreed with. They are the Government’s objectives, too, and I will explain why I do not agree. He starts the energy review by talking about the Government’s target in the Climate Change Act 2008 to reduce carbon emissions in this country by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. I do not agree with that, and I will explain why. However, it is the Government’s policy and the law, and that is the basis of the review. His second objective, which he took as concrete, was the security of energy supply. Along with those two objectives, he wanted to see whether costs could come down.

My disagreement is that I have always thought that there should be a hierarchy of targets in energy policy. Security of energy supply should always be the top target, because if the lights go out, not only would we be in trouble as Members of Parliament for creating a system that does not keep the lights on, but the country would be in trouble. I have always thought that security of energy supply, rather than arbitrary carbon targets, should be the top priority.

Secondly, I would find it difficult to explain to my constituents and industry in my constituency if price was not one of the top priorities. For it to be tertiary is a mistake. Lower prices should be a priority, but a consequence of the policy is that they have been neglected, and they have gone up by more than they would have otherwise. That is where I disagree.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate; he makes some good points. I agree entirely with what he has just said about price, and with what the report seems to indicate. There has been a complete failure of competition in the domestic energy market; Governments always talk about it, but they have failed to deliver. There is still a predominance of the big six
energy companies, effectively rigging prices. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that needs to be fundamentally addressed if we are to have a proper energy market that benefits customers?

Graham Stringer: That is my reading of the report. I think Professor Helm goes slightly further than that—beyond the big six energy companies—and talks about the problems that have been caused by investing in costly new technologies that might have been cheaper to purchase later, but I essentially agree with the hon. Gentleman.

The price of energy is important not just in the way that I have described; it is also probably the most important industrial policy that this country can have. Matt Ridley pointed out in *The Times* some 12 months ago that at the start of the industrial revolution—this is from memory, so I might have the numbers slightly wrong, but they will not be far out—the cost of energy in Newcastle was about one 20th or one 25th of the cost of energy in China. We know what happened: this country, Europe and the United States boomed ahead because what previously required 20 horses could now be done with a few lumps of coal.

Recklessly putting up the price of energy has been a huge mistake for the country. When I say that, I do not want anyone to think that I am somehow in the category of anti-science. My background is that of a scientist, and I understand the opacity or otherwise of carbon dioxide to different wavelengths of electromagnetic energy. I understand the greenhouse effect in some detail, and I do not deny its existence—I think that what its impact will be is sometimes exaggerated, but that is a debate for another day.

We have been putting the price of energy up and closing coal stations—probably the coal stations should have been closed earlier, as Professor Helm says. As an intermediate pathway to the Government’s goals, it might have been sensible to use gas-fired power stations, which have half the carbon emissions of coal-fired power stations. If we look at the whole-world picture, we see what little impact we have—I think we produce about 2% of the carbon dioxide in the world. Over the next 10 years or so, 1,600 coal plants are planned in 62 countries around the world. China will make 700 of them. Approximately 65% to 70% of India’s energy production is from coal, but last Monday India cancelled the vast majority of its planned nuclear power plants.

Whatever impact we have will be minimal to negligible, yet we are putting the price of energy up for some of the poorest people in the country, including my constituents. We are also undoubtedly damaging industry, because due to the high price of energy we are, in effect, exporting many jobs to countries such as China, India and Malaysia, where they are often less efficient, and there is the carbon cost of the transport by ship or plane when we buy their goods.

Professor Helm, taking the Government’s policies as firm, has a number of suggestions. First, he believes that there should be one uniform carbon price. He points out, in a chart towards the end of the report, that we have many carbon prices at present, where we add to the cost of fossil fuels through many of the interventions to VAT. He believes that they should be unified, which would make things transparent. He also believes that there should be auctions for energy suppliers. Devastatingly, he says in the report that he is surprised, and I think it was a surprise to everybody else, that when things were put out to auction, rather than using interventionist prices, the prices dropped dramatically.

Professor Helm gives us his reasons on the interventions. I do not want to read too much of the report directly, but he says that the different interventions have made the market extremely complicated and expensive. He points out:

“The legacy costs from the Renewables Obligation Certificates (ROC), the feed-in tariffs (FiT) and low carbon contracts for difference (CfDs) are a major contributor to rising final prices, and should be separated out, ring-fenced, and placed in a ‘legacy bank’. They should be charged separately.”

On the complexity, Professor Helm’s answer to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee was devastating, because some of the vested interests had been into the Committee previously and had lobbied. Some of the renewable energy people and some of the people from the Committee on Climate Change—all of them professors, you understand, Mr McCabe—had said, “There’s no problem with complexity whatever.” I think there is a problem, and anybody who has been in the real world for very long knows that there is a problem. Professor Helm’s key finding and recommendation on that was:

“The scale of the multiple interventions in the electricity market is now so great that few if any could even list them all, and their interactions are poorly understood. Complexity is itself a major cause of rising costs, and tinkering with policies and regulations is unlikely to reduce costs. Indeed, each successive intervention layers on new costs and unintended consequences. It should be a central aim of government to radically simplify the interventions, and to get government back out of many of its current detailed roles. This review explains how to do this.”

In taking on the professors who think that complexity is not a problem, Professor Helm said:

“It is empirically impossible to work out the costs of current policy, because each policy intervention interacts with every other policy intervention. Any cost-benefit analysis of a particular intervention has to do the plethora of interactions with all the other bits as well. If you want an empirical piece of proof, you need to have all that analysis done and then analyse the empirics of the counterfactual, of what would have happened if you did not have all that complexity.”

I agree with him: it is impossible.

The report also says that, having created that complexity:

“As a consequence of Electricity Market Reform (EMR), the government now determines the level and mix of generation to a degree not witnessed since these were determined by the nationalised industries”.

I suspect that if I had been a Member of this House when Lord Lawson, as Energy Secretary, proposed privatising the energy industries, I would have voted against. Nationalised industries at least have a direct line of responsibility between the taxpayer, who may benefit from them and subsidise them, and the controlled industry. What we have here is a complete mess: Government intervention, interfered with by lobbyists and vested interests with no accountability, which ends up with the poor consumer paying more than they need to.

Professor Helm criticises the Government for focusing too much on electricity and not enough on agriculture, which is a tiny part of the economy and creates about 10% of carbon dioxide emissions. He strongly believes—this
should please the Government—in a free market solution. He believes that the auctions will not pick winners, but that the winners will pick themselves by being efficient in the auction process.

I want to deal with one of the main questions put forward by my hon. Friends who represent constituencies where Vesta, for instance, produces wind turbines. That question is whether the alternative, renewable energy business would have got going without intervention. Nobody can really answer that. When all that extra cash has been put into the energy market, there are bound to be spin-off benefits, but it cannot be known at any time, unless the market is tested, whether someone could have got more bangs for their buck for investing differently.

One area where I completely agree with Professor Helm is that we need research—not just the research carried out by vested interests who want to produce energy, but pure research. There is a long way to go in battery technology, which may be part of the solution. Unless something has happened since I left the Energy and Climate Change Committee, we do not even have a proper pilot scheme for carbon capture devices. All those things could be explored in a pure way and then, in the way that often happens after pure research, industry could look at what could be used and the way we are investing at the moment.

The final point made by Professor Helm is that tens of billions have been invested in subsidising wind farms in the north sea. On what basis can we say that was the right decision, rather than putting the money into carbon capture and storage? I do not have the answer to that, and I know the Government do not have the answer. They have opened their arms to vested interests and have ended up with a system that disadvantages our constituents and is essentially not fit for purpose. The Government need to respond thoroughly and properly to this important report. It is possible to disagree with it or to agree with parts of it, but it certainly needs a response.

2.54 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and I thank the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) for securing this important debate.

I thank Professor Helm and the advisory board for their work on the independent review. It has certainly contributed to the wider debate on how we should approach energy policy in a way that balances the challenges of climate change, energy security and justice for customers. The true cost, or benefit, of the review will be determined by what the Government do with the findings. I am confident that the review, or at least the debate it has provoked, will lead to positive and successful steps to reduce the price of energy in this country for both domestic and business users.

The concept of starting an important debate about the future of energy markets, with the aim of bringing down the cost of energy for customers, must surely be the right thing to do. The UK Government have already shown that they are serious about making energy prices more affordable for consumers. In July 2017, the UK Government and Ofgem set out a plan to create a smarter energy system. We are seeing some progress, although perhaps not as much as many would like, on smart meters. It is a big hill to climb and I only hope it will continue to accelerate in the next couple of years. I am looking forward to the return of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill to the House for its remaining stages, which I believe will be next week. It is entirely reasonable that the UK Government have sought to build on those actions with a review of what else can be done to bring energy prices down and provide energy security in a low-carbon economy. All the elements of energy production and the low carbon aspect make this quite a difficult Rubik’s cube to square off.

Professor Helm has frequently raised concerns about the price of renewable energy as produced by current technology and has called for Governments to take a more balanced approach to sourcing and securing energy. In his review, he put forward many interesting proposals for the future of UK energy policy, from a carbon price to the replacement of overpriced standard variable tariffs with a new default tariff, to a wider simplification of the whole raft and range of state interventions, which are cumbersome and only understood by a few people, if by anybody.

We do not necessarily have to subscribe to the findings of the review in full to acknowledge that many of its proposals are interesting contributions to the debate and at least merit further examination. That is why it is right that the UK Government have responded to the review by taking evidence from a range of interested parties, including consumer groups, and are now analysing that evidence. The review has been worthwhile and I am confident that it will prove to have been a valuable contribution to the UK Government’s efforts to reduce the cost of energy and to reduce fuel poverty—an important aspect for many—and to assist industry to become far more competitive as we go forward.

2.58 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I express my thanks to the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) for securing this debate. I am pleased we are having this debate on the cost of the Dieter Helm independent review, launched by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and led, of course, by Professor Helm, an economist specialising in energy. Such a review is a rather important matter. Therefore, it was extremely disappointing that it was announced by BEIS on a Sunday in the peak of the August holiday season last year and was scheduled to last a mere 30 days.

The review was set in the context of rising customer concern about power prices, which were set to increase by 15%, following the decision by British Gas to increase electricity prices by 12.5% on average, despite falling wholesale prices. Although UK domestic power tariffs remain low relative to other countries in the EU, they are rising, and for industrial users, they are the third highest of 15 European countries, according to the UK Government’s figures. One reason is increases in climate-related policy costs, which make up a growing proportion of the average energy bill.

The review’s terms of reference are about ensuring energy is affordable for households and businesses. It sets out 11 short bullet points and reiterates the laudable ambition to have the lowest energy costs in Europe for homes and businesses. However, the expert panel of five working alongside Professor Helm lacked a consumer
voice, although manufacturing was represented. I do not understand why that was the case, but perhaps the Minister can shed some light on it.

Although the review was independent, with the purpose of reviewing the cost of energy, it focused on electricity. The Government said:

“The specific aim of this review is to report and make recommendations on how carbon and energy security aims “can be met in the power sector at minimum cost and without imposing further costs on the exchequer.”

Indeed, the Government recognised that, although the UK has some of the lowest gas prices in Europe, our electricity prices are less competitive, compared with those for households in Europe, and are among the most expensive for the industry. Bills are about volume, not just price. For example, average domestic electricity prices in the US are half those of the UK, but bills are higher because the more energy-efficient UK homes have less waste. The same can be said of gas.

As well as the fact that the review was restricted to electricity, utility firms’ pricing and profits were not included, which some might argue was a missed opportunity. The Government have rejected the idea that the review was too narrowly based on Professor Helm’s opinions and too brief to unearth any valuable new evidence. Does that remain their view? How on earth can anyone seriously consider the cost issues facing UK energy without looking at the £20 billion Hinkley Point reactor project? I know that many in the energy industry agree with that.

There has been much debate about various aspects of this report, and that is as it should be. The report’s two main findings are that the cost of energy is significantly higher than it needs to be, and that energy policy, regulation and market design are not fit for the purposes of the emerging low-carbon energy market, but I believe we have to focus on the cost of energy to the consumer. The report makes it clear that, since late 2014, the price of oil, gas and coal has fallen significantly, the price of renewables has fallen, and there is downward pressure on the cost of transmission, distribution and supply. New technologies should mean lower, not higher, costs, and much greater scope for energy efficiency. Margins should fall as competition increases, yet Professor Helm points out—if we accept this—that households have seen few benefits from the cost reductions. Prices have gone up, not down, for too many consumers.

I am sure I do not need to tell the Minister about the strain that the unnecessarily high costs for households put on household budgets across the UK. Indeed, Professor Helm warns that such costs risk undermining the broader democratic support for decarbonisation. The Climate Change Act 2008 estimates that the cost of decarbonising electricity is about 20% of typical electricity bills, and it is thought that such legacy costs will amount to well over £100 billion by 2030. Professor Helm concludes that much more decarbonisation could have been achieved for less, and that costs should be lower and falling further. I am interested to hear the Minister’s reflections on that.

As Professor Helm identifies, the problem is that those higher than necessary costs are locked in for at least a decade, despite the Government’s welcome temporary price cap, due to contracts that the Government entered into. We need a way to reduce the burden imposed on consumers and businesses and ensure that decarbonisation costs are more transparent, at the very least.

There is no doubt a difficult balance to strike between costs and the challenges that the electricity and energy system will face in the next decade and beyond. Carbon budgets need to be met as we invest in new technologies that come on stream. We are living through a technological transformation, and electricity is increasingly the dominant energy form.

Professor Helm is clear that the 2050 carbon target could be met at a lower cost. It could perhaps even be met early, which would be of real benefit to households and the entire industry. Does the Minister have any thoughts about that? It is important that we consider Professor Helm’s work more carefully than is possible in a 90-minute debate, because our wider economic needs, and our ability to meet our energy demands and deliver our carbon budgets may, as Professor Helm points out, depend on it. We must also be extremely mindful when we attempt to break out of the high costs of our energy system, which locks too many households into fuel poverty. There are opportunities in the energy market, and I am extremely interested to hear how the Minister intends to capitalise on them for the sake of consumers, businesses and the delivery of our carbon budgets.

We cannot take Professor Helm’s conclusions as gospel, and nor should we. Indeed, in the past his work has not been short of critics, but it always provokes debate. It seems that Governments have pretty much ignored much of what he has said in the past. I am interested to hear about how his work will inform the Government’s approach as we face the future in this field, and about how consumers can remain at the heart of this process.

3.6 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on securing the debate.

I agree with much of what has been said. The Helm report is imperfect, although my copy is greatly improved by the artwork on the back of it contributed by my children. Such a report was always going to be imperfect. For the past 18 months, since the report was first discussed and commissioned, the whole industry and the Government have been holding their breath in anticipation of the response. It was always unlikely that the clouds would part and Professor Helm—as brilliant as he is—would provide the absolute solution for all future energy policy.

Professor Helm is right that the auction system we have been operating over the past decade or so is imperfect. It is complicated, and parts of it have given us the wrong result. Until recently, in the grid services markets, in particular, we ended up with lots of diesel coming through to meet that need. Clearly, that is not what the Government or anybody in the lobby in favour of decarbonisation hoped for. Clearly, it was not perfect. I accept Professor Helm’s criticism of the Government’s picking winners. More accurately, losers are very good at picking Governments. There is no doubt that some things we committed to in the past would not bear scrutiny today.
I do not accept that it is all doom and gloom. I accept the criticism from the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton of the advertising that suggested that the cost of offshore wind had come down by 50%, but let that not hide the fact that the speed at which the cost of offshore wind has come down is a stunning success. Whatever the reduction is—we can debate that—there is no doubt that, only a few years ago, it was well over £100 per megawatt-hour, and it is now well below that. That is a consequence of the Government seeing the opportunity both from an energy perspective and for industrial strategy in the north-east of England. I think that is a good thing.

Graham Stringer: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point, but does he agree that there has not been a huge technological advance in windmill technology over the past few years? The drop in costs probably represents how inefficient the energy market was previously, rather than an increase in wind turbines’ efficiency.

James Heappey: I do not have the evidence at hand to disagree with the hon. Gentleman absolutely, but my understanding from the industry—I accept that he is sceptical about the industry’s lobbying prowess—is that there have been some fairly significant improvements in the cost of manufacture and in the scale of the wind turbines that can be deployed. It may be that the cogs, wires and mechanisms within are no more efficient than they were—I honestly do not know—but if they can now be deployed much more cheaply because of the scale at which they are being manufactured, and if they can generate so much more electricity because of the size of these things, I think that those are cost reductions even if the underlying technology has not moved on. I suspect it has a little, but I do not have the evidence at hand to debate that point today.

Renewables have, I think, become the cheapest form of generation. Solar has been going gangbusters in the speed at which it has brought down its costs and so, too, has onshore wind, notwithstanding the political pressures against it in this place. It is increasingly hard to argue that the burning of hydrocarbons for the purpose of generating electricity is the cheapest way of providing electricity. More and more often, we can buy out the intermittency of renewables to deliver very cheap clean green energy, and it is no longer a choice between decarbonisation and cheap energy. It is just that the greener energy happens to be the cheapest as well. Crucially, what renewables also allow us to do, which will realise a big saving, is to decentralise the energy system. That will certainly bring with it significant reductions in the costs of transmission, and potentially even distribution as well.

I have said that our auction mechanism is imperfect, but it is worth noting that many other countries have sought to emulate what we have done with Government policy on the deployment of renewables. It has sped up our decarbonisation—spectacularly so—and has reduced the wholesale price of energy. I accept that that has been clouded by a combination of the energy companies not necessarily passing on the savings to consumers as quickly as they could and of the green taxes that the Government put on top of the wholesale price. That has meant that consumers do not see it, as some people in this room would, as the right thing, because, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton said, they have not seen on their bill the translation of that change into their energy costs.

Professor Helm also rightly mentioned that there are other areas for decarbonisation where the Government have not yet made as much progress as they might. Some very good things are being talked about within the Government’s Department and I know that she is a big champion of the decarbonisation of heat and how we do that better. I am a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Transport and I know that a lot of work is going on there to look at how we decarbonise transport and the future of mobility.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is doing great things on waste. I accept the criticism of Professor Helm and others in this place that agriculture has been lagging behind. Representing a farming constituency, I know exactly why that is the case. It will be very challenging when we have to start telling people that they need to reduce their consumption of meat, milk, cheese and everything else in the interest of decarbonisation, but that conversation is surely coming.

The issue is how we translate all the advances in technology in the power sector into reduced bills. The Domestic Gas and Electricity (Terror Cap) Bill, which I spoke to on Second Reading—I also served on the Public Bill Committee—should not be regarded as the process by which we do that, I am reassured by my previous discussion with my right hon. Friend the Minister, and I hope that the Bill will not be a temporary raid on the market.

The analogy that I like to use is that the current market, the caterpillar, is going into the chrysalis and on the other side we will have the butterfly that is the wonderful, digitised, decentralised energy system of the future. It would be disastrous if the caterpillar went into the chrysalis and after an inordinate period of time what emerged on the other side was still a caterpillar. We need to give Ofgem the latitude to use this as an opportunity not just to introduce a price cap, but to transform the energy system so that all of the savings that clean tech undoubtedly will afford start to translate into reduced bills for consumers.

In this place, we have a job to keep ahead of what will undoubtedly be a change in the mindset of consumers. Electric vehicles are not gaining in popularity among the electorate because we in Parliament have told people they are a good thing. They are gaining in popularity because they are unquestionably the future of motoring. They are technologically advanced, better than normal cars and cheaper to run, and people will be going for such things as a result of that, not because they are motivated by decarbonisation. We need an energy system that is ready to give them not only the ability to motor effortlessly because the charging network is all there, but from which, with their electric vehicles, they can take full advantage of the fact that they now have a battery parked outside in their garage, and can participate in the energy system to further reduce their bills.

Increasingly, people will start to get the internet of things within their home and businesses. They might not realise that that transition is happening because all that it might mean at the moment is a smart speaker in the corner of the room from which they invite Alexa to tell them the weather. Increasingly, people will find that
as their homes become smart, they will be able to participate in the energy system and access services that will allow them to deliver their domestic energy much more cheaply because something like Alexa, Siri, Google Home or whoever else will be able to run their homes more cheaply and will work out when they need to perform various functions to take advantage of cheaper market prices.

In turn, as policy makers we need to ensure that everything is in place for storage to be fully unlocked both in catalysing the research and development for grid scale storage and making sure that the market is ready for people who have storage in their business, home or community. We need to make sure that the market is ready for storage to participate.

Demand-side response has been spoken about for so long, but I am not sure we have the policy levers quite right yet to make sure that demand responds on a meaningful scale, particularly when aggregated across lots of domestic users and small businesses. We have the big users signed up to it, but delivering it when it is aggregated across a large number of consumers is very important. We need to accelerate that transmission because I suspect that consumer demand for those things will start to take off quite quickly in the next five to 10 years. There is a danger that we will get caught out having not put in place policy and regulatory frameworks for the new energy system that people will realise they want, and it will not be delivered if we do not get that right.

The other thing it is tempting to do when talking about Professor Helm's report, which focuses on the big stuff, is to forget that energy efficiency is far and away the best way to deliver savings to consumers. I know the Government have made some eye-catching announcements on this recently, and it is absolutely right that we continue to see small gains in people's homes and businesses as just as important as the things that we talk about in the North sea or the big power stations that we build here in this country. They will deliver the biggest savings by far for consumers in the short and medium term.

I will wrap up simply by saying that the report is not perfect—we know that—but it raises interesting points that have stimulated a conversation in Parliament and helped to focus the Government on what could change. We are in danger of losing the argument with the bill payer if we do not start to show how all the clean technologies can and will participate in the energy system and access services that people will realise they want, and it will not be delivered if we do not get that right.

Promising the right behaviour from industry and not being punitive when it comes to increasing the price of energy. The opportunity for a future hydrogen economy requires decades of planning as we seek to transition, so starting that conversation now is very important indeed.

The discussion that we are having today is excellent. There is a lot that the Government need to do, and that Professor Helm will have prompted them to do through his report. It is not perfect, but the fact is that renewables are driving down the costs of energy. We need to be able to translate that into cheaper bills for the consumer. I know that the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton is sceptical on such matters, but I passionately believe that the evidence shows that what we are doing is the right thing, and that we should keep our course.

3.20 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on bringing forward the debate. I was glad that we cleared up, right at the start, the pedantic point about the title and that we were not going to be debating whether Professor Helm should have been paid £500 or £400 a day.

The hon. Gentleman set out his stall with respect to the potential value of the overpayment by consumers. Obviously, we need to realise, going forward, that the issue is about getting the best value for consumers. I was a wee bit alarmed when he said that he was a scientist. I am a civil engineer, and I am always aware of how scientists like even more evidence-based detail. Funnily enough, one of the criticisms of Professor Helm's report by some parties was that there was perhaps not enough evidence to back up his assertions. However, as other hon. Members have touched on, it certainly provides a good debating point, and throws down a few markers for the Government to consider.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton mentioned a potential 1,600 new coal plants coming in around the world, while we are decarbonising and, correctly, eliminating coal-fired plants, so the UK impact on overall world reductions is pretty minimal. I do not think that that is the correct attitude. We must continue to lead by example on decarbonisation and to lobby and negotiate for others to do so. The hon. Gentleman was correct in pointing out that complexity is an issue—a theme that Dieter Helm brought out in his report.

A recurring theme of the hon. Gentleman's remarks was the correctness or otherwise of the information presented by lobbyists for what he sees as vested interests. There is no doubt that it is a challenge for the Government and for all politicians when someone sets out how good their technology might be and how it might change the world. As I get more involved with the energy sector, it is a challenge to get to grips with the terminology—the buzzwords and abbreviations.

Most of the hon. Members in the Chamber seem to agree that the review is a good thing, but there has been debate on aspects of it. The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton seems to question the value of the reductions in respect of offshore wind and how much is through cost reductions or efficiencies. I suggest that, at the very least, there has definitely been an increase in the efficiency of the manufacturing supply chain from
going bigger and better. There is obviously an initial up-front cost. Cost reductions can be seen all around Europe. Given those similarities, I think there are genuine redress in connection with technology.

In a relatively brief speech, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) touched on smart meters and the progress of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill. He mentioned the Rubik’s cube, which is another thing I never got to grips with, and overpriced standard variable tariffs. At least in terms of the tariff cap and overpriced SVTs, cross-party working and political pressure are bringing the energy companies to book at last. I welcome that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about reducing fuel poverty. That is certainly important. I suggest that it is not just energy policy that leads to fuel poverty; austerity clearly feeds into it—if people do not have enough money coming into their household, they will, by default, almost certainly experience fuel poverty. So other Government policies have an impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) gave a characteristically laid-back and chilled speech. I am tempted to go down that route, but I certainly agree with all the points she made. She concluded that consumers need to be at the heart of considerations. She is a champion of consumers, and I echo that sentiment. She correctly highlighted the issue of Hinkley Point. I shall come back to that and the fact that the cost of decarbonised energy is equivalent to 20% of bills; perhaps there is a better way of paying for decarbonisation.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). I congratulate his children on the high standard of their art work. The hon. Gentleman echoed Dieter Helm’s assertion that the auction system may be imperfect, but, as he said, it has clearly led to decarbonisation and the introduction of low-carbon technologies. There may be faults, but it has moved things in the right direction.

When the hon. Gentleman spoke of lobbyists and of losers backing Governments, I thought he might mean losers in government—but perhaps that is just a cheap shot by me. Electric vehicles are perhaps an offshoot of the debate, and although he said that there is increased uptake because people see them as the technology of the future, I am not sure we are quite there yet. Electric vehicle uptake is still too low, and we need to do more to get people to use them.

Uncharacteristically, I want to commend the Government for commissioning the review of energy policy. It may have been an admission that household energy bills are too expensive. As we have heard, that point has been reinforced by the announcement of the intended energy price cap—the Bill has its Third Reading on Monday. In October 2017 the Secretary of State said:

“Over the past 15 years energy prices have risen by over 90% in real terms.”

He added that there were bill increases

“on prices the CMA had already concluded were too high.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 473.]

The cap is intended to be temporary—until 2023—which does not give the market too much time to become truly cost-effective and competitive. That means that we need longer term, consistent, logical energy strategies in place by then. Hopefully we shall see the butterfly come out of the chrysalis, as the hon. Member for Wells said.

It is therefore not surprising that Dieter Helm obviously agrees that the cost of energy is too high

“to meet the government’s objectives and, in particular, to be consistent with the Climate Change Act.”

Another key finding was 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.”

Those aspects of the matter, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton said, are the result of a combination of successive Government failures to remedy matters.

The review highlights the fact that the investment strategy of picking winners is not necessarily efficient, and suggests that interventions should be radically simplified. No doubt the latter point will appeal to a Tory Government, but it is also the case that simplification should not happen to the detriment of emerging technologies. I have sympathy for a Government trying to support particular technologies. However, it should not be done on too much of an ad hoc basis. The way the Government have tackled the matter has not always been logical. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned Hinkley Point C, with a price of £92.50 per megawatt-hour, compared with £57.50 per megawatt-hour in the latest auction for offshore wind. That is only half the story. As Dieter Helm correctly reminds us, Hinkley is sucking those costs out for a 35-year contractual period. Meanwhile offshore wind gets only a 15-year contractual period. As he says:

“The nuclear plant will always run, reducing the market available to newer technologies until mid-century or possibly longer. This could act as a brake on technical change”.

Will the Government heed that warning and pull back from other nuclear projects such as Sizewell?

On my recurring theme of onshore wind, we need to find another route back to market. It has been excluded from contracts for difference auctions, cannot bid for the flexibility market under current arrangements, and is not allowed to bid for the capacity auctions. We need to find a way to get onshore wind and photovoltaics or solar back to market so that we can capitalise on the reduced prices.

Dieter Helm also recommends that the legacy costs for renewables obligations certificates, feed-in tariffs and contracts for difference should be separated, ring-fenced and placed in a legacy bank. It will be interesting to hear the Minister’s recommendations on phasing those out.

Dieter Helm highlights the fact that the “revenue = incentives + innovation + outputs” framework for Ofgem, which covers the transmission and network operating regime, needs to be changed, and is resulting in higher than necessary prices. We have long argued that the current transmission system is outdated and dis-incentivises the construction of appropriate generation in the correct locations. Of course, it also disadvantages Scotland—particularly the north of Scotland.

Dieter Helm suggests that the Government should establish an independent national system operator and national system operator in the public sector, with relevant duties to supply and take on some of the obligations of the relevant licences from regulated transmission and distribution companies—again, it would be good to
hear a ministerial response on that. Such a provision might be slightly different, but to me it vindicates the SNP Government’s proposals to develop a not-for-profit energy retail company, and further changes that Dieter Helm suggested would complement that venture. It would also reduce Ofgem’s role in network regulation, which would be good.

Dieter Helm highlights that capping the supply margin would be the best way to meet the objectives of new legislation, and that the Government should issue an annual statement to Parliament, setting out required capacity margins and guidance for system operators. That would give parliamentarians greater scrutiny and input, which I would welcome.

Energy costs are a function of two things—the cost of energy and the amount of energy households use, which is linked to a property’s energy efficiency. Other hon. Members have touched on that issue, and I think the Government need to make more direct investment in energy efficiency policies. The SNP Government are doing that, and there is no doubt that the cost of energy then becomes less of a burden on those who might be fuel poor or struggling with their energy bills. If the money comes from direct taxation—especially in Scotland, where we have a more progressive tax system—that is clearly a much better way of paying for such initiatives and creating a fairer society.

As other hon. Members have said, this is a great starting point for debate. In the long term, we look forward to a proper Government response after their call for evidence, and I would certainly welcome a response from the Minister on the matters raised today.

3.31 pm

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on securing this debate. He is well ahead of the Government in having the first response to the Helm review—as he rightly said, a response from the Government who commissioned the report in the first place is currently conspicuous by its absence. Given how these things proceed, it is a little odd that the Government’s initial response to the Helm review into the costs of energy was essentially to call for evidence on the cost of energy. I am not quite sure where we are with the Government response to the report they commissioned, although I am sure we will hear about that from the Minister. Because we have no indication of what the Government intend to do with the Helm review, we are slightly at sea in terms of how best to respond to it at this stage. Should we consider the commissioning of the report, its terms of reference, the recommendations within it, or, indeed, what the Government will do with it?

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): A good place to start would be Dieter Helm’s conclusion that there is apparently nobody in government or any other sphere who can explain all the interventions being made in the energy market, such as the clutter of interventions in that market.

**Dr Whitehead**: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point. That point is also made strongly in the Helm report, which has a list of the various interventions in play. Indeed, I think we can add a few more to those in the report, some of which have appeared more recently, such as energy intensive industry, underwriting and so on. What the Helm report says is right: we have vastly over-complicated many of the areas that we consider necessary as policy levers. Indeed the temptation, not just for the current Government but for successive Governments, has been than when they see a shed that is slightly leaning, they build another outhouse on the side to stop the shed leaning. They subsequently have to do something with the outhouse, and then we get the current extraordinary complexity of the whole process.

To get a feel for exactly how complex the market is, I refer hon. Members to a recent chart produced by the University of Exeter about the various interactions that the energy market now undertakes. Helm makes that point strongly. The question is this: if we are simplifying the market and how it works, how do we do that? How do we dismantle the complexity as we simplify the market, and what will be the consequences of that simplification?

All other things apart, this review was a hospital pass for Dieter Helm, and, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) emphasised, it was, frankly, an unbelievably rushed job. It was commissioned on 6 August last year, and concluded on 25 October last year. Not only was it commissioned on 6 August, but it had terms of reference that ran to one and a half pages. If hon. Members read them, they will see that not only do they greatly curtail what the review could have covered, but they are internally contradictory, regarding what they ask the review to do. For example, the review states that the Government have “the ambition for the UK to have the lowest energy costs in Europe”, but, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alun Brown) emphasised, the review merely talks about power. Although we are supposed to have the lowest energy costs, the review is only supposed to consider power, and not heat or energy efficiency; that point was made by the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). The review has apparently wide ambition, but in practice it covers a constrained area of examination. It is essentially a review of the cost of electricity, and that is what it concentrates on.

Given where energy is now, if we talked properly about its overall cost we would have to mention that, as the Helm review lays out in some circumstances, the cost of energy is higher in a number of other European countries but the cost to consumers is much lower. That is because of the difference in energy efficiency in those countries, and the interaction between different forms of energy—what happens to heat, for example—and the power sector. If we take the lowest energy costs in Europe as our theme, it is not immediately clear what we are talking about. What will those lowest energy costs be compared with? If we restrict ourselves to the power sector, how can we complete that examination in terms of overall energy costs? That is a bit of a theme of the report, hospital pass that it is, although given the short time span and the terms of reference given to Professor Helm he has done a tremendous job.

Nevertheless, we should be clear that the report in essence represents an extended opinion piece: the opinions of Professor Dieter Helm on how the energy market and the electricity market in particular will work in
future. He has been expressing those opinions—I am familiar with a number of them—forcefully for a considerable period. I strongly agree with some of his opinions and do not agree with some but they are mostly there in the report, one way or another.

The question we have to ask about the recommendations that Professor Helm makes in the report is, how are they backed up with evidence? Having read the recommendations or even the executive summary, we might confidently assume that in the report we would find not only evidence to back up the recommendations, but talk of their consequences. However, we do not find that. What we find is material to back up why Dieter Helm’s opinions are right. As a satisfactory answer to the question asked, the report falls rather short of what one wishes might have been achieved. That is a problem in responding to it fully.

I strongly agree with some of Professor Helm’s conclusions, but some I do not agree with at all. However, I would have liked to see in the report what informs his conclusions, what the consequences of those conclusions are, and how they will be worked through. Professor Helm, for example, talks about the legacy costs of energy and of interventions by Government. As the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) intimated in his intervention, the extent of those potential legacy costs is laid out for us in the Helm report.

The solution provided is that those legacy costs should be discontinued as something that goes on people’s bills, as they do at the moment, but that they should be all bundled up and put somewhere else. Where are they put? There is nothing in the report to tell us that, except that they will be socialised across consumers and not across to industry. One way or another, the bundle of legacy will reach back on consumers’ bills, in just the way that the social and environmental costs that appear on bills now are also borne by customers. Not only that, that cost will land on customers’ bills in a more concentrated way because, according to Professor Helm’s recommendation, industry will be exempted from the impact of the legacy costs. That means that customers’ bills will go up considerably and not down considerably over the period, as I assume is the intention of that particular proposal.

Similarly, one suggestion is that generators that produce power intermittently might be required to back that up by commissioning their own power resources to ensure that the intermittency is not spilled across the rest of the market. That sounds like a good idea except that if we do that, with each of those power generators independently commissioning their own power back-ups, that is a recipe for extreme inefficiency in the market over time. The market would have a series of near-redundant back-up power stations, not socialised across the piece but responsible only to those people who commission them and, therefore, in the market as a whole probably substantially increasing rather than decreasing the cost of energy.

There are a number of things in the report—the question of who runs the distributed energy service, how that is best run in the public interest, the simplification of the system over the period, and how the carbon price can be used in future to manage the transition to a low-carbon economy—but I am not convinced that it is much other than a good talking point as far as future energy policy is concerned. The report is a good, elegant and well-constructed talking point, but nevertheless it is a starting point and not a conclusion by any means.

I hope that that is how we see the report in future, because there is a long way to go before we get to the conclusions necessary to back up what the hon. Member for Wells described as the difference between the caterpillar turning into the pupa but still ending up as a caterpillar, or the caterpillar turning into a butterfly. As I think I have already mentioned to the hon. Gentleman, I personally prefer the example of the axolotl, which is a Mexican salamander. As I am sure hon. Members know, unlike other salamanders, it does not undergo the metamorphosis necessary to become a land-living amphibian; it stays for the whole of its life unmetamorphosed, with gills, under water. We do not want the energy market to end up like the axolotl. We are in a process of rapid transition—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. I am very conscious of time, Dr Whitehead. Perhaps we could get back to the wind-up.

Dr Whitehead: Yes, Mr McCabe. I am just about done with the axolots.

To conclude that remark and indeed all my remarks, in our energy markets we are above all—indeed, the terms of reference to an extent underline this—in a period of rapid transition towards forms of energy generation, transmission, distribution and supply that will look very different from most things that we are used to today. We know that is the case, because that transition is proceeding apace. I am not sure that the report does justice to that transition, and I hope that the Government response to it and their actions on its recommendations—that transition and the need to achieve a safe landing with that transition in the interest of customers and carbon emissions—are properly undertaken for the future. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

I understand about axolots and chrysalises, but I did not know what a hospital pass was. I assumed that it was something people put in their windscreen when at Great Western Hospital. It made me very grateful that we unveiled the statue of Millicent Fawcett today—11 blokes and now one woman in Parliament Square. Perhaps we can have some terms everyone understands in the future.

I thank the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) for securing the debate. We could discuss the issues of science and climate change, but that is not why we are here. The points he made were very good ones. The challenge of how to make policy in a way that keeps the lights on and the costs down, does not burden future generations with unnecessary costs and achieves carbon emissions reduction targets, involves important questions for debate, so I am grateful.

Before I get on to some Helm comments, I will set out a couple of ground-preparation points. We are at a tipping point. When we used to talk about low carbon, it was axiomatic to think about high cost. As we heard very eloquently from my hon. Friend the Member for
Wells (James Heappey), those trade-offs increasingly are going away. I accept that renewable energy without the necessary level of battery, solid state or liquid storage will not keep the lights on and give us the hot showers we want, which is why I am such a proponent of gas, particularly clean gas, in the system in future.

Tackling our climate change issue and delivering on our carbon commitments, which are world leading in their scope, does not mean that we are looking forward to a high-cost, low-economic productivity future—quite the opposite. As we have set out in the clean growth strategy and continue to debate, we are employing more than 400,000 people in the low-carbon economy, which is bigger than aerospace in the UK. That economy is growing very rapidly, creating great export opportunities, and is doing so in the knowledge that we have decarbonised more and grown our economy more than any other G7 country. That is something of which successive Governments should be very proud.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton that when we think about technological investments in the future, we are trying to apply a triple test. First, what happens to the carbon emissions? Can we see emissions actually coming out—can we count them? Secondly, can we see a cost-effective pathway to deployment? Can we deliver technology that will reduce costs rapidly? Thirdly, does this give us a competitive advantage based on what we are doing well in the UK, which we can export? It is not just us on this low-carbon journey; the world is pivoting to a low-carbon economy. Trillions of dollars are being spent on low-energy production and transport.

The hon. Gentleman talked rightly about coal; as a founding member of the Powering Past Coal Alliance, I wish we could persuade all countries that it is the fuel of the past. Equally, it is not right for us to dictate to some of the emerging economies their energy mix. We have to encourage and support them. India has said that it wants its entire car fleet to be electric by 2030. That will have a material impact on the price of that technology around the world. All that creates a reinforcing, positive spiral. If we can demonstrate leadership in technologies and other countries do, too, the price will drop, as has been seen with solar panels. That means that more countries can adapt and we get ourselves to a better place.

The focus on low carbon is not a win-lose situation; it is a win-win situation. The emphasis on innovation cannot be made strongly enough, which is why we have committed £2.5 billion over this Parliament just for this area of low-carbon innovation, which is part of the biggest increase ever in public spending on UK science research and innovation.

We can debate strategies, and we will, but we need to focus on costs now. Reducing costs both for consumers and for businesses is the heart of what we want to do. We have seen and heard what has happened to the input cost going into the system; I accept the point about onshore wind—the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and I have debated that. We have again heard—commitment that we do not believe large onshore wind is right for England, but I am aware of other parts of the country and we are working to see what we can do.

We have seen a dramatic fall in the cost of low-carbon energy. Indeed, we have just celebrated our second period of coal-free power generation—a record of 57 hours not using coal to power our electricity in the UK. There are some other more subtle points, too. Network costs, which make up a quarter of dual fuel bills, have fallen 17% since privatisation, and the pressure is downwards on those. We have seen a dramatic increase in the level of competition in the retail energy market—there are now more than 65 suppliers. Switching levels are hitting record highs.

As hon. Members will know, I will bring back to the Floor of the House the Report stage of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tari ff Cap) Bill next week. It sounds as if we will have strong support from all Members present. We believe that we need to do more to help that market move towards a more price-competitive place, and we want that cap to be in place for this winter.

On household energy bills, it has not just been about consumers and taxpayers investing in the future of energy generation and low carbon. Much of that investment has been offset by improvements in fuel efficiency in homes, which I believe the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) alluded to, often directly through measures such as the energy company obligation. In fact, although prices have gone up as a result of the investment in future forms of technology, the average bill in homes has dropped by £14 since 2012, because we have become much more efficient.

Stephen Kerr: The Minister has not mentioned smart meters in her list. When does she feel she might be in a position to tell us where we are going with the SMETS2 meters and the connection with the Data Communications Company?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has anticipated my speech; I was also going to mention the very dramatic, large roll-out of smart meters. We know we need to move to SMETS2 and make sure that that is done as seamlessly as possible for consumers who already have a SMETS1 meter—I am happy to take that offline.

Alan Brown: On the point I made, does the Minister agree that there is also scope for direct Government investment in energy efficiency, rather than relying on the likes of ECO, which still makes the consumers pay for it in their bills?

Claire Perry: I do; things such as the warm home discount are part of the long-term commitment that we have made to ensuring that there is better energy efficiency. We are working hard to take out costs wherever possible.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton represents a manufacturing and industrial constituency; we have reduced the policy impact of energy bills on our most energy-intensive industrial consumers by up to 80%. He mentioned the relative costs of energy in Europe, where we tend to do very well in terms of gas costs and not so well in terms of energy. That is often because of political choices that countries make about where they will allocate their network costs. That is exactly why we commissioned the Helm report, to understand what it is we need to do better to ensure that our cost of energy for both households and businesses is as low as it can be.
I heard a lot of conversations about not wanting Government meddling in the design of the energy system, but somehow the terms of reference were too broad and Government should have been involved in setting them, and that the report was too short. Professor Helm is one of the world-leading experts on energy markets and design. It is fantastic that he has come out with some incredibly far-reaching recommendations; it is a no-holds-barred look at how we deliver more affordable energy, keep the lights on, decarbonise, create innovation and build relationships between the market and the public sector. I will not even answer the criticisms about his remuneration; he did a great report and it was good value for money.

We have had a very vibrant debate about the report; we will not rush to respond to it. This is an opportunity when we are at a tipping point on how we generate and deliver our energy. We need to take a very sensible, sober look at what we want to do. Much of that was covered in the report—questions about the importance of energy to our economic success, the disruptors that are going along, the move from passive to active demand, zero marginal low-cost clean generation, and the need to access lower cost, effective storage technologies. The market is changing, regardless of what the Government do. All the analyses of the report benefit strongly from hindsight, which is a wonderful thing, but the hon. Gentleman’s point about complexity, and Government layering intervention on intervention, are really well made. We need a response that is sober and sensible, that sets out an energy policy or strategy for the future that can survive successive political cycles and can respond quickly to what I have no doubt will be enormous technological changes.

The job of Government is to set ambition. We are among the most ambitious Governments in the world—we are the first developed country to ask for advice on what a zero-emissions economy would look like in 2050. It is great to see other countries joining us. We are also responsible for setting a balanced budget, so that all our decisions can be made secure in the knowledge that we will have a stable financial framework. Our job is not to respond to customers who lobby loudest, but to look to work with companies that create value for consumers, so we have frameworks and stability that will stand the test of time. If we get that right, this trilemma that we always talk about of cost, carbon and security, would be solved, at least for electricity.

I thank all the Members who have spoken; it is always a pleasure to talk about this very important subject. I look forward to repeating the debate when we bring forward the response to the Helm review, but I am extremely grateful to Professor Helm for his report and for challenging us to think about these vital issues for the future.

3.59 pm

Graham Stringer: It has been a good debate. I thank the Minister; I understand why she says she is reluctant to formally reply to the report in the short term. That is disappointing—an interim reply on the Government’s position would be useful. I am pro-renewables: I just think that we are at the stage where they have to answer the question of whether they can exist without subsidy. If they cannot, auctions look to be the way forward, as Professor Helm says.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Protection of Welsh Speakers from Defamation

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those who are not staying for the next debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and quietly? We now come to the important issue of the protection of Welsh speakers from defamation. I call Liz Saville Roberts to move the motion.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered protection of Welsh speakers from defamation.

Diolch yn fawr, Mr Hollobone. It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship. It will probably come as no surprise to anyone present that the subject of the debate was inspired by the recent contributions of a topical columnist to a national Sunday newspaper and current affairs magazine. The text is in the public domain, so I will refrain from using the little time available to repeat it. Suffice it to say that those comments are the latest manifestation of a long tradition of decrying, belittling and mocking the Welsh language and, by association, Welsh speakers.

The royal commission on Welsh education stated in 1847, in Y Llyfrau Gleision, or the Blue Books:

“The Welsh Language is a vast drawback to Wales and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of its people. It is not easy to over-estimate its evil effects.”

Fast-forward to 2011, and the Daily Mail saw fit to allow a book reviewer to describe Welsh as an “appalling and moribund monkey language”.

There has been much in between—you get the picture.

I want at the outset to establish a sense of proportionality. I do not seek to equate the bigotry against the Welsh language in the 21st century with the extremes of Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, but neither should the fact that majority prejudice is directed against a range of minorities devalue the need to address this issue.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She talked about how this issue sweeps back to 1847. Putting aside the specifics of what has happened in the modern era, does she agree that no one should be discriminated against by virtue of the language they speak, whether it is Welsh or any other language?

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree entirely. We need to consider the effects on groups in how we deal with press regulation and in our regulation of hate crime and hate words.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Does she agree that the refusal by the Independent Press Standards Organisation to apply clause 12 of the editors’ code of practice to groups such as speakers of the Welsh language shows how inadequate the regulatory system run by IPSO?

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising something that I will raise anon. The two of us agree with the National Union of Journalists, which has raised that very point. Sadly, we live in a time when bigotry is increasingly acceptable. Hate words open the way to hate crimes.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Lady is being hugely generous in giving way. Does she agree that one way we could address this issue is by extending the use of the Welsh language in this place? It is currently restricted to the Welsh Grand Committee, but I wrote to the Leader of the House today to ask her to meet me to discuss permitting the use of Welsh in our debates in this Chamber and in the main Chamber. Does the hon. Lady think that that might be one way to raise the profile of the Welsh language and stop the bile of the bigots?

Liz Saville Roberts: Of course. We recently used Welsh for the first time in the Welsh Grand Committee, but allowing its use in the Chamber and here in Westminster Hall would be a clear statement about the status of the language.

IPSO acknowledges that hate crimes and hate words are connected by exhorting the media to avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual’s race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation, or to any physical or mental illness or disability, but complaints to IPSO are turned down on the ground that the editors’ code does not apply to groups of people. As I mentioned, the NUJ has long campaigned for the press regulator to accept complaints about how specific groups are represented in the media, rather than confining its remit to comments relating to specific individuals.

The drip feed of mockery undermines the extraordinary success story of one minority language at a time when 97% of the world speaks around 4% of the world’s languages—mostly English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili and Hindi—and only 3% speak the roughly 96% remaining languages. Wales’s Government have set a target of doubling the number of Welsh speakers to 1 million by 2050. The number of pupils in Welsh medium schools reached an all-time high last year of almost 106,000, and more than 1 million people learn Welsh on the language learning app Duolingo.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She must be proud of having secured this excellent debate. Does she agree that we should not belittle the advancements the Welsh Government have made with Welsh language learning? Although I am not a Welsh speaker, I am a proud person who represents Wales and I speak other languages. The advancements that Wales has made are a good example for other languages, particularly in Northern Ireland.

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed. Much about Welsh is a success story. None the less, the constant undermining—the drip feed—affects the way parents approach sending their children to Welsh medium schools and the way individuals approach using Welsh in services. I will return to that.

There is an idea that Welsh is somehow antiquated rather than new. We need to challenge that. Many of us are frustrated by references to Welsh as a quaint folk antiquity. A language is as venerable as its oldest literature and as vital as its youngest speaker. Yet language is not
just a mechanical tool of communication. There is an expression—in Welsh, of course—"Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon," which means, "A nation with no language is a nation missing its heart."

For many people, Welsh is their first language. For many, the Welsh language is their mother tongue. It is the language of the home, the language of the community and the language of the workplace. Why would anyone seek to force those people to justify the language in which they think, dream, work and live? It is as natural and as normal to them as the English language is to its first-language speakers. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to learn the language as an adult, but my daughter’s first language is Welsh, as it is for my husband and for the majority of people in my constituency. For them, speaking Welsh is not an optional extra; it is who they are. The Welsh language just is.

Ask almost any Welsh speaker and they will talk about the accumulative effect of centuries of establishment scorn. They will talk about parents choosing not to pass their own first language on to their children, about Welsh speakers being reluctant to use the language beyond a narrow social group, about the social norm of turning to English, about children who lack the confidence to use Welsh outside school, and about adults who are reluctant to access services in Welsh, internalising the negative stereotype. Let’s speak plainly. We know that that prejudice is an example of the majority asserting its power over minorities to devalue them. Tolerance and diversity walk hand in hand. This is on the spectrum of oppression.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and thank her for securing this debate. I have the advantage of not reading the Sunday papers, but I understand that the debate originated with Rod Liddle. I am not a defamation lawyer, but does the hon. Lady agree that, rather than changing the law in the long term, we need a respect agenda for the United Kingdom’s four nations and their languages so that we can all express ourselves comfortably in the language of our choice?

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree entirely that we need a range of approaches. We do not want to be heavy-handed in our legislative approach, but when there is legislation that could be put into effect, as there is in other countries—I will come to that—it would be remiss of us not to consider all the options open to us.

Let me give an extremely brief synopsis of the status of Welsh in law, which is concerned mostly with the rights of Welsh speakers to use and access services in the language. The office of Welsh Language Commissioner was established by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, which gave Welsh the status of an official language in Wales with legal effect. Most of the commissioner’s work concerns the creation and implementation of language standards, but she also has a remit to ensure that Welsh speakers are treated fairly. In the light of what we are discussing, the commissioner recently stated:

“While it is important that we respect freedom of expression...the increase in the offensive comments about Wales, the Welsh language and its speakers is a cause for concern.”

She called for action to stop such comments and said that “legislation is needed to protect rights and to prevent language hate.”

I remind Members that Welsh and Scottish Gaelic enjoy European status as semi-official or co-official languages, meaning that they can be used in the European Council and the requesting member state. The UK ratified the European charter for regional and minority languages 17 years ago, and article 7 of the charter includes provision to,

“promote...mutual understanding between all the linguistic groups of the country and in particular the inclusion of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to regional or minority languages among the objectives of education and training provided within their countries and encouragement of the mass media to pursue the same objective.”

I also draw attention to the evident relationship between the characteristics afforded protection under the Equality Act 2010 and how a number of those are reflected in the way police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service record hate crimes on the grounds of hostility or prejudice towards a person’s disability, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or transgender identity.

It is interesting that some forces have chosen to identify additional protected characteristics, with Greater Manchester police recording hate motivation against alternative subcultures such as goths. North Wales police treat that the Welsh language and culture as legally protected characteristics. Such hate crimes and incidents are identified under race and further categorised as Welsh or English, with 42 such crimes and incidents recorded in the last two years in the force’s region. Indeed, it appears that legislation may already cover hate crime on the grounds of people speaking a different language, given that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2011 includes provision to,

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have of course ratified, and the UK’s commitment to encouraging the mass media to play its part in promoting respect, understanding and tolerance across linguistic groups.

Although I understand full well that defamation as a legal concept refers to the individual rather than the group, I beg the Minister to consider that linguistic groups are made up of individuals, as are groups protected from discrimination and hate crime by the Equality Act’s protected characteristics, which in turn are reflected in IPSO’s list of what qualifies as discriminatory.

I ask the Minister to approach his Government colleagues and discuss how to deal appropriately with the prejudiced caste of Welsh language speakers by acknowledging the existence of language hate and thus laying the foundations necessary to identify language as a recognised protected characteristic in equality legislation. That might be on the grounds of the Welsh language’s status as an official language, along the lines of a list of identified languages, or by an alternative method. It might be via greater clarification of the resources already available in criminal law. As this is potentially a protected characteristic, could he comment on the means by which IPSO might then be called on to review its present dismissal of Welsh speakers’ complaints, and on the wider question of IPSO’s handwashing of responsibility for the effects of media incitement of hatred against protected characteristic groups?

Finally, I ask the Minister to join me in welcoming North Wales police’s inclusion of the use of both Welsh and English as protected characteristics in relation to hate crime, and request that we work together to facilitate the complete devolution of policing and the enabling of Wales’s four police forces to establish a hate crime unit best able to address our country’s needs. Would he also note that once again this might well be an example of how a separate legal jurisdiction would better serve the needs of Wales than the England-and-Wales anachronism? Diolch yn fawr.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Cadeirydd. I first congratulate the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing this debate. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the important matter of the protection of Welsh speakers.

The hon. Lady’s speech, and the interventions, were certainly interesting. I have noted the strong views expressed on all sides and I am grateful to hon. Members for their contribution. I will try to respond to as many of the points as possible in the short time I have, but I will say at the outset that I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady so that we can perhaps discuss this in more detail. I think we need more than half an hour to discuss this important matter. I also think it would be useful to ensure that we include an invitation to the Welsh Cabinet Secretary, given the important role they play in the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government, to come to that meeting. I hope she will be happy with that offer.

The right of the people to speak in Welsh is simple, but powerful. Our language is part of what defines Wales as a nation, but it should not set us apart. I am very proud to be a Welsh speaker. I grew up in an English-speaking household, but my parents sent me to a bilingual primary school because they wanted me to have the best options available to me. When I moved away, as I have mentioned before, I stopped speaking Welsh daily. Now, returning to more frequent use of the language, I have noticed that it is not easy to get back into the swing of things and confidence can sometimes be something we struggle with.

As a Minister, though, I not only want to use Welsh more frequently, but believe I have a responsibility to do so. We all work in privileged positions and we have an opportunity to show Welsh speakers that our language is a normal part of the business of running the country. That is why, although I felt quite a bit of nervousness about it, I was keen to get on with doing media interviews in Welsh and trying as much as I can to conduct some of my meetings in Welsh, and indeed a phone call with the hon. Lady just yesterday. I do that because I believe it sets a good example, because people have a right to expect to be able to interact with their Government in the language of their choice.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Does the Minister acknowledge the inappropriate comments made by the hon. Member for Monmouth, when he condemned Rod Liddle’s comments as, “kind of pub banter shock-jock stuff”? [Liz Saville Roberts]

Stuart Andrew: I will come on to Rod Liddle’s comments later, but I will not make a comment about my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) at this stage. I am sure the hon. Lady will not mind.

I was also immensely proud to be able to speak Welsh in the first bilingual Welsh Grand Committee that was held in this House in February. Again, I confess I was apprehensive, and I was worried that people would pick up on my mistakes rather than focusing on the content of what I was trying to say. I know that many speakers have that worry, but we all have to get over it, frankly, and we all have to support each other. I think I mentioned during the St David’s day debate that I was struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd:

“Only through the use of the language will the language live.”—[Official Report, Welsh Grand Committee, 7 February 2018; c. 81.]

Governments at both ends of the M4 can set policies and targets, and commit to certain service levels, and those are undoubtedly important, but what is critical is to support Welsh speakers to feel able to speak the language. We have a responsibility to continue to protect and support its use not only when dealing with officialdom, but as everyday conversation. I say we all have a responsibility. Yes, the Government have a role, but those who are fluent in Welsh also have to help those who are learning to feel confident to be able to speak it. If they make a mistake, it does not really matter; it is about giving oxygen to the language.

I know that the Welsh people as a nation have a sense of humour. Much of the debate has centred on the individual who tried to deride our language, and even though we have a Welsh sense of humour, and even though the author of the article says it was a joke, I have news for him: he is not much of a comedian. His articles were, frankly, downright rude.
The Government are committed to a free and independent press, and as such only intervene in cases where publishers have broken the law. I am sure that we all agree that that is vital to a strong and fully functioning democracy, in which the powerful can be held to account without fear. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd and others have mentioned IPSO, which regulates 95% of national newspapers, by circulation. The rights of individuals are protected under IPSO’s editor’s code, but not the rights of groups. I am sure that the hon. Lady and I will discuss that in the meeting we will arrange.

Ian C. Lucas: The crucial point is the Government’s position, so far as IPSO is concerned. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recently asserted that he supports IPSO in its regulatory role. However, IPSO refuses to look at cases such as the one we are discussing. Does the Minister support the Secretary of State, or does he support people who want an appropriate regulator?

Stuart Andrew: The Government are committed to a free and independent press. That is an important part of what we do. We intervene only when the law has been broken. I have been asked if I will raise these issues with my colleagues, and I commit to do just that. Once I have had those meetings, I will be happy to reply to the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd and, if he wants, to the hon. Gentleman too.

The issue of equalities has come up. The hon. Lady mentioned the various groups and individuals that are protected because of their age, disability, sex, sexual orientation and so on. However, there is already appropriate legislation to capture potential cases of defamation—the Defamation Act 2013. Unlike colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins, language is not, as she knows, an explicit aspect of race for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010.

Nevertheless, where an organisation, such as an employer or service provider, imposes language requirements that may in some way be linked to person’s nationality or national origins, it would be a matter for the courts to determine whether that might constitute unlawful indirect discrimination under the race provisions of the Equality Act.

Liz Saville Roberts: Along those lines, it is important that I mention Gwynedd County Council v. Jones in 1986. It was declared legal for Gwynedd County Council to have a language requirement across a number of its jobs because there was not, in terms of employment, a connection between race and language, because language is an acquirable skill.

Stuart Andrew: Again, this is why we need careful consideration of many of the issues that have been raised. Looking at the Equality Act, for example, it is not clear what the effect of adding language to the list of protected characteristics might be. For example, if it was unlawful to discriminate on the basis of language, would it be possible to advertise a job that required a person to speak Welsh, or would that be discriminatory against speakers of other languages? I hope the hon. Lady understands why I want to make sure that we discuss this in great detail and that we do not actually create unintended consequences.

Liz Saville Roberts: I agree entirely with the need to not rush legislation and to avoid unintended consequences. I draw a line between employment law, and the skills necessary for jobs, and defamation.

Stuart Andrew: I take note of what the hon. Lady says. I will move on, because I notice that time is running out, as often happens in these debates.

I know that the author of that article wanted to be provocative. It is what he is about. It is how he tries to gain publicity, in the hope that more people will read his articles. He will probably give some publicity to this response. However, I do not personally intend to give him any more airtime.

Albert Owen: The Minister and I are both from a bilingual community. Although he does not want to give any more oxygen to that author, is he as concerned as many Opposition Members, including the mover of the debate, about IPSO? Will he take this matter up with the editor of the newspaper that the article was published in, to show the concern there has been in Wales? I am sure that the Wales Office is also upset by the article. Will he make the editor of that newspaper aware of what has been said in the debate?

Stuart Andrew: I will happily write to the editor.

As I say, I do not want to give any more oxygen to that article—although I commit to writing that letter. Instead, I will focus on our language and the important contribution it makes to our culture. At about 4,000 years old, Welsh is one of the oldest languages in Europe. We should be proud of how we teach people to speak Welsh; of how we are keeping the language alive; of our institutions, such as S4C, which, through the reforms we are implementing following the independent review, will broaden the appeal of the language to a digital audience; and of events such as the National Eisteddfod, which has roots back to the 12th century and attracts more than 150,000 visitors each year. Our attention must be focused on the important matter of ensuring a strong language for the future; on giving people across Wales the opportunity and confidence to use Welsh in social and official capacities; on ensuring that more and more Government services are available in Welsh; and on taking every opportunity to promote the strengths and attractions of our nation.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd. She made an important contribution, as have other hon. Members. I know that there is a great strength of feeling on this in Wales, but I also know that Wales is a very confident nation. It is staggering to compare the number of Welsh speakers in my community of Llanfaes and around Beaumaris when I was growing up on Anglesey with how many there are now. I was there just a week or two ago and it was pleasantly surprising to hear more and more people speaking in Welsh in shops, in restaurants and, of course, in the pub. I hope we will see more of that.

I have agreed to the hon. Lady’s meeting request, and I will of course approach other colleagues. However, the Government have a firm view on police accountability. The practice of English and Welsh police forces working together is a strong one that we will stick to. On the other issues, I look forward to our meeting in due
Global Road Deaths

4.28 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered global road deaths.

Not many people realise this, but 3,500 homes will today have a knock on the door, and a policewoman or policeman will say to the person who opens the door that their son, daughter, mum, dad, uncle or aunt is dead. Some 3,500 people die on the roads globally every day. That is, at a conservative estimate, 1.3 million people dying on the road on this planet of ours each year. That is a disgraceful number.

I have been in this place longer than you, Mr Hollobone, but you will recall that I have form when it comes to being passionate about tackling road deaths. I shall be very careful today, and I hope that colleagues will stop me if I mention something that ends in "safety", because I do not believe in that description. I think that we should talk about road deaths and serious road casualties, because that brings home to us the reality that 3,500 people die on the roads every day and 1.3 million die every year.

According to the World Health Organisation, road accidents are the 10th leading cause of death globally—the number of people killed in road accidents is just under that for deaths from tuberculosis, which is in ninth place—and they are forecast to be the seventh biggest cause of death by 2030. But unlike natural disasters or disease, this is a human-made problem and every one of the deaths is avoidable—every one of them.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): We should discontinue the term “road traffic accidents”, because, in fact, that is not the case at all—these are road traffic collisions.

Mr Sheerman: I did promise that I would not call them accidents or talk about safety.

As I said, I have form on this issue. Very early in my career, I saw two young people thrown from a car and dying by the side of the road, and I never lost that image in my mind. They had been thrown out of the car because they were not wearing seatbelts. When I came to this place, I tried to do something about the issue. My only successful private Member’s Bill—the only time I have come in the top 10 in the ballot—was my Safety of Children in Cars Bill, which stopped children being carried unrestrained in cars. After that, with a little help from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is now the Father of the House, I managed to wangle past him a coalition that delivered adult seatbelts. We managed to get a 72 majority in the vote the night before a royal wedding, and I am very proud that that was the case. We then took the coalition that succeeded in that and called it PACTS—the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety. I still have the privilege and honour of chairing that organisation. After 10 years, we formed the European Transport Safety Council, as regulation was moving to Europe. Some years after that, I became chairman of the Global Road Safety Partnership established by the World Bank.
Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I think that I have to challenge my hon. Friend. He said that if he mentioned the word “safety”, colleagues in the Chamber should stop him, so I am stopping him—because he has a very proud record on transport safety, in terms of seatbelts, his private Member’s Bill, the role that he played in setting up the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety and his recent role, which I am sure he will come on to, leading the inter-country legislators committee at the United Nations. Safety is in his DNA, and he should not be embarrassed by that.

Mr Sheerman: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned with me for many years on this topic. One thing that I am trying to highlight today is that too many of us in this field have been doing this work for a long time. We need fresh blood; we need new people coming in who will be as passionate as we have been. Certainly part of my role as chair of the Global Network for Road Safety Legislators will be to enthuse people in legislatures around the world to get involved in order to understand that 1.3 million deaths a year is unacceptable to any civilised society.

When I was working in this area some years ago, a Swedish professor—a doctor—said to me, “We have to get the United Nations to take this seriously and then we can lift the profile of what is happening on our roads.” As Lord Robertson said in a presentation only recently, people forget that if road deaths carry on at the present level, more people will die in the 21st century on the roads than died in all the wars of the 20th century. I hope you agree, Mr Hollobone, that that is a chilling statistic.

I want to say a little about Britain. In 2016, 181,384 casualties on Britain’s roads were recorded. There were 1,792 fatalities—that is 1,792 knocks on the door. Please let us use that all the time—the knock on the door, the chilling moment when someone is told that a member of their family has died. The long-term trend in the numbers of people killed and injured in road accidents has been declining, but the decline has stalled since 2011, and in 2016 we actually had an increase. To those figures we should add the road deaths and injuries in Northern Ireland; otherwise the Minister, who understands these stats very well, would pick me up on that.

It is important that the United Nations now has road safety as one of its sustainable development goals. Why is that? It is because the United Nations knows that that is vital to taking on poverty worldwide. We know that the death of a member of a family in the developing world usually means that family unit lurching into poverty, or, if it is a long-term disability, it drags the family down because it affects their ability to live a decent life. These tragedies are not just about statistics; they affect real families.

In relation to the countries that we have knowledge of, we know that we probably have an underestimate of the numbers of people dying. I was in Beijing not many months ago, and an interesting fact is that, mysteriously, as soon as the United Nations introduced a 5% reduction target, a 5% reduction started appearing every year in the Chinese statistics. I am saying that the stats may be worse even than we are arguing today.

I have just come back from New York, where we had a General Assembly debate on road deaths. It was a very good debate indeed, and a motion was passed on an action programme that I think will be very useful if we take it seriously.

I am arguing today that the United Kingdom has great knowledge about transport safety and great expertise. We have quite a good record. It is not the best in the world—sometimes Sweden is better than us—but the fact is that we have a good record. As I said, we have enormous knowledge; we have research centres and research evidence. We know very well how to reduce the number of accidents on the road, and we do not do that by a lovely gesture.

I have been in this field long enough to know that someone has only to knock on the door of an insurance company and it will say, “I will give you this flashy little thing that you can put on your bicycle when it’s dark and it will illuminate you and prevent accidents.” Another company will say, “I’ll give you lots of money to have a brand-new version of the Tufty Club, where you train all children about road safety.” Neither of those things, according to the research evidence, has been very successful at all. They may be quite fun to do, but they are not the way in which we tackle these things.

I have worked very closely with the Safer Roads Foundation. It knows very well the efficacy—all the research shows this—of low-cost engineering schemes. We know where people are having accidents. We modify the landscape; we do something about a particular junction that is dangerous, and that low-cost engineering scheme provides the best return possible on our investment.

We have knowledge of the research across the world. I also chair the international committee for road safety research. That is an attempt to link all the researchers on this planet of ours to one another so that we know what each of us is doing. We have worked very closely with India, for example. It is a case of finding out which research can help and sharing the information. One nation will have done the research and can pass it on quickly to the others.

We did not have a millennium development goal for road safety, but the sustainable development goals adopted by the United Nations changed the whole framework. We are now being taken seriously and we need to work very hard indeed to ensure that we achieve something substantial.

In September 2015, at a UN Heads of Government summit, the UK accepted sustainable development goal target 3.6, to halve road deaths by 2020. That was welcomed, but it was rather paradoxical, as our Government have failed to adopt a target for the UK since 2010. The Minister and I get on very well. He knows that, in a debate like this, I will nudge him again on two things: first, to have targets in the UK and, secondly, to have a national centre for investigation of all road accidents, particularly road accidents involving a road death.

We know that we are holding back casualty reduction at home. Targets are not a solution, but they do indicate ambition and commitment, and they influence where we put the resources. When the Government have targets for issues such as reducing suicides, hospital waiting times and net migration, it is hard to see the logic for not having an accident death reduction goal as well.

Jim Fitzpatrick: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point and one that many of us have challenged the Government on since 2010. Does he agree that it is
completely anomalous that the Government are signed up to the sustainable development goals for the reduction of road casualties, deaths and serious injuries internationally, and that they are signed up to the European Union’s targets for the reduction of road deaths and serious injuries, but that they will not sign up to targets for the reduction of deaths and serious injuries in the United Kingdom?

Mr Sheerman: I take that point. My hon. Friend is a great campaigning friend of mine. I did not know whether to apply for this debate under this Department or the Department for International Development. I hope that I am stimulating a relationship between the Department for Transport, which is very good—I will give it its due—and has a Minister who cares about this, and the International Development team, so that they make proposals.

Using our experience, research and knowledge to help people around the world is one of the best investments we can make in helping a developing country at the moment. Road crashes are the No.1 killer of young Africans aged between 15 and 29. Certain countries leap off the page, such as Tanzania and South Africa, because they are well above where they should be, given the size of their population, the nature of their roads, and the number of people driving cars and two-wheeled vehicles. Much of this has a heartbreaking real cost. Road crashes frequently kill or injure household breadwinners, causing loss of income, increased costs—such as those of caring for a disabled victim—and tipping people into deepest poverty.

The Overseas Development Institute report “Securing safe roads” contained in-depth analysis in three cities—Nairobi, Mumbai and Bogota. That analysis was led by the ODI and the World Resources Institute, which found that it is the poorest sections of society that bear the brunt of traffic-related injuries and deaths, and that politicians and the public tend to blame individual road users for collisions, rather than policy makers or planners.

Can I put this next point at the heart of my remarks? The fact is that, in many ways, cars have become much safer—like a cocoon. My wife recently changed her car because she wanted a hybrid car. It has automatic collision avoidance and 16 airbags. Cars are safer and getting safer still thanks to some of the great work that is being done on the new car assessment programme worldwide. The people in danger are the vulnerable road users—the pedestrians, cyclists and people on two-wheeled vehicles—across the world. Those are the people we really have to worry about.

In terms of other places, America is in fact slipping back on its success. There should be good laws and sensible research-based activity by Government, such as seatbelt legislation, as well as law enforcement, so that people are not let off, or able to pay bribes, because they do not want to be caught for speeding or drunk driving. In the United States, because the states have different rules and regulations, many of their cars do not have rear seatbelts or regulation on that. They are slipping behind. We need that mixture of wise laws, good science-based answers and ensuring that these laws are enforced. How confident are the Government that their contribution to accident prevention overseas will be well spent?

There is a new United Nations trust, which we established last week. It has every possibility of being a good and substantial fund. The Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile put in the first £10 million, and some companies will put in. However, given my experience with the World Bank and the Global Road Safety Partnership, there is a danger that we put too much emphasis on the private sector. Individual Governments must come in. I hope the British Government will put money into the United Nations trust, but they must ensure that there are strings attached, so that we know that the money flows to evidence-based, good ends.

We need to support the development of a road accident strategy across the world. We need to highlight what the Overseas Development Institute report says. We need to reframe road safety in public debates, making connections with issues that people care about, such as the economy, equality and education, and to build alliances at all levels of government, including local, regional and national. We must also produce, in every country, a dedicated road safety plan with short, medium and long-term objectives.

I have had the privilege to work with some very good people on this. Etienne Krug at the World Health Organisation in Geneva has been inspirational in the work that I have done. David Ward and the team from his organisation produced the wonderful report “Manifesto #4roadsafety” for the Global Network for Road Safety Legislators—that comes out of the Towards Zero Foundation. There are some very good people in this area, but at the end of the day, we must ensure that we have, as the World Health Organisation says, a policy called “save lives” based on an integrated safe-systems approach. The WHO report recommends 22 priority interventions in six key areas: speed management, leadership, infrastructure, vehicle safety, enforcement and post-crash survival.

To conclude, we know the answers. We can stop these 1.3 million deaths. We can reduce them dramatically if we work together on the basis of good laws that are enforced fairly and squarely across every country that we work with. We have an enormous opportunity to save lives, communities and families. Let’s go for it!

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am obliged to call Mr Sheerman to wind up in four minutes. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Mr Sheerman has a minute or so to sum up the debate at the end. There are five hon. Members seeking to catch my eye, including at least two former firemen. I am afraid there will have to be a time limit of four minutes to ensure that everyone gets in.

4.48 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As you suggested, I have served more than 31 years in the fire and rescue service and sadly, I am no stranger to road traffic crashes. It is unbelievable—and indeed shameful—that road crashes are the leading cause of death worldwide for people aged between 15 and 29. It is a sobering thought to consider the number of lives and the human talent, especially in less well-off countries, that have been lost due to road crashes that were in many cases, if
not all, entirely preventable. Things can and do change. In my time in the service, from the early ’70s to 2005, I witnessed many advances. I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for his contribution to some of them. They include local authorities’ road improvements at dangerous corners, chevrons, warning signs and improved lighting.

The law has been brought to bear through drink-driving limits, speed limits, speed cameras, seatbelt-wearing, crash helmets for motorcyclists and improved driving tests. Safety campaigns such as “Reckless driving wrecks lives” are another advance that many authorities introduce to school children at secondary 5. Manufacturers are to be complimented again for introducing air bags, side impact bars, advanced braking systems, child safety seats and restraints. The fire service has also improved training and equipment and introduced collaborative working with the police and our wonderful ambulance service in the UK.

Road deaths around the world are tragic and costly, and it is time that we stopped treating them as simply things that happen. With others, I delivered fire service training in Romania in the ’90s post the Ceaușev regime. That was an eye opener. It was a wonderful country with wonderful people, but they had no particularly good infrastructure. They had poor equipment and poor training and, at the time, the fire service was linked to the military. I am sure the situation will have improved in recent times.

A report earlier this year by the World Bank and the World Resources Institute spoke about treating road deaths as a public health issue, which I would be very much minded to support. There is much more that can and must be done, particularly in developing countries, to improve road safety and reduce the number of accidents and the number of lives needlessly lost due to traffic accidents every year.

As the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, it is very often the police officer who has to go and knock at the door to advise mum or dad that their son or daughter is not coming home, or sometimes to advise the son or daughter that their mum or dad is not coming home. That is a horrendous consequence of a road traffic crash.

I am proud that the UK still has one of the lowest traffic-related fatality rates in the world, with 2.9 deaths per 100,000 people per year. Despite the improvements mentioned earlier, that is still too many, and we should continue to work to reduce that figure further, but it can be compared with the African average of 26.6 deaths per 100,000 people per annum, which is surely unacceptable. I hope that the Department for International Development and the Department for Transport recognise that global road safety is a public health issue of immense importance. The unacceptable fact is that traffic accidents—or traffic crashes—cause almost as many deaths each year worldwide as malaria, HIV and AIDS combined.

I trust that DFID and Transport will consider what more can be done to engage with Governments and stakeholders to promote road safety around the world and in developing nations. The UN rightly included among its global goals for sustainable development a target of halving road deaths by 2030. I hope that those who can implement change are listening, especially to the passion and enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Huddersfield.
so many countries, whom I hope would acknowledge our assistance. We should not do it just for geopolitical advantage, although that should not be lost on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but because it is the right thing to do. It is already being done by all those I mentioned earlier and others.

I am keen to hear how much the Government are doing, how much they recognise what is being delivered by those UK organisations and how much more they think we can do—not just through the Department for Transport, but through the Department for International Development too. I look forward to the Front-Bench responses from the SNP, from my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for the Opposition and from the Minister. This issue should demonstrate that there is no difference between any of the UK parties.

4.56 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing the debate and on his excellent speech, which many hon. Members found very stirring. His passion in the subject reawakened in me the memory of a phone call to our home in the middle of the night when my cousin, Eric, sadly died in a road traffic collision. I shall never forget the sight of my father, a typical Scot who did not wear his heart on his sleeve, standing in the kitchen of our home in Forfar and crying.

I want to speak briefly about the privilege I recently had of attending a presentation on stage at the MacRobert theatre at the University of Stirling entitled “Safe Drive, Stay Alive”, which shows young drivers how dangerous the roads can be. All the year 4 and year 5 pupils from the surrounding secondary schools in central Scotland attend the presentation. Frankly, the dramatic production uses shock tactics to hammer home the message about the importance of being aware on the roads and concentration when driving, and about how dangerous the roads are. I pay tribute to the team who I saw on stage: PCs Vinny Lynch and Andrew Starkie alongside Alan Faulds, Patrick Boyle, D Gallachan and Bill Taylor. D Galloway particularly deserves a special plaudit. He talks about road safety with the authority of someone whose life has been drastically changed by a road collision. The performance is intensely emotional and moving, so it is hard not to shed a tear throughout the evening. From start to finish, it works effectively to truly convey the impact of a car crash—those two seconds that change lives forever, both physically and mentally.

I will never forget what someone from one of the blue light services said on stage:

“When I go home from my shift at night, and I lay my head on my pillow and I close my eyes, I see you lying in the wreckage of the car.”

No matter how hard the rescuer tried to expunge that memory from her mind’s eye, that is what she saw. It is my view that although it is a shock production, it is so important that the relatives of those who have died, the voices and testimonies of the emergency service first responders, and the victims themselves speak to young people, as it can truly be a turnaround moment in their appreciation and awareness of the danger of roads. If every young driver could see this production and see through the eyes of a road casualty, I am sure that we would go a long way to ending the scourge of car fatalities among young people. I believe that it would teach lessons that would remain for a lifetime.

5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this debate, on the compassion and passion that he always shows for his subject matter, and on the vociferous way that he speaks on each and every occasion that he brings an issue forward. The hon. Gentleman is a Huddersfield Town supporter, but we forgive him for that. As a Leicester City supporter, I am very pleased to remind him of that. I think that his team beat us once this season, but we beat them the other time. However, that is by the way.

It is very good to come along and speak about an issue that is very important to the hon. Gentleman and indeed to every one of us who is here in Westminster Hall to participate in this debate. One preventable death is one too many. The fact is that road deaths are largely preventable and we must do our part to try to ensure that such deaths are prevented.

As I always do in these debates, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective. I look forward to the Minister’s response. There is a great responsibility on his shoulders to come forward with the answers that we are looking for, but I have no doubt that he will respond in a very strong and supportive way to what we are saying.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland data shows that 95% of all deaths and serious injuries on roads are caused by human error, whether that is drink-driving, speeding, carelessness, inattention, or not wearing a seatbelt. We all know what we have to do on the road and sometimes, inadvertently and for whatever reason, we may not do those things.

The latest figures released by the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland show an increase in the number of serious injuries from road collisions to 828, which is the highest figure since 2010. While the number of road deaths has been dropping in the last couple of years, the number of road injuries has not, and we also have to consider that.

The 63 road deaths in Northern Ireland in 2017 continued the downward trend that began in 2014, when 79 people in Northern Ireland lost their lives on the roads. Although the 2017 total is significantly higher than 2012’s low of 48 deaths, about half as many people die on Northern Ireland’s roads now compared with a decade ago. Yet, as I said at the start, one preventable death is one too many. Sixty-three families are grieving today; 63 homes have been torn apart; and the communities of those 63 people are living without a vital part of their make-up. We need to see an improvement in road safety and in this place we need to play our part in achieving that.

A recent survey by the Brake charity and Churchill Car Insurance of 2,000 UK drivers was quite illuminating; we always cite statistics, but I believe they give an indication of what people are thinking. Some 52% of those surveyed admitted to driving at 25 mph or faster in areas with a 20 mph speed limit; 25 to 34-year-olds
were the age group most likely to drive at 25 mph or faster in a 20 mph area, while 55 to 64-year-olds were the least likely to do so; more than seven in 10 drivers underestimated the number of children who are killed on roads globally every year; and eight in 10 drivers thought that vehicles travelled too fast in their area. In addition, research has found that children cannot judge the speed of approaching vehicles that are travelling faster than 20 mph, so children may believe that it is safe to cross a road when it is not.

In his introduction to the debate, the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred to the Green Cross Code, the Tufty Club and so on; I am of the generation that can remember those things. When we were children, those things were very much part of the safety regime that existed.

Five hundred children are killed on roads globally every day, which comes to nearly 183,000 deaths across the world each year. It is for that reason that we must take on board the manifesto of the Global Network for Road Safety Legislators—Manifesto #4RoadSafety—which highlights the measures that it believes parliamentarians worldwide should adopt to reduce the number of road deaths.

As I have said, we have a role to play to improve road safety globally. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward, raising awareness of it and highlighting it for the attention of the Minister. I would also like to highlight the fact that any strategy must be carried out in co-operation with the devolved Assemblies, and I look forward to understanding what the cohesive UK-wide strategy will entail. I ask the Minister to consider—indeed, very much consider—having a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland-wide strategy. If he introduced such a strategy, all the regional devolved Administrations could be part of it, which would also be a good idea.

5.4 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for calling this debate on a really important topic. Around the world, we must design better safety into our roads, and as a member of the Transport Committee I will confine my remarks to how we can design better safety into roads, not only here in Britain but around the world.

There is one feature in particular that I will speak about, which is road signs, because right around the world, whether the road signs are pointing to Plymouth—

5.4 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.28 pm

On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate will now run until 5.54 pm.

Luke Pollard: Before the interruption, I was talking about road signs. Whether they point to Plymouth, Perth, Paris, Panama or Phnom Penh, they are important around the world. The issue was brought to my attention by one of my constituents, Trevor Gorman. His son, also called Trevor, was killed in a road accident last June on the A38, which runs through Plymouth. Trevor was driving with two friends when their van collided with a road traffic post, killing all three men. The post they collided with was made of steel, and was not designed to collapse or crumple to absorb the impact. Experts at the inquest said that the pole met requirements when it was erected in the 1990s, but had not been replaced since then.

The accident that took the lives of these three young men could have been prevented. Thanks to Highways England, the steel signpost has now been changed to a lattice-type pole that crumples in the event of an impact. I wrote to the Minister on 15 March trying to raise awareness of the importance of crumple-able lattice poles in preference to hard steel poles that do not crumple when hit by traffic that comes off the road. I wrote to and met Jim O’Sullivan, the chief executive of Highways England. He confirmed that the sign would be replaced with a crumple-able post, not the same steel post that has been used in the past. That is really important, because as there is more and more traffic, more and more hard, galvanised steel posts are being erected on motorways and lesser roads across the world. In Britain, many of those hard posts are being replaced by lattice-type posts. I invite hon. Members, next time they are driving on busy motorways, to have a look at the signposts. The lattice-type posts—those that can be seen through—crumple if they are hit by a car, absorbing the impact. The pole will not come loose and hit people in cars, which is how Trevor Gorman and his friends died.

We have an obligation not only to learn from best practice of replacing hard, galvanised steel poles in the UK with crumple-able, collapsible poles, but to ensure that best practice is shared around the world. I am sure that hon. Members will be familiar with the 1968 UN convention on road signs and signals, which sought to standardise the amount of signs. What it did not do is standardise the poles to which those signs are attached. I invite the Minister to engage in international collaboration and co-operation on road safety. Could the best practice that is being adopted on our roads in the UK—replacing hard poles with collapsible poles—be shared with our international neighbours?

Mr Gorman, who has been running a fantastic campaign to raise awareness of this issue, wants to ensure that no other families suffer the knock on the door spoken about by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield. If we can do that not only in England and for traffic authorities across the UK, but around the world, those three young men who died on the A38 because their van hit a pole that could not collapse might not have died in vain.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the Front-Bench speeches. To help our Opposition spokesmen, I will ask the Clerk to set the clock to show how long a five-minute speech should last. I call Alan Brown for the Scottish National party.

5.31 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship; the debate has been impeccably run, as usual.
I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on introducing the debate. He has spent a long time campaigning on road safety in general, and I pay tribute to his previous work on seatbelts and his parliamentary manoeuvres to ensure that that important legislation got through. He clearly set out the magnitude, scale and impact of global road deaths, how important the issue is, and the fact that this is the 10th biggest killer in the world at the moment—set to rise to seventh, around the level of tuberculosis and all the rest of it. As parliamentarians we all sign up to campaigns to eradicate diseases and other killers, but clearly more needs to be done to tackle the scourge of global road deaths.

I pay tribute to all the other speeches made by hon. Members—I cannot go through them all due to time constraints. Clearly, it has been a consensual debate because it is on such an important subject, but I may make a couple of comments about the Government that are not quite so consensual. I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) for their speeches and the work they have done in the fire services. I have friends in the fire services. Such personnel are at the front end, seeing this close up. The devastation is not just for the families; we have people at the front end, and the psychological stress has an impact on other people besides the families.

We have touched on the fact that according to the World Health Organisation, road accidents are the 10th leading cause of death, so obviously the issue needs to be tackled. To tackle it properly, we need to understand the causes. Over the years, better vehicles and roads have contributed, particularly in the UK, to a reduction in the number of deaths on the road, but the fact that 90% of deaths occur in low and middle-income countries—Africa has the highest death rate—suggests that there are other factors such as healthcare and remoteness when people are involved in accidents. We need a detailed analysis to tackle the issue on a proper, global scale.

From the Library briefing paper, Great Britain seems to do well; it is ranked 46 out of 49. I noticed that, interestingly, Mexico has the same death rate per million as the UK—27.7 deaths per million population. Mexico is not a high-earning country, so other factors are obviously at play. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield mentioned, the US does not have as good a record. In actual fact, there has been a 7.6% reduction in the first year of the new legislation. It has helped to bring about a change in culture, which will clearly lead to a reduced number of fatalities and accidents. I urge the Minister to think carefully about this and to fall in line with Scotland, rather than having the joint highest drink-driving limit in Europe.

In terms of other road safety measures, average speed cameras have been a success. On the A9, average speed cameras have reduced the number of fatalities by 40%. Investment in the strategic road network helps. I would also suggest that the UK needs to sign up to the UN target to halve the number of road deaths. The Scottish Government have a target of a 40% reduction in road deaths between 2010 and 2020. I believe the UK Government abandoned their target for a reduced number of fatalities—I would urge the Minister to think carefully about that.

This is a very timely debate. Globally, about 1.3 million deaths as well as more than 50 million injuries are caused by road accidents each year, according to the latest estimates from the World Health Organisation. In the UK, we have a proud record and some of the safest roads in the world. There are an estimated 3.7 road traffic deaths per 100,000 people in the UK, meaning we have the safest roads in the world other than in Sweden. However, we must strive to be even better.

I am pleased that the last Labour Government supported global road safety. In 2009, Labour pledged to donate £1.5 million each year from the Department for International Development to a global road safety facility. However, under this Government, progress has somewhat stalled. The 2010 to 2015 coalition originally scrapped our 2009 pledge, before being forced into a U-turn by the International Development Committee in 2011. In our 2017 manifesto, we said that a future Labour Government will reset the UK’s road safety vision and ambitiously strive for a transport network with zero deaths, reintroducing road safety targets and setting out bold measures that will continuously improve road safety standards.

I ask the Minister why the Government scrapped the road safety targets that were introduced by Labour. The Government talk about road safety being a top priority, but Ministers have failed to reduce the number of those seriously injured or killed on our roads.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I know my hon. Friend has limited time, so I will just ask a quick question. We had a 30-year consensus on the reduction of deaths and serious injuries on roads, starting with the Conservative Administration in the ’80s under Mrs Thatcher—I think the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)
was Road Safety Minister at the time. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is very disappointing that the coalition Government moved away from targets? Does he hope, like I do, that the present Conservative Government would restore the targets that they started 40 years ago?

**Matt Rodda:** My hon. Friend puts it very well. I seek consensus on this issue and I hope the Minister will consider the points that my hon. Friend has made so eloquently. He did not mention the reductions in the police, but I should add that there is a link to that as well. I hope the Government will also reconsider their cuts to the police service.

It is worth bearing in mind that the road injury statistics are rising. A Department for Transport statistical table for the year to September 2017 showed that serious road injuries had increased by 7%. We should focus on that point and seek consensus. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister should seriously look at the UK taking a leading role in promoting road safety globally. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for International Development about global road safety? I also believe, in addition to domestic consensus, that there should be consensus between Departments. We should seek to work with our international partners.

In conclusion, although we have one of the safest road networks around, we should not be complacent. The Government should be doing much more to make our roads even safer. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on some of the important points raised in today’s debate.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** If the Minister is kind enough to finish his remarks no later than 5.52, that will allow Mr Sheerman two minutes to sum up the debate.

5.41 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):** I am very grateful for those remarks, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to colleagues from all parts of the House for the thoughtful interventions they have made on this important topic and for how they have managed to compress a lot of thought and passion into a small number of minutes. That is impressive and good to see.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this debate. As he said, this is a serious global issue. It is a sobering thought indeed to reflect that around the world, 3,500 lives are lost in road crashes every day according to the World Health Organisation. I absolutely recognise his efforts over many years, internationally and at home, to create a positive force for change. I am also pleased to acknowledge that sat behind him is a Mount Rushmore of dignitaries from the global road safety world, including David Ward of the Global New Car Assessment Programme and David Davies of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety. I thank them very much on behalf of the House and the Government for the work they do.

I had the pleasure of presenting to an international field of parliamentarians and others at the Global Network for Road Safety Legislators in December last year. That was a welcome opportunity to share the UK experience with other legislators, to learn from them and to see best practice in the field. As has been said today, by international standards the UK has an excellent road safety record and a long history of success in encouraging safe behaviour and safe road use from all those who travel on them. It is a record that this country should be proud of. It goes back many years under different Administrations. It is interesting to reflect that the number of people killed or seriously injured on Britain’s roads has dropped by 61% since 1990.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly mentioned that many of these accidents occur from human error. It may be that in a world of connected autonomous vehicles and pods travelling around the world, human error will be minimised, road safety will be improved and accidents will fall, but there are many things that Government, local authorities and business can do and have done to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads and roads in other parts of the world.

I am keenly aware of the impact such fatalities can have and the need to protect our most vulnerable road users. I cannot pause without reflecting on the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). They drew attention to the important issue of the impact on young people. In my constituency we have a marvellous charity called the ELY Memorial Fund, which is dedicated to supporting those bereaved by road traffic accidents. It was set up after the death of Emma Louise Young by her wonderful parents, Angie and Steven Tyler. They have pioneered a “Dying2Drive” initiative that will match anything that my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling could mention. I have visited it myself. As the sixth formers come out, seeing a smoking ruin of a car with bodies slumped over it and blood everywhere, the colour drains from their faces and they become completely aware in the most graphic way possible of what it could be to have an experience like that. As my hon. Friend rightly said, it is absolutely harrowing.

Just looking at our young adults, the number of those aged between 17 and 24 killed on Britain’s roads has fallen by 25% since 2010 and 77% since 1990. There is therefore much to be proud of but much still to do. The UK has been a key driver in the development of the sustainable development goals. We are in a strong position to make an effective contribution to the UN’s target on road safety, sustainable development goal 3.6, which is to halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 2020. We are also pleased to play our part in the development of a common global vision and narrative on sustainable transport through a target to provide by 2030 access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems and special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations. The hon. Member for Huddersfield rightly focused on the impact that a death can have in destroying the fabric and the social and economic integrity of a family. That is one reason why that is a development issue as much as it is merely a road safety issue.

I suggest to the House that the Government’s commitment in the area is clear. The road safety statement, “Working Together to Build a Safer Road System”, published on 21 December 2015, set out our priorities for action. We have delivered heavily on those actions.
In particular, in March 2017 we doubled the penalty points and increased the fine—to £200—for using a hand-held phone when driving, as part of our continuing efforts to tackle that dangerous and reckless action.

For more than 50 years, we have used a combined approach of tough penalties and rigorous enforcement along with the THINK! advertising campaigns, recognised by Members across the House for their quality and the international respect that they command, to reinforce the social unacceptability of drink-driving, reminding people of the serious ramifications that drinking and driving can have on themselves and others. That has had results: alcohol-related fatalities have reduced from 25% of all road deaths in 1979 to 13% of a much smaller number of reported road deaths two years ago.

On drug-driving, we introduced a specific drug-driving offence in 2015, with specified limits for 17 drugs, including illegal and prescription drugs. In addition, in 2015 we provided £1 million in funding to police forces specifically for better equipment, enforcement and training of officers in drug-recognition and impairment-testing skills. Last year we published research on the effectiveness of the drug-driving legislation introduced in 2015. It found that the legislation had led to additional police activity against drug-drivers, and higher prosecution and conviction rates.

It is important to say that we also recognise the importance of equipping drivers with the right skills, encouraging the uptake of more pre-test practice in driving and a broader range of real-world driving experiences for novice drivers. Following a public consultation last year, therefore, we have announced amended regulations to allow approved driving instructors to provide lessons on motorways to learner drivers in a dual controlled car. Those new rules will come into effect in June this year. Meanwhile, from 4 December 2017 the practical driving test changed to include following directions from a sat-nav and testing different manoeuvres, making it more applicable for modern driving.

A theme of this debate has been that young people are particularly at risk. That is absolutely right. We know that they are disproportionately represented in our casualty figures, and we are undertaking a substantial £2 million research programme to identify the best possible interventions for young and novice drivers. Those measures to be considered include voluntary limits during the first months of driving solo, more pre-test learning and hazard perception learning, the use of telematics to help novice drivers, and a range of educational interventions.

It is also important to recognise that vulnerable road users other than drivers need attention. Motorcyclists account for 19% of all road deaths, despite accounting for only 1% of traffic. They have not been mentioned in this debate, which I know is by accident and because of the short time we have had, but they are a very important source of the killed and seriously injured statistics. We consulted on improvements to motorcycle training and provided our response last year, setting out our long-term intention to provide for change.

In September last year I announced a cycle safety review. In March this year I launched the consultation on the cycling and walking investment strategy safety review, which invited those with an interest in improving safety of cyclists and pedestrians—including vulnerable road users—to provide evidence, whether drawing on experience from this country or other countries, so that we may use that evidence to shape future policy decisions.

Our road safety statement sets out the Government’s vision, values and priorities to improve the safety of our roads, and how we are working towards a reduction in the number of deaths and injuries domestically. However, I recognise that our road safety statement—it is a theme that that has come out today—does not include a national road safety target.

Jim Shannon: No mention has been made of the insurance companies, which have been strategically and purposefully trying to reduce accidents by offering insurance incentives. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that, because some of those insurance companies have brought in systems that really help.

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman acknowledges, insurance can cut in different directions based on the pooling effects and the way it is segmented, but potentially insurance can be a valuable part of setting a set of incentives, particularly for young drivers, that could improve road safety over time.

I will return to the key topic that has been raised: the lack of a national road safety target. It is true that we do not have one and we do not have road safety targets for local authorities or the police. Our judgment has been that there is a tremendous need, as has been recognised here, for local road safety practitioners, the police and local authorities, to supply and apply their knowledge and skills to local circumstances, but we are wary of a centralised approach to setting targets. That occurs in a political context in which the 2010 Government took over a vast panoply of targets across the whole of Government and sought to create greater empowerment and local accountability by removing many of those targets. It is important to say that local authorities, the police and other bodies remain free to set their own targets, if they find that useful. It is also worth saying that the over-emphasis on targets can itself be counterproductive, because it can cause people to chase the target, rather than the problem.

We understand and remain committed to the international road safety goals, to which we have already committed ourselves, to sharing our experience and expertise with other Governments, and to taking part in many global forums, which have responsibility for making roads safer, including the UN World Forum for Harmonisation of Vehicle Regulations and the Global Forum for Road Traffic Safety, both hosted by the UN Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva. In addition, my colleagues in the Department for International Development are contributing nearly £10 million—not £1 million or £1.5 million—to the Global Road Safety Facility, a multi-donor trust fund operating through the World Bank. That is a scheme to which the Government as a whole are signed up. The programme has been running since 2013 and is due to continue until 2021.

The Global Road Safety Facility generates research and evidence on road safety. Working on these areas directly relates to the focus area of disability through potential reductions in future disabilities incurred through road crashes, as well as all the other economic and social effects that have been highlighted today. That facility has made progress on road safety particularly
within the World Bank, and in 2015 all World Bank-funded road programmes included the road safety component as a result of its work. Also, in 2016, road safety was accepted as a theme in the World Bank environmental and social safeguarding framework, so that all programmes approved near a road will need to include an appropriate road safety component.

This research will help to reduce the high numbers of fatalities for road traffic accidents in low and middle income countries. We will be collecting road transport data through a grant between the Department of Health and Social Care and the work of the official development assistance research funding, in order to assess solutions to road safety problems globally. That will help shape policies and regulations to reduce accidents in four partner countries: Vietnam, Bangladesh, Kenya and China. In summary, the Government take an active role in reducing global road deaths and will continue to support and engage in making not just our roads, but all roads around the world, safer.

5.53 pm

Mr Sheerman: We have a thoughtful Minister, and we are building a good relationship with him. This is not a party political matter—

5.54 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 April 2018

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY in the Chair]

Protecting Children in Conflict Areas

9.30 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered protecting children in conflict areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the Minister for being here to respond and hon. Members from across the House who have joined me for this important discussion.

I want to begin with a question. Why are photographs taken of children in warzones, which are the most arresting, harrowing and distressing to viewers? It is because they get to the heart of the matter. Children are the ones who suffer the most, yet have the least involvement with the players and actors of war. Children are the ones we all relate to, either because we are parents of children ourselves, or because we have all been children and like to look back at that time more often than not as being happy, loving and with fond memories.

We all remember from autumn 2015 the photograph of Alan Kurdi that was splashed across newspapers, which I have in my hands—that lifeless body lying down, washed up on the Mediterranean shore with his trainers still on his feet, after fleeing with his family from war in Syria. He drowned alongside his mother and brother, trying to reach safety in Greece. Some of us may also know the photograph of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, sitting dazed and bloodied, with soulless eyes, in the back of an ambulance after surviving a regime airstrike in Aleppo. Yesterday, a new photograph emerged, taken from a video, of a young boy in a green shirt, hugging a man’s lifeless body—probably his father. He is screaming and crying, after Saudi-led airstrikes at a wedding party in northern Yemen killed at least 20 people, including the bride, and injured 45 others. I ask hon. Members to keep those images in mind for the rest of the debate.

With the growing instability around the world, new kinds of war are developing that are very different from the traditional method of thousands of mobilised soldiers fighting one another on open battlefields. Now, new weapons and patterns of conflict, which include deliberate attacks against civilians, are increasingly turning children into targets of war. This is why now more than ever, we need to make sure we protect children in conflicts. The shocking images on our television screens and in our newspapers of children in warzones come from the most dangerous conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, but also from other regions such as Myanmar, where almost 400,000 Rohingya children have had to flee to Bangladesh for safety.

Despite the collective efforts of the international community, brutal tactics are still commonly used against children. They are suffering things that no child ever should. They are used as suicide bombers and their homes, schools and playgrounds have become battlefields.

The widespread use of indiscriminate weapons, such as cluster munitions, barrel bombs and improvised explosive devices, make no distinction between soldiers and children.

To give just a few examples, in South Sudan, around 13,000 children have been recruited to fight by all sides of the conflict, putting their lives at risk and changing their future forever. In Myanmar, the atrocities include girls being raped, infants being beaten to death with spades and children being forced to witness soldiers execute their families. Girls and boys in refugee camps who have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh told World Vision that they fear violence daily. Almost half a million child refugees in Bangladesh face extreme danger, as the monsoon season approaches. In Syria, one in five school children are forced to cross lines of fire just to go to school. In Yemen, it is estimated that one child dies every 10 minutes because of extreme hunger and disease resulting from conflict.

The examples do not happen just in far-away places. Closer to home, on Europe’s doorstep, the conflict in Ukraine has destroyed or damaged an average of two schools every week for the past four years. Areas where children used to play and learn are now littered with landmines, killing and injuring dozens of children a year. Those children are innocent bystanders in times of conflict, caught up in the violence taking place around them. I could go on and on.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on getting this timely debate. If we do not have the debate, all these things tend to fade into the distant past. One of the areas that does not get much attention is China. We have seen on television that schools have been bulldozed, leaving minority children in particular with a lack of education to advance themselves in future. We could do more to take children from some of those areas into this country. I do not think we have met the targets for taking refugee children.

Chris Law: I welcome the comments from the hon. Gentleman; they are a message to the Minister to reconsider renewing the Dubs amendment, which brought Syrian children here. I welcome the observations on China.

Last month, Save the Children published the report, “The War on Children” at the Munich Security Conference. The report shows that more than 350 million children around the world are living in conflict zones. Let us pause for a minute: that is one in every six children on earth, and an increase of 75% since the 1990s. Those are harrowing figures. The images I asked hon. Members to remember at the beginning of the debate are only three of those.

The report found that nearly half of those children are in areas affected by high-intensity conflict, where they could be vulnerable to the UN’s six grave violations, which are killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals and—last, but certainly not least—the denial of humanitarian assistance. As I touched on at the beginning of my speech, the shocking increase in the number of children growing up in areas affected by conflict has been fuelled primarily by a growing disregard for the rules of war and indiscriminate violence in countries such as Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan and Myanmar.
Furthermore, the increasingly destructive nature of modern armed conflict intensifies the trauma that children experience, and usually leads to long-term mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression. The psychological impact of living in conflict zones can lead to a vicious cycle of conflict, in which the next generation struggles to rebuild peaceful societies following the trauma of violence.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the difficulties is not only the mental and physical health of those children, but their future education? In Syria, for example, the war is in its eighth year, so a whole generation of children has been denied the chance to prepare themselves to become the educated people that Syria will need.

Chris Law: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Every child needs a safe environment where health and education are paramount.

In other words, history will repeat itself through our lack of intervention and as the vicious cycle continues. The findings of this report are stark and the message is clear: we need to take concerted, collective action to turn back the tide of brutality and indifference, and to better protect children in conflict; otherwise, we owe a chance of conducting peaceful resolutions to conflict on earth in the future.

Turning my attention to the UK Government, the UK is well placed to globally champion measures that will protect and improve the lives of children caught up in conflict. Previous welcome initiatives, such as the UK leadership on preventing sexual violence in conflict and global campaigns on cluster munitions and landmines, have demonstrated that changes in policy and practice can limit the impact of conflict on civilians.

I welcome last week’s announcement by the Foreign Secretary that the UK is now signed up to the safe schools declaration, which commits the UK to take concrete measures towards protecting education in conflict. However, I urge the Minister to commit to going further to protect children in conflict and to introduce practical measures to reduce the impact of conflict on children. They must include updating the Government’s civilian protection strategy to include a focus on explosive weapons in populated areas and measures to address challenges surrounding that, and improving civilian harm tracking procedures by creating and implementing a cross-Government framework, so that child casualties are properly monitored and reported.

Furthermore, funding must be put in place for conflict prevention initiatives, peacekeeping and training for military forces on child protection. We cannot expect to implement these measures without funding designated for that purpose.

There is no doubt that more needs to be done to help children after violence has come to an end. The UK Government have the opportunity to play a leading role in responding to the psychosocial challenges of childhood trauma in conflict. We must therefore invest in programmes for children affected, including providing the right mental health support, training local mental health and social workers and assisting children with disabilities.

Children must be at the centre of reconstruction efforts, which means including them in peacebuilding initiatives and social stability. Those children are the most powerful actors in reconciliation and recovery from conflict. I urge the Minister consistently to champion independent accountability mechanisms at the UN, including stronger justice systems to hold perpetrators of crime to account, and investigations into potential grave violations of children’s rights. I look forward to hearing views from across the House on what we can do to help innocent children who are caught up in conflicts around the world and exposed to the most serious forms of violence imaginable.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman, who said that 350 million children around the world are suffering because of war. Does he agree that we should focus a lot more on prevention of such conflicts, bearing in mind the huge impact that they have on young people, including in later life?

Chris Law: I agree, but unfortunately certain nation states decide that war is their only option, and children are the biggest casualties of that. Prevention of war would be the ultimate best step forward, and children who have unfortunately been caught up in war in their own nations should be involved in any future prevention strategies. All children deserve peace, safety, security, and an opportunity to thrive in life, and no effort should be spared to give them a better future, free from the horrors of war. All hon. Members must fight tooth and nail to ensure that every child has access to health, education and a safe environment free from conflict and war.

I began this debate by asking Members to consider three images of young children caught up in conflict that we, and the world, are all aware of today, and I will conclude by reminding us all that such images are nothing new. Back in 1972, another image that we are all aware of shocked the world. It is of a child nicknamed “napalm girl”. She was only nine years old, naked and screaming in pain, and running towards a photographer after an aerial napalm attack on a village. That image helped to bring the Vietnam war to a close one year later. The name of that girl is Kim Phuc, and today she lives in Toronto with her family. Not only is she a motivational speaker, but she also helps other child victims of war around the world. Sadly, however, her story is unique and does not reflect the grave situation we face today. Let us begin to put an end to such photographs in our media, and to the horrific statistics of one in every six children worldwide living in conflict. Until then, however, let us keep those photos in our mind, and focus on the real losers in war, who are of course the children.

9.42 am

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to follow the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) who has secured this important debate. As he rightly said at the end of his speech, children suffer more than anybody else. They lose their parents, their family networks, and their brothers and sisters. Indeed, members of the International Development Committee
saw that in action in some of the areas we visited. We saw lost children who were being looked after, but not necessarily by their parents. That is a tragedy, as it is to see men and women who have lost their children and are terrorised by the thought of what has happened to them. On a recent visit to Bangladesh we saw a grown man crying. He had fled, but had not been able to go as fast as the rest of his family, and apart from one small son, he did not know what had happened to them. That is the tragedy of war. He has one young son left, and he has no idea whether he will ever see the rest of his family and his other children. That is why this debate is so important.

The hon. Gentleman reminded us of very important images brought back by journalists who, at times, have risked their lives. That is important because such images send a powerful message to everybody, and we have all been moved at different times by these terrible and traumatic photographs. The sad inevitability of war means that, unfortunately, the children who populate the countries involved in conflict are affected by it, either through recruitment and their use in hostilities, or—probably more frequently—as innocent bystanders. Armed conflicts have left children vulnerable to appalling forms of violence, sexual exploitation, abduction, mutilation, forced displacement, and amputations if they step on land mines, as happened a huge amount in Vietnam.

Conflict also impacts on the availability of education and children’s development. We heard today about the conflict in Syria, which has lasted eight years, meaning that a couple of generations of children are missing out on education. Although we are committed to helping children in conflict areas to receive education, it is incredibly difficult to ensure that they get the appropriate education, in the right language and with the right curriculum, because they have probably moved to another country to be safe. As the Committee saw in Lebanon, Jordan and other places, it is difficult for aid agencies to set up schools in refugee camps. I feel that we must redouble our efforts because once a child misses out on education, it is incredibly difficult ever to catch up.

Victoria Prentis: Given that we are taking part in a Save the Children sponsored event, does my hon. Friend agree that we should thank such organisations for the enormously good work they do, particularly in Jordan? We in this country should be grateful to the countries such as Jordan and Lebanon that surround Syria, because in some ways they are risking the education of their own children by running a two-shift system in schools every day to enable refugee children to be educated.

Mrs Latham: I was not aware that this was a Save the Children sponsored event; I thought it was a debate secured by the hon. Member for Dundee West. It does not really matter who started it—it is an important debate. We should be incredibly grateful to Jordan and Lebanon, which have done an amazing job. They both have relatively small populations that have been overwhelmed by the numbers of refugees, but at least the people in those refugee camps speak their language and can be taught in local schools. The money that the Government and the Department for International Development have sent to keep those people in their own region has been incredibly valuable. If and when they can go back to Syria, they are not too far away and will not have lost their traditions, customs and language. Unfortunately, if they came to Europe they would have to do that. They would be able to keep those traditions to a certain extent, but if huge numbers of refugees came to Britain it would be very difficult for them. They would have to learn English, just as they would have to learn French or German if they went to the countries that speak those languages. We owe huge gratitude to countries that have willingly taken in refugees, even if there will be tensions in different areas.

Education is incredibly important. If children lose the opportunity of education, they are more likely to take up activities that most people would prefer young children not to get involved in. Children are more likely to become radicalised if they are disaffected, upset and have no education to cling on to, and they will have no hope of a proper job unless they have received at least basic, if not further, education. We have put a huge amount of money—indeed, we are the largest contributor—into Education Cannot Wait, which is the first global movement of aid funding dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises. Through that we are targeting some of the world’s most vulnerable children, and aiming to reach 3.4 million children through the first set of investments—an incredibly ambitious target.

I am concerned, and I have spoken repeatedly, about the sexual exploitation and abuse of children by UK peacekeepers and other personnel operating in the name of the United Nations. There has been recognition of the scale of the problem by the media in recent months and we have discussed it in the International Development Committee. From what evidence there is, it appears that there is a real macho culture, and a white western culture, among some of the aid organisations. Obviously, I am not talking about the majority of people who work in the aid industry, but it permeates many of the organisations working there. It is not good enough to say, “Well, they are away from home for a very long time, and they are tired.” There is no excuse for any form of sexual exploitation, particularly when it affects children, but also when it affects women. It should not happen.

There is now, from the office of the special representative on children and armed conflict, a framework of six grave violations, which are monitored and reported on annually: recruitment or use of children as soldiers; killing and maiming of children; sexual violence against children, which is incredibly important because they do not recover easily from something like that; attacks on schools or hospitals, which have happened again and again in Syria; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access. It might be interesting for the Committee to look at the reports over time, and the results.

I am particularly concerned about the number of children who are now affected, not just in Syria but worldwide. A huge number live in conflict zones and they need every bit of help that we can give them. I should be interested to hear from the Minister how we are doing. I know that 50% of DFID’s funding is directed towards fragile states and regions, and that is important because those children deserve all the help they can get.

Nutrition is one area of particular concern. Some children live in areas where we cannot get nutrition to them. If they do not get the right nutrition in their first 1,000 days, they are stunted for life and will always
[Mrs Latham] struggle to get a decent education and a proper job. As my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) commented, it is important that they can eventually get a job, and they need help while they are in the conflict zone. There will be a time of rebuilding afterwards, and particularly in places such as Syria one would hope for an educated workforce that could come back. There is a need to educate young people now, so that they can replace the educated adults affected by the situation as they get older, and fulfil their roles in jobs; there will be a huge amount to do when they eventually go back to their country.

I am pleased that DFID officials co-hosted a high-level Wilton Park dialogue addressing mental health and psychosocial support. The needs of children affected by conflict in the middle east are enormous. Some children need safe spaces before they can even think about education. They have to get the trauma out of their minds before they can even start on education. Much of what we need to do is about education and trying to protect children so that, on their return, they can play a full part in society.

9.53 am

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I want to declare, as relevant items in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, that I went to Jordan with Oxfam in 2015 and made two visits with RESULTS UK, which supports the work of the all-party parliamentary group on global education for all, which I now chair.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) on securing the debate and on his powerful opening speech. It is also a great pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). Both are active members of the International Development Committee, and they have raised important issues. I look forward to the response from the Minister and from the Labour Front Bench.

As I listened to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire I reflected on visits that the Select Committee has made, and I was struck by the opportunities we have had to meet children who have escaped from some of the worst conflicts in the world. In Uganda last year, we met Congolese children who were being educated in Kampala. They had escaped the appalling conflicts that have scarred the Democratic Republic of the Congo for many years. In 2015 I visited the Zaatari refugee camp with Oxfam, and met Syrian children traumatised by the experience of barrel bombs being used on the communities where they had grown up. They had to flee and all that they and their families wanted was the opportunity to go back to a peaceful Syria. Most recently, of course, the Committee last month visited Cox’s Bazar—the hon. Lady told the story of the families we met when we were there.

I have also been reflecting on the experience of the predecessor Committee, when we went to Nigeria and met the amazing campaigners for girls who had been abducted by Boko Haram. One of the factors that we need to address when talking about children in conflict is the actions of armed groups such as Boko Haram, as well as the actions of Governments. The hon. Member for Dundee West was right to remind us about the children of Yemen, the appalling consequences of the conflict there, the atrocities by all sides, and the impact on children growing up there.

As crises around the world become more complex and protracted, it is vital to use opportunities such as today’s debate to restate the centrality of the protection of children to our development and foreign policies. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire said, schools wherever they are should surely be safe havens for children. Even when crisis strikes or even in conflict, children should not be denied the fundamental right to education, yet often schools are targets for attack by armed forces and groups. In some cases they are even turned into military bases or barracks. Even the presence of armed personnel close to a school puts children in the line of fire. There are countless examples from conflict zones around the world where that has happened. Of course there is an addition element—children’s vulnerability to recruitment as soldiers or to sexual exploitation.

I welcome the fact that the Minister last week signed the safe schools declaration on behalf of the United Kingdom, making us the 74th country in the world to do so. I am pleased about that because I and others called for it to happen when we were here to debate the Select Committee’s report on global education just before the Easter recess. The declaration is important. It commits Governments around the world not to use schools for military purposes, and to ensure that they are protected even during military operations. Now that the UK has signed it, we have an opportunity and responsibility to encourage as many other nations as possible to sign up. I hope the Minister will use her good offices to do so.

I want to state my appreciation for the efforts of the fantastic Send My Friend to School campaign, which has mobilised public opinion, particularly among children and young people in this country, on global education. In particular, it ran a high-profile campaign encouraging the UK to sign up to the safe schools declaration. As the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire said, it is a big challenge to ensure that the increasing number of children caught up in conflict situations, either internally displaced or living as refugees, get some sort of quality education.

More than half of the world’s registered refugees of school age are not in school. Funding for education in humanitarian emergencies is not readily available, and less than 2% of global humanitarian funding goes towards education. When we visited Cox’s Bazar, we saw the efforts being made to provide some sort of education, but essentially the child-friendly spaces in the camp provided two hours’ education a day. That is clearly better than nothing but we need to aim for much better. It is perfectly understandable that humanitarian support in the form of food, water and shelter is given first priority, but surely we must not neglect the importance of investing in education for children who have been forced to flee their homes. What more will the Government do to work with the authorities in Bangladesh to ensure that the fleeing Rohingya refugees have access to quality education while they are displaced?

I reiterate some of the points the hon. Lady made about the Education Cannot Wait fund, which was launched in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit. As she rightly said, the UK has played a leading role
and is the biggest single funder. It is a fund dedicated to education for children in emergencies and protracted crises. DFID has pledged £30 million already, but we know that, as conflicts become more protracted, it will be even more important to have funds such as Education Cannot Wait. I would welcome confirmation from the Minister today that the Government maintain that commitment.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency has long been regarded as one of the best multilateral organisations in the world. It operates in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the west bank, and provides services for more than 5 million registered Palestinian refugees and their descendants, who have been displaced since the 1940s. UNRWA has been hit recently by a decision by the Trump Administration in the United States to cut its funding.

Child protection is central to UNRWA’s work. Given the volatile nature of the region, Palestinian refugee children have faced enormous challenges, including as a consequence of the conflict in Syria, the impact of the Israeli occupation and the blockade of Gaza, and simply the protracted nature of their displacement. Even faced with all those crises, UNRWA has come up with innovative ways in which to ensure that children caught up in them are protected and given an education. When the Select Committee visited Jordan and Lebanon, we visited an UNRWA school in Jordan, and were impressed by the quality of education provided for those Palestinian children.

In Syria, UNRWA has developed a series of self-learning materials for children in hard-to-reach or besieged areas who have been out of education for prolonged periods. A series of summer learning activities and catch-up classes is provided to students who have missed out on education, to help them to catch up with their peers. The agency also runs recreational spaces supervised by teaching staff and support counsellors, where refugee children can learn and engage in recreational activities, hopefully free from the threat of violence. In 2012, UNRWA launched its own education TV channel, broadcasting from Gaza and providing additional educational support to students and parents. It broadcasts English, maths, Arabic and science lessons to refugee children across the region, to ensure they do not miss out on learning the vital skills they need for their future.

I urge the Government, and the Minister if she has time in her response, to both reaffirm the UK’s long-standing commitment to UNRWA, and say that we will work with other donors to ensure that funding cuts by the US do not hit the vital work it does.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should support moves from other multilateral education funders such as the Global Partnership for Education to look at funding non-state actors where they control particular regions, such as the Kurds in the northern region of Syria, so that they can access education funding for their children?

Stephen Twigg: That is an important point for both GPE and Education Cannot Wait. The agencies best placed to provide education in some of these emergency situations are often non-state actors. It is important that informal as well as formal education receives the necessary funding. Last week, I met with Alice Albright, the head of GPE, to discuss what more the organisation can do to support Syrian refugees, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan, and Rohingya refugees. GPE is looking at those issues, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw our attention to them.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire touched on the important issue of sexual exploitation in the aid sector. I put on record again my tribute to her personally. She has been raising the issue for some time, well ahead of recent public and parliamentary interest. I remind colleagues that that follows damning reports of sexual misconduct by Oxfam aid workers in Haiti. As a result, our Select Committee is conducting an inquiry into sexual exploitation. In Haiti, aid workers exploited aid recipients after the earthquake in 2011. I thank The Times, in particular, and other journalists for shining a light on that appalling situation.

As the hon. Lady rightly reminded us, there have been long-standing concerns that some United Nations peacekeeping missions have failed the children they are meant to protect. In February, the UN revealed that it had registered 18 cases of sexual abuse and exploitation by its peacekeepers and civilian personnel in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some of those involved were minors, and we have had previous complaints about actions by UN staff in a number of countries, including from Senegal, Uruguay and South Africa. In those instances, people who were sent to protect children from crises tragically became the very people committing violence, adding to the crisis. If we are to protect children in future crises, surely we have to be able to trust the people who are meant to be there to provide that protection.

My final point is one that has already been touched on: the mental health impact of crises on children. Of course, when a crisis strikes, the first step of any humanitarian response is the basic services of food, water and shelter, but the psychological impact of those conflicts on children should not be overlooked. Without access to proper mental health and psychosocial support, there is a risk that children will develop greater problems later in life, and that their ability to rebuild their lives after conflict will be limited.

Last December, War Child published a report calling on the Government to commit a minimum of 1% of humanitarian funding to mental health services for children and their support networks. I ask the Minister to set out in her response what priority the Government place on the challenges of mental health and psychosocial support for children caught up in crises. Protecting all children caught up in conflict is important. That means protecting them from the threat of violence in whatever form it might take, including sexual violence, but also, in so far as we can, it must surely mean allowing children to live as normal a life as possible and preparing them for life after conflict.

That is why education is so central to this debate on the protection of children, and why the UK has such an important role to play not only in our bilateral work on education, but in the multilateral organisations such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. The right to education surely does not end when a conflict begins. It is critical that children caught up in conflict are still provided with every opportunity to continue to learn.

Several hon. Members rose—
Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I want to call the three Front Benchers at 10.30 am, and we have three more speakers. If hon. Members could keep their contributions to not much above five minutes, then everyone will get the opportunity to speak.

10.8 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) for bringing this important issue to the Chamber’s attention and for speaking so passionately on the subject.

Unfortunately, today’s debate could not be more relevant, and it was pertinent that the hon. Gentleman brought to the attention of Members in the Chamber pictures that remind us of the impact that war, and living in a conflict zone, can have on young people and children. I am sure that all hon. Members have witnessed the horrific pictures of injured children in the aftermath of the chemical attack in Douma only a few weeks ago. Seeing children gassed by their own leader is truly terrible, and I am glad that the United Kingdom, with her many allies, has spoken out against that and stood up to it. We must act to stop any further use of these despicable weapons, especially on civilian populations where vulnerable children will inevitably be victims.

That is evidently not the only area where children are affected by war. According to Save the Children, around one in six children live in conflict zones. Whether those children are recruited as soldiers, attacked in their schools or killed in their homes, the consequences of these conflicts are devastating.

I applaud the Department for International Development for doing all it can to alleviate the horrendous situations that children find themselves in, through no fault of their own. Committing 50% of aid to conflict zones shows the United Kingdom’s dedication to this cause. That includes our £45 million of support to the United Nations children’s fund in Syria, to help with humanitarian assistance in the wake of the civil war, as part of the wider £2.4 billion aid package to Syria as a whole. We are also providing almost £40 million to places such as Vietnam to help to clear landmines, which can maim or even kill children many years after a conflict has passed.

The funding provided by DFID for education, vaccinations and democracy in many countries around the world also helps to reduce the possibility of conflict; as countries grow their economies, they produce healthier, more peaceful and more prosperous nations. I am very proud to support the Government’s commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid, and we should all be proud that the United Kingdom—alongside only six other countries in the world—achieves that target. The long-term continuation of that funding will help to eradicate more diseases, empower more women and, importantly, ensure that those who are caught up in conflict, including children, are protected from the horrors of war.

I conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Dundee West on raising this important issue. I hope that we can all work together, on a cross-party basis, to ensure that more children in every part of the world can grow up in a safe environment.

10.11 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to contribute to the debate, although, like probably every Member here, I wish it was not necessary. I am also delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) secured the debate. It is timely, as we have heard, given international events and the February 2018 Save the Children report, “The War on Children”.

We have heard throughout the debate that the sad fact is that children pay the heaviest price for war, but they bear no responsibility for causing it. They may survive conflict, but their innocence is murdered. War robs them of their sense of themselves, their homes and, too often, their parents. It is an indictment of mankind as a species that the number of children living in conflict zones has increased by more than 75% from the early 1990s, when it was around 200 million. It is now more than 357 million—around one in six of the world’s child population. Some 165 million of those children are engulfed in high-intensity conflicts, where there is often no access to schools or health facilities, and where they are much more exposed to violence.

The middle east is where children are most likely to live in a conflict zone. In 2016, about two in five children in the region lived within 50 km of a conflict event in their own country. Africa, where one in five children are affected by conflict, is second in this grotesque league table. Children are more at risk of conflict now than at any other time in the last 20 years. Research shows that the trends are very clear: there has been an escalation in the number of UN-verified cases of killing and maiming children, with an increase of nearly 300% since 2010. Incidents involving denial of humanitarian access have risen fifteenfold in the same period, and there has been a growing trend of abductions, because war opens the door to, and invites in, the chaos in which such licence thrives.

We also have to accept that increasingly brutal tactics are used: the use of children as mere weapons of war—as suicide bombers—and the targeting of, or the launching from, schools and hospitals. We in this Chamber are extremely lucky that we can only speculate; we cannot even really begin to imagine what effect living in such conditions has on children. A culture of violence often breeds a culture of violence in the next generation, and peaceful societies become harder to build and rebuild as a result.

We need real and concrete international action to ensure that children’s lives and safety are protected. Save the Children has called on the United Kingdom Government to use all the influence at their disposal to improve measures that protect children and to ensure that there is a greater focus on explosive weapons in populated areas. It also calls on them to bring in measures to address the challenges surrounding that; those measures include the provision of training and support to the forces of other states, the establishment of a cross-Government framework to track civilian harm and ensure the comprehensive recording of civilian casualties, and the consistent championing of independent accountability mechanisms at the UN and other forums, including investigations into potential grave violations of children’s rights.
The UK Government should seek to show leadership in delivering humanitarian assistance, working with allies to prevent the long-term damage of armed conflict. Responding to the psychosocial challenges of childhood trauma in conflict and toxic stress is extremely important. There is an opportunity here, and there ought to be the political will, to drive forward global action and investment in children’s mental and psychosocial health, thus helping to reverse the long-term damage that will be done to a generation of children.

The earlier point from the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) about the UK Government’s absolute duty to fulfil, in full, the terms of the Dubs agreement was well made. The UK’s endorsement of the safe schools declaration is, of course, to be welcomed. As the lead in the global partnership to end violence against children initiative, the UK must use and prioritise aid to protect and champion children, to protect them against violence and recruitment into the worst forms of child labour.

Children do not create wars; they, more than any other group, are victims of war. The UK Government and the international community must take note and act. It is time to do all that can be done to end this murdering of innocence.

10.16 am

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is very nice to see you in the Chair, Sir David. It is great that the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who is actually a good man and a friend, brought the debate. Well done, you. [Interruption.] I am not allowed to say you. Well done to him.

As the hon. Member for Dundee West said, about one in six children on earth have the bad luck to live in conflict areas. We should thank our lucky stars that our children are safe from war. However, we have a duty to try to reduce the threat to the lives of nearly 17% of the world’s children. They can be active participants in conflicts—as soldiers or suicide bombers, for instance—but in the main it is their bad luck to have been born and brought up in the wrong place. The problem is compounded because more and more conflicts and armies operate more and more among the people, in villages, towns and cities, where the majority of children live.

The problem is getting worse. According to the United Nations, in its report from the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, 10,068 children were verified as being killed or maimed in 2016. In 2003-04, that figure was 3,223. Those are just the incidents that we know about. That is a 300% increase in kids being killed or maimed in conflicts around the world. We can clearly see from those figures that the situation is getting worse.

It is their innocence and lack of knowledge that puts children even more at risk than adults in conflict areas. Let me use an instance from my own experience. In 1993 in Gornji Vakuf, central Bosnia, a soldier from my battalion, which was working for the United Nations peacekeeping force, was on patrol when he saw a child pick up what the soldier thought was a bomblet. He could not speak the boy’s language, but he moved close to him and gestured to him to put the thing down gently. Instead, the child threw it to the ground. There was an explosion. My soldier was hit in the head by a ball bearing from the device, but luckily he survived.

Thank goodness the child was unhurt. The point of the story is that the child had no idea of the danger that he faced when he saw something attractive lying on the floor, and of course armies sometimes use attractive things such as flashlights to make people pick them up.

Save the Children is calling for greater investment in training for military forces on child protection. I must admit that I never had any myself when I was a soldier, but honestly, protecting children should come automatically to anyone, soldier or not. I presume that the training for which Save the Children is asking would include measures such as not using schools as bases, not firing near schools and playgrounds, and ensuring that weapons and explosives are not used near children, but for goodness’ sake, is that not obvious to normal, decent people? I do accept that sometimes it is very difficult when soldiers are in the middle of a battle and children are nearby.

It is not just in far-flung places that children are used in conflicts. To my knowledge, from seven tours in Northern Ireland, several attacks were carried out by the Provisional IRA in which a terrorist gunman opened fire on our soldiers and then, at a pre-arranged signal, children were encouraged to come between our soldiers and the gunmen. I am proud to say that, in such cases, our men immediately stopped firing, but of course that encourages unscrupulous terrorists to use the tactic again—because it works.

Personally, I was educated on my responsibilities to children in conflict by one simple comment when I was the UN commander in Bosnia. An International Committee of the Red Cross delegate asked me to take responsibility for a six-year-old Bosnian girl and look after her in the house where I was quartered. She told me that the girl had been woken up very early in the morning—at about 5.30, I think—on 16 April 1993. Her mother and father had told her to dress quickly and come downstairs with her brother. She did that, and her mother and father and she and her brother were then taken out by soldiers and laid on the grass, face down. As the girl said, there was a lot of noise and her mummy, daddy and brother did not get up. The man who was going to kill her could not do so, and she was thrown into a prison camp.

When the ICRC delegate asked me to take in the girl, I was surprised and immediately replied, “No, I can’t! I’m the British UN commander; I’ve got enough on my plate without taking children into my house.” Her tart, barbed response was to ask me what the hell I was doing there if I could not do such a thing. She said, “What’s the point of having soldiers here if you can’t help a little girl to live?” I felt ashamed and I had no choice but to agree, albeit reluctantly. I did not know how I was going to do this or where it would lead and I was extremely concerned. I could not see how I would square it with the Ministry of Defence that I would have a child living in my house.

The girl, whose name was Melissa Mekis, was brought to me by the ICRC delegate the next day. I could not quite believe that I was taking possession of a six-year-old kid. She was filthy dirty, blonde-haired, blue-eyed—a Muslim girl, as it happened, not that it mattered what her religion was. She was left with me and my soldiers. My so-called bodyguards boiled up a billycan, filled a bath and bathed her. They went and found fresh children’s clothes from Save the Children’s house nearby, and they fed her, particularly with sweets. Clearly, they pampered
her as much as they could. They made up a bed for her between their own two camp beds and checked on her all the time.

After a few days, the ICRC delegate who had brought Melissa to us located her uncle in Novi Travnik and came to take her away and reunite her with her real family. She did not want to leave my two sappy bodyguards, whom by then she adored, but of course it happened. I gather that Melissa Mekis eventually went to the United States, where she married and she has two children.

The moral of the story is that wherever we are and whatever we are, we should all take responsibility for trying to protect the one in six of the world’s children who suffer because of conflict. That includes us in this place.

10.27 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My goodness, how can I possibly follow that account? I thank the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). As always when I hear him speak, in any debate, he contributes something from his own experience that sets us all thinking about our own responsibilities and what more we can do in the world. I thank him for sharing that story, and I thank him and his bodyguards very much for taking that responsibility. We have to wonder what would have happened to Melissa without that and where she would have gone. They at the very least gave her somewhere she felt safe, which was a hugely important thing to do. If the MOD got the hon. Gentleman into trouble for it, it certainly should not have, because he did absolutely the right thing, and we should all express our appreciation.

Robert Owen said that “no infant has the power of deciding at what period of time or in what part of the world he shall come into existence”.

That is true, because no child would want to be born in a conflict zone or grow up in one, but those are the circumstances in which so many children find themselves—it is one in six of the world’s children and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, disproportionately those in the middle east and Africa. The brilliant briefing by Save the Children gives us food for thought on what more we can do in that respect.

All hon. Members have said strongly and passionately that the first thing that we should try to do is to protect education for children, because that is the foundation on which all other things will be built for the future, for the children individually, for their communities and for their countries. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) highlighted, if we do not protect children’s education, that will breed further violence. There will be a cycle of violence that the country will not be able to break out of. The responsibilities that we hold as a significant player in the international community and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council should therefore include, in as many circumstances as possible, ensuring that the protection of education becomes a priority in all the different areas. That is the basis on which the countries will be able to get themselves back on their feet once the conflicts hopefully conclude.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the safe schools declaration, which seems like a hugely positive step in making places of education safe spaces where children can come together. I am glad that so many countries have signed up. We should use our pressure in the world to get other countries to come on board. I suggest we prioritise Saudi Arabia, which is not yet a signatory.

I do not mention Saudi Arabia and Yemen lightly, because as we saw with the attack on a wedding this week, it is a huge problem. We have responsibility because we are selling arms to a country that is disproportionately targeting civilians in the attacks it carries out. The evidence is there to see in the picture that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) held up. It is also evident in projects such as the Yemen Data Project, which collects airstrike data for Yemen. The results do not make good reading. At least one third of Saudi airstrikes have hit civilian targets. Last month’s data identified that a school had been targeted and hit, and that parks and residential areas have also been targeted. This should give us cause for concern as a nation. The Government are signing off on arms deals to a country that is not taking its responsibility for the safety of civilians in conflict seriously. We must cease these arms sales before more children are severely damaged and lose their lives forever.

The UN convention on the rights of the child is almost 30 years old, but this is clearly a time of increasing danger for children. Many hon. Members have mentioned that children are becoming part of the very mechanisms of war, and are targeted by state and non-state actors. It is a huge worry to us all not only that chemical weapons are coming back to countries such as Syria—as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said—but that children, whom we have always tried to protect in war, are becoming part of the target. We should be extremely worried about that and use our international influence to maintain international norms and standards. If children are becoming a routine part of conflict and the target of weapons, the fabric of international society and conventions is fundamentally damaged. We must be very afraid of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West movingly showed us four photographs, which stick in our minds and resonate. I went recently to an exhibition of photographs by Antonio Olmos and Young Lens Syria at Anderston Kelvingrove church in my constituency—they showed the journey of Syrian refugees from their home countries to Europe. It strikes me that families in conflicts make decisions, not choices—there really is no choice in such situations. They want to keep their family and children together if they can, and keep their children safe by all means possible. It has often been said that people will not put their child on a boat in the sea unless it is more dangerous than staying on land. That is the non-choice and the decision that families make every single day. We will continue to see that until their countries are safe.

We must also bear in mind our responsibilities when those children reach Europe and the UK. Organisations I have spoken to in my constituency have taken in child refugees who are on their own, and tried to support them and give them the counselling that we can perhaps better offer than their home countries—we have the professional expertise and the counsellors who can do
that. There is barely any counsellor in some countries, never mind one for all the children who need one. What those organisations cannot offer, but the Government can, is certainty for those young people. They do not know how long they will be here, whether they have a future here, or whether or when they will be sent back to a country where they feel unsafe, and where they might have seen their families killed, as the hon. Member for Beckenham mentioned. We must do all we can to ensure that the young people that we as a country take into our care feel safe, that they do not feel that they cannot put down roots here, so that they can start to heal from their traumatic experiences. If they cannot do that, they will not be able to fully engage with the services that are trying to help them and will continue to feel unsafe.

I thank everybody who has spoken in the debate and look forward to hearing what the Minister will do. We have a responsibility to children all around the world. They are not somebody else’s children. They are the world’s children—they are our children. We must do all that we would do for our own children to ensure that they stay safe and get all the rights that we expect for our own.

10.35 am

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) on securing this debate. It is clear that in his official capacity on the Front Bench he takes these issues seriously, but I know that he has a real personal passion for all these important development topics, especially the rights of children.

We have heard some excellent contributions, not least from the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). I realise that we will be in this Chamber many more times over the coming years, which is a delight. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), is Chair of the Select Committee on International Development. I know how much time and energy he puts in every day on these really important topics. He reminded us today that the fundamental rights of children need to be put front and centre in all of our debates in this area.

My hon. Friend mentioned UNRWA. I had the privilege of travelling to the West Bank and seeing some of the work that UNRWA does over there. I believe that more than half its employees are teachers working with children and young people across that region. It is so important, as the Minister has said in the past, that if there is any negative impact from the announcement from the Trump Administration, we look at how the UK can lead the way in securing additional resources from all our partners. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) really illuminated what this looks like on the ground. I want to give him my appreciation for telling us that story of his real lived experience.

We must remember that as we debate, children are being abducted to fight in wars. They are being trained to use weapons. They are being abused and targeted as deliberately victims of war. As we heard, protecting education and schools needs to be one of the main priorities for the UK Government and international organisations. Today we have heard a number of alarming statistics, and we could continue simply to exchange them for the rest of this debate. The most alarming is that one sixth of all children in the world are affected by conflict. Heaven knows that these statistics are deeply shocking, but they do not alone do justice to what we are talking about today.

I want to begin by telling James’s story. James lives in South Sudan, a country that was born out of decades of bitter conflict to become the world’s newest independent state in 2011. Tragically, South Sudan has been plunged into bitter internal conflict in the years since. James’s happy family life in a small village with his mum, dad, brothers and sisters was disrupted when he was only 13 years old. James tells his story:

“I was betrayed by my own brother, who forced 15 of us from the same village to become boy soldiers. It was a very hard life and there was so much suffering.

I saw soldiers abusing civilians—I saw them with guns, powerful guns—I knew then that we could be powerful like them if we had guns. One day we received an order that we had to march from Unity State; it was a terrible ordeal.

We marched without food and water, in a terrible heat. I watched some of my colleagues die of hunger and exhaustion.

Later I was shot in the shoulder, and I hid in the bush. It took a month for me to recover. I hid and eventually I found a school that took me in.

But after 7 years as a boy soldier, I then found out that my mother and father had passed away.”

James’s story is typical of South Sudan, and of the conflict zones that girdle the globe. Since 2003, well over 12,000 children have been recruited on both sides of the conflict inside South Sudan. Untypically, perhaps, James’s story is now a happy one. Eventually, he trained as a United Nations child protection officer and 15 years on, he uses his experience to help others who, like him, have been caught up in conflict that is not of their making.

Virginia Gamba, the UN special representative for children and armed conflict, presents an annual report on children and armed conflict to the UN Secretary-General each autumn, as the world gathers for the UN General Assembly in New York. Last year, she told a handful of journalists at a press briefing:

“The tragic fate of child victims of conflict cannot and must not leave us unmoved; a child killed, recruited as a soldier, injured in an attack or prevented from going school due to a conflict is already one too many”.

It was not the fault of Ms Gamba or the few journalists gathered that attention was largely focused elsewhere—when disturbing and uncomfortable facts are presented, it usually is.

Ms Gamba’s report referred to children from countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. In the 20 countries covered by her report, at least 4,000 verified violations were committed by Government forces and more than 11,500 verified violations were committed by non-state armed groups.

We look to the United Nations, UNICEF, the International Red Cross and others to provide leadership in forcing global leaders to act, and we commend UK charities and non-governmental organisations—such as Save the Children, World Vision UK and War Child—that continue to make the unarguable case for action. It is important to support their calls to increase investment in education for children in conflict areas and in improved mental health opportunities for children who are living through major conflict or where conflict has ended.
I also commend the work of Gordon Brown, UN special envoy for global education and former Prime Minister, for all the work that he has put into the safe schools initiative, which has helped to bring about the safe schools declaration. I congratulate the Minister and the Government on its signing last week.

Bob Stewart: From the other side of the House, I pay tribute to Gordon Brown’s work, which is largely unsung—as, indeed, are so many things that he has done. I really appreciate and commend him for the work he has done since he left Parliament.

Dan Carden: I thank the hon. Gentleman and associate myself with his comments.

Britain has a continuing and strong role to play as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a leading member of the Commonwealth and a member of NATO. We have put our global influence to good use by being at the forefront of initiatives to combat sexual violence in conflict and to ban the use of landmines and cluster bombs. Will the Minister commit to updating the Government’s civilian protection strategy to ensure that those and other explosive weapons are explicitly avoided, that their impact is mitigated and that when we train foreign forces, we ensure that explosive weapons do not contribute to the deaths of civilians and children?

Let us not fool ourselves: some of the Government’s other actions go completely against the commitment we share in this debate to protect civilians and children. On Monday, the BBC reported that 20 people, mainly women and children at a wedding, were killed in an air strike in northern Yemen, as has been mentioned.

According to the United Nations, Yemen is now a failed state. Let us be absolutely clear that the so-called Saudi-led coalition, which the Government continue to arm heavily, is responsible for the lion’s share of the death and destruction. How can we arm the Saudis with one hand and provide humanitarian aid to the suffering Yemenis with the other? Where is the sense and where are the ethics?

In the last week, my hon. Friends and I have twice, without receiving a clear response, asked Ministers from the Department in the Chamber why, if the Government are concerned about children in Yemen, they did not insist on full and permanent humanitarian access in Yemen and on an immediate end to the bombing of civilian areas before they signed what is, I am afraid, a disgraceful new £100 million aid partnership with Saudi Arabia last month. That partnership whitewashes that country’s reputation but does nothing to protect children in Yemen. I hope the Minister will answer that question.

UN Special Representative Virginia Gamba said:

“If you have no justice, there is no law, there is no order, there is no fair deal and there is no fair play.”

Those words should ring in our ears, because our country has an ability and a special responsibility to behave in a consistent manner to champion an international rules-based system. To achieve that, we need a foreign policy based on human rights and social justice, and for that, it is increasingly clear that we need a Labour Government.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriet Baldwin): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) on securing the debate. I recognise the important and passionately argued personal contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), and the hon. Members for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden).

The protection of children in conflict situations is clearly close to many of our hearts. I was struck by the way in which the hon. Member for Dundee West used pictures. As politicians in Westminster Hall, we have to rely on words and try to match the power of those pictures with them. In preparing for the debate, I was struck most powerfully by the shocking statistic that in the last six years, more non-state armed groups have been created than in the previous 60 years. That brings home the scale of the issue that we are dealing with as a world.

The numbers bear repeating. A staggering 246 million children are living in countries affected by armed conflict, 61 million children are missing out on part of their basic education, and millions more are migrating in the hope of a better life, risking violence and exploitation along the way. Clearly, those children deserve our attention and protection if they are to reach their full potential.

We have heard about the gravity of living in conflict or crises for children. It is harrowing to hear those individual and collective stories about losing the opportunity for education, being separated from loved ones, being forced into marriage or slavery, suffering from the worst forms of child labour, being trafficked across borders or, increasingly, recruited into armed groups. As hon. Members rightly pointed out, the effects are not just physical, but mental. The trauma and distress caused during times of conflict can endure for a lifetime—well after the conflict has ended—and need appropriate help.

The UK Government are not sitting on the sidelines, but showing leadership in protecting the worst affected people. We have heard many allusions to that. I reiterate that the UK’s aid strategy commits 50% of our aid to fragile states and regions. In such places, protecting children is a policy priority.

In the time allowed, I will highlight three themes of the debate: our provision of education to children in crises; our work to reform the humanitarian system; and our protection of children from violence, abuse and exploitation, including modern slavery.

First, the need to get children back into school came up throughout the debate. During a conflict situation, it is critical to support them, because it helps to regain a sense of normalcy above all and invests in their education and the human capital that will be needed post-conflict. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby asked specifically about the Education Cannot Wait initiative.

The UK will continue to make multi-year investments in quality education in crisis contexts that prioritise child protection and support children’s psychological and social wellbeing.
I am proud that the UK has been a leading supporter of quality education for children affected by the devastating crisis in Syria. We have played a key role in the “no lost generation” initiative. The UK has helped over 350,000 Syrian children to access formal education, and future support will reach a further 300,000 children.

In Uganda, we have reoriented our education support to ensure that we reach the children who have been displaced by conflict in South Sudan—an issue that was rightly highlighted by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton—as well as the communities that are hosting refugees around the world.

I am glad that hon. Members appreciate that the UK has just signed the safe schools declaration, underlining our important political support for the protection of schools during military operations and in armed conflict, and of course the UK will encourage other countries to endorse the declaration.

Secondly, our humanitarian reform policy, which was launched last October, demonstrates our continued commitment to reforming the humanitarian system to protect children in conflict. It reaffirms our commitment to international humanitarian law, human rights and refugee law, and it states that protection should be at the centre of all humanitarian action. We call for all humanitarian agencies to put protection of civilians at the centre of their work and to ensure minimum standards for the protection of children. That includes the work that we have done since the situation with Oxfam in Haiti was revealed by The Times, and the leadership that the Department has shown in ensuring that all the organisations we work with have really robust safeguarding measures in place.

We also continue to support agencies that work specifically with children in conflicts. People have mentioned the important work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, and how much of that work will be funded by UK aid. Questions were specifically asked about United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA—an unlovely acronym. I have said it before but I will repeat today that we are a firmly committed supporter of UNRWA, which provides vital services to refugees, and we are very concerned about the impact of reduced donor funding, particularly from the US, so we are working very closely with other partners on how best to ensure continuity of services.

We hope to see many fragile and conflict-affected countries commit with new vigour to ending violence against children.

In conclusion, the protection of children in conflicts and crises remains a top priority for the UK. We will continue to show global leadership on this issue. We will also continue to be flexible enough to respond to emerging threats in a changing world, going beyond delivering humanitarian assistance by building better systems and societies for children of the future. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Dundee West on securing this debate and I leave the last word to him.

10.56 am

Chris Law: I thank the Minister for her response, and for giving us assurances about what is being done and mentioning some pathways for the future. As outlined in this debate, there is a lot more that we can do if we are serious about protecting children in conflict.

I thank you, Sir David, for chairing this debate, and I thank each and every Member for their poignant and powerful speeches and contributions to it. In addition, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his personal testimony about his time in Bosnia.

In many ways, this debate has been difficult to listen to. The atrocities committed against children during conflicts are so appalling that we need to confront them and we need to begin doing so now. The sheer scale—one in six children across this world live in conflict—can no longer be ignored. After listening to the debate, I hope that the Minister will take on board the unanimous view of hon. Members and go further. In doing so,
she will have our support and—I am sure—support from across the UK, to show how deeply we feel about what is happening to children in conflict and the urgency of the action that is required.

I will finish by mentioning an issue that has already been raised today by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewlis), and it was also raised yesterday in an urgent question on Yemen. There have been over 17,000 targeted bombings in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition, with one in three targeted at civilian targets. Our weapons are being sold to Saudi Arabia and used against those targets; our British military are involved in intelligence and service there. So, if we want to end the suffering of little children, the first step we should take is to halt arms sales now and end the atrocity that is happening in Yemen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protecting children in conflict areas.

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Capital Needs of Co-operatives

11 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered capital needs of co-operatives.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. It is a particular delight to be able to talk co-operatives with the Treasury Minister twice in two days. For those of us who want the co-operative and mutual sector of our economy to double in size, fixing the difficulties that co-operatives have in accessing the capital they need to expand is critical. Co-operatives UK, the co-operative movement’s trade body, has done an excellent job in recent years of championing community shares as one way for local co-operatives to raise significant but comparatively small amounts of capital to grow. Lottery money is currently being used by Co-ops UK’s community share unit to support community shares offers, but more could be done if the Government renewed their previous interest in this area. It would be good for Ministers to explore what else they can do to encourage the further expansion of community shares.

More recently, Co-ops UK, working with retail co-op societies, has begun to explore whether fixed-term withdrawable share capital could be developed, allowing more established societies to raise patient and engaged equity finance from members and non-member investors, up to a £100,000 maximum individual shareholding limit. The Financial Conduct Authority does not always get a good press, but it has been very supportive of that work, and I hope the Minister will encourage the FCA and Co-ops UK to continue to champion that new potential source of capital for many co-operatives. The chief executive of Co-ops UK, Ed Mayo, deserves praise for his skill in getting this work so far down the road.

Other parts of the co-operatives and mutuals sector of our economy—notably building societies, friendly societies and mutual insurers—have been subject to legislative changes permitting them to raise much larger amounts of additional capital. These reforms are yet to apply to the co-operative world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene—I sought his permission to do so beforehand. Does he agree that co-operatives should be allowed to invest in social housing?

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. If he can use his not inconsiderable influence on the Minister to support what I will say, we might be able to accelerate the addressing of some of the problems co-ops face in investing in social housing. Unless co-operatives can raise additional capital, they cannot expand or develop to their true potential. At worst, they are at risk of demutualisation, as I will set out. Co-operatives do not issue shares in the same way as investor-owned companies—to do so would mean demutualising—so bigger co-operatives can face considerable difficulties.
raising additional capital at the level they need. Their growth inevitably is limited and their ability to compete on equal terms is reduced.

In short, legislation is needed to fix this problem—legislation that protects that unique governance model of co-operatives, but allows them to issue permanent investment shares. Such shares could allow consumer co-ops to grow by acquisition and by developing new business offers for their customer members. Football supporter-owned clubs could fund the development of new stadium facilities, grow their businesses, serve their communities and consolidate their income streams. Co-operative-owned energy generators could attract long-term investment to build even more energy infrastructure of the sort we need in this country. A lack of capital limits a co-operative’s growth and ability to develop new services. The growth rate of that co-operative is constrained by its relative inability to add significant capital through retained earnings.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, the Headingley Development Trust is doing its second community share offer. It has already managed to raise £232,395 from individuals—I declare an interest as an investor in that share scheme. That money is being matched by £100,000 from the community shares booster programme from Co-ops UK, Locality and Power to Change. The trust can have only £100,000 because of the cap. Energy, community facilities and social care can all be aided by lifting the cap.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend raises a good example of the difficulties that co-operatives face. I pay tribute to his work championing the co-operative he mentioned. He also underlined my point about the good work that Co-ops UK has done in championing community shares. His fundamental point is absolutely spot on: there is a limit to the amount of capital that co-operatives can raise because they do not have the instruments available to them that are available to many of the non-co-operative businesses that operate in our economy.

Like all businesses, co-operatives need to be able to benefit from the economies of scale that are often available only by growing their businesses. They need to gather sufficient capital to serve their members well, to extend services to new members and to expand their services. Without new capital, many co-operatives could be driven into inappropriate corporate forms through demutualisation. Many of us in the co-operative movement can think of many examples where that has already happened. If co-operatives convert to other corporate forms, consumer choice in our economy is reduced and large numbers of consumers would no longer have non-listed, member-owned options in the marketplace. That reduces competitive pressure from the operation of different business models in the same market and adds to systemic risk to the economy.

There is inevitably a limit to the amount of debt that can or should be raised by any business. Mutual shares would present an opportunity for small mutuals to raise funds that they may not be able to raise otherwise, and for larger co-operatives to raise funds that subordinated debt does not provide.

Additional capital helps in a number of ways. It could be used in tactical acquisitions, which would help businesses’ competitiveness. They could also look at local infrastructure development potential. There are a number of examples overseas of similar co-operative share offerings. Examples from Canada, the Netherlands and across the European Union show how mutuals can enlist their members in raising capital through the issue of new deferred shares. In summary, the benefits offered provide evidence that Government support for such a Bill would create a viable new opportunity for mutuals to attract new capital and deliver positive outcomes for mutuals and consumers.

Currently, co-operatives largely have to generate capital for growth internally. They have no shares to sell and hence no access to equity markets. Ongoing capital in co-operatives consists of retained earnings and bank borrowing, with some smaller co-ops also raising withdrawable share capital. The lack of access to reliable capital can be a serious limiting factor on the growth and development of consumer mutuals. How these businesses are constructed means that the introduction of external capital without additional safeguards, such as limits on voting rights and distributions, would water down the mutual purpose of the organisation. The International Co-operative Alliance said that co-operative capital needs to offer “a financial proposition which provides a return, but without destroying co-operative identity; and which enables people to access their funds when they need them. It also means exploring wider options for access to capital outside traditional membership, but without compromising on member control”.

Consolidation between mutual businesses has been the short-term response to pressure in the past. That has created a small number of firms of critical size that are better able to compete in their markets. Without access to new capital, however, organic growth has remained a difficult challenge. In staying true to their business purpose, customer mutuals are therefore limited by their options to access capital for growth. Some external capital instruments do exist in mutuals. In building societies, more than a billion pounds of deferred shares have been issued. Nationwide building society and Cambridge building society have issued core capital deferred shares. That new capital instrument is designed for mutual building societies and enables them to raise common equity tier 1 capital to supplement retained earnings and diversify their capital base.

The Government supported legislation for mutual insurers and friendly societies to issue deferred shares in 2015, although I note that the restrictive position of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has prevented its full implementation and the relevant orders from being laid before the House. It would be good to hear whether the Minister can unlock that particular blockage.

The mechanisms for funding co-operatives are more restricted than those for companies. It is not possible for co-operatives to have equity share capital, as understood in the company law context, because equity ownership is incompatible with the co-operative principles and would therefore be prima facie unregistrable. It is also not possible for societies for the benefit of the community because distributions of income and capital are not permitted.

Co-op societies, like building societies, were historically funded by their member customers, who were required to subscribe a minimum amount of share capital in order to be afforded full membership rights. That might be built up over a period of time, including by leaving
undrawn dividends. Subject to the minimum capital requirements, therefore, members were permitted to withdraw funds from their account, and share capital was typically withdrawable. One of the consequences of that was that members’ share capital remained static in value. Although it was risk capital in the sense that it could be lost on insolvency in paying debts owed to creditors, it did not give members an undivided share in the value of the underlying business.

While the co-operative carried on trading, members therefore had no expectation of any entitlement to more than the repayment of their original capital. Their real interest was in the continuity of the existence of their society, providing goods and services to meet their needs. As a direct result of that approach to funding and ownership, any undistributed surplus was retained as reserves and shown as such in the accounts, and although such reserves constituted members’ funds for accounting purposes while the society remained a going concern, they did not belong in a traditional ownership sense to the members. They were more like assets currently being held by the body of members, almost as trustees for the purposes of the society.

An appropriate and sustainable basis of funding is a prerequisite for any business if it is to start up and survive, and the requirements for funding are likely to change or evolve over the life of the business. The restrictions on relation to the funding of co-operatives, which are created by legislation, are therefore fundamental to the future use of the co-operative form, and to the future viability of co-operatives.

I do not expect the Minister to give a guarantee of support today for the new form of investment capital for co-operatives, but I hope he will take time to reflect. Although I appreciate he has committed to meet me on another issue, perhaps he will be willing to meet me with Mutuo, the think-tank in the co-operative world, which has been developing this instrument, and which supported Lord Naseby when he introduced similar measures in 2015 which, as I said, are currently held up as a result of the unfortunate attitude of HMRC.

Another new type of raising capital that I want to put on the table comes from Italy. Worker co-operatives can play a significant part in rejuvenating firms that would otherwise close in places where there is a supportive policy and business infrastructure to facilitate that. It can act as an essential component of a progressive employment policy. Perhaps the best example of this is the so-called Marcora law from Italy, where conversions take place as negotiated employee buy-outs between workers, the exiting owners, the co-operative sector, the nearby local authorities, and bankruptcy courts. Under a legal framework—the Marcora law—an infrastructure of support has been created to assist the worker buy-out of firms. State funding that would otherwise be spent on unemployment benefits is used to finance the new co-operatives. It has been remarkably efficient for the Italian taxpayer. It is estimated that that investment has safeguarded nearly 14,000 jobs in 270 businesses and generated an economic return for the Italian state of almost seven times the capital invested.

The Italian method of creating staff buy-outs is essentially a negotiated conversion and business restructuring mechanism, with a unique set of supportive policies and a financing structure facilitated by a collaborative approach between staff, the co-op sector and the Government. Some resources are provided by the Italian state Treasury. Again, I do not expect the Minister to commit to this measure today, but in due course it would be good to hear his reflections on that example.

Perhaps on another occasion it would be good hear what further steps the Minister will take to try to encourage the expansion of the credit union sector, where capital remains a significant issue. The lack of resources for marketing is probably one of the biggest things holding back that sector’s development.

11.15 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David—for the first time, I believe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this debate today. I am grateful to him for giving advance notice of the topics that he has brought before the House, which has given me an opportunity to consult my officials. Although I do not anticipate that we will get to final conclusions that will fully satisfy him today, I am very happy to have a meaningful dialogue with him in the Treasury with officials and Mutuo, the think-tank that he mentioned. I acknowledge his long-standing commitment to co-ops as chair of the Co-operative party and chair of the all-party group for mutuals. I take what he has said very seriously.

We have heard today how much the mutuals sector is valued in this country, and we share that enthusiasm in Government. I am aware that the hon. Gentleman, alongside other voices in the sector, proposes the introduction of a new financial instrument that co-operatives could use to raise capital. I also recognise that co-operatives need to be able to raise capital quickly and efficiently, and I appreciate the need for flexibility in capital planning.

The hon. Gentleman knows, as a distinguished former Minister himself, that any new policy needs to be thought through and to receive due consultation, not as a wilful delay but to ensure that it is right. I will ask my officials to explore the proposal further, including through discussion with representatives of the sector. I will gratefully receive any further information that he can provide me with.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of allowing co-operatives to invest in social housing, and I thank him for that suggestion. Again, I do not have an answer now, but I will be happy to discuss that with officials and to liaise with him over the outcome. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) asked about the £100,000 cap on share capital and its potentially being lifted. In 2014 the cap was lifted from £20,000 to £100,000. We will keep that under review, but I acknowledge what he said and we will continue to examine that.

I turn to the mutuals’ deferred shares, which the hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned. The Government recognise the benefits of mutual insurers to consumers and the economy. That is why they supported the passage of the Mutuo’s Deferred Shares Bill, which was originally introduced as a private Member’s Bill in 2015. The Treasury consulted on the technical details of MDS in late 2016. We received representations from a variety of
mutual insurers, consultants, and industry groups. It emerged from the consultation and follow-on work that the industry sought to issue MDS that, first, qualified as top-tier capital under relevant prudential regulation, and, secondly, had no ill effect on the tailored taxation regime that applies to mutual insurers. Since the consultation, my officials have been working closely with HMRC and the regulators to investigate whether it is possible to structure MDS to satisfy both requirements. Throughout that process, officials have sought the views of industry and its representatives via correspondence and roundtable meetings.

It has become clear that, if a mutual insurer issues equity that qualifies as top-tier capital, it will breach at least one of the principles of mutuality, found in case law, affecting mutual insurers’ tax treatment. Amending primary legislation to ensure that that did not occur would not be straightforward, and could have many unintended and undesirable consequences. For instance, any proposed exemption could give rise to legal risks in the form of state aid. I am happy to get into the detail of that in conversation with the hon. Member for Harrow West. I am considering the available options, but clearly there is no simple solution. I was drawn to ask officials why this matter did not become apparent during the passage of the Bill. Probably it was because the Bill was passed quickly in the early part of 2015, and the issue did not arise.

I now want to exhaustively examine the issues raised. The hon. Gentleman suggested that the Marcora law would assist worker buy-out of failing firms. I thank him for making me aware of that policy, which sounds worthy of further consideration. Job losses caused by firm failure can have a devastating impact on communities, particularly when those employers account for a high concentration and number of employees in a single community. I would be interested in learning more from the Italian example about how converting to a co-operative structure can avoid job losses while saving taxpayers money.

I would also be keen to see evidence on the implications for productivity. Clearly, a short-term fix that does not address some of the fundamental challenges that exist in a business is something that one would wish to examine. Again, I will ask my officials—they will be very busy—to discuss that with representatives of the co-operative sector in order to understand whether that model could be used in the UK, if not in that precise form then in one derived from the concept.

We must not forget that the Government have shown a demonstrable commitment to supporting the sector, because we are acutely aware of its significance. There are nearly 7,000 co-operatives in Britain today that, together, contribute more than £36 billion to the UK economy. Recognising the value of co-operatives, in February we introduced a measure to bring audit requirements for small properties in line with those for small companies. Properties have a key role to play in social investment. Last year, the Government expanded the social investment tax relief scheme, which provides a tax break to encourage investment in social enterprises for certain co-operative investors. That expansion will allow social enterprises to receive investment of up to £1.5 million under the tax relief, which is a substantial increase from the previous limit.

The Government see the great value in the mutual sector and the contribution it makes to not only our economy, but our communities. That is why we have taken steps to support all mutual structures, from co-operatives to credit unions. Today’s discussion has been fruitful, and I will look to have further such conversations. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West for his long-standing commitment to co-operatives, and the constructive way in which he has brought this matter to my attention. As a Minister, I am very conscious that one’s time in office can be very short. If there is anything I can do to move this agenda forward, I give him my commitment that I will do so.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.
Transport for the South East

2.30 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered Transport for the South East.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and to see colleagues from across the political divide from the south-east here to contribute to the debate.

Last year, I hosted a parliamentary reception for a new, emerging subnational transport body, Transport for the South East. Strategic transport investment is integral to growing our economy and parliamentarians should support bodies such as Transport for the South East, to allow them to secure and direct the investment needed to grow our regional economy. I called this debate to demonstrate our collective support for the aims and objectives of Transport for the South East.

Let me describe the transport challenges and opportunities for those living within the south-east region. It is home to 7.5 million people, a figure that will grow by 16% over the next 25 years. That accounts for 12% of the UK population and 13% of the workforce. At £200 billion per annum, our region is the second-highest contributor to the economy after London. The amount of public spending per head in the south-east is, at £8,100, the lowest in the UK—10% lower than the national average and 20% lower than London.

Despite carrying the bulk of rail passengers, the public subsidy per passenger mile on Southern and Southeastern railways is in the region of 5p to 7p, versus Northern Rail's 25p. Unlike London, we do not have an efficient mass transportation system, so 70% of those in employment travel to work mainly by car, which is similar to the UK's other regions outside London. Despite that, spending per head on local roads and local public transport is lower in the south-east than in any other English region outside London.

As the gateway between the rest of the UK and mainland Europe, we are fortunate in having some of the major transport assets within our region. Dover and Southamptoon ports power the UK's European and global export market. Gatwick carries the world's busiest and most efficient runway. Heathrow, on our border, is the second busiest airport in the world. We have a high-speed railway link to the continent and more commuters journeying to London by rail than any other region.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman: I was just about to mention the Dartford crossing, so I will of course give way.

Gareth Johnson: That is very good timing—perhaps I should have let my hon. Friend continue. As he mentioned High Speed 1, does he agree that the Elizabeth line—the Crossrail system—which is very much to be welcomed, is nevertheless unsatisfactory because it falls 10 miles short of High Speed 1 at Abbey Wood? There is a gap of 10 miles that prevents commuters going from Windsor and the west of London right through to Brussels, Paris and so on, which would enormously help the transport network in the south-east.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend has a similar issue about High Speed 1 to the one I have about Ashford. We believe there is a real economic case for links towards Hastings and Bexhill. I am absolutely sure that his economic case and the case for expanding on current plans will be heard.

I was about to reference the Dartford crossing, and the challenges and opportunities delivered by 50 million vehicles per year travelling across the River Thames.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing today's debate. Does he agree that we have incredible infrastructure and transport hubs? Would we add Newhaven port to the list he gave. Outside London, the south-east economy needs those infrastructure hubs to add up to more than the sum of their parts. If we are to exploit fully the economies of Slough and Brighton—I struggle to add Bexhill and Eastbourne to that list—getting people to and from them is incredibly important. We need to get that right so that the south-east economy outside of London does not remain dependent on just London.

Huw Merriman: Despite our political differences, I work very closely with the hon. Gentleman, who comes from further across the coast in Hove, and whose constituents experience many similar challenges to those of my constituents. He is absolutely right. A body such as Transport for the South East gives us that opportunity. Although it is always tempting for us to focus on our individual constituencies, which we must, the reality is that the sum of the parts is going to be much better at delivering what we need as our constituents travel from one part of the south-east to the other. He is right, and I hope this debate will move us on.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On the Dartford crossing, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the concerns of the residents of Gravesham, and in particular of those in Northfleet and Gravesend, should be taken into consideration before the scheme is finalised by the Government?

Huw Merriman: With any major transport project, that is absolutely essential if we are to have good will. A crossing such as that is incredibly exciting because it will alleviate the existing pinch point and make us more productive, but of course we need to carry the local population with us, particularly as it is the locals who are impacted—many who travel will not necessarily be from the local area.

It is a coincidence that I took interventions from two Opposition Members as I was about to talk about Government intervention and thank them for significant investment schemes in the south-east transport network. In this road investment period, Highways England will invest £2 billion into roads in the south-east. The equivalent funding period for Network Rail will see £3 billion invested in the Southern and Southeastern rail network, which has some of the oldest rail infrastructure in the UK despite carrying the most passengers.
have challenges to overcome, and although we lobby for a funding share commensurate to our output, we are getting more funding overall because the Government are spending more on transport. The key is to ensure we get the projects the region needs. That is where Transport for the South East comes in to play.

Established in June last year, Transport for the South East is the shadow subnational transport body representing 16 local transport authorities and five local enterprise partnerships, which speak with a single voice about strategic transport priorities for the south-east. Its primary aim is to support and grow the economy in the south-east by identifying and prioritising a programme of integrated strategic transport interventions. It also aims to improve the experience of the travelling public and businesses and bring about more reliable journeys, free of congestion, while safeguarding the environment.

Although I am tempted to raise my own local transport issues in this debate today—I encourage others not to hold back—and lobby for schemes within my 200 square miles of constituency, I believe that there is more chance of securing success in my constituency and those of colleagues if we all work together to establish one body, with one voice, that works effectively across the south-east region to address the biggest problems in our strategic infrastructure network. By getting behind the work of the body—it is under the chairmanship of Councillor Keith Glazier and the leadership of the region’s local authority and local enterprise partnership representatives—we can secure the best strategic transport to support the outcomes we want for our region: new housing without increased congestion, improved connectivity and access to the best employment opportunities for our residents.

The south-east’s population has substantially grown in recent years. Businesses are drawn to a great place to do business and individuals are drawn by high levels of employment. That has driven growth in the south-east’s economy of 25% since 1997, which has generated substantial tax revenue for the country. There is, however, a cost to this success. Our transport infrastructure is facing the challenges of population and economic growth and we risk the future delivery of an economy of huge strategic importance to the UK if action is not taken. That is why Transport for the South East is vital for our future prosperity.

At the same time, TISE knows that it must not forget those pockets of the region that have not experienced the same economic success and are not as prosperous as other parts. Our coastal communities in particular—many hon. Members represent those communities—have large populations, high unemployment and low productivity. That is due in part to poor connectivity, and in part the further and higher education facilities in those deprived areas of employment. The transport network has a key role to play in improving access to skills and employment and creating new opportunities for the residents of those areas so that they, too, can lead prosperous lives. The challenges extend beyond the administrative and political boundaries. They require the new body to join up transport policy, regulation and investment, and give clear strategic investment priorities to improve connectivity across our region.

To move forward, Transport for the South East needs to do three things: develop a transport strategy, secure statutory status and secure additional funding from the Government. Considerable funds have been awarded to Transport for the North, which has received £50 million, and Midlands Connect, which has received £17 million, to help them take forward their work programme over the next few years. The subscriptions that Transport for the South East is currently raising from its constituent authorities will amount to only £500,000 in the next year. We must congratulate the local authorities that raised that cash. They have taken the initiative and come together despite their own funding pressures because they recognise the importance of working as one. However, more funding is badly needed, not least because the Transport for the South East infrastructure has a significant bearing on the performance of the wider UK economy. Securing statutory status is critical in ensuring that Transport for the South East becomes a formal legal entity and a formal partner of the Government, Network Rail and Highways England, with the ability to influence their investment programmes. Without that status, it will not have the influence we need it to have.

This substantial, resource-intensive process will require additional funding support from the Government if it is to be completed in a timely manner. Work on the main transport strategy is due to commence in the summer, but the pace of its development is dependent on central support of the kind enjoyed by Transport for the North and Midlands Connect.

To conclude—I want to give other hon. Members the opportunity to raise issues in their localities—the south-east economy is already delivering for the country, and has greater economic potential if we allow it to come through. Awarding Transport for the South East statutory status would give us the opportunity to identify and prioritise a package of strategic transport improvements, which will benefit not just the south-east but the entire UK economy. With Government support, Transport for the South East will be able to move at pace to statutory status and, more importantly, complete its transport strategy, which will determine the transport investment we get in the south-east.

Strategic transport investment will give not just the south-east but the country as a whole the opportunity to prosper. I look forward to working with colleagues and Transport for the South East as a new body as it drives these new opportunities. I hope the Minister will signal in his response his encouragement for the quest we are following.
and the Department for Transport. Its aim is to promote and support the delivery of a direct rail link between Slough and Heathrow before 2024.

A western rail link to Heathrow would enable passengers throughout the west to travel to the airport without travelling into London. It would mean faster, more reliable and convenient journeys for passengers, with travel times expected to be about 26 minutes from Reading and only six minutes from my Slough constituency. It would provide a step change in rail accessibility at Europe’s busiest airport, open up new markets across the Thames valley, Wales and the south-west, and relieve congestion at London Paddington.

A link coming in from the west, through Reading and Slough and on to Heathrow, would mean four direct trains every hour each way between Slough and the airport. According to Network Rail statistics, that short link of less than four miles would generate more than £800 million of economic activity and 42,000 new jobs across various regions.

In addition to the obvious convenience and benefits to the economy, there are potentially huge benefits for our environment. The carbon dioxide savings from the modal shift from cars to rail would equate to approximately 30 million road miles a year through a reduction in road congestion. Some 20% of the UK’s population could access the airport via just one interchange; there would be no need to go into London and back out. The scheme is beneficial to areas of the south-east, even if they never use it. The areas of the south-east that stand to benefit most from the direct link are Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

It would be remiss of me not to point out what an opportunity the link would present for passengers in Bristol, the midlands and beyond, including the south-west and Wales. All that from a four-mile rail link, most of which is tunnelled, with no obvious planning, land ownership or technical obstacles to overcome. There has been a very favourable response to Network Rail’s public consultation exercises thus far.

Given that the Government committed to the rail link in 2012, I hope the Minister will extend his support to it today and assure us that it will finally be built without delay. I very much hope he joins us next week at the inaugural meeting of the APPG on the western rail link to Heathrow. Simultaneously, I ask that he reassures us about the promised timetable to deliver Crossrail—the Elizabeth line—by the end of 2019 to ensure that residents and users in Burnham, Slough and Langley will benefit and that those stations will be fully operational.

2.47 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate.

Transport infrastructure is a core component in the functioning of a modern society. Transport has the power to guide our decisions about where to live, study and work. If it is done well, it can transform and regenerate villages, towns and cities, increase workforce productivity and facilitate the operation of industry, which in turn attracts other industries and services. If it is done badly, we have the flip side of the coin.

The south-east of England is the most populated part of the country and a powerhouse of economic activity. It contributes more than any other region outside London to the national economy. Consequently, we are home to some of the busiest roads and railways in the country, and that is further compounded by historical underinvestment and a lack of foresight in planning decisions.

Evidence of capacity limitations on road and rail networks is becoming increasingly stark. As an MP, I hear about it on a weekly basis. Just yesterday, a constituent who works in Chichester told me that she regularly sits in traffic for an hour each way on the A27 to and from work, even though in normal conditions the journey, door to door, should be about half an hour.

There are similar concerns about the railways. Govia—the company that manages Southern, which operates much throughout my constituency—announced in November last year that complaints from the previous year were up by well over 200%. Of course, that was exacerbated by strike action.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Lady is making a really great speech, and I am enjoying listening to it. The Minister will know that every MP in this Chamber joined together in the all-party group on Southern Rail. We called on the Government last year to release £300 million, which Network Rail told us was the most it could spend on infrastructure upgrades in our area. To their credit, the Government released that money, for which MPs from both sides of the House are very grateful. Will the hon. Lady join me in endorsing the Gibb recommendation for that £300 million to be released for the next three years, after which we can deliver transformation on the line?

Gillian Keegan: I agree, of course. As a fellow member of the APPG on Southern Rail, I agree with its recommendations.

In the south-east, high economic activity is good news for our area, but that does not tell the whole story. Many coastal and rural communities miss out on the wider region’s success. In part, social and economic exclusion can be attributed to the design of the transport network, and our system is designed in an “all roads lead to London” pattern, like spokes from a wheel. Only two key routes cross my region from east to west: the M25 to the north and the A27 along the coast.

The A27 is therefore a highly congested road, exacerbated by pinch points where traffic builds in Chichester, Arundel and Worthing, to name but a few. The effects are wide-reaching, pushing more traffic on to local residential roads, worsening air quality and impacting on business supply chains moving goods in and out of the area or, indeed, from the ports or the coast. Such is the issue along the south coast that much east-west traffic will go from the south coast up to the M25 and come back down on major trunk roads such as the M3—all to avoid the A27.

The rail network is formed in a similar pattern. All trains run into hubs. The Windmill Bridge junction at East Croydon, for example, can have a paralysing effect on the network. Routes across the south-east and London funnel into that single junction and, put simply, the sheer volume of traffic has long exceeded the capacity of the junction. Consequently, a delay on one line delays the next, creating a domino effect of delays across the region, with people sitting on a train and not
at their place of work. The effect on productivity could be mitigated, at least, if we had some degree of adequate wi-fi connectivity on the trains.

The Coast to Capital LEP hit the nail on the head when it described the travel network in the south-east as congested, overcrowded and inefficient. The problems we as an area face are clear, but so are the opportunities for locally driven strategic transport infrastructure improvements to link up networks, to support businesses and attract them to our area. I therefore fully support the formation of Transport for the South East as a statutory sub-national transport body. That would be a positive step to meet the needs of our area.

Transport for the South East brings together representatives of the area who have an inherent understanding of local needs and concerns. They can inform any process from the start. That is crucial when we consider impacts on our protected landscapes, for example, such as the South Downs national park that reaches across the heart of region, so I am glad the South Downs national authority is represented on the TfSE board to give a voice to our protected landscapes.

Other local advantages can come into play, such as planning decisions. TfSE comprises representatives from 16 local authorities that understand national, regional and local priorities such as housing provision, business development, tackling unemployment, social care services, energy supply, global economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability. Those can all be fed into the process to deliver smart and sustainable growth.

Working with a collective voice has advantages. As an area, we have common transport issues, such as the Windmill Bridge junction that I mentioned earlier or the lack of an east-west road infrastructure. A single regional voice will be much more impactful than people working as individuals.

I am glad that TfSE is already talking about improving travel technology as part of our infrastructure investments, such as electronic ticketing and—another much-needed tech enhancement—the provision of effective wi-fi to all trains and stations. That is crucial in an area such as Chichester, where we have a poor signal—never mind 4G—or across the South Downs. Wi-fi could be transformational for commuters and productivity, and TfSE could do just that. Similar programmes, such as Transport for the North, have already been successful.

The World Economic Forum’s global competitiveness index shows that the UK is behind many of its major western European trading partners on transport infrastructure. The south-east is home to international businesses and industries that use our airports, seaports, roads and railways. By bringing together 16 local authorities and five local enterprise partnerships, we shall have better integration of transport modes across our region to create a transport system that runs smoothly, improving services for all users.

I fully support Transport for the South East, and I hope that we secure statutory status for it soon so that it can become a formal partner of the Government, Network Rail and Highways England. In doing so, we shall be able to address the significant issues in our area, bringing together communities and providers to form a truly integrated network. Strategic transport planning and improvement has the potential to bring with it talent, investment and opportunity for the entire south-east region and beyond.

2.55 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Henry.

I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for securing this important debate. I also appreciated the words of the previous speakers. This is an important debate, and one of the things that I was thinking about as Members were talking was that, as we all know, the south-east is one of the most prosperous parts of the country, and yet for decades the transport infrastructure in parts of Sussex and Kent has been absolutely atrocious. It has never really been any good.

A wee while ago someone of the same persuasion as Government Members put a theory to me, saying, “Well, Stephen, you have to appreciate that all those years ago in Sussex and Kent there were a lot of ex-colonial officers, colonels and senior civil servants who had moved to Bexhill, Eastbourne and other parts. The last thing they wanted was good transport, because they would get all the hoi polloi down there”—his quote, not mine, I stress. I drew myself up to my full height, only to say, “You’re probably right.” It is bizarre, however, and Eastbourne is a case in point. My colleague the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), whom I know well, is well aware that he has a speedy train from Brighton to London and the M23, but from Eastbourne I am constantly struggling with Southern Rail and the A27.

The point about this debate, however, and about Transport for the South East, which I am keen to support, is that the only way we can move forward productively is to join together and pool our resources, and do so on a cross-party basis. A lot of the business chambers and local councils are involved. I am delighted that the chairman of Transport for the South East—I was going to say this anyway, but I see him in the Public Gallery—is a colleague of mine, the leader of East Sussex County Council, which I usually spend my time attacking these days because of the cuts. I am absolutely delighted that Councillor Keith Glazier is the chair.

We have had a number of discussions, but from the purely selfish perspective of East Sussex, having the leader of the county council right in the middle is very important. Bluntly, over the years East Sussex has for one reason or another lost out a lot on transport infrastructure in many areas. It is good to welcome Councillor Glazier, although I think he has two letters from me on their way to him right now, as usual.

The two key issues are rail and road. Obviously, Southern has problems that have been going on for a long time, albeit I would like to think that it has been getting better over the past few months. More than that, specific rail transport infrastructure matters need to be put on the table, which I am happy to do. I have been reminded that rail infrastructure generates £5 billion in gross value added per annum for south-east England, provides more than 81,000 jobs and brings in almost £1.5 billion in tax. More specifically, in Eastbourne alone the rail network brings in £47.2 million per annum and provides directly and indirectly 750 jobs. Rail is crucial.

I recognise that Sussex has infrastructure challenges—it has had them for a long time—but we also have challenges on how much space we have to put down new tracks. What I would do to have a fast train zip from Eastbourne
to London in an hour! It would make such a transformational difference, but I appreciate that there are challenges. None of that detracts from the infrastructure benefits that rail brings to my town, East Sussex, Kent and beyond. Those benefits are vital to the south-east.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about the importance of the link between the coastal towns and London. However, does he agree that we have learned in recent years that the coastal towns between the cities on the south coast have not benefited from the economic renaissance and prosperity of recent decades in the same way as places such as Brighton and Chichester, and other towns and cities in the region? That is why we need investment in the coastal route and much smarter travel between the coastal towns. We need to make the economies of the cities far more accessible, rather than being dependent on London all the time.

Stephen Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. One of the most depressing things imaginable is to drive around this country and stop at every single coastal town—for one reason or another, a lot of them are suffering desperately and have been for a long time. I am enormously proud of how Eastbourne has bucked that trend, certainly in the last 10 years. We will be opening a new transformed shopping centre, with £85 million of private money—my God, I had to have an awful lot of meetings to be part of making that happen.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that poor transport links between the coastal towns and cities makes it three times harder to try to turn them around. I do not want to name any particular coastal towns that have suffered, because that is invidious—I know how hard it is to turn a coastal town around once it goes over a tipping point—but without improving infrastructure between those towns, turning them around will be impossible. We can pour as much money in as we would like, but unless we can find a way to get people to come to the towns and spend money, they will keep going in an ever-deteriorating circle. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

There are very specific inconsistencies in rail funding. I believe the Department for Transport is looking at them, but I would like to reiterate them. I pay tribute to the Rail Industry Association for providing this briefing, because it is very important. It states, as we know:

“The Government provides funding for the rail network in five year timespans known as control periods. At the end of these control periods there is often a drop off in funding before it ramps up again at the start of the next control period. This means the supply chain for rail goes through periods of boom and bust, making it very hard for business to plan”

particularly SMEs, which are involved from a subcontracting perspective. The briefing also states:

“It also increases the cost of...the rail network by up to 30%.”

The hon. Member for Hove alluded to the Department’s generosity in boosting the funding to Network Rail to improve the infrastructure in the near past. I support him very much in the hope that the Government will continue in that direction of travel over the next few years. I believe they will—I am hearing good soundings and would be very supportive.

Believe it or not, I try very hard in most debates to stay away from the subject of Brexit, because it does not half go on a bit, but it is important. One of the realities of Brexit, according to RIA figures, is that anywhere between 20% and 45% of the skilled staff of Network Rail and related ancillaries are of EU origin. We need to ensure that, over the next year—whatever my personal views are, we leave the EU next year—the Government do everything they can.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman mentioned both Brexit and Kent. The M20 in Kent very often becomes a lorry park. Does he agree that, in their Brexit dealings, the Government need to ensure that the M20 does not become a permanent lorry park?

Stephen Lloyd: When the hon. Gentleman mentioned Brexit and Kent, I thought he was going to announce the independence of Kent, but clearly not. He makes an important point. The Government have put a lot of effort into that—they face specific local residential problems in various areas and are looking to extend transport and parking facilities. I am glad the Department for Transport has to sort the problem, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it has to be resolved. Clearly, it is likely to get worse from March 2019.

On the jobs front, if 20% to 45% of staff are EU nationals, that has to be absolute priority for the Government. We were talking coastal towns earlier. Somewhere between 60% and 70% of staff in the catering and hospitality area are EU nationals. We are on a journey, which I appreciate is supported and was voted for in the referendum, but I hope the Government are watching closely for the complexities coming down the track such as jobs in the rail network.

I have spoken a lot about the importance of rail. I make no apologies for that, because I have always believed that it is a crucial game-changer for my town. The usual trains take an hour and 25 minutes to an hour and 30 minutes. If I could get that down to an hour and 10, it would make life so much easier to keep Eastbourne growing in the positive and prosperous manner for which I have worked so hard for so many years. I look forward to the chairman of Transport for the South East, Councillor Keith Glazier, working with me, together with all of us, to keep the pressure on Gavia Thameslink Railway and Southern rail to ensure that they keep improving. It is absolutely vital that the industrial issues and dreadful problems we had for one reason or another for 18 months or two years on the line from Eastbourne to London and back, and on other parts of the network, do not reoccur. I will be working on and watching that very closely.

When the hon. Member for Hove drives from Eastbourne to Folkestone as the crow flies, it is only about 70 miles but takes about three and a half hours. It is absolutely ridiculous. The coastal connections around that part of the country are absurd. There is no other word for it. Going across Romney Marsh, I half expect to see some of the old smugglers from 200 years ago. It is ridiculous and needs to be fixed. It would transform a lot of the coastal towns that have seen terribly difficult times for the last 30 or 40 years. It is the sort of thing that would be a game-changer and I would be very supportive.

My bête noire is the A27, as we know—I wrote to the Minister only 10 days ago. I am aware that East Sussex County Council has put a lot of thought into it.
Colleagues and various businesses are putting together a strong business case for the Department, which I know has been looked at. The Minister knows very well my views and how supportive I would be of the solution, which probably means a new spur that would be a dualling of Lewes and Polegate. I will be happy to do anything I can do to encourage that.

I again thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle for securing this important debate. Given the problems we have had for decades with transport in the south-east, it is amazing that we have done as well as we have. So much of the infrastructure is rickety. This new body is very positive step. I wholly appreciate that it covers and includes a whole range of people, experts, political parties and business groups. I have no hesitation in supporting it and hope and pray that it will be the catalyst for making a significant difference, which we all know the south-east needs, over the next five to 10 years.

3.9 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this important debate.

Transport plays a crucial role in the development of a strong economy. That is what I argued on 22 March when I delivered a speech in the other Chamber of this House during an equally important debate on the economy, which I am pleased to say continues to defy the naysayers, and I was one of them. In that speech I urged the Government to make some use of the expected Brexit dividend by spending some of it on the roads and rails going to Clacton—I have moved our argument slightly north of Bexhill.

It is interesting to note that connectivity along the coast is not something we could do in my area because we have these damned great rivers, so I am going along the lines of being one of the spokes on the bicycle wheel when we talk about Clacton. As a regular commuter myself, I know that it takes far too long for my constituents to travel from Clacton to the capital, and vice versa. We are that spoke.

Without more investment in transport infrastructure around Clacton, we will limit the incentive for people to move to and commute from our glorious sunshine coast. That would harm the economic potential of my district and would restrain the prosperity of hard-working local residents: an outcome that is not acceptable to me or my residents. That is why I have continued to push for what I call my 70 in 60 campaign at every opportunity, which has the ultimate aim of ensuring that the people of Clacton are able to cover the 70 miles—that is all it is—to London in 60 minutes. That is not unthinklbe. It is not even illegal.

Currently the journey of 70 miles takes one hour and 40 minutes nearly, and it takes longer than it did in the days of steam, which, unfortunately, I remember—or fortunately; depends how you look at it. If we get that journey time down to about an hour it would in my opinion regenerate our area, and it would make our sunshine coast a place for people to come, live, work and play. I am here today to plug that campaign once again, because my constituency has so much to offer, not only as a tourist destination, but as a place to live, and it has real untapped economic potential. When it comes to unlocking that potential, I know, as someone with extensive experience of supporting businesses in my district—I was the cabinet member for regeneration at Tendring District Council—that important investment in infrastructure is a crucial first step, so I am pleased to say that we will soon have new rolling stock with wireless internet and USB ports. The trains will be comfortable and modern and they are beginning to be delivered this year.

The new trains will stop and start with greater efficiency. They will be quicker, but not quick enough, which is why, although I celebrate the positive development of the new trains, I maintain that much more must be done because, without more significant investment in our transport infrastructure, commuters simply will not believe that Clacton is a place they can live and work from, as the journey times to London are currently so unfavourable. I have been meeting regularly with Network Rail, Greater Anglia, and the Great Eastern Main Line Taskforce to raise my concerns and support their efforts to improve the current appalling situation.

Additionally, as the Minister will probably know to his cost, I continue to make representations to his Department for Transport at every opportunity. I thank him for his support and I am encouraged by the Government’s shrewd approach to transport investment.

I do, of course, recognise that the core issue is that places such as Colchester are growing and have an increasingly young and more economically active population. Consequently, they are seen as more vital for transport investment than some of the older communities and coastal communities such as Clacton that have for far too long been neglected. However, although the demographics are set against us, I am determined to keep going and find a way forward. We cannot fall into a cycle of neglect where our older communities are left isolated—I speak as one of them because I became a pensioner a few weeks ago—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] Thank you for that. Our older communities are left isolated in favour of areas that have younger residents and new development. We want to attract younger residents, and if we do not take steps now to invest more in improving Clacton’s transport infrastructure, we cannot hope to attract that younger economically active population at any point in the future.

I accept that we have not built enough homes in Clacton. That might be another reason why young commuters do not wish to call my constituency their home, so I would support sustainable housing developments in my local area, because we must do our part to help address the national housing crisis. That is not only vital for people in Clacton, but for the entire south-east region. However, the Government must do their part, too, and we must improve our transport infrastructure before any new major housing developments break ground. We simply cannot build more dwellings without first making it easy for people to occupy and live in them, and investing more in transport would do that.

Furthermore, such investment will address the concerns of current residents, who just this weekend told me they have worries about the new developments because of congestion on their roads and railways. That is why the Government should focus on infrastructure investment before delivering new homes. We need the I before E approach: infrastructure before major expansion.
By following that approach in the south-east, we can deliver quick transport to London and to major regional hubs such as Colchester, Ipswich and Chelmsford and further to the north in Norwich. By doing so, we can deliver the homes we desperately need, the transport we require and the economic opportunities that are currently just out of reach. With that in mind, there are various opportunities across the south-east that I would like the Minister to look at.

One of the projects includes Stansted airport, which I heard today has the most efficient runway in the south-east. It is already a vital transport hub, but that hub needs to be able to continue to expand, and in the next few years the right decisions need to be made to help the airport reach its economic potential. According to projections, that will deliver an additional 15,000 jobs by 2030, with a £1 billion boost to our region’s growth. I ask the Minister to do all he can to support that project as I know there are those who live in my constituency who work there, but it is still quite a long a commute.

It will come as no surprise to the Minister to hear me ask him to support the upgrade of the A120. He knows how passionate I am about that campaign, and I was pleased to read in his recent letter to me that the A120 scheme is in a strong position moving toward the decision making process for the second road investment strategy. Delivering an improved A120 would open the doors to a renaissance in house building in the south-east and connectivity to Stansted. For any hon. Members who agree with me, I will be hosting a reception on 17 July to move the campaign over the line, so please come along.

There are jobs to be created and homes to be built in areas just like Clacton if we invest in and improve the roads and rails to such areas in the south-east, which we have neglected in the past. For people in Clacton there is the world of entertainment, enterprise and revelry to be had in London if we improve the ability to access it for people in some of our less well-connected areas. I will always argue that the transport investment strategy should focus on delivering locally to unlock the economic potential of communities such as Clacton: regionally, on projects to improve connectivity between our economic hubs; and of course nationally to rebalance our economy. The implications of such a decision for our economy, transport in the south-east and our country are in my view only positive, and I back the body for transport in the south-east.

3.17 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on what has been an incredibly constructive debate this afternoon. He was absolutely right to set the tone and say that transport should be about serving our wider economy. It plays an important role.

We find ourselves yet again debating transport across the south-east, which has been a regular theme in my role as the shadow Minister for Transport. It is significant because we know that 9.2 million people live across the south-east region and investment is therefore really important, which we must get right as we move forward.

As the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, this matter is not only about the economy. It is about housing and infrastructure and making sure that we get a wider connectivity, and we must recognise the importance of that.

Transport infrastructure requires a strategic approach, not least because of its significance to London, but also because far better orbital routes are needed to rebalance the London focus back into the region to develop wider regional economic opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) made the point about how investment in transport is crucial if we are to see the revitalisation of our coastal towns. Across the ports in the south-east there is currently concern, however, as the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) said, about the customs arrangements that could well operate in a post-Brexit environment. The ports provide a vital gateway to the British economy. They are a major employer in the region and support millions of passengers each year. Business is dependent on the pace by which freight flows through the ports and moves onto its onward journey. Customs equivalence is therefore essential, and the whole industry is nervous about the Government narrative, and the contemplation of less favourable terms.

The technology that the Prime Minister has raised to address a bad deal does not currently exist, so it would be years before technology could undertake the task required. With her hard Brexit approach, there is a risk that ever more lorries will stack up on local and main roads or, more likely, that they will not come at all. The roads infrastructure cannot cope as things are now, but that would be a challenge too far. The road freight infrastructure deficit and the lack of lorry parks were exacerbated by the latest fiasco of not following process and having to scrap the lorry park plans at Stanford West. Local people’s calls for the Government to get things sorted out have been ignored. Operation Stack needs decisions to be taken now, and actions to be expedited.

The rail network always dominates the debate, and its fragmentation creates barriers not only between the London and south-east footprints, but within the south-east, which has hosted a plethora of rail operators over time. The lack of capacity is straining the infrastructure, but the Government have been too slow in managing the unavoidable mismanagement of the services, not least on Govia Thameslink Railway. We are nine months on from the publication of the Gibb report, whose importance has been mentioned in the debate. It is important for the Minister to update the House on progress that the Government have made with the recommendations in the report.

We have heard how fragmentation, and the issues with Southern across the network, have been a distraction from the provision of what I would call basic passenger services, including wi-fi, which, as the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said, is essential for increasing productivity.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend’s speech about the region’s transport challenges is a tour de force, and I am grateful. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) made the point incredibly well about the lack of wi-fi, and some of the technological advances that we are missing, but it is worth pointing out that most trains running
from Hove to Chichester do not even have toilets on them. They are class 313 trains, which were mostly built in 1976, before most of the Members present were even born. Does my hon. Friend really mean that at times, in addition to the technological advances that have been mentioned we need to get really good rolling stock, so that people who work on the trains, as well as passengers, can from time to time use a toilet?

Rachael Maskell: I could not put that better than my hon. Friend has done. Toilets on trains are a public health issue as much as anything, and we need to make sure that the transport system can provide all passengers with the basics. That would be Labour’s focus on the transport system—seeing it as a service to the public, and therefore ensuring that the infrastructure is in place.

I want to discuss devolution, because it is important that decisions can be taken as close as possible to the communities that they affect, so that local expertise can be invested into the transport system. Westminster currently has far too much power, and the level of centralisation of decision making by the Secretary of State for Transport and his Department is unbelievably constraining. It also ignores local advocacy. We must see devolution as about moving powers and resources from Westminster to the regions. We do not want new bodies to become talking shops; we want them to have power to make a difference to their communities. Transport for the North was recently established, and it has powers of strategy setting and advocacy but still has to go cap in hand to the Secretary of State.

Earlier this week I raised concerns about the inequality in decision making between Scotland and Wales. The country is becoming a patchwork of entirely different powers, and some areas have no voice at all. It is a mosaic of chaos and confusion, leaving all frustrated. I advocate redress and with a Labour Government the public will be confident in how strategic planning will be embedded across the transport system, giving devolution a strong place across the country, with no one left behind, and equality as things move forward.

That brings me back to transport in the south-east. I welcome Councillor Keith Glazier to the Public Gallery. I was reading some statements made by Councillor Tony Page, who also sits on the shadow board of Transport for the South East, which was launched last month, in which he highlighted why the region was plunged into chaos after the Government scrapped the former regional transport board in 2010, and set out the regional and strategic focus that is needed. I realise that the Secretary of State is now trying to make up for lost time. However, I must emphasise the slowness of the pace of reinstatement of the board. More could be done to bring it forward from 2020 to 2019, and I urge the Minister to do that and make sure that the process does not continue to be so protracted. The blueprints for regional boards are already out there, and I want the Minister to put more emphasis on bringing things forward. There is cross-party support for doing it by 2019. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

Since I have been in post, I have listened to numerous debates, questions and MPs’ concerns about the need to future-proof the south-east’s transport infrastructure and investment. I recognise the inequality that has grown across the nation with regard to transport spend, and it is vital to redress that, for the sake of the economy and communities of the north, but it is no secret that the south-east’s infrastructure is creaking and that at times things do not continue to be so protracted. In addition to the technological advances that have been mentioned we need to get really good rolling stock, so that people who work on the trains, as well as passengers, can from time to time use a toilet.

We just seem to move from one underwhelming environmental piece of the Heathrow expansion plan to the next. It has, to date, failed to address the serious environmental standards that are demanded. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) is right to press the Minister about the importance of the western link into Heathrow—just four miles of track to improve air quality significantly and bring about modal shift back on to the railways.

Labour cannot stress enough the urgency of improved infrastructure links to the many important coastal ports, and the fact that rail and road connections to most of them are nearing full capacity, if they have not reached that point already. Without the use of strategic regional intelligence to future-proof the transport system, the country will continue to stumble forward to the next hurdle. Devolution is also urgently needed to drive a sustainable transport system in the south-east. The heavily congested road and rail networks demand a completely different approach. Seventy-one per cent. of people currently commute by road. We need a modal shift away from car reliance and its environmental consequences. The Government have spent a lot of time in court defending the indefensible with respect to the nation’s poor air quality. Instead, they should bring the focus of a strategic vision for the transport system.

As is, sadly, often the case, buses have not yet been mentioned in the debate. Nevertheless, a strategic bus plan in the region is important, and I wish to ask the Minister what investment his Government are putting into the next generation of sustainable buses. We hear much about cars, including the significant investment in electric cars, but that will not solve the issue of congestion because there will still be an equivalent volume of vehicles in the south-east, and the roads cannot cope with that. Many journeys carried out by car could, as an alternative, take place by bus, and bus tech is really important for the future. We must invest in R and D in bus tech, and I would be interested to hear the Government’s plans on that and their focus on our bus network.

Labour has focused on buses in recent weeks. We will offer all those under 25 free bus travel where there is municipal ownership—rightly putting buses back under the control of local authorities to provide a public service, rather than allowing bus companies to cherry-pick the most profitable routes. In a region with the highest age demographic, that point will not be lost.

Mr Dhesi: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must fully support the work of Slough Borough Council, which is trying desperately to ensure that bus services continue in the area? A current operator has decided that certain routes will no longer be operational, but the council needs support from the Government. As yet that support has not been forthcoming. Does she agree that the Government need to step in and support local councils?
Rachael Maskell: It is crucial that local authorities such as Slough Borough Council have control over bus routes. Buses are servants of the community and must determine how best to service the wider needs of that community. Quite simply, bus operators put other interests such as the profits they make above the service they provide. We must ensure that people again have confidence in their bus service. We have seen how successful that has been here in the capital, where a real investment has been made, and we are clear that local authorities must again have that control over the bus system.

Finally, I wish to mention the promotion of active travel across the region. Cycling and walking have not featured in today’s debate, but they should be the transport mode of choice, particularly for short journeys. Sadly, however, the car is often seen as the most convenient way to travel because of the barriers that have been put in people’s way. What does the Minister plan for the south-east regarding the promotion of cycling and walking? To date, I believe that the Government’s plans have not been ambitious enough to see a modal shift or a real embrace of the cycling and walking agenda.

In conclusion, it is vital to have a far more strategic approach to transport planning across the south-east to ensure that resources are in the right place, as well as a longer-term vision. As we have heard, start-stop control periods do not give authorities enough time for substantial planning. We must advance our transport system, because it is imperative that we rebuild our economy and build a sustainable environment for the future, whether for freight or for passengers.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): May I say what an adornment you are, Sir Henry, to the Chair in Westminster Hall, and may I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on securing this debate on the important issue of the sub-national transport body, Transport for the South East? As with everything else, my hon. Friend has been a vigorous, energetic and, if I may say so, effective campaigner. Indeed, as he gently reminded the House, this is the latest stage of his campaign to put this institution on the parliamentary map, and I salute him for that. In his speech he gave an excellent summary of the opportunities and challenges facing the region. This debate is timely given the run-up to the launch of the economic connectivity review for Transport for the South East on 8 May, which I understand will be a key milestone in its work towards developing a transport strategy for the region as a whole.

I will come in due course to the many constituency issues raised, but I will first follow my hon. Friend in placing the emphasis precisely where it should be, which is the regional potential of Transport for the South East—I think that is the original purpose of the debate. My Department and I have been impressed by the pace at which Transport for the South East has worked, despite its young age, and I pay tribute to Councillor Glazier who is sitting in the Public Gallery observing—and, I hope, approving—the proceedings of the work he has done and the leadership he has shown. At not even a year old, TISE has built, and continues to build, partnerships across the region, and it speaks with an increasingly clear voice to Government about its priorities. I am sure that voice will make a real difference to local people in the south-east, and in due course to the country as a whole, since this is a principal engine of economic growth.

Local areas know their economies best, and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was right to say—indeed, it is an ancient Tory principle—that power should be devolved and exercised wherever possible close to the people it affects. In part that is for informational reasons, because local councils will know what local priorities are, but those priorities must be balanced with national and regional priorities, and getting that balance right lies at the heart of good transport policy. Local areas will know how best to drive growth for the benefit of their residents, and it does not need saying that transport has a key role to play. As colleagues have said, transport unlocks housing and economic growth; it gets people where they want to go for work, education, or to access and enjoy public services.

Sub-national transport bodies are new organisations that speak with a single voice for their region. Contrary to there being too much centralisation, the hon. Lady seems to have forgotten that this Government have been significantly decentralising. Metro mayoralities are an important aspect of that, as are sub-national transport bodies, which allow us and local people to prioritise the transport interventions that will make the biggest difference to people in their areas and beyond.

STBs, as they are called—no clinic required here, Sir Henry—fill the current gap between local and national transport authorities, bringing a regional voice to Government investment decisions. When local areas come together to plan long-term infrastructure, they can deliver outputs that are greater than the sum of their parts. Using evidence and local knowledge, STBs will make the case to Government for the transport priorities that they believe will drive transformational growth. The Government are hearing those voices across the country, and those bodies—including Transport for the South East—have already submitted to the Department their priorities for the second road investment period. They are also engaging with our proposals for a new major road network that will benefit from dedicated funding from 2020.

On 1 April 2018, Transport for the North became England’s first sub-national transport body, and I was delighted to lay the statutory instrument for that in the House. Three other STBs are currently operating in shadow form across England, with ambitions to become statutory bodies in their own right: Midlands Connect, England’s Economic Heartland and, of course, Transport for the South East. TISE is the youngest of those shadow bodies, but it has made impressive progress since its inaugural meeting in June last year. There are also proposals for STBs to emerge in other parts of the country, including the east of England and the south-west, and I and my colleagues watch those developments with interest.

We are seeking to work closely with all those bodies to support them as they establish their priorities, develop their own transport strategies, and submit proposals to Government to become statutory bodies. That should ensure they can continue to add value to transport decision making over the longer term, but I should be clear on what we look for in a successful sub-national transport body. We want it to have a strong rationale and a coherent economic geography, and to speak with
one voice alongside its local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and, of course, local MPs. Where those things come together, STBs can be very powerful bodies, and my Department will take account of their views in our decision-making processes.

From the toil and woe that some hon. Members have told of in this debate, one might have thought that the south-east was an area in significant economic difficulty, rather than one of the richest parts of this country and indeed of Europe and the world. But, of course, with success come growing pains and strains. It is important to recognise that, and we do. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle has stated, it is important to say that the south-east is a significant contributor to, and driver of, the UK economy as a whole. We will continue to support that process in Government.

It is also worth noting—a point well made by colleagues on both sides of the House—that there is no standardised, one-size-fits-all picture of unbroken economic success across the region. There are clear and important areas of deprivation that exist, especially in coastal communities, and we must attend to those no less than we must feed the flames of economic growth across the region as a whole. To reflect both, we have provided a boost to local economies across the whole south-east, with over £1.4 billion of local growth fund money allocated to local enterprise partnerships in the region to help to encourage economic growth and housing. A substantial portion of that money has been invested in transport projects.

In addition, the Government are investing £2.2 billion in major road schemes on the strategic road network in London and the south-east of England, and investing substantially in rail schemes such as Thameslink and Crossrail, which has been mentioned, and in transformational local schemes such as the £850 million improvement—I do not think we have any hon. Members from Berkshire here—to Reading station. The Department is also investing £1.2 billion to improve local transport through maintenance and small improvements, as well as large local schemes such as the £56 million towards the Combe Valley Way link road between Hastings and Bexhill, which has helped reduce congestion and supported growth in the area.

As my hon. Friend and Opposition Members have pointed out, the sub-region contains a number of ports and airports that are nationally significant, supporting not just the south-east but also London, the Midlands and the north. TfSE and its members can play a major role in ensuring that the importance of those international gateways is fully understood and that they continue to support economic growth across the whole country. That role will become more important in the future, when we look to expand trade relationships with the world as we leave the European Union.

I know that TfSE has worked hard to establish itself, working alongside Government to identify investment priorities and to establish a robust evidence base that will feed into its own transport strategy. As I said, it has made a good amount of progress in a short time, and we are pleased to see it learning fast from those that have gone before it. My officials are working hard with its members to help them to sustain that pace. As TfSE develops its economic connectivity review, which will form part of the evidence base for the transport strategy, Department for Transport economists are providing support and advice to ensure it is able to fulfil its objectives and hopes.

Peter Kyle: The Minister’s Department is clearly doing a lot of work on this and is keen to see improvements in the metrics. What metrics will his Department use to judge whether the initiative is successful, and is his Department giving the right support?

Jesse Norman: We are seeking to support the sub-national transport bodies appropriately at each stage of their development. One thing that is misunderstood is that each of those entities is at a different stage of development. The classic example is Transport for London, which is very well established and now self-funding, with its own historical settlement from central Government. That is one thing. Transport for the North is substantially funded, with £10 million a year and a lot of extra money for ticketing and so on, but it is a much younger organisation, albeit we are seeking to build capacity and work with it as it gets bigger.

Mr Dhesi: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman may have to sit down for a second and let me answer the previous intervention. Otherwise, he can intervene on his colleague’s intervention and I can try to make a sub-response to a further response.

To finish my point, TfSE is an even younger body, but we are supporting it in a small way and expect to continue to do so as it grows. The hon. Member for Hove raised the question of metrics. What metrics one sets will inevitably be those that are devoted to local needs. Part of the challenge of successful growth is not to have a one-size-fits-all set of metrics but to develop challenging local targets with the STB that meet its goals, and encourage it to meet national goals.

Mr Dhesi: The Minister mentioned Berkshire. I am from Slough, where we have not only the highest number of electric vehicle points in Berkshire, but one of the highest in the country. Will he explain what support the Government can give to our council and its partners as they seek to get more people into electric cars?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we make a lot of money available to local councils to support the roll-out of charge points. We have given money historically to support plug-in car grants and home charging. I recently wrote to local authorities to encourage them to take up our offer, which remains open and, I think, not fully expended. He would be welcome to invite Slough Council to write to us, and we would be happy to work with them according to that scheme to make more installations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle mentioned funding for TfSE. In all STBs it is important that we are clear that local partners are committed for the longer term, and that there is clarity about what funding is needed and what it would and should be used for. My officials and TfSE have been working closely on those issues, and Ministers will take a decision at the next stage in the near future.
We welcome the ambition the subnational transport body has shown to become a statutory body and are working closely with it to develop that proposal for the Government. That requires groups of local authorities to pledge to come together with a proposal to the Secretary of State, including what functions they think might be best exercised at a more regional level. They may differ from one to another on that. As I have said, where those groups can show a clear mission and purpose—not just economic and geographical strength, but robust governance arrangements—the Secretary of State will be in a position to have a constructive conversation about their ambitions.

Stephen Lloyd: On that important point, the Minister knows I am very interested in the question of the A27 from Lewes to Polegate. He also knows that there is a tremendous partnership between the council, different MPs, the business community and, I would hope, Transport for the South East in support of the new spur. Can he give any indication of when a decision will be made?

Jesse Norman: I was coming to the specific issues that have been raised. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the current roads investment strategy scheme includes a package of improvements to the existing route. We expect consultation to start in spring 2020, and are providing funding toward a feasibility study for a larger-scale bypass. Those options are being developed as we speak.

If I may press on, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to STBs. The Secretary of State will consider each on its individual merits, and the creation of bespoke arrangements for each STB will reflect the varying local transport and economic growth needs of the area. Creating these organisations permanently by statute is a serious matter and is not to be undertaken lightly. It requires the proper level of local consensus and commitment, but if it is done properly, the payoff is that the entity increases its impact and influence, as well as its longevity, and therefore has the potential to play a role in delivering transformational change.

The shadow Minister raised Operation Stack and the M20. We will recall that the disruption in 2015 was not brought about by any Brexit-related activity but by unions and by other factors. As she will be aware, the Department has asked Highways England to develop and deliver an interim solution to mitigate the worst effects of traffic disruption on the M20 by March 2019. A series of potential options can be used as part of that, and our goal with all of those is to allow non-port traffic to continue to travel in both directions.

One colleague mentioned the extension of Crossrail to Abbey Wood. I can confirm that the route to Abbey Wood is safeguarded, from our point of view, but the focus in the first instance, as one might imagine, must be to deliver Crossrail on time.

One perfectly understands why hon. Members mentioned A27 investment. They should be aware that we expect to make preferred route announcements for the improvements at Worthing and Lancing, and for the bypass at Arundel, by summer 2018.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned the Heathrow rail link. He knows that that important proposal will be considered alongside other national priorities through the planning process for the next control period. That will ensure that the rail link provides maximum benefit for passengers, and will allow us to understand the journey opportunities and other possibilities that such a link could provide.

I was asked whether the concerns of Gravesham residents will be reflected in the decision on the lower Thames crossing. I can confirm that Highways England will continue to work with all stakeholders.

It is a little hard, and self-contradictory and inaccurate, for the shadow Minister to accuse the Government of introducing too much centralisation. Let us not forget that, since 2010, the Government have created local enterprise partnerships, metro mayoralties, Transport for the North, Transport for the South East and other sub-national transport bodies. They do represent not centralisation but devolution. It is self-contradictory to say that too much centralisation is going on and that devolution has created a patchwork or mosaic. With devolution comes diversity and difference. Part of the strength of devolution as an idea is precisely that we can take advantage of the best efforts and the best opportunities and examples used locally and the creativity that pushing power down unleashes.

Rachael Maskell: Does the Minister recognise that Transport for the North was absolutely clear that it wanted the electrification of the Transpennine route? The Secretary of State denied that opportunity to TfN. While the Government have created spaces for dialogue, they certainly have not given power, which is what devolution has to be about.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will know that TfN became a statutory body literally weeks ago. These are very early days. There remains a role for national policy making where issues of cost and benefit, passenger satisfaction and the proper spending of public money are in play—that is entirely as it should be. The key point is that TfN exists and is functioning. It is working hard to reflect the interests of the constituencies and the economic priorities of its diverse region, which we massively welcome.

The shadow Minister offers what she calls a completely different approach. Since our approach is long term, strategic and integrated, and involves a significant increase in funding, I wonder which part of long term, strategic, integrated or higher funded her new approach will differ from.

Rachael Maskell: I will again draw on the electrification example and the words of sheer frustration coming from the rail industry at the Government’s stop-start approach to control period 5. The industry has seen only blocks of funding, as opposed to the Government looking at the 30-year planning process needed across the rail network, which Labour will certainly adopt.

Jesse Norman: It is certainly a helpful clarification that the shadow Minister’s comments apply only to rail. I thank her for that.

The shadow Minister raised bus tech. She will know that bus companies are investing significantly in new ticketing technologies. We rightly fund them to the tune of, I think, a couple of billion pounds a year through the bus service operators grant. The proposal she seems
to be making amounts to expropriation of the bus companies if a Labour Government are elected. That seems to me to be not only economically unwise but thoroughly contrary to the interests of passengers.

Finally, the shadow Minister raised cycling and walking. I invite Members to raise their hand if they cycled to the House of Commons today.

**Rachael Maskell** indicated assent.

**Jesse Norman:** I am delighted. I congratulate the shadow Minister for sharing my commitment to the cycling and walking investment strategy. I assure her that our new cycling and walking review is gathering an enormous number of good ideas about how we can put public money and better regulation, co-ordination and co-operation to better support cycling and walking. She is absolutely right to raise the importance of this issue and the importance of modal shift, and I thoroughly concur. She will know that, as a result of our cycling and walking investment strategy, public funding for those areas has roughly trebled since 2010. That is a record on which I would like us to continue to build.

**Mr Dhesi:** Will the Minister give way?

**Jesse Norman:** I am sorry but I cannot; I have no time because I need to make way for my beloved colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle. I have taken quite a lot of interventions already, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows.

I am absolutely aware of the close involvement of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle with TfSE and am delighted to see the wider acknowledgement that debates like this can bring to the organisation’s good work so far. I wish it good luck in its launch event on 8 May, and I very much encourage it to continue to work closely with the Department on its transport strategy and proposal to Government. I look forward to learning more about the work it is doing and its priorities as it enters this exciting next phase of its development.

3.56 pm

**Huw Merriman:** I thank you for chairing what has been a really good-natured debate, Sir Henry, and your team for keeping us to order. I thank the Minister. I am sorry that, unlike him, I did not cycle in today. Commuting from East Sussex, as I do daily, I would not have made the debate unless it was moved to tomorrow. I also thank the shadow Minister for her kind words.

The Minister is absolutely right when he talks about the south-east having large areas of wealth. I say to him to keep investing in us and we will pump more than the £200 billion that we pump into the UK economy as a whole to support the other regions. We can do that only with more support and investment in our area. The Minister is also right to point out that parts of the south-east—the coastal areas, which have been represented today—are deprived. Those constituents of ours deserve the same right of access to transport to link them to other parts of the UK as other deprived parts of the UK have. We very much stand up for those constituents.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Clacton (Giles Watling), and the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Hove (Peter Kyle) and for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), for making this a debate in which we have worked cross-party to encourage TfSE to find its voice. It is absolutely essential that we work together as a team. It is no good us looking to the team of MPs in the north or in the west midlands engine. The reality is that the south-east is the powerhouse. We have the assets: we have Gatwick, Dover and Southampton, we have Heathrow and we have the Eurostar. Those are the jewels that we want to support. I very much hope that all MPs from across the south-east will work together to make Transport for the South East a great success.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered Transport for the South East.
Christchurch Council: Governance

[GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair]

4 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered future governance of Christchurch Borough Council.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Let me remind hon. Members of some important parts of the 2017 Conservative party manifesto. On page 9, it says:

“True Conservatism means a commitment to country and community...a respect for the local and national institutions that bind us together”.

On page 12, it says:

“Theresa May’s Conservatives will deliver...Prosperous towns and cities, underpinned by strong local institutions”.

On page 32, it says:

“We will support those authorities that wish to combine to serve their communities better.”

It is with those three commitments in mind that I invite my hon. Friend the Minister carefully to think again about the future governance of Christchurch Borough Council.

The most fundamental question that this debate raises is whether the future governance of Christchurch should be decided by its citizens and elected representatives or by the Government. The Government are seeking parliamentary approval to ignore the will of the people of Christchurch, its elected district councillors, county councillors and Member of Parliament. The issue was put before the people of Christchurch in a local referendum last December. They voted by 84% to 16%, on a 54% turnout, against the council’s being forced into a merger with Bournemouth and Poole to create a new unitary authority.

The Dorset (Structural Changes) (Modification of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) Regulations 2018, laid on 29 March, are designed to make several changes to the 2007 Act and to backdate those changes so that an application for single-tier local government does not have to be made in response to an invitation from the Secretary of State. Since the laying of those regulations, I have tabled a series of parliamentary questions to my right hon. Friend, to many of which I do not think I have received a satisfactory response. I shall refer to one or two of them now.

Why has there been no specific consultation on the regulations to which I have referred? Two sets of regulations were laid on the same day. The second set of regulations were certainly the subject of consultation and discussion, but why was there no specific consultation on the first set—the ones to which I have referred? When was the need for the regulations first identified, and for what reason were they laid more than 13 months after the need for them arose? That was when the Dorset councils made the application that the regulations are designed to validate.

The chief executive of Christchurch Borough Council has told me in an email:

“There was no discussion at any point about the need for an invitation to be made. It was only when the draft Regulations were sent to each of the Councils that the matter of ‘invitation’ came to light”.

Why did the letter that my right hon. Friend sent on 27 March to me and other colleagues in Dorset state specifically that the draft regulations had been “developed and worked up with all nine Councils”, when that was not correct? In one of my questions, No. 136755, I asked him to explain why the retrospective effect and impact of the regulations was not set out and why he did not consult Christchurch Borough Council in making the regulations. This Minister answered that the regulations “were shared and developed with the Chief Executives and Monitoring Officers of all nine...councils.”

It is clear from what the chief executive of Christchurch Borough Council has said that that is not correct. In a further briefing, the chief executive said:

“I don’t recall any discussion with MHCLG”—the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—“about this and my first knowledge of any of the details was in a letter, sent by MHCLG in the latter part of March to each Chief Executive to ask if their Council would give its consent to the making of Orders to bring about local government reform”.

I should therefore be grateful if the Minister would now correct the answer that he gave to my question, and the assertion that the regulations had been “developed and worked up with all nine councils”.

The Minister has also failed to explain why he believes that the regulations have no impact on the costs of business and the voluntary sector and, as a result, do not require a regulatory impact assessment to be produced. One justification for the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 was to facilitate devolution so that businesses could be more involved with local authorities in achieving regeneration. To that end, all Dorset councils and Dorset local enterprise partnership collectively made a submission for the creation of a Dorset combined authority. The submission was made in July 2016, but remains undecided by the Secretary of State. In his statement of 26 February, he said that he intended “now to ask the leaders of the Dorset councils how they would like to proceed with their combined authority proposal”—[Official Report, 26 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 20WS].

Although the Secretary of State said some time ago that he would reach a decision on the Dorset combined authority proposal at the same time as making his announcement on local government reorganisation, I understand that there has been no further communication on this even since 26 February. Why is that? How is it that the Government believe that their decisions on local government reorganisation do not impact on the costs of business?

To take one topical example, on 6 March Bournemouth Borough Council decided to approve an investment in the construction of a hotel on the site adjacent to the Bournemouth International Centre involving some £70 million to be borrowed by the council, and “to make consequential changes to the budget of the Council”. I do not know whether the Minister shares my concern that that is another example of the abuse by local authorities of the preferential loan terms that they get...
from the Government, which enable them to make borrowings at far lower cost than the private and commercial sectors.

In a letter sent this week on behalf of other hotel proprietors in Bournemouth, it is said that

“there would be a real, adverse impact on the provision of front-line services”

if

“this highly speculative venture were to fail”.

The authors of the letter describe the prospect of failure as “disturbingly likely” and say that, in such a scenario, Bournemouth Council

“would be left to service a significantly increased debt, backed by an asset which...would not cover the value of the ‘investment’.”

The loan being taken out by Bournemouth Council to achieve its objective is described as

“the very antithesis of prudent borrowing”.

If the Secretary of State has his way, citizens and businesses in Christchurch will be saddled with the consequences of Bournemouth’s decision for many years to come. It is ironic that the justification that the Government give for seeking local government reorganisation is to achieve better value for money. Over recent years, my constituents have watched Bournemouth with dismay—from the safety of the other side of the River Stour—as they have seen one failed project after another: the IMAX cinema, the surf reef and the £395,000 pay-off for the last chief executive. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that there is a well-established and, I think, well-founded loathing from Bournemouth with Christchurch’s interests will be in a permanent minority.

Harmonisation is a fraught issue. Given the gap of over £200 in the current level of council tax between Bournemouth and Poole, on the one hand, and Christchurch on the other, a new authority will need to levy a council tax that is ultimately the same across the whole of the new unitary authority area. Christchurch Borough Council has been consistent that in such a scenario harmonisation or equalisation should take place from the outset. A similar proposal has been accepted by the joint committee in the rural part of Dorset. However, in order to try to demonstrate that local government reorganisation would be good value, the consultation with the people was carried out on the basis of a harmonisation period of 20 years. Where did that figure come from? It came from a discussion that was held between section 151 officers from Dorset and departmental officials in June 2016. I have asked for notes of that meeting, but I have been told that no notes were kept. However, that meeting was really crucial, because on the basis of what was said at it, the consultation that was carried out in Dorset—designed to secure the approval of the people for a change from two-tier local government to unitary local government—was based on a 20-year harmonisation period.

In November 2017, the official in charge of this, Paul Rowell, told me that the harmonisation period of 20 years was certainly off the agenda completely; that the maximum period for harmonisation would be five years, but more likely in the range of zero and two to three years; and that up until now there had never been a situation where councils had been abolished or restructured and the harmonisation period had been longer than two years.

So what happened? This relates to the issue of governance. When Christchurch Borough Council went to the joint committee, which it has joined to try to show good faith and co-operation, it insisted that the committee should accept the fairness and equity of having everybody paying the same council tax in a new area from day one, but that committee has shown absolute contempt for the council’s representations. Of course, that is not surprising, because in a new unitary authority Christchurch would only comprise 13% of the councillors and resources of that authority. Therefore, Christchurch’s interests will be in a permanent minority.

This issue of harmonisation is symptomatic of the high-handed way in which Christchurch people will be dealt with in the future, were this unitary authority to come about.
That point is also emphasised by the fact that Christchurch Borough Council has at the moment 24 councillors and there are five county councillors in Christchurch. In the proposals that are being considered, the number of councillors would fall to about 10 or 11, which would be a significant diminution of democratic representation of the people of Christchurch. That means that Christchurch people would have much less influence in the future.

The fear and loathing I have spoken about is coupled with the fact that it is well known that Bournemouth Borough Council is keen to take advantage of the fact that Christchurch has a lot of land in the green belt. Under the Government’s new relaxed arrangements, if the council as a whole were to bring forward a plan seeking to remove that land from the green belt, all the protections that the people of Christchurch thought that they had in relation to green-belt land would be swept away. That is another cause for concern.

The Government have dealt with all this in a thoroughly asymmetrical way. In Christchurch’s alternative submission to the Government, it suggested that one way out of all this would be for Bournemouth and Poole to merge together and leave Christchurch as it is. That was ruled out by the Government as not permissible under the rules, because they cannot force Bournemouth and Poole to merge together if they do not wish to do so. Amazingly, Bournemouth and Poole do not want to merge together to achieve significant savings, because both of them have a common interest in getting their hands on Christchurch and its assets. Although Christchurch cannot suggest that Bournemouth and Poole merge together, Bournemouth and Poole can not only object to their own merging together, but insist that they would like to merge with Christchurch in a new unitary authority.

According to the Government’s rules, that is perfectly hunky dory and fair, but it is certainly not fair as far as my constituents and I are concerned. I fought the general election hard on this issue. Ironically, we face the prospect that one issue on which I fought hard, namely leaving the European Union, will be delivered on 29 March next year, thereby bringing back sovereignty to the United Kingdom to the delight of myself and my constituents, but two days later, the other issue on which I fought hard, namely that Christchurch Borough Council should retain its sovereignty and independence, will not be delivered, because Christchurch will lose the sovereignty that it has had, in one form or another, since 1216 or thereabouts—a long time.

When I refer back to the Conservative party manifesto, which talked about the sense of community, I have in mind the sense of community that can come only from a strong, historic association. Christchurch was around a long time before Bournemouth was ever invented, and it resents enormously my Government’s proposals to abolish it against the clearly expressed will of the people. I recently saw in the paper that the Secretary of State has said that it would be wrong for Parliament to reject the people’s verdict in the EU referendum. Likewise, the people of Christchurch think it is totally wrong for the Government to reject their verdict, which was delivered by more than 17,000 people in their local referendum last December.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on securing the debate and on his dedication to pursuing the cause. He is a living embodiment of the values that he quoted from the Conservative party manifesto about making a commitment to one’s community. I approach the debate with some trepidation, not only because of my hon. Friend’s long and distinguished experience in this place, but because he held my position as a Minister with responsibility for local government, which is something I am new to. As a small boy growing up in Southampton, his was one of the first MP’s names that I knew. It is a great honour to respond to him. There is a lot to get through.

The Government’s aim is to enable the people of Christchurch to have as good a deal as possible with their local services. Those services are mainly the responsibility of Dorset County Council, but Christchurch Borough Council is responsible for about 20% of them. Those services are important to the local people.

Although I agree with my hon. Friend and share his joy that we will be leaving the European Union, a difference between him and the Government may lie in our belief that the proposed governance changes, for which we are seeking parliamentary approval, will benefit people across the whole of Dorset, including the residents of Christchurch borough.

With respect, it is important to note that that is not only the Government’s view, in contrast to what was just said. It is a view shared by many other people and organisations across Dorset, including Dorset County Council, which has major service responsibilities in Christchurch, as I have said; approximately 79% of councillors across Dorset; and major public service providers and businesses, particularly those with responsibilities for health, police, fire and rescue, and rail services across Christchurch and the wider Dorset area.

A number of my right hon. and hon. Friends with constituencies in the area share that view. On 29 November, they wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and urged him to support the proposal that the Dorset councils have submitted, because it is the option that commands strong local support and does the job that needs to be done. They state that “the further savings required to be made, if our councils are to continue delivering quality public services, can only be done through a reorganisation of their structures”.

The view is also shared by a third of the elected councillors to Christchurch Borough Council, who wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and stated:

“We are acutely aware of the constraints on local government funding and the financial pressure that upper tier services are facing. We therefore consider it our duty to respond to these challenges by supporting the restructuring of local government in Dorset”

The representative household survey commissioned by the nine Dorset councils estimated that 65% of residents across the whole of Dorset support the proposal. Of those nine councils, eight support the proposed change and have formally consented to the necessary secondary legislation.
My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch raised a number of specific points, which I shall do my best to deal with. The Secretary of State has had careful regard to the local advisory poll and its results, but as a poll of only 6% of the whole area’s population, we do not see it as casting doubt on his conclusion that there is a good deal of local support across the area.

On council tax harmonisation, as the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), told the House in a written answer on 18 December, it has consistently been

“for those implementing any unitary proposal to put to the Secretary of State their proposals”

for council tax harmonisation. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch that it is for the Secretary of State to specify in secondary legislation the maximum period for harmonisation.

Although a maximum period of five years has been specified in previous restructuring, the Government have made no such specification to date. We intend to introduce secondary legislation on council tax harmonisation in June or July. In deciding the maximum period to specify, we will have regard to local preference, the impact on individual council tax bills across the areas concerned and the financial implications for the authorities.

I have highlighted the considerable support for the proposals by business. On the specific question about the timing for the combined authority, the Government have written to the various local authorities about their proposals for a combined authority. We await a response to those questions to take that proposal forward or not, as local authorities see fit.

My hon. Friend asked about the timing for laying the regulations before the House. Of course, it would not have been appropriate to lay them 13 months ago, as he said, because it was not clear exactly what proposals would emerge from the locally driven process. As I am sure he is aware, the regulations are specific to the proposals that have emerged, so they could only have been laid after the proposals were finalised. On consulting, all council executives were shown copies of the regulations and asked for their opinions.

On the comparison with Northamptonshire, it is important to note that the situations are markedly different. In Northamptonshire, the proposals for restructuring are the result of a best-value inspection, whereas in Dorset, they have come bottom-up from councils themselves. In both cases, there has been extensive consultation. The year-long development of proposals in Dorset means that there has been considerable and adequate engagement of local communities in that process.

In conclusion, if Parliament approves the draft legislation that we have laid before it, it will provide the people of Christchurch with more sustainable local governance and safeguard the delivery of local services. I accept that my hon. Friend does not share that view, and there will be an opportunity for it to be considered and debated by Parliament when considering the secondary legislation, which I look forward to doing with him and others in the coming weeks. I will close as I started, by commending my hon. Friend’s dedication to his local community in pursuing the matter with such verve.

Question put and agreed to.
IDPs are often excluded from the support offered to refugees. That is partly because, having not crossed a border, they are actually quite hard to identify. The vast majority of IDPs do not enter camps, as refugees do. Instead, on average, 75% of IDPs stay in host communities. In Iraq, the figure is as high as 90%. IDPs in host communities are not as well documented as refugees in camps, and they are therefore much harder to find and identify. If IDPs go undocumented, it is difficult to provide them with the proper support that they need.

A further reason for the exclusion of IDPs is that, because they have not crossed an international border, they remain the responsibility of the state within which they have been displaced. Unsurprisingly, this can prove incredibly problematic in cases where states have been ravaged by conflict; it may even be the state that is causing the displacement, as we have seen in Syria. The state may, in fact, be further abusing and exploiting its citizens once they have been displaced.

In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that more than half of the Syrian population lived in displacement—that is really quite an astonishing fact—either across the border into another country or within their own country. As the civil war in Syria goes on and on, large swathes of the population continue to be displaced. In recent weeks, the Syrian Government forces in eastern Ghouta have been busing people to camps that are surrounded by other Government forces and then allegedly demanding that they surrender any form of ID.

Local journalists have reported that that is part of a broader Government plan to make drastic demographic changes, whereby property is handed over to pro-Government supporters. In such situations, the people who have been displaced must feel a real sense of hopelessness. Under international law, they remain the responsibility of the state that seems intent on persecuting them.

A further example of significant incidence of internal displacement can be seen in neighbouring Iraq, where it is estimated that there are around 2.2 million IDPs. Since the cessation of hostilities and violence in Mosul in 2017, many Christians from that area now wish to return, although they face significant difficulties in doing so.

I have not forgotten the most recent visit by a Christian pastor, whose church in Mosul had been burned down. He actually came over to Britain, at the investigation of the Open Doors charity, and he brought with him a scorched Bible, which he had asked to present to the Prime Minister, as one of the most poignant reminders of just how terrible the situation is for the persecuted minorities in Iraq. He explained how he and others had been displaced and how he had set up a new church, but, almost before he knew where he was, more than 300 families had come to seek refuge within the compound where the new church was situated.

The pastor explained how hard it is to return to Mosul and to try to start rebuilding one’s life all over again. We should not overlook the fact that the ISIL fighters have gone back to their original homes, so they are living in communities and making it very hard for the neighbours of Christians to welcome back their former Christian friends. The Christians are not made welcome again in the communities in which they once lived.
Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman makes a poignant point. I will never forget, during the war in Afghanistan, going to see internally displaced people and those who had fled just over the border into the federally administered tribal areas, sometimes to completely unofficial camps. Some were carried on the backs of their relatives. A person can move only very slowly if they are carrying another human being, especially an adult, to a place of relative safety. Those with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. Sadly, they often get left behind and fall prey to all the threats to life that pertain to any conflict zone. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the plight of the disabled in this debate on internal displacement.

There have been some notable successes in tackling internal displacement over the past 20 years, such as the Kampala convention, which was agreed in 2012. It was the world’s first continental instrument that legally bound Governments to protect the rights and wellbeing of people forced to flee their homes from conflict, violence, disaster and human rights abuses. However, much more needs to be done. Not everyone has signed up to the Kampala convention, including some of the countries we would very much like to see as signatories to that commitment.

The Department for International Development is certainly a leader in trying to promote other countries signing up to the convention. It is also a leader in its longer-term country programming in places suffering drawn-out, protracted, complex conflicts. For example, in answer to a written question relating to humanitarian operations in South Sudan, the Minister of State wrote:

“The UK is at the forefront of the international response to the crisis. Through the Humanitarian and Resilience Building in South Sudan programme, the Department for International Development will provide £443 million in humanitarian aid between 2015 and 2020 to support the provision of food, emergency shelter, and nutrition and health services, including our response to famine and severe food insecurity.”

Famine and food insecurity is a big problem in South Sudan. That level of support for IDPs is very welcome, and the Minister for International Development recently spoke of her support for a high-level panel to look into IDPs at the United Nations, and I was delighted to hear that. It would go some way towards addressing the lack of global oversight of IDPs in the current drafts of the global compact on migration and the global compact on refugees. It is worth noting the comments of Foreign Office Minister, Lord Ahmed. He said:

“The UK—alongside partners—remains committed to the UN process to develop both a Global Compact on Migration and a Global Compact on Refugees. The decision by the United States to withdraw from the former does not alter the UK Government’s commitment to engage fully and work towards the successful delivery of these compacts. We believe that the Global Compact on Migration should offer an effective international framework to ensure that migration is safe and orderly and that it should balance the rights and responsibilities of both states and migrants.”

Those are incredibly important words for anyone who has seen the general chaos and risks associated with people fleeing at speed from conflict. It is incredibly important to try to bring order to that chaos and safety for the most vulnerable among those who flee.

I encourage the Secretary of State for International Development to join such countries as Denmark, Sweden and Austria in supporting the calls for an expert report on refugees and IDPs to be commissioned by the UN Secretary-General. Such a report would serve as a useful precursor to any high-level panel on the topic. Furthermore, the UN has set up a plan of action around the 20th anniversary of the guiding principles this year. That multi-stakeholder plan of action aims to resolve and reduce internal displacement through prevention, protection and solutions for IDPs. Its purpose is to strengthen and galvanise support around the guiding principles and to add greater weight to them. I urge the Government to consider supporting that initiative alongside other such UN processes, including the high-level panel and the expert report.

I conclude by thanking my right hon. Friend the Minister for attending the debate today. I look forward to hearing what he has to say. He is knowledgeable on this subject matter, but so are those who have taken the time to come to the debate, and they will make other useful contributions to the discussion.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): This debate is on a terribly important issue, and seven Members have indicated they want to speak. I apologise, but I am going to have to impose an immediate time limit of three minutes.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing this debate. I welcome the work of Christian Aid. As she rightly pointed out, the majority of displaced people around the world are internally displaced rather than refugees. Some 65 million people are displaced globally,
of whom 43 million are displaced internally. I highlight one example, which is the Rohingya in Burma. Many Rohingya are internally displaced, so do not qualify as refugees. The Select Committee on International Development recently visited Bangladesh and saw the plight of the Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar, but we were refused visas to visit Burma, so we were unable to meet the internally displaced. It would be great if the Minister talked about the work that the UK is doing to support the Rohingya and other minorities within Burma who are internally displaced.

As crises in such places as Syria, Iraq, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan become more protracted and complex, it is vital that the world system responds. I echo what the right hon. Lady said about the importance of the UK giving support to the call for the UN Secretary-General to commission an expert report looking at the position of IDPs around the world and how humanitarian systems can be improved to help them.

The sustainable development goals—the global goals adopted in 2015—are very relevant here. For example, goal 13 is about tackling climate change. Some 25 million are displaced by natural disasters, and minimising the impact of climate change is a powerful tool of prevention. SDG 4 is about education. This morning we were in this Chamber talking about the protection of children. The Select Committee recently published our report on global education. It is vital that internally displaced children have access to education, not least when, as the right hon. Lady reminded us, they are likely to be displaced on average for 15 years. Thirdly, goal 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies is the goal for which the UK rightly fought. Within that, we need to ensure that religious minorities, women and girls, disabled people and others are fully protected.

The International Development Committee has decided that we will hold an inquiry later this year on displacement in Africa. We will focus on both IDPs and refugees. The inquiry is topical because, as the right hon. Lady said, it is the 20th anniversary of the guiding principles on internal displacement. It will give us an opportunity to look at the work of the Department for International Development; the work of the UN, particularly following the inquiry is topical because, as the right hon. Lady said, it is the 20th anniversary of the guiding principles on internal displacement. It would be great if the Minister talked about the work that the UK is doing to support the Rohingya and other minorities within Burma who are internally displaced.

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Let us work together in this House to ensure that the very real needs of IDPs are fully reflected in UK policy.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. One or two speakers have dropped out, so there now may be an opportunity for interventions—I am sorry about that, Mr Twigg. I call David Duguid.

4.50 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. I have redacted some of my speech, so will keep it short anyway. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing this important debate.

The number of internally displaced persons in the world is both staggering and unacceptable. As has been mentioned, about 40 million people worldwide have been made IDPs by conflict and violence alone. More than 24 million new displacements were caused by natural disasters and meteorological events in 2016 alone. Africa and the middle east account for the majority of displacements due to conflict and violence, and over in South America, Colombia is the single country with the most people—more than 7 million—who are internally displaced for those reasons. South and east Asia have the most displacements due to disasters. Even Europe has millions of IDPs, especially Ukraine. In 2016, 1.7 million people had been displaced there, in large part due to Russian aggression.

I must declare an interest at this point. My wife is originally from Azerbaijan, where 600,000 people were internally displaced. Compared with some of the numbers I have been reading, that is still a large number, but it is not as large as in some of the other countries that I mentioned. Nevertheless, those 600,000 IDPs mean that Azerbaijan still has one of the highest numbers of IDPs per capita—I think the population of Azerbaijan is about 10 million.

IDPs are faced with a unique range of challenges and difficulties. They are in their own country, but they are not at home. They are, in general, citizens in the countries where they are displaced, but in many cases they are denied their rights as citizens. Their Government may even be the reason they have been forced from their homes in the first place.

I applaud the action the UK Government have taken to help IDPs around the world. In Syria, for example, the UK is one of the largest bilateral donors—I think we are the second-largest. The UK has put large amounts of funding towards providing IDPs with a range of support, including food, water, healthcare, and shelter, and has supported UN efforts to ramp up international support for Syrian IDPs. I am also pleased that the UK Government are committed to diplomatic efforts around the world to end conflict, restore peace and pave the way for the return of IDPs to their homes. However, it is crucial that we redouble our efforts and take a lead in supporting IDPs so that we can stop this grave issue from growing.

Such efforts would certainly be complex—from working to end conflicts, to developing credible solutions to cases of displacement, promoting human rights, preventing conflicts from developing in the first place, and to working with countries to make communities more robust to natural disasters. Despite that complexity, we need to act. The problem is simply too big and too tragic for us to allow it to continue growing. I trust that the UK Government will continue to lead and work hard for a brighter future for the tens of millions of IDPs around the world.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. As I mentioned, a couple of people who were on the original list of speakers have now signalled that they do not wish to speak. There is therefore an opportunity for a couple of interventions. I call Thangam Debbonaire.
Debate, which is the human aspect. I will read a short so eloquently. I want to add a specific aspect to the interventions. It is a pleasure to serve with you in the work.

I urge all hon. Members to think about how they might involve and integrate them into our policy making. The author is directing us to make connections with internally displaced persons, which is even harder than connecting with those who are externally displaced, and how we involve and integrate them into our policy making. The author is directing his article mainly at humanitarian organisations, but I argue that we, as policy makers, are setting the tone and context. Unintentionally—in fact, often with very good intentions—we set them slightly at odds with what Syrian people and others who are internally displaced want.

In my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I have focused particularly on Syria, partly because my constituency has a link, but also because of the current crisis in which more than 0.5 million Syrians have died, 5 million are refugees, and 6 million are internally displaced. I am repeating what has already been said because that is three quarters of the population of Greater London, and six times the population of Birmingham. That is the equivalent of six Berminghams being forced to flee their homes within their own country.

I will leave hon. Members with one thought. I have struggled but am managing to learn Arabic. It has taken me a year and a half to get to conversational level. That is even harder than connecting with those who are externally displaced, and how we involve and integrate them into our policy making. The author is directing his article mainly at humanitarian organisations, but I argue that we, as policy makers, are setting the tone and context. Unintentionally—in fact, often with very good intentions—we set them slightly at odds with what Syrian people and others who are internally displaced want.

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I will leave hon. Members with one thought. I have struggled but am managing to learn Arabic. It has taken me a year and a half to get to conversational level. That is one of the ways I am trying to take the initiative—to hear the voices of people in the middle east who are in conflict, and who are internally and externally displaced. I urge all hon. Members to think about how they might include, involve, recognise and value the voices of internally displaced people, in policy making, as the Minister will say, and in our work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some people might think I was speaking in Arabic, but it would be Ulster Scots, which is very different.

It is always a pleasure to speak in such debates. I commend the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) for presenting her case so well, as she always does. Her compassion, knowledge of, interest in and love for other people always comes out in her speeches. I wanted to put that on record, and thank her for it.

Along with others, I received a briefing from Christian Aid earlier this year. Today we received an update on where we are. We should thank Christian Aid for all its does. Its staff have been very industrious in ensuring that we all have the facts and figures for this debate.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—I pulled out to give more people time, as there were too many speakers. I commend to anybody watching this debate the briefing from Christian Aid. For further background, I would direct people to Christian Aid’s website, where they can learn a bit more. I also commend Christian Aid’s ideals of a FAIR solution—one that is funded, ambitious, inclusive and respectful. Those are great headings under which to work.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. His words are very much what we are all thinking in this House today.

More than 40 million people are currently displaced within their own country due to conflict. That is the equivalent of 60% of the population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Women account for 50%, and a further 40% are children—so 90% of the displaced are women and children.

There are internally displaced people in Syria, Sudan, Colombia and Iraq, as has been said, and the number of internally displaced has more than doubled since the creation of the guiding principles in 1998. Oh that the guiding principles had been adopted by all those countries, and we would be a step further on. Internally displaced people represent more than twice the number of refugees in the whole world. It is simply heart-breaking.

I will make some brief comments as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the freedom of religious belief, and on the persecution of Christians across the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced in countries in the middle east, with families who have had to leave their homes and businesses, unable to return. People had worked their whole life for all they had and had to walk away.

Women are disproportionately affected by internal displacement, and are at greater risk from sexual violence and trafficking. Girls suffer higher levels of early marriage and women have weaker or no property rights and no recourse to compensation for land losses. They can be subject to physical or sexual abuse when carrying out simple activities such as fetching firewood or water. Women often do not find personal security following displacement. I make a special plea for the women and children.
Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady always adds to any debate she takes part in and adds a significant point to this discussion, which we would all endorse.

We are fortunate. We know that the Minister is an exceptional person, not just because he is here, but because his interest in this subject is renowned. We are all hopeful that his response will encapsulate the points we all make. Not to leave her out, I have got to know the shadow Minister personally, and I know she is also committed. What we are saying, we are saying together.

In South Sudan, UN investigators have said that 70% of women have been raped, typically by soldiers and police officers. Some 80% of IDPs live in urban areas. The countries most affected by internal displacement are some of the most afflicted by child marriage. I do not know how anyone else feels about child marriage, but it really narks me, to use an Ulsterism. I am very uneasy with it. In the Central African Republic, as many as 68% girls are married by the age of 18, and in South Sudan, more than 50% are. Such things should never happen. I do not know whether we have to address the culture in those countries or whether they just need a lesson on where we are. The levels are higher among IDP populations.

All those issues need to be dealt with and I look to the Minister to see how we can influence those things for the better—how we can use our embassies, our international development aid programmes and diplomatic pressures to bring about reform and change. How can we better work with the UN and non-governmental organisations to bring about a different and safer way of life for those who are internally displaced? Will the Minister tell us how his Department believes we can do things differently to promote a different result?

I believe we have a duty of care and an ability to help, and I would like to know that today is the first in a progression of steps in making a difference for people whose lives have been torn apart. It is our duty to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak out today for those who have no voice.

5.3 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am pleased to see you in the chair, Mr Davies. I dispense with the usual niceties because there is not enough time, but I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing this debate.

I was made aware of the difficulties of helping internally displaced people through speaking to Iraqis and representatives of the international community when I led an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Iraq in February. We were told repeatedly that rebuilding infrastructure and the restoration of services in areas recently won back from Daesh—some 40 cities in two and a half years—was the priority, so that IDPs could return home. Managing expectations about what could be done was, however, challenging.

We were told that reconciliation would be crucial in allowing thousands with family ties to militants to return to their homes. Yet the Financial Times recently reported:

“Aid groups and western powers all acknowledge the importance of suturing Iraq’s divisions, but few are willing to co-ordinate with Baghdad”.

They worry, the article continues, about some of the Government’s methods,

“like walling suspected ISIS relatives in displacement camps, while forcing other families to return home before they feel safe”,

sometimes when the area is not even cleared of bombs.

Dr Drew: Would my right hon. Friend accept that one of the problems is that, whereas refugees often come under the accountable control of international agencies, including the military and the police, IDPs are often subject to national agencies and therefore subject to the conflict and repression that they have tried to flee from, and they get put back into that situation?

Ann Clwyd: Indeed I would. That is a very good point. The Financial Times article also points out such methods

“violate international law and is a recipe for another round of radicalisation. That leaves much of the work to civil society groups, tribes and politicians with competing interests.”

There was an incredible account in The Times last week about the work of a young nurse in Mosul who now collects the remains of dead bodies with a small team of volunteers, which highlighted how little reconstruction has been carried out so far in the old city, though some rebuilding has begun in less damaged parts of west Mosul. Even more worryingly, the report highlighted the feeling of some there that the authorities are now enacting a form of collective punishment on Mosul, Iraq’s largest Sunni city, which was seen as a hotbed of radicalism even before Daesh took it on in 2014. There is a very real difficulty in fostering the reconciliation that will be required to ensure that many IDPs can return home and stay there.

I would like to talk about the tragic situation that colleagues have talked about in Syria, Yemen, the DRC and Colombia. However, I will conclude by calling on Governments with IDPs and the international community to do more to understand and address the challenges faced by IDPs and to engage with them. Last, but not least—who has the primary responsibility to protect and assist IDPs when their home state will not or cannot do so? Will the Minister tell us today what action the Department for International Development has taken to develop and publish a departmental strategy to support IDPs around the world, and what has been done to deliver on commitments on IDPs made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit?

5.8 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on an important and deeply passionate speech. I congratulate all Members of this House who share a common cause in seeing a rapid reduction in the numbers of internally displaced peoples and an increase in protections for them.
We always think of displaced people as those who have fled their home country due to natural disasters or conflict, but we often underestimate those who are displaced within their own country, as we have heard today. These are people who have not crossed a border to find safety. Unlike refugees, they are on the run at home. The displacement of millions of people within the borders of their own countries has become a pressing global concern. It disrupts lives, threatens communities and affects countries as a whole, resulting in serious humanitarian, social and economic concerns.

Worldwide, there are now 65 million people displaced; around two thirds of that total are displaced within their own countries. The number of internally displaced people has increased by 10 million in the last four years alone. In 2016, it was equivalent to one person being displaced every single second. Everyone here today should be shocked by those figures.

As we have heard, people forced to leave their home are generally subject to heightened vulnerability in several areas. They also remain at high risk of physical attack, sexual assault and abduction, and frequently are deprived of adequate shelter, food and health services. The overwhelming majority are women and children, who are especially at risk. More often than refugees, internally displaced people tend to remain close to or become trapped in zones of conflict. They get caught in the crossfire and are at risk of being used as targets or human shields.

I will give a few examples of countries with high numbers of internally displaced people. As we have heard repeatedly today, Syria has the biggest internally displaced population in the world—6.5 million people, which is 1 million more than the entire population of Scotland. Since 2011, 50 Syrian families have been displaced every hour of every day. The pace of displacement remains relentless.

Thangam Debbonaire: The comparison with Scotland is really helpful. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, like the population of Scotland, those people are teachers, nurses, architects, builders and engineers, and should be engaged? They have remained on the spot, and will be critical in the rebuilding of Syria. They need to be integrated into any peace process that we hopefully support.

Chris Law: I completely agree. They must also be involved in peacebuilding. The people who have seen acts of war and heinous crimes of war on the ground are those who will build the future peace in Syria.

The devastating famine across east Africa, combined with ongoing violence in parts of the continent, has forced so many people to flee that east Africa now rivals Syria in having the world’s largest displacement area. There are almost 2 million internally displaced people in South Sudan. In Sudan, almost 5 million people need humanitarian assistance, half of whom are internally displaced.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about Africa. All African countries had the opportunity to be part of the Kampala convention of 2012. Some that signed up and committed themselves to the process in ink and on paper have not delivered on it. Is it not time that those who have committed themselves to a process actually take action?

Chris Law: I completely agree. We need to speak about this issue in Chambers such as this all across Europe and beyond to make that point. If I am not mistaken, one of the signatories is Nigeria, which has 2 million internally displaced people itself.

The numbers continue to grow, but there has been an absence of effective and lasting strategies for the millions of internally displaced people in Syria, Africa and across the world. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the UN guiding principles on internal displacement, which set out for the first time a definition and some of the vulnerabilities. This year, a joint plan of action is looking at what further steps can be taken to support internally displaced people. That work is being led by the UN special rapporteur, countries, NGOs and UN agencies. The purpose of the plan is to prevent more arbitrary displacement, improve protection and rights, and develop durable solutions to support the informed choice of those who cannot return to their home in their own countries. The UK Government must fully support that global plan, which is particularly pertinent in the light of the recent airstrikes undertaken by the UK Government in Syria. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm what action his Department will take to support and deliver the recommendations in the plan of action. Will his Department produce and publish its own strategy on how DFID will support internally displaced people around the world?

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit made a number of extremely important commitments. For example, it committed to pass more humanitarian funding to local and national actors, and to reduce internal displacement by 50% by 2030. Will the Minister explain how the UK is delivering on the commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit?

The refugee migration crisis is probably one of the most important issues of our time, and it is getting worse by the minute. Our vision of Scotland is of an open country that looks outward. We believe the UK Government must live up to their moral obligations through action and leadership. They must lead the way in putting internal displacement back on the global agenda and developing an effective and lasting strategy for the many millions of internally displaced people at risk. We cannot stand by as the numbers continue to grow.

5.13 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing this important debate.

We have heard some excellent contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) highlighted that displaced people with disabilities struggle to make the journey and need specific support. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about the Rohingya who are internally displaced, and about some of the challenges in the camps. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) outlined the human side of internal displacement, and said that we as policy makers set the tone. I am proud to hear about her initiative to learn Arabic to connect with others; it is so inspiring. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), and the hon. Members for Dundee West (Chris Law) and forBanff and Buchan (David Duguid), for their contributions and their concern about the plight of the internally displaced. This is one of the world’s most pressing humanitarian issues.
Although refugees fleeing famine, persecution and disease across borders understandably grab diplomatic and media attention, we must not overlook or forget those who are displaced internally within their own countries. We have heard that, of the 65 million people currently displaced from their homes worldwide, more than 40 million are displaced within their own countries, and 90% are women and children. It is sobering to think that, since the United Nations introduced its guiding principles on internal displacement some 20 years ago, the number of IDPs has more than doubled. Ultimately, that means we are not going far enough and fast enough in tackling the problem.

In 2016, natural disasters caused an additional 24 million internal displacements. Every year, an estimated 15 million people are displaced by development projects. Millions more displacements, including from land grabs, criminal violence and drought, are not systematically recorded. Colombia, Sudan, Iraq and Syria have the ignominious honour of topping the list of countries with the most IDPs. Colombia, where conflict has eased and the slow, painstaking process of reconciliation is beginning, reminds us that it takes only a heartbeat to displace millions, but a whole generation to recover and rebuild lives.

It is right that the UK treats the symptoms of displacement. Just last week, the UN launched its plan of action for IDPs, entitled GP20. It promises to tackle internal displacement through prevention, protection and solutions for IDPs. Will the Minister spell out exactly what the UK will do to support that plan, how we will support it financially and politically, how we will align DFID’s migration and refugee work with its priorities, and by when we can expect the UK to spell out clearly its full support? As with so many multilateral plans, the faster the UK gets behind the plan and the more vocal we are, the more likely other countries are to follow suit.

Let me turn to the second area where the UK can surely add value. The United Nations guiding principles for internal displacement identify good data as key to providing support to IDPs, yet 20 years on that data is not good enough. Indeed, UNICEF found that only 20% of data on IDPs is disaggregated by age, compared with 50% for all refugees and 77% for migrants. That is something the UK could lead on by providing technical expertise and insights to countries with high IDP populations, and enabling them to collect and monitor data on IDPs more effectively. That could form part of the global cross-Government UK strategy on IDPs. Will the Minister outline what steps his Department has taken to increase the volume and quality of data collected on IDPs?

I have spoken briefly about the importance of the Government addressing the symptoms of displacement, and look forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks, but let me turn briefly to the wider context. The lives of IDPs and the issue of internal displacement cannot be improved by humanitarian responses alone. As Christian Aid argued, humanitarian efforts need to be conducted in concert with sustained investment by states and development actors to resolve the underlying causes of internal displacement, be they related to conflict, natural disasters, large-scale development projects or extreme poverty.

I am sure we all agree that, if we want to reduce and resolve internal displacement, we need to tackle its root causes, not just its symptoms. Labour has recently launched its own plan for Government, called “A World for the Many, Not the Few”, in which we commit to an approach that targets action on what we believe to be the five biggest drivers of poverty and inequality. That includes a commitment to building peace and conflict prevention, pivoting the UK’s approach from being one preoccupied primarily with national security in conflict settings to one preoccupied first and foremost with peace and development. It also includes a commitment to take action on climate justice, which threatens to be one of the biggest drivers of internal displacement.

It is easy to say that we will tackle root causes, but the devil is in the detail. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the Government’s strategy on internally displaced people gets buy-in and ownership from across Government, and that it is not dwarfed by the concerns of other Departments? For example, does the media and political focus on migration and refugees into the UK—driven by the Prime Minister’s “hostile environment” and the Home Office—risk shaping the UK’s priorities more than it should? With European donor agencies including DFID seemingly channelling more of their migration support into dissuading people from leaving their countries and coming to Europe, does the Minister agree that the job of political leaders is to rise above nasty rhetoric and keep the focus of our humanitarian support on those who need it most?

The Secretary of State argued in her keynote speech that the purpose of UK aid was to act as a “shield against uncontrolled and unsustainable economic migration”. Does the Minister think that that type of language is constructive or projects the desired image of the Government’s so-called global Britain?

To conclude, I call on the Minister to ensure that his Department produces and publishes a departmental strategy on how DFID supports internally displaced people around the world. The strategy must outline how the UK is delivering on the commitments made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit by the Government on internally displaced people, and it must ensure that DFID does all it can to support and deliver on the recommendations made in the joint plan of action devised by the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs with states, NGOs and UN agencies. More than that, the strategy must bring the whole of Government to bear on the problem with a clear joined-up plan, and it must ensure that the priority in our displacement work is not to be a shield against migration or a hostile environment, but the lives of the 40 million people at risk.
Bench did—for me to answer conveniently in the seven or so minutes that I have. I also need to leave a moment for my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden to conclude. However, let me say one or two things in response.

The debate is opportune, with 2018 being the 20-year anniversary of the international guiding principles. I am grateful that colleagues have brought the subject, informing Members of Parliament and bringing forward the “Big Brekkie” breakfast briefing on IDPs, which my noble Friend Lord Bates was able to attend. It is staggering to look back over the past 20 years and see the change in the numbers and how many of them are related to conflict.

As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said and as others have mentioned, more than 65 million people globally have been driven from their homes by conflict or violence—that is equivalent to the entire population of the UK. It is staggering to look back over the past 20 years and see the change in the numbers and how many of them are related to conflict.

I was particularly struck, as I have been a number of times, by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and the way in which she framed her comments and spoke about individual experiences. The particular vulnerability of IDPs needs to be put on the record. They are in transit from one place to another, which is disorientating in itself, and the social organisation that they have come from has been replaced—the psychosocial distress of heads of families who can no longer provide for their families, instead becoming supplicant to aid agencies and the like. That is a sense of loss and potential humiliation of which none of us has experience, but it has a profound effect. To look at the situation in human terms, beyond the large figures, is important, and the hon. Lady did that particularly well.

IDPs suffer the removal from sources of income and livelihood, and from schooling, which we now try to replace not only for refugees to other countries but for the internally displaced. There is also the deprivation of access to facilities. All that is a vulnerability and, as colleagues have remarked, IDPs are not refugees. The whole point of the internally displaced is that they remain within their countries. Therefore, in answer to the question of who is primarily responsible for them, the state is, yet the state might be the perpetrator of the very distress from which those people are fleeing, which colleagues mentioned.

The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who understands this well, spoke about how, unless IDPs are dealt with effectively, and if we do not resolve the issues, we will have a recipe for future conflict. The emphasis on peace building, which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston mentioned, is about looking forward and not about only our policy—peace building for the future. We need to deal with the issue of an issue that we need to look forward to ensure that we have taken out the reasons for problems to recur. That is most important, and that is where the difficulty has been in dealing with IDPs.

Let me try to put some of that a bit more in context. We are strongly committed to meeting the needs of IDPs. Our work is part of a wider strategy to shift our approach to protracted cases, to do more to protect people in such crises, to find ways to improve humanitarian access and to mitigate the effects of forced displacement. That means doing more to effectively meet the long-term needs of internally displaced people, and the communities that host them, through sustained access to education, health and jobs. Fundamentally, IDPs should not have to wait until a crisis is fully resolved before they begin to rebuild their lives.

The specific vulnerabilities of women and girls, which were mentioned by a number of colleagues, are very much on our radar screen. The empowerment of women and girls in emergencies was a priority for the UK at the World Humanitarian Summit, where we committed to put gender equality at the heart of humanitarian action, going beyond protection to make further commitments to ensure that women and girls have a voice, choice and control even when crisis hits. In many contexts the UK is working to prevent and address the effects of gender-based violence for displaced people, which includes a £25 million research initiative that is delivering innovative new programmes.

To answer the question of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston on data, we work closely with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. A new report is out soon. We cannot have too much data in such cases, but sometimes it is very difficult to get.

I will now move on to what colleagues are looking for us to do, because we are short of time. We are exploring new options with the UN, including the idea of launching a UN high-level panel on IDPs. That would help to galvanise political and operational action by bringing together a wide range of experts to make recommendations that cut across humanitarian, peace and security, development and human rights issues. It would not solve all issues that IDPs face, but it could set out a blueprint for reducing displacement and driving a more effective response. Ultimately, learning what has worked, addressing the root causes of crises and delivering a more comprehensive global approach are firmly in the interest of those forced to flee their homes, the countries that host them and the UK itself. On our own humanitarian strategy published last year, which contained information on IDPs, we look forward to ensuring that our actions are relevant to mitigating displacement and responding to it more effectively.

We could have done with a longer debate, but I want to give the last moments back to my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden. A number of issues have been raised, and more can be raised in questions and further debates, but I am grateful for this opportunity. IDPs are an important issue and should not be neglected. All of us who have come across them, and those who work with them, are always profoundly impacted by what we have seen and heard.

5.29 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman: I thank the Minister and all hon. Members. We are all on the same page. We have sounded the alarm today. The media focus definitely does not get the plight of such large numbers and the growing problems presented. My last experience of the high-level panel was that it gave rise to SDGs. Some things need to be elevated right at the top to draw attention, but we also need solutions that are right down on the
[Dame Caroline Spelman]

ground. That is where agencies such as Christian Aid and others come in. It will take all of us working together to address a problem of this scale.

5.30 pm  Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Thursday 26 April 2018

[Mr David Amess in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Financial Services

1.30 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the financial services sector in its own right and its importance to the wider economy, lay out some of the many considerations that the Brexit negotiations bring for the sector, and raise some specific actions that the Government may wish to consider taking.

Fundamentally, we know from history how important it is to get the regulatory environment for financial services right, and it is important that we, as legislators, focus on those issues.

London is the leading international financial centre. Some 1.1 million people are employed directly in financial services, and the number of people employed in the sector increases to nearly 2.3 million when other professional services are added. One in 14 people working in Britain today works in financial and professional services. Those jobs are not just in the City of London: Manchester is a leader in legal services, as is Birmingham in accountancy; Edinburgh has a global reputation for fund management; and Northern Ireland is increasingly an area of expertise for vital back-office and middle-office functions. Two thirds of financial services jobs are based outside London.

Today is of course a very quiet day in this place, and time for the debate was allocated only last week. Many Members have given me their apologies because they cannot be here due to previous constituency commitments, and a bit of a gremlin in the parliamentary IT system unfortunately meant that the debate was advertised on the Parliament website only last night.

Fortunately, I have received many comments in the past few days from stakeholders representing literally millions of people about the importance of this debate, and it is really important that we point out to the public that the fact that not many Members are present right now does not mean that many of them do not care about this issue they do.

I will address the financial services sector in its own right and its importance to the wider economy, lay out some of the many considerations that the Brexit negotiations bring for the sector, and raise some specific actions that the Government may wish to consider taking.

London is the leading international financial centre. Some 1.1 million people are employed directly in financial services, and the number of people employed in the sector increases to nearly 2.3 million when other professional services are added. One in 14 people working in Britain today works in financial and professional services. Those jobs are not just in the City of London: Manchester is a leader in legal services, as is Birmingham in accountancy; Edinburgh has a global reputation for fund management; and Northern Ireland is increasingly an area of expertise for vital back-office and middle-office functions. Two thirds of financial services jobs are based outside London.

In fact, 21 cities and towns across the country have more than 10,000 people working in the industry.

More than 3,000 jobs in my constituency are in financial services, many of them in insurance, and many of my constituents commute to London to work in the sector. It is estimated that, across the country, banking employs more than 400,000 people, insurance more than 300,000, management consultancy more than half a million, accountancy 360,000, and legal services 340,000.

But this is not just about jobs: the financial services sector is a massive contributor to the public purse. The CityUK estimates that the sector paid more than £72 billion in tax last year—11% of total British tax receipts and 4.5% of our GDP. Some §31 billion of that came from income tax and national insurance contributions. The banking sector alone paid £35.4 billion, of which £17 billion was from non-British banks that have chosen to locate here.

The sector is key to our trade. Of every £100 generated in our economy, £11 comes from financial services—it is among Britain’s largest industries. According to the Office for National Statistics, UK-based financial and related professional services generated a trade surplus of more than £80 billion in 2015—larger than the combined trade surplus of all other industries. It is fair to say that British financial and related professional services firms are the face of British businesses around the globe. A large proportion of that trade is with our partners in Europe; more than £27 billion of UK financial services exports go to the EU. Maintaining that trade and the jobs and tax it brings matters hugely to our economic prosperity.

Access to financial services products makes a real difference to real lives. Buying a house and taking on a mortgage is the single largest financial decision most people will ever make. Two thirds of families in the UK own their own home. There are 11 million mortgages across the country. Furthermore, more than 1 million people have opened help to buy ISAs since they were introduced in 2015. Those have helped people buy more than 100,000 homes, and they have been used particularly in areas such as the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Three quarters of British families and households have savings and pensions managed by the UK fund management industry, and pension providers are key to delivering a better future for us all. We have the second largest pension industry in the world, with total investments of nearly £3 trillion. At the end of last year, more than 9 million people in this country had been automatically enrolled into pensions thanks to this Government’s actions. Insurance services are vital to consumers, too. More than 20 million households have motor insurance, 19 million have contents insurance, and 16 million have buildings insurance.

People also use banks: 99% of British adults have at least one bank account. That is great. We know retail banking is going through a massive transformation. Consumers are moving from paper, cheques and cash to online and contactless payments and records. Government figures show that 56% of consumers used online banking last year. That is great, but it means that nearly half the population did not. The issue of bank branch closures is not just for rural areas. I represent the city of Chelmsford, and I have had many emails from constituents who are concerned about the last bank closing in the Great Baddow area. It is right that MPs raise the issue often in the House. Post offices can and will provide some of the services that people need, but there also needs to be clear and specific communication to those affected.

Financial services are also of huge benefit to the public sector. People in my constituency really want to see investment in infrastructure—that is a top priority—and dynamic financial services are key to getting the infrastructure we need. I should probably declare an
interest: I had a long career in infrastructure finance before entering the House. The UK Government aim to invest more than £240 billion between now and 2021, of which it is estimated 45% will come from a diverse range of private investment sources.

Financial services are also key to supporting other businesses. They provide current accounts and insurance cover, and help companies to raise the money they need to invest, grow and create jobs. The total value of loans from major banks to British businesses is just over £460 billion. More than a third of that is lent to small and medium-sized businesses. Last year, British companies raised £27.2 billion by issuing shares, nearly £24 billion of which was raised on the London stock exchange. Companies also raise money from corporate bonds, asset finance, angel investment, crowdfunding, peer-to-peer funding and private placements. According to research by Cambridge University, in 2016 more than 33,000 small and medium-sized enterprises had already received funding—totalling more than £3 billion—from alternative finance providers. That market is growing rapidly.

The UK is a global leader in the FinTech sector. Investment in FinTech more than doubled last year. We are the second largest FinTech country in the world, just after the US. FinTech products have given access to services to many people who found themselves excluded from traditional financial services. FinTech products have increased transparency, dramatically reduced the cost of everyday transactions and helped to fight financial fraud and improve security.

Last month, the Chancellor launched the FinTech sector strategy, which I welcome, but many other parts of the financial services industry could benefit from such sector strategies too. The financial services sector comprises many different subsectors, each of which needs and deserves detailed and specific focus. It is important that we have that focus now, especially because of the Brexit negotiations. Financial services will be very much impacted by the type of Brexit we have.

I will give the example of the insurance sector, which, as I have said, is a major employer in my constituency. The UK is a global leader in insurance services. We are home to the largest insurance industry in Europe. Our commercial insurance market facilitates the flows of trade across all of Europe and acts as a massive bridge to the markets in North America and across the world, in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Many clients across the rest of the EU rely on the London market to provide certain insurance and reinsurance products that they simply cannot get in their own markets.

That is why, every year, European companies pay insurance premiums worth over £9 billion into the London market and why £7 billion of international business is written in the London market by organisations whose parent companies are elsewhere in Europe. Once the UK has left the EU, UK-based insurance and reinsurance undertakings will lose their right to conduct business in EU27 member states by way of freedom of establishment and freedom of services—and vice versa: European companies will lose their right here, unless there is a deal allowing that to continue.

A further technical but very concerning point is that, in December, the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority issued an opinion saying that insurance contracts concluded before the withdrawal date by British companies into the EU27, and by EU27 companies into Britain, are in principle valid post-Brexit, but that those same firms would not be able to continue to ensure the continuity of their services to businesses and customers on a cross-border basis after we exit. That would include their not being able to service the claims of existing policyholders.

The continuity of servicing of cross-border contracts after Brexit is a real concern. According to the Bank of England, 36 million insurance policyholders—individual people—in Britain and the EU are potentially affected. That is only insurance policyholders; there is another £26 trillion of outstanding uncleared derivatives contracts. It is in the interests of both the UK and the EU to resolve the issue of contract continuity, both during the transition period and thereafter, and I am pleased to have heard the Chancellor mention that recently.

As well as resolving contracts, there is the issue of market access. The London Market Group, which represents the commercial insurance sector, points out that without continued access to insurance markets there will be disruption across a wide range of sectors, including aviation, marine, bank lending, satellite communications, shipbuilding and even nuclear power. Market access in the insurance sector is important to those other sectors that come to London to get insurance.

It is also important in sectors other than insurance. British-based asset managers manage more than £1.5 trillion of assets for EU clients. Two thirds of the debt and equity raised by European companies comes from British-based banks. Three quarters of European forex and interest rate trading takes place in the UK. Trade in services is not just a one-way street, and it is important to remind people on the other side of the channel of that. The UK imported £76 billion-worth of services from the EU in 2016, an increase of about 10% on previous years. Financial services also underpin the cross-border flow of goods. I have just bought a new car; like most new cars bought in Britain today, it comes with a financial services contract. The service is linked to the good.

When it comes to the financial services sector, the concept of no deal with Europe is not a good deal for Britain, and it is not a good deal for the rest of Europe either. There is no free trade agreement anywhere in the world that offers anything like the depth and breadth of what is needed by the EU and UK financial services players to help to keep the sector and to ensure it continues to underpin the wider economy. That is why it is right that the Prime Minister, in her Mansion House speech, called for a “broader agreement than ever before.”

It is important that we focus on the details of what that relationship could look like. Companies in financial services have very long lead times to plan their businesses. Once contingency plans have been put in place, they are unlikely to be undone. The agreement on the transition period is welcome, but it is not legally enforceable until we also know what the withdrawal agreement looks like.

Firms, especially in the EU, are still being asked by their regulators to continue planning for a no deal scenario, which risks the transition agreement being undermined in practice. In contrast, the Bank of England and the Prudential Regulation Authority have given helpful guidance to firms here that they can continue to operate under the current regulatory regime. One thing I ask the
Minister to do is to work with our European counterparts to try to ensure that firms on the other side of the channel can be given similar messages to the one the Bank of England is giving.

On the long-term agreement, an organisation called the International Regulatory Strategy Group prepared an excellent report on “A New Basis for Access to EU/UK Financial Services Post-Brexit”, which I strongly recommend. It concluded that a deal should be sought that was based on mutual recognition and regulatory co-operation, delivering market access rights. That view has broad support from across many areas of the financial services community.

The UK Government have called for cross-border access in financial services based on regulatory and supervisory co-operation. It has been encouraging to see an acknowledgement of the importance of services in the EU’s own negotiating guidelines. It is important to recognise that, if we are to achieve that high level of market access, we also need a high level of regulatory dialogue, trust and co-operation. The lessons of the last financial crash remind us how important good regulation is, because if a failure happens it can become systemic. The crash also emphasised the need for international co-operation and made us realise that, when it comes to cross-border institutions, the regulatory framework needs to work across borders too.

However, it is important to remember that the industry has come a long way since 2008. Across the world, capital requirements on large banks are now 10 times higher than they were before the crisis. British banks have raised over £130 billion of loss-absorbing capital. The recovery and resolution regime, which I am proud to have played a part in negotiating, means that failed banks can be wound down without needing to rely on taxpayer bail-outs. Fundamental to that is the fact that senior executives can now be held individually accountable for the banks they run.

Under this Government’s leadership, the UK has worked with regulators all across the world to improve the stability of the financial sector. When it comes to the detail of the regulation, we have worked most deeply with our neighbours in the EU. We have created a common rule book in many subsectors of financial services, and industry players in the vast majority of those subsectors want to continue to use that rule book. It is important that we focus on how that co-operation continues and what sort of regulatory environment we want to have going forward.

There is huge devil in the detail of financial services regulation. We should not kid ourselves that global rule-making will replace the level of detail that EU-UK co-operation has given, and we should remember that our co-operation with Europe has helped us to have a stronger influence on the global stage. The example of taxpayers’ money no longer being needed to bail out a failing cross-border bank was critical to building British stability in financial services after the financial crash. We agreed that that should happen at a global level, but it was actually getting the devil in the detail right between the UK and the rest of the EU that enabled us to get the detailed negotiating right and to then take the details back to the global stage.

In his excellent Canary Wharf speech, the Chancellor spoke of ongoing co-operation on a number of areas, including market abuse, transaction reporting, stability monitoring and the means to identify prudential concerns about individual firms. Achieving a successful Brexit negotiation is fundamental to ensuring that the UK’s global financial services sector remains competitive and is able to continue to deliver not just for the British economy but for clients across Europe, too.

I know I have already spoken for quite a long time, but I will use this opportunity to take a few more minutes to focus on areas where I think the Government or our regulators might take action. On supporting innovation, the FinTech sector deal is very welcome. Open banking provides huge opportunities, allowing customers to better compare deals and find the best products to suit their needs. It means that we will get new market entrants, and some of the services that they will offer will be taken up by people who have been or have felt excluded from traditional services.

The Government could do more to unlock the sharing of data in this space, especially by increasing transparency over capital requirements for new bank start-ups—sorry, I am a bit of a geek on bank capital requirements, after many years of negotiating—which would help to get more of those new businesses and ideas off the ground. The growth of green finance is potentially very exciting, and targeted measures could put us at the forefront of that exciting area of innovation.

I will look at a few issues on regulatory oversight. Our financial services sector has a strong reputation across the globe for high standards of regulation and transparency, which is vital in underpinning the trust that delivers the sector’s success. However, the industry has not always been perfect, and when issues arise it is important that they are dealt with fairly. Many small and medium-sized businesses were badly affected by the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products—especially by organisations such as the Royal Bank of Scotland and HBOS—in the run-up to the financial crash and in how those products were managed thereafter.

One of my constituents told me how he was forced to hand over the keys to his business, which he had grown and delivered, and was then given no transparency on what happened to the businesses thereafter. These are complex cases, and many of those affected still do not believe that they have been given a fair hearing or fair compensation. There have been questions on whether the Financial Ombudsman Service has the capacity to cope, and I understand that a new independent investigation into it is being undertaken. It is important that we take this opportunity to move forward and restore that confidence, so I will be grateful if the Minister will keep a firm eye on how we deal with those legacy cases.

As Members of Parliament, it is important that we focus on consumer issues. The Government have rightly taken action to cap the charges associated with payday loans. However, a recent Which? study found that consumers needing to borrow as little as £100 could sometimes be charged up to £156 more for the loan by a major high street bank than a payday lender would have been allowed to charge when borrowing the same amount for the same period. There is a particular issue with how banks treat heavy overdraft users, who are often quite vulnerable. It appears that we may need to look at the way banks lend in this area. I understand that a consultation on that was meant to be launched in the spring but that it has been pushed back to next year. I ask the Minister to look at that issue.
Cyber-security is a big issue, and I am honoured to chair the all-party parliamentary group on cyber security. I strongly recommend Members look at it. Cyber-crime is now second only to political risk as one of the key challenges facing the financial sector, and the sector is taking action. Yesterday morning I was with TheCityUK to launch a major new report on how boards and companies can better protect themselves with cyber-security. Cyber-security is often linked to money laundering, and it is absolutely right that tackling that economic crime is a major priority for the Government and the industry.

Many Members on both sides of the House have mentioned money laundering issues in the past few weeks, especially since the terrible incident in Salisbury, which the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), dealt with so thoughtfully. It is a significant and important issue, on which Britain needs to lead the world, so it has been good to see the Chancellor this week putting the fight against dirty money right at the top of the International Monetary Fund’s agenda for leaders across the world to focus on.

Regulators here have also asked the Government to look at some potential legal and regulatory barriers that currently limit effective counter-fraud procedures. It is easier to transfer money at speed across different bank accounts today than ever before. Many legitimate customers welcome that, but that speed of transfer is also exploited by criminals. There needs to be a balance between openness and speed, and I would like to see the Government and regulators looking at ways to enable banks to share information across the industry and for us to discuss whether the approach to payment processing could be flexed to allow more time to scrutinise higher risk payments. I remember a constituent of mine coming into my constituency surgery traumatised because he had lost his life savings thinking he was genuinely buying the car of his dreams, only to find it had been a massive fraud. It was impossible for the bank to track down what had happened to that money afterwards.

If the law were changed, banks tell me that they would be able to share data more quickly and safely, so they could better detect and prevent those types of economic crime. Innocent people’s life savings are being stolen, and we should do what we can to stop it. I would love to see the Government and the regulators working to see if there is anything more we can do to make sure that we can target those incidents while also protecting personal data.

One of the great things about the Government’s industrial sector strategy deals is that they run across all areas of Government and identify areas where all Departments can help to deliver success. The financial services sector is no different from others in this area. On skills, the sector needs to know that there is a strong pipeline of talent of people who have the skills, education and training needed to keep the industry globally competitive—particularly focusing on areas such as FinTech and cyber.

Financial services is a people-driven business, but many of those people commute, so investment in infrastructure—physical as well as digital—is key. We need to connect those regional clusters, reduce journey times and bring a larger number of people within an easily commutable distance of jobs in those sectors. My goodness, how much we need to improve our commuter experience! My local railway station in Chelmsford is the busiest two-platform train station anywhere in the United Kingdom. We need investment in infrastructure to ensure that people can get to work in this sector. We also need to provide housing and to enable our country’s businesses and ideas to connect with markets across the globe.

As I said, financial services do not exist just in London. Just as it is for other industries, localism is important for this one. Local and devolved decision making can help. An industrial strategy must be suitable for the whole nation, but local differences need to be permitted. The most effective way to support this industry is to have a strategy that gives local areas the power to focus on their strengths.

The UK’s financial and professional services sector is a world-leading industry today and is well placed to continue to lead the world in the future. We cannot divorce this sector from our wider industrial strategy. Our dynamic financial services industry is key to every other part of our country’s industrial performance. It is the key pillar of our economy and deserves the full and focused attention of the Government and Members of the House.

2.1 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I should at the outset disclose my interests—both directly, in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and as co-chair and member of a number of all-party parliamentary groups. My background is also relevant. I have worked in financial services for the best part of the last 15 years, including in the weeks before the general election was unexpectedly called, having taken a new job in insurance and so having to review that rather quickly just after Easter last year.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for co-ordinating the debate and for speaking so comprehensively and lucidly in outlining the challenges and opportunities for the sector. I will not go over them at length, because she covered many of them so incredibly well.

I welcome the debate for a number of reasons, the first being that financial services are important for the economy as a whole. My hon. Friend explained that in a lot of detail. This sector accounts for 11% of GDP and a significant number of jobs across the country. Those jobs are not just in London. When I was working in financial services, I spent as much time in Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Sheffield and Leeds as I did in London. That demonstrates the number of jobs involved and the importance of regional centres for financial services as a whole and for our economy, both regionally and nationally.

Financial services are important for the economy as a whole, but also for people. Financial services are the vehicle—the driver—for ensuring that people and businesses can get out there and do as they wish, and can work hard, achieve and get on. Credit is a fact of life. Credit opens up those opportunities and helps to realise the ambitions of people, businesses and organisations.
I particularly believe that financial services are important for social mobility. I have a history degree, so I did not necessarily expect to get into financial services. I come from a relatively working-class background in Derbyshire. I was at a report launch at Rolls-Royce in my county—not my constituency—a couple of weeks ago, and the report talked about the importance of IT for social mobility. My social mobility was through IT in financial services, and I know so many people—ex-colleagues and friends in the sector—who have also experienced social mobility as a result of what banking, insurance, asset management and wealth management offered them. Credit makes the world go round, and we need to ensure that that is at the heart of our strategy as a country and for our economy as a whole.

The challenge, of course, is to lift the discussion out of the framework of the 2008 financial crisis, important as that was, and out of the entirely sterile and cartoonish debate that it falls into at points. I was working in financial services at the time, and there is no doubt that in 2008 a significant amount of bad behaviour was going on, extremely bad practice was occurring—illegal practice was occurring—and the regulations were not appropriate. The debate is not about too much or too little regulation; it is about the appropriateness of the regulations. The capital ratios had got too low, and we got into a place that was significantly problematic. We do not want to go there again.

I make my comments on the basis that all of that is accepted. We also have to recognise that we are now in 2018. The financial crisis was 10 years ago—a decade ago. Nearly a third of my life has taken place since it occurred. We have to stop having the debate about what happened in 2008 and start having the debate about what will happen in 2018 and 2028.

We have not yet heard the comments from the Opposition Front Bench. I know the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) as a very thoughtful speaker. I have had the pleasure of listening to him in numerous debates over the months that I have been in this place. However, there is a sterility to the debate on this subject. I am sure he will not contribute to that—or at least I hope he will not—so long as his speech has not been given to him direct from Labour central office.

We have to ensure that we stop talking solely, important as these things are, about how all bankers are bad, the high remuneration is terrible and IT failures are very problematic—that is probably not the best argument to make this week, given all the TSB customers who have been so badly affected and with whom I sympathise hugely. I hope that Mr Pester sorts out the problems as quickly as possible and does not just send us apology emails, which he seems to have sent us this morning. I accept that some bankers were bad and remuneration was too high, but we have to bring the debate on, move it forward and look at the challenges that are coming, not those that are behind us.

In that regard, the first points that I want to make are about the opportunities that we have. My hon. Friend talked extensively about the challenges and the opportunities that are coming with Brexit, and I wholeheartedly endorse many of the statements that she made. Like her, I think that the continuity point is crucial. The Government are working extremely hard on that point. Everyone I talk to in the sector ultimately boils the point about contract continuity down to the ultimate essence, which is that it is highly likely that we will all find a way through this. Actually, it will be almost impossible not to find a way through it, given the meshing together of the EU nation states and the United Kingdom in terms of the contracts that are cross-border. If we do not, we get ourselves into a really tricky place. Ultimately, many of the discussions have, underneath, a tremendous political element, not an economic element. The Government are working very hard on that. They have been completely up front and straightforward about it and are working to ensure early resolution of the problems.

We cannot get ourselves into a place where we are novating or rewriting millions and millions of contracts. I am sure that the lawyers would be delighted, but I am not sure that even the combined might of the European and the UK legal sectors could rewrite all the contracts, even if they wanted to.

I understand that there is significant precedence for what I am referring to, including from 1999, when the euro came in and there was an effective grandfathering of contracts that had gone before. I wish we could get to that place as soon as possible, because people are spending a significant amount of money on preparations that could usefully be spent elsewhere. I strongly encourage the European Union not to play politics in this area and to accept that it is important that there be clarity as soon as possible.

The same principle goes for recognition of the continuity of the ability to book into the United Kingdom. I accept that there is a commercial and economic discussion in the European Union about wanting to develop its own systems, approaches and financial centres, but the reality is that London is central to most of what happens in Europe from a capital perspective and a booking perspective at the moment, particularly in terms of underlying the instruments of risk that come with many of the larger contracts, especially on the commercial side. I hope that the European Union is not playing politics from that angle as well. The reality is that there is no point in making these decisions and agreeing them at five to midnight, as is the wont of the EU in many of its negotiating positions. We have to try to get clarity now. The Government are working on that; I hope that Brussels is doing the same.

I have had the opportunity over the past few months to do a fellowship from the Industry and Parliament Trust on the future of financial services. I have been to a number of different financial services organisations now—I was with UK Finance on Monday. As a country, we have a number of opportunities in financial services over the coming years and a number of interesting questions about where we want the sector to go. I will touch on a few of those, as my hon. Friend did.

First, we have to get the regulatory framework correct. Much progress has been made in the past 10 years on this, and my hon. Friend referred to that. The Prudential Regulation Authority, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Financial Services Authority do a good job generally on many of these areas. Andrew Bailey is highly respected for that and rightly so. However, it is incumbent on us to raise the quality and interest of debate in this House. I agree with my hon. Friend that Thursday is perhaps not the best time to do these debates—I am sure that if we held this debate on another day, we would have more hon. Members here. However, from a Back-Bench perspective, we cannot
outsource decisions and discussions on regulation to the PRA and Andrew Bailey on the basis that they know what they are doing; we have to have those discussions and debates here, because there are political angles to them. I know that the Government are intrinsically involved in that, but as Back Benchers and Members of this place, we have to get involved as well.

We have a huge opportunity with FinTech. That is a truism, which everybody knows, but we have a particular opportunity because, compared with some of the larger countries, we have a relatively contained group of people who are highly switched on, mobile, flexible and connected, and with whom we can do an incredible amount of work as a country, to test some of the innovations that will be coming through the FinTech sector in the next five to 10 years. We should see the UK as an incubator, as I know the Government do. We should be supportive of what FinTech offers, to transform society as a whole, not just for those at the top. FinTech should be seen as an opportunity to support everybody who experiences financial services and who may be more vulnerable and to transform their experience. Some of the things that have been done, particularly around the regulatory sandbox, are very impressive. I spoke to colleagues in America just a few months ago, and they are very complimentary of what the sandbox is achieving. I hope we can continue to replicate—to create and perpetuate—that environment, which supports FinTech and FinTech development.

Competition is a long-standing and challenging area. We have done much in the last few years, including around account switching, to make the process of markets more flexible. Customers seem to have an inherent stickiness in terms of being willing to transfer banks. We have to do some further work on that. I tried to change my bank account on Monday. I went into an unnamed company and I was told that it would take an hour to change my bank account. While I think it is perfectly legitimate—I am not trying to seek Government control over these processes—the sector needs to reflect on the challenges and barriers that it puts up, to ensure that flexibility can be created within the industry. We need to encourage greater competition. The challenger banks are doing incredibly well, but we need to ensure that there is greater flexibility and competition as a whole.

Within that, we have to ensure, and not forget, the importance of mutuals. I declare an interest: I was employed by a mutual—Co-op Insurance—for all of six weeks before the election. Mutuals are incredibly important to the future of our financial sector. They do great work; they often explain what they are doing and their mission better than some of the larger players in the sector. We should welcome how mutuals work in this country, across both business and personal banking. We should support them in their endeavours, particularly by looking at the barriers to entry for new mutuals coming into the sector. It is important that, just as we have new challenger banks, we should have new mutuals, also keeping the existing players honest and on their game.

There is a significant opportunity for automation and artificial intelligence in this industry. A significant amount of attention is going on that. I was working on some of those elements last year in the private sector. However, banks and financial services organisations need to recognise that opportunities for automation and artificial intelligence are not just about cost reduction and cost drivers; they are an opportunity to put the customer at the heart of processes. I mean that in an actual way; this is not just lip service. My constituents tell me about their frustration, which I share, that they find banks faceless and financial services companies unwilling to engage. We have to get away from that “computer says no” mentality. I hope some of the opportunities around automation will be about not just cost reduction, but customer service improvement.

My hon. Friend talked extensively about the importance of cyber-security, data handling and risk as a whole. I wholeheartedly support that. In particular, we need to see open banking as an opportunity, but we need to recognise that, through application programming interfaces, we are opening new challenges and domains where security can be challenged. We do not want banks to have created firewalls and frameworks to prevent cyber-events, only for those cyber-events to be transferred elsewhere as a result of open banking. Catastrophic data losses need to be avoided—that is obvious—but if they are not and we do not have that at the centre of our minds, we could get into a difficult position.

We also need to recognise that data handling, and the changes around big data, machine learning and the like, which are coming into the sector, will change the way in which the economic models of banks and insurance work. Insurance is effectively about pooled risk, but it is also about making an assessment of risk. When we can interrogate the levels of data coming into the sector, we move away from the necessity of pooling risk based on a series of avatars about what people aged 35 and 40 tend to do. We can make a decision on actuality: what people actually do and what they have actually done. That is creating a more perfect market, where risk is priced closer to the challenges, but it also creates a series of ethical questions about how we use that data. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and I—under the auspices of the Parliamentary Internet, Communications and Technology Forum, which he co-chairs—are launching an investigation into the ethics of technology and artificial intelligence. I encourage hon. Members who are interested in that to get involved.

Finally, one of the most important points for my constituents regarding financial services is vulnerable customers and branches. My hon. Friend spoke about branch closures in her constituency. I have similar examples. A branch closed in Clay Cross—a town in my constituency—just a number of months ago. There were serious concerns from local residents about that. We have to see financial services, and the challenges and opportunities they present, as a way to address some of these things. There is a clear move for the majority of people in the country towards digital banking—that is to be welcomed—but there will always be a group of people who are unable to be engaged through that process. We need to ensure processes are in place to engage them.

I welcome the developments around post office openings in recent years, but I wonder whether the sector as a whole is really thinking through the opportunities it has. For example, nobody in the sector has been able to give me a clear answer as to why some form of shared service in local towns is not possible—why banks cannot
inherently share the infrastructure of branches so that a customer might walk into the space between four physical walls, but have four different banks in that space, sharing the overheads, costs and all the challenges, which they say are the reasons for their leaving these important towns in the first place. I hope that banks and other financial services will reflect on other opportunities than just the post office.

In conclusion, there are many opportunities for financial services in the coming years. It is crucial that we recognise the importance of financial services to the economy as a whole. I hope that, as a country, we can grasp those opportunities and recognise the importance of credit in our society every moment of every day. If we do that, we can hopefully ensure that our country continues to thrive in the years to come.

2.18 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to be able to speak for the Scottish National party in this debate.

I am sure the Brexiteers will accuse me of not being optimistic enough, but having looked the issues for financial services in the UK post-Brexit, I cannot help but have some apprehension. I understand that a lot of people in the industry are apprehensive as well. The challenges are huge and significant.

We have the best possible set-up in financial services with the EU, whether with regard to co-operation, influence or regulation. We are part of the decision-making process and have been key players in the set-up of financial services across the EU. There is no doubt that we will not be able to replicate the influence we have, because that influence is born from being part of the EU and a member of the single market and the customs union. The UK Government must seriously consider that reckless approach. The financial services sector provides a good illustration of why remaining in the single market and the customs union is the least-damaging option for the UK's and Scotland's economy. Brexit is a key risk to that sector.

The financial services industry is huge—the figures were mentioned by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford)—and, as she said, Scotland is a key part of it. Many financial services jobs are outside London. Edinburgh has 49,800 employees in the industry—a significant number—but Glasgow has 36,300 employees or thereabouts. Nearly 60% of employment in financial and related professional services in Scotland is concentrated in those cities. Edinburgh has an important international financial centre and a strong presence in banking, life insurance and investment management activities, and Glasgow has strengths in insurance, legal services and accountancy, but Aberdeen and Fife employ a large number of people in the industry.

As the Member for Glasgow Central, it would be remiss of me not to talk about Glasgow which, since 2001, has developed its international financial services district. That has rejuvenated an area in the city that had been left behind by old industries, with warehouses and neglected areas near the Broomielaw. It has been redeveloped into a hugely vibrant sector of the city. Many large companies based there employ people in high-value jobs. Those companies were able to get buildings, set up to work and employ people locally.

The IFSD has attracted £1 billion of investment to the area, so it is no small project. It has brought in more than 15,500 new jobs through investment and expansion by working in partnership with the city council, Scottish Development International, Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland, to name a few.

It worries me greatly that Glasgow, which is recognised in the global financial centres index as the 14th most competitive financial centre in Europe, would lose out as a result of the reckless move towards leaving the EU, the customs union and the single market. It concerns me because when jobs go in London, London may be able to absorb it, but the economies of Edinburgh and Glasgow are more peripheral in the UK set-up. The UK has a London-focused economy. Without any great control in the Scottish Parliament over such things, I am concerned that we will not be able to put the mechanisms in place to protect those industries as we would like to do. We are at the whim of what the UK Government decide to do.

I hope the Minister can tell us more about the White Paper that the Government were due to publish last summer on the approach to Brexit and financial services. As I understand, that has not yet been brought forward. I asked the Library for an update on its report from July on financial services and Brexit, and although it could give me an update, it could not give me much progress, because not much has been made—certainly not anything visible or tangible. That concerns me and the sector greatly because of the uncertainty. We should be in no doubt that the sector has to plan and make decisions. The more uncertainty there is, the greater the risk of losing jobs.

Predictably, the European Banking Authority has decided to move to Paris. There are moves afoot from France to build up its sector and to regain what it feels it has lost to the UK in terms of financial services expertise. There is a risk, and other countries are looking to step into the void that we are leaving. The transition agreement merely extends the deadline to reach a deal to the end of 2020. The financial services industry needs and deserves more certainty so it can plan for that.

Not only will we lose financial institutions and companies, but those companies will not have the automatic access to EU markets that they currently have. That loss of influence is significant for the companies that base themselves here, for the decisions and investments that they make and for the jobs they create.

We will also lose influence in Government and between Governments. We will not be in those decision-making rooms where the regulations are being drawn up. We will not have the early influence that we have through EU institutions. We have set a lot of the rules, but in future, at most, we will be able to take rules, which is a huge difference.

The Minister has acknowledged that in an article, where he wrote:

“We know how important it is to the financial services industry that they have continued market access”.

I am sure he will tell us more about what he intends to do about that. Market access is not the same as being part of a market or a component in that market. Market access is second best. The Tories are delusional if they think we will get a better deal than we have at the moment.
Remaining in the European Economic Area could enable financial passporting to continue. That is crucial, because equivalence is nowhere near as uniform and comprehensive as passporting. It does not cover the full range of services currently sold by UK-based firms into the EU, or the full range of clients. As I understand it, banking services could not be offered under an equivalence regime.

Many are deeply concerned about what would happen if there was policy divergence between us and the EU in future, because that could result in the Commission revoking access to those markets with only 30 days' notice. If a regulatory change that we disagreed with was agreed by the EU, such as a cap on bankers' bonuses, that could be enough to trigger that denial of services. Switzerland's referendum to limit immigration from the EU triggered such a response from the EU.

That is worrying given the Government's attitude to immigration and how they want to treat immigration from all parts of the world—not just the Windrush generation, but EU nationals. Many constituents who come to my surgeries are in highly skilled jobs and have come here as highly skilled migrants. They have found that, because they made a minor change to their tax returns many years ago, the Government deem them a threat to national security under paragraph 322.5 of the immigration rules. If that is how they treat the highly skilled migrants who come to this country to contribute, work and generate wealth, I have little confidence that they will do anything to improve the situation. That is how people are being treated now. How will they treat EU nationals who have come to work in the finance sector?

Some 9,000 EU nationals work in the financial and business services sector in Scotland. Each of those people brings wealth to this country, pays their taxes, has a family, works here and has settled here. They have no great certainty about their future status, how their employers will employ them and whether they will have the right to work as they do now, which is a huge worry.

Those individuals are making decisions as to whether they want to stay here on the basis of what they hear and see. The mood music around immigration has not been very welcoming. Those narratives are almost certainly causing many of them to give up and leave. The Minister is sighing somewhat at that, but that is the reality—that is what I get at my surgeries.

Alison Thewliss: People are not sure what will happen, and they need to have more certainty before they make their decisions. Just as people in the financial sector are making decisions about where their businesses will go, individual employees are deciding as well.

My husband works as an IT professional in Glasgow and knows many people in the sector. They are highly sought-after, highly skilled and well-paid jobs, but they are tied to financial institutions in the city such as J.P. Morgan and Barclays. If those financial institutions contract, those IT jobs, which are highly skilled, will contract too. We need to think carefully about the full pipeline of people. It is not just about bankers in suits sitting in offices; it is the full ecosystem. Those bankers buy lunch, commute into towns and take public transport.

Glasgow has a long and distinguished history in banking. The Bank of Scotland opened its doors in 1695. The Royal Bank of Scotland has its global headquarters in Edinburgh, the Clydesdale Bank has its European headquarters in Glasgow and there are lots of other banking operations in Scotland. I have mentioned Barclays, but HSBC and others also have a presence within Scotland.

Scotland's general insurance, life insurance and pensions sectors also have a strong reputation and an enviable history of success, with their origins dating back to the early 1700s, when the increase in international trade led to a requirement for marine insurance, and Scotland continues to be a major centre for that sector.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford mentioned the insurance industry. The Association of British Insurers is deeply concerned about the current uncertainty. It has contracts that run for 10 years and pension contracts that run for more than 30 years, and has pointed out that

"these contracts cannot be transferred safely and quickly to a new EU location. Special arrangements would be needed to transfer the contracts, covering both legal form and regulatory responsibility...If nothing is fixed, insurers will be left in an impossible position and face an unacceptable choice: break their promise to customers or risk breaking the law."

That is deeply serious and I hope the Government are looking at it. It is a huge concern for the sector, which relies on confidence and its reputation.

Fund management in Scotland encompasses a broad mix of large institutional companies and smaller boutique firms that provide investment services to institutional and personal clients around the world. The quality of investment management expertise in Scotland has led to a robust growth in boutique firms and new business start-ups. We have also become a major European centre for asset servicing.

Looking forward, Scottish Government analysis shows that a hard Brexit threatens to cost our economy £12.7 billion—£2,300 per person—a year by 2030, compared with what would happen if we remained in the EU. The UK Government's analysis is that reverting to World Trade Organisation rules could reduce growth by 8%; that a free trade agreement with the EU would reduce growth by 5%; and that membership of the European Economic Area would reduce growth by 2%.

The EU is the largest single market for Scotland's international exports—in 2016, Scottish exports to the EU were worth £12.7 billion. The Fraser of Allander Institute estimates that 134,000 Scottish jobs are supported by EU trade. Last week, a report for Citibase, a service provider to small and medium-sized enterprises, found that 63% of Scotland's SMEs would like to reverse the Brexit process and remain in the single market. That report also found that just 14% of Scotland's SMEs trusted the UK Government to get a good deal on Brexit. Steve Jude, the chief executive officer of Citibase, has said:

"The message is clear. Scottish confidence in the Westminster Government to secure a good deal for them is at an all-time low, with most SMEs wanting to press the reset button on the entire process."

The Government should take on board those concerns, because we do not have to leave the EU. Yes, the EU referendum produced a UK-wide result, but there was no mandate for leaving the customs union and the
single market, and we must think very carefully about the potential damage that leaving the EU would do to our economy, which would hurt all of us and all of our constituents.

The hon. Members for Chelmsford and for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) mentioned bank closures, which are of huge concern to our constituents right across the country. That is particularly true for RBS, in which the Government have the leading share. We own RBS and we should be telling it that it is unacceptable to renego on the trust we have put in it—we helped it to get back on its feet—by whipping away services to our communities. We have heard Members from across this House—not just Scottish National party Members but Conservative Members—criticising RBS for saying that it would provide banking services and send its vans around before pulling back on that as well. RBS has reneged not once but twice. RBS has provided a limited service, which are the bank vans it sends around. Those vans do not have disabled access, which has led to people being served in car parks in the wind, rain and all weathers. That is a ridiculous situation and the Government should do more to put pressure on RBS.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire mentioned the idea, which has a lot of merit, of a shared service point for bank branches. Banks should come together to see what they can do collaboratively so that their customers are not left with nothing. I know people from other parties have mentioned that idea. It definitely has merit.

Hon. Members have mentioned on the record dirty money, the importance of clamping down on money laundering and the SNP position on the scandal of Scottish limited partnerships being used for money laundering. I hope there will be progress on tackling SLPs and addressing their lack of accountability. We have tabled amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill to that end, but if the Government are not going to take them on board, as I had hoped they would, I hope they will bring something else forward soon so that we can deal with that.

The major issue that prevents a clampdown on money laundering is the Companies House loophole. I have mentioned that to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury before—he has heard my views on it. Just recently, we had the strange case of the businessman Kevin Brewer, who fully admitted what he was trying to do in testing the Companies House loophole. However, he was fined and found guilty of crimes related to money laundering when all he was trying to do was to prove that the system was absolutely defunct and open to all kinds of corruption.

The Government have hailed the prosecution of Kevin Brewer, but all they have done in this case is to shoot the system was absolutely defunct and open to all kinds of corruption. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said the EU was “playing politics”. I found that comment slightly bizarre, because it is playing politics that has got us into this situation in the first place. A weak Tory Government, pandering to its Back Benchers, led us into the EU referendum and to the calamitous situation we are in. If anyone is playing politics, it is the Conservative party, and we need to get a lot more serious than playing politics because there is so much at stake.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned innovation within financial services. That is an area where the UK has taken a great lead. I was on holiday in the US recently, over the Easter period. I found it astonishing that US companies do not even have chip and pin, never mind contactless payment, for their financial transactions. In this building and in other buildings in the UK, we are used to being able just to tap our cards to make a payment, so I find it bizarre to be given a slip of paper to sign. US companies find our position unusual, whereby we can just tap something and pay with our phone or a card. There is an interesting contrast between where we are and where they are in terms of technology—there are huge advances coming along in financial technology and other areas.

Hopefully, if we get any kind of Brexit deal right, FinTech will continue to blossom. Staying within the single market and the customs union gives us the best possible chance of using and developing our expertise and making it sellable to the rest of the world through the EU, which of course has a huge customer base.

I will close my remarks by saying that the problems within the financial sector are clear with regard to the EU and Brexit. The sector has made clear the difficulties that are arising, and the impact that those difficulties will have on jobs and on our economy, but we are coming up very close to the date when we will leave the EU, and the solutions are not there. The transition period will give only a little extra time for that process and does not give the reassurance required.

We need solutions from this Government and we need them soon. We need a White Paper and solutions that will make a difference to companies and give them reassurance before they decide that they will just take flight, and take with them so many jobs and so much else that they give to the UK economy.

2.38 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Sir David, for calling me; it is always a pleasure to spend some time on a Thursday afternoon with you in the Chair.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing this debate and her very fine speech to introduce the subject that we are debating. Indeed, I have enjoyed listening not only to her speech, but to those of the hon. Members for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

All speeches on this subject and this sector begin by talking about how hugely important financial services are to the UK, which is absolutely correct. Such speeches always begin by talking about the role that the sector
plays in employment and in the number of jobs in the UK, and it is always good to hear that about two thirds of jobs in financial services are based outside London and the south-east. We always rightly mention the huge amounts of revenue that the sector generates for the Exchequer, but the caveat I always put on both those things—we all need to recognise this danger—is that when we mention such arguments in this place, the public hears something slightly different. They hear us almost saying that we have struck a grand bargain with finance; that we somehow tolerate people doing things that the public thinks are risky or perhaps dangerous because they provide half the budget for the NHS. To me, that is not the message we want to get across to the British public.

We need to get across to the British public a much greater sense of what the sector does for them as consumers and what it does for the country. We need to explain that if we have an ageing population and we want to be able to live in retirement with good pension products, that requires an effective asset management industry. If we want our businesses to be successful, that requires an effective system of finance for business. If we want to solve the housing crisis, that requires a robust mortgage market. I have even tried to push with some Front-Bench colleagues that insurance is a socialist industry: it is about pooling the risks everyone in society faces in a way that shares the burden equitably.

To Labour, it is clear that finance plays a major role in the economy. We want to work in partnership with financial services to deliver the kind of policies we think this country needs. We held a major financial services conference in Bloomberg Europe last Thursday that was addressed by the shadow Chancellor. We went through many of the issues that the sector needs to look at and how we feel we can work with them. I put a slight caveat on that: The Daily Telegraph on 23 March reported me as saying that I believe bankers are a public good, but that is not quite what I said. I said that good financial services are a public good. It tells us something about how the sector is sometimes viewed in public that a Member of Parliament saying that good pension products, good mortgage products and good insurance products are a public good could be reported with some degree of controversy.

Many of the speeches we have heard have rightly highlighted Brexit as the major issue facing the sector, which is extremely correct. I will start with some analysis of that. There is no doubt that Brexit poses enormous challenges to financial services. As well as my concerns about the impact on manufacturing and supply chains, there is no doubt that Brexit poses enormous challenges to financial services. The situation we see today is difficult. There is no doubt that Brexit poses enormous challenges to financial services. As well as my concerns about the difficulties in repapering contracts if we do not get mutual regulatory recognition.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire talked about the difficulties in repapering contracts if we do not get mutual regulatory recognition. He is right. We have to admit that for such sectors as the insurance industry there simply is not enough time, even if we start today or had started six months ago, to move the quantum of contracts that would need to be novated. We have to recognise that the position we are in today is extremely unfavourable. Much time has been wasted by the Government when frankly they could have cut to the chase a lot faster.

To do such a deal is clearly not easy—I recognise that and the burden placed on the Treasury to try to get to that point—but it is also true to say that we have never had a trade negotiation where two countries are aligned and they are moving further apart through the process. From talking to industry, my analysis is that what the EU wants to know more than anything else is whether we seek continued alignment or whether we seek to break off and go in a different direction. It is not getting a clear message from the Government on what the future is. We have heard the Prime Minister say that we will remain aligned, but with the autonomy to move away in the future. That is not the unequivocal message we need to give. We need to spell out clearly that we want to continue, not with the political integration of the European Union, but with the economic integration that has been so successful for financial services in this country. Once we give the EU that signal, there will clearly be questions on the method of alignment we would continue with, the jurisdiction we would seek to govern that future relationship and—perhaps the most difficult of those questions—how we would manage the full freedoms and impact on immigration policy of that relationship, but it has got to be possible.

We also have to understand—I think the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said this—that it is not the EU playing politics if it puts a negotiating position to us. It is clear that there is a threat to jobs and revenue in this country from the Brexit process. We cannot be surprised if other countries enviously eye up parts of our successful sector that they would like to move to their countries. The big threat to jobs in London and the rest of the country is not other parts of the EU, but Singapore and New York. If we are being honest, if the German economy had made a decision akin to the one we are making with Brexit, would we look at parts of our car industry and wonder whether we could take some of that business for ourselves? I think quite reasonably we would. We see that most of all in questions around delegated portfolio management and asset management—essentially the right to manage in this country assets and wealth held overseas. That should not necessarily in itself be an issue of leaving the European Union, but it clearly underpins a large ecosystem in financial services. Some countries will look at that and say, “If we can pull that thread, ultimately that will lead to a relocation of jobs and higher value sectors to our economy.” It is difficult.

People say all the time—certainly the more Brexiteer MPs—that financial services in the City will adjust to Brexit. Of course they will. We are the world-leading
financial sector; it will not disappear overnight. The key issue has to be the cost of that adjustment. If it is 10% of the economic activity of financial services in the UK, that is an extremely painful place for us to get to. We would not want to be in that position.

A key point that needs making in establishing what that future relationship will be is that there is absolutely no appetite from financial services in this country for some sort of regulatory bonfire. There is a desire for stability, but there is nothing that I receive regularly that says people want to unpin the post-financial crisis settlement or that says they see a future for the UK undercutting the rest of the EU regulation. The opposite is true. Good regulation attracts business activity to the UK, among other things. We should always seek to cherish and continue our reputation as a first-rate regulator.

The issue of trust in financial services comes up a lot, and many speeches have referenced it. A quote I like to give when I am in the City doing roundtables or making speeches comes from a fellow Member of this House, and it is indicative of where the debate is. It is not a famous quote, but I like to use it. The Member said that “in our country, far too often the rewards have gone not to risk-takers and job creators but to insiders in our financial system and big businesses who have rigged the market in their interests”.

I read that out, and people think that must be a comment from the Leader of the Opposition or the shadow Chancellor. It is actually a quote from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He said that on the day he launched his campaign to be leader of the Conservative party. It reflects how many people feel about the financial sector. We have to recognise that an event such as the financial crisis has a huge impact on trust and how people feel when they talk about financial services.

Some of that is a reflection on how the past 10 years have been for many people. They have been very tough years for many in my constituency. The relative positions of capital and labour have fared differently. We have had quantitative easing, which even the Prime Minister has said has clearly had an impact on those already with assets. Labour has faced a flatlining of wages for 10 years and a public sector pay cap. It will be difficult. The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire asked when we will move on from that. We will start to move on from it, although I have a constituent who refuses to vote for me because he is still angry about Howard Wilson’s devaluation of the pound in 1967, so these things can have a considerable shelf life. We will begin to move away to a more positive feeling in the country about financial services, but only if we give people a greater understanding of what the sector is doing for them.

I do not like and have never liked the sense in this debate that we have the real economy over here and financial services doing something different over there. That in no way reflects the complexity of the British economy or what is going on, but I can understand that sentiment among the public. For many, investment banking looks akin to something not that far from gambling. When I talk to constituents about the financial crisis and explain a collateralised debt obligation, they cannot believe that that was the basis on which the global financial system essentially fell apart.

As the hon. Member for Chelmsford said, what happened with the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Global Restructuring Group was not defensible economically, politically or morally. Not only were businesses fundamentally let down, but in some cases people’s financiers and bankers personally benefited from buying the assets that they had put into distress. We must understand that that will generate legitimate anger, and how we politicians respond to that will be crucial to people’s ability to move on. A call for a full public inquiry into events such as those that happened with GRG is the right way forward.

It is fair to say that the next Labour Government will be more interventionist in financial services, and that this Conservative Government have been more interventionist than previous ones. We have to learn the lessons of the past. We have to tell the public, and make them understand, that we are not complacent about the risks, and we are not beholden to finance in the sense that we are unable to properly regulate it because we do not appreciate the full scale of those risks.

We cannot be complacent about regional inequality or productivity, and the finance sector can provide some of the answers. The Opposition have talked about a strategic investment board to look at where finance is investing in the economy. We have talked about a national investment bank, akin to the German model, working with private lenders to secure access to businesses. There is an exciting agenda on transparency, greater stewardship of assets, and incentivising long-term investment over short-term decision making, for which there is a lot of support on both sides of the House.

It was particularly good to hear some talk about financial inclusion. I think I have said to the Minister before that I find it fascinating how we have both a world-leading financial sector and so many people who are victims of significant financial exclusion. Our financial resilience in this country is insufficient; many people have effectively less than £100 to fall back on when times are tough. No matter what we think of the Government’s economic policies over the last eight years, the big change for us all as constituency MPs has been seeing debt become much more an issue of people managing their monthly living costs, and less about the purchase of a car, or a “white good”, as they were called.

How we respond to that in the policies that we pursue is crucial. The Opposition have talked about extending the Financial Conduct Authority’s credit card market report to deal with those people who are in the most difficult circumstances, effectively living off their credit cards every month with no hope of paying the money back. That requires an intervention. We support, as I know the Minister does, the breathing space scheme. We believe that public sector debts such as council tax have to be included in that to make it effective.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire rightly mentioned bank branch closures. Clearly, there is a big transition through technology to things such as online banking, but the scale at which that happens has to be of interest to us. I think RBS is to close 50% of all its branches in the south-west of England. That seems an enormous change overnight—I would be very concerned if I was an MP for that region.

The impact of technology will undoubtedly lead to a period of radical change in financial services over the next few years, but it could also be one of tremendous benefit. I agree that things such as open banking, where
people might be able to separate out their overdrafts from their current accounts, could lead to much better deals for consumers.

Big data, and access to big data, could change the access to finance that many people enjoy, because risk is fundamentally about information. If we can get better information on people and offer them better financial products, that could benefit us all. The danger is that financial services for consumers end up being akin to what we have in the energy market: a small set of consumers getting good deals because they are savvy and use technology to their benefit, while a large group of people get poor deals, used to subsidise the people who are savvy. That leads to resentment and, frankly, to the kinds of interventions that both sides of the House have proposed in the energy market. We have to avoid that.

My final point is on dirty money and transparency—again, an issue where there is huge agreement on both sides of the House. I think the motivation is there in the Government—perhaps the Minister could reference that in his remarks—as well as among the Opposition, but two policies are key. First, we must finally introduce a public register showing where beneficial ownership of UK property lies. That policy was very much associated with the former Prime Minister, and appears to have been lost somewhat since he left.

Secondly—this is more contentious—we need a public register of beneficial ownership in the Crown dependencies and overseas territories, by Order in Council if necessary. It is no good having the finest and most robust money laundering policies in place in the UK if people can register a company in a Crown dependency, and access all the things that they associate with this country, without the same level of transparency. That will simply lead to the migration of company and property registrations to other parts of the world within the British umbrella.

We should be proud of our financial services sector, not just for its economic contribution but for the benefits it brings in helping us to manage our day-to-day lives. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the sector is fit for every type of consumer, and that vulnerable people do not fall through the gaps. We need a sector that is at the cutting edge of technological change, but using that change to meet the diverse needs of its customer base. Most of all, we need to offer some certainty, and continued market access, through the final Brexit negotiations. The more clarity the Minister can give us on that, the better for us all.

2.55 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on securing the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) on their contributions.

We have had a very well-informed discussion of a wide range of financial services issues. It felt as if every discussion I have had over the last three and a half months as a Minister has been put under scrutiny. I will try to respond to all the points raised. I acknowledge the deep knowledge and experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, in both her work in financial services, infrastructure and project financing and, more recently, her work as a Member of the European Parliament, particularly on the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs.

Before I get into the substance of the issues, it would be useful to acknowledge that today’s debate is occurring not in a vacuum, but in the context of a strong and resilient economy. GDP growth has remained solid at 1.8% in 2017, extending the period of continuous growth to five years. That is higher than the 1.5% forecast at the autumn Budget. The UK economy has beaten expectations, and the Treasury and the Government will continue to set ourselves the mission to beat the forecasts. As Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I am committed, along with my Treasury officials, to ensuring that the financial services industry retains its place on the mantel as a beacon of prosperity for this country.

As I continue to tell industry and my colleagues in Government, financial services constitute the plumbing of this country’s economy. We do not want to be reticent about describing and applauding that. Financial services, as others have mentioned, represent 12% of total UK economic output, and the industry contributed £72.1 billion to the Exchequer in 2016-17—11% of total Government tax receipts. It is a critical industry for our nation.

As others have also mentioned, more than 1 million people are employed in the financial and insurance sector in the UK. Some 63% of those jobs are outside London, with 52% outside London and the south-east. That includes 98,000 in the north-west, and 87,000 in Scotland—including, I understand, that of the spouse of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central. Those figures represent the livelihoods of people up and down this country and, as the hon. Lady pointed out, they represent a multitude of jobs beyond the square mile. As I often point out, there is a whole ecosystem of support services and economic activity related to financial services. Bank tellers, mortgage brokers, salespeople, and IT staff form the backbone of this industry in the UK.

The Government’s approach to financial services is based on ensuring that the sector does what it should: effectively channelling savings and capital flows into productive investment to allow the real economy to manage financial risk, take advantage of commercial opportunities, and boost economic prosperity up, down and across the country.

Our historical success has been based on being the most open and dynamic financial hub in the world and having the deftness to continuously innovate and adapt, but there is no room for complacency. We cannot and will not rest on our laurels. The success of financial services has helped elevate the UK to the status of a post-industrial economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford made reference to the industrial strategy, which was launched in November 2017 to prepare the whole UK economy for the future. We are taking action across a range of sectors. We published an investment management strategy. I look forward to responding to the recommendations of the green finance taskforce, which reported in March. We are poised to continue to be leaders in innovating in these sectors, to capture the value of innovation, capitalise on all opportunities and speed prosperity to all regions of the United Kingdom.
Close alignment between our financial sector and other parts of the economy is therefore crucial to the success of our industrial strategy. Financial services is a high-growth, high-tech driver of the UK economy and we are working to ensure that, in the face of rapid change, the UK remains the No. 1 place in the world to conduct financial services business. We are fully committed to that mandate, as demonstrated in the announcement of our FinTech sector strategy last month, which is intentionally aligned with and complementary to our industrial strategy.

I want to run through current Government thinking on the regulation of financial services, which is key to how the sector will thrive in a post-Brexit Britain. I also want to reassure hon. Members that the changes required to the financial services regulatory framework following our exit from the EU are an integral part of the Treasury’s exit planning. The Government are listening to the views of industry—the International Regulatory Strategy Group was mentioned—and of course to those across Parliament. I look forward to further work with my Treasury colleagues on financial services regulation as we prepare for our departure from the European Union.

Following the financial crisis 10 years ago, the Government introduced necessary changes to seek to restore public trust in financial services. I recognise that that has been a long and difficult process, but we continue to attract international commendation for the robustness of our regulatory and prudential systems. In the last round of the Financial Sector Assessment Program, the International Monetary Fund found that the UK was fully compliant on the 19 Basel core principles for effective banking supervision. Only France and Switzerland are able to match that. A decade on from the crisis, we should never lose sight of the principal purpose of the regulatory and supervisory regimes: to ensure financial stability and protect taxpayers from having to step in to deal with failure. The key lesson from the financial crisis has been cross-border co-operation, not a global race to the bottom or destabilising protectionism.

That thinking extends to our approach to Brexit. It is crucial that our exit from the EU is smooth and orderly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said, we made a big step forward in agreeing the legal text on an implementation period, which will keep market access on existing terms for firms and consumers. In December, the Government said that, if necessary, we will legislate on existing terms for firms and consumers. In December, the Government said that, if necessary, they will legislate on the contractual obligations she mentioned continue to be met, which will benefit millions of UK consumers who have insurance policies from EU firms.

It defies logic that a loose relationship with the UK would give the EU the depth of co-operation necessary for a market as close as the UK, and vice versa. That means—I want to be crystal clear—that we do not intend to rip up the rule book after exit. When I hear echoes that there should be a bonfire of financial services regulation post-exit, or a race to the bottom, nothing could be further from the truth.

On 7 March, the Chancellor set out a vision for our future relationship in financial services in what has been called his HSBC speech. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central asked about that vision. It was a thorough analysis of the challenge and the opportunity and the need to prioritise financial stability, and argued for a deal that preserves the mutual benefits of the sector. Neither the UK or EU should be under any illusion about the significant additional costs that would be borne by Europe’s businesses and consumers if this highly efficient market were to fragment. It is a complex ecosystem that serves the UK and the EU. Oliver Wyman calculates that the wholesale banking industry would need to find $30 billion to $50 billion of extra capital if new regulatory barriers forced fragmentation of firms’ balance sheets.

To echo the Chancellor, the major winners from fragmentation would not—despite what President Macron suggests—be Paris or Frankfurt, Dublin or Luxembourg, but New York, Singapore or Hong Kong. That point was made by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde.

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree entirely with the Minister’s analysis but he would surely recognise that the transition period can come into play only if the Northern Irish issue is solved. The only way to solve the Northern Ireland issue is with a customs union, and the only way to solve where the country is on that is to let the House of Commons vote on it. Does the Minister know whether the Trade Bill will come back to the House at any point in the near future to give the it the chance to resolve the issue and get the benefits he is describing?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman has made a valiant attempt to try to draw out from me something over which, as he is probably very aware, I have little control. I do share with him an appreciation of the centrality of financial services in the City of London and we have a shared understanding that, if the EU does not come to a place of understanding about City of London financial services, it would leave Europe a lot less competitive.

To address that, the Chancellor set out what our future regulatory framework should look like, underpinned by three things: a binding dialogue for regulatory requirements, supervisory co-operation arrangements that are reciprocal and reliable, and an independent arbitration mechanism to provide durable dispute resolution. That is clear. It is complex, but necessarily so, given what we are dealing with.

Reaching such an agreement with the EU need not be a challenging objective because the status quo is an unbeatable precedent to work from. Our markets are already deeply interconnected; our rule books are identical; and our mutual commitment to world-leading standards is unbeatable. The EU itself has challenged the notion that financial services cannot be addressed in trade negotiations, as evidenced in its approach to creating a deep bilateral framework with the US in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations. In those negotiations, the EU pitched a relationship based on mutual recognition of regulations and a unique dialogue on aligning future rule-making. TTIP is a precedent for the approach that we wish to take with the EU. It is in neither the UK’s nor the EU’s interest to exclude financial services from the future relationship.

The UK is clear that there are limitations to how much either of us can achieve unilaterally. The reality is that the European Council and European Parliament have now formally recognised the need to address the
terms of market access in financial services between the UK and the EU, so we need to come to the table and discuss it further.

Myriad financial services on which businesses rely to reduce their costs are derived from or pass through, or are linked to, the UK market. Businesses also reap the benefits of the savings and capital flows to consumers across the continent. Those flows untap greater financial prospects for a broad range of people and allow them to access new products and services, such as innovative investment opportunities, tailored and appropriate debt products, and technology-driven solutions such as open banking.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire talked about shared services in the context of the challenges relating to bank closures. The only inhibitor to that is the banks themselves—there is no restriction on finding a shared venue. I know from my conversations with banks in my constituency that phenomenal changes are going on in the age profile of bank users. Just before the Easter recess, I took the opportunity to visit different banking environments and a mobile banking facility in Derbyshire. I was very impressed with what I saw. It happened to be a Lloyds mobile bank, and it came to the village twice a week at the same time. It had disabled facilities. Of course, we all want to retain that certainty about the bank network, but that is not possible because it is a commercial decision. I am in active dialogue with a range of banks, as we all are as constituency MPs, and I know that these are difficult decisions. I commend my hon. Friend’s suggestion, and I raise it actively when I meet representatives of banks.

Vicky Ford: On bank branch closures, I too commend the suggestion about bringing together many banks to operate out of the same premises, although that could be difficult to achieve. People have raised with me the issue of depositing cash. The people who run the church or school fete tend to have large quantities of small denominations of cash. Is there more we can do to ensure that the Post Office offers that service?

John Glen: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. I do not believe I have made that point to the head of a bank yet, but it is certainly something I would be happy to take up, particularly given the rurality of some communities.

Let me move back to my script. The industry in the UK has matured and developed in the UK as a creator of wealth for a broad spectrum of people across the world. Firms based in the UK do business with and have exposure to jurisdictions across the globe. We need to ensure that investors and banks from across the world can continue to come together to meet and transact, which means embracing the exciting commercial opportunities that will define international capital markets over the coming decades. The UK already has world-leading positions in the markets of the future, including FinTech, for which we have developed what we call FinTech bridges to other jurisdictions—most recently Australia. We are world leaders in green and sustainable finance, and in rupee and renminbi products, and we are committed to strengthening that position further. That also means expanding our bilateral relationships with key partners around the globe, which includes our economic and financial dialogues with China, India, Brazil, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan. There are enormous growth opportunities for the future.

Our new financial regulatory working group with the US, launched last week, cemented the already strong and deep relationship between the UK and US regulators. All of that will increase our financial co-operation with priority overseas markets and further establish the UK as the partner of choice for financial services.

As has been made clear, the significance of financial services to this country’s economy cannot be understated. It has propelled the UK to greater heights and its people to greater prosperity. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this very useful discussion, which has highlighted to me what a privilege it is to represent these interests in Government. Beyond Brexit, the Government are committed to creating the right environment so that this industry can continue to thrive.

3.16 pm

Vicky Ford: I thank hon. Members for their contributions. Many times since joining this place, I have heard hon. Members take very angry and aggressive positions in opposition to each other. It is good, on this calm and quiet Thursday afternoon, to hear hon. Members speaking in support of the financial sector, and about their pride in it and in the way the people who work in it and in the related professional sector use those services and their careers to support customers and the wider economy.

I want to pick up a couple of small issues. The Minister stated clearly that Britain does not want a bonfire of regulation; our aim is to continue to be a benchmark of good regulation across the globe. I absolutely support that aim, and I think it is important that we continue to say that again and again.

The Minister also made the very clear point that, from the British point of view, we want to give certainty in the Brexit negotiations to businesses and consumers on this side of the channel that they will not face disruption. We want to ensure that what we continue to be recognised during the transition and beyond, and we need those on the other side of the channel to give the same level of certainty.
I am going to make terrible mistakes if I try to name everybody’s constituencies—

Alison Thewliss: Glasgow Central.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said she is extremely concerned about how soon we can give certainty in the EU negotiations. There are two sides to giving certainty. The Government’s statements—especially the detailed HSBC Canary Wharf speech—contain a huge amount of detail about the need for ongoing co-operation. The EU negotiators have also talked about wanting to have super-equivalence, and that is helpful, but we have not seen the same level of detail. It needs to come from both sides.

In my experience of many years of EU negotiations, having a seat at the table was sometimes helpful—that will be missed—but there were other times when it was a challenge. The financial services industry is much more important to our economy than it is to that of many other countries, although it does support them, but that left us with different exposures. That is why we did not want to have an identical approach to solve certain issues; the approach of maximum harmonisation—one size fits all—that we increasingly see across the single market is very challenging.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) spoke about needing to confirm whether we are going to align. To me, that sometimes means having a completely identical approach, which can be a challenge. One thing I learned from my time in European politics is that there are times when the EU recognises equivalence, but without that being identical. I particularly look at the way in which we treated the bank sector. When we introduced our bank levy, the rest of Europe, particularly within the eurozone, had the funded deposit guarantee system. There were two different ways to solve the same issue to make sure that funds were set aside in case there was failure, but they are both built into the legislation.

Jonathan Reynolds: My point was not around the specifics of regulations; it is a question of economic models and the partnership we seek with the European Union. We have to try to move the negotiations forward. We have to give them an unequivocal sign of what our future intentions are, or we simply will not get the progress that we need. We are already way behind where we need to be. The point around equivalence is simply this: yes, that model will work, but it must have legal certainty. Without that certainty we will have the migration of business.

Vicky Ford: On legal certainty, I completely agree. It is only five or six stops on the Jubilee line to get to Canary Wharf, so I took the bother to go and listen to every single word that was said in that speech. I wish more Members from this House had bothered to go and listen to it and to speak to the industry players who were there afterwards, because it went into detail and addressed very important things—especially how one was going to co-operate with the colleges of supervisors that have been set up on a bank-by-bank basis. Speaking to the individuals who are responsible for the regulatory functions within their own institutions and getting that level of detail was welcome. It is not fair to criticise only the British side of the negotiations for not giving enough detail—the British side has given significant detail.

Maintaining ongoing co-operation, dialogue and exchange of information is key in building regulatory trust. Let us not forget that £45 billion of taxpayers’ money had to be spent bailing out RBS; we had to bail out branches of not just the British bank but the Dutch and Irish bank because there was no legal mechanism for a cross-border reorganisation of a bank in crisis. That has been resolved, and part of the way it has been resolved is by having that ongoing dialogue that brings together the British regulators with the Dutch and the Irish. The very clear message from the Chancellor that he wanted to continue to be part of that should be welcomed. It is not as simple as saying we need alignment to give legal certainty. From the contributions that I had from organisations prior to this debate, the calls are for more legal certainty to be given from the other side of the negotiation table.

I thank Members for the many suggestions on how to deal with the issue of branch closures. There are clearly different problems in different parts of the country. As I said, my part of the country is an urban area—a city—and because we are seeing a change towards digital banking, there is less demand for physical banking, so we need to manage that transition.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who made fantastic points so eloquently about the future of financial services, reminding us that we need to look forward to what sorts of services we want come 2028 and beyond. The actions that we take are absolutely key. Unlocking some of the benefits of the digital age, but also making sure there is perhaps some friction in the system so that we can put protections in for consumers, is definitely one of the actions I want to continue focusing on after this debate. I think that will help to protect people from cyber-attacks on their bank accounts.

It is absolutely vital that we continue to champion these industries, to support the people who work in them and to work with other parts of the world. I completely welcome the comments that the Minister made about setting up the regulatory working group with the United States and other parts of the world, and I wish him great success. Let us pick up the specific issues that have been addressed by Members here to make sure that we make targeted interventions where we can to help the industry, the people who work in it and the very many of our constituents who are, at the end of the day, consumers of these services and rely on them. Thank you, Sir David, for this wonderful afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the financial services and the impact on the UK economy.

3.26 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements
Monday 16 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I hereby give notice of the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's intention to seek an advance from the contingencies fund in the amount of £4,626,000 for FY 2018-19 to provide financial cover to the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR).

This cash advance is sought to enable the ONR to undertake project activities planned for FY 2018-19 (i.e. from April 2018 onwards) to ensure the UK can have a domestic nuclear safeguards regime that meets international nuclear safeguards standards in place from day one of exit.

ONR has already made progress towards delivering this regime with financial support provided from the previous contingencies fund advance, notice of which was given on 2 February, and which covered the period up to the end of March 2018.

The Government's commitment to establish a new domestic safeguards regime was announced on September 2017 and forms a vital part of this Department’s EU exit preparations for the UK’s nuclear industry.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £4,626,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £4,626,000 will be met via repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Nuclear Safeguards Bill and the Supply and Appropriation Bill.

[HCWS617]

DEFENCE

Mechanised Infantry Vehicle

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am pleased to inform the House that on 31 March the British Army took a major step forward in securing a potential deal to get a fleet of new armoured vehicles by re-joining the Boxer programme, which could support at least 1,000 British jobs. The UK will re-join the programme and explore options to equip the Army with the state-of-the-art 8x8 troop carriers (mechanised infantry vehicles) to modernise its vehicle fleet. The UK played a major role in the design, development and testing of Boxer, and would reassert the rights it had as an original project partner, thus allowing the option for the vehicle to be built and exported from the UK.

The intention would be for at least 60% of the manufacturing to be within British industry, sustaining and developing UK industrial capabilities, facilities and skills.

A capable mechanised infantry vehicle is integral to the Army’s new strike brigades. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) conducted a comprehensive market analysis of mechanised infantry vehicles in-service, entering service and in development. The analysis was guided by the British Army’s requirements and how best to deliver them. The Boxer is the stand-out performer across a wide range of requirements including protected mobility, capacity, flexibility, utility and agility, and is a worthy choice for the British Army, who deserve the very best equipment. With the ability to rapidly adapt to suit our soldiers’ needs and perform across multiple climates and terrains, the Boxer would provide the British Army with a credible medium capability, enabling commanders to provide an appropriate level of response to emerging threats.

The MOD is now taking forward negotiations with the organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation (OCCAR) and Artec to look at options to purchase the vehicles. Any deal will be subject to commercial negotiation and assessment in 2019 and the aim is to have the first vehicles in service with the Army in 2023.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 16 April 2018

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 16 April. 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 Luxembourg.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, Russia, Iran, Syria, western Balkans and the European neighbourhood instrument.

Foreign Affairs Council: Russia

Ministers will have a substantive discussion of the EU’s five principles on Russia to follow up on the robust conversation at the March European Council on the challenges Russia poses, particularly in light of the Salisbury incident. The five principles are full implementation of Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia’s former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues; and support for people-to-people contacts.

Western Balkans

Ministers will discuss the political situation in the western Balkans ahead of the EU28-Western Balkans summit in Sofia. We can expect the discussions to focus on the EU-facilitated dialogue on Kosovo/Serbia, as well as the risks of instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, if there is no agreement on electoral reform ahead of October’s elections.

Iran

Ministers will discuss shared concerns around Iran’s destabilising regional activity and the EU’s role in responding to this.
Syria

Ministers will discuss recent developments in Syria.

European Neighbourhood Instrument

Ministers will discuss the European neighbourhood instrument (ENI) and the next Multi-annual financial framework (MFF). The UK will have leave the EU before the MFF comes into effect and does not therefore expect to have a strong say in decisions but will note the importance of dedicated funding for the European neighbourhood in the next MFF.

Council Conclusions

The FAC is expected to adopt conclusions on Syria, South Sudan, malicious cyber-activities and chemical disarmament and non-proliferation.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In my update on building safety on 15 March 2018, I informed the House that a glazed fire door from Grenfell Tower manufactured by Manse Masterdor, around five years ago, and marketed to resist fire for at least 30 minutes failed testing after approximately 15 minutes.

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 panel consulted representatives from the Metropolitan Police, the Government’s chief scientific advisers and the National Fire Chiefs Council. Following that, the Expert Panel advised that there was no change to the fire safety advice that the public should follow, and further investigations into doors from Manse Masterdor and others should be undertaken.

As I outlined in the statement on 15 March, we have taken forward further investigations. These investigations are focusing on fire doors manufactured by Manse Masterdor. This company is no longer trading and is not associated with organisations of a similar name.

We are engaging with the industry, and have also established a technical group of experts who are able to provide us with specialist advice on fire doors.

We have secured capacity to test fire doors at accredited test houses and testing is ongoing.

We are working closely with devolved Administrations and are engaging with local authorities who are supporting us in our investigation.

We continue to consult the expert panel as these investigations progress. I committed to updating the House before the end of April and can confirm that at the present time, the Expert Panel’s advice remains unchanged.

As a result of my Department’s investigations to date, the Expert Panel has advised me that further testing is required, which will take time. I intend to update the House further as and when the expert panel provides further advice, or no later than the end of May.

I want to reassure hon. Members that my Department is doing all it can as quickly as possible to properly investigate these issues and to make sure that where needed appropriate action will be taken.

As part of our wider effort to ensure that people are safe now and in the future I commissioned an independent review, led by Dame Judith Hackitt to look at the regulatory framework around construction, maintenance and on-going management of buildings in relation to fire safety. The Government welcomed an interim report, published in December 2017, and has already taken action to implement some of its recommendations, including by recently publishing a consultation on the use of desktop studies to assess the fire performance of construction products. A final report is expected in the late spring and the Government stand ready to consider and respond to this report. Public safety is paramount and I will continue to keep the House updated on progress.
written statements

Tuesday 17 April 2018

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Salisbury Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Following the indiscriminate and reckless use of a nerve agent in Salisbury on 4 March 2018, decontamination work is starting this week to bring a small number of potentially contaminated sites back into safe use for the people of Salisbury and its visitors. A lot of preparatory work has been completed already and these plans will now be discussed with the local community and businesses.

In total nine sites, three of which are in the city centre, have been identified as requiring some level of specialist decontamination. The focus will be on returning public spaces to full use as soon as possible, but only where it is safe to do so. The Government will work closely with both the affected businesses and the victims of this appalling act as detailed plans are put into effect.

In the case of London Road cemetery, after extensive investigations and testing, it has been established that it was not contaminated and is therefore being fully reopened to the public today.

The other sites will remain secured and the current scientific assessment is that the remainder of Salisbury is safe for residents and visitors. Public Health England have reaffirmed that the risk to the general public is low.

The community will begin to see more activity from this week and overall it will take some months before all sites are decontaminated and returned to normal use. During this time some cordons will be expanded to ensure safety and allow workers access to the sites with specialist equipment. This will be kept to a minimum wherever possible and the community will be kept informed as work progresses on each site.

The decontamination work is being planned and overseen by my Department with additional specialist advice from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, Public Health England, the Department for Health and Social Care, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence. The work will be delivered in partnership with Wiltshire Council with support from the Ministry of Defence, who are providing specialist contractors.

The Government are basing their approach on the best scientific evidence and advice to ensure all decontamination is carried out in a thorough and careful way. Thanks to detailed information gathered during the investigation and the clear scientific understanding of how the agent works and is spread, the likely level of contamination at each site is known.

Specialists have developed tailored decontamination plans for each site. To refine these plans, specialist personnel will be collecting additional samples from some sites, building on testing carried out during the investigation. This information will be used to ensure the plans are correct and that decontamination will be effective.

The decontamination work will involve a process of testing, removal of items which could be contaminated and that might harbour residual amounts of the agent, chemical cleaning and retesting. All waste will be safely removed and incinerated and each site will not be released until decontamination is complete.

This work to bring the closed sites back into public use will go hand-in-hand with the £2.5 million already announced on 27 March to support businesses, boost tourism and meet unexpected costs in the response and recovery effort in the city.

Exiting the European Union

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Sir Tim Barrow (Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the European Union) will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 17 April 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes: Reform of the Electoral Act

The Bulgarian presidency will discuss a Council decision to make changes to the electoral law governing European parliamentary elections. The presidency will ask member states whether they can support the proposal.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) treaty of the European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal

The Commission will provide Ministers with its analysis of Poland’s official response to the “reasoned proposal” issued by the Commission in December 2017.

Any other business—enlargement package

The Commission will present its annual enlargement package for the six western Balkan countries and Turkey, which is scheduled for publication on 17 April.

Transport

Greenhouse Gases: International Shipping

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): On 13 April the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) agreed a comprehensive strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) from international shipping. The United Kingdom, led by the Department for Transport, played a leading role in the negotiations, pushing for an ambitious and credible outcome that would enable shipping to play its part in meeting the Paris agreement temperature goals.

The strategy is a major milestone for the shipping industry, which is now the first global sector to have set an absolute emissions reduction target.

The strategy includes:

A commitment to phase out GHGs from international shipping as soon as possible during this century;

A target of at least 50% reduction, and an aim for 100% reduction, in total GHG emissions from shipping by 2050;
A target of at least a 40% improvement in carbon intensity of ships by 2030, pursuing efforts towards 70% in 2050; and
A list of possible short, mid and long-term emission reduction measures with a commitment to develop a work-plan for implementation to deliver emission reductions before 2023.

The United Kingdom was at the forefront of a coalition of high ambition countries working with other member states, industry and non-governmental organisations to agree ambitious quantified emission reduction targets for the sector.

Countries will now, through the IMO, commence work on implementing the strategy. The UK, through the Department for Transport, will continue to work with other IMO member states, industry and civil society to establish what practical and technical steps need to be taken to deliver the emission reduction targets. A revised version of the strategy is due to be adopted in 2023.

[HCWS621]
Written Statement

Wednesday 18 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

General Affairs Council: April 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following written statement:

I attended the General Affairs Council (Cohesion) on 12 April 2018. The meeting was held in Luxembourg and chaired by the Bulgarian presidency.

The meeting was dedicated to the strategic context and priorities for post-2020 cohesion policy, and included an information session from the Commission on communicating cohesion policy.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at:

The General Affairs Council discussed the future direction of cohesion policy in the next multiannual financial framework. Ministers and their representatives from member states presented their positions on the strategic context and priorities for post-2020, with a view to influencing the Commission's proposals. Member states particularly focused on efforts for simplification, harmonisation, the strategic framework for future cohesion policy, and the principle of national co-financing.

I intervened to reflect on the lessons learnt from the UK's experience of implementing cohesion policy and provide some suggestions for a future cohesion policy.

The Commission provided an update on how cohesion policy has been, and could be, better communicated to the public.

The Bulgarian presidency provided an update on non-legislative and legislative items.

[HCWS624]
Written Statements

Thursday 19 April 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

UK Diplomatic Network in the Commonwealth

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Global Britain is this Government’s ambition to increase the UK’s national security, prosperity and influence, signalling our resolve to remain a big and influential player on the world stage.

In March, I announced plans to open around 10 new sovereign missions over the next two years, drawing on additional funding granted to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to enhance our diplomatic capability overseas.

During the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London this week, I will announce the location of nine new missions: six high commissions in Lesotho (Maseru); Swaziland (Mbabane); the Bahamas (Nassau); Tonga (Nuku’ Alofa); Samoa (Apia); Vanuatu (Port Vila); and a further three missions, in Antigua and Barbuda (St John’s); Grenada (St George’s); and St Vincent and the Grenadines (Kingstown). These new missions will strengthen the UK’s diplomatic influence in the Commonwealth and help to deliver the UK’s security and prosperity objectives.

This expansion of our diplomatic network in the Commonwealth, which marks the beginning of the UK’s two-year tenure as chair, demonstrates our commitment to making an even greater success of this historic and important network of like-minded friends.

[HCWS625]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Funding

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Following the debate on police funding held in this House on 28 March 2018 and the motion of this House, the Government wish to highlight that they are committed to protecting the public and providing the resources necessary for the police to do their critical work. At the 2015 spending review, the Government protected overall police spending (the combination of Government grants to police and crime commissioners (PCCs), police precept, and special grant by local government) as the best long-term measure of the crime people experience—is down by more than a third since 2010 and by more than two thirds since its peak in 1995. However, we recognise that there have been material changes in the demands on policing since the 2015 spending review. Demand on the police from crimes reported to them has grown and shifted to more complex and resource intensive work such as investigating child sexual exploitation and modern slavery. At the same time the terrorist threat has changed.

Crime as traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales—widely regarded as the best long-term measure of the crime people experience—is down by more than a third since 2010 and by more than two thirds since its peak in 1995. However, we recognise that there have been material changes in the demands on policing since the 2015 spending review. Demand on the police from crimes reported to them has grown and shifted to more complex and resource intensive work such as investigating child sexual exploitation and modern slavery. At the same time the terrorist threat has changed.

We included four key elements in the police funding settlement for 2018-19 to enable the police to respond effectively: an increase in funding, greater future funding certainty, clear opportunities for substantial improvements in productivity and efficiency, and greater financial transparency to ensure effective use is made of police financial reserves.

Following the spending review in 2015, the Government committed to protecting force-level funding in cash terms over the spending review period, when police precept and Government grant are taken together. The 2018-19 settlement changed this by enabling every PCC to maintain their funding in real terms. This was achieved by a combination of protecting the Government grant to PCCs in cash terms (compared to 2017-18) so PCCs retain the full benefit from any additional local precept income, and increasing flexibility to raise precept without calling a referendum (in England). The vast majority of PCCs used the additional flexibility to increase precept, resulting in an over £280 million increase in funding in 2018-19. In addition, many PCCs have set out proposals to use this extra funding to improve frontline policing.

We are also increasing investment in national policing priorities such as police technology and special grant by around £130 million in 2018-19 compared to 2017-18. This reflects our commitment to support the police to deliver a modern digitally enabled workforce, and to manage major events such as the Commonwealth summit and terrorist attacks. We are maintaining the size of the police transformation fund at £175 million in order to help drive police reform.

Counter-terrorism police is receiving a £50 million (7%) increase in like for like funding when compared to 2017-18, enabling the counter-terrorism budget to increase to £757 million, including £29 million for the uplift in armed policing from the police transformation fund. Once the armed uplift programme is complete, there will be around 7,000 armed officers in England and Wales, which exceeds the number of firearms officers in 2010. This is a significant additional investment in the vital work of counter-terrorism police officers across the country. These specialist officers will be better trained and equipped than ever before to deal with the full range of complex terrorist attacks.

Separately, the Home Office has also provided £9.8 million in special grant funding to cover the costs of the police response to the Manchester Arena attack and a further £7.6 million to support the costs in London.
Overall, police funding across the system is increasing by around £460 million year on year, including police precept. The House of Commons debated and voted for the police funding settlement on 7 February, as is done on an annual basis.

The motion debated by the House on 28 March referenced the UK Statistics Authority’s recent work on police funding statements. The Government recognise that police funding is a complex topic and are committed to presenting and explaining police funding clearly. The UK Statistics Authority suggested the Home Office should produce a regular analysis of police funding in line with the principles set out in the code of practice for statistics. The Home Office chief statistician is currently considering how this could be achieved.

Police leaders rightly highlighted to me that one year of additional financial support would not be sufficient to mitigate the challenges the police face. It is also important that PCCs and chief constables can plan effectively. Therefore the Government committed at the police funding settlement to protect police grant in cash terms, and repeat the additional precept flexibility in 2019-20, so long as significant progress is made this year on efficiency and productivity. This approach gives policing the opportunity to make major improvements in efficiency, and use those gains to improve services to the public.

Efficiency and productivity are essential to a sustainable plan to enable the police to manage challenging demands. Since the police funding settlement, I have been working with the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council to agree concrete proposals to save around £120 million through better procurement and use of shared services. We are also working with the police to deliver the benefits of better, digitally enabled working. The motion debated on 28 March called for 10,000 additional officers. The motion did not make reference to efficiency or productivity. If all forces could deliver the same one hour per officer per day of productivity benefits from mobile working as the best in a recent sample with eight forces, this has the potential to free up the equivalent of 11,000 extra officers nationally to provide the proactive policing that committed police officers want to deliver. The Government believe that it is essential that we work with the police to realise these productivity benefits, rather than focusing on extra funding or having a sterile debate on officer numbers alone.

We are also encouraging the police to make effective and prudent use of their financial reserves. As at March 2017 PCCs held usable resource reserves of over £1.6 billion. This compares to £1.4 billion in 2011. Current reserves held represent 15% of annual police funding to PCCs. There are good reasons for holding reserves, including to invest in better ICT to help officers work smartly. However, PCCs’ plans for using their reserves must be robust and open to public scrutiny. That is why we set out new guidance in January requiring them to publish their reserves strategies in plain English, with a clear justification for each reserve held, as well as publishing national information on the level of reserves held.

Taken together, the Government have listened to the police, we have substantially increased police funding in 2018-19, we have demonstrated our complete commitment to protecting the public from terrorism, and we have provided the police with the tools to respond to changing demand.

[HCWS626]

Local Government Finance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I am writing in response to the Opposition day debate on “Reductions in Local Government Funding” of 28 March and the resolution of the House made that day. This Government recognise the vital role of local government in delivering the frontline services which communities across the country rely on. I am writing to the House to confirm the support this Government are providing to ensure councils have the resources they need to deliver vital local services.

In February, the 2018-19 local government finance settlement set out the resources available to councils in England. This is the third year of a four-year offer which was approved by Parliament, as was the case in both preceding years. The multi-year settlement was also overwhelmingly accepted by councils, 97% of which took up the offer in return for publishing efficiency plans. It has provided greater certainty, allowing councils to plan ahead and secure value for money.

Through the settlement, local government has been given access to £45.1 billion in 2018-19 and £45.6 billion in 2019-20. This is an overall increase since 2017-18 of £1.3 billion. This recognises both the growing pressure on local government’s services and higher than expected inflation levels. For adult social care in particular, a further £150 million was provided for 2018-19, which we expect will help support sustainable local care markets, in addition to the £2 billion announced at spring Budget 2017. With this, and other measures, the Government have given councils access to £9.4 billion dedicated funding for adult social care over three years.

Informed by the representations received from councils, organisations and members of the public, we are ensuring that the sector is equipped to drive economic growth, to think and act creatively and to deliver for their residents. We are clear that is about more than just the funding. Through additional flexibilities and responsibilities, we are responding to the sector’s request for more control over the money they raise as well as the tools to make this money go further.

Local authorities already have a strong incentive to grow their economies through 50% business rates retention and benefit from the additional income that growth in their business rates brings. Over 150 local authorities in 16 pilot areas are incentivised further by retaining 100% of their growth in business rates.

We are also looking towards the future. We are undertaking a review of local authorities’ relative needs and resources to address concerns about the fairness of current funding distributions. The consultation has now closed and my Department is carefully assessing over 300 responses from a wide range of stakeholders. We have sought the views of councils, representative associations and others to capture the key factors which should be included in a new funding formula and we will continue to collaborate with local government on this. We aim to implement its findings in 2020-21.
Local government also has a vital role to play in helping the broken housing market. The recent allocation of £866 million from the housing infrastructure fund for 133 local authority projects will help to deliver some 200,000 additional homes, and we have also announced an additional £1 billion of borrowing headroom to enable local authorities in the highest value areas to build more homes for social and affordable rent.

We further announced last month the 45 areas across England we are working with to develop Forward Funding infrastructure projects, with up to £4.1 billion of funding available to unlock a potential 400,000 homes. These are strategic, long-term projects which will deliver housing not just for now, but for generations to come—creating new settlements, growing places and supporting local authority ambition for growth and regeneration.

This Government remain firmly committed to ensuring local government has the support and resource it needs to deliver its services effectively and efficiently, while protecting hard-working taxpayers from excessive council tax rises.

[HCWS627]
Written Statements

Monday 23 April 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) is the regulator responsible for financial reporting and corporate governance in the UK, as well as the designated Competent Authority for independent audit in the UK.

The Government have invited Sir John Kingman to conduct a comprehensive independent review of the FRC. Sir John Kingman has a wealth of private and public sector experience which he will bring to bear in his independent review. He will be supported by an advisory board which he will convene.

The review is part of the Government’s industrial strategy aim of creating a business environment that works for everyone, in which independent and effective regulation plays a key role.

The UK has a strong reputation as a dependable place to do business, but this needs to be continuously updated, and it is important to ensure that our regulators continue to drive high standards.

The root and branch review will assess the FRC’s governance, impact and powers, to ensure it is fit for the future. It is intended that the review will include a call for evidence, and will be completed by the end of 2018.

Further detail regarding the scope of the review is set out in its terms of reference, which have been placed in the House Library.

[HCWS635]

Intellectual Property Office: Performance Targets

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): As an executive agency and trading fund of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Intellectual Property Office sets targets which are agreed by Ministers and laid before Parliament. For 2018-19 its targets are:

At least 85% of our customers will rate us 8-10 or higher in overall satisfaction.

We will have prepared the systems supporting our trade-marks and designs services for the UK’s exit from the EU and the implementation of the EU trade mark directive.

We will offer faster handling of patent applications, by providing an examination report with a search report when both are requested at the application date, and meeting at least 90% of requests for an accelerated two-month turnaround for search, publication and examination.

We will demonstrate an efficiency gain of at least 3.5%.

[HCWS629]

DEFENCE

Contingency Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I have today laid before Parliament a departmental Minute describing a Contingent Liability (CL) in the region of £150 million associated with the Initial Airport Services Contract (IASC) at RAF Brize Norton. This initiative is part of programme GATEWAY, which was established to develop an enhanced operating model for the station.

The IASC will ensure the continuity of existing contracted technical support services following the expiry of the current Multi Activity Contract (MAC) on 30 September 2018. It will also offer benefits through the contractorisation of additional services, including elements of ground engineering, logistics and support administration. By expanding the existing MAC service provision, it will release military liability to meet the strategic defence and security review 2015 growth plan and release civil service posts in support of the planned civil service headcount reduction. It will also provide a value for money service contract through rationalisation and economies of scale.

The maximum CL is in the region of £150 million, which ensured healthy competition from prospective tenderers. There is also a further CL of £2,880,000 associated with the indemnity given to contractors for terminal redundancy liability associated with ex-authority staff.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before the House, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the Minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS632]

Submarine Delivery Agency

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): In the strategic defence and security review 2015, the Government committed to creating the dedicated submarine delivery body in order that we can better manage the complex submarine procurement, support and disposal
programmes. We have established the Defence Nuclear Organisation, led by the Director General Nuclear, in the Ministry of Defence and the Submarine Delivery Agency was formally established as an executive agency on 1 April 2018.

We will create a high-performing delivery organisation capable of managing industry to schedule and cost in order to provide world-class capabilities to support our deterrent and submarine operations. The agency has the authority and freedom to recruit and retain the best people to manage the submarine enterprise.

The SDA is held to account through performance indicators and metrics under the following themes:

Corporate performance. To confirm the SDA is delivering the benefits associated with being established as a dedicated delivery organisation focusing on the submarine enterprise; and to ensure that the SDA has the right people with the right skills in the right place to deliver the agreed programme of work.

Performance against the acquisition programme. To provide confidence in the SDA’s ability to deliver the programme to the agreed performance, time and cost.

Performance against the in-service support programme. To provide confidence in the programme.

Supply chain. To assure the SDA’s relationship with industry and the supply chain to achieve cost-efficient delivery for the SDA’s customers, as well as protecting our ability to deliver underwater capability in the future.

Safety and security. To confirm that the SDA is embedding a culture that achieves continuous improvement in safety and security through a robust and consistent application of processes and development of lessons learned.

Further details of the SDA’s governance structure, function and policies are contained in the framework document. The agency’s strategic objectives are set out in the corporate plan. I have placed copies of both documents in the Library of the House.

[HCWS633]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): On 11 April 2018, under section 57(1) of the Enterprise Act 2002, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) formally brought to my attention the acquisition by Trinity Mirror plc of certain publishing assets of Northern & Shell. The CMA considered that the transaction may raise public interest considerations for the Secretary of State under section 58 of the Act. The CMA has also launched an initial investigation into the competition aspects of the merger.

Having considered a broad range of evidence, I have today written to the parties to inform them that I am minded to issue a public interest intervention notice on the basis that I have concerns that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in the Act—on two grounds that are relevant to this merger that warrant further investigation.

The first public interest ground is the need for free expression of opinion, and concerns the potential impact the transfer of newspapers would have on editorial decision making. In coming to this decision I have given consideration to the issue of formal mechanisms to ensure that editorial independence is maintained at the acquired titles.

The second ground is the need for a sufficient plurality of views in newspapers, to the extent that it is reasonable or practicable. In coming to this minded-to decision I have taken into account that the merged entity would own the largest share of national titles within the UK newspaper market, owning nine out of 20 national newspaper titles, and become the second largest national newspaper organisation in circulation terms, with a 28% share of average monthly circulation based on circulation figures for 2017 among national titles, including daily and Sunday titles.

Any decision to intervene would require Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest considerations and the Competition and Markets Authority to report on jurisdiction.

In line with the guidance that applies to quasi-judicial decisions, I have invited written representations from the parties and will aim to come to a final decision on whether to intervene in the merger shortly.

[HCWS636]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) has replaced my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS630]

Safe Schools Declaration

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am today announcing that the UK will endorse the Safe Schools Declaration underlining our political support for the protection of schools during military operations and armed conflict. Furthermore, the UK will encourage relevant international partners to endorse the declaration.

The Safe Schools Declaration is a pledge; an assurance from Governments to take all feasible measures to protect schools during armed conflict.

The provision of education in conflict zones and humanitarian situations puts affected populations back on track, establishes routine and purpose, shapes belief in the future, and supports the process of reconstruction.

[HCWS631]
PRIME MINISTER

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Last week I hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (19-20 April)—the largest summit of its kind in our country’s history. Leaders from 53 countries gathered together with over 15,000 delegates, including at 90 side events, demonstrating that the Commonwealth is united not only by a common history, but by a common future.

We put young people at the heart of the summit, recognising the need to ensure the actions we took would renew the Commonwealth and promote its relevance to its people, 60% of whom are under 30.

We agreed a range of actions to build a Commonwealth which is fairer, more sustainable, more secure and more prosperous. These commitments were captured in a communiqué and accompanying leaders’ statement. I have placed a copy of both in the House of Commons library.

A central theme of our leaders’ meeting was our resolve to stand together in defence of the rules-based international system.

To build a more secure future, we expressed our unanimous opposition to the use of chemical weapons, and committed to strengthen the effective implementation of the chemical weapons convention. We also agreed the ‘Commonwealth Cyber Declaration,’ the world’s largest and most geographically diverse intergovernmental commitment on cyber-security co-operation and capacity building, helping to protect our people and businesses from ever-more sophisticated digital threats. The UK has committed £15 million to help member states boost their cyber-security capabilities.

To build a more sustainable future, we celebrated every nation of the Commonwealth having now ratified the Paris Agreement, and recommitted to pursuing efforts to limit the increase in global average temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. We also took specific action to protect our oceans and launched the Commonwealth Blue Charter, supported by the UK and Vanuatu’s Clean Oceans Alliance. A number of Commonwealth countries have made a series of commitments to tackle the scourge of plastic pollution, including Papua New Guinea, which has banned plastic bags; Belize, which has banned plastic bags, forks and other single-use items by 2019; and New Zealand, which has announced a ban on microbeads. The UK pledged to ban plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds, as well as announcing funding for research into tackling marine litter. With over 90% of Commonwealth citizens living in malaria-affected countries, leaders pledged to halve malaria across the Commonwealth by 2023.

To build a more prosperous future, we made a unanimous statement on the need to fight protectionism—the first Commonwealth summit to do so. We launched initiatives to break down barriers to trade through the promotion of common standards across the Commonwealth, to address systemic barriers to women’s full and equal participation in the economy, and to boost youth employment through a new Commonwealth apprenticeships programme. We also pledged to ensure that all girls and boys across the Commonwealth will be able to access at least 12 years of quality education and learning by 2030. The UK has committed a further £212 million to ensure no child is left behind.

To build a fairer future, we agreed the critical importance of the full social, economic and political participation of all our citizens for democracy and sustainable development to thrive. In my speech to the joint forum plenary on Tuesday 17 April, I set out that nobody should face persecution or discrimination because of who they are or who they love, and announced a programme of support for any Commonwealth member wanting to reform outdated legislation that permits discrimination, including against same-sex relations.

The week also provided the opportunity for bilateral meetings with Commonwealth leaders. I met Caribbean leaders on Tuesday 17 April and gave an absolute commitment that the Government will do whatever it takes—including, where appropriate, payment of compensation—to resolve the anxieties and problems which some of the Windrush generation have suffered. My right hon Friend the Home Secretary will be providing a further update in Parliament later today.

We expressed deep gratitude for everything that Her Majesty the Queen has done to nurture this remarkable organisation, and agreed that the next Head of the Commonwealth shall be His Royal Highness Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales.

As we begin the UK’s two-year chair in office, I look forward to working with all our Commonwealth partners in fulfilling the commitments we have made, and preparing for the next meeting in Rwanda, in 2020.

[HCWS634]

TRANSPORT

Light Dues

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): A strong and growing maritime industry is vital to the economy of the United Kingdom and it is critical that we treasure and protect this vital artery if we are to remain a world-leading maritime centre.

The work of the General Lighthouse Authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation and respond to new wrecks and navigation dangers in some of the busiest waters in the world, is crucial to underpinning that vision while maintaining our vigorous safety record and continuously improving standards of safety.

Reductions in the three General Lighthouse Authorities’ running costs have enabled the UK to reduce light dues for four successive years. For 2018-19 I intend to freeze light dues rates at 37.5p per net registered tonne. This will mean that light dues will have fallen by 28% in real terms since 2010.

Light dues rates will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that the General Lighthouse Authorities are challenged to provide an effective and efficient service which offers value for money to light dues payers.

[HCWS628]
Written Statements

Tuesday 24 April 2018

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan: Ireland

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Her Majesty’s Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to the bilateral loan to Ireland as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 October 2017 to 31 March 2018.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was issued to Parliament on 7 November 2017, Official Report, column 45WS. [HCWS641]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Sodium Valproate Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

The EU review into the safety of sodium valproate has now been completed and has recommended that a contraindication for valproate should be introduced in pregnancy and in girls and women of child bearing potential unless they are enrolled in a pregnancy prevention programme.

Valproate is a very effective treatment for epilepsy and bipolar disorder. For some women with epilepsy it may be the only effective treatment. Use of valproate (Epilim, Depakote and other generic brands) in pregnancy is associated with a 40% risk of persistent neurodevelopmental disorders and a 10% risk of physical birth defects. Clear information on the risks of valproate in pregnancy is failing to reach patients, and the warnings issued over the last four years have not had a significant enough impact on valproate prescribing in women of childbearing age. Despite repeated communications on this risk, it is estimated that 400 women in the UK took valproate during pregnancy in 2016.

Following the completion of the EU review, the UK healthcare system will now be making changes to ensure that girls and women of childbearing potential are only taking valproate if there is no other suitable treatment, and that the woman is enrolled in a pregnancy prevention programme. This programme will ensure that every girl or woman knows about the risks of valproate in pregnancy, that where appropriate she is on effective contraception, and that she has a review by her specialist prescriber at a minimum once a year, when a risk acknowledgement form will be discussed and signed by both prescriber and woman herself.

There are approximately 27,000 women of childbearing age receiving prescriptions for valproate in primary care. Within the coming months, GPs should identify all relevant women and girls on valproate in their practice, check that they are on effective contraception as appropriate, and refer them for specialist review unless they have already had a review in the last year.

Specialist prescribers should assess whether treatment with valproate is necessary for women of childbearing potential referred to them, namely that there is no suitable alternative treatment. If continued treatment is necessary, the woman must be enrolled in the pregnancy prevention programme, be on effective contraception, and understand the need to avoid pregnancy.

Pharmacists will ensure the medicine is dispensed in packs which will include the new pictogram and the warning statement. Pharmacy professionals will also make sure that the GP has discussed the risks in pregnancy with female patients and where this has not happened advise them to make an appointment with their GP to have this discussion at the earliest opportunity.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has been working in partnership with professional bodies and the healthcare system to bring together a package of measures to support healthcare professionals in implementing these important changes. Educational materials for healthcare professionals and patients are being sent to GPs and specialist prescribers. NICE has updated its guidelines which mention valproate to reflect the new regulatory measures. GP electronic system providers have provided a search and audit function to facilitate the identification of women of childbearing age on valproate and are updating the alerts for valproate.

The MHRA will be closely monitoring the effectiveness of the new measures for avoiding prescribing of valproate to women of childbearing age and in preventing pregnancies from being exposed to valproate. Relevant data will be published and there will be ongoing follow up to ensure progress is being made.

I would particularly like to thank the families involved the Valproate Stakeholder Network who have shared their experiences and expertise. Their dedication, support and altruism will help to keep future generations of children safe. [HCWS640]

TRANSPORT

Port Connectivity: England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today publishing the Government’s report on port connectivity, entitled “Transport infrastructure for our global future: A Study of England’s Port Connectivity”.

This country’s ports are a modern success story. At present around 95% of all goods entering and leaving Britain are moved by sea and the port sector directly contributes £1.7 billion to the UK economy. Once factors such as supply chains are considered, the port sector’s economic contribution to the UK is estimated to be £5.4 billion per annum.

The role ports play in facilitating trade and driving economic growth is only likely to increase. As an island our ports are fundamental to our global success as an outward-facing trading nation.

Ports are investing many billions of pounds in their own infrastructure to ensure larger ships and volumes can be accommodated, and so that England continues to be a key destination for global trade. It is therefore vital there is appropriate capacity on our inland transport network, to and from our international gateway ports, to meet demand.

As part of a wider commitment, Government are making investment totalling over £60 billion in this Parliament alone to improve our transport networks as a whole, including freight connectivity.
This connectivity supports the movement of everything to and from our ports which are vital to our everyday lives from providing fuel to our power stations to generate electricity for our homes, to transporting the produce to our supermarkets so we have food to eat.

“Transport infrastructure for our global future: A Study of England’s Port Connectivity” sets out our vision for how we can continue to grow a thriving English port sector and how collaboration and innovation by Government and industry can enhance the trade, economic and productivity benefits delivered by ports.

The report has been developed with input from Network Rail, Highways England, the port and wider freight industry, and its customers. In doing so the study has looked at the current challenges and opportunities for port and freight connectivity, and makes specific recommendations which the Government and industry can work together to achieve.

A copy of the study has been placed in the Library of both Houses and is also available on gov.uk, together with the supporting regional case studies report on connectivity.

1 Ports policy is fully devolved to the Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments. In Wales, responsibility for fishing ports only was devolved to the Welsh Government but from 1 April 2018, powers in the Wales Act 2017 will saw further devolution to include all ports wholly in Wales, other than reserved trust ports (Milford Haven is the only one of these) for which the UK Government retain responsibility. An overview of Milford Haven’s connectivity is included in the supplementary case study document for information, but the recommendations are not intended for implementation in Wales.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Financial Guidance and Claims Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Later today I will place in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order No.83L in respect of the further Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill.

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council


The agenda consisted of presentations from experts and panel discussions among experts, member states, the presidency and the Commission.

The first day focused on how member states and social partners can deliver upon principle one of the European Pillar of Social Rights: education, training and life-long learning. Following an opening plenary, a number of speakers presented on themes including early childhood development, and the implementation of the Council recommendation on upskilling pathways. Panellists then reflected on how to best provide upskilling opportunities for adults.

The second day centred on delivering on principle four of the European Pillar of Social Rights: active support to employment. The Commission first took stock of progress against the Council recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market and the youth guarantee. A presentation was then provided by Eurofound on the remaining challenges with regard to integrating young people and the long-term unemployed into the labour market. Panellists then discussed domestic measures being taken to address the challenges.

The informal Council concluded with remarks from the EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills, and Labour Mobility, and Dr Biser Petkov, Minister of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria.
Written Statements

Wednesday 25 April 2018

CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: Clause 11

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The UK Government have today tabled amendments to the devolution provisions in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. In parallel, a supporting intergovernmental agreement has been published at: https://www.gov.uk that sets out a number of additional commitments on how the amendments, if agreed, will work in practice.

My priority has been to reach agreement with the Scottish and Welsh Governments on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. Over recent months, we have been in intensive discussions in order to find a mutually acceptable way forward. This needed to provide greater reassurance to the devolved Administrations that the distribution of returning powers in otherwise devolved areas would honour the devolution settlements, while maximising legal certainty on how current UK frameworks will function as we work together to implement new arrangements where they are necessary.

The Government tabled amendments at Lords Committee stage that reflected the progress made on frameworks since the autumn when we started working with the devolved Administrations on our analysis. Those amendments debated by peers established a presumption that returning powers in otherwise devolved areas would flow to the devolved legislatures. The UK Government withdrew the amendments in order to continue our discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Governments and consider the suggestions made by peers during the debate and others in their consideration of the proposal.

Following Lords Committee stage of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, officials from the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments jointly explored options put forward by all three Administrations. I discussed the proposals with Mark Drakeford AM, Cabinet Secretary for Finance in the Welsh Government and Mike Russell MSP, Minister for the UK Negotiations on Scotland’s Place in Europe a number of times in order to agree a way forward.

The new proposal, which is given effect through the amendments to the Bill tabled today and the supporting intergovernmental agreement, will see decision-making powers returning from Brussels transfer to the devolved legislatures. For a small number of areas, set out in the intergovernmental agreement, we expect that common legislative frameworks may be needed in whole or in part across the UK after the UK has left the EU. While these are being designed and implemented, we have proposed maintaining the existing common arrangements through the exercise of regulations in specific areas. The proposal emphasises the importance of joint working—the UK Government are under a legal duty to share any such regulations in draft so that the approval of the devolved legislatures can be sought before proceeding to the UK Parliament. It also recognises though the importance of providing legal certainty where agreement cannot be reached between the Governments and where, despite this, the UK Government and Parliament consider it necessary to act; for instance, to protect the UK internal market, ensure our international obligations are met or manage our common resources. It is right that these amendments recognise that it is only the UK Government, with approval of the UK Parliament, that can act for the UK as a whole. This is built on, and now delivers in legislation, the suggestion put forward during the Lords Committee debate that there should be a presumption of acting with consent, with a means for the UK Parliament to act where agreement is not possible.

Responding to specific proposals put forward in the UK Parliament and the devolved institutions, the maintenance of existing frameworks is strictly time limited. The amendments now ensure that the regulations maintaining specific frameworks will expire five years after they come into force, if not revoked earlier, and the power to create those regulations will expire two years after exit day at the latest.

In line with the amendments tabled at Lords Committee stage, the UK Government will also be under a legal duty to report to the UK Parliament periodically on the progress made towards establishing new frameworks and therefore removing any temporary arrangements. Our preference, however, is to design and implement new common arrangements that are better suited to the UK as quickly as possible in the coming months and years.

The intergovernmental agreement covers a number of non-legislative commitments, which support the tabled amendments. It confirms, for instance, that the UK Government will not bring forward legislation for England where the devolved Administrations are prevented from doing so by virtue of existing EU frameworks being maintained. In response to the points raised in the debate at Lords Committee stage, the UK Government have committed to ensure that clause 11 regulations will not affect the operation of the Sewel convention and that related practices and conventions in relation to future primary legislation, including legislation giving effect to common frameworks, will continue to apply. In exchange, the agreement sets out that the devolved Administrations will not unreasonably withhold recommendations of consent, recognising that this is ultimately a decision for the devolved legislatures.

I welcome the letter from Mark Drakeford which confirmed yesterday that on the basis of these amendments the Welsh Government will recommend legislative consent to the National Assembly of Wales for the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. This demonstrates the significant progress made on both sides to ensure we deliver maximum legal certainty with a functioning statute book on exit day. As part of this, the UK Government and the Welsh Government have agreed that the UK Government will seek to withdraw the reference to the Supreme Court of the Law Derived from European Union (Wales) Bill, known as the continuity Bill and that steps will be taken to repeal it from the statute book.

The Scottish Government have at this stage declined to join the agreement between the Welsh and UK Government, but the UK Government remain hopeful that the Scottish Government will become party to the agreement, which builds on extensive work between the
UK, Scottish, and Welsh Governments over recent months and reflects the considerable and constructive policy development. Irrespective of our ongoing discussions, the UK Government will honour the commitments they have made towards the Scottish Government in these documents, including seeking their agreement before maintaining a temporary framework.

The Northern Ireland civil service has been kept informed of developments. Our priority is to see a restored Northern Ireland Executive. The intergovernmental agreement remains open to incoming Ministers in a future Northern Ireland Executive. I am writing to Northern Ireland parties to update them on the latest position in relation to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill.

As a result of these changes, the devolved legislatures will see a significant increase in their decision-making position in relation to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I am writing to Northern Ireland parties to update them on the latest position in relation to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill.

The Northern Ireland civil service has been kept informed of developments. Our priority is to see a restored Northern Ireland Executive. The intergovernmental agreement remains open to incoming Ministers in a future Northern Ireland Executive. I am writing to Northern Ireland parties to update them on the latest position in relation to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill.

As a result of these changes, the devolved legislatures will see a significant increase in their decision-making powers as a result of EU exit. I look forward to continuing to work with them on designing new arrangements and will continue to keep the UK Parliament updated on that progress.

[HCWS646]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Sir Tim Barrow, the UK’s Permanent Representative to the European Union, represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Luxembourg on 17 April 2018.

The agenda covered: Reform of the Electoral Act, Rule of Law in Poland / Article 7(1) Treaty on European Union (TEU) Reasoned Proposal and, under any other business, the Commission’s annual enlargement package.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at:


Reform of the Electoral Act

Ministers discussed proposed amendments to the electoral law governing European Parliamentary elections. The majority of member states supported the text. The presidency indicated its hope that the file will be adopted by written procedure before the end of April to enable the proposals to come into force ahead of the 2019 EP elections.

Rule of Law in Poland / Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission provided a positive assessment of progress in the dialogue between the Commission and the Polish authorities regarding the rule of law and Poland’s judicial reforms. Although changes introduced by the Polish Government to the reforms so far did not fully satisfy the Commission’s concerns, the Commission hoped that outstanding issues could be resolved in the coming weeks. The Commission indicated that it expected to present its final assessment on the rule of law at the next GAC in May.

The UK intervened to welcome progress and emphasise the importance of the issues and values at stake. The UK welcomed the positive momentum in the dialogue towards a solution and affirmed its support to both parties in taking dialogue forward.

AOB - Annual Enlargement Package

The Commission presented the 2018 annual enlargement package, assessing progress of the six western Balkan countries and Turkey on meeting the criteria for EU membership. The package recommended opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The Presidency concluded by expressing hope that member states would reach agreement on the enlargement conclusions in June.

[HCWS643]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Wilton Park: Tailored Review

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am announcing today the start of a tailored review of Wilton Park, an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The principal aims of tailored reviews are to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, are well governed and properly accountable for what they do. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tailored-reviews-of-public-bodies-guidance.

Wilton Park is an executive agency of the FCO, which convenes discreet dialogue on the UK’s strategic foreign policy priorities. It has shaped and delivered events since 1946 linking a global network of experts from a range of sectors, including academia, the military, civil society, business, politicians and diplomats.

The review, the first since 2015, will provide a robust scrutiny of and assurance on the continuing need for Wilton Park—both its function and its form. If this process finds the agency should be retained in its current form and status, it will then consider how Wilton Park can deliver on its core mandate more effectively and efficiently. It will also assess the control and governance arrangements that are in place to ensure that Wilton Park and the FCO are complying with recognised principles of good corporate governance.

In conducting this tailored review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK and overseas, including staff, management and the board of Wilton Park. These consultations will include participating and sponsor organisations of Wilton Park events as well as partners from across UK Government, foreign Governments, international organisations, business, academia and the third sector.

The review will follow guidance published in 2016 by the Cabinet Office: ‘Tailored reviews: guidance on reviews of public bodies’. The terms of reference for the review can be found at: https://www.gov.uk.

I shall inform the House of the outcome of the review when it is completed and copies of the report of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS642]
HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Interim Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am pleased to announce that the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has, in accordance with its terms of reference, today published its Interim Report [HC 954]. Pursuant to section 26 of the Inquiries Act 2005, I am also laying a copy of the report before the House.

The report will be published on the inquiry’s website at: https://www.iicsa.org.uk and at: https://www.gov.uk. Copies will also be available in the Vote Office.

The interim report provides an overview of the work undertaken by the inquiry so far, together with emerging themes and recommendations.

Across Government, the interim report will be given careful and proper consideration. Discussions with business managers are currently in hand to schedule a debate to be held in Government time to enable the House to fully discuss the content.

I would like to thank Professor Jay and the panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS645]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

World Bank Group Capital Increases and Reform

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I am pleased to confirm that on Saturday 21 April, World Bank governors welcomed the package of additional financing for, and reforms to, the World Bank Group (WBG). As a shareholder to the WBG, the UK is expected to contribute. The UK contribution of around $550 million (around £390 million based on current exchange rates1) over an expected five years would support a package that is expected to enable US$315 billion of additional global development financing by June 2030, delivering life-changing development impacts globally.

This package is firmly in UK national interests and represents good value for money for UK taxpayers. The WBG is the largest development actor globally with the scale, expertise and experience to deliver life-changing development projects. It shares UK values and projects these globally. This package will further enable the WBG to support global development, prosperity and security, including through its work to reduce poverty; support an open, rules-based, and predictable international trading system; mobilise private finance; and address sources of instability. This will support our prosperity and security at home, while maintaining the relevance of the WBG in the eyes of all its shareholders.

As a leading shareholder, the UK Government played a central role in supporting this package helping to shape important reforms that will further enhance WBG effectiveness and efficiency and support UK national interests. These included ensuring that the share of lending going to the poorest countries will increase and that wealthier countries, such as China, will pay more to borrow. This will support wealthier borrowers in their transition from being aid recipients to aid donors. Given the WBG’s impressive track record of supporting UK national interests and delivering results, and the further reforms that have been agreed, the UK Government support the package.

Governors will be asked formally to agree the package by the annual meetings 12 to 14 October 2018. DFID will lay an order before Parliament and a departmental minute relating to the increase in contingent liabilities, before making any payments towards this package (expected in 2019).

Shareholder support

The package will involve a total of US$13.0 billion of paid-in capital from shareholders. It will also involve shareholders accepting an additional contingent liability of US$52.6 billion, the UK share of which is estimated to be around $1.9 billion (or around £1.4 billion2).

This would comprise:

- US$7.5 billion of paid-in and US$52.6 billion of callable capital for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the WBG institution that provides financial support and advice to middle-income and creditworthy low-income countries;
- US$5.5 billion of paid-in capital for the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the WBG institution that provides financial support and advisory services the private sector in developing countries for projects with development impact; and
- an adjustment in relative shareholding in the IBRD to more closely reflect changes to the economic weight of its shareholders and their contributions to the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank’s fund for the poorest countries, while maintaining UK’s joint fifth single seat on the IBRD board with France. IFC shareholding would also be adjusted to ensure that it is more closely aligned with IBRD shareholding while retaining the veto of the largest shareholder, the US.

Russia was isolated in indicating that it would not participate in the package. This intransigence occurs against a wider backdrop of continued Russian efforts to undermine multilateral co-operation.

Impact

The WBG has a proven track record in delivering life-changing development results, for example, between 2015 and 2017 it supported:

- 286.5 million people receive essential health, nutrition and population services;
- 81.2 million people get new or improved electricity services;
- 73.2 million people, microenterprises and SMEs receive financial services; and
- 53.9 million and 44.5 million people gain access to an improved water source and improved sanitation facilities respectively.

The IBRD and IFC’s financing models allow them to deliver many multiples of shareholder contributions in development finance. Each $1 of capital paid in by shareholders has delivered almost $50 in development finance. This package, and the UK contribution within it, would enable the IBRD and IFC to deliver a further US$315 billion of global development financing by

1. Based on current exchange rates
2. Estimated based on current exchange rates
June 2030. This additional financing and the reforms secured will support the WBG in delivering further life-changing development outcomes.

Reforms
As a leading shareholder in the WBG, UK Government engaged with the WBG management and other shareholders to support the package, while securing important reforms to further enhance the WBG’s efficiency and effectiveness. These included:

  - Strengthening global peace, security and governance—Increased WBG investment in fragile and conflict affected states, with IFC increasing its support for the poorest and most fragile countries to 40% of its total support by 2030 (from around 24% currently).
  - Strengthening resilience and response to crises—A new crisis buffer for the IBRD, which would allow it to surge lending in crises. Investment in projects with climate change benefits increased to 30% of IBRD support by June 2023 and 35% of IFC support by June 2030.
  - Promoting global prosperity—An increase in the mobilisation of private finance and further support for economic development and market creation through regulatory reform and infrastructure investment.
  - Tackling extreme poverty and helping the world’s most vulnerable—IBRD support to its poorer clients will increase to 70% (from around 63% historically) of its total lending and the proportion of its projects that narrow gender gaps will increase to 55% by June 2023.
  - Delivering value for money and efficiency—Further efficiencies. A new “financial sustainability framework” to help ensure that IBRD lending levels remain sustainable. Higher prices for wealthier countries, such as China, borrowing from IBRD.

1 This and all further GBP figures in the written ministerial statement are converted from USD using HMRC average exchange rate of April 2018 of £1 = $1.4,065.
2 See previous footnote.
The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury Minute informing the House of the contingent liability that HM Treasury has taken on in authorising the sale of a portfolio of Bradford & Bingley loans acquired during the financial crisis under the last Labour Government.

On this occasion, due to the sensitivities surrounding the commercial negotiation of this sale, it has not been possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the liability in advance of the sale announcement.

The contingent liability includes certain remote fundamental market-standard warranties which are capped at 100% of the final sale price. The maximum contingent liability arising from these remote warranties is capped at the total consideration received, giving a maximum contingent liability of £1.1 billion. The fundamental warranties are considered to be so remote that they do not meet the definition of a contingent liability requiring disclosure under international financial reporting standards. However, they are disclosed as remote contingent liabilities under principles of parliamentary accountability.

Further market-standard time and valued capped warranties and indemnities confirming regulatory, legislative and contractual compliance have been provided to the purchasers. The maximum contingent liability arising is approximately £0.3 billion.

I will update the House of any further changes to Bradford & Bingley as necessary. [HCWS649]

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the service complaints ombudsman’s annual report for 2017 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

This report is published by Nicola Williams, and covers the second year of operation of the new service complaints system and the work of her office in 2017.

The report recognises the improvements and progress made by the services in 2017, including the reduction in the backlog of pre-2016 complaints from the old system and where the services have demonstrated a better quality of evidenced decision making.

It also highlights those areas of the system where the ombudsman judges further work is required to improve the way in which complaints are handled, and makes ten new recommendations.

The findings of the report and the recommendations made will now be fully considered by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the ombudsman will follow once that work is complete. [HCWS648]

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 Luxembourg on 16 April. Counsellor Rory O’Donnell represented the UK.

The most substantive agricultural item was a presentation by the European Commission setting out a proposal for a directive on “unfair trading practices in business-to-business relationships in the food supply chain”. The Commission’s presentation highlighted the UK’s Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) as an example of best practice in this field. The UK outlined its agreement with member state action to tackle unfair trading practices, but stressed the need for any proposed EU-wide legislation to protect well-functioning existing national systems.

The Bulgarian presidency also provided the Council with an update on food losses and food waste, following the adoption of Council conclusions on tackling food waste in June 2016. The Council reaffirmed its commitment to meeting UN sustainable development goal 12.3 on food waste.

For fisheries, the focus of this Council was a presentation by the European Commission outlining a proposed multi-annual plan for fish stocks in western waters. The UK welcomed the proposal’s alignment of the western waters plan with the approach taken in the North sea plan, while reminding Council of the need to find solutions for by-catch stocks in the context of meeting the landing obligation.

Four further items were discussed under “any other business”:
- the Spanish delegation requested clarification on interpreting the landing obligation in article 15 of the common fisheries policy
- the presidency informed the Council of the outcomes of the TAIEX workshop on the role of wildlife in animal health management
- the Polish and Danish delegations presented information on African swine fever
- the European Commission informed Council about a proposed regulation on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain. [HCWS647]
Written Statements

Friday 27 April 2018

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): An informal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Sofia on 27-28 April 2018. The Council will discuss the following:

Working Session I - Convergence in the EU - Inside and outside the euro area

Based on a presidency issues note, the Council will exchange views on the ECOFIN Council roadmap of June 2016 on completing the banking union. This will be followed by an update from the Eurogroup president on reform of the European stability mechanism.

Working Session II - Improving revenue collection and fighting tax fraud in the single market

The Council will exchange views on improving revenue collection and fighting tax fraud in the single market. The Council will then be joined by Central Bank Governors for the first working session.

a) Convergence in the EU - Inside and outside the euro area

Following a presentation from the Centre for European Policy Studies, the Council will discuss the possibilities to increase convergence in the EU among both euro area and non-euro area member states.

b) Further reducing fragmentation within the capital markets union

Following a presentation from Bruegel on deepening the capital markets union, the Council will discuss measures to further reduce capital markets fragmentation. The Council will then be debriefed on the outcomes of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting on 19-20 April.

Working Session III - Corporate taxation and tax challenges of the digital economy

The Council will exchange views on the approach to corporate taxation in the single market and the tax challenges arising from digitalisation of the economy.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill: EVEL

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am pleased to announce the publication of our analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to Government amendments tabled to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill for consideration at Report stage.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws. Bill provisions that relate exclusively to England or to England and Wales, and which have a subject matter within the legislative competence of one or more of the devolved legislatures, can be certified.

The memorandum provides an assessment of Government amendments tabled to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of its Report stage in the House of Commons. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill, for the purpose of Standing Order No. 83L of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons.

This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments be accepted.

The memorandum will be published on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website and I will place a copy in the Library of the House.

[HCWS652]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Syria: UK Response and Brussels Conference

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The Syrian regime's continued and systematic blatant disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. Medical facilities, schools and aid workers appear to have been deliberately targeted, aid has been blocked to starve communities into submission, and rape and sexual violence have been deployed as routine weapons of war.

13.1 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance, including 5.6 million with acute needs. In addition, over half of Syria's population has been displaced by the violence, with 5.6 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

Since the conflict began seven years ago, the UK has been at the forefront of the international response. We are the second largest bilateral donor to the crisis. We are the second largest bilateral donor to the crisis. Our support to Syria and the region since 2012 has provided humanitarian assistance to 17 million people, including over 27,000,000 monthly food rations and over 10,000,000 vaccines, and helped over 7.1 million children gain a decent education.

But now, in the eighth year of the conflict, the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people remain as grave as they have ever been. It is clear that the regime has no intention of ending its people's suffering. The barbaric chemical weapons attack in Douma on innocent civilians, including young children, was yet another example of the regime's flagrant disregard for its responsibility to protect civilians.

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We must not turn our backs on their suffering. That is why at this week's Brussels conference for Syria and the region, I announced that the UK will provide at least £450 million this year, and £300 million next year.
to alleviate the extreme suffering in Syria and provide vital support in neighbouring countries. We have now committed £2.71 billion to the Syria crisis since 2012, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

Our pledge will help keep medical facilities open so doctors and nurses can save lives, and will help support the millions of Syrian refugees sheltering in neighbouring countries.

Our friends in the region, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in particular, continue to demonstrate extraordinary generosity in opening their doors and communities to millions fleeing the conflict in Syria.

We must continue to offer them our fullest support. Not least because as the trajectory of the Syrian war has worsened, our collective interests in a stable and prosperous region have increased. Jordan’s resilience and prosperity are critical to the long-run interests of the region. That is why, in addition to the support to the region provided in our pledge, I announced that the UK will host an international conference with Jordan in London later this year: to showcase Jordan’s economic reform plans, its aspiration to build/enable a thriving private sector, and to mobilise support from international investors and donors.

But money alone is not enough. We continue to support the UN-mediated process as the surest path to peace. But while we work towards a political solution in the future that can end this suffering once and for all, we must not give up on improving conditions in the present.

In this spirit, I called upon those present at the conference to join the UK in calling for concrete actions to enable greater protection for civilians and aid workers now. That means an immediate ceasefire and immediate safe access so that brave aid workers and medical staff can do their jobs and help the most vulnerable and the most desperate without fear of attack.

The UK is a global leader within the Syria response. I am proud that at this week’s conference, we demonstrated clearly that we will not turn away from the suffering of the Syrian people—we will continue to lead the response in working with others to call out atrocities, mobilise funding, demand access for aid, protect civilians and ultimately, work towards a solution that can put Syria on a path to peace.

TRANSPORT

Ministerial Correction

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I wish to inform the House that an error has been identified in the closing speech of the end-of-day debate on Thameslink upgrades across the south-east. [Official Report, 18 April 2018; Vol. 639, c.431]. The correct information should have been:

“As part of this upgrade, a fourth track and other improvements are being built north of Bedford, which will provide space for an additional train path from December 2020. Unfortunately, until these works take place, some difficult decisions have to be taken. East Midlands Trains’ fast peak-time services will not call at Bedford or Luton from May 2018 to December 2020.”

[HCWS653]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): I can today announce that we will extend the existing support within universal credit and child tax credit for children who would otherwise be likely to be in local authority care, including children who are adopted or looked after by non-parental carers, also known as kinship carers.

The policy to provide support in child tax credit and universal credit for a maximum of two children ensures parents in receipt of benefits face the same choices as those supporting themselves solely through work.

We recognise that not all parents are able to make the same choices about the number of children in their family. That is why exceptions have been put in place to protect certain groups. Exceptions apply to third and subsequent children who are part of a multiple birth; adopted or in non-parental caring arrangements when they would otherwise be in local authority care; or likely to have been born as a result of non-consensual conception.

For children who would otherwise be likely to be in local authority care, these exceptions will be applied regardless of the order in which they joined a household.

The Government recognise the immense value of the care that non-parental carers and adoptive parents provide. The role that those parents and carers play in helping to bring children up who could otherwise find themselves in local authority care is vital. It is for this reason that we are ensuring that they are supported by enabling them to access benefit entitlement in the same way as birth parents.

Since becoming Secretary of State, I have been reviewing this issue carefully to ensure that the exceptions, as they apply to non-parental carers and adoptive parents, provide the right level of support.

Last week, I welcomed the High Court ruling that the policy to provide support for a maximum of two children was lawful overall. I have considered the part of the judgment that pertains to non-parental carers alongside internal reviews that the Department for Work and Pensions carried out in parallel to the legal case, and I consider that it is right that this change should be extended, not just to those in non-parental caring arrangements, but to include children who are adopted who would otherwise be in local authority care.

This change will reassure those non-parental carers and parents who adopt and are eligible for this child support, that it will be available to them regardless of the order in which their children joined the household.

[HCWS650]
Petition

Monday 16 April 2018

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

NatWest bank closures

The petition of residents of Penistone and Stocksbridge,

Declares that the proposed closure by the NatWest Bank of its local branches in the town of Penistone and Stocksbridge should be reconsidered by the bank; further that the closure of these branches will leave both towns without bank services; further that the bank claims electronic banking will still allow customers to access services; further that the petitioners believe for many customers that this will not be possible and further that petitioners maintain that the closure of these branches could have a detrimental effect on many small business in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to recommend that the NatWest bank reconsiders the closure of these two branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Angela Smith. Official Report, Tuesday 6 February 2018; Vol.635, c.1463.]

Petitions in the same terms, objecting to the closure of bank branches were presented by the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen, (Royston Smith) [P002110]; the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) [P002111]; the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) [P002118]; the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) [P002125], [P002131]; the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) [P002121]; the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) [P002126], [P002129]; the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) [P002127], [P002130] and the rt. hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) [P002128].

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thank all Members of Parliament who have recently submitted petitions on bank branch closures on behalf of their constituents.

The Government are sorry to hear about residents’ disappointment at the closure of their local bank branches.

All banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies. Decisions on opening and closing branches and agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis, without intervention from Government.

Where closures are being carried out by RBS group, the Government are clear that their stake in RBS Group is managed at arm’s length by UK Financial Investments (UKFI). UKFI are wholly owned by the Government and are responsible for managing the Government’s stake in the assets acquired during the financial crisis. UKFI are not responsible, however, for managing the assets themselves. RBS retains its own board, which is responsible for strategic and management decisions and decisions relating to branch closures are solely within the remit of the bank.

However, the Government do believe that banks should act in the best interests of their customers and is committed to increasing competition to deliver better financial products and services for all bank customers. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these issues on an ongoing basis.

In May 2017, the major high street banks signed up to the Access to Banking Standard, committing to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services. The Standard commits banks to ensure customers are well informed about branch closures, the bank’s reasons for closure and options for continued access to banking services. These options should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. The operation of the Standard is monitored and enforced by the independent Lending Standards Board, ensuring that banks are held accountable for the way they treat their customers when a branch closes.

In addition, in January 2017, the Post Office announced that it had reached an agreement with the banks that will allow more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The new arrangement allows individual and small business customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at more than 11,600 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office’s extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. The Post Office estimates that 99% of personal and 95% of business customers will be able to carry out their day to day banking at a Post Office as a result of the new agreement.

Both initiatives have the Government’s full support, and banks are aware that the Government expect their involvement to be genuine and unqualified.

Should constituents decide to switch banks, the Government have made it easier to do so than ever before using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountsswitch.co.uk.

The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can it determine firms’ commercial strategies in response to those changes. However, the Government will continue to take positive action to maintain access to vital banking services and ensure banks support communities across the UK when their local branches close.
Petition

Thursday 19 April 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Provision of adequate, ring-fenced funding for mental health services

The petition of residents of Dulwich and West Norwood,
Declares that there is widespread concern about the deterioration of our mental health services and that those in need of care are receiving inadequate treatment as a result; further that a revolving door of admission, discharge and readmission is emerging, instead of the long term treatment that is needed; further notes that overworked professionals do not always have the time that they would like to spend with their patients to determine the best course of treatment and most appropriate support; and further that welcomes news that the Government is putting some extra funding into mental health services, but is concerned that this is insufficient, and not ring-fenced, and that despite the increase the proportion of funding that many Clinical Commissioning Group (CCGs) are spending has continued to fall, including in Lambeth and Southwark.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to commit to providing adequate, ring-fenced funding for mental health services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Hayes, Official Report, 13 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 572.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price):

The Government are committed to improving mental health services, as described in the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, and to ensuring staff are in place to deliver these improvements, as set out in the Mental Health Workforce plan, Stepping Forward to 2020-21.

It is the Government’s view that Clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) are best placed to make decisions on commissioning mental health services for their communities, based on local need and working closely with local authorities and other partners.

In 2018-19 all CCGs will be required to meet the Mental Health Investment Standard—increasing their spending on mental health services each year. This will be subject to confirmation by their auditors. In 2016-17 CCGs invested £9.7 billion on mental health services, which is £575 million more than the year before.

Transparency around mental health expenditure is a key priority for the Government, which is why we are now publishing every CCG’s expenditure as part of the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health Dashboard. This shows that CCG and specialised commissioning funding on mental health in England has risen to a planned £11.86 billion in 2017-18, and that Southwark CCG and Lambeth CCG both reported increased mental health expenditure in 2016-17 over the previous year.
Petitions

Tuesday 24 April 2018

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Cross border contracting of taxis

The petition of residents of Charnwood Borough,

Declares that the taxi drivers in Charnwood Borough Council seek an end to the practice of cross border contracting; further that taxi drivers in the area believe that this practice has affected the industry in a negative manner; further that cross border contracting poses a risk to public safety, takes work away from local drivers, is a crime that is difficult to prosecute and is the reason for a decline in the standard of service that the public expects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review their policies relating to cross border contracting.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Nicky Morgan, Official Report, 29 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 646.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani):

Legislation allows all taxis and private hire vehicles (PHVs) to undertake pre-booked journeys outside the area in which they are licensed, and PHV operators to sub-contract bookings to PHV operators based in other licensing areas. These measures have enabled the taxi and PHV trade to work more flexibly to meet the needs of passengers, increasing the availability of licensed operators, drivers and vehicles and mitigate the risk of passengers being turned away when a booking cannot be directly fulfilled.

Where local operators cannot meet demand, I believe that the sub-contracting of bookings, both within and across licensing borders, is preferable to the risk of the public resorting to the use of illegal, unlicensed, uninsured and unvetted drivers and vehicles.

Local licensing authorities in England and Wales have a duty to ensure that any person to whom they grant a taxi or PHV driver's licence is a fit and proper person to hold such a licence. Although the term ‘fit and proper’ is not defined in legislation, all licensing authorities require an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (criminal record) check.

Licensing authorities remain responsible for ensuring that all drivers it licenses remain fit and proper throughout the period of the licence. Any complaints about a driver can be investigated by the authority that issued the licence, regardless of where the driver was working at the time. Licensing authorities are also able to work together to ensure that enforcement action is taken against all vehicles and drivers licensed regardless of which authority licensed them.

The Government attach the utmost priority to passenger safety in the licensed taxi and PHV trade. My Department will consult on statutory guidance enabled under the Policing and Crime Act 2017. This guidance will contain robust standards that I expect all licensing authorities to adopt; these will ensure all passengers, particularly children and vulnerable adults, are protected when using taxi and PHV services. Also, we will be consulting on revised best practice guidance which will include recommendations to licensing authorities to assist them in setting appropriate standards to enable the provision of services the public demand.

At a Westminster Hall Debate on the 'Regulation of working conditions in the private hire industry', the former Minister for Transport, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. John Hayes), announced his intention to set up a working group to consider how PHV and taxi licensing authorities use their powers, and produce focused recommendations for action. The Task and Finish Working Group is considering the regulation of the trade as one of its key areas for discussion. I look forward to receiving the group's findings soon.

Speed Limit in Spatham Lane, Streath Lane and Underhill Lane

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current national speed limit in use on Spatham Lane, Streath Lane and Underhill Lane in the County of East Sussex is unsuitable as it is a danger to other users of the lanes, notably equestrians; further that the petition follows an incident that took place on Spatham Lane during September 2017 whereby a car collided with resident of Ditchling Mrs Beverley Berrill, who was on horseback; further that the accident resulted in the temporary hospitalisation of Mrs Berrill and the termination of the horse; and further that the incident has resulted in distress for local equestrians who wish to exercise their use of the local lanes in safety.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reclassify said roads as quiet lanes, or alternatively reduce the speed limit of the said lanes from its current national speed limit classification, to ensure greater safety for equestrians and other users of the lanes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maria Caulfield, Official Report, 21 March 2018; Vol. 635, c. 355.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

Local traffic authorities are responsible for setting speed limits on local roads. They have the flexibility to set local speed limits that are appropriate for the individual road, reflecting local needs and taking account of local considerations. The Department issued guidance to local highway authorities on setting local speed limits in 2013, which can be viewed online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-local-speed-limits.

All road users are required to comply with road traffic law in the interests of their own safety and that of other road users. For those who do not adopt a responsible attitude, or if their use of the highway creates an unsafe environment or causes nuisance, there are laws in place that can make them liable for prosecution. The offences include: driving dangerously, driving without due care and attention, and driving without reasonable consideration for other road users. This is set out in Rule 144 of The Highway Code and the penalties for these offences are listed in Annex 5. The Highway Code is available online at: www.gov.uk/browse/driving/highway-code-road-safety.
Enforcement of the law is a matter for the police who will decide, on the evidence of each individual case, whether an offence has been committed and the appropriate action to take.

The Department takes every opportunity to remind motorists of their responsibilities towards vulnerable road users, such as equestrians and their horses.

The Department, through the THINK! Road Safety Campaign, worked with the British Horse Society (BHS) to support its “Dead Slow” campaign to encourage car drivers to pass horses safely. The Department was able to reinforce the BHS campaign by developing a short film that is being promoted as a public information film on UK TV stations.

The Department also invested in promoting the film on YouTube and other social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. Leaflets and posters to support the campaign further reminded motorists of the need to be patient when they encounter horses on the road, and supplemented the advice already given in the Highway Code.

In addition THINK! launched a campaign to warn drivers of the dangers of country roads. Details of the campaign can be found at: http://think.direct.gov.uk/country-roads.html.

The driving theory test contains questions about how drivers should interact with vulnerable road users, including horse riders; and the hazard perception test includes a number of clips where horse riders are the hazard, either directly or indirectly. These clips are refreshed and updated periodically.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 18 April 2018

EDUCATION

Allergy Awareness in Schools

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on allergy awareness in schools on Wednesday 14 March 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): 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 policy for supporting pupils with medical conditions, including allergies. I will hold a roundtable to look at what more we can do to ensure that happens in every school.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Anti-Semitism

The following is an extract from the debate on anti-Semitism on Tuesday 17 April 2018.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,346 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK—the highest on record. [Official Report, 17 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 248.]

Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in my speech in the debate on anti-Semitism on 17 April 2018.

The correct information should have been:

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,382 anti-Semitic incidents in the UK—the highest on record.
Ministerial Corrections

HOME DEPARTMENT

Kerslake Arena Attack Review

The following are extracts from the statement on the Kerslake Arena Attack Review on 28 March 2018.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for her urgent question, and I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. What are the Government doing through the Prevent strategy in schools and colleges? Obviously, Prevent is the thing that stops the conveyor belt to extremism.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. If we are really to reduce the risk to our people, we need to invest in prevention. Although some people have issues with the Prevent scheme, we published the second lot of figures yesterday showing yet again that more than 200 people have been diverted away from following a path of violent extremism, and schools play one part of that role.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Will he agree to meet the people leading the review on radicalisation policy in Greater Manchester, the leaders of Oldham Council and of Bury Council, to learn lessons about whether the Prevent programme is in fact working? There are massive differences of opinion on that. Will the Government agree to learn from the review that Greater Manchester is undertaking on radicalisation policy?

Mr Wallace: I am very happy to meet the people undertaking that review, but I must point out that the figures published yesterday and those published earlier in the month show that Prevent is working in many areas.


Letter of correction from Mr Wallace:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. If we are really to reduce the risk to our people, we need to invest in prevention. Although some people have issues with the Prevent scheme, we published the second lot of figures yesterday showing yet again that more than 200 people have been diverted away from following a path of violent extremism, and schools play one part of that role.

Mr Wallace: I am very happy to meet the people undertaking that review, but I must point out that the figures published yesterday and last year show that Prevent is working in many areas.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 24 April 2018

TRANSPORT

Thameslink Upgrades

The following is an extract from the Minister’s reply to the Adjournment debate on 18 April 2018.

Bim Afolami: First, when was the decision made to make changes to East Midlands trains that would impact Harpenden? At what stage were changes to Harpenden’s services considered and decided upon?

Joseph Johnson: This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the system has ever undertaken and, as I have said, it will not have satisfied everybody in its first iteration. However, December is coming along in not too lengthy a period of time, and hon. Members are always welcome to put suggestions to the Department and to their operators for consideration.

The impact of the midland main line works only became apparent to us in November 2017, as I mentioned. This short timeline meant that a specific consultation for Harpenden passengers was simply not a viable option.


Letter of correction from Joseph Johnson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) during his Adjournment debate on Thameslink Upgrades.

The correct response should have been:

Joseph Johnson: This has been one of the biggest timetabling changes the system has ever undertaken and, as I have said, it will not have satisfied everybody in its first iteration. However, December is coming along in not too lengthy a period of time, and hon. Members are always welcome to put suggestions to the Department and to their operators for consideration.

The impact of the midland main line constraints only became apparent to us in November 2017, as I mentioned. This short timeline meant that a specific consultation for Harpenden passengers was simply not a viable option.

DEFENCE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 23 April 2018.

Nia Griffith: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Taking that as a yes, how is it that more than half a million pounds of LIBOR funds has been spent by the MOD in support of armed forces welfare, when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—the Minister for Defence people—has said categorically that “LIBOR funding should not be used to fund Departmental core responsibilities”?

Is it not time for the Secretary of State to admit that it was a serious misjudgment to use LIBOR funds in such a scandalous way? When will his Department be paying back that money?

Gavin Williamson: I am sure the hon. Lady is very well aware that the Ministry of Defence does not actually administer LIBOR funding—that is the Treasury. So much of the LIBOR funding has made such a difference, not just to those who have ceased to serve in our armed forces but to those who continue to serve. We are very grateful for the positive impact of that funding on so many of our services.


Letter of correction from Gavin Williamson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith).

The correct response should have been:

Gavin Williamson: I am sure the hon. Lady is very well aware that the Ministry of Defence does not actually commit LIBOR funding—that is the Treasury. So much of the LIBOR funding has made such a difference, not just to those who have ceased to serve in our armed forces but to those who continue to serve. We are very grateful for the positive impact of that funding on so many of our services.

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 23 April 2018.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Following on from what has been said earlier about the cadet force, does the Minister agree that the cadets are a great introduction to military life, because as well as giving children positive role models, they help to promote social mobility? Will he update the House on what steps the Department is taking to encourage the participation of state schools in the cadet movement?

Gavin Williamson: What our cadets do is extraordinary, right across the country, and we have had a roll-out of 500 new cadet units this year. This is about the ability to promote social mobility and giving youngsters an opportunity to really succeed in life—that is what our armed forces do. The cadet units are a brilliant way of giving young people the opportunity to get a taste of military life and they provide those role models. The question we need to be asking is: can we be doing more to inspire young people in our schools? I think the answer to that is a most certain yes.


Letter of correction from Gavin Williamson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns).

The correct response should have been:

Gavin Williamson: What our cadets do is extraordinary, right across the country, and we are planning to have a total of 500 cadet units in schools within the next two years. This is about the ability to promote social mobility and giving youngsters an opportunity to really succeed in life—that is what our armed forces do. The cadet units are a brilliant way of giving young people the opportunity to get a taste of military life and they
provide those role models. The question we need to be asking is: can we be doing more to inspire young people in our schools? I think the answer to that is a most certain yes.

TREASURY

Spring Statement

The following is an extract from the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s spring statement on 13 March 2018.

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 Philip 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 next year, and as we move to the fair funding formula for schools, every authority will be funded to enable every school to 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.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend has struck the right balance between the need for financial discipline and the justifiable need for investment in public services. With that in mind, will he ensure in the autumn Budget that additional funds are provided for schools to ensure the successful implementation of the national funding formula, which we welcomed in Stockport?

Mr Philip Hammond: When she was Education Secretary, my right hon. 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.


Letter of correction from Mr Philip Hammond:

An error has been identified in the response that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Hammond: When she was Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) announced that under the fair funding formula every authority will be funded to enable every school to receive a cash-terms increase.