HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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14 May 2018
The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Apprenticeship Starts

1. Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of apprenticeship starts since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. [905245]

2. Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of apprenticeship starts since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. [905246]

21. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of apprenticeship starts since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. [905265]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): At the outset, on behalf of all on the Government Benches, may I briefly echo the Prime Minister’s words on the passing of Dame Tessa Jowell? She gave a lifetime of tireless public service, and displayed incredible bravery and dignity in the final months. I know that there will be an opportunity shortly for colleagues throughout the House to pay tributes.

Since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, there have been 242,100 apprenticeship starts and we have seen a marked shift to higher-quality, longer and higher-level apprenticeships.

Mr Dhesi: Employers and providers of apprenticeships, including in my constituency, are concerned that the approvals process for apprenticeship standards is far too slow and bureaucratic. That follows the news that the Institute for Apprenticeships cleared only four standards in April and 10 in March—that is actually down from 21 in February. What extra resources will the Secretary of State give the IFA to address those genuine concerns?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman’s constituency has leading apprenticeship employers, including Centrica, Mars and Telefónica-O2, and they play a leading role in showing what it is possible to do with apprenticeships. The IFA has brought forward a programme called “Faster and Better” to make sure that standards are approved more quickly, and we have seen the number of apprenticeship starts on standards rising sharply. We continue to monitor that.

Eleanor Smith: Last year, the Government set a target of 2.3% of the workforce for public bodies on employing apprentices, yet following a series of parliamentary questions by the shadow Education team we have discovered that the vast majority of Departments, including the Department for Education, are failing to hit that target. If the Department is unable to meet such targets internally, how are we supposed to believe that it is going to meet the 3 million target by 2020?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is right to identify the important role that the public sector plays and to say that we have to try additionally hard. She mentioned
my Department, and we have opportunities for training assistants and graduates through the teaching apprenticeship.

Judith Cummins: The Government say that they want 3 million new apprentices by 2020, but all the signs are that we are going in the wrong direction. Last year there were 70 fewer apprentice starts in my constituency than the year before, and nationally starts are down by 23%. Can the Minister tell us why that is? Do the Government agree with the British Chambers of Commerce that the apprenticeship levy is “unfit for purpose”?

Damian Hinds: The apprenticeship levy is an important structural reform to the way we do training provision in this country, to make sure that all sizeable firms are contributing to upskilling the nation. We are in a period of change, and some employers are taking longer to bed down what they are going to do with their apprenticeship levy money. We must bear in mind that they have two years to do that with each month’s money, but we are seeing a shift to longer, higher-quality apprenticeships, and that trend is to be welcomed.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend is committed to helping more disadvantaged apprentices. The Conservative manifesto said: “We will introduce significantly discounted bus and train travel for apprentices to ensure that no young person is deterred from an apprenticeship.” Does my right hon. Friend agree with the British Chambers of Commerce that the apprenticeship levy is “unfit for purpose”?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend rightly identifies the importance of making sure that apprenticeships are fully inclusive, and we continue to look at ensuring that such facilitation is available.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that more women are taking up apprenticeships in science, technology and manufacturing?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right to identify the challenge that we have in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths. That goes for apprenticeships and for other parts of the education and training system, as well as employment. It is partly about encouraging girls through programmes such as “Girls Get Coding”. We are taking part in the Year of Engineering, and we continue to support improvements in gender representation through our diversity champions network.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that raising the quality of apprenticeships is just as important as raising the numbers, and that there is evidence that good progress is being made in this area?

Damian Hinds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. In reforming apprenticeships, we looked around the world to see what the standards were in leading nations such as Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Having a lengthy apprenticeship with a significant off-the-job training element is very important.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State looked at the impact of cuts in further education on apprenticeships, particularly in Coventry?

Damian Hinds: Of course, through the apprenticeship levy, the funding available for apprenticeships will be roughly twice what it was at the start of the decade, and further education colleges are among those that can bid for that funding and benefit from it.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) about funding for the levy, is it not right that the levy is an important part of the reforms in this policy area and will ensure that there is long-term investment in apprenticeship training?

Damian Hinds: That is absolutely right. As I said earlier, the levy ensures that all sizeable firms contribute to the upskilling of the nation. It is an employer-led system to make sure that the apprenticeships that are done are those demanded by employers.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): May I echo the Secretary of State’s words regarding our friend, the late Dame Tessa Jowell? I think in particular of her role in the founding of Sure Start centre, not just as the shadow Secretary of State for Education but because when I was a young mum it was the local Sure Start centre that really helped me and my son. For all that is said and done in this Chamber, that is the best that any Member can hope to have achieved.

Last week, Ministers told us that nursing apprenticeships were the answer to NHS staff shortages. They set a target of 1,000 nursing apprentices, but just 30 have actually started training. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how many will start this year?

Damian Hinds: Apprenticeships are an important opportunity in the national health service, and we continue to work with the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care on them. Of course, in the health service, as throughout society and the economy, apprenticeships are employer-led programmes, so the health service takes the lead.

Higher Education: Part-time and Mature Students

3. Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the decreasing number of part-time and mature students in higher education.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Part-time participation in higher education is absolutely important to making higher education accessible to everyone and promoting lifelong learning. We have adopted a number of measures to support part-time and mature students. For example, next year part-time students will for the first time ever be able to access full-time equivalent maintenance loans.

Chris Williamson: The Minister will be aware that since the Government tripled tuition fees to £9,000, the number of part-time student applications has fallen by...
a staggering 59%. Even the former Universities Minister David Willetts has said that that is a disaster. Will the Minister take this opportunity to apologise to a whole generation of would-be part-time students and outline in a little more detail than he just gave what steps he is going to take to reverse this awful trend?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the downward trend in part-time students, which actually started before the tuition fee changes. The Prime Minister has announced a review of post-18 education and funding, which will look into, among other things, flexible, part-time and distance learning, as well as commuter study options, to boost the options available to those who want to pursue such a course of study.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I declare an interest: I read history. Many graduates see an advantage in returning to higher education to learn a STEM subject. I read history. Many graduates see an advantage in returning to higher education to learn a STEM subject. What is the Minister going to do about that?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend refers to the qualifications required for someone to be able to go back and study for a further degree. We have relaxed the “equivalent or lower qualification” rules to support students who already have a degree and wish to retrain in a STEM subject on a part-time basis. If my hon. Friend is contemplating an engineering degree in his spare time, the way is open.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): First, may I associate myself and those on the Scottish National party Benches with the Secretary of State’s remarks regarding the sad passing of Dame Tessa Jowell? Last year, more than 38,000 non-UK students enrolled on part-time higher education courses. Such students are important for universities’ income streams and for the wider local economy, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that part-time students from the EU are not subject to harsh immigration rules post Brexit?

Mr Gyimah: Part-time students from the EU will be treated in the same way as full-time students from the EU. We have made our position on EU students clear. We will make announcements in respect of future years—2019-20 and 2020-21—in due course.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Does the Minister not realise that since tripling HE tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012, Tory-led Governments have been a disaster for mature and part-time students in England? As my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) said, there has been a 59% drop in part-time student applications. That has left scores of continuing education centres in HE axed, while our iconic, world-renowned Open University, where I proudly taught for 20 years, is in crisis. What is the Minister going to do now—not after a wait for pittances in the 2019 review—to protect the OU, where students will not benefit from the loans he talks about, and others from policies that have become both socially and economically insane?

Mr Gyimah: Of the £1.3 billion of grant funding that the Higher Education Funding Council for England allocated to support teaching in higher education last year, £72 million went to part-time study. The Open University received £48 million of that, and 47,000 students have steady part-time courses there. We are supporting the OU. It is going through restructuring at the moment, but as I have often said, the review is looking at that and we will ensure that it continues to deliver excellent education for part-time students.

Sixth-form Colleges: Funding

4. Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for sixth-form colleges.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We have protected the 16-to-19 funding base rate until 2020 to make sure that every young person can access an excellent education. There are also the 16-to-19 bursary funds, which can be used to help disadvantaged students meet the costs of participation, including transport costs, and of course there will be an extra £600 for every additional student taking level 3 maths.

Laura Pidcock: That is not the reality in my community. To me, it is unjustifiable to provide £50 million for grammar schools when Wolsingham School, in the heart of rural Weardale in my constituency, has been forced to suspend its sixth form, which means that young people may have to travel up to four hours for access to post-16 education. The issues are inadequate per-pupil funding combined with historical debt from years of cuts and the failure of the funding formula to allow for smaller pupil numbers owing to rurality, or a lack of grammar school places. Will the Secretary of State please come to Weardale, and will the Minister also look into this case with urgency and provide some assurance to young people, teachers and parents in Weardale that they will have a sixth form come September?

Anne Milton: I know that the hon. Lady met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and that the Department for Education is working closely with Durham. The Secretary of State will keep closely in touch with her, because I appreciate that her concern is about the learners in her constituency.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): First, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the excellent work she is doing in this area? Is she aware that the absolutely first-class sixth-form college in Haywards Heath is now closed, in an area where there is a desperate need for a sixth-form college to cater for the ambitions and the further education of many young people coming out of our local schools? Will she do her very best to work with us, Mid Sussex District Council, West Sussex County Council and the local universities to put together a really original idea to reopen Haywards Heath sixth-form college?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Indeed, I was at school on that campus. [Hon. Members: “Ah!”] It was a grammar school then. The Department for Education is working very closely with others on the matter, and I have to say that not only my right hon. Friend’s input but that of the district council has been brilliant. I would dearly love to see an innovative and a really groundbreaking project on the site.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If the Minister is to get to the heart of these things, she must come to Huddersfield and see that we have not only two excellent sixth-form colleges but a further education college. We need all those facilities to be as good as they can be, but at the moment all of them are struggling under financial cuts.

Anne Milton: I look forward to visiting the hon. Gentleman’s constituency at the earliest opportunity. I am spread rather thinly, and there are many colleges for me to get round. [ Interruption. ] I missed a football match yesterday.

Mr Speaker: Which Arsenal won.

Anne Milton: Well, Mr Speaker, I know quite a lot about sixth-form colleges and FE colleges, although I am due a visit to the hon. Gentleman’s, and a great deal less about football, so I will not be drawn into making a comment.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: having sixth-form colleges, further education colleges, independent training providers and higher education institutes all working together is how we can raise standards to the levels that we all want to see.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): In both educational performance and value for money, sixth-form colleges are the most successful institutions in our education system, so when will the Government fund existing colleges properly and take steps to establish many more sixth-form colleges across the country?

Anne Milton: We are looking at the resilience of the FE sector across the board to ensure that it is as efficient and effective as possible. Learners are at the heart of all that, as we want to ensure that young people have all the opportunities possible. Sixth-form colleges do a brilliant job, and I am looking forward to visiting Godalming College on Friday.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): On the subject of resilience, how long does the Minister think it is sustainable for 16 to 18-year-olds to be funded 21% less than those who are 16 and under, and 48% less than university students?

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty campaigner in this area; we have had many debates across the Chamber on the issue. There is a post-18 review under way, and we are looking at the resilience of the FE sector. What matters is that we ensure that every learner, whichever route they choose to take—further education or training through an apprenticeship—has the best possible training and education.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): My local side Ashton United, who do a lot with local schools, were promoted recently.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Of course, this is not a new issue; we are simply shining a light on it. We recently published extensive data showing the poor educational outcomes for children in need. A call for evidence has been launched to develop our understanding. My Department is also working with three What Works centres to build our national evidence base on improving those outcomes.

Derek Twigg: That was a bit of a poor answer. The number of children’s centres has halved since 2010, 350 Sure Start centres have closed, children’s services departments in local authorities are struggling with budgets and getting enough staff, and more children are being taken into care, so that answer is quite frankly not good enough. What are the Government going to do to ensure that we have more early intervention to prevent those problems from happening in the first place?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are determined to close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. The early years are crucial to getting that right. The gap continues to narrow, having gone from 19 to 17 percentage points. In our ambitious £800 million plan, “Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential”, we committed £100 million of investment to help close the gap further. Councils decide how they use children’s centres in the overall provision, and I have seen great work being done in Wigan, Hackney and Staffordshire. It is not simply about bricks and mortar.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the excellent review of the outcomes of children in need will look not just at educational outcomes, but at employment and other outcomes?

Nadhim Zahawi: I can confirm that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I would like to associate myself and the Liberal Democrats with the tributes paid to Dame Tessa Jowell. She was an inspiration, particularly in the area of early-years provision.
Looking after children in Oxfordshire could have to wait for up to six months to get into the secondary school that they need to, primarily because local authorities do not have the directive powers over academies that they do over maintained schools. What is the Minister doing to ensure that the most vulnerable children do not miss a day of school?

Nadhim Zahawi: I also pay my own tribute to Dame Tessa Jowell, who was a constituent of mine and helped me in this place when I arrived here as a young novice. Those most disadvantaged children, to whom the hon. Lady referred, are actually given priority during the admissions process.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What about Shakespeare?

Mr Speaker: Well, we cannot mention Shakespeare in every question, but I am sure that the Minister will take his opportunity ere long.

Basic Skills

6. Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve basic skills. [905250]

16. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve basic skills. [905260]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We fully fund maths and English provision for adults and will do the same for digital from 2020. A record number of 19-year-olds now hold a level 2 qualification in English and maths. We perform to above the OECD average for literacy, at 14 out of 34, but we perform below the OECD average for numeracy, at 20 out of 30, and we have to change that.

Thelma Walker: When I met representatives of businesses in my constituency, they told me that many apprentices are missing core skills such as English and maths. What plans does the Minister have to address these concerns without placing additional pressure on young people through yet more testing?

Anne Milton: The new primary maths curriculum that came into effect in 2014 focuses on ensuring that children are fluent in basic arithmetic, including their times tables. The objective is for every child to leave primary school ready for the demands of secondary school. These reforms are already starting to yield results. Anecdotal evidence shows that fewer children are without these basic skills going into secondary school. My job, with responsibilities for post-16 education, is to make sure that those who missed out on that type of reformed education get an opportunity to catch up.

Kate Green: Government funding for ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—has fallen by 53% in real terms since 2010, and participation rates have fallen by 36%. Home Office-funded regional ESOL co-ordinators say that there is severe pressure on provision at pre-entry level. What additional funding are the Government going to put into ESOL?

Anne Milton: Funding matters, absolutely—I am not disputing that; but this is also about the innovative ways in which people—

Kate Green indicated dissent.

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady raises her eyes to the heavens, but this does make a difference. I have seen some extraordinary examples of adult education providers working with local primary schools to make sure that people who need English language skills get the support they need.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why did the Minister not proceed with the grants for year 7 catch-up projects?

Anne Milton: I will have to write to my right hon. Friend about that. It is an area that falls between my portfolio and that of the School Standards Minister.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Daily Mile initiatives are good for our young people’s physical and mental wellbeing, attainment, and readiness to learn in the classroom. Will the Minister therefore undertake to look at how these initiatives can be more widely rolled out in schools and also supported across Government?

Anne Milton: The School Standards Minister will have heard my hon. Friend’s question. This is not just about classroom learning—there is no doubt about that. There are all sorts of initiatives that make a difference not only to how much children learn but their readiness to learn.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): This Wednesday is National Numeracy Day. Speaking as a mathematician—not a historian—I welcome the fantastic work that the Government are doing to increase critical basic maths participation for longer in our schools, especially for girls. Does the Minister agree that, as our all-party group on maths and numeracy report on early years highlighted last year, we need to invest more in basic skills in maths-focused learning and teacher training for early years education, so that through the development of number sense, all children can flourish in maths once they get to school?

Mr Speaker: It is also Mental Health Awareness Week, colleagues, as I am sure you will all be aware. I commend the ribbon to you—on top of the important point that the hon. Lady has made.

Anne Milton: I fear that when I take the national numeracy test on Wednesday, as I intend to do, my stress levels will be rising; I gave up maths at 15 after I took O-level. We should be shocked that one in two adults have the numeracy skills of an 11-year-old or younger—the figure is one in six for English—and that 11 million adults lack basic digital skills. We live in a rarefied atmosphere in this place, and some of us find it quite extraordinary to appreciate those facts. The test on Wednesday is a must for every Member of this House. I hope that they will join me in taking it, tweeting the picture, and making sure that everybody understands the need to be numerate.
Church of England Free School: South Birmingham

7. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What progress has been made on plans for a new Church of England free school in south Birmingham.

Mr Speaker: [905251]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is planned that Christ Church Church of England Secondary Academy will open in September 2021. Feasibility studies have been completed on the proposed site on School Road in Yardley Wood and will be shared with local residents at ward meetings in advance of the formal planning application in the late autumn.

Steve McCabe: I am grateful for that information. About this time last year, Ministers and officials told us that they could afford to close Baverstock school in Druids Heath because they had more than sufficient places in south Birmingham. Now it transpires that around that time they were planning to build another school a mile and a half down the road on playing fields used by local residents, including Maypole Juniors FC, for a variety of recreational activities. Can the Minister talk us through the economics of his decision?

Mr Speaker: Briefly.

Nick Gibb: The decision to locate and build the new school in Yardley Wood rather than on the Baverstock site is supported by Birmingham City Council, as that location will help address the need for new secondary school places not only in the Selly Oak area but in the neighbouring Hall Green area. The feasibility study shows that the site can accommodate a school and make greater use of the playing fields, and will significantly improve sporting facilities for both pupils and the local community.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no. Gainsborough in Lincolnshire is a splendid place, but it is a considerable distance from south Birmingham. I know that I can rely on the ingenuity of the hon. Gentleman to give us his thoughts on another matter at a later point in our proceedings, but not much later, I am sure.

Safeguarding for 16 and 17-year-olds

8. Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the quality of safeguarding for 16 and 17-year-olds.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It was wonderful to see “Three Girls” triumph at the BAFTAs yesterday, and that was also a demonstration of what happens when agencies fail. Schools and colleges must have regard to the Department’s statutory safeguarding guidance, “Keeping children safe in education”. Ofsted has published a document setting out the approach inspectors should take to inspecting safeguarding. Inspectors will always report on whether arrangements for safeguarding children and learners are effective.

Fiona Onasanya: In my constituency, the schools that serve our 16 and 17-year-olds and that have sustained the biggest cuts were graded level 3 by Ofsted, which means that they are now deemed to require improvement. Does the Minister agree that the average of £300 less per pupil is having a negative impact?

Nadhim Zahawi: The same safeguarding duties apply for 16 and 17-year-olds as for children of any age. That would be the message that I would send to the hon. Lady’s school.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Sixteen and 17-year-olds are overrepresented in the secure residential estate. Instead of addressing capacity issues, last year, in the face of opposition, the Government changed legislation so that the most vulnerable children from England and Wales can now be placed in Scotland, miles away from their families, friends, schools and the health professionals who support them. Written questions that I have asked show that the Minister has made no attempt to look at the impact of this dire legislative change. Why is that?

Nadhim Zahawi: Placing any child or young person more than 20 miles away from their area requires the agreement of the director of children’s services. Children should always be placed where appropriate and the director of children’s services must make that decision.

Further Education Providers: Funding

9. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he plans to increase funding for further education providers; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We protected the 16-to-19 funding base rate for all types of further education providers in the 2015 spending review. I should point out that the additional investment for the new T-levels to increase hours of learning from 600 to 900 per session will result in £550 million by the time of their roll-out. We are also spending £20 million to help teachers with T-levels, and there is a host of other funding going into FE, not least the restructuring fund—£726 million was made available by the Treasury. There is also the local growth fund for capital and the strategic college improvement fund.

Gareth Snell: What the Minister really said there, in a very long-winded way, was that there is no new funding. T-levels do not exist yet, and the funding she has re-announced already exists. Some £1.3 million would have been available to the colleges and further education establishments in my constituency had the Department not redirected the underspend between 2014 and 2017. I simply ask her: can we have it back, please?

Anne Milton: As I pointed out earlier, we have a post-18 funding review going on and we are looking at the resilience of the FE sector—

Gareth Snell indicated dissent.

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman can shake his head—

Gareth Snell: I can shake my head, yes.
Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman was shaking his head, but perhaps he just had a fly buzzing around his ears.

We are looking at resilience. I was at Leicester College last week— it was a fabulous visit to a fabulous college—and, interestingly, it said that employers and universities are now coming to it. The opportunities for FE colleges to generate income through apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy have never been better.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that work has now started on the new £17 million high-tech and skills centre at South Devon College in Paignton. Does she agree that this funding makes the college the ideal place to be one of the first to deliver T-levels?

Anne Milton: I do not want to jump a stage in the announcements, but I have to say that South Devon College is clearly doing a wonderful job putting in that new facility and, I have no doubt, working very closely with local employers.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As the Minister will know, Hull College has been one of the recipients of Fresh Start funding. However, a condition of the funding is that the college can spend only 60% of its income on staff, which has led to its having to get rid of 231 full-time equivalent posts—one in three jobs going from Hull College. Will the Minister explain where the figure of 60% came from, and how will she make the process more transparent so that people can actually understand what is happening?

Anne Milton: I am very aware that Hull College has had record amounts of funding put in, and we are working very closely with it to make sure that we get a sustainable solution for learners in the hon. Lady’s area. Good colleges, and I see this as I go around the country, are about having good financial management and good leadership, both of which are crucial. I know that the FE commissioner and my team in the Department for Education will continue to work closely with the hon. Lady to make sure that we get the right solution for Hull.

PSHE Lessons: Problem Gambling

10. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If he will take steps to ensure that the dangers of problem gambling are taught in PSHE lessons.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): At the beginning of the year, we invited views through a call for evidence on the status and content of personal, social and health and economic education, and we spoke to a range of expert groups. We are considering the evidence we have gathered, and we will make an announcement on the subject later in the year.

Philip Davies: Will the Minister work with Gamble Aware and other problem gambling charities such as YGAM—the Young Gamblers Education Trust—to ensure that schoolchildren understand gambling and the dangers of gambling addiction, especially given that the Government, wrongly in my view, currently allow 16-year-olds to gamble on the national lottery and scratchcards?

Nick Gibb: Some schools already choose to teach about the dangers of gambling in their curriculum—for example, in their PSHE provision. During the recent call for evidence, we heard from a number of problem gambling charities, including Gamble Aware, and we are considering the evidence that they submitted.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the provision of integrated user-friendly programmes is crucial to delivering good PSHE in primary schools, and will he recognise the work of organisations such as 1decision and Headway, which I have the pleasure of hosting in Parliament today?

Nick Gibb: I very much hope that those organisations will respond to the call for evidence; we are keen to hear from organisations with expertise in this area. We are consulting on the content of relationships education, and we will respond to the consultation shortly.

Kinship Carers

11. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What support the Government provide for kinship carers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The Government recognise the important role that family and friends play in caring for children who are unable to live with their parents. We have set clear duties on local authorities to support children living with family or friend carers, regardless of their legal status.

Melanie Onn: I find that answer particularly interesting because that tells me that the Government are doing absolutely nothing. Three quarters of kinship care families experience severe financial hardship. Does the Minister agree with me that kinship carers should get the same rights and allowances as foster carers, and will he take a first step by agreeing to discount tax credits from the benefit cap for kinship carers?

Nadhim Zahawi: Kinship carers actually have access to benefit entitlements in the same way as birth parents.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): On Friday night, I held a crime forum in Corsham, and outreach to carers and parents by schools was regularly discussed. Corsham high school already employs a person to do this outreach, and a lot of charities also work in this space. Are there any plans by the Government to review support and to share best practice, which can encourage social mobility?

Nadhim Zahawi: As part of our social mobility action plan, we are looking at all these issues. I would be very happy to discuss them with my hon. Friend.

Disabled Students’ Allowance: Self-contribution Charge

12. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the self-contribution charge of £200 under the disabled students’ allowance on trends in the level of students applying for that allowance.

[905254] [905255] [905256]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Official data shows that there were 4,600 fewer English full-time undergraduate students receiving equipment from disabled students’ allowances. This is expected, because we knew the numbers would fall once students had to pay £200 towards the cost of computer equipment. Evaluation of the impact of this change is currently under way.

Marsha De Cordova: The truth is that the number of students in receipt of the disabled students’ allowance for essential equipment has fallen by nearly 30% since the £200 up-front fee was introduced. Given that this charge is clearly preventing disabled students from accessing the essential equipment they need to further their studies, will the Minister commit today to reversing that £200 fee?

Mr Gyimah: I think the hon. Lady misunderstands the situation. The fact that the number of students who are accessing the £200 has gone down does not mean that they are lacking in equipment. The truth is that computer ownership is now common among all students, with students spending on average around £250 on computers. As DSAs are not intended to cover all student costs, we think it is reasonable to ask students to contribute towards the cost of computer equipment.

Social Mobility Action Plan

13. Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to improve social mobility since the publication of the Social Mobility Action Plan.

18. Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): What steps he is taking to improve social mobility.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Social mobility is at the heart of our programmes and my own priorities. We have announced a number of steps, including delivery plans for a further six opportunity areas, and a pilot scheme to help parents improve their children’s early language and literacy skills at home.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. As we rightly pay tribute to the amazing Dame Tessa Jowell, who pioneered Sure Start centres, is now not the moment for us to come together across this House and recognise that boosting the early years is the route to social mobility in this country? Even George Osborne said that to the Education Committee the week before last. Will the Secretary of State work with me and others in the all-party parliamentary groups to look again at how we restart the Sure Start programme and to give life to maintained nursery schools, which do so much for quality early education in some of our most deprived communities?

Damian Hinds: We absolutely come together in recognising the fundamental importance of the early years. I am afraid it is all too depressing a fact that, from what happens from age zero to five, so much is predictable of what will happen in later life. Addressing that involves a number of different strands, one of which is what happens in the home, and that is perhaps what has had least attention hitherto. The work of children’s centres is also important, and there are over 2,000 children’s centres across the country. It also matters what happens in childcare and early years settings, and we now have many more young disadvantaged children—71% of eligible two-year-olds—benefiting from the 15 hours at age two.

Sammy Wilson: I congratulate the Government on the additional funding that they have made available for the expansion of grammar schools, especially since grammar schools have traditionally been the mode by which many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been able to improve their education chances. To access funding, what steps must schools take to show that they are genuinely improving access to academically gifted youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Damian Hinds: That is an incredibly important question. Northern Ireland has a particularly strong record on educational outcomes when we look at the international tables. The right hon. Gentleman asks specifically what schools need to do to bid into the capital fund for selective schools. They would have to submit a fair access and partnership plan and, at a minimum, commit to prioritising pupil premium pupils in their admissions criteria. They would also have to re-examine their admission or testing arrangements and undertake outreach to support access for disadvantaged pupils.

Childcare Settings: Financial Viability


15. Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Government’s policy on funded childcare on the financial viability of childcare settings.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): By 2019-20, we will be spending an extra £1 billion annually on higher funding rates to deliver 30 hours of free childcare. The rates are based on our review of childcare costs, which was described as both thorough and wide-ranging by the National Audit Office. We have commissioned new research to understand providers’ current costs.

Afzal Khan: According to Ofsted, the number of childminders dropped once again in the last three months of 2017. We now have over 15,000 fewer childminders than there were in 2012. Does the Minister believe that funding levels have played a part in this dramatic drop-off? If not, how does he explain it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are spending record amounts on childcare—£6 billion in total. If we look at parents who got their 30 hours of childcare for three and four-year-olds, we see that 377,000 codes have been issued for the summer term. The system is working.

Dan Carden: Evidence to the Treasury Committee shows that the Government’s scheme is making childcare cheaper only for those already using it and failing to
bring parents into work. How have Ministers created a system that pushes child carers into poverty and out of business, and prices out the poorest families in most need, like those in north Liverpool?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Mr Speaker, you will not be surprised that I disagree with those words. A lone parent has to earn just over £6,500 and a couple just over £13,000 to be eligible for the 30-hour three and four-year-old offer. The Secretary of State spoke about the two-year-old 15 hour disadvantage offer and that same 15 hours for three and four-year-olds as well. The evidence is clear that the money is being targeted at those who are in most need.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The latest evidence that the 30-hours policy is underfunded came in the shape of a survey of providers conducted by the National Association of Head Teachers. It showed that a quarter of providers believe that 30-hours children have displaced three and four-year-olds who are entitled to only 15 hours of free childcare—the children most likely to be disadvantaged. Will the Minister tell us whether this was in the plan for this policy? If not, does he not agree with the chorus of voices telling him it is time to relieve the financial pressures on providers so that the poorest children do not miss out?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** This year, we will be enhancing our annual survey of childcare and early years providers with more detailed research on provider finances and childcare costs. This will provide us with robust, up-to-date evidence on childcare costs. I remind the hon. Lady that funding to local authorities for three and four-year-olds, delivered through the early years national funding formula, has increased from £4.56 to £4.94. As of April 2017, our funding rate to deliver the entitlement for two-year-olds increased by 7% in every local authority.

**Mr Speaker:** We move on to Topical questions. I give notice to the House that I would like to move on to tributes to Baroness Jowell at 3.30 pm, so it is important that colleagues are either characteristically or uncharacteristically, as the case may be, brief.

**Topical Questions**

**T1.** [905270] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):** Last week I announced the drive for more good school places at selective schools, free schools and faith schools, alongside others, to meet local demand and to strengthen partnership between independent schools and the state sector. This will build on our investment in creating over 800,000 new schools places since 2010. Great education is all about great teachers, and this month I announced plans for a clearer system of accountability, freeing up teachers to focus on what really matters in the classroom. If children arrive at school struggling with language they are at a disadvantage and that hampers social mobility, as we were just discussing. I have announced two new schemes to help to close the word gap, including a pilot to provide practical tools to parents and funding for local authorities to share good practice.

**Luke Graham:** Currently, Scottish universities receive about £560 million research and development funding from the UK Government. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to guarantee that investment post Brexit and to support spin-off companies spreading wealth across the UK?

**Damian Hinds:** In the industrial strategy we have set out a long-term ambition to raise UK investment in R&D to 2.4% by 2027, and our guarantee of Horizon 2020 funding for UK participants remains in place.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A hard Brexit could see Scotland miss out on millions of pounds in European research funding, damaging the success of our universities. The Universities Minister said that we will not participate in Horizon 2020’s successor programme at any price. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how much would be considered too much?

**Damian Hinds:** We have to look at this and consider value for money. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say “not at any price”. The UK, including Scotland, remains an extremely attractive destination for these research projects.

**T2.** [905271] **‘Jeremy Quin’** (Horsham) (Con): What support has the Department provided to schools to help them to address cost pressures?

**The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):** The Department provides a range of support to schools, including a national deal to help schools to save money on such things as energy, where there is a 10% saving, or photocopiers and other computer equipment, where there are savings of up to 40%. We are also providing buying hub advice in pilots in the north-west and the south-west and a new framework from this September to help to drive down the costs of agency supply staff.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the unintended consequence of the Progress 8 assessment system, as The Times Educational Supplement put it this week, is that all the losers look the same—they are schools in white, working-class areas with high levels of pupil premium. On the current measures, this will result in Ofsted having no choice but to downgrade these schools, compounding the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, and putting off prospective academy sponsors. What action is the Minister taking?

**Nick Gibb:** Actually, Progress 8 carries widespread support in the sector. It is a far better method of assessing schools than the previous method—five or more GCSEs of A* to C—because it measures progress and takes into account the starting point of pupils when they start secondary school. We think it is a good measure. We are looking at some of the details of the outliers when we calculate Progress 8, and we will have more to say on that in due course.

**T4.** [905274] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): The Minister will have read the Education Committee’s report on the Government’s Green Paper on children’s mental health.
Does the Minister agree with the Committee that there needs to be specific, distinct proposals to enable looked-after children to access mental health services?

T3. [905273] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Almost one in three children at secondary school in the north-east attends a school judged to be “inadequate” or “needing improvement”. Rather than chucking money at grammar schools, when can we expect to see action to drive up standards and tackle education inequality in regions such as the north-east?

**Damian Hinds**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to identify the challenge in the north-east—a region with particularly strong primary schools and early years settings, but with more of a challenge at secondary school. She is absolutely right that we need to work doubly hard, and I look forward to working with her.

T5. [905275] **Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): I have seen the enthusiasm for apprenticeships from firms in Ashford improve markedly in recent years, which is great, but I hope Ministers agree that the quality of apprenticeships is as important as quantity. Is my right hon. Friend in discussion with the Institute for Apprenticeships about how to enhance the quality of apprenticeships?

**Damian Hinds**: My right hon. Friend the Skills Minister is in very regular contact with the IFA, and I also met it last week. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) is absolutely correct to identify that if we are going to make the step change that we need in the skills and productivity of this country, it is going to be all about driving quality.

T8. [905279] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on art, craft and design in education, I welcome the Government’s recent announcement of extra funding for the arts. However, will the Minister explain what benefit that would bring to the majority of children who are missing out on arts education because of funding cuts, as evidenced by the recent BBC survey on this issue, especially as the new money went to the gifted and talented?

**Nick Gibb**: Yes, the money we announced was for those schemes, but we are spending £500 million between 2016 and 2020 on music and arts in our schools. We value music and the arts in our schools— they are hugely important—and those schools with the best academic results also tend to have very strong arts, music and sports facilities and offer that as well.

T6. [905277] **Vicky Ford** (Chesterfield) (Con): English universities are soon to start advertising for courses that start in 2019, after we have left the EU, and the courses will run after the transition period. Will the Minister provide an update on the fee status that will apply to EU students on those courses?

**The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation** (Mr Sam Gyimah): As ever, my hon. Friend is spot on with her question. Institutions and students need information on the support students are entitled to. We will be making information available for the 2019-20 academic year as soon as possible.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister for sixth-form colleges be willing to meet me to discuss some of the financial and capital needs facing Britain’s best sixth-form college, St Dominic’s in my constituency?

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills** (Anne Milton): I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that when the hated 1% pay cap is lifted, the balance will be paid entirely from central funds and will not be foisted on to the schools themselves?

**Nick Gibb**: The Government’s position is clear: the public sector pay cap is no longer in place and we have adopted a more flexible approach to public sector pay. We have asked the School Teachers’ Review Body to use this flexibility to target the next pay award to promote recruitment and retention.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What more can be done to help companies such as Turnock Ltd in my constituency and its owner, Gordon Stone, who has apprentices busy making Christmas lighting for cities and towns across the country?

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills** (Anne Milton): I congratulate the firm on my hon. Friend’s patch and am delighted it has apprenticeships. The National Apprenticeship Service is there to help at any time.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): On Monday 7 May, one of my constituents was stabbed in a local park. Today, he would have been sitting his GCSEs, but instead he is in an intensive care unit in a London hospital having undergone life-saving surgery. Does the Secretary of State agree that my constituent, having been a victim of a serious knife crime, should not suffer now or in later life as a result of not being awarded GCSE grades, and will he put pressure on the exam boards to allow my constituent to be awarded the grades he was predicted to get?
Damian Hinds: All our hearts go out to the hon. Gentleman's constituent and his family. I do not know what is possible, but I will meet him as a matter of urgency, if he wishes, to discuss the matter.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What changes is the Minister considering to ensure that the apprenticeship levy can be used to fund the type of training schemes and shorter courses that employers are demanding and which will help to get more people back into work?

Anne Milton: The apprenticeship levy is designed to make sure we get the money into training and end-point assessment and is critical to driving up quality. One year of 20%-off-the-job training for apprenticeships will ensure a rise in the quality of training.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sure that a brain of the brilliance of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) can produce a question of fewer than 20 words.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Whitworth School in Spennymoor has had to close its sixth form. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Anne Milton: I hesitate to say I can change the world, but I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the details and make sure we protect the needs of learners in her constituency.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): West Oxfordshire schools are frequently small and rural. What is being done to help them?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend will know that the national funding formula contains a sparsity allocation of more than £20 million for schools in rural areas, particularly small schools, to help to deal with the problem he has rightly highlighted.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On Friday, the University of Chester Academies Trust wrote to its staff at two schools in my constituency, University Academy Kidsgrove and University Primary Academy, to announce savage cuts. Will the Minister meet me and other colleagues with UCAT schools in their constituencies immediately to talk about an urgent solution?

Damian Hinds: The schools Minister and I will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman’ s needs further with him.

Mr Gyimah: UKRI has been launched to bring together work done in our universities alongside business and will be a bridge to engaging in interdisciplinary and collaborative research. I am happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman’s needs further with him.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): In the light of information obtained recently by the National Deaf Children’s Society, will the Government review their funding decisions as a matter of urgency to ensure that an entire generation of children with special educational needs are not let down?

Nadhim Zahawi: This Government have launched the most ambitious reforms of special educational needs and disabilities provision in a generation, and are committed to improving outcomes for children with SEND, especially those who are deaf as well.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I recently met secondary headteachers in my constituency who told me that they were almost at breaking point as a result of cut after cut after cut. When will the Government fund all our schools properly, for the sake of all our children?

Damian Hinds: Funding for our schools is at the highest level that it has ever been, and we have committed ourselves to protecting per-pupil real-terms funding for the system as a whole over the next couple of years. I recognise that there have been cost pressures on schools, and I am committed to continuing to work with them to do what we can to bear down on those costs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Time is short, but I wish good luck to all the young people who are starting their standard assessment tests and GCSEs this week.

The Government claim that they have increased funding per pupil in my constituency. Does that increase take account of inflation and national pay increases for teachers and staff?

Nick Gibb: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we are spending record amounts on school funding: £42.4 billion this year, rising to £43.5 billion next year. We recognise that there have been cost pressures on schools, and we are giving them a range of help and advice on how to deal with those pressures. For instance, there are national schemes for buying energy, computers and other equipment to help schools to manage their budgets at a time when they are having to do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): How does the Secretary of State expect local authorities to retain special services for vulnerable children, let alone share them, when they have faced—on average—40% cuts in total funding in the last eight years?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have made £200 billion available to local authorities in the spending review, and high-needs funding has actually risen from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the last few weeks, we have tragically seen the deaths of another three students at Bristol University. What are the Government doing to ensure that the NHS and universities work more closely together to improve student mental health services?
Mr Gyimah: I am aware of the tragic deaths of students at Bristol University. The Government’s Green Paper on mental health for students—that is, children aged between 16 and 25—is focusing particularly on how tertiary education and the NHS can join up their services to prevent such tragic incidents from happening again.
Tributes: Baroness Jowell

3.32 pm

Mr Speaker: We come now to tributes to the late Baroness Jowell, former Member of Parliament for Dulwich and West Norwood. While there is not time today for many right hon. or hon. Members to speak, I know that many of you would like to record your memories of her, and her contribution both to Parliament and to the nation. I am confident—I repeat, I am confident—that there will be other opportunities for you to do so in the coming days and weeks.

Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, colleagues in all parts of the House: in offering my own heartfelt condolences to Tessa’s family, together with my own deeply felt personal tribute, I shall attempt for once to lead by example, and be uncharacteristically brief.

The embodiment of empathy, a stellar, progressive change-maker, and a well of practical compassion without rival, Tessa Jowell was the best of us. I rue her tragic and untimely passing, which leaves all of us in this place, and countless others beyond it, infinitely and permanently poorer. May Tessa rest in peace.

3.35 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I pay tribute to Baroness Jowell, may I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House that I may not be able to remain to hear all the tributes as I am due to welcome the President of Panama to Downing Street this afternoon?

I am sure the whole House was deeply saddened by the passing of Dame Tessa Jowell this weekend. She was a most extraordinary politician, colleague and campaigner, but she was also a loving mother and wife, and our thoughts and sympathies at this time must be with her family: her husband David, her children Jess and Matthew, and her stepchildren Eleanor, Luke and Annie.

Jess said this morning: “It is the greatest honour of my life to be her daughter,” but, Mr Speaker, we were all honoured to share this Chamber with Dame Tessa, and we are here to pay tribute to her life and work—to her warmth, her compassion and her incredible strength of character.

I was fortunate enough to meet Tessa while she was confronting her illness, and her dignity and courage were as humbling as they were inspirational. She was resolutely brave, not only in how she faced her treatment, but also through the way in which she spoke so openly about her illness and campaigned tirelessly for greater brain cancer research. Even at what must have been some of her most difficult moments, her compassion for others shone through.

Like many across the House, Tessa began her career in politics as a councillor, becoming an MP in 1992 and entering Government in 1997. Whether as councillor, a Back Bencher or a Minister, she was defined by her devotion to public service.

Throughout her time in Parliament, she would always reach out to an MP of any party who was going through a tough time; whether it was personal or professional, she would be there for them. For Tessa was a person first and a politician second. And nowhere was that humanity greater than with the support she provided to the loved ones of those who died in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7. Her advocacy was so compelling because Dame Tessa was never one to take no for an answer, something I believe she put down to her Scottish roots.

Dame Tessa certainly refused to take no for an answer when many said that London should not even bid for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. As Secretary of State at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, she persuaded Tony Blair and the Cabinet, the civil service and ultimately the whole country to get behind the bid. That historic summer of 2012, which brought us together so powerfully as a nation, would simply not have happened without her.

Tessa Jowell’s political achievements were outstanding. But those who know her will also never forget her sense of humour. For many years after London won that Olympic bid the screensaver on her phone was a photo of her and David Beckham after the announcement—hugging. As she said: “You can be a feminist but still be susceptible to a David Beckham moment.”

Dame Tessa brought all those qualities of compassion, passion and determination to her final, and perhaps most important, campaign: on brain cancer. Her impact was reflected in yesterday’s announcement of the Tessa Jowell brain cancer research fund, and it will live on in an annual Tessa Jowell global symposium, to be hosted by the UK, to bring together the best clinical, scientific and academic minds on brain cancer.

No one who heard her extraordinary speech in the House of Lords when she spoke about her own brain tumour could have failed to be moved. As she said in that speech:

“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.]

Dame Tessa lived out those words. To the end, she fought not for herself, not for her party, but for everyone affected by this most cruel of diseases. It was typical of the spirit with which she approached her whole life.

The outpouring of tributes this weekend, from those who had the privilege to know her and those who did not, shows the extent to which her courage and service inspired us all. Her legacy will live on.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Prime Minister. Colleagues, it is typical of our beloved Chaplain, the Rev. Rose, that she joins us for these exchanges. I call the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn.

3.40 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and thank you for arranging this half hour of tributes to Tessa Jowell. We are grateful to you for that, and we are grateful to the Prime Minister for what she has just said about Tessa. Right across the House, people were devastated when they heard the news of Tessa’s death. Like the Prime Minister, I send my condolences to her family and friends and to everyone who knew her well. The media coverage yesterday and this morning goes way beyond the coverage of the death of a normal politician. It goes way beyond that because it brings in the way in which she lived her life and the way in which she died.
I knew Tessa for a very long time. She was a warm and compassionate person. Prior to coming to this House in 1992 as the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, she was a councillor in Camden in the 1970s, which is where I first met her—I in my role as a union organiser and she in her role as a councillor. There is always a basic synergy between the two. She was Labour’s candidate in a by-election in Ilford North in 1978, and many of us trudged along many streets in support of her at that time. Unfortunately, she was not elected then, but she came into the House sometime after that. In Camden, Tessa was instrumental in trying to bring an end to the pay dispute in 1979 by offering us lots of money. When we wanted a national settlement, she offered us a local one. It was very kind of her. It was an attempt to try to support low-paid workers in her constituency in Camden.

In Government, Tessa was absolutely determined to bring about Sure Start, which was one of the great achievements of that Government. The idea was that all children and all families should have a place and be supported in the difficult times that they were going through. Sure Start helped to lift 1 million children out of poverty, and I thank her for that. I also thank her for being an active NHS campaigner in London from the moment she entered this House in 1992. I worked with her on that, and I was very happy to do so.

Tessa’s pivotal moment was helping to win the 2012 Olympics for London, when she persuaded a probably her on that, and I was very happy to do so. In Camden, Tessa was instrumental in trying to bring an end to the pay dispute in 1979 by offering us lots of money. When we wanted a national settlement, she offered us a local one. It was very kind of her. It was an attempt to try to support low-paid workers in her constituency in Camden.

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Tessa’s pivotal moment was helping to win the 2012 Olympics for London, when she persuaded a probably reluctant Prime Minister, an undoubtedly reluctant civil service and a probably reluctant just-about-everybody-else with her amazingly penetrating stare, saying, “Well, you’ve got to do it!” And of course, everyone had to do it and they did. She then showed her skills in diplomacy by putting together a team consisting of Lord Coe, Ken Livingstone and herself to deliver the Olympics for London. I have never forgotten her describing the chances of a British gold medal in taekwondo to a meeting of Labour MPs. I do not think that any of us knew what taekwondo was, but we did not want to admit that to her, so we all said, “Well done, yes, it’s bound to go well.” She actually tried taekwondo, and she was just as formidable as she was later in putting her case to the House of Lords. So, well done Tessa on that.

Tessa’s recent speech in the House of Lords was just amazing. We live our lives and enjoy our lives and none of us wants it to end, but she was able to convey to the House and to the world that living your life is also about how you end your life and about the legacy that you leave behind. It was such a brave and selfless speech, and it took so much out of her, but she was determined to do it. Using her platform as a Member of Parliament in the House of Lords to raise awareness of brain cancer was truly amazing: well done her. She will be remembered for her passion, for her sense of social justice, for her sense of inclusion and for her sense of fun in dealing with people. Above all, she will be remembered for the manner of her leaving us. Her children and family are obviously totally devastated, but I think they can also be very proud of the legacy she has left behind. It is wonderful that we now have the Tessa Jowell brain cancer research fund, and I hope that we will all see that so that others do not have to suffer in the awful way that she suffered. She taught us how to live, and I think she also taught us how to die.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for what he has said and for the way in which he said it. I call Sir Hugo Swire.

3.44 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I have been in this House since 2001—far less time than some colleagues—and I have come to distinguish between when the House comes together to lament a former colleague because it feels it ought to and when it comes together to lament a departed colleague because it feels it wants to. There can be no doubt that the latter is the case this afternoon. Many people in the House knew Tessa far better than I did, worked with her far more closely and were far more ideologically wedded to her beliefs, but it was my privilege—as much as being in opposition can be a privilege—to be the Shadow Culture Secretary when she was Secretary of State, and I want to take a few seconds to thank her for her extraordinarily unpartisan behaviour.

Tessa embodied the best in a Minister—one who goes about their business trying to do what they believe is in the best interests of the country, not necessarily of the party. It was of course my job to rubbish the Olympic bid and to rubbish the dome, both of which I did extremely unconvincingly, I am sure. However, Tessa was unfailingly courteous to me and my family, and I miss her as much as anyone else.

3.45 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, I express my deep condolences to Dame Tessa’s family and friends and note the passing of one of the truly great parliamentarians of the past 30 years. I had the great pleasure of shadowing Tessa at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport from 2001 and for the Olympics from 2005, and it would be impossible to find a more accommodating, supportive and open colleague. Even if she furiously disagreed with me, as she quite often did, she was able to do so in the most charming and personable of ways. I liked Tessa immensely. I enjoyed her company, and she was always immensely knowledgeable of every detail of her brief.

I remember when the London Olympic games were first announced, and I can say now that there was not a huge amount of enthusiasm among the SNP group for what we saw as further spending in London, but that was important to Tessa, and she had to ensure that the whole UK bought into the project. She selflessly went around the UK in order to recruit people as champions and to rubbish the dome, both of which I did extremely unconvincingly, I am sure. However, Tessa was unfailingly courteous to me and my family, and I miss her as much as anyone else.

I call the Mother of the House, Harriet Harman.
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): Tessa Jowell was the embodiment of that old women’s movement saying: “The personal is political.” For Tessa, the personal and the political were completely intertwined. Her devotion to her children and her stepchildren was what underpinned her drive for Sure Start children’s centres, with parenting support at their heart. Her enjoyment of her family and their prowess in sport was what lay behind her wanting to get the Olympics for the UK. She wanted them and the Paralympics to be shared and to inspire every child and young person across the country.

Tessa had a unique personal style. She befriended people who were struggling, had difficulties or were powerless, whom she felt she could support, but she also befriended the powerful in order to get them to back her progressive causes. She was no softie, though. Everybody has quite rightly said how charming and nice she was, but there was steel behind those clear blue eyes. As her constituency neighbour for 23 years, we went to countless meetings together and worked together on countless campaigns. She was always courteous and polite to the police, the schools, the hospitals and the council, but if ever she felt that they were obfuscating or letting people down, she would be tougher than anybody. She was true Labour, as an activist, as a councillor, as a Member of this House and as a Member of the Lords, but she was never afraid to work cross-party for the causes that she supported or to forge friendships across parties. We are so sad for her family, especially David, Jess and Matthew, but I know they will be strong because she will have prepared them for the loss they faced, just as she supported, on behalf of the Government, those who faced loss after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks. We send them all our sympathy.

All around the country there will be people who are listening to these tributes and who have heard of Tessa’s death who worked with her, who knew her and who will be feeling sad but also immensely proud that they can say, “I knew Tessa Jowell.”

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a privilege to pay tribute to my predecessor as MP for Dulwich and West Norwood, Baroness Tessa Jowell of Brixton, on behalf of the thousands of my constituents whose lives she touched.

Tessa served our area as the MP for Dulwich—later Dulwich and West Norwood, Baroness Tessa Jowell of Brixton, on behalf of the thousands of my constituents whose lives she touched.

Tessa’s legacy is national as well as local. Sure Start was born of her passionate belief in the need to address the disadvantage affecting children at the earliest opportunity, and Sure Start centres have transformed the lives of countless families. It was Tessa’s vision, which she nurtured from idea to completion, that the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics should be not just a singular sporting event but the vehicle for transformative long-term investment in east London and the most authentic and glorious celebration of London and Londoners that we have ever seen.

I last saw Tessa a few weeks ago, when her presence lit up this Chamber as she attended the debate in her honour led by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). Tessa’s commitment to using her devastating brain tumour diagnosis to campaign to make a difference for others was no surprise to anyone who knew her, but it was nevertheless extraordinary and extremely brave. At a reception following the debate, Tessa was determined to speak. Although her language was much affected by her tumour, among the words she managed to articulate were “determined,” “love” and “lucky”—the essence of Tessa, whose determination and love led her to deliver so much and who leaves so many of us feeling lucky to have known her.

Tessa’s legacy in Dulwich and West Norwood is in our schools, our hospital and our community, and it is in our culture of campaigning, which puts people at its centre. We are grateful to have had so much of her time. Our thoughts and love are with David, Jessie and Matthew and the rest of Tessa’s family on their deep loss. I hope they will take some comfort from knowing that Tessa leaves the world a far better place than she found it, and that there are many in Dulwich and West Norwood, and across the country, who will ensure that her tremendous legacy lives on.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On behalf of Liberal Democrats in Parliament and, indeed, throughout the country, I offer our condolences to the family and friends of Tessa Jowell.

Tessa was already a Cabinet Minister when I was first elected in 2001 so, unlike others, I cannot claim to have had a close association with her as she made her way up through the ranks. When I speak to my colleagues and former colleagues who did know her well, either from her time in office here or from working on the 2012 London Olympics, I get the same messages time and again: always cheerful; good at building consensus; boundless energy; and a natural team player. Perhaps less well known and less remarked upon is the fact that all those qualities were displayed towards not just MPs, peers and Ministers, but all others with whom she worked in Parliament and in the civil service. When I was Secretary of State for Scotland, I acquired a member of my private office who had previously worked as part of Tessa’s private office in the then Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Despite it being more than four years since he had worked as part of Tessa’s team, he always spoke warmly—and with very little prompting—about how great it had been to work with her. Like so many others, he spoke with pride and affection. He was always kind enough never to draw a direct comparison with his experience working for me; for once, I was sensible enough not to ask.

Although one would not have known it to listen to her speak, Tessa had a long-standing association with the north-east of Scotland. She was educated there, in St Margaret’s School for Girls in Aberdeen and later at Aberdeen University, where she was both a graduate and an honorary graduate. The university principal,
Professor Sir Ian Diamond, spoke yesterday of her helpfulness and humanity. Unlike some universities, the University of Aberdeen has never been over-represented on these Benches but—I declare an interest as an alumnus—I like to think that what we lack in quantity we have been able to make up for in quality. I have never been able to think of a better way of advancing that argument than by reference to Tessa Jowell.

Tessa Jowell leaves a legacy that is substantial in politics, and it will be enduring. I think that she would be a little frustrated to think that her life might be defined by the way in which it ended but, as a member of the all-party group on brain tumours, I want to comment on the enormous impact she has made for those who suffer from brain cancers. A couple of years ago, I raised with David Cameron at Prime Minister’s questions the subject of funding for brain tumour research. I was astonished at the response I got—emails and messages from people thanking me for raising the issue and saying that this was something that affected their son, daughter, husband, wife, friend or neighbour. They came from people whose lives had been touched by the condition—some of whom I knew quite well—but who never felt able to talk about it. For some reason that is well beyond my understanding, brain cancers seem to be the last cancer taboo in our society, but because of Tessa Jowell dealt with hers—with courage and candour—I am sure that that taboo is weakening today than it has ever been. The money for research will doubtless help us to find better cures, but Tessa’s courage will be the biggest hope and encouragement.

3.57 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Last month we held a debate on cancer and paid tribute to Tessa. Just before that debate, Tessa said to me, “This is not about me; this is about what comes next.” She would therefore not forgive me if I did not both welcome the new Government money that has been announced today and say that together we can go further. I look forward to working with the Government on the data sharing, clinical trials and research to come.

Having been helped by Tessa, having been friends with her and having been her employee, I saw the velvet and the steel in Tessa Jowell. She always got what she wanted, but she always wanted the best for others. The best advice she ever gave me—and gave anyone—was, “Never take no for an answer.” She never gave up. I wish to repeat the words from Tessa that I read out in the debate here last month:

“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.”

3.59 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I first really got to know Tessa when we were both very pregnant—I with my last child, and she with her first, Jessie. In those days, we did try to cuddle each other, but we were both slightly vertically challenged, so with these big bellies, it was—

Mr Speaker: There is a lot to be said for it.
about Tessa and her life. What she saw in her own family, with David, Jessie and Matthew—all her family, for whom we now feel so much—was what she worked so hard to provide for other families throughout the country.

I know that when we think about Tessa and the Olympics, we are supposed to think about her steely determination in getting the games to happen. We are supposed to think about her amazing values of inclusion and diversity, which she infused throughout the Olympics, whether in the amazing Danny Boyle opening ceremony that she commissioned, the games makers she championed, or the sending of the torch all around the country. All that is true, but I cannot help but keep remembering a meeting before the London Olympics in which she briefed us in some detail, and with great frankness, about her plans to distribute condoms throughout the Olympic village. She said, “Well, there are going to be all these athletes with their beautiful bodies, and when they finish their races they’re going to have a lot of sex, and we have a responsibility to keep them safe!” That, in the end, along with the twinkle in her eye, was Tessa. She was completely down to earth and practical; she did the work and to have a good gossip about this place. We were being served by the person whose turn it was, had a nice glass of wine, gave points for the food that we put the public health case for condoms during that meeting—once a Public Health Minister, always a Public Health Minister.

Tessa was a lovely and delightful person, but she was not a saint. There were a few off-the-record conversations and discussions that we had when she let rip with a few choice swear words. We were part of a relatively small group of colleagues—Hazel Blears, Jacqui Smith, Ruth Kelly, Baroness Scotland—who had a “Come Dine with Me” club. Occasionally we would try to escape this dreary in these Chambers. If Tessa walked into a room, it felt like a bit of joy was coming through the door. I remember her with love and affection. I remember her enlivening this Parliament, which can sometimes be a bit dry and dusty. I especially remember that she had that quality of sparkle. Although I am a bit of a bad Christian, I still think of both of them—Mo Mowlam and Tessa—up there smiling and bringing joy wherever they are.

4.5 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): In following my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), as a former Public Health Minister, I can say that I was so glad that Tessa put the public health case for condoms during that briefing—once a Public Health Minister, always a Public Health Minister.

Tessa was a great listener. She was always hands on in every job that she did. In many respects, she set an example for Ministers today and in the future. One thing about the jobs she did—whether it was Minister for Public Health, for the Olympics or for London—was that she put her heart and soul into them. She was not looking to the next job or the next promotion. She devoted herself to the job in hand. Truthfully, Tessa had so many firsts to be proud of, but she would have been a great Secretary of State for Health. Actually, she would have been a great Foreign Secretary, given her talent for bringing people together. At this very sad time, emotions will be raw for her family, but she will live on through them and their children. For all of us, she will live on in our hearts.

4.7 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I first met Tessa in a stable. It was the 1992 general election, and I was the shadow Home Office Minister—the deputy to Roy Hattersley—covering policing. Roy said, “Go down to the stables where the Metropolitan police have their horses and get a photo opportunity with this candidate.” I pitched up somewhere, which must have been in the constituency, and saw this very lovely young candidate standing near three enormous horses snorting—there was not exactly fire coming out of their noses, but it was pretty close. If anyone has been close to one of those horses, they will know how big they are. The PR person said, “One of you has to get on that horse for the photograph.” I said, “Well, I’m only here to support Tessa.” I’ll tell you what: Tessa—and she was small—stepped up and stroked the nose of the horse, and in about two minutes, she was his best friend. She got up on the horse—I remember putting the hat on—and we had the photo opportunity. That was how I first met Tessa. When she arrived in this House, we already had something in common.

I have been in this place for quite a long time. I have seen some really superb parliamentarians on both sides of the House, but there are some who bring a certain sparkle to this place—they are just different. Mo Mowlam was one, and Tessa was as well. David Beckham was not the only person who got a hug from Tessa. If you pleased her or if you did something as part of her team, she gave you a hug. She liked to give a hug. She also brought fun into this place. Sometimes we are a bit dreary in these Chambers. If Tessa walked into a room, it felt like a bit of joy was coming through the door. I remember her with love and affection. I remember her enlivening this Parliament, which can sometimes be a bit dry and dusty. I especially remember that she had that quality of sparkle. Although I am a bit of a bad Christian, I still think of both of them—Mo Mowlam and Tessa—up there smiling and bringing joy wherever they are.

4.9 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): There have been many wonderful tributes to Tessa. One of the many that would have pleased her hugely was yesterday’s from the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair. He described in detail the rigour with which Tessa put forward her case in the now famous meeting at which she pitched the Olympics to him. Tessa described that same meeting to me a few years ago, and it was identical to Mr Blair’s description—with one addition. She said that at the end of the meeting she turned informally to him and said, “Do you want to be the Prime Minister who had the Olympics within their grasp and chose to turn away?” That, for me, was Tessa. She had learnt to weaponise the male ego, and woe betide any big beast that stood between her and one of her political objectives. That somebody could have an Olympic-sized vision and make it happen, yet do so leaving nothing but a trail of love and laughter, is a modern day political miracle. For those of us who knew her, she was that miracle. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]
Mr Speaker: That was a very special tribute, and the reaction of the House to the hon. Gentleman tells its own story.

4.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wish to add my contribution and heartfelt words on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party. I commend all who have spoken so far, including you, Mr Speaker. You have a tremendous grasp of the English language and set things out in a succinct and helpful way—we all appreciate that very much.

I may have only been here a short time, but I recall Dame Tessa Jowell’s wise and helpful contributions in this House both while I was here and before I came to the House. She had an everlasting smile. I always felt that she was a lady who I would not want to get on the wrong side of, as other Members have said, but she reached out to people everywhere. One of my constituents phoned me this morning to say that she was moved by Tessa’s life, and by her courage, strength and determination that shone through. Tessa touched the lives of many.

On a Thursday some three weeks ago, we had a debate in this Chamber on brain cancer. You were also present for that very emotional debate, Mr Speaker. Tessa sat right through the debate—very much a campaign warrior—not too far from where I stand now. She was so very obviously in pain, with her head gently resting on her husband’s shoulder, alongside her family, who were there to support her.

At this time of sorrow and grief, I say to Tessa’s husband, family, friends and the many colleagues in this House who knew her much better than I did: we have fond memories of a lady who we will all miss greatly, but we remember with joy what she did in this House right to the very end. God bless Tessa.

4.12 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): We have heard a lot today about what Tessa did—her outstanding legacy of bringing the Olympics and Paralympics to London, and her amazing work—but I want to talk a little bit about how she did it. I remember a fantastic speech that she gave at the Labour party conference in 2005, when I was a newly elected MP. She spoke about her plans to roll out music education to every child, and mentioned a conversation that she had had with a lady in a tower block in Lambeth. She talked about that lady’s daughter, saying, “I want this music education programme to reach everyone. The test will be: will Rosa learn to play the violin?” I am pretty certain that Rosa, in that tower block in Lambeth, did get to play her violin.

I remember running into Tessa in the middle of the Olympic games, when she was incredibly busy and under pressure. I asked her, “What’s going on? How are you, Tessa?” and she said, “Well, I’m living here for the next six weeks.” I said, “Gosh, are you not even going home? Do you have enough stuff with you?” and she said, “Yes. Essentially, me and Sebastian Coe are the joint mayors of the Olympic village.” I just knew that she was glorying in that amazing six weeks of tremendous sport.

A friend of mine sent me a text to say that she had been at a housing association trust, where a nervous young man had introduced Tessa as “Jessa Towell”.

Tessa had just roared with laughter. My friend said that everybody in the room simply fell in love with Tessa at that moment. That is what she was—irresistible, charming and funny, but with a little bit of steel inside. She loved fashion. She could rock a frock and she liked to shop. In the end, the moments I treasure are the lifts home that she gave me, having some pretty salty conversations on the way as well.

In an era of fast food, fast politics and fast media, Tessa was a slow politician. I mean “slow” in the very best sense of the word: every word, every deed, measured out for kindness, for thoughtfulness and for compassion. Seamus Heaney wrote in “At the Wellhead”: “Being with her was intimate and helpful, like a cure. You didn’t notice happening.”

She leaves a legacy in our hearts. Rest in peace, Tessa.

4.15 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Tessa Jowell was both a very special person and a very special politician, and the qualities of one reinforced the brilliance of the other. She was the best friend that anyone could wish for: loyal, true, uplifting and empathetic. There are many people in this House and outside it who, when they found themselves at a low ebb, would know that Tessa was there for them, holding out love and support: never your judge and jury, always your friend and shelter in a storm.

She was quite simply full of love—full of love for her family, her friends, and the causes she believed in. She loved London, our great capital city. She loved it for its openness, its diversity, its endless opportunities, and its focus on tomorrow rather than yesterday. As a politician, she was a change-maker, a moderniser. Her mission was not to preserve Britain or seek illusory solace in nostalgia but to change it for the better—and always, always in a progressive direction. For her, Sure Start—the mission to give every child from whatever background the best possible start in life—was not just a Government programme but a symbol of what she believed the United Kingdom should stand for.

For the London Olympics, she not only played a vital role in winning the bid but helped to shape the character of what, for many of us, was the greatest moment of Britishness and the coming together of the country in our lifetimes. She understood more than anyone that how we hosted the games was as important as what happened in the competition itself. She gave us our golden summer. She gave the country our united golden moment.

Her love and empathy were there for the families of the victims of terrorism on 9/11 and in the 7/7 London underground bombings. There was Tessa, full of love and the desire to help—the human embodiment of the total antithesis of the hatred that had caused those people their grief.

And in her final illness, she was determined not to go quietly into that good night. She fought for better treatment for cancer sufferers and for international collaboration on how to treat the disease, and—as the Secretary of State can testify—used all her firmness and charm to ensure that Ministers backed their words of support with the very welcome new resources announced for cancer research today. She was both proud of what
she had achieved and immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to achieve it. She was thankful for the era that she lived through—the modernising movement for progressive change and social justice of which she was such a vital and brilliant part.

At a time when there is so much that divides the country, and when demonisation of others is all too readily reached for and transmitted in the world of politics, we should remember that Tessa Jowell represented the opposite of all that. Let us give thanks and remember her not only for the wonderful things that she did, but for the way that she did them, and for the many lives that she changed for the better along the way.

4.19 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us walked around yesterday slightly dazed and deeply saddened by the news of Tessa’s passing. She was funny, kind, strong, generous, warm and brilliant, and she was always there for any of us. She was a great support to me and, I know, to many others when we were first elected to this House, and her advice on politics and, indeed, the practicalities of being an MP was incredibly helpful.

Winning the Olympics and all that did for our country, our pride in each other and our place in the world, owed much to her vision, her passion, her integrity and her determination. It was a story of the best of our country, a story of the best of politics and a story that showed the best of Tessa. She was an inspiration, and in her final months she gave voice and comfort to those who have been suffering from brain tumours and their families, like our friends Tara and Michelle Brady, who lost their teenage daughter Addie to brain cancer just a few months ago and who will be visiting me in Parliament tomorrow. We had hoped that they would be able to meet Tessa and, had she still been here with us, she would have hoped to meet them.

We send our love to all Tessa’s family. I hope that she would be as proud of how we take her legacy forward as we are of her.

4.21 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Tessa Jowell was one of the greatest entrepreneurs in public life that we have seen in this country for decades. She was such a brilliant idealist not because she could talk with people late into the night about the newest ideas or the latest trends in thinking, but because she thought that the best thing to do with ideas is turn them into action. She was a practical idealist unlike any that we have seen for many years.

She was tremendously persistent, but with that persistence came the wisdom to know that sometimes progress did not always happen in a straight line. She had one of the best polished sat-navs in the business. She knew that if you hit a roadblock, that was not the end of the story. You just had to figure how you went on round it.

She had tremendous passion, but she matched that with her compassion. She knew that this business is a contact sport and that many of us are perfectly capable of self-inflicted wounds sometimes. She was never one to judge. She was always the one—the first—to ring you, to hug you, and to tell you reassuringly that it is always darkest before dawn.

4.23 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): For all that Tessa achieved on the national and international stage, she never forgot the local. It was as a local campaigner and politician that I first knew Tessa, when I was leader of the opposition and then of the council in Lambeth, where she was one of our fantastic local MPs. Whether it was the young people, like Solomon and his friends who set up the Brixton Soup Kitchen, or the women—it usually was women, formidable, generous women—who were running the residents associations on the estates she represented, or the parents she worked with to set up the country’s first parent-promoted secondary school, the Elmgreen School in West Norwood, Tessa’s love was with people and the communities they were part of.

Yesterday I spoke with Andy Troke, who for 20 years was Tessa’s organiser in Dulwich and West Norwood. Andy said to me that a very important part of Tessa’s legacy is that there is a little bit of Tessa in thousands of us around south London and around the country. We have been inspired by her vision, her passion, her love and her empathy, and we will take that legacy forward. As fantastic as Sure Start is and as the Olympics were, those people are Tessa’s legacy.

Tessa did me the enormous honour of asking me to chair her mayoral bid—not with enormous success, it has to be said. It is funny how things work out sometimes, because instead of sitting in City Hall, she spent the past two years with her family. Who could begrudge them the precious, treasured moments that they spent together in what turned out to be her last two years?

If I may, I would like to address my final comments to Tessa’s family. Thank you for sharing Tessa with us. Today, we stand with you in love and respect for this remarkable woman.

Mr Speaker: Before 2010, the current Secretary of State for Health and Social Care shadowed Tessa Jowell, and Tessa later came to shadow him, so I think it is fitting that the final words in these exchanges should go to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

4.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for graciously allowing a second contribution from the Government Front Bench.

Some people may wonder why a Conservative Government are so determined to mark the legacy of a Labour Cabinet Minister, but those who know, or knew, Tessa will not be surprised at all, because she had an
incredible gift for bringing people together and breaking down barriers in a way that was unique and inspiring. As many have said this afternoon, we saw that in London 2012, when as Culture Secretary I had the terrifying responsibility of making her dream come true—and faced with Tessa, I never dared to put a foot wrong. What an incredible success that was: real Tessa magic, bringing the whole country together.

We saw those qualities latterly, and more tragically, when almost as an aside in her final harrowing few months, she decided that the Government needed to tear up our policy on brain cancer and start again, so basically we have done so. Thanks to her, and many other campaigners from this House and outside this House, we are proud to announce today the Dame Tessa Jowell brain cancer mission, which seeks massively to increase research and improve the treatment of this most challenging of cancers. Today, the thoughts of all of us are with David, Jess and Matthew. We hope and pray that, as a result of her efforts, many more will survive this terrible disease—a final and most wonderful gift of Tessa magic to the nation.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, colleagues, for what you have said and the manner in which you have said it, which has witnessed the House at its best.

4.27 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the Government’s response to the Schools That Work For Everyone consultation.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): By 2020, core school funding will rise to £43.5 billion, the highest ever figure and 50% higher per pupil in real terms than in 2000. On Friday, I announced measures to create more good school places in a diverse education system, and this includes our response to the Schools That Work For Everyone consultation.

As previously announced to the House, we will not be enabling the creation of new selective schools. However, selective schools are one important part of our diverse education system, and it is right that they can expand, as other schools can, where there is need. The autumn statement in 2016 announced funding for the expansion of existing selective schools. On Friday, I launched the selective schools expansion fund for existing selective schools that commit to improving access for disadvantaged children and to working in enhanced partnership with local non-selective schools, and £50 million is available in 2018-19.

We are retaining the 50% cap on faith-based admissions in free schools. I recognise the positive role that faith providers play and that some have felt unable to establish new schools through the free schools programme. We are developing a capital scheme to support the establishment of new voluntary-aided schools. We will continue to work with universities and independent schools to encourage them to work in lasting partnerships with the state sector. Our joint understanding with the Independent Schools Council sets out how independent schools will support that. Overall, this package of reforms will help to ensure that we are delivering a diverse education system, providing choice and opportunity for all.

Angela Rayner: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

May I start by asking the Secretary of State whether he agrees with himself? In the last Parliament, he thought grammar schools—I notice he uses the term “selective schools” now—were “not the answer” to social mobility, and he said he would not want one in his own town, as it would be “divisive”. His own Schools Minister has said: “I never get people asking... Why don’t you bring back the secondary modern?”. And in fact...most children would go to a secondary modern school...if we brought back selection.

Why do they now believe it is right to spend £50 million of taxpayers’ money expanding selective schools? Will the Secretary of State confirm that this is the same funding announced in the 2016 autumn statement and that £200 million is budgeted overall?

Will the Secretary of State tell us what the evidence was that convinced him that this policy works? Can he share it with us? He has not published a breakdown of responses to his consultation. Is that because he did not get the right answers?

The Secretary of State said schools will have to submit fair access and partnership plans, but what will need to be in those plans? What changes to admissions
policies will be required? Will schools continue with the 11-plus? Will he commit to publishing all the plans submitted?

Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether it remains Government policy to keep open the option of changing the tax status of independent schools, or is this another manifesto pledge abandoned? Will he confirm whether the Government are finally giving up their plan to remove the cap on faith admissions? He has committed to new voluntary-aided and free schools. How much funding will be available? How many new schools will open, and in what areas will they be?

The previous Conservative Prime Minister once said he had a simple message for Conservative Members who wanted more selective schools:

“Stop your silly class war.”

He also said:

“this is a key test for our party. Does it want to be a serious force for government, or does it want to be a right-wing debating society”.

Has the Secretary of State forgotten that advice?

**Damian Hinds**: I thank the hon. Lady for her question.

Selective schools, of course, include grammar schools; they also include partially selective schools. [Interruption.] Well, they do; that is the distinction.

The hon. Lady asked whether I agree with myself and with things I said in the past. I am happy to confirm my agreement with myself. When she says I was quoted as saying that I did not think grammar schools were the answer to social mobility, it is patently obvious that there is no one single answer to the challenge we have in this country of social mobility. However, there are many things that can play a part, and we want this type of school—existing selective schools, if they wish to expand—to do more to contribute towards social mobility.

The hon. Lady asked specifically whether the money involved was as announced at the autumn statement 2016. I believe I did cover that in my opening statement. She is right that it is £200 million over a period of time. Initially, we are talking about £50 million this year.

The hon. Lady asked what evidence we had. There are parts of the country—the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) represents part of one of them—that are performing well right across all the types of school where there is a selective school system in place. On progress measures, when we look across Progress 8, we see the gap narrowing in terms of children who are able to attend grammar schools, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, this is only one part—and a relatively small part—of our overall school system, which is a diverse system.

The hon. Lady asked about independent schools, and many already do good work in partnership with the state sector. We want to see more of that, and we announced that on Friday as well. On faith schools, I cannot say exactly where they will be or how many there will be, because that depends on the faith groups and others who will sponsor voluntary-aided schools.

Overall, this package is about making sure we continue to provide good-quality school places. More than 800,000 school places have already been created since 2010. We want to make sure we carry on with that record.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I am not against grammar schools and I wish them well, but they have a poor record on social justice. Only 3% of those who go to them have free school meals and the proposals will benefit only a few thousand people. Has my right hon. Friend considered that the £200 million would be better spent on one-to-one tuition for our most vulnerable pupils, including the 33% who do not get free school meals? Some 285,000 children could be helped, through the Education Endowment Foundation, with 12 weeks one-to-one tuition for our most vulnerable children.

**Damian Hinds**: My right hon. Friend is of course right about the variety of interventions that are important in this area. He is also right to identify that not enough children on free school meals are able to go to these schools. I want to see that number go up, which is why we are insisting on enhanced access arrangements. I should clarify that this is capital funding—it is not the same as per pupil funding—following the creation of a place. Places will be created at all sorts of schools, the vast majority of which will be comprehensive intake—[Interruption.] I am not sure why the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) shakes her head. The vast majority will be comprehensive intake schools and the funding will follow in that way.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is regrettable that we are having to have this debate yet again. The grammar school the Secretary of State attended, St Ambrose in Trafford, has just 25 children on free school meals. Across the whole of Trafford, less than 2.5% of children are on free school meals. That compares with 25% in Manchester, where the attainment gap is narrower than it is in Trafford. In fact, the attainment gap for those on free school meals in Trafford is twice that in Manchester. The same pattern is true for any selective area. This is about not just the individual, but the systemic impact of these schools. What percentage of free school meals will a school need to have to access funding? What attainment gap adjustment will need to be made to the whole area for schools to receive funding?

**Damian Hinds**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I totally acknowledge—I think I have already acknowledged it—the point that not enough children who are eligible for free school meals are able to attend these schools. We are trying to get that number up, which is why to bid into this capital fund schools need to come forward with a proposal for how they are going to make their admissions broader and more accessible. At a minimum, that must include priority for pupil premium recipients, ensuring outreach to specific primary schools and looking again at admissions criteria to make sure they are as broad as possible.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What justification is there for the Secretary of State reneging on a solemn Conservative manifesto commitment, on which we all stood, to drop the totally ineffective 50% cap on faith schools? He has reneged on that commitment. He knows perfectly well that the only new free schools that will not now open are Catholic schools. Catholic schools are the most diverse, the most inclusive and the most prone to operate in deprived areas, so why has he reneged on the cap? He knows all these arguments, because he made them when he was a Back Bencher before he became
a Minister. He knows there will now be faith free schools all over the country, except for Catholic schools. Before he says that we are now going to open voluntary-aided schools, he is shackling us to a model that has not been encouraged for 10 years. He can give no commitment that local authorities will want to use them or that the funding will be available. This is a disgraceful announcement.

Damian Hinds: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the value of faith schools as part of our overall diverse school system. There are thousands of faith schools across the country, and they do get slightly above-average results at both primary and secondary. He specifically mentioned Catholic schools—it is true, again, that they get a slightly better set of results than the faith school average, and I totally value their contribution. I also acknowledge, as I think I did earlier, that some groups—the Catholic Education Service is chief among them—have not felt able to take part in the free schools programme because of the admissions criteria. We are very conscious of the sensitivities and the need to make sure that we promote societal inclusion, including in narrowly defined local areas. Having published the integration strategy, we have taken the decision to retain the 50% faith cap on new free schools, but it will also be possible to open voluntary-aided schools, of which there are thousands across the country. They have existed since 1944. It has always been possible to open new voluntary-aided schools—it just has not happened in recent years, because the money has not been there, but it will be possible under these proposals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate all colleagues, but there are a lot of you, so brevity is of the essence.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The absolute tragedy is that there is more evidence available to Ministers now than there has ever been about what will improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged, so why on earth do the Government persist with targeting funding on selective education? That may theoretically benefit the pupils who attend Ilford County High School or Woodford County High School for Girls, which serve my constituency, but what will it do for every other school in my constituency, not least the schools that serve some of the most disadvantaged communities but whose buildings are in dire need of refurbishment? This statement does absolutely nothing for them, and that is the absolute tragedy of the Government’s education policy: it is elitist in the wrong sense of the word.

Damian Hinds: I fear that there may be a misunderstanding. We are talking about either £200 million over a period, or £50 million over one year for selective schools expansion, but that is in the context of a much, much larger capital budget for school expansion overall of £1 billion this year, and an even bigger capital budget again, if we are talking about how we address the existing condition of schools—over a period of four years, that is something in excess of £20 billion.

Mr Speaker: Brevity will be exemplified as always by the right hon. Member for Wokingham.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the extra money to expand grammar places. Kendrick School and Reading grammar school, which serve my constituency, need to provide more places, and I hope that they take my right hon. Friend up on it. Will he confirm, however, that there will also be more money for the very good comprehensives in my area under his fairer funding?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right to identify that where there is a demand for places and where schools are popular with parents, it makes sense to be able to expand them. I can confirm that that absolutely applies to comprehensive-intake schools, of which there are, of course, vastly more than there are selective schools.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Government’s consultation paper states that the educational benefits of attending a grammar school are twice as large for pupils on free school meals than others, but has the Secretary of State actually read the sole report that is cited in the consultation paper? It states that the advantage is “certainly not large” and that “we should be cautious about interpreting this as a strong endorsement of grammar schools.”

Does he accept that his evidence base for selective schools is itself rather selective?

Damian Hinds: I see what she did there—but no. Selective schools are part of the diverse school system that we have. We allow schools in general to expand. The vast majority, as I say, are comprehensive-intake schools. Where there is a basic need, parental demand, and when the schools commit to extending their inclusivity in very practical ways, it makes sense to allow them to expand as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the author of the standard textbook on brevity, Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What argument persuaded the Secretary of State to drop the manifesto commitment on the cap for free schools?

Damian Hinds: What persuaded me was that we have to balance a number of different things. That is just a reality, as I think most right hon. and hon. Members would accept. We have just published our integration strategy, and it is right that in that context we retain the 50% faith cap on new free schools. However, there has always been a model of school—always, it never went away; it has been there since the Education Act 1944—to enable faith groups and others to do the admissions for a school if they contribute part of its capital funding. The amount used to be higher, but it is now about 10%. To be clear, never in the history of our country has there been a general route by which to open a school that is 100% state funded but for which a church group has 100% control over admissions.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that Trafford schools, both grammar and secondary, perform extremely well in our selective system, but that is despite, not because of, selection. Were it because of selection, we would see similar results in schools in selective systems around the country.
What they certainly do not do is act as engines of social mobility: of the children in grammar schools, just 6% are looked-after children, 3% are on free school meals and less than 1% have special educational needs or disabilities. What figures does he intend to require those schools to meet for each of those categories of disadvantaged children?

Damian Hinds: I share the hon. Lady’s appreciation of grammar schools and high schools—and other schools indeed—in Trafford and other high-performing areas of the country. She asks what figures I will require. I will require ambitious plans, but they will be specific to individual schools and their circumstances. I want more children from deprived backgrounds to be able to take advantage of this funding.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): A free school in my constituency, the Europa School, has proved very inclusive in providing good places for children. Is this not a good example of a school that adds value to the network and provides more choice for parents and children?

Damian Hinds: The free schools programme has added enormously to diversity and innovation in our school system, which is why it is important that we continue to expand their number, through our plans for another 110 or so over the next few years.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This has been described as new money. In areas such as mine in Wales, where we have no grammar schools—prudently—and no selection, will the Government’s announcement bring a consequential that we can spend on all our children?

Damian Hinds: This is all part of existing capital funding. I mentioned earlier the much larger figure of which this is one part.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement on wave 13 of the free school application process and the fact that free schools have created 212,000 places since 2010. Applications for two new free schools, which I am keen to support, will the Secretary of State justify £50 million to increase the number of grammar school places when schools in my constituency are facing a £3 million cut?

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thomas Bennett Community College in my constituency was rebuilt in the early 2000s, but the only option was the private finance initiative, and it is now spending about a quarter of its revenue budget on servicing that loan. I appreciate that this is new capital spending, but what can be done to help schools in such a position restructure such loans?

Damian Hinds: I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend again to discuss that situation.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Sheffield’s schools are losing out in comparison with those in similar cities under the new funding formula. Money is being shifted away from primary schools, and there is simply not enough for children with special educational needs and disabilities. I shall be meeting Sheffield primary heads on Friday to discuss the crisis in their schools. Does the Secretary of State understand why they will feel that providing £200 million extra for grammar schools is simply the wrong priority?

Damian Hinds: There are some particularly striking examples of individual schools that have gone rather further, including the Schools of King Edward VI in Birmingham. We know that when children from disadvantaged backgrounds go to selective schools, they make more rapid progress. I want more children to have that opportunity.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I welcome the measures that the Secretary of State has announced to enable children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to selective education, but can he ensure that children on free school meals and looked-after children benefit from those measures?
Damian Hinds: Indeed I can. We owe particular attention and focus to looked-after children, and we have been discussing specifically with the Independent Schools Council what more we can do to help that cohort.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): This morning three excellent primary schools in my area, including The Spinney and Mayfield Primary School, announced that, after two years’ work, they are pulling out of their plan to form a multi-academy trust because “the recent change in education policy now makes the current educational climate too ambiguous for us to proceed”.

I am pleased that they are staying with the local authority, but does the Secretary of State really believe that ambiguity is a good way to run our school system?

Damian Hinds: I suppose that for us here in the House, managing politics, ambiguity is a daily feature. I think that converting to academy status, becoming part of an academy trust and having the opportunity to share good practice and learning across schools is a very positive action. Many thousands of schools have benefited from it, and I want more of them to make that positive choice. However, individual schools may have different criteria.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): There are many excellent faith schools in my constituency, and I believe that a third of all schools are now faith schools. They are popular with parents and achieve good results. Does my right hon. Friend agree that parental choice should be central to any successful education system?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A third of state-funded schools in the country are faith schools. That is, perhaps, a higher proportion than people tend to expect, but it is a matter of parental choice, and faith schools are very popular with some parents.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Students on free school meals in selective areas do less well than those in non-selective areas. At this time of scarce cash and difficult choices, would it not be better to support the dissemination of best practice from the non-selective areas, where we know that it works?

Damian Hinds: I do not think that it is a case of either/or. As I said earlier, we know that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who go to selective schools can make more progress, but the hon. Gentleman is also right—as he often is—to say that the dissemination of good practice, which is completely separate from the question of selective or non-selective schools, is fundamental. That is why we supported the Education Endowment Foundation, and that is why sharing that best practice is at the heart of what we do.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for saying that selective schools will have to prove that they are improving access for the most disadvantaged pupils. Will he also look into how we can make progress on the proportion of children just on the other side of the free school meals line, who have been found to be under-represented at selective schools as well?
very supportive of his principle of prioritisation for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but does he agree that that objective will be assisted if every single child in our primary schools has the opportunity to be considered for a place?

Damian Hinds: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely vital that this opportunity is presented as widely as possible and to all primary schools.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will keep under review the removal of the cap on faith schools? I appreciate the point about integration, but was a drop to 25% considered as a compromise?

Damian Hinds: We keep all policies under review. As I said earlier, having published the integration strategy we thought very carefully about this issue and determined that the best approach was to retain the 50% cap. There are of course various other requirements on new free schools to demonstrate their inclusivity, but there are also thousands of faith schools in this country not subject to a cap, and through the voluntary-aided route it will be possible to open them.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that the many comprehensive-educated Members on the Government Benches will always support any education policy that enables more children to reach their full potential? The expansion of selective schools, especially when targeted at the most disadvantaged, will achieve precisely that.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We should value diversity and choice in our system. There is no single type of school that will be right for all children, and we need to find new ways of ensuring that every child can reach their potential.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Contrary to the doom and gloom espoused by the Opposition, I welcome this announcement, which puts more money into new school places, whether selective ones such as those across the county boundary in Berkshire or new free school places in Hampshire. In doing so, may I put forward the case made by local residents in North East Hampshire for a free school in north Hampshire that will be academically rigorous but open to all?

Damian Hinds: I hear my hon. Friend’s pitch and I know that it is heartfelt. We have an open process for the making of applications, and there can be mainstream and special free schools throughout the country. We want to ensure that, in particular, parts of the country that have not benefited from free schools to the same degree in the past have the opportunity to do so, but that does not mean that any part of the country should be out of the picture.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I always welcome more money for education funding, but the Department always focuses on expanding places when it comes to revenue and capital expenditure. Has the Secretary of State thought about areas such as mine, which have too many school places but still need capital expenditure? I am thinking about a primary school in my area that has 17 free spaces, and the impact on that primary school’s budget.

Damian Hinds: There is capital money available not only for expanding places but for school condition, and there may be occasions when other moves are required for the school estate. I cannot comment in detail right now on the case that my hon. Friend has raised, but I will be happy to discuss it with him.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Speaking as a former Kentish grammar school boy, I too welcome this funding. This is one of the few occasions on which I can recall extra money being made available specifically for grammar schools. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should never aspire to a one-size-fits-all education system? Grammar schools have a crucial role to play in achieving the diversity that he speaks about, and they tend to be good or outstanding schools, so it makes absolute sense that we should allow them to flourish and expand.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. One size does not fit all. The grammar schools in this country are a relatively small part of the overall diverse schools system.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Amber Valley is an area with no free schools and no selective schools, and sadly attainment is lower than we would like it to be. How will my right hon. Friend’s welcome suggestion of prioritising such areas work in practice? What can he do to encourage new schools into areas like that?

Damian Hinds: I am afraid there was a crucial word in my hon. Friend’s question that I did not hear. He talked about prioritising something.

Nigel Mills: I asked about prioritising areas with low attainment.

Damian Hinds: Prioritising areas with low attainment is at the heart of narrowing the gap. It is what we are doing with the 12 opportunity areas around the country, for example, but it has to go far beyond that. What we are doing in the opportunity areas is partly about what happens for the areas themselves, but it is also about learning from good practice, bringing together partners in those areas and seeing what can be spread more widely throughout the system.
Points of Order

5.3 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, the High Court in Belfast ruled that a civil servant who had granted planning permission for an incinerator in Mallusk in County Antrim had acted beyond his powers. The specific event does not concern the House today, but there is now an implication for all decision making by civil servants in Northern Ireland. You will be aware that there has been no devolved Assembly or governance in Belfast for nearly a year and a half. On the back of this ruling, we now need certainty about how decisions can be taken forward. Have you had any indication as to whether the Secretary of State plans to make a statement to the House or whether there are, in any case, other ways in which I can pursue this fundamental constitutional question?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order which, as he knows, is not a point that I can answer now from the Chair, but I appreciate the importance of the matter that he has drawn to the House’s attention. Those on the Treasury Bench will have paid attention to his important point, and it will undoubtedly be conveyed to those who have responsibility for such matters. The hon. Gentleman is well aware that if he wants to attempt to bring the appropriate Minister to the Chamber to answer questions on this topic, various routes are open to him to do so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you will have gathered that quite a deal of concern has been expressed by Members on both sides of the House about the general data protection regulation, which comes into full force on 25 May. Some of the training that was provided last week by another organisation on behalf of the House authorities gave MPs’ staff the impression that they should be deleting all electronic information relating to their constituency casework from before the 2017 general election. Indeed, the organisation, IT Governance, encouraged Members’ staff to do so and organised for the material to be deleted.

I do not know whether this is your impression, Madam Deputy Speaker, but my anxiety is that our casework is an essential part of doing our job. Being able to remember and have a record of what representations were made for a constituent 10 or 15 years ago is important, and some cases last a long time. As for our personal security, there are times when we want to know the pattern of who has turned up to our surgeries, how often, what anxieties they had and whether their issues were addressed.

I understand that a letter has gone out from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to some Members, but not all. There is some uncertainty and a lack of clarity about what the proper advice should be, and—I notice that an inspirational piece of paper has been handed to you—I just wondered whether you might be able to provide a bit more clarity. In the end, we have to be able to do our job properly, and we cannot let silly laws get in the way.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. On his last point, there are no silly laws; there are only laws that are passed by this Parliament. Therefore, it cannot, by definition, be a silly law. However, I completely take his point about the importance of Members of this House complying with the rules while continuing to do our work for the people who live in our constituencies in an efficient and correct manner. He has made a good point.

I do not have an inspirational piece of paper, but I do have the knowledge that the House of Commons Commission is due to meet later this afternoon. I would be surprised if the Commission does not consider the hon. Gentleman’s points. In fact, I am pretty sure that the Commission will consider those points shortly, and I am sure that the outcome will be that any Member who wishes further guidance on how to apply the new law will get it and that all Members will be properly helped in ensuring that they carry out their duties correctly.
Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

5.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The United Kingdom’s road haulage sector plays a major role in keeping our economy on the move. Each year, UK-registered heavy goods vehicles carry around £30 billion in goods between the UK and the EU, and around 300,000 people are directly employed within the industry. I saw a snapshot of the UK logistics sector’s importance this morning when I visited and opened the new United Parcel Service sorting and delivery centre at the DP World London Gateway logistics site. It is a strong and positive new investment in the sector that is helping British businesses to become more efficient and is, crucially, a vote of confidence in our future as a trading nation. The Bill is important because it is about our future as a trading nation.

The Bill provides a framework that should reassure hauliers that the final Brexit deal agreed with the European Union will be able to be implemented smoothly and will support the continued movement of goods by truck between the UK and Europe. We are committed to maintaining the existing liberalised access for commercial haulage. It is in everyone’s interest that there should be a mutually beneficial road freight agreement with the EU that secures our objective of frictionless trade and is in the interest of both parties.

The Government are moving ahead with the negotiations with the EU, and I expect us to move towards a proper agreement later this year—I am very confident about that. However, it would be irresponsible of this Government not to plan for all eventualities. I stress again that it is in everyone’s interest to secure liberalised access, which is by far the most probable result of the negotiations, but this Bill is prudent planning for the future. It forms part of the Government’s broader EU exit legislation programme and, as set out in the other place, the haulage permits aspect of the Bill provides a framework for the UK to manage permits in all eventualities, including if they are needed as part of our agreement with the EU.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might be putting a gloss on what is potentially a catastrophic situation. I give him the opportunity, from the Dispatch Box, to give a categorical guarantee that, after exit day, the licences of 318,000 drivers will still be valid to deliver goods across the European Union. Is that right?

Chris Grayling: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the final details of the negotiations at this stage, but let me tell him some straightforward facts: 80% of the trucks that come through the channel ports and the channel tunnel are carrying EU exports to the United Kingdom, so it is pretty evident that it is in everyone’s interest that we reach a sensible agreement for the future. This Bill ensures that we have the legal mechanisms in place to deliver the registration framework that is needed for all eventualities, which is prudent and sensible.

Mr Leslie: I am sorry to interrupt the Secretary of State, but this is quite important. He acknowledges that I asked a straightforward question about the guarantee. Is it not the case that, even in that worst-case situation, some sort of bilateral agreement with other EU countries would be required and there is no guarantee that such an agreement will come forward? Is that not the truth?

Chris Grayling: I cannot guarantee that EU countries and their businesses will want to continue selling goods to UK consumers, but my best guess is that French farmers will still want to sell their produce through our supermarkets and that German car makers will still want to sell their cars in our car showrooms. No, I cannot guarantee that it will rain or be sunny tomorrow, nor can I guarantee that EU countries will want to continue selling their products to us, but do you know what, I think they probably will.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on introducing a timely and good Bill to deal with all eventualities, and on so politely answering idiotic interventions that are trying to create fear where there is no need for it because, of course, goods will move smoothly with or without a deal.

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is right. The fact that this morning, just to the east of London, I visited a £120 million investment in the future of the United Kingdom as a trading nation by a major United States-based company says that I am not alone in believing that trade will continue and flourish in the future, because it will.

There are two parts to the Bill, the first of which is all about the permits. It enables us to introduce a scheme that simply allows trucks to cross borders in a variety of scenarios—this is, basically, like a truck having its own international driving licence. In many circumstances, through a variety of international agreements, that is a necessity in order to carry goods from one nation to another. We are simply making sure that we put in place the legal framework for the Government to establish a system for issuing permits if, after we have concluded the negotiations, it proves necessary to do so. We have designed the legislation to be flexible in response to different circumstances. We do not want to place any undue regulatory or financial requirements on the industry.

Permits are a feature of almost all international road freight agreements outside free-trade areas. The UK already has several permit-based agreements with non-EU countries, including Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and Ukraine. The UK also has liberal, non-permit agreements with Albania and Turkey. The Bill will also cover non-EU agreements relating to permits, which means that there will be one simple, straightforward administration system that is designed to be as easy as possible for haulage firms to use.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I, too, welcome the Bill. The Government are right to make it clear that in the event of no deal we will still have made preparations.
The Bill makes a distinction between international permits with other EU countries, and permits and agreements with the Irish Republic. Why is such a distinction made?

Chris Grayling: We worked on this carefully. The important thing to say is that this is not in any way related to broader discussions about border matters. We are aware that some hauliers travel from Belfast to Dublin to Holyhead to deliver their goods within the UK—we are talking about a UK business delivering its produce within the UK—so this provision is simply designed to ensure that that will not be impeded in any way by the regulatory system. I will say a bit more about that later in my remarks, but we want to ensure that nothing can undermine the integrity of the UK and people who travel from point A to point B within it.

That is very important to me.

The final details of the scheme will, of course, depend on the agreements that we reach, and the Bill allows for that. It creates flexibility and allows us to make regulations on the allocation of permits to best meet the needs of the economy. Guidance on the allocation process will be issued to hauliers.

This aspect of the Bill also allows the Government to charge fees in relation to applications for permits and the grant of permits. I stress that our aim is purely to set those fees on a cost-recovery basis so that we minimise the impact on hauliers; this is not designed to be a revenue-raising mechanism. The system is simply designed to cover its own costs, and the amounts involved will be relatively small for anyone seeking a permit. The fees will recover only the day-to-day cost of administering the scheme. The set-up costs of the scheme are being funded as part of a £75.8 million grant from the Treasury to the Department for Transport as part of our preparations for all the different Brexit scenarios.

The Bill provides for the first set of regulations made under clauses 1 and 2 to be subject to the affirmative scrutiny procedure, which means that the House will be able to scrutinise the new permitting system fully and properly. The first regulations will set out the overarching framework to provide the framework for the grant of permits under any future agreements. As I have outlined, we are confident that we can maintain our existing liberalised access with the EU, but the Bill will help to cater for any possible future permit arrangement with the EU.

On timing, we plan to have the system for a permit scheme ready by the end of the year. It is important that we make sure that we are prepared for all eventualities. Any applications for permits after the relevant regulations we make sure that we are prepared for all eventualities.

Before I move on to part 2 of the Bill, let me touch briefly on the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic, which the UK signed 50 years ago and which the Government have recently ratified. The convention will come into force here before 29 March 2019. It was introduced by the United Nations to enable international road travel and to increase safety by establishing common rules for roads around the world. It builds on the earlier 1949 Geneva convention on road traffic and, indeed, the 1926 Paris convention, which was the first in this policy area and which the UK has already ratified. Why does it matter? Because we need to make sure not only that trucks can come across borders, but that we are able to line up with the rules in other countries, such as Germany, on trailer registration.

The second part of the Bill gives the Government powers to establish a trailer registration scheme to meet the standards in the 1968 Vienna convention. Many EU countries have similar schemes. It will mean that UK operators will be able to register trailers before entering countries that require trailer registration for travel on their roads. By trailers, I mean not the trailer on the back of a car that carries a tent, but full HGV trailers that cross borders to carry goods from point A to point B. The Bill will allow us to set the scope of such a scheme’s coverage.

The detail will be set out in regulations, but our intention is to ensure only users travelling abroad to register their trailers. It is not UK-only, but purely about those travelling internationally. Only commercial trailers weighing more than 750 kg and all trailers weighing more than 3.5 tonnes will need to be registered. As was clearly set out in the other House, the duty to register will apply almost exclusively to international hauliers. Virtually all private-use trailers, such as caravans and horse trailers, will not fall within the scope of mandatory registration, because it is rare that trailers of that kind weigh more than 3.5 tonnes.

We will consult on the scope of the trailer registration scheme over the next few months, and we will try to make sure that we are in good shape later this year to put in place the right scheme, depending on the nature of our agreements and what is required to ensure the smooth flow of trade across borders. We plan to recover the costs of running the scheme by charging fees, which we expect to be lower than those currently set out for the registration of motor vehicles. It is of course important that the new arrangements are complied with; if they are not, we will apply existing penalties to those who transgress.
will be used internationally, but my hope is that once that initial surge is over, it will be possible to carry out the registration very quickly when there is a change of circumstance. We do not expect to have a system that is so expensive that it deters somebody who wants to register a trailer in case it is used internationally. We want to ensure that there is only a small cost to businesses. Many people will want to register their trailers in case what my right hon. Friend highlights happens.

We listened carefully to the debate in the other place and we are working on a report on trailer safety, which is a policy area in which proper analysis will be beneficial and will help safety on our roads. Off the back of the report, we will be able to offer a clear and comprehensive analysis of the complex issue of trailer safety and towing-related accidents. That was a constructive element that came out of the debate in the other place, and we will certainly engage with it.

On the question of the island of Ireland, the Bill covers the whole United Kingdom, other than two provisions that amend legislation in Great Britain and Northern Ireland respectively. Road haulage policy and trailer registration are devolved in Northern Ireland, but not in Scotland and Wales. We have been working with all the devolved Administrations as the Bill has developed. With regard to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Bill supports the commitments made in the December 2017 joint report to avoid a hard land border. This is an enabling Bill, and the Government will preserve the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom.

The Government are committed to ensuring that trade and everyday movements over the land border continue as they do now. The Bill does not create a permit regime in relation to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, nor does it create a hard border between them. It means that trailers travelling only between the UK and Ireland will not need to be registered. It also avoids the situation that I described earlier in which someone who chooses to go via Dublin to come over to the UK finds themselves needing a permit even if they are moving purely within the United Kingdom. I can confirm that the Bill will not impact on border arrangements and that there will not be, as a result, any new transport-related checks at our borders.

**Sammy Wilson:** Will the Secretary of State clarify whether there will have to be a separate agreement between the UK Government and the Irish Government covering people who are taking lorries across the border, whether through Ireland to the rest of GB, or simply carrying loads from Northern Ireland into the Irish Republic?

**Chris Grayling:** The right hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot speak for the Irish Government. We are putting in place a mechanism that ensures that there is no issue on our part. The Irish Government, like any other Government, are of course perfectly able to put barriers in the way of trade, but we will not do that. We will not create a regime that affects those travelling into the Republic of Ireland or those travelling through the Republic of Ireland into the United Kingdom.

I cannot give guarantees on behalf of the Republic of Ireland, but I cannot for a moment believe that people there will want to put in place administrative systems that we do not put in place.

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**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** I understand that the Secretary of State cannot speak for the Irish Government, but can he tell us what discussions he has had with the Irish Government about this, and therefore give us an indication of what the position might be?

**Chris Grayling:** The hon. Gentleman will know that the Irish Government are part of the European Union negotiations. We continue to discuss this and other transport issues as part of those negotiations, and I am entirely confident that we will reach a sensible place at their conclusion.

Let me sum up. As I have outlined, we are committed to ensuring that the road haulage industry can continue to prosper as we leave the European Union. As part of our programme of EU exit legislation, this Bill prepares us for a range of scenarios. It will ensure that the UK can fulfil its international obligations and will be ready when we leave the EU.

The Government have been supported by the industry in bringing forward these sensible measures, and we have talked extensively with it over the past few months. I believe that this represents prudent planning for different eventualities. I personally want to lead a Department that is prepared for all those eventualities and that can deal with whatever circumstance lies ahead, notwithstanding my view that we will reach a sensible partnership agreement for the future this autumn that will enable us to remain good friends and neighbours of the European Union, and that will allow the trade between us to carry on flowing as it does today. I commend the Bill to the House.

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**Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab):** The Bill presents a long overdue opportunity to consider the importance of the transport and logistics industries to the United Kingdom and the commercial road haulage sector in particular. The industry employs more than 2.5 million people and is the fifth biggest sector of the economy contributing £124 billion.

One of the privileges of my job is to meet people from across the transport, freight and logistics sectors. In the course of those discussions around transitional and post-Brexit arrangements, I hear an increasing frustration and anger at the cavalier “it will be all right on the night” approach from this Government, and rightly so, because there is no evidence that economic self-interest will prevail.

As we debate the prospect of a permit system for the haulage industry in the event of a no-deal Brexit, it should be recalled that the UK has 600,000 goods vehicle driving licence holders. There are nearly half a million commercial vehicles over 3.5 tonnes registered in the UK, which are responsible for moving 98% of goods. This is a serious and vital industry and we meddle with it at our peril.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the haulage industry is important to the United Kingdom, especially to Northern Ireland where almost all of our food and goods travel by road? Does he not accept that the whole purpose of the Bill is to ensure that, if there is a deal, we are prepared for it, and if there is no deal, we are also prepared for it, and that that should reassure the haulage industry?
Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I just do not share his sense of confidence that the provisions of the Bill are anything like adequate in the event of a no-deal. These measures will not respond to the needs of the country should that contingency arise.

The Bill must be regarded as the first piece of legislation that provides for a no-deal Brexit. It sets out new powers for the Government to allocate permits to hauliers if required by future agreement or lack thereof, so that UK lorries can continue to operate to and within the European Union. A newspaper headline this weekend—in The Sunday Times, no less—was correct to say that “this government is failing business at every turn”. Today’s debate is a further foretaste of the damage that this Government’s prevaricating is doing to the British economy.

Mr Leslie: My hon. Friend will have noticed that the Secretary of State—in all his finger-crossing hopes for something to crop up before Brexit day—did not actually update the House on the progress that he might be making towards a comprehensive land transport agreement, which is what the Freight Transport Association is asking for. The Secretary of State did not confirm whether he is personally in discussions with the Irish Government, other Governments or the European Commission. Is it not lamentable that he could not even give this vital industry some level of update on the progress of negotiations towards those agreements?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend has got it absolutely right. It is indeed lamentable that there has been a complete absence of those discussions. It is a question of hit and hope, finger in the air and everything will be alright on the night. This is not the right way to go about it. The Secretary of State has come to the Dispatch Box and said that he does not speak for the other 27 Governments. I sometimes wonder whether he speaks for the one of which he is a member. A damaged and disrupted logistics sector will result in a damaged and disrupted British economy.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman just tell the House what additional contingencies he would make if he were the Secretary of State?

Andy McDonald: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue, that is exactly what I am going to outline during the course of my speech.

I hope that this Bill represents the dawn of the realisation of the catastrophe that would flow from a chaotic Brexit. A few months ago the “beast from the east” left supermarket shelves across the country empty, while logistics problems forced fast food chain KFC to close hundreds of outlets because of supply shortages. These examples provide the merest glimpse of what shocks to the supply and distribution chain will look like for British consumers and businesses if the free flow of trade is not maintained following our departure from the European Union.

The Bill has serious implications for the UK’s music industry, particularly the concert haulage industry, which supports the music industry in the UK and the EU. Concert haulage operators require a community licence for road transport to the EU, which will be lost after Brexit.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Forgive me; I did not mean to interrupt the hon. Gentleman in mid-flow, but I think that I am right in saying that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), visited Dover last week. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a straightforward Member of this House and would not want to mislead the House, so he will probably want to correct what he said. I say this to be helpful.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. Given the current snarl’s pace in the negotiations, with the Cabinet split in two to look for solutions rather than no solutions, should there not have been some contingency in this Bill for customs checks, which are looking increasingly likely due to the Government’s handling of Brexit?

Mr Hayes: The Road Haulage Association says that a permit system will not work for concert hauliers, and estimates that the UK will run out of permits in 2.5 days. I have to ask: when will the Government listen to business and accept that there has to be a continuation of the current trading and transport environment, if a massive disruption of the flow of goods and produce is to be avoided?

As an island nation, ports are and will remain vital to our trading relationship with Europe and the rest of the world, so it is quite extraordinary that no Minister from the Department for Exiting the European Union has visited Britain’s most important gateway to Europe—the port of Dover. Half of the UK’s international road haulage traffic comes through Dover alone. I ask the Minister, is transport really a top priority in the Government’s Brexit negotiations?

Mr Hayes: Is it not lamentable that there has to be a continuation of the current trading and transport environment, which he is a member of. A damaged and disrupted logistics sector will result in a damaged and disrupted British economy.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Given the current snarl’s pace in the negotiations, with the Cabinet split in two to look for solutions rather than no solutions, should there not have been some contingency in this Bill for customs checks, which are looking increasingly likely due to the Government’s handling of Brexit?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a good point. One does wonder why no such contingency has been put in the Bill, and we will have to address that in Committee.

The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders tells me that, on average, 1,100 trucks from the EU deliver components worth £35 million to UK car and engine plants every single day. The UK automotive industry relies on just six major ports for the export of 95% of completed vehicles. The SMMT says that some manufacturers face costs of up to £1 million an hour if production is stopped due to component supply issues. A 15-minute delay to parts delivered just in time can cost manufacturers £850,000 per hour. Is it not blindingly obvious that the current trajectory of this Government, with Brextemists at their core, means that we are heading for economic and trading chaos?
Chris Grayling: May I ask the hon. Gentleman a simple question? If business shares the pessimism that he is laying before the House, can he explain the string of positive announcements of investment in the United Kingdom that we have seen in the past few months by Vauxhall, Toyota and others? If things are so bleak, why are they choosing to make substantial investments in their future in the United Kingdom?

Andy McDonald: If the Secretary of State had looked at the papers over the weekend, he would have seen exactly why. A lot of people are making their plans to get out of the UK if necessary. That is exactly what has happened. He is playing with fire on this, and he really should wake up and smell the coffee.

The Government have done little to help the road haulage industry. They have made a complete and utter dog’s breakfast of contingency planning for the M20 motorway. A lorry park off the motorway has been desperately needed for the breakfast of contingency planning for the M20 motorway. Yet the Department for Transport failed properly to undertake the critically important environmental risk assessment before the planning process for the £250 million project and had to scrap it last September. This incompetence will have disastrous consequences. If this Government cannot successfully plan how to build a lorry park in Kent, how do they expect anyone to believe that they are capable of introducing an alternative haulage permit scheme?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman says, rather surprisingly, that this Government have done nothing for the road haulage industry. Is he not aware that the HGV levy brought in to level the playing field between foreign and UK hauliers brought in £96 million in the first two years after it was introduced in 2014, and that the previous coalition Government increased the speed limit on single-carriageway roads from 40 mph to 50 mph, which made a great contribution to improving logistical efficiency?

Andy McDonald: If the right hon. Gentleman had had the pleasure of listening to the Road Haulage Association last week, and the FTA as well, he would probably agree with me that they are not exactly overjoyed by the prospect of the uncertainty that is facing them. A lot of these companies are small companies working on very small margins. He raised the issue of costs that are now going to be put on to those companies. He should be worrying about how that is going to impact on them.

Mr Goodwill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: No. I am not trying to be rude, but I need to make progress. I have taken a lot of interventions.

The ongoing supply of labour is a huge concern for the road haulage industry. The average age of an HGV driver is now 55 and only 2% of the workforce is under 25. The industry is enormously reliant on the 60,000 non-UK EU nationals and any restriction on the supply of skilled workers will undoubtedly have a negative impact.

Ministers urgently need to reassure the road haulage industry that Brexit will not result in more delays at borders as well as that it will not have to bear additional red tape and costs. The Government need urgently to provide clarity about customs, borders and future regulations, about which there are real and deep concerns. Ministers continually argue that economic self-interest will mean that things naturally gravitate towards protecting British business. That is a naive and irresponsible view that is already damaging UK industry.

I pay tribute to the noble Lords, whose work has improved the Bill. The Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the Lords described the Bill as “wholly skeletal, more of a mission statement than legislation”, said that the Committee was “in the dark because the devil will be in the regulatory detail”, and urged the Government to provide “illustrative examples...of at least some of the regulations to be made under the main delegated powers in the Bill”.

As the future relationship is a matter for the Brexit negotiations, this is an enabling Bill that contains little detail and grants the Secretary of State significant powers. The fact that so few details are on the face of the Bill also speaks to the lack of strategy and progress in the Government’s approach to exiting the European Union. The Secretary of State should of course have the powers needed to mitigate the damage to the UK haulage sector caused by a failure to retain current arrangements, but those powers should not be excessive. For example, an argument has been made in favour of a sunset clause so that the powers do not remain on the statute book ad infinitum.

Following pressure in the other place, concessions were made. I am glad that clauses 1, 2, 12 and 17 will be subject to the affirmative procedure, but account of the recommendations of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee to the effect that regulations made under certain clauses should be subject to a vote of both Houses. I am pleased that the Government tabled an amendment introducing a new reporting requirement, requiring the Secretary of State to lay a report before Parliament annually that assesses the effect on the UK haulage industry of any restrictions that apply to a permit scheme agreed with one or more EU member states. The impact of a future permit scheme has the potential to be far reaching with many unintended consequences, so it is right that the Secretary of State should report to Parliament.

In the light of the Government’s abysmal failure on road safety, which has seen the number of specialised road traffic police plummet while the number killed and seriously injured on our roads rises year on year, I urge the Secretary of State not to attempt to remove Labour’s amendment on trailer safety. The amendment is eminently reasonable, and requires the Government to assess evidence on the incidence of trailer-related road accidents and, only if the evidence justifies action, for a new MOT-style mandatory safety standards testing scheme to be created.

I note that when it was introduced in the other place the Bill would have allowed for permits to be allocated on a first come, first served basis or through a lottery, creating a situation where companies would be left queuing overnight or waiting with their fingers crossed that their company’s name would be pulled out of a hat. I am glad that, after criticism from the noble Lord Tunnicliffe, this was changed.

In Committee, Labour will continue to identify any further unintended consequences of the Bill, and will look to strengthen the accountability to Parliament and restrict the powers granted to the Secretary of...
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I am slightly astonished at some of the points that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) made on behalf of the Opposition. I know him well—we often travel down on the train from the north-east together—but he has spent most of the past quarter of an hour attacking the Government for implementing the decision made by 65.5% of the voters in Middlesbrough, and by over 60% of people in Cleveland as a whole, to leave the European Union.

Andy McDonald: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree with me that the voters did not vote to be worse off?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman has fallen into the other trap that many Labour colleagues fall into, which is arguing that the people were too stupid to understand what they were voting for. They knew precisely what they were voting for. They knew it would be tough, but they put the interests of the country before short-term economic advantage. I believe that the Government are negotiating to get the best deal for Britain and one that will be to the long-term benefit of our country.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my surprise at hearing the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) say that any attempt to restrict the supply of workers coming in from the EU would be resisted? Labour Members’ support for a customs union and their not wanting any restriction on the freedom of movement of workers shows that they are in denial about leaving the European Union.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend has correctly identified that Labour Members are all over the place on this subject. There was no shortage of “Project Fear” in debates during the referendum campaign—people knew they were voting for something that would be very tough for this country—but, by and large, they voted because they understood the facts. I turn again to the point that Labour colleagues often make, which is that people did not know what they were voting for. Yes, they did: they were intelligent enough to understand the arguments, and to say otherwise is to insult the many people in Yorkshire and the north-east who voted to leave the European Union.

John Redwood: Did my right hon. Friend also notice that Labour Members’ case seems to be that the EU is so nasty and unpleasant that it would deliberately wreck its own exports to us to make a point, yet they want to be more closely aligned with people and an organisation that would do that? I just do not understand what they are talking about.

Mr Goodwill: As always, my right hon. Friend makes a valid point. It is not in the interests of the German motor industry, the French agriculture industry or industry right across Europe to cut off its nose to spite its face. If that were the case, I am sure that German motor manufacturers would be beating a track to Chancellor Merkel’s door to make that very point.

I have not seen one recently, but I remember following lorries down the road and reading a sticker saying, “If you’ve got it, it’s been on a truck”. Although progress has been made in switching freight to rail or short sea shipping, the last leg of any journey invariably involves a truck. We heard from the hon. Member for Middlesbrough about Dover. It had 2.6 million truck journeys last year, with 1.6 million trucks going on Le Shuttle, which is 11,500 per day. Dover represents 17% of all UK trade coming in, worth £122 billion last year.

It is not just on this side of the channel that people are making such a case; Calais chiefs have also stressed the necessity of a frictionless border. Jean-Marc Puisesseau, president and general manager of Port Boulogne Calais, has said that the port boarded 2 million lorries last year. Without an agreed system in place, we could face 30-mile queues on both sides of the channel—every day, not just when the French seamen go on strike. During such a strike, some UK motor manufacturers, and indeed BMW in Bavaria, were three days away from stopping production. As we have heard, Honda relies on 350 trucks a day on a one-hour just-in-time delivery schedule. It is in no one’s interest not to get a deal.

Sammy Wilson: The right hon. Gentleman is making his point very sharply and well. Does he accept that even the permanent secretary of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has made it quite clear that the picture painted by the Opposition spokesman is very far from the truth? We can have a frictionless border at Dover, and not need have a lorry park on the M20 or the checks he described.

Mr Goodwill: I will come to that point as I expand my comments.

Turning to trucks and the importance of the road haulage industry, it is currently in vogue to demonise diesels, and Volkswagen must take some of the blame for that. However, if one looks at the trucks operating under the Euro 5 and Euro 6 regulations, one sees that heavy vehicles pretty much perform as expected. The reason for that is quite simple: although the analytical equipment that exposed Volkswagen was not previously small enough to go on the back of a truck, so equipment that exposed Volkswagen was not previously small enough to go in a car boot, it has for a long time been small enough to go on the back of a truck, so trucks actually comply very well with the regulations. Indeed, industries have always stepped up to the mark when a higher level of regulation has been proposed, and there is no reason whatever why the regulations will be slackened once the UK leaves the European Union.

As one of the few Members, I suspect, who holds what used to be called a class 1 heavy goods vehicle licence, I spent many hours driving HGVs—transporting potatoes to make oven chips or, as part of the family business, transporting sulphuric acid. I have also driven 44-tonners in France, Belgium, Germany and Holland, so I know a bit about their haulage system—indeed, I wish we had motorway service stations as good as theirs. We rely on our haulage companies, our 320,000 drivers and our logistical organisations to literally keep the wheels of business turning, and they are equally important in cross-border trade.
The Bill could be described in part as a just-in-case Bill—a safety net in case the Brexit negotiations fall off the trapeze—although the permits will also be useful in how they apply to non-EU states. It is unlikely that we will not get a deal, because I think we all understand that it is in everyone’s interest to get a good deal in place for the other side of Brexit.

International trade relies on the capability of vehicles, as well as the goods they carry, to cross international borders. To ensure that vehicles minimise empty running, logistical operations need to be flexible. That is why we have cabotage rules in place, so that non-EU trucks can carry out work here before returning, hopefully loaded with exports, to their home country. When there are short-term capacity problems, the rules can be lifted temporarily, as was the case when a shortage of car transporters coincided with the new registration plate.

The single market for transport services is one baby that we must not throw out with the Brexit bathwater. Yes, we are leaving the single market, but we must keep the flexibilities, liberalisation and competitive elements that benefit trade and jobs. We have always promoted this mechanism, often in the teeth of opposition from member states such as France that see competition from eastern European hauliers as “social dumping” rather than as a competitive element that raises everyone’s game.

In the absence of an agreement, the Bill is our fall-back plan B. In a post-Brexit scenario, one expects the standards that our haulage industry has to comply with not to change radically. Vehicle safety and emissions standards will not be eroded when the UK leaves the EU. Innovations such as autonomous automatic braking, selective catalytic reduction and particulate traps apply to vehicles manufactured and used in Europe. I expect that the Euro 6 standards will be identical to the new UK 1 standards, as I guess they will be called, after Brexit. Similarly, it is in no one’s interest to start a race to the bottom on drivers’ hours.

So much for the vehicles. What about the goods they carry? Whether we have a customs partnership, a so-called max fac or some other custom-built customs solution, the system must operate electronically and without friction, and it must not delay vehicles passing through Dover, Holyhead or Newry, or indeed—this is probably our biggest challenge—goods passing from Spain to our loyal friends in Gibraltar.

I do not share the pessimism of some people who have been known as remoaners—incidentally, I was one of those who voted remain. As Shipping Minister, I visited Southampton and Felixstowe and saw the thousands of containers coming in from all over the world and moving seamlessly through the port. The last thing anyone wants to do is to start opening those containers. The same applies to our biggest port by value—surprisingly, not many people know that that is Heathrow, with the holds of long-haul flights laden with goods inbound and outbound to places all over the globe.

Perhaps the most impressive operation I have seen as part of the Industry and Parliament Trust involved Manchester Airports Group and UPS. The hub at East Midlands airport deals with thousands of parcels every day. Customs duty is collected by the shipper, who navigates a complex administrative system, without the parcel—whether from Beijing, Detroit or Tokyo—stopping for a moment, either on its journey to a UK destination or on its way to trans-shipment on a departing flight. Using the widely recognised “known shipper” arrangement enables truly global trade to function between dozens of jurisdictions and with myriad permutations. For example, some hydraulic components attract a different tariff depending on whether they are destined to be fitted to a tractor or an aircraft. East Midlands is impressive, but nothing compared with the operations in Cologne or Louisville, Kentucky. As I say, this system is already delivering frictionless trade every night. We do not need to reinvent the wheel—or indeed the hub.

I hope such arrangements can be put in place before the end of the transition period. I agree with James Hookham of the Freight Transport Association that the timetable is tight. Until this issue is resolved, however, it will not be possible to initiate free trade, or a freer trade arrangement, with our new global trading partners, so time is of the essence.

Turning to trailers, I note that the UK has now ratified the Vienna convention, which will come into force in March 2019. There have been problems with UK trailers and semi-trailers pulled by non-UK motive units on the continent. The proposals to register trailers will address that. I am pleased that that will not apply to the whole fleet—I must declare an interest in this respect—but only to existing trailers used internationally, and to new trailers as they are registered. I also note the need to facilitate trailer rental, and I am pleased by the reassurance I received from the Secretary of State earlier. We already have a registration system with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, as trailers must pass an annual MOT test, so the Department for Transport will be well aware of the scale of the operation needed.

Belgium—I think uniquely—has a separate registration number for trailers, so the number on the front of a combination will not match the one on the back. Most countries, like us, however, have a plate in the cab that is fixed to whichever trailer is being pulled. The current plating certificate—affixed to the chassis bar of a trailer in most cases—is often hard to find and usually hard to read as well. Has the Minister considered whether the plate fitted to the trailer could have a number or barcode, as is used on shipping containers, that could be read by an automatic number plate recognition-type machine to further facilitate the free flow of vehicles between jurisdictions? I understand that the plate must be fixed to the vehicle, but is there a view on the best position for remote sensing?

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill, but I hope that progress in negotiations will render it superfluous. When we take out insurance, that does not mean that we expect our house to burn down. I think the Government are being prudent. Incidentally, I think the Bill also sends a clear message to EU negotiators that we will not accept a bad deal at all costs and that contingencies are being put in place.

5.57 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), who must be one of the very few of us in this place to have a class 1 licence. I think I will continue the theme of Opposition Members expressing their genuine concerns about what is happening and about how we go forward, while Conservative Members
just continue to tell us, “Everything will be all right on the night. Why should we worry? Just believe us. It will all be okay.” The Government’s confidence is indicated by the fact that a Parliamentary Private Secretary has been going round the Government Benches giving out a crib sheet and lobbying for support. I think that tells us how confident the Government really feel.

I understand the need for the Bill, which is a back-up in case there is no deal. For that reason, I certainly would not vote against it, but I hope that the UK Government are doing their best to ensure that part 1 is not required and that the existing streamlined operations we enjoy under the Community licence scheme remain in place. However, we have to look at the current reality. We have a Brexit Cabinet that cannot agree a customs arrangement. The Tories are determined to pull out of the customs union and the single market. They are absolutely all over the place, and the clock is ticking away, so the prospect of a seamless transition becomes more and more unlikely.

In many ways, the Bill is symptomatic of the Government and their approach to Brexit. It is mainly superficial. There is a statement of intent, but we do not know the detail behind the Bill. We do not know what the permit system will look like or how it will operate. We do not know what fees will be applied. We do not even know whether limits will be applied to the number of permits. Like the Brexit process in general, the Bill is just the equivalent of talk but no action.

There is a further irony. The Bill is another example of primary legislation formulated in the other place. When it suits the UK Government they tell us that the House of Lords is only a revising chamber and that it should not get in the way of the business of the Government, yet if it is willing to do the Government’s bidding, we are supposed to laud its expertise. However, when it applies its expertise and says there is a need for a customs union, a vote to stay in the single market and a meaningful parliamentary vote in this place, somehow we have to ignore that expertise and wisdom. That shows the hypocrisy of Government Members when it comes to the House of Lords.

Another aspect of the Bill is that it is a part of the no deal preparations. The Brexiteer argument is that preparing for no deal will show the EU we are ready to walk away, thus strengthening our negotiating position. However, I am pretty sure that the Bill is not going to have Michel Barnier quaking in his boots. This is the first Bill going through Parliament in preparation for no deal. I suggest there is a long way to go to strengthen the Government’s hand. We are only a couple of months away from summer recess and a whole load of other legislation will be required for the Government to be in a competent place in terms of no deal arrangements. There is no way that the Government are strengthening their hand. If anybody thinks that we are in a stronger negotiating position, they are kidding themselves.

The Government have not even published their transport priorities in a single policy or place, so we do not really know their overall hoped for direction of travel. We know in theory that they want frictionless trade. They want extensive free trade agreements without any meaningful show of what that means in reality and how it would be implemented—that is a key issue.

On haulage, we know that the supposed preference is for things to remain much as they are under the Community licence arrangements, but where are we on those negotiations? If agreement is reached for arrangements to continue as is, or if a reciprocal licence arrangement is agreed, that means few extra checks will be required. There is still, however, the fundamental issue of the customs and border arrangements, which is far more relevant to hauliers and businesses reliant on the import and export of fresh goods.

What will be the timescale for a new IT system? Has any work actually started on it? How much of the £75.8 million allocation for transport Brexit preparation has been spent so far and what has it been spent on? What is the planned programme of work for the fund for the rest of the financial year? Is the renting of Manston airfield as an emergency lorry park part of the Brexit preparations and expenditure? As the shadow Minister said, they cannot even get their plans for a car park correctly in place. That is £13 million down the drain.

Chris Grayling: It may be helpful to the House if I say that the preparations for any disruption, not necessarily Brexit-related, of the Channel ports are well under way. Work on the M20 will begin in a matter of weeks, either late this month or early next month, to ensure that we have greater capability than we did in 2015 to store more lorries. We are not relying on Manston airport. It remains available to us in the short term, but it is not included in our long-term plans.

Alan Brown: The Transport Secretary says that the work is going to start shortly. Can he give me a timescale for the completion of the lorry park?

Chris Grayling: I will go into detail another time, but we are putting in place plans that will enable us to store at least as many lorries as we did at the worst of the situation in 2015 without creating a situation where the motorway cannot flow in both directions. Those plans are well advanced and we will have them in place before next March.

Alan Brown: I remain to be convinced. That seems to be another example of, “Believe me, it will be okay. We’re dealing with it, just trust me.”

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I just wonder if perhaps this is the hidden agenda behind the Foreign Secretary’s proposed bridge, because that would create 20 miles of road between Britain and France. Perhaps the lorries could be stacked along that as well.

Alan Brown: It would certainly provide additional space. I wonder how long the bridge would take to complete, right enough. It is something else I would not trust this Government to implement.

On the Government’s overall preparations, the reality is, as James Hookham, the deputy chief executive of the Freight Transport Association stated:

“There is a lack of any progress in agreeing new systems for avoiding customs checks.”

He also explained that there is much detail to be agreed in two and a half years, a tiny period in business terms. His comments assume a transition period up to December 2020.
If there is no deal, however, the transition period falls and that takes a year and a half out of that timetable. Time really is ticking on and we do not get a sense of urgency from the Government.

Our reliance on road haulage is confirmed by the fact that in 2016 3.7 million tonnes of goods were exported from the UK and 4 million tonnes were imported. For Brexiteers—we have heard the arguments already in interventions—this apparently shows how much the EU relies on the UK for its exports and so it will do everything it can to make sure its exports get here. What it actually shows, however, is how much UK businesses rely on EU imports to put food on the shelves and for it to be a reasonable price. The UK is far more reliant on EU imports. In terms of export value, it is 27 countries versus only the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point. I suspect that when we talk about the import of food into this country, the Government will be reliant on the American market. If they do that, they will be held to ransom. That is what I suspect they are up to.

Alan Brown: That is a valid point. There have been mixed messages from the UK Government. The Trade Secretary says he will get a free trade deal with the United States. The Environment Secretary says we will get a deal but he assures us that there will be no chlorinated chicken or hormone beef. If we trade under World Trade Organisation rules, we cannot impose those welfare standards.

Sammy Wilson: I admire the hon. Gentleman’s ability to find a negative in every argument. He talks about the importance of food imports for the United Kingdom. Does he accept that those food imports come from farmers in Spain, Ireland, France and Italy? Does he think that they want transport to be disrupted to the point where their goods sit and rot in lorries? Is that not an incentive for their Governments to do the kind of deal that the Secretary of State is talking about?

Alan Brown: First, may I thank the right hon. Gentleman for saying I can find a negative in any argument? I can assure him that I have a wife who agrees wholeheartedly with that sentiment. He makes my point for me. There will be a whole raft of countries coming together, so the potential hit on them is much less than the potential hit on the UK. It is easier for them to play hardball. Government Members say that they will not play hardball, but why would they not? The UK is trying to play hardball with the EU, so it is quite clear that the EU is going to have to play hardball back.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My point would be that the hon. Gentleman finds the cloud in every single lining. Perhaps his wife would also agree with that. He talks about food policy and agriculture. When will the Scottish National party release its agricultural policy? The rest of the UK has been waiting for months for the Command Paper. When will the SNP finally come up with policies and make a constructive contribution to the debate, rather than helplessly hitting at the Government?

Alan Brown: For a start, the UK Government have delayed the agriculture Bill. The SNP wants control of immigration to support the farming industry. There are big concerns about agriculture, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. There are concerns about the power grab and the attempt to override devolved policy matters. We heard at the weekend about the much promised review into common agricultural policy funding. The UK Government kept money that was due to Scottish farmers. They held on to it and we heard at the weekend that the review has been delayed again. I will not take any lectures from the hon. Gentleman on agricultural policy.

For the benefit of the House, I will try to return to the Bill. Part 1 covers the haulage permit system, as stated earlier. This is just an enabling Bill, so the real proof of the pudding will come from a combination of Government negotiations and the secondary legislation that is required as part of the Bill. At the moment, we really do not know what we are getting from the Bill.

The Government have stated that they intend to consult on fees later this year when the negotiations are much clearer, but that does not give me much confidence either. The reality is that we should be there or thereabouts with the negotiations already if we are going to get systems in place and advise hauliers and the Freight Transport Association what the future looks like for them, and what they need to do to comply. Clause 2 also introduces further uncertainty by referring to possible random selection or selection on a first come, first served basis, if permits are limited. If that is the outcome, it will cause further uncertainty for businesses.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituency is home to W.H. Malcolm Ltd, one of Scotland’s largest hauliers. When I met its staff, they said that the industry has gone through a tough time for a variety of reasons over the last few years. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State’s gung-ho, “It’ll be all right on the night” approach gives little comfort to hauliers such as W.H. Malcolm and to exporters across the UK?

Alan Brown: I completely agree. I am sure that the haulage company that my hon. Friend referred to—it is clearly a massive haulage company—will have concerns about how the licence will come about, how vacancies will be filled in future and, as we heard earlier, the rising age profile of drivers. Something else that the UK Government have refused to do is help to pay for drivers to be trained so that they can get into the industry. Individuals cannot afford the £3,000 that it costs to train for an HGV licence.

Just to surprise the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), on a slightly positive note, I welcome the fact that clause 9 comes from the Government accepting a Lords amendment about future reporting on the impact on the UK haulage industry of the restrictions that apply to a permit scheme. What I find curious about that is that when I try to get amendments through in Committee that require the Government to report on future implementation, they always vote them down, so I hope that this will be a precedent for other future legislation. I welcome these provisions on future reporting.

Clause 12 covers Northern Ireland. Despite assurances from the Minister in the Lords that this legislation will not result in a hard border in Ireland—we have heard that from the Secretary of State—we need to know how the powers will be enforced and how it will not lead to a hardening of the border. I notice that the Secretary of State could not state clearly how the Irish Government see this operating. The Bill also specifically requires the
As I read the Bill, I could not help thinking that it is yet another piece of legislation that had its genesis during my time at the Department for Transport. We spend a great deal of time debating Bills that I had a hand in. When I was a Minister, I suppose that excessive humility meant that I did not fully accept the plaudits from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, but now I realise just how inventive I was in the Department. It was that combination of perspicacity and imagination that led to so much legislation, including this Bill.

As has been said, the essence of the Bill is to create a framework. The first of the Bill’s two parts deals with establishing a permit system that will allow the continued movement of goods across Europe by hauliers, and the second deals with trailer registration. I do not want to go exhaustively into that—it was described very well by the Secretary of State, and others have made reference to it—but some points of amplification are worth making. I emphasise again the significance of haulage and why the measures that we are debating really matter. Both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State drew attention to the scale of the industry. It is worth something like £13.1 billion to the economy and directly employs almost 200,000 people but, of course, there are many more jobs in the logistics industry, as we like to describe it in the modern idiom. Around 2.35 million people have occupations that relate to the transit—the movement—of goods.

Through haulage, for the vast majority of goods are transported by truck, the things that we want and the things that we need—they are not necessarily the same, by the way—are brought to us, and the things that we make and sell are taken from us to other places. It is just-in-time culture that we have created means that the lead times involved in acquiring, transporting and retailing goods are very short indeed, and were they to suffer as a result of any change, it would mean not only a considerable disruption to what we have come to expect, but significant additional costs to the haulage industry, which works on very narrow margins—typically something like 1% to 3%. I have spoken to the RHA about that, both since and while I was a Minister, and it is conscious of the need to maintain that free flow of goods not only for its own sake, but for the sake of all those it serves through the industry including, ultimately, consumers—those who buy and use the goods, and whose lives are made better by their acquisition.

It is therefore important, as the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State have both emphasised, that we make the process as seamless as possible. The optimum outcome, of course, is that it be as much like it is now as possible. As the Secretary of State said, that is what he anticipates will be the product of the negotiations in which we are engaged, and his argument is compelling, because it is in our mutual interest that that is the case. It is absolutely in the mutual interest of countries across Europe that they are able to sell and buy goods as they need them.

Andy McDonald: Does not the right hon. Gentleman accept that while a principle of solidarity exists in an EU comprising 28 countries, once we are a third
country, that principle of solidarity will obtain across 27 countries and their duty will be to each other, not the UK?

Mr Hayes: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s argument, but I suspect that the commercial interests of those countries and the pressure that commercial interests put on them will, in the end, be irresistible. For example, as was argued a few moments ago, farmers, growers and food manufacturers across Europe—whether in northern Europe or, as we heard, in Spain and Italy in the south—will want their goods brought here, much as they are now. I think the pressure to do a deal in our mutual interest will in the end rule the day.

Now, I do not know that, and the Secretary of State asked, very honestly, “How could I predict that?”—he would not want to, and he did not—but I think a deal in our mutual interest is the likely outcome. He called it his best guess; I would go further and call it my considered estimation.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman touches on a fundamental point. Does he not agree that, if we do not get this right, it will affect costs and quality, certainly for transporters and producers?

Mr Hayes: That is why it is vital that the negotiations go well and why it is important to put in place this framework legislation. It is right that the Government prepare for all eventualities. In opposition, I spent half my time saying the Government were being too precise, too dogmatic, too determined to specify, and the other half saying they were being too open-minded and too flexible. The trouble with all Oppositions is that they meander between those two positions: on the one hand, they want the Government to be specific; on the other hand, they want the Government to be flexible. I slightly sense that that dilemma prevails in respect of the existing Opposition. This is a framework Bill—there is no need to apologise for that. The detail will come forward when we know the shape of the negotiations and how much of the Bill will be necessary. That is a straightforward and honourable position for any Government who want to anticipate, prepare and act.

The shadow Secretary of State made an additional important point about haulage that I also want to amplify. On skills and employment, he is entirely right that, whether we look at the UK, there is a pressing need to recruit more people into the industry. As he was speaking, I was looking at notes on this very subject. He will know that the strategic transport apprenticeship taskforce, which has been looking at just these matters, published a report last year, off the back of its earlier consideration, and although there have been improvements across each sector of transport—road, rail, and so on, including haulage—there is still more to do, particularly to recruit people from under-represented groups in the sector.

When I was a Minister, work was being done, which I know is continuing under my successors, to encourage more people into the industry by, if you like, recasting or rebranding it—something I discussed with the RHA many times. That is vital not only on the purely numeric ground. The hon. Gentleman mentioned, but because we want people to have worthwhile careers in logistics. It is an important sector, and there are many good jobs to be had and many important skills to learn and use, so there is an efficacy in this as well as a necessity. To that end, I hope the work will continue through the apprenticeship taskforce. I gather from its report that there are 15,000 apprentices in road freight this year. I hope that that number will continue to grow. I established an education advisory group in the Department to advise on how we could cast out more widely in attracting people into the industry, and it seems to me that that work should also continue—but far be it from me to bind the hands of my successors.

Andy McDonald: Does the right hon. Gentleman also agree that this is not only about attracting people into the industry but about retaining them? The figures show that many young people coming into the industry do not hang around but go on to pastures new, and that requires urgent and focused attention.

Mr Hayes: It does require focused attention. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: it is about retention as well as recruitment. We must recruit from different sources, which might mean people coming back into the industry, and address the rate of attrition. We must draw on people from other sources—a good example is the armed services, where people, having learned to drive, could re-enter the private sector—and we must attract more people from minority communities, which are very sparsely represented in haulage and road freight, and more women drivers. To do that, however, we have to change some of the working conditions. That is critical to both recruitment and retention.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you did not mind my digressing a little from the specifics of the Bill in order to amplify an important point that I know is keenly felt by shadow Ministers and Ministers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I just want to raise two points. First, might one way of attracting more young people into the business be for the Government to provide a financial incentive to companies, tied into some contract of employment, to enable us to keep people in the business? Secondly, business is changing and many married people do not want to be away for long periods, so might it be worth trying to engage with single people, and those with more free time and who do not have the same obligations at home? Those are probably two things we need to look at.

Mr Hayes: As the hon. Gentleman will remember, in an earlier phase of my celebrated ministerial career, when I was apprenticeships Minister—I expected at least a titter when I said that, but clearly people take it very seriously, which I am actually rather relieved about—we looked particularly at smaller businesses and their commitment to training and introduced a grant scheme for small businesses that took on apprentices. I think there is a case for looking at that again, particularly in sectors with the most pressing demand—and haulage might be one of them—but I will say no more than that, because I do not want to commit my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to anything they do not want me to commit them to; I simply endorse his thoughts.

The Bill does two things: it provides powers that will support Britain’s hauliers to continue operating internationally after the UK leaves the EU; and it gives
[Mr John Hayes]

the Government the necessary framework to introduce new administrative systems if needed after exit. It provides the kind of flexibility I have described and, as has been said, under provisions in part 2, puts in place a trailer registration system in line with the Vienna convention, which, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, came to pass in 1968. It is a UN treaty designed to facilitate international road traffic and increase road safety by establishing uniform traffic rules, and has been signed and ratified by 75 countries. The Bill will allow us to apply it more comprehensively.

I do not want to delay the House any further, because I know that others want to speak—

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Don’t stop! Do go on!

Mr Hayes: No. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] I really feel that it is only fair to others to give them the opportunity to emulate my style and content.

Cardinal Newman—who, in my experience, is given insufficient attention during debates on road haulage—

[Laughter—]

said:

“Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt”.

Of course there will be difficulties in the process during the period following our departure from the European Union. It will be a cathartic process, and all kinds of challenges will have to be met. However, that does not of itself make an argument for not taking the right challenges will have to be met. However, that does not of itself add up to the profound of itself make an argument for not taking the right action now; it does not of itself make an argument for not taking the right action now; it does not of itself make an argument for not taking the right

Edward Argar

Mr Argar: Shhh! Mr Hayes: I do not want to delay the House any further, because I know that others want to speak.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the merits of trailer safety—although it is a compromise—but my work on the overwhelming conclusion there ought to be a compulsory register of all trailers weighing less than 3.5 tonnes, and that they should be subject to regular testing. I shall say more about that later.

My interest in trailer safety began soon after I was elected to this place in 2015, when my constituents Donna and Scott Hussey came to see me about their son, Freddie, who had been tragically killed in January 2014. Three-year-old Freddie and his mum were walking along the pavement when a two-tonne trailer came loose from a Land Rover, sped straight towards Freddie, and killed him. The trailer’s tow hitch had not been secure, as the position of its handbrake had prevented it from being locked down.

If the trailer had been subject to mandatory roadworthiness checks, the problem with the hitch might have been fixed and the tragedy might never have happened. Currently, trailers weighing less than 3.5 tonnes, known as categories 01 and 02 or “light” trailers, are not required to have any such roadworthiness test, although trailers and their vehicles must be roadworthy when used on the road under section 40A of the Road Traffic Act 1988. That is a loophole: without the licensing and hence the testing, there is no enforcement system.

I do not need to tell the House that the family continue to suffer a life sentence because of the horrific events of that day. However, I have been inspired by their courage and resilience, and we have been working together on a campaign to improve trailer safety ever since.

In the last three years, I have initiated a Westminster Hall debate and had meetings with two transport Ministers: the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and the current Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman). I have held two trailer safety summits, which were attended by representatives of key national organisations and Government agencies; I have spoken at the National Trailer and Towing Association’s annual conference; and I have met various experts with insights into trailer safety, including members of my local police force. The result has been the #towsafe4freddie campaign, launched by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to raise driver awareness, and an awful lot of hard work by the National Towing Working Group, spearheaded by Highways England and others. The National Trailer and Towing Association has set up a free trailer safety-checking initiative, and Avon and Somerset police have begun trailer awareness training for officers to enable them to spot unsafe trailers on the road.

That work commands cross-party interest and support. I am grateful to the Ministers for their attention to the issues, and for meeting the Hussey family: that meant a great deal to them. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire and his team for attending my trailer summit in Bedminster last month,

for Transport’s current reporting methods do not give us a true picture of the risks posed by light trailers in this country.

The subsections also give the Secretary of State the power to introduce compulsory trailer registration and mandatory testing of trailers weighing more than 750 kg. I accept that as a long overdue step towards improving trailer safety—although it is a compromise—but my work on the overwhelming conclusion there ought to be a compulsory register of all trailers weighing less than 3.5 tonnes, and that they should be subject to regular testing. I shall say more about that later.

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and for his willingness to engage with the experts. Despite that good work, however, we continue to underestimate hugely the safety risk posed by unchecked light trailers on our roads—which brings me to the Bill, and its importance.

Part 2 of the Bill deals with the establishment of a trailer registration scheme that would allow UK trailer users to meet the registration standards outlined in the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic. Registration is critical to trailer safety, because it constitutes an essential requirement for regular safety checks, and prevents unsafe trailers from being sold and resold. However, non-commercial, leisure-use trailers weighing less than 3.5 tonnes do not fall within the scope of the Bill, because they are not included in the convention. I believe that that is a missed opportunity.

In Committee in the House of Lords, Lord Bassam tabled a probing amendment that called for the registration scheme to apply to all trailers weighing less than 3.5 tonnes. He referred to the Government’s impact assessment, which stated that the Bill represented “an opportunity to improve safety through better regulation”, and asked why the Government would not take advantage of it to widen the scope of the scheme. That raised an important point. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency’s digital service is now in place to facilitate the registering of trailers. It presents a good opportunity for the registration of all trailers, not only those weighing more than 3.5 tonnes. The Government fear that expanding the scheme would create an unnecessary administrative burden, but that needs to be balanced against the dangers posed by these vehicles. I remind the House that Freddie Hussey—aged just three—was crushed by a two-tonne trailer, heavier than the average car.

The issue of “proportionality” arose several times in the House of Lords, which is why, should the report referred to in the Bill conclude that trailers ought to be registered and subject to mandatory safety checks, the rule would apply only to trailers weighing more than 750 kg. That is a compromise. It is still very much my view—based on evidence that I have seen—that faulty trailers weighing less than 750kg represent a huge safety risk, which is why I believe that all trailers should be registered and checked.

I was delighted that the Lords supported the amendment that compels the Secretary of State to collate comprehensive data on the number and nature of trailer-related road accidents in the UK, and to include those findings in a report, but the key word is “comprehensive”. It would not be good enough for the Government to commit themselves to a report, but to give us what already exists. I would welcome the Minister’s clarification of how the Government will define “comprehensive” and how his Department will go about collecting the data. I am certainly not alone in believing that data on the safety of light trailers is currently lacking. During the Lords debate, Baroness Sugg, speaking for the Government, admitted that, having looked at the Department for Transport’s road accidents report, she agreed that the Government could and should consider the way in which they report trailer safety, and that it could “definitely be improved”. I welcome that assertion.

In the report, the Department highlights the huge gaps in the data that they currently collate for road accidents generally. They include only accidents that are reported to the police, that involve a personal injury, and that occur on public roads. The true number is of course much higher. The report states: “These figures...do not represent the full range of all accidents or casualties” in Great Britain, and goes on to describe the large proportion of non-fatal casualties not known to the police.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is talking eloquently about safety in relation to trailers and vehicles. We must have a high level of safety, so does she agree that those with licences from other countries, such as eastern Europe, should have the same high driving standards as our drivers in this country? Some, although not all, of the events the hon. Lady has been talking about involve drivers from other parts of Europe who do not have the driving skills that they should have.

Karin Smyth: I agree that we want all drivers to be of the highest standards. I cannot comment on the number of accidents caused by trailers that involve drivers not of that high standard, but in the work I have done over the last three years I have been shocked to discover how many trailers, in agriculture and across the piece, on our roads do not meet the requirements we would ordinarily expect, and I hope this Bill helps to improve that situation.

The current method of reporting a road accident means that there is no real way of knowing whether, and how, a trailer contributed to an accident. The details of incidents involving trailers are largely dependent upon the subjective viewpoint of the police officer on the scene, which the Department’s own report admits poses difficulties. The STATS19 form filled in by the officer is complex and gives 78 contributing factors for them to choose from. We currently have several police forces testing new reporting systems because of the huge inaccuracies and the inadequacy of this method.

In contrast to the statistics on trailer-related incidents presented by the Department for Transport, a growing body of evidence from industry organisations and case studies indicate the true scale of the problem. In July 2017, the National Trailer and Towing Association introduced the free safety checks initiative, the first of its kind in the UK, in which light trailers are offered a free inspection at members’ premises. Since rolling this out it has found an astonishing 93% failure rate. I hope the work being done will help highlight to Members that they can encourage people in their constituencies to take advantage of these free safety checks and promote their use. Avon and Somerset police have also been carrying out checks and they broadly substantiate these findings; the failure rate is very high.

These initiatives further highlight that what is needed are checks on these vehicles in order to prevent accidents, and not purely the collection of data on vehicles once they have been involved in an accident. With an estimated 2 million light trailers on the road, a large proportion of which are many years old, it is not unreasonable to assume that a significant amount would fail a roadworthiness test. All cars, which in many cases are lighter than trailers, are subjected to rigorous MOT testing each year, so by what logic can the Government argue that trailer safety checks are not integral to improving safety standards?
It is my sincere hope that the Government will accept the measures discussed as an opportunity to move this issue on and demonstrate their commitment to preventing further tragedies such as Freddie’s from happening in the future. We can only do that if we have clearer data on light trailer safety so that the Secretary of State can make an informed decision on whether we ought to have mandatory registration and checks.

In summary, I am grateful for the comments and the work of the Secretary of State and the Minister on this issue and for clauses 13(3), (4) and (5) and 14(3) and (4), but how will the Government define what is “comprehensive”? Also, will the Department initiate new ways of collating data on light trailers beyond the STATS19 form? How does it plan to gather such data? Finally, how does the Minister plan for the data to be gathered to meet the timeframe set out in the Bill— one year from the day the relevant section comes into force?

6.44 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth).

This is a very welcome Bill and demonstrates that the Government are making prudent preparations for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and many other speakers this afternoon have rightly pointed out the importance of the UK’s road haulage sector and the contribution it makes to the country’s economy. It is, by any standards, an important British industry: it employs about 300,000 people, and in 2015 some 76% of all goods moved in this country were moved by road. It is therefore entirely understandable that the road freight industry is keen to see an agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union on the future of road haulage.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that road haulage is one of his Department’s top two priorities. He also rightly pointed out in response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) that about 80% of the lorries operating between the UK and the continent are owned by EU-based businesses. It is therefore clear that achieving an agreement is, or at least should be, a matter of similar priority to the European Union as it is to us. Indeed, I am heartened by the fact that the EU’s negotiating guidelines, adopted on 23 March, set out the aim of continued transport connectivity between the UK and the European Union. I am pleased to hear from my right hon. Friend this afternoon that the negotiations are going well, and I have no doubt that it will be to the mutual benefit of the United Kingdom and the European Union, and their respective transport industries, to achieve an agreement that provides for frictionless road transport after Brexit.

However, that being said, the Government are entirely right to prepare contingency measures for the event of there being no deal, and that course of action has attracted the approval of the road haulage industry itself. As part of the process of preparation, Parliament recently ratified the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic. The UK was already a signatory to the 1949 Geneva convention; however, five EU member states, including Germany, are party to the Vienna convention but not to the Geneva convention. Ratifying the 1968 convention, therefore, will, in the Government’s words, “address the lack of a mutual legal basis for road traffic” with those countries. In other words, it will provide for some degree of continued traffic with the EU in the event of there being no deal. As the Government have also observed, ratifying the Vienna convention will enable the United Kingdom to help shape the evolution and future direction of the convention, which is particularly important in respect of automated vehicle technology.

The Road Haulage Association has indicated that ideally it would wish the UK and the EU to use the current Community licence system and all EU rules for road haulage once Brexit has taken place. That may be the most desirable outcome, depending of course on whether the issue of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice can be resolved. The Department for Transport is no doubt considering a number of other proposals that would result in a similar degree of flexibility without ECJ jurisdiction.

One of the proposals suggested by the RHA is that the United Kingdom and the European Union should set up a new authorising system for international road haulage. That may also be a desirable outcome, but in addition there is always the possibility of the UK and individual EU member states setting up a new permit-based system for international road haulage—in other words, a system of bilateral permits.

The Bill of necessity employs a broad brush: it has to take into account all possible contingencies from the negotiations, from complete agreement to no deal. It is therefore necessarily widely framed, and is no worse for that. Part 1 enables the Secretary of State to put in place arrangements to enable a road haulage permit scheme, should it be required. Clause 1 provides for regulations to oblige road hauliers to carry a permit where international agreement requires it. The expression “relevant international agreement” is defined in the clause as an agreement “to which the United Kingdom is a party and...which relates to the transport of goods by road to, in or through the country”.

However, in the case of Ireland, an international agreement is expressed as one to which the UK is a party and “which relates to the transport of goods by road to, in or through Ireland” and “which the Secretary of State has certified as an agreement to which the Government of Ireland has consented”.

That is for a very good reason. There has been a long history of co-operation between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland with regard to transport on the island of Ireland, and I suggest that continued bilateral arrangements are most desirable. In fact, they are equally important for the Irish Republic. The A55 north Wales expressway passes through my constituency, and hundreds of Irish lorries pass along it every day. It is important that the Republic of Ireland’s free access to the roads of the United Kingdom should be maintained. I would be pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister what discussions have taken place with the Government of the Republic and whether he anticipates agreement on new bilateral arrangements after Brexit.

Clause 2 allows the Secretary of State to issue permits to applicants and provides for regulations that would detail how hauliers should apply for permits and the
basis on which the Secretary of State would decide whether to grant a permit. I understand that those regulations will be the subject of a consultation by the Department, which is sensible and welcome. The clause also provides for criteria to be used in allocating permits, should they be required as part of an agreement with the EU. Subsection (l)(c) indicates that regulations may make provision

"as to how the Secretary of State is to decide whether to grant an application for a permit, including provision specifying criteria or other methods of selection (which may include first come, first served or an element of random selection)."

Concern was expressed in the other place as to the somewhat haphazard nature of the selection provided for in the clause, and the reasonable point was made that it would be difficult for any haulier to make serious business plans on such a basis. Will the Minister give a further indication as to how such a method of selection would operate? No doubt it will be set out in the regulations in due course, but it would be good to know the Government's current thinking.

Part 2 of the Bill provides for a system of trailer registration. That has been included in the Bill to enable the Government to comply with their obligations under the Vienna convention, which has now been ratified. The Minister, Baroness Sugg, indicated in the other place that it was the Government's intention to require only operators that take trailers abroad to register their trailers. It would be good if the Minister could reiterate that commitment and further confirm that the scheme will apply only to commercial trailers over 750 kg and 3.5 tonnes are subjected to no routine safety checks whatever. Vehicles over 3.5 tonnes are required to have a yearly inspection, so it would seem ridiculous to most people that this does not apply to all trailers. A 3 tonne trailer that becomes detached could easily destroy a building. The dangers to other motorists, and pedestrians, are obvious.

The National Trailer and Towing Association has been so disturbed by those dangers that its members have been offering free visual checks for trailers and then recommending what action needs to be taken to make them safe. Since the scheme began, 91% of the trailers seen have failed the test. The Rotherham Towing Centre gave me an example of a catering trailer that its new owner had brought in last week. It had been bought on eBay and, as it was being towed home on the motorway, a wheel came off. During its subsequent inspection at the centre, staff condemned the brakes, the tyres, the hitch and the lights. The centre owner, Irene, said that the only thing that worked was the deep fat fryer.

The amendments moved in the other place by Lord Bassam would go some way towards addressing the glaring safety omissions, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for acknowledging that in his speech. The amendments do not call for the compulsory registration of trailers or for safety checks, but they would require the Government to collate information on trailer-related accidents and to consider what further regulation is appropriate. As that does not currently happen, we have no idea of the scale of the problem. I am sure we would all agree that evidence-based legislation is always the best approach, and the Bill could ensure that that evidence is robust. Personally, I would push the Minister to go further and to go straight to registration for all trailers.

Finally, I take this opportunity to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South, who has campaigned extensively on this issue and worked closely with the family of three-year-old Freddie Hussey. I would also like to offer my deep sympathy to Freddie's family. As my hon. Friend said, Freddie was tragically killed when a trailer became detached from a vehicle. The trailer was later found to be unsafe as the tow hitch was not working correctly. Terrible incidents such as that can be avoided, and I urge the Minister to act to close the loopholes in the existing legislation without delay.

6.54 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I have really enjoyed this debate, and I hope that the Minister takes seriously all the points that have been raised in good faith. I am also particularly pleased to speak after my hon. Friend for Bristol South (Karin Smyth)—thank you for that, Madam Deputy Speaker—as I wish to support the points she made on towing equipment and trailers. Last week I visited the Rotherham branch of Towing Centres UK, which fits towing equipment to vehicles. As skilled professionals, the centre's staff were keen to tell me about the serious gaps in the current legislation regarding safe towing—gaps that the Minister has the opportunity to address today.

The Rotherham Towing Centre is the second facility in the UK to be accredited by Horizon Global, one of the world's largest suppliers of towing equipment. Customers using such an accredited centre can be sure that a tow bar fitted to their vehicle is safe and secure. The consequences of tow bar failure can be catastrophic, and many of us will be aware of horrific incidents of unsafe towing that have resulted in serious injury or death, yet there is no legal requirement for tow bars to be fitted by a professional. There is nothing to prevent an unsafe, badly fitted tow bar from being used. Even at the vehicle's next MOT test, a newly fitted tow bar will not be tested. Added to that danger, trailers between 750 kg and 3.5 tonnes are subjected to no routine safety checks whatever. Vehicles over 3.5 tonnes are required to have a yearly inspection, so it would seem ridiculous to most people that this does not apply to all trailers. A 3 tonne trailer that becomes detached could easily destroy a building. The dangers to other motorists, and pedestrians, are obvious.

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6.58 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I might not be able to emulate the knowledge and experience of my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), the eloquence, erudition and elegance of delivery of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), or the positivity of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), but I will equally seek to avoid the pessimism of the hon. Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I will seek to address the positives of this important piece of legislation, which is, as Members have said, a sensible preparation for different Brexit eventualities and for the delivery of a smooth Brexit for the people and businesses of this country.
The Secretary of State has been absolutely clear that he expects the UK to secure a good deal, and I share his positivity on that. He is right, however, to bring forward a precautionary contingency Bill. It is the action of a responsible Government to prepare for every eventuality. Indeed, it is also the action of a responsible Secretary of State, and I pay tribute to him for that. Of course, I hope that many of the Bill’s powers prove unnecessary, but it is right that we have them, and the regulation-making powers will allow the Secretary of State to create the regulatory architecture to cater for various scenarios.

My right hon. Friend and others have been clear about the importance of the haulage sector both to our economy and to each of us in our day-to-day lives. Lorries may not always be popular, but they are hugely important in making this country function. For the sake of brevity, I will not recount the statistics referred to by many Members, but they set out just how important the sector is to our economy. Not only is contingency planning important and responsible, but the economic imperative for each of us in our daily lives and for our economy is clear. The UK played a key role, starting in 1988 and continuing through the 1990s, in driving forward the liberalisation of haulage in Europe, and it is right that we are now acting to ensure that that continues.

Baroness Sugg set out clearly in the other place our country’s reliance on the industry, particularly for foodstuffs. The trailer registration scheme is an obligation that derives from the UK’s ratification—albeit slightly belated—of the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic, which we had signed but never ratified and which built on the 1909, 1926 and 1949 conventions. The ratification of the convention now is part of our responsible preparation for all eventualities. I suspect the main reason why it was so important to do it now is found in paragraph 3 of article 3, which states: “Subject to the exceptions provided for in Annex 1 to this Convention, Contracting Parties shall be bound to admit to their territories in international traffic motor vehicles and trailers which fulfil the conditions laid down in Chapter III”.

That will help to provide for the continued free flow of cars and commercial vehicles so that traffic can continue as before, allowing the UK to issue international driving permits.

In order that we can comply with the convention and secure the benefits of it, it is important that the registration of trailers is brought forward. The Department has been clear that it proposes mandatory registration for commercial trailers over 750 kg and all trailers over 3.5 tonnes used for international purposes, but not for domestic use. Such a reasonable and measured approach will ensure that caravans, horseboxes and so on are not necessarily caught by the scheme. However, I note that that is not specifically detailed on the face of the Bill, although the Minister in the other place made the point clear. The Bill also enables the Secretary of State to make regulations for such a scheme to be brought in.

On the subject safety, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who has done so much in this place with her “Tow Safe for Freddie” campaign, following the tragic death of Freddie Hussey. She has been passionate and determined in her pursuit of that cause, as I know some of their lordships were. I hope that the Minister, in his usual thoughtful and sensitive way, will pay due heed to what their lordships and the hon. Lady have said and will address her comments in measured, sensible tones.

I welcome this sensible piece of contingency planning by the Secretary of State—I pay tribute to him for his foresight—and the enabling framework that it provides. I suspect that there may be little actual change and that the powers may prove largely unnecessary following the negotiation of a successful deal, but it is right that we plan for all eventualities and ensure continued liberalised traffic and haulage for the future. That sensible approach reflects not only pragmatism but the Government’s clear and focused determination to secure a good deal for Britain, which is in sad contrast to the chaos and contradiction that characterise the Opposition’s policy as we deliver our exit from the EU. I again commend the Secretary of State for his foresight and sagacity, and I am pleased to support the Bill.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend is correct. The RHA has adopted a constructive, engaged and positive approach, as he will know from his dealings with it when he was a successful Transport Minister. The Bill will also provide the Secretary of State with new powers to allocate permits and to charge fees, and with enforcement powers for different offences.

The trailer registration scheme is an obligation that derives from the UK’s ratification—albeit slightly belated—of the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic, which we had signed but never ratified and which built on the 1909, 1926 and 1949 conventions. The ratification
the Government—whether in this Bill or in conversations, interviews or statements—indicate to those negotiating our exit from the EU that we have the option of walking away if they are not prepared to play ball. Regardless of how small this particular warning may be, it is nevertheless part of a picture that we need to present.

Having said that, I share Ministers’ optimism and the optimism of many other Members who have already spoken. There is every reason why the current arrangements—the Community licence and the standard international operator’s licence—should be made available as a result of the Brexit negotiations. As we have already seen, road transport is vital not just for this country, but for every country with which we trade in the EU.

Alan Brown: The Democratic Unionist party obviously has first-hand experience of how good the UK Government are at negotiating. Given the concessions the right hon. Gentleman’s party extracted from the Government, the whole EU saw how the DUP had the Tories dancing on the head of a pin. Does he really trust that lot to negotiate a good deal from the EU?

Sammy Wilson: The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. When the Government stuck their heels in with the EU in December 2017, the agreement was changed and the protocols were not insisted on in March 2018. The Prime Minister stuck her heels in when the Irish Government said June was a deadline. The UK Government made it clear that it might not be done by June, and we have now moved to October 2018. When the Government make it clear that they intend to be in the driving seat on these negotiations, I have every confidence that we can get a good outcome for the United Kingdom.

Of course, there is every reason for us to be confident. Road transport is important to every European nation that trades with us, and it is particularly important to Northern Ireland—over 90% of our trade is via road transport. Road transport is not only important to us. If we look at who actually transports the goods we export to other parts of the EU, we see that 85% of the goods that go from the UK to other EU countries are carried in vehicles owned by EU-based companies. That being the case, there is every incentive for nations with lorries, lorry drivers and transport companies to come to an arrangement with our Government to ensure that free movement can happen. Equally, many of those goods are perishable, and it is therefore important that there is as little disruption to road transport as possible, hence why I believe it will be possible to get the kind of deal the Government seek. Nevertheless, it is important that we have this fall-back position.

The second issue is Northern Ireland. Although I heard the Minister’s explanation, I am still not clear on why we need a separate provision in the Bill for agreements on transporting goods to, and on lorries driving through, Northern Ireland. I would appreciate further explanation from the Minister as to why the international arrangements covering other EU countries cannot simply apply to the Irish Republic. If lorries from Northern Ireland go through the Irish Republic, they are going through another country, so why would the international arrangements and agreements not apply? Why do we need a specific bilateral arrangement with the Irish Government who, unfortunately, at present seem to be in a temper tantrum and are not willing to listen to too much logic, even if not doing so damages their own economy?

Alan Brown: While the right hon. Gentleman is castigating the Irish Government—he says they have said there will be no cameras and no technology—will he explain what technology he proposes? The UK Government have said that there will be no infrastructure and no cameras, or anything like that, at the border, so what is this magic technology that will rely on no infrastructure whatsoever?

Sammy Wilson: When people talk about infrastructure, they think of red and white posts on the roads across the border. The one thing we know—I do not want to digress too much—is that during the troubles 50,000 troopers could not seal the Irish border. If we think we will seal the Irish border to trade with a couple of barber’s poles across a road, we are barking up the wrong tree. That shows a total misunderstanding.

The infrastructure that would be involved is used elsewhere and has been proven, whether it is GPS, telephones, early notification or electronic notification that trade is moving. There are a whole range of things that do not require a physical presence on the border, and that technology could also be used at Dover to clear that there are technological solutions that could ensure there is no hard border so that trade flows easily across the border. The previous Administration in Ireland even started down the route of considering the kind of technology that could be used but, since coming in, the current Irish Government have cut off all the negotiations on those solutions. Only this weekend, they insisted that they will have no cameras, drones or any kind of technology that could make the border a soft border when we leave.

Mr David Jones: Can the right hon. Gentleman say, from his experience of the island of Ireland, whether the Irish Government fully understand the importance to the Irish economy of maintaining free access to the United Kingdom for trade not only with this country but beyond?

Sammy Wilson: It seems that the current Irish Government do not understand. Six times more of their trade is with Great Britain than with Northern Ireland, and more of their trade is with Great Britain than with the whole of the rest of the EU, yet they seem to be willing to pursue a solution that will mean a border and barriers between the Irish Republic and its main market in order to have an open border with Northern Ireland. When it is suggested to the Irish Government that they can have both an open border with Northern Ireland and access to the GB market, they simply put their hands over their ears and say, “We don’t want to hear. Nah, nah, nah.”

I am not as convinced as the right hon. Member for Clwyd West that it will be easy to get a transport arrangement with the Government of the Irish Republic, and I would appreciate further explanation from the Minister as to why the Irish Government fully understand the importance to the Irish economy of maintaining free access to the Irish Republic. If they do not, the border that they are imposing on themselves is not only the highest border on the island of Ireland, but beyond?

Alan Brown: The Democratic Unionist party obviously has first-hand experience of how good the UK Government are at negotiating. Given the concessions the right hon. Gentleman’s party extracted from the Government, the whole EU saw how the DUP had the Tories dancing on the head of a pin. Does he really trust that lot to negotiate a good deal from the EU?
avoid the kinds of problems highlighted by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald). It is not just a solution for the island of Ireland but a solution between the United Kingdom and the EU when we leave.

Karin Smyth: I fail to understand why there is no co-operation, when 5.2 million tonnes of trade is going north-south and 3.4 million tonnes of trade is going south-north—I think that is the right way round. The movement of freight across the island of Ireland is clearly critical to both economies. It might help the right hon. Gentleman if we had the results of the mapping exercise mentioned in paragraph 47 of the joint report on phase 1 of the negotiations. There are 140 areas of agreement across the border, but the Government are refusing to let us see the results of that mapping exercise so that we can really understand the true impact across the whole island.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady also has to understand that, although there may be 5.2 million tonnes of trade across the Northern Ireland-Irish Republic border, there is six times more trade between the Irish Republic and Great Britain. Yet that does not seem to exercise the minds of those in the Government of the Irish Republic even a little bit, and none of us can understand that. The big prize lies in finding a solution that allows that east-west trade, as well as that north-south trade without any impediments. I believe we have the technology and ability to do that, but the political willingness is not there.

I want to welcome a second thing in relation to Northern Ireland. In the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Government have, in clause 12, taken it upon themselves to amend the legislation; many of these issues are devolved to the Assembly, which is not functioning at present. I suspect it will not function for many a long month or perhaps a year, because of the way in which Sinn Féin has now used its veto to prevent the Assembly being reformed. The Minister mentioned that a legislative consent motion would be sought. In the absence of an LCM, I take it that these powers will simply be taken by the Government.

Many Members have made this next point already, but it is worth noting. In the absence of knowing exactly where negotiations are going, and given the nature of some of the information that is required, I would not expect the detail of the scheme to be set out in the Bill. However, it is important that, at the earliest possible stage, people in the haulage industry know how many licences are going to be available, how they can apply for them, how they are going to be allocated and what is going to be paid for them. If some detail can be spelt out, even though it may not be in the Bill, that would give some certainty to the haulage firms that operate in my constituency.

I shall now turn to the part of the Bill that refers to trailers. We have heard some passionate speeches on that subject—from two Members in particular. As a result of personal tragedies in their constituency, they are concerned about the registration of trailers. The Bill is fairly ambiguous on this matter, simply talking about the registration of trailers, full stop, and not dealing with weight restriction, size or anything else. Despite personal tragedies that people may have faced, legislation must always be proportionate. I would like an assurance from the Minister that the ordinary guy who has a trailer that he uses to take stuff to the dump or uses to collect a few bits and pieces will not be required to go through the process of having the trailer registered and inspected on a yearly basis, with all the cost involved, especially as many of these trailers are used on only an occasional basis. Trailers over 3.5 tonnes, which are used commercially, are probably used more regularly and there is a case for having registration there, but I do not believe that there is a proportionate case for registration for ordinary domestic trailers, which would be affected if we extended this across all trailers.

I welcome the Bill. I welcome the fact that the Government are sending out a signal that, if Barnier and co. decide to dig in their heels, we are prepared to go our own way and that we have made preparations for it. At the same time, we believe that there is a strong case for continuing the current system of Community licensing so that firms that operate a vital part of our economy can continue to provide the service that they do now.

7.24 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a delight to follow the optimistic and upbeat speech from the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I welcome this Bill as a modest, appropriate and measured move by the Government to make provision in case there is not a comprehensive free trade deal with the European Union. I am surprised that the Opposition have not actually stated their case. They sound as though they are just not in favour of the Bill at all but, judging by the absence of Opposition Members, I presume they are not going to vote against it. However, I cannot believe that the Bill is not something we would all welcome. A failure to plan is a plan to fail, so why would we not want this Bill?

The UK is an outward-looking, global trading nation, and I believe this will only be more the case after we leave the EU. As many Members have said, trade with the European Union is important—crucially, it is important to both sides. It goes without saying that it is in the EU’s best interests to maintain the current liberalised trade by road between the UK and the rest of the EU, and it is also in our interests to maintain that situation. We have heard all the statistics about the huge trade deficit with the EU—£72 billion in 2017—and how much that trade means in respect of the movement of goods across the UK. This shows just how crucial smooth access to the UK market for EU countries is. Many businesses across the continent sell their goods into the UK and, more often than not, they transport those goods here by road. We have all rehearsed the statistics as to why we need this modest measure to deliver that access and they are well in our brains now.

As the Prime Minister said, “No deal is better than a bad deal”. We cannot allow our UK hauliers to be left high and dry if we are offered a bad deal—if the EU does not come to a common-sense agreement, although we all believe it will do. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that he is confident about that, and I share his confidence. The UK must make provision to allow for the outcome and this Bill does just that—it is a sensible piece of legislation.
This issue, like many others the House deals with, has significance in my constituency. Our proximity to London means that several haulage companies are based there, operating across the UK and into EU countries. In essence, the Bill is one that we hope we will never have need to call on. It is our backstop—our insurance position—and it therefore should have a fair wind and sail through its Second Reading tonight. I cannot understand the negativity we have heard from Opposition Members, who somehow interpret the Bill as being a massive piece of legislation that gives huge powers to the Secretary of State. I see it as exactly the opposite: something that is tidied away in case we should ever need it, although I share the Secretary of State’s confidence that we will not need this Bill.

7.27 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am sure that the House will be delighted to hear that I do not intend to speak for long on this important Bill. As Members on both sides of the House have acknowledged, this is an essential piece of legislation that allows for a smooth and orderly transition out of the EU and gives the Government a degree of wiggle room to take account of how the negotiations pan out. The Bill will certainly have my support.

I wish to talk, in short order, about the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic—that is a sentence I never thought I would hear myself say. The ratification that has taken place, after a prolonged period of consideration of some 50 years, has implications that I wish to raise, because they affect the car industry in my constituency. As hon. Members will know, the convention required that a driver was always in control of their vehicle. The provision was amended in 2016 to allow the vehicle to have a degree of autonomy, provided that there was a driver in place to take over in the event of emergency conditions.

My constituency is home to Ford’s UK headquarters, where some of the most ingenious and innovative design for the next generation of autonomous vehicles is taking place. The problem with the Vienna convention, even as amended, is that it might prevent the development of level 4 autonomy. Such autonomy would, in effect, allow a whole trip to be automated—indeed, it allows for the removal of the steering wheel. In January, General Motors produced its first such model, the Cruise AV fourth generation, which literally has no steering wheel. That means, of course, that a driver cannot intervene, even if emergency conditions are met.

I am concerned that our ratification of the convention will mean that are we are not able to deliver the next generation of automated vehicles in the UK. I am sure that the Department for Transport and the Minister have at their disposal an excellent legal team who will be able to find a way through the issues, but I seek reassurance that the UK will be in a position to continue the excellent work that we have been doing to make us one of the foremost countries in the world for the development of driverless cars.

7.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As a recently elected member of the Transport Committee, and given the significant number of haulage and distribution companies in my constituency, it is an absolute pleasure to speak in the debate.

The liberalisation of commercial haulage has delivered huge consumer benefits in the choice of goods available at affordable prices throughout the UK. Even the smallest corner shops now commonly stock goods that only a generation ago would have seemed impossibly exotic. Trade is a two-way street, and it is the modern haulage industry that has made possible the geographically deep penetration of overseas markets. I note that, according to the Department for Transport, UK road haulage directly contributes more than £13 billion in gross value added and plays a major role in the transport of some £35 billion of goods that are traded between the UK and the European Union. It is therefore only right that, as part of our international road haulage policy, we take the need to support the sector seriously.

There is, of course, still some uncertainty about the final Brexit deal. While the negotiations are under way, we must continue to move things forward. I regret to say this, but that uncertainty is compounded by the unfortunate regression in some quarters to the tried and failed politics of “Project Fear”. I have been extremely optimistic about the opportunities that can come from Brexit, and it is important that the Government come forward with actions to mitigate the lingering uncertainty. I am pleased that they are making positive provisions, where they can, for maximum continuity and the utmost clarity, including through this Bill. I welcome that positive action, because optimism, continuity and clarity are the most powerful antidotes to uncertainty, and they will mitigate any possible doubts in the industry about future investment decisions in the UK.

The Government are absolutely right to bring forward comprehensive measures that will reassure the haulage industry with clarity and continuity, and thereby enable it to plan for the future without knowing the final outcome of our negotiated exit from the EU. Nowhere is a smooth and orderly transition for the haulage and trailer industries more important than in Stoke-on-Trent. As a city, we are at the very heart of England and the natural centre for the logistics industry. Indeed, the city is a long-standing confluence of inland freight routes by water, rail and road.

Most famously, the ceramics industry is centred in the Potteries, and the experienced hauliers of Stoke-on-Trent are very good at ensuring that we avoid breakages. The haulage and logistics industry in the city is expanding, providing employment, including apprenticeships, to my constituents. I am delighted to say that S J Bargh, the haulage firm behind the highest-scoring apprentice ever at the Scania training school, has an expanding presence in my constituency, and I hope to visit the firm in the coming weeks. There are distribution centres for Screwfix, Sainsbury’s, Pets at Home and others in my constituency. Last week, I was pleased to visit the Portmeirion distribution facility, where some of the most advanced technology is used for the distribution of its fragile wares.

On the trailer side, the manufacturer Don-Bur is based in my constituency. I was pleased to visit the company over the Easter recess. It makes every conceivable trailer, from the box van and the curtain-side to the wedge double deck, and even the aerodynamic teardrop shape, for which it is famous. Don-Bur is at the cutting edge of innovation, making trailers more aerodynamic, fuel efficient and environmental. It is fair to say that it...
makes precisely the types and sizes of commercial trailer that are intended to be covered under the Bill’s registration provisions.

It is important that we ensure that UK operators that use those trailers and other trailer brands can comply with the registration standards outlined in the 1968 Vienna convention when they drive on the continent. How does the Department plan to communicate the effect of the Bill, and those aspects that are yet to be consulted on, to trailer manufacturers and to commercial and non-commercial users? I note that the overview to the Bill issued by the DFT mentions the intention that trailer registration with the DVLA will be done “through a digital service”. Is it the Minister’s intention that communication with those who fall under the scope of the Bill will be achieved through purely digital means, or will there be some activity in the trade press, and the leisure press, too? As I stressed earlier, we need maximum clarity for those affected, so it is extremely important that the rumours and fears promoted by some are put to one side.

The Bill is an important addition to the Government’s measures to ensure that we have a smooth and orderly Brexit. It provides for both continuity and flexibility in the face of temporary uncertainty. We need to communicate that message effectively among those whom the Bill will cover. It is important to my constituents, and to hauliers and consumers everywhere, that we make these provisions and that we get them right.

7.36 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I shall give a Kent perspective on the Bill. Kent is well known as England’s gateway to Europe. On a busy day, around 10,000 lorries pass through the port at Dover and an extra 6,000 lorries pass through the channel tunnel at Folkestone. That is perhaps 16,000 lorries a day passing to and fro through Kent, so people in Kent feel strongly about making sure that we have the right processes at our borders come Brexit day.

I well remember my first summer as a Member of Parliament, in 2015, because that was the summer of Stack, when for 32 days the M20 was largely closed and 5,000 lorries were parked up on the motorway. While those lorries were parked on the motorway, the roads around the area were also at a standstill because so much traffic was diverted through the neighbouring roads. That caused chaos and misery throughout my constituency and in many other parts of Kent, where journeys that would usually take five or 10 minutes were taking hours. Children struggled to get to school, hospital operations were delayed and patients missed their appointments, people could not get to work, and businesses struggled to do their business, gain income and pay their staff. I heard of one constituent, a 10-year-old girl, who fell off a climbing frame and had to wait for an ambulance, injured, for an hour and a half.

After that summer, my neighbouring Kent MPs and I did all that we could to make sure that that would never happen to Kent again—that we would never again see such misery and, in fact, such an economic cost, because that enormous hit to business was estimated to have cost the Kent economy £250 million. As we never wanted to see it happen again, we campaigned for a lorry park. We appreciate that money was put aside for one, but the project has got into some trouble, meaning it has been delayed. I have spoken to the Minister about the matter, and we very much appreciate the efforts to make sure that, should there be any trouble at the border, there will be alternatives to the closure of the M20. It is important to Kent that we keep the traffic flowing.

In that spirit, I support the Bill, because although we hope not to have to use it, it is about making sure that there will not be trouble at our borders come Brexit day. It is a precaution to ensure that trade will continue to flow and that lorries will be able to travel back and forth as they need to, not only to avoid disruption for my constituents in Kent, but to supply the goods that people need in the EU and that we need here. As others have said, although lorries might at times be unpopular—they are certainly unpopular in my patch for often parking up in lay-bys and country lanes—we know very well that the vast majority of our goods, be they food, drink, clothes or building materials, are transported by lorries. We need a flow of lorries between us and the European Union. We know perfectly well that getting this to work is in the interests of the EU as well as in our own. While we hope that we will not need the Bill, it is right that we have it as a precaution to make sure that we do not have the problems that we saw back in 2015 with Operation Stack.

I welcome the Bill and I welcome the Government’s efforts to ensure that we do not have to use Operation Stack again. Opposition Members called that matter into question this evening but, in fact, an enormous amount of work is going on in my constituency to resurface the M20. It is causing some upset, because of the diversions during the night. Lorries are driving through villages such as Bearsted, where they should not be going, and keeping people awake, but at least the work is being done. We know that the hard shoulder will shortly be strengthened so that it can be used in the event that lorries need to park up. I sincerely hope that these Operation Stack measures will not be needed, that the permit scheme will not be needed, and that we will have frictionless trade and free flowing traffic across our borders. None the less, I welcome the fact that the Government are rightly taking the precaution of putting in place these measures just in case they are needed.

7.40 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I will not detain the House for long this evening. I welcome the precautionary measures and the purpose behind this Bill. The logistics, storage and distribution industry is a very important component part of the East Anglian economy, with the container business going through Felixstowe and agricultural foodstuffs going through smaller ports such as Lowestoft in my constituency.

I just wish to home in for a few minutes on a particular business in my constituency. Transam Trucking is very much a specialist in storage and distribution, with an important focus on Europe. It was formed in 1976 and is, in effect, a company of roadies. It provides specialist haulage services to the music industry and it takes bands and acts on tours all around Britain and Europe, particularly during the summer months. It has built up a significant business over its 40 years. Its client list is...
pretty impressive. It includes: Roger Waters, Bryan Adams, Iron Maiden, Guns N’Roses, Judas Priest, the Rolling Stones, Ozzy Osborne, Ringo Starr, Gary Barlow, Katy Perry, Billy Joel, and, bringing us up to date, Taylor Swift.

The company has built up this particularly strong business. What concerns it is a particular directive that cannot cut from the EU in January from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport, setting out the requirements for its business post Brexit. It is particularly concerned about the requirement for road transport operators to hold a certificate of professional competence, which must be issued by an EU state. The current certificate, which may be issued by Britain, will no longer continue. Likewise, driver attestation must be provided by the remaining EU states. Furthermore, after 29 March, a driving licence issued by the UK will no longer be valid. There is also a requirement that it must have an established base on the continent. We have also heard the issues related to Community licences, and the questions over whether they will still be valid.

Clearly, there is uncertainty hanging over the industry. It is important to bear in mind that this company is now beginning to take bookings for next year—post March 2019—and a number of clients are questioning whether it will be able to continue to provide the services that it has provided for the past 40 years. In particular, I am told that the Germans are casting very envious eyes on what is a great British industry. Can the Minister clarify whether the concerns of businesses such as Transam Trucking have been taken into account in this Bill? If not, can he provide other assurances to ensure that those concerns are allayed?

7.44 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We have had an essential debate this evening on a Bill that we really should not have any necessity to debate. Although the title of the Bill sounds somewhat niche, the Government’s complete failure to secure trading arrangements with the EU means that the haulage industry could come to a complete standstill without this Bill. For that reason, we will not stand in the way of its progress to Committee this evening.

The haulage industry contributes £13.1 billion to gross value added, with 3.7 million tonnes exported and 4 million tonnes imported each year. It employs 319,000 HGV drivers. Although it is 45,000 drivers short, and the settled status is also creating uncertainty for EU nationals, Parliament must, without doubt, understand the importance of this sector to both the economy and jobs, especially with all the other uncertainties in the industry over Brexit, such as driver hours, custom borders and many of the issues that we have heard about this evening.

Negotiations should have established that the UK would be part of the Community licence scheme, along with all other EU countries, European economic area countries and other EU countries. This would enable the continuation of the free flow of goods to service our economy, and that is Labour’s position. However, even that most basic provision has caused much division on the Government Benches.

Today, the Government have tried to brush over this Bill as a “just in case” measure. The reality is that a no deal scenario, or even a “frictionless as possible” deal, and all things in between, highlight what a complete and utter nightmare this will prove to be without Community licensing or a customs union.

Currently the UK has permit-based agreements with Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Morocco, the Russian Federation, Tunisia and Ukraine and liberal agreements with Serbia, Albania and Turkey. They are typically managed through the DVLA, which in itself is already overstretched. Similar reciprocal arrangements exist, but now everything is up in the air. Therefore, for a lorry to drive on the continent to a destination, or to drive through another country to reach its destination, or within cabotage rules, the haulier will need documentation to prove that they have permission to be there.

We are debating this legislation when we still have no clarity over what the European negotiators will determine is required in these matters, so it is only a “virtual” Bill on something that the Government have no clue about what will be required. As the Secretary of State said, the Government are still, at this 11th hour, consulting on the content. We may pass legislation here, but without knowing for certain that the EU will accept the UK regime, this Bill could be redundant anyway. It is as if we are passing legislation to guide a negotiation process, such is the weakness of the Government with their chaotic Brexit.

Those of us on the Labour Benches are clear: be part of the Community licensing regime, and remove these completely unnecessary trade barriers and uncertainties. This legislation will give the Government powers to create a permit scheme for UK hauliers to be recognised across the EU. It will establish a trailer registration scheme in line with the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic, which this Parliament ratified on 28 March 2018, so UK trailers are registered for use on EU roads.

If hauliers are looking for clarity over how these new arrangements will operate, and how much it will cost them, I have to tell them that they will have to wait until secondary legislation is laid, except, of course, for the £75.8 million from the Government—or should I say the taxpayer—in set-up costs. That is another Brexit expense. Therefore, this is simply an empty Bill, built on a possible negotiated position, with no clarity over how the scheme will operate, or how much it will cost the operator for needing to go to the EU to save our economy—an emperor’s new clothes Bill.

For those Brexiteers who now feel that they can say, “Well, at least this means that our borders will be secure”, I am afraid to say that this Bill does not automatically stop international road haulage either. But they are right to suspect the worst-case scenario: vehicles stacking up without the right documentation. Research already suggests that two additional minutes spent on checks will result in 10 miles of lorries stacking up. Get this legislation wrong and we will have gridlock at our borders.

I have asked the Minister whether licences could be electronic documents. “No”, was the reply. Can Members believe that we are talking about a new system only issuing paper documents? Even in 2018, drivers will be expected to carry paper documents as they cross borders that could be subject to checks. If a permit is not present, fines could be issued. We therefore need an inspectorate. Where will this be based? How will it operate? I am afraid that that is not clarified in the Bill either. We have to wait for the regulations, but that will
be all too late to create any certainty for the industry, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) has highlighted with regard to the music industry.

Commercial traders over 750 kg and non-commercial traders over 3.5 tonnes will need to be registered with the DVLA and will be required to carry paper, not electronic documents. We are told that most caravans and horse trailers will be exempt, unless owners opt for the voluntary register, which we have not heard about in today’s debate. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) made a powerful case as to why we also need comprehensive safety measures for light trailers. The tragic loss of little Freddie Hussey showed why this Bill must be amended in Committee to bring about greater public safety. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) further highlighted the impact that tow bar safety would have, not least as 91% of trailers have failed basic safety tests. We need another inspectorate of certificates and trailers in order to ensure compliance as well as administration in the issuing of registration certificates. This means more unknown costs to the industry. Failure to comply could lead to imprisonment and/or a fine.

The noble Lord Tunnicliffe of Bracknell rightly won a vote in the House of Lords on improving safety standards and recording accidents. In Committee we must look at measures such as improvements to exhaust emissions, trailer safety and tyre safety in order to keep the public and drivers safe. He also sought clarity that there would be no restrictions on the number of permits issued—this is so vital for trade to flow—and said that we should not create even more obstacles.

I must seek clarity over the Irish border question with regards to haulage licensing. We are being led to believe that there will be no new restrictions that would limit cross-border road haulage on the island of Ireland. This means that EU to UK haulage and UK to EU haulage will flow without checks. However, when probed on this the Minister said that there could be differentiation across the Irish sea. This is completely unacceptable to the parties in Northern Ireland, and is the central point of the whole customs union argument.

As we understand it, road haulage—for example, originating from Germany—will travel into the Republic of Ireland as it does now, and will be able to continue its journey into Northern Ireland without checks, without borders and with “no new restrictions”. However, it will need a permit if it crosses to England, Wales or Scotland. In effect, are the Government saying with this Bill that they are going to create borders across the Irish sea and therefore cross other red lines? Clarity is needed and has not been provided by the Secretary of State. These important issues need to be resolved, particularly across the whole island of Ireland. This is too important for the Minister just to skim over in his reply, so I trust that he will spell out in detail exactly how these borders will work. Finally on Northern Ireland, the Bill requires a legislative consent motion from the Northern Ireland Assembly, but we all know that the Assembly is currently not sitting. I would be pleased if the Minister told us how he plans to handle that situation.

The true cost and chaos of Brexit can be judged by this Bill. We will hold the Government to account throughout its passage, while advising that we should remain within current arrangements. There is no reason for the UK to leave the Community licensing scheme, but this is a matter for negotiation—something so simple to establish, but which appears to be too controversial for the Conservative party to unify on.

7.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a great pleasure to close the Second Reading debate on this Bill. We have had an extremely engaging and positive debate in many ways. Cardinal Newman has been invoked, very surprisingly, by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). There has been catharsis. We have had a Scottish National party Member praising the Lords—Allelujah!—and quoting Donald Rumsfeld, which is always an interesting combination.

I have been surprised not to see, during the entire course of the debate, a single Liberal Democrat Member in the Chamber. I was surprised because, as I had understood it, they felt very passionately about the issue of Brexit, and of course this is the first Brexit implementation Bill. At the very least I would have expected speeches and interventions, but in fact not one Liberal Democrat Member has bothered to show their face in the Chamber.

As today’s debate has made clear, the Bill is needed to support the continued movement of goods between the UK and Europe. The Secretary of State outlined well in his opening speech that we are committed to maintaining the existing liberalised access for commercial haulage. A mutually beneficial road freight agreement with the EU that secures our objective of frictionless trade is in the interest of both parties. When 85% of trade is carried across the UK border by EU hauliers, we can be certain that EU countries—Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland and the like—have a tremendous interest in the maintenance of frictionless trade. It has also been noted that international conventions support it and the EU’s own negotiating objectives demand it.

Today’s debate has focused on the two parts of the Bill. The first part deals with haulage permits and provides a framework for the UK to manage them, including if they are needed as part of our agreement with the EU. We will also be using the powers in part 1 to bring our existing international agreements into a comprehensive legal framework—a point that the Opposition somehow ignored or missed.

On trailers, the debate focused on the scope of the trailer registration scheme that will be established in regulations under the Bill. The Government need to establish a trailer registration scheme in order to support the UK’s ratification of the 1968 Vienna convention on road traffic. It will ensure that trailer users can register trailers to meet the standards in the convention. We intend to require the registration of commercial trailers over 750 kg and non-commercial trailers over 3.5 tonnes that travel to or through countries that have ratified the convention—it is important to say that. I can give the assurances that my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) asked for earlier.

Many other countries have similar schemes, and both of those schemes will utilise the expertise of our agencies—the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—to deliver the systems needed.
We plan to have the systems set up and running by the end of the year, and see no reason why that should not be the case. It is true that we will be charging fees, but they will be on a cost-recovery basis to minimise the impact on hauliers. We are well aware of the tight margins in the industry, and we will do all we can to reduce the cost of any scheme. The fees will only recover the day-to-day running costs of administering the systems and will not be intended to generate revenue. The Government will cover the set-up costs of the systems as part of a £75.8 million funding grant from the Treasury to the Department for Transport. I am delighted that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) recognises the distinction between “Government money”, which does not exist, and taxpayers’ money, which is of course the only money that the Government can draw on.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): Will the Minister reassure the Central Registration and Identification Scheme, otherwise known as CRiS—a key local employer in Chippingham—that the Bill will not alter the voluntary registration of UK caravans?

Jesse Norman: I recognise the quality of that scheme, and I have spoken personally to the National Caravan Council to discuss it. My hon. Friend will be aware that the vast majority of caravans will not be within the scope of the new scheme as we are currently defining it. Indeed, the DVLA scheme will not concern security, which is the principal purpose of the CRiS regime. We have no intention to replace CRiS, so I do not see that it needs to have any concerns or fears on that account.

I can confirm that the Bill will not have an impact on border arrangements and that there will be no new transport-related checks at our borders. That is perfectly plain. Separately, my Department is working closely with the Department for Exiting the European Union and with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs as part of the cross-Government borders working group to manage any impacts there may be on borders after we leave the EU.

Stakeholders have welcomed the Bill and recognised the need for it. As has been noted, the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association have given it their support. The Road Haulage Association has said that it “wholeheartedly supports” it and that it is “the right thing” for the Government to be preparing measures for all scenarios. The Freight Transport Association has welcomed the Government’s objective in ensuring that no limits are set on the number of goods vehicles going between the EU and the UK. The Bill provides a framework that should reassure hauliers that the final Brexit deal agreed with the European Union will be smoothly implemented.

With that in mind, let me move swiftly on to some of the many excellent points raised during the debate. As ever, the informed questions, challenges and arguments that we heard are welcome in helping us to strengthen the Bill, and I greatly appreciate the broad support shown for the ambition and energy behind it.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) asked whether the Bill would deter investment. I simply draw his attention to the fact that, as the Secretary of State said, Vauxhall, Toyota and UPS have recently made investments in the haulage and car industries, while Apple, Facebook and many other international businesses continue to invest in this country. He mentioned concerns, also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), about the impact on the music industry. We will look specifically at that issue in more detail, and I am sure I can provide some reassurance on that front. I have mentioned the support that we have already received from the RHA and FTA.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) for sharing his expertise and for the wisdom he brought to his speech. He made a good point about the importance of the Bill in providing protection against over-zealous enforcement—a point that others did not pick up on—and the extent to which it therefore gives reassurance to people who may already be vulnerable. He asked whether plates could be fitted that could be read by ANPR. That will be part of our wider considerations. We will also consult on the display of plates in order to address the other matter that he raised. That will require tweaking or elaboration within new IT systems, but that is well within the scope and capability of the DVSA and the DVLA.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings made a worryingly restrained speech in which he chastised himself for his excessive humility in recognising his own perspicacity and imagination. I am delighted that he was able to correct that on the record in the House, and I thank him for his unwonted brevity in doing so. He made an important point about the recruitment and retention of new drivers and apprentices within the industry. I am sure that he shares my view that the Road to Logistics initiative offered by the RHA potentially offers an important and interesting route forward for the Government in future.

The most important speech of the evening, if I may say so, was made by the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). I absolutely salute her work on trailer safety. She has built a reputation across the House for the careful, intelligent and dedicated way in which she has pursued the issue. It was an honour for me to be able to visit her constituency and spend time at the trailer safety summit that she recently organised, and also, of course, to meet Donna and Scott Hussey, the parents of Freddie Hussey, to talk about the experience they have had and measure what can take to address the issue. We have agreed to report on it within a year of the regulations coming into effect.

As the hon. Lady will know, we have also agreed to consider a recommendation on whether to extend registration. I think it is fair to say that, as she pointed out, the Government currently have quite extensive data through agencies. It is not necessarily, in some cases, the right data to solve the issues that she described, but it is good data. It is also fair to note that, as other colleagues have mentioned, some trailers are used very infrequently, and that extending the scope of the scheme to mandatory registration would potentially include well over 1 million more trailers. We have therefore so far taken the view that given the administrative burdens and other issues that would be involved, a proportionate approach needs to be taken. However, I do not in any sense rule out the proposal that she makes. It is important for us to proceed slowly and carefully and to understand the issues in more detail as we do so.

Karin Smyth: I thank the Minister for his comments. I know that he knows that I will pursue the trailer safety
regime with great vigour. I hope that many hon. Members will support me in that work in the coming months and years.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that reassurance, but I do not think it was required by anyone in the House who has seen her at work.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim ( Sammy Wilson) made an important speech in support of the Bill. He asked why we think the agreement will be doable. The answer is simple: because the interests of both parties are well aligned. I cannot comment on the views that will be held in the Irish Republic. This Bill addresses UK hauliers. I can say, however, that the Bill will not result in any impediment to trade between the two sides. We see no reason for concern on that front.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) mentioned the 1968 Vienna convention. We are now a signatory to that. However, like many other contracting parties, we do not take the view that the testing and use of autonomous vehicles is in conflict with either the 68 convention or the 49 convention. Nevertheless, it is an important question and I thank him for raising it.

We have heard contributions relating to Operation Stack, on which we will be publishing a response shortly.

Alan Brown: Going back to the Northern Ireland border issue, surely it is incumbent on the UK Government to seek the views of the Irish Government to see how this is going to work instead of continually saying, “We can’t speak for the Irish Government—we don’t know what they’re thinking.” It is incumbent on them to find that out.

Jesse Norman: My officials are of course in regular contact with officials in Ireland and discuss these issues at length, so it would be quite wrong to suggest that there is no interaction between the two parties.

Let me conclude by mentioning the comments of the shadow Ministers. I have to say that the Labour position is very strange. Their strategy seems to be to cloud the issue and scare people as much as possible, and then criticise the Government in calling for clarity. They complain that everything is up in the air but then criticise a Bill whose specific purpose is to act as a sensible, belt-and-braces, common-sense backstop.

We do not think that this Bill is anything other than a thoroughly sensible move. It will ensure that the road haulage industry can continue to prosper as we leave the European Union. As part of our EU legislation programme, the Bill prepares us for a range of scenarios. It will ensure that the UK can fulfil its international obligations and be ready for what happens when we leave the EU.

Karin Smyth: It is incumbent on them to find out. We have heard contributions relating to Operation Stack, on which we will be publishing a response shortly.

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Karin Smyth: It is incumbent on them to find out.
That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Uzbekistan) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.

Immigration

That the draft Special Immigration Appeals Commission (Procedure) (Amendment) Rules 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 March, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Environment Agency: Enforcement Action

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

8.9 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): This is my first end of day Adjournment debate in a very long time; however, I am glad to have secured it as it gives me the chance to raise an ongoing issue in my constituency that has been a source of great consternation to me and many of the residents of Teal Farm and the areas adjacent to the Pattinson Road waste processing sites cluster, which I will refer to collectively as Teal Farm, as that is quite a mouthful.

For more than two years now, or perhaps even longer, residents and local councillors—especially Councillor Tony Taylor, who has been vigilant and tenacious on this matter—have raised concerns about the activity going on in Teal Farm, especially on the industrial estates that neighbour the residential area. It has been going on for so long that I have been applying for this debate for months now, and my former researcher, Daniel Tye, who helped me prepare this speech, moved on months ago. I wish that the issue had as well, but alas it has not. That is what brings me here.

Let me give some context. Washington new town was built in the 1960s as one of a few new towns across the country to help with overcrowding and population growth in local urban areas. In Washington’s case, that means the neighbouring cities of Sunderland, Durham and Newcastle. Part of the planning was meant to allow it to be a town with residential estates and industrial estates that were side by side but did not interfere with each other’s daily lives. Although the planning was meant to reduce interference between the two, that has become more of a problem as the town has grown and more residents have moved into the area, making the luxury of quiet residential living more difficult than when the town was first founded in the 1960s.

Sadly, the situation in Teal Farm in Washington is a microcosm of that situation; the original idea of residential and industrial being in close proximity but not bothering each other has been thrown out of the window. That has led to tensions between residents and businesses alike, which have extended to organisations such as the local council and the regional branch of the Environment Agency. Unfortunately and annoyingly for the residents of Teal Farm, there seem to be endless cases of problems arising, and local residents have kept me abreast of all the issues through the residents association and the dedicated team of local councillors.

As I just set out, the reason I am speaking today is to document this officially on the record and to prise out of the Minister what more can be done to address the issues of industrial mismanagement that has blighted the lives of many of my constituents in Washington, especially when it comes to environmental issues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue forward; these are always very important debates. Does she agree that it is essential that fines given by the Environment Agency should fit the crime, that legislation should also reflect that, and that the council and the Government need to act accordingly?
Mrs Hodgson: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am pleased with his intervention, and I will come on to fines later, as that is the crux of what I am proposing.

To help the Minister understand fully the scale of the problems that my constituents have faced, I want to read a few excerpts from some emails I have received over the years. I assure him that he will find them both troubling and enlightening about the situation that has been ongoing for some time. First, in 2016 I received an email in which a constituent described the following situation:

“Last week when it was exceptionally warm, I left the windows open in the dining room and sitting room to allow some air circulation for my dog, the scene I returned to was unbelievable. Every single room in my house was inundated with flies. To say that there were upwards of 50 flies in my house would be a conservative estimate, and yes, you read that correctly, I said upwards of 50.”

This constituent went on to say:

“I have lived in Teal Farm Village for three summers now and for three summers this pantomime has repeated itself”.

In a follow-up email, after issues were raised with local agencies, the exasperated constituent wrote:

“Nothing is done to prevent a recurrence, nothing is done to compensate those of us who cannot eat, sit, play or venture into our gardens or onto our balconies or even dare to leave windows open when we are in or out of the house. How about those of us who are woken during the night by smells that have to be experienced to be believed.”

However, not just flies and other vermin but the activity of businesses operating in the industrial park are blighting the lives of my constituents. In an email I had passed to me from March of last year, a constituent documented that he witnessed

“several vehicles over the last week, some from Niramax and two others from their contractors, leaving Monument Park and travelling along Pattinson Road to the A1231—then travelling down the slip road towards the A19. All of the lorries were netted but litter was streaming out of the covered areas onto the road behind them. Pattinson Road is again awash with litter as is the A1231 slip road from the roundabout—this slip road has not been litter picked since the middle of last year at which time it had not been done for over a year.”

This constituent then went on to say:

“The trees alongside the road have plastic streaming out in the wind dropped from lorries, and the verges are an absolute disgrace. It is no wonder fly tipping is on the increase as litter attracts litter.”

Another very alarming and worrying situation that occurred in October of last year, which was raised with me by Councillor Tony Taylor, involved a badly loaded HGV and an incident when a washing machine fell off the back of a van while it was whizzing down the A1231. The Environment Agency said that it was not going to investigate any further as insufficient evidence had been brought to its attention. Someone could have been seriously injured or killed—there could have been a pile-up—if this washing machine had fallen onto the path of another vehicle, yet the case did not warrant any further investigation from the enforcement agency that should have been looking into it with urgency.

As I am sure the Minister can appreciate, these are stressful circumstances for my constituents to live in every day, all because of companies that fail to adhere to their responsibility to be good neighbours and keep our local area litter-free, as well as the fact that agencies such as the Environment Agency fail to penalise and fine the offending businesses.

There has been plenty of documentation of visits and activity regarding these issues at the industrial park, including a visit by residents, councillors, council officers and a member of my office who saw run-down premises inviting in flies, smells and vermin and in which they could thrive.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend that the Environment Agency is a toothless tiger, but does she agree that this is not just about the agency but about the fact that it does not work with other Government agencies, such as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, to crack down on illegal activity—not just dumping, but avoidance of landfill tax and other taxes that should be going to the Exchequer?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, I agree with my right hon. Friend, and that is not an issue that I had planned to cover in my speech, so I am pleased that he has raised it. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench heard him.

This issue has gone on for many, many years with many, many complaints and investigations, resulting in significant resources being directed at addressing the problems by the Environment Agency, by my office and by the numerous councillors who have to deal with them week in, week out, trying to take up the cases on behalf of constituents. The Environment Agency has been into my office with a team at least twice, and once into the council offices, and has stressed the amount of resources it is putting in to deal with this one small area in the larger north-east, but the issues returned after breaches occurred and, in no uncertain terms, that has infuriated my constituents—and, I must add, me. It cannot continue.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Environment Agency has additional powers and that the polluters—the people causing the problem—should pay for the time and resources put into resolving these problems? My constituency had a similar problem with litter a couple of years ago, and it devastated our area. The signs are still there. It is really important to local people.

Mrs Hodgson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I remember the case she mentions in her constituency of Blaydon. In certain areas, such as driving along the A1231, people can see the plastic still in the trees. We now know that local councils do not have the resources to be picking up constantly after these companies, as they did years ago. It is therefore up to these businesses to be more responsible, and if that means that the Environment Agency has to fine them to make them pay for picking up the litter, so be it.

As I have said, I have convened several meetings with the Environment Agency, which is supposed to deal with these problems, and I have repeatedly been told that it does not have the powers or the authority to do anything other than the bare minimum that it has done. To me, it just seems as though these companies get a slap on the wrist. One constituent, Mr Morgan, has described this sorry saga as

“a badly written Groundhog Day movie sequel”,
and I have to admit that I agree with him. The repeated incidents that have been reported and the breaching of operating permits, with the lack of any apparent enforcement action for so long, have left many constituents and me feeling frustrated and disappointed. I am not blaming the Environment Agency, which is acting within its remit and in accordance with what it is allowed to do under the current law. That is what has brought me to the Floor of the House to plead with the Minister, and I have some solutions about what might be done.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am very interested in what my hon. Friend is saying about wanting more powers, but the Environment Agency already has powers—for example, to enforce the storage of waste at waste transfer stations. In my experience, it is very reluctant to use such powers, or if it does, it gives a slap on the wrist, as she suggests, rather than real enforcement action in conjunction with HMRC and local councils, which would be far more effective in bringing these rogue operators to book.

Mrs Hodgson: I definitely agree with my right hon. Friend. That is why I felt the need to bring this debate to the House. I want to seek the Minister’s views on this matter, and find out what more he and his Department can do given the examples that I and other hon. Members have outlined.

I have been trying for many months to secure this debate. It is incredibly interesting that, since I let it be known publicly that I had applied for a parliamentary debate, I have finally seen some activity by the Environment Agency. [Interruption.] I know; it is rather curious. It seems that the threat of a parliamentary debate does wonders for getting things sorted—small wonders at least—but this should never be the case, and this matter should never have been escalated to the Floor of this Chamber.

As I have said, the Environment Agency has finally fined one of the major culprits in this on-going saga: Niramax Group Ltd received a fine of £26,000 in January. However, it is frustrating that the Environment Agency clearly made this out to be a victory for it and local residents, yet, as its own press release stated, the specific issue with Niramax had been going on since April 2015. That was nearly three years previously, so it is hardly a victory. It is safe to say that I was flabbergasted by this announcement and stunned that, after so many years of back and forth with the Environment Agency, it had finally pulled its finger out and done something constructive and punitively necessary to sort out the many breaches that have occurred for far too long.

However, in the words of one of my constituents, Mr Kirkland, following this announcement:

“Although the Environment Agency have brought a successful prosecution it has taken an unacceptable amount of time and done nothing but confirm the inadequate regulation of these and other waste operators in the area. There has been nothing done by the Environment Agency regarding the disgraceful and negligent disregard of the littering laws by the same companies and the main road routes taken by their lorries are some of the worst roadside littering I have ever seen.”

He went on:

“They should be made to pay for our hundreds of phone calls and hours spent complaining to the Environment Agency and the council, and we must now have grave doubts as to the honesty of any such companies who will—we have no doubt—lie through their back teeth to keep their permits.”

As you can appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, my constituents feel that it is now time for regulatory change and for the enforcement powers of the Environment Agency to be bolstered so that such situations never happen again. My constituents have put up with this for far too long. I therefore want to know from the Minister what it plans to do to look into all the cases involving Teal Farm and to learn from the failures that my constituents have had to endure for far too long.

It is only right and fair that my constituents should be able to live a happy and comfortable life in their homes, not see their lives blighted incessantly by the failures and disregard of businesses operating in the area, and that when such episodes take place, they should have the fullest confidence that the agencies, which they pay for through their taxes, will do all they can to ensure that violations are dealt with swiftly and punitively, with on-the-spot fines for any breaches that occur.

I am therefore calling for increased powers for the Environment Agency, so it can actually do the job that it is there to do, and can issue on-the-spot fines to environmental offenders. After all, environmental litter officers can issue on-the-spot fines to the public for littering and dog fouling. Surely the problems that Environmental Agency officers deal with in regard to such companies are just as troublesome—perhaps even more so—and they should face the same penalty action. There should not be any disparity in our approach to litter louts—be they individuals or businesses.

I would like to gauge from the Minister what support there is in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for conducting a strategic review of charges and fines to businesses that breach environmental permits. It is important that penalties are commensurate with the type of business put under the microscope, but also that they take into consideration the scale of the incidents that occur, often on a regular basis, as I have outlined.

Alongside the idea of reviewing fines, I want to hear more from the Minister about the scope for time limits on business permits—perhaps three to five years—and about making them renewable only if businesses are fully compliant with their permit mandates and there have been no breaches at all during that time. One way for the Environment Agency to monitor any such breaches would be to have on-the-spot fines, which I have already mentioned, to penalise businesses immediately.

Another way would be to introduce a “penalties on your permit” system, not dissimilar to fixed penalty notices for motorists who are caught speeding, which could be used as part of the review of businesses’ environmental permits when they are up for renewal. Currently, when such a facility is up for sale, the licence the Environment Agency grants is automatically kept with the land and sold on by default. This is a very easy way for unscrupulous companies to obtain a licence. Does the Minister agree that that is wrong?

I do hope that the Minister will look into all of this carefully, and will respond with assurances that I can take back to the residents of Teal Farm. I want to bring my speech to a close, but I have one further point to add. It is pertinent as it relates to the application for a waste gasification plant in my constituency. If successful, this will lead to a huge increase in HGV traffic to and from waste processing plants, and I fear—I given what I have set out today—that it will bring the inevitable litter
and congestion. Having written to the Minister about the safety of this plant, I have received letters reminding me that the body ultimately responsible for monitoring the site’s safety is none other than—you’ve guessed it—the Environment Agency.

I hope that the Environment Agency will live up to its promises, and that I have given the Minister some food for thought about the solutions I and my residents in Teal Farm feel could be implemented. I know that Governments do not necessarily like new regulations, but on this issue I think hon. Members would say that I have—and I hope I have—made the case for them tonight.

8.29 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on finally securing this debate. I know that she has raised the issue on a number of occasions, both on the Floor of the House and through parliamentary questions, and I am sorry it took her so long to get her debate. The Government do not control the scheduling of these debates, so I can assure her that that was not deliberate.

As the hon. Lady says, a well-functioning and regulated waste industry is essential to ensure that we use our resources efficiently and to minimise impacts on our environment and local communities. The Environment Agency, as she knows, is the lead enforcement body within Government targeting those who do not comply with the regulatory framework or their permitting conditions.

As the hon. Lady pointed out, badly managed facilities can cause suffering to communities through odour, fires, and vermin or fly infestations, as in the case of her constituency. We therefore take this issue seriously, contrary to some of the points she made.

I will move on to the specifics of the hon. Lady’s case in the Sunderland area and particularly to the waste transfer sites that have caused a problem.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Minister says that the Environment Agency is the main enforcement body, so why in the last few years has it not investigated the clear breaches we have asked about in parliamentary questions? For example, there have been a number of fires at waste transfer stations, which are clearly designed to avoid landfill tax and are linked to tax fraud. Why have the Environment Agency and HMRC not looked in detail at any of those?

George Eustice: I will describe some of the action that the Environment Agency has taken in the north-east on a number of issues, but I want first to say that I do understand the particular issue that the hon. Lady raised. In my constituency, I have a similar issue with a waste processing centre and waste transfer site located quite close to a residential area. There is a difficult tension, because it is on an industrial site, so on one level that area is designated for industrial use. When the planning went through, it was assumed that that would be okay. While my constituency experience means that I am familiar with the tensions these things can cause, I assure her that that was not deliberate.

I want to address some of the hon. Lady’s points about enforcement. The Environment Agency has taken clear action in the north-east in recent years. From the start of 2013 until the end of March 2018, it secured 126 prosecutions and 41 formal cautions in relation to waste offences. The agency has also made successful use of confiscation orders under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Orders to a value of nearly half a million pounds have been made. Moreover, since the summer of 2012, the agency has closed 372 illegal waste sites in the north-east. This equates to over one illegal waste site per week. It has also investigated 2,226 reports of illegal waste sites, which is over one per day.

There are also number of operations regarding serious and organised crime in the waste sector in the north-east. As Members will understand, I am somewhat limited as to what I can divulge about ongoing investigations, but I will say that these operations target organised criminals who use sophisticated methods to cheat the system and ultimately take money from the taxpayer.

Mr Kevan Jones:

George Eustice: I am going to carry on if the right hon. Gentleman will allow me.

It is well known that the criminal nature of the groups operating in the waste sector has changed over recent years. Groups are using highly sophisticated techniques to evade the agency. They act violently and threateningly to their legitimate competitors and agency staff, and often use their waste business to mask their involvement in other illegal activities, such firearms or drugs.

The agency therefore works closely with the National Crime Agency to map and detect the extent of serious and organised crime. The agency also undertakes proactive disruption and prevention work. For example, a successful landowner campaign was launched in 2017 in response to the widespread dumping of baled waste in empty buildings. Some 1,300 buildings that were possible targets of waste criminals were identified, and a host of organisations was then contacted.

The EA also works with a range of partners through the Government Agency Intelligence Network. In Teesside, for example, it instigated a local group that includes the police, fire and rescue services, local authorities, HMRC, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, trading standards and UK Border Force. Following on from the positive results of that group, similar area-focused groups are being set up in the north-east.

In the north-east, the agency has a dedicated team of enforcement officers who lead on serious and significant cases of waste crime, and there is a host of resources to draw on for less significant cases. Agency officers use sophisticated surveillance equipment to detect waste crime. For example, officers have recently started wearing body cameras when visiting illegal waste sites.

The Government have ensured that enforcement is adequately resourced. An extra £30 million of funding, which was announced in the Budget in November, has been put into waste crime enforcement. That means that an additional £60 million has been committed to the agency for enforcement since 2014. The additional Budget funding will mean more boots on the ground, with over 80 extra enforcement staff across the country.
The Minister to bring forward.

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outcome of the consultation, which was launched in

makes further proposals on fly-tipping. Subject to the

the permitting regime. The consultation will tighten

example of how we have strengthened the law in this

We have conducted a consultation on strengthening

the permitting regime. The consultation will tighten up

the waste permitting and exemptions regime by raising

the bar for people to operate in the sector. It also

makes further proposals on fly-tipping. Subject to the

outcome of the consultation, which was launched in

January and ran for 10 weeks, we will seek to implement

the changes later this year. This is an important step to

ensure that only fully competent people are able to hold

a waste permit. The process will crack down on criminals

who choose to operate in the sector while acting under a

veil of legitimacy. We strengthened the law on fly-tipping

in 2016, introducing on-the-spot fine enforcement notices

for people caught fly-tipping. One element of the current

consultation is about strengthening that further so that

even if we do not catch people in the act of fly-tipping,

there will be an opportunity to levy a penalty notice

against them when we are able to trace where the waste

came from.

Mrs Hodgson rose—

George Eustice: I will give way.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister has plenty of time as we

have until 10.30 pm, unless he has a pressing engagement—

although what could be more pressing than talking

about environmental issues in my constituency?

On that point, the Minister will appreciate that fly-tipping

is very different from the issue I raised today. Waste is

flying off the back of lorries, which are supposed to be

netted, and on to the A1231. One of the problems for

the Environment Agency is that that waste will have

come from all over the place. Even if the EA or residents

see it happening, the waste that they find may come from

Joe Bloggs and somebody else. It could be traced

back to the lorry and the company to which it belongs,

and if an EA officer sees that take place, it should be

enough for a spot fine. That was what I was calling for

the Minister to bring forward.

George Eustice: I was going to return to that point

later, but the type of fly-tipping we are attempting to

tackle through the consultation is when a rogue collector

of rubbish does not have a permit and then dumps it in

a farmer’s field or in a gateway. That is slightly different

from litter coming loose from a lorry. That would be an

issue of permitting for those who transport waste to a

particular site and the operators of those vehicles. It is

not so much an on-the-spot fine or a penalty notice that

is needed in that case as the power to suspend a licence

to operate is incredibly powerful and, I think, the preferred

tool. That is why, in the case of operators, we tend to

use an improvement notice, an enforcement notice or an

actual suspension since that does more damage to them

than a penalty notice probably would.

Liz Twist: Does the Minister understand that people

in my Blaydon constituency, where two landfill sites

have produced their own problems, including with litter,

cannot see why the Environment Agency does not have

the power to say, “Let’s close this site straightaway—it

is not working properly. We need to resolve this issue”?

It is absolutely crazy that rubbish is being transported

across the country in huge lorries to my constituency

when we do not dump our own waste there. The rubbish

comes from all over the country. Does he not agree that

we need to put right that absolutely crazy system?

George Eustice: As I said, I have experienced such

issues in my constituency, so I understand residents’

concerns. The Environment Agency has the power to

issue improvement notices and enforcement notices, or

to suspend a permit. It uses those powers and, indeed,

has done so in some cases in the north-east, which I will

come on to.

To conclude my point about the consultation, we are

also tightening the waste exemption regime. That is

about looking at some of the sites that currently have a

derogation and are exempt from requiring a permit—there

is particular concern about those that have tyres and the

way in which some are handled. We are raising the bar

for those who want to operate a permitted site. That

includes the requirement for a demonstration of technical

competence, for example, and we have even looked at

the idea of sites needing to put a financial bond in place

to allow for recovery if there is a problem. I therefore

think I have demonstrated that, through the consultation—it

was launched in January and we are currently analysing

the results—we have taken steps to strengthen the law in

the way for which the hon. Member for Washington

and Sunderland West has asked.

I turn now to some of the specific points that the hon.

Lady raised about her constituency of Washington

and Sunderland West, where there are eight permitted waste

sites. Although three have had permit breaches in the

last five years due to problems with flies in particular, as

she described, all the sites are currently performing well

and are rated A or B on the Environment Agency’s

performance scale—A is the top performance. When

there were permit breaches, the agency took the relevant

enforcement action. In one case, as she pointed out,

there was a prosecution, following which there was a fine

of £16,000 and an award of £10,000 in costs.

The most recent of these problems was the 2015 case

at the former Niramax site, which the hon. Lady mentioned.

That site is now owned by Veolia and is performing

better. I stress that the agency and the waste companies

concerned work closely to ensure that operators are

kept in compliance with permits and to try to overcome

problems. For example, in 2014, the agency initiated a

permit variation across all eight of the sites permitted

derogation and are exempt from requiring a permit—there

is particular concern about those that have tyres and the

way in which some are handled. We are raising the bar

for those who want to operate a permitted site. That

includes the requirement for a demonstration of technical

competence, for example, and we have even looked at

the idea of sites needing to put a financial bond in place

to allow for recovery if there is a problem. I therefore

think I have demonstrated that, through the consultation—it

was launched in January and we are currently analysing

the results—we have taken steps to strengthen the law in

the way for which the hon. Member for Washington

and Sunderland West has asked.

I turn now to some of the specific points that the hon.

Lady raised about her constituency of Washington

and Sunderland West, where there are eight permitted waste

sites. Although three have had permit breaches in the

last five years due to problems with flies in particular, as

she described, all the sites are currently performing well

and are rated A or B on the Environment Agency’s

performance scale—A is the top performance. When

there were permit breaches, the agency took the relevant

enforcement action. In one case, as she pointed out,

there was a prosecution, following which there was a fine

of £16,000 and an award of £10,000 in costs.

The most recent of these problems was the 2015 case

at the former Niramax site, which the hon. Lady mentioned.

That site is now owned by Veolia and is performing

better. I stress that the agency and the waste companies

concerned work closely to ensure that operators are

kept in compliance with permits and to try to overcome

problems. For example, in 2014, the agency initiated a

permit variation across all eight of the sites permitted

to accept waste that had the potential to give rise to fly

infestations, which added a bespoke condition on pest

management. Sunderland City Council also became

involved with breaches relating to public amenity.
The Environment Agency works with other public bodies locally, such as the police and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, to monitor standards and performance relating to vehicles that transport waste in the local area. That is particularly important, given the hon. Lady’s concerns about waste that is supposed to be netted not being adequately secured to the load. In the most recent checks of over 200 vehicles that were inspected on site or observed on local roads, 12 were found to have minor regulatory issues relating to waste, and the DVSA dealt with two non-waste issues.

In conclusion, I recognise the important issues that the hon. Lady has raised. It is important to highlight that the Government have increased spending on enforcement in this area. I hope that I have reassured her both that we have changed the law recently—in the last two years—to strengthen regulations in this area and that we intend to do more. I have talked about the consultation, but we intend to strengthen the permitting requirements further. I also recognise that she has raised others issues, particularly around transport, and I will ensure that these are taken on board.

Mrs Hodgson rose—

George Eustice: I will give way to the hon. Lady because I can see she is keen to make use of the time available.

Mrs Hodgson: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. I know he has given some assurances but, with the summer months approaching, I doubt that my constituents—they will be watching in large numbers, even though this debate has been held sooner than might have been thought, so they may be watching later—will be as reassured, given that they are the ones who are living with this day in, day out. As I have said, this has been going on for years. I know the Minister says that some of the new measures have come in within the last two years, but they really are not biting or perhaps having the effect he had hoped. I just wonder if he or his Department could keep an eye on this and perhaps revisit it. I will raise it again in questions, and if things are not progressing and companies are not adhering to the enforcement measures, further regulations might need to be looked at.

George Eustice: As part of our consideration around the consultation, I will ensure that an official in the Department takes note of this debate and considers some of the issues the hon. Lady has raised. As I said, we have specific proposals to raise the bar for those who want to operate a permitted site and with regard to the exemptions. If there is more we can do, working with the DVSA, to strengthen some of the standards for the transporting of waste material, we will certainly consider it.

We have had a very positive debate. It has been timely, given that our consultation recently closed, even if it was not as early as the hon. Lady would have liked. She has now had the opportunity to put her constituents’ concerns on record, and I hope I have reassured her about the action we are taking, although I also take on board her concern that it might not be enough.

Question put and agreed to.

8.46 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons  

Tuesday 15 May 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cameroon

1. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cameroonian counterpart on the level of violence in that country. [905281]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): I visited Cameroon in February and met the Cameroonian Prime Minister, and the Foreign Secretary met him at the Commonwealth meetings in London in April. In all our discussions with Cameroonian Ministers, we have stressed the importance of inclusive dialogue and not resorting to violence.

Jessica Morden: A constituent of mine from Cameroon who sought asylum here has been highlighting the ongoing violence and the brutality committed by that country’s Government in Anglophone regions, and the acute refugee crisis that that has caused. I know that the Department has been raising these issues, but what more can Ministers do to help to get a meaningful process going to address the issues and end the violence?

Harriett Baldwin: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has managed to get this important issue on the Order Paper and up for discussion in the House of Commons, because it is a serious situation. There is violence from all sides in Cameroon and we are extremely concerned about the situation. We are encouraging not only the Government there but all Cameroonian citizens to participate in a process of inclusive dialogue. It is an election year and the election must take place without people resorting to violence.

Girls’ Education

2. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of girls’ education throughout the world. [905282]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): If every girl in the world had 12 years of quality education, this world would be infinitely safer, vastly more prosperous and better, which is why education for girls is at the heart of Government policy.

Giles Watling: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but I am concerned that, according to UNESCO estimates, 130 million girls between the ages of 6 and 17 are out of school and 15 million girls of primary school age, half of them in sub-Saharan Africa, will never enter a classroom. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that tackling this issue will continue to be a top priority for global Britain?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the statistics are truly horrifying. There are countries around the world, including in sub-Saharan Africa, where female illiteracy is running at 60%, 70% or sometimes 80%, which is why the UK is in the lead in campaigning at the UN, the G7 and the G20 for focus on this issue. That is also why the Prime Minister announced a further £212 million for girls’ education at the recent Commonwealth summit.

Mr Speaker: As he is the father of lots of daughters, I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that, in many parts of the developing world, educational institutions and orphanages are not quite what they seem? Children are taken into them and trafficked, instead of getting an education. Will he look into that?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Lady Sheerman here knows that, in some parts of the world, educational establishments are not what they seem to be. We continually work to tackle not just trafficking and modern slavery for many years. We certainly co-ordinate with the Home Office to tackle the problem that the hon. Gentleman describes.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Girls who do not receive education are more likely to become victims of human trafficking, early marriage and gender-based violence. Will the Foreign Secretary update the House on what he is doing not only to support girls’ education, but in particular to join up the strategies for ending violence against women and girls?

Boris Johnson: We continually work to tackle not just female illiteracy and innumeracy but the associated problems, including gender-based violence, and we work continually on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict. I recently had a meeting with Lord Hague, whom colleagues will remember championed that issue to great effect.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What discussions has the Foreign Secretary had with the Government of Pakistan about girls’ education in that country? What assessment has he made of that Government’s track record?

Boris Johnson: I am proud to say that I have had repeated conversations with the Government of Pakistan about the UK contribution to the challenge that they face. As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows, 66% of adult women in Pakistan are illiterate. Through the
Department for International Development, the UK is trying to tackle that issue, and I think that 6 million girls in the Punjab have been educated thanks to the UK’s generosity.

**Commonwealth: Diplomatic Relations**

3. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen UK diplomatic relations with Commonwealth countries.

**Mr Jayawardena:** I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s comments. It was great to see so many Heads of Government attending CHOGM last month. Does he agree with Her Majesty that the Commonwealth will continue to offer stability and continuity for future generations under the worthy leadership of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales?

**Boris Johnson:** My hon. Friend asks an extremely good question, though he sets a very high bar in asking me in any way to disagree with Her Majesty the Queen, which I will not do because I think that the Prince of Wales will serve admirably as the next head of the Commonwealth.

**Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to strengthen bilateral relations with Commonwealth countries.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sure that colleagues will not rose—

**Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend explain how the UK is working with allies such as Australia to bolster Commonwealth ties in the south Pacific as a counter balance to growing Chinese influence in places such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands?

**Boris Johnson:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and it has been raised specifically with me by our friends in the south Pacific that they want to see the UK back there. A head of an island there described to me his sense of grief at seeing a vacant UK seat at a recent meeting—I will not name the country in which the meeting took place. We are filling that seat; we will be back there in all the countries that I have just announced.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** I do not know whether “Fox and Friends” has broadcast in any Commonwealth countries, but can the Foreign Secretary tell us whether appearing on breakfast TV is now an official part of UK diplomatic foreign policy, or is it reserved only for countries with which we have a special relationship?

**Boris Johnson:** I cannot comment on whether “Fox and Friends” is broadcast across the Commonwealth, but what I will say is that we should use every possible means at our disposal to reach out to our friends not just in the Commonwealth, but in the former Commonwealth—the United States of America.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sure that colleagues will not wish to be deprived, so I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will place a copy in the Library of the House for their delectation in the long summer evenings that lie ahead. [Interruption.] The transcript, man.
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Malaysia on her recent outstanding elections, which have seen the return of the first ever opposition party since independence? It shows that democracy is alive and kicking in Malaysia. Does he agree that there is much more that we can do together, not least through an extended relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations?

Boris Johnson: Not only that; I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work he does to promote relations between the UK and ASEAN. He works tirelessly on that dossier. Malaysia certainly presents extraordinary opportunities for the UK. A massive friendship and partnership already exists with the country, and we look forward to building relations very fast with the new Government of Mahathir Mohamad.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): We are all delighted that there was a successful Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting this year. Among the valued Commonwealth members are of course the Caribbean countries. We know that Caribbean Foreign Ministers raised the issue of Windrush deportations with the Foreign Office in 2014 and that high commissioners did so in 2016, so will the Foreign Secretary tell us what discussions he and his Ministers had at that time with their counterparts in the Home Office?

Boris Johnson: I must respectfully tell the hon. Lady what I am sure she knows very well: this is a matter for the Home Office. We certainly alerted the Home Office to the issue, but the question of how to manage immigrants in this country is a matter for the Home Office.

Iran Nuclear Deal

4. Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What recent discussions has he had with his international counterparts on the future of the Iran nuclear deal?

Boris Johnson: I am going to Brussels this afternoon to talk to our European friends and partners. [Laughter]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): As the House will understand, the UK continues to work hard with all our friends and partners—particularly the other European signatories to the joint comprehensive plan of action—to keep that deal alive. We believe that it is of fundamental importance that Iran was not in breach of the JCPOA last week. It is still not in breach of the JCPOA this week. There are advantages to maintaining the essence of that deal, so we will continue to work for that and to protect the interests of UK business in Iran.

Mr Baron: Recent tensions between Israel and Iran underline the importance of the nuclear deal, and we should not forget how close the west and Iran came to conflict over the nuclear issue in 2012. The Government have rightly maintained their full support for the agreement, but exactly how far are they prepared to go in concert with their allies, to keep this deal alive—including, if necessary, protecting companies that trade with Iran from American sanctions?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend brings a great deal of learning to this subject. This issue is difficult because of the extraterritorial effect of US sanctions; when companies touch the live wire of the American financial network, they find themselves almost immediately sanctioned. I am going to Brussels this afternoon to talk to our European friends about what we can do to work together to protect the interests of UK and other European businesses.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): When the Foreign Secretary goes to Brussels, will he explain to our European friends that this country values our defence and security partnership with our European Union partners? Will he also say positive things about whether we will be joining permanent structured co-operation—PESCO—and co-operating with the other European countries in the future?

Boris Johnson: I can direct the hon. Gentleman to no better text than the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech—fleshed out by her Mansion House speech—in which she made it clear that the UK’s commitment to the defence and security of our friends and partners is unconditional and indivisible.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will he also say positive things about whether we will be joining permanent structured co-operation—PESCO—and co-operating with the other European countries in the future?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend is completely right to raise the disgraceful behaviour of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the missiles that are fired from Syria at Israel and elsewhere. The JCPOA was not designed to constrain that activity; it was specifically designed to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon and it has succeeded in that effort so far. That is why we propose to keep the core of that deal alive, but to work with our friends and partners to constrain the malign activity that my right hon. Friend describes.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Last July, at a conference of the Iranian resistance movement in Paris attended by a number of Conservative Members, John Bolton announced that the Iranian regime is “not going to change…the only solution is to change the regime…And that’s why, before 2019, we…will celebrate in Tehran!”

Now that Mr Bolton is President Trump’s national security adviser, does the Foreign Secretary believe that regime change is still his objective?

Boris Johnson: I have a very high regard for John Bolton and his intelligence and vision, but I have to say that I do not believe that regime change in Tehran is the objective that we should be seeking. I must be very clear with the hon. Gentleman that I think that we might conceivably achieve regime change at some stage in the near future, but I cannot with any confidence say that
that would be a change for the better, because it seems equally plausible to me to imagine that Qasem Soleimani of the IRGC could put himself in a very good position to take over from Ayatollah Khamenei, for instance.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I suggest to my right hon. Friend that there is a temptation among his allies to point the finger at the United States and heap opprobrium on it when he goes to Brussels. May I urge him to point out to them that, since sanctions were lifted on Iran, it has used the money that it has earned to invest in developing ballistic missiles, to start a proxy war in Yemen and to interfere in Syria? Will he remind them that notwithstanding the fact that it was a narrow deal, there is a real, serious threat from Iran that needs to be dealt with?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend is completely right, and that is indeed what we intend to do. But we also intend to try to address the substantive difficulties in the JCPOA itself—the fact that it expired, the fact that the sunset clauses are not adequate and the fact that in 2025 it is at least theoretically possible for Iran to proceed very rapidly to break out to acquire a nuclear weapon. That is a legitimate concern of President Trump, and we have to deal with it as well.

Bahrain: Death Penalty

5. Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What assessment he has made of the effect of the use of the death penalty in Bahrain on human rights in that country. [905283]

Alistair Burt: No, I do not believe that that can possibly be the case. If the right hon. Lady would write with the specific detail of an allegation, I will look at it, but I do not believe that it is the case.

18. [905289] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): That specific detail is available in the report by the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy and Reprieve that was referenced earlier. It says that British-funded institutions and trained-by-Britain organisations have indeed covered up this sort of behaviour. Can we have an assurance from the Dispatch Box that that report is being looked at and that a formal response will come to Members?

Alistair Burt: Yes, I will. As I indicated earlier, the purpose of our engagement with Bahrain is to deal sometimes with difficult practices that have been there in the past in order to change them and improve them, but I think a specific allegation of British involvement and cover-up would not be right.

Israel-Palestine Peace Process

7. Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on prospects for the peace process in Israel and Palestine. [905287]

11. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on prospects for the peace process in Israel and Palestine. [905291]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): At this highly sensitive time in the region, there is an urgent need to restart the peace process between Israel and Palestine. We regularly press both parties to resume direct negotiations towards the two-state solution.

Matt Western: Last week, the Secretary of State suggested that President Trump could be in line for a Nobel peace prize. Does the Minister welcome the move by the US to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem, and does he agree with the White House today that the position is known: we did not agree with the decision, which is a sovereign decision, of both the United States and Israel to move the embassy. We have no plans to do anything similar. In relation to the second question, there is an urgent question after Question Time, and we will go into the difficult circumstances of the past few weeks. I will be happy to deal with that question then.

Mr Cunningham: May I push the Minister a little? Why has he not called for the United Nations Security Council to be recalled so that it can look at this situation? Does he agree with the Secretary-General that there should be an inquiry into what has been happening over the last six or seven weeks?

Alistair Burt: The House may not yet be aware, but there will be a UN Security Council meeting this afternoon or this evening in relation to this matter. The UK has
already said that it supports an independent investigation into the circumstances of what has been happening, and we will continue to take that position.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The simple truth is that the realignment of power in the middle east between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and their now closer friendship with Israel in this increasingly Sunni-Shi’a divide has left the Palestinians marginalised, and in danger of being marginalised further. Will my right hon. Friend, following the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration, restate categorically the United Kingdom’s commitment to the Palestinian people and rule out moving the British embassy to Jerusalem?

Alistair Burt: In answer to the second part of my right hon. Friend’s question, as I have indicated, that is the United Kingdom’s declared position: we are not moving our embassy. On the wider issues, as we will discuss later, the United Kingdom’s commitment remains to a just settlement of this issue which recognises the need to respond to Palestinians’ concern at the same time as ensuring the safety and security, and the existence, of the state of Israel. That remains our position.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): When the Hamas Prime Minister has said, “We will take down the border and we will tear out their hearts from their bodies,” what are this Government doing to build international pressure on Hamas to renounce violence and disarm?

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom regards Hamas as a terrorist organisation. It is proscribed and we have no dealings with it. It speaks for itself in relation to its threat to the state of Israel, and that should always be remembered in issues where Hamas is involved and is exerting pressure on the population of Gaza to do its bidding.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Does the Minister agree with the Foreign Secretary that Trump’s Jerusalem embassy move is a “moment of opportunity” for peace?

Alistair Burt: I always agree with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, because all circumstances in the region, and even the tragedies of yesterday—we will get on to this—have to be used as an opportunity for a springboard to peace, rather than further confrontation. We have made our view clear on the embassy. We did not agree with it, but it is a reality now. It will not be our position, and we will continue to work for peace in the region.

Stephen Gethins: Yesterday was the worst day of violence in Gaza for four years. Will the Minister look at yesterday’s violence and agree with me that the embassy move was reckless and irresponsible and stoked tension? Does he also agree, in terms of long-term peace, that there is a need for an impartial and independent investigation?

Alistair Burt: In relation to the second part of the question, I have made it clear that the UK supports an independent investigation into what has happened, and I repeat: the move of the United States embassy yesterday was not supported by the United Kingdom. We do not see that as being conducive at present to peace in the region, and the timing, of course, was incredibly difficult.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Minister has already mentioned the importance of face-to-face negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Would he please say how important that is for the future of the area?

Alistair Burt: The events of yesterday were the culmination of many things, but one of the things they were the culmination of was the failure of respective leaders over time to grapple with the situation and to realise how urgent and desperate it has become. The situation in Palestine and Gaza and the occupied territories will not simply be managed; it will get worse unless it is grasped and something is done to make it better.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): At this moment of abject crisis, following yesterday’s events in Gaza and west Jerusalem, the Palestinian people are sorely pressed to retain hope and faith in a two-state solution. Will the Foreign Secretary give them some hope and faith today by choosing this moment officially to recognise the state of Palestine, and will he lead a global effort to persuade other countries to do the same?

Alistair Burt: We have said before that we will recognise the state of Palestine at a time when it is most conducive to securing peace in the area, but the hon. Lady is absolutely correct in saying that the absence of hope and the increase of despair in the area is of great concern to all of us and needs to be recognised and dealt with.

Palestinian Refugees and Displacement of Palestinians

8. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment his Department has made of the extent to which the human rights of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are protected. [905288]

16. Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What assessment has made of the effect of the long-term displacement of Palestinians on stability in the middle east. [R] [905296]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We are committed to protecting the human rights of Palestinian refugees. In 2017 and 2018, we provided £50 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency to support Palestinian refugees across the middle east. Ultimately, to promote stability across the region, there must be a fair, agreed and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question.

Tracy Brabin: This year, the United States more than halved its aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees, piling further pressure on people trapped in an already hellish situation. In the light of that, can the Minister tell us what representations he has made to his American counterparts about this decision and whether he intends to bring forward a new funding settlement?
Alistair Burt: I have indeed made representations to US counterparts in relation to this. We have brought forward our own next tranche of support to UNRWA, and we continue to believe that support for UNRWA is vital, particularly in the present circumstances. We will be further reviewing what we can do—not just ourselves, but with other donors as well.

Andy Slaughter: Today, Nakba Day, is the 70th anniversary of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from what is now Israel. Israel chooses to mark it by escalating the murder and maiming of civilians in Gaza, including hundreds of children. Can we hear from the Minister and the Foreign Secretary, as we have from the shadow Foreign Secretary, an unqualified condemnation of the actions of the Israeli Government and security forces, and support for international law, including the right of return? Is the Minister prepared to take action, starting with the suspension of arms sales to Israel?

Alistair Burt: That were three questions in one there. I will deal with the centrality of the issue in Gaza later. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that our statements make it clear that we deeply regret the extent of the use of live fire yesterday. We understand the reason why Israel would seek to protect its border and its border fence—it knows what would happen if there were a significant breach of it—but we are also concerned about the events that will have led to people being pushed towards the fence. However, it is a complex situation and we will cover it in more detail shortly.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes. I think the House must hear the cerebral voice of the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I call Mr Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful. As we are talking about the status of refugees in the middle east, does the Minister agree that his excellent work in the region has promoted peace but, more than that, does he also agree that many others could contribute to it? I am particularly thinking of the Iranian Government, who rather than spending their money on missiles and terrorists in Syria and elsewhere, could instead spend some of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps money on the fate of refugees in Lebanon, Syria and indeed the areas of Gaza and the west bank. Those Palestinians are so often linked through political means to the Iranian regime, yet somehow the money seems to go only on weapons, with none of it going on education, schools or hospitals.

Alistair Burt: There are elements of my hon. Friend’s question that I cannot comment on, but I can say that in the longer term the engagement of Iran with the region, in a supportive rather than a disruptive manner, towards the causes that he mentioned, is, of course, what we look for. But we are some way away from that yet and we will continue to press the case with Iran in relation to its behaviour.

Russia: Diplomatic Relations

9. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent assessment has made of the UK’s diplomatic relations with Russia.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Russia’s use of an illegal nerve agent in Salisbury was met with an unprecedented global diplomatic rebuff, in the sense that 28 countries expelled a total of 153 diplomats. The House will understand, therefore, the balance between the UK and Russia in expulsions of operatives: we lost a handful of people involved in the security side, while they lost about 153 across the world—a massive net loss for Russia and a significant gain for the UK. But we remain committed to a policy of engaging with Russia, while being wary of what it does.

Kevin Hollinrake: Despite the fact that oil and gas exports make up 70% of Russia’s international trade, they are not currently covered under the EU sanctions regime due to the high reliance of the EU on Russian gas exports. After our exit from the European Union, would that be a sensible extra measure for us to take that might assist with our diplomatic efforts?

Boris Johnson: We will, of course, consider all possibilities once we exit the European Union and take back control of our sanctions policy.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): At the European championships in 2016, Russian hooligans showed themselves to be organised, well armed and extremely violent. British fans’ safety must be our top priority at the World cup. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the British diplomat responsible for fans’ safety at the World cup was expelled by Russia? If so, how can the Government even contemplate relying on Russian reassurances that our fans will be safe?

Boris Johnson: We are not actively trying to dissuade fans preparing to go to Russia for the World cup, as we do not think that would be right. They should look at our “Be on the Ball” website and the risks that we believe may be associated with any particular venues. But it is up to the Russians, and on their honour, to guarantee the safety of not just British fans, but fans from around the world.

21. [905301] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share the widespread concern about Nord Stream 2, the proposed Russian gas pipeline? Does he agree that there appears to be no economic justification for it? It is instead a political project, designed to increase European dependence on Russian gas and weaken Ukraine. Will he press that point on our allies—particularly Germany and Denmark?

Boris Johnson: I assure my right hon. Friend that we in the UK Government are well aware of the deep controversy surrounding Nord Stream 2. We raise it not just in Ukraine but with other European friends and partners.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Earlier, the Foreign Secretary indicated the diplomatic headcount exchange. How would he describe current diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and Russia? Are they likely to change in the near future?

Boris Johnson: I can sum up our policy, which I repeat to the House: engage but beware. We will continue, where necessary and possible, to engage with Russia diplomatically and culturally across the field. But relations are currently, of course, difficult.
Richard Benyon: In firmly supporting the Government’s robust response to the malign actions of the Putin regime, may I remind my right hon. Friend that in the cold war we had the best civil servants and an enormous infrastructure based on preparation for strategic arms limitation talks? That kind of engagement is as vital today, and I hope that the Government are putting equal resources into it.

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend raises an extremely good point. As I think he is indicating, we are increasingly concerned about a Russian breach of the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. There will have to be much more international engagement to keep that treaty intact.

Syria

10. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the investigation and prosecution of any breaches of international humanitarian law in Syria.

15. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking with his international counterparts to end the conflict in Syria.

23. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking with his international counterparts to end the conflict in Syria.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We are working closely with the UN, the Syrian opposition and our international partners to encourage a negotiated settlement to the Syrian conflict. We support the non-governmental organisations and UN mechanisms gathering evidence and preparing future prosecutions for the most serious crimes committed in Syria.

Jeff Smith: I thank the Minister for that response. I think we all want the prosecution of the Assad regime and any other parties responsible for using chemical weapons, but does the Minister agree that for indiscriminately bombing civilians, for targeting medical facilities and for using starvation as a weapon of war, the regime already deserves to be prosecuted for war crimes?

Alistair Burt: The short answer is yes. It is a question of gathering the evidence and providing the right forum, but undoubtedly war crimes have been committed. We are working continually with authorities to see what mechanisms can be used to hold people to account. I wish we could be certain of the outcome.

Chris Green: Given the limited impact of the United Nations Security Council to date, does my right hon. Friend agree that when it comes to resolution by consensus its terms must be adhered to?

Alistair Burt: Absolutely, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We actually got resolution 2401 through by consensus. It called for a ceasefire and humanitarian access, particularly in relation to eastern Ghouta but it applied all over Syria. The resolution was then not adhered to by some of the parties who had signed up to it. If we are going to make any progress on Syria, UN resolutions have to be adhered to.

Victoria Prentis: Save the Children and the Royal United Services Institute published an excellent report last week on children in conflict, which highlighted in particular the devastating effect of the use of barrel bombs. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with our allies about a joint approach to civilian protection in civilian areas?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this further aspect of the atrocities perpetrated on the Syrian people. As well as calling out such behaviour and considering international mechanisms for holding people to account, the support for civilians is necessary and, at the recent Brussels conference on Syria and the region, working with donors, we pledged to provide at least £450 million this year and £300 million next year to alleviate that extreme suffering.

Derek Twigg: Although I agree that President Assad should be held accountable, a lot of opposition groups have committed human rights violations and some terrible atrocities. There has to be a very careful and balanced approach. We need to ensure that we focus on those groups, too.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I met the director of the Independent, Impartial and International Mechanism recently, and we have been offering help and technical support through legal services in the United Kingdom. There should be absolutely no distinction between those who have committed such crimes.

Alison McGovern: As the Minister and other hon. Members have said, accountability for war crimes in Syria is crucial, but so is prevention. How can we stop the bombing of hospitals?

Alistair Burt: Again, I wish there were a simple answer to such an honest and direct question. Without physically intervening and without a physical no-fly zone, which has been considered but would be immensely difficult to implement, the best thing we can do at present is to draw attention to such attacks on facilities—sometimes with information that has been given in all good faith to authorities to keep these places safe—support the work of the doctors and those involved in humanitarian expertise, and make clear that this is happening. It has no place in warfare. It has no place in the modern world. Hopefully, those responsible will ultimately be held accountable.

Israel: Arms Exports

12. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to monitor the use of arms and arms components exported from the UK to Israel.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Export licensing applications for all countries, including Israel, are considered on a case-by-case basis against strict criteria. Human rights and international humanitarian law considerations are important parts of that assessment. We keep the situation in Israel under continual review, as we do with other countries.
Richard Burden: When, in a written question, I asked the Foreign Secretary to investigate the uses to which sniper rifles and other weapons exported under licence from the UK to Israel were being put, I received from the Minister a reply which stated:

“We do not collect data on the use of equipment after sale.”

Does that answer not mean that the Government do not have the first idea whether UK weapons are being used to shoot demonstrators in Gaza? What does it take for the UK to enforce its own arms export criteria and stop arms sales to Israel?

Alistair Burt: I would say two things in answer to the hon. Gentleman’s perfectly proper question. First, before any arms sales are considered, a proper risk assessment is carried out as to what will happen in relation to those weapons, as I indicated. Secondly, since the start of the recent difficulties in Gaza, we have looked at all extant licences in relation to Israel. Our sense at the moment is that we have no information to suggest that UK-supplied equipment has been used against protesters.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that Israel has the right to defend itself from external aggression and terrorism—something that it has unfortunately had to do for most of the last 70 years?

Alistair Burt: That is quite correct: we support Israel’s right to defend itself. As in the cases of all other supplies of UK weapons, strict criteria are imposed on the supply of any weapons for the purpose of defence.

Myanmar: Rakhine and Kachin

13. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with his Myanmar counterpart on the treatment of minority communities in Rakhine and Kachin provinces.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised concerns about the treatment of the Rohingya of Rakhine in a meeting in Naypyidaw with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on 11 February. I reiterated those messages when I summoned the Burmese ambassador on 6 March. Moreover, I called for the Burmese military to show restraint and protect civilians in Kachin on both 28 April and, most recently, in a public statement on 11 May.

Stella Creasy: Multiple rapes, airstrikes and genocide—the crimes of the Burmese security forces against the Rohingya, as well as against the Kachin and Shan people, are well documented. The UK Government can refer Burma to the International Criminal Court from the UN Security Council. Will the Minister therefore meet the new Justice for Rohingya Minority initiative to discuss its call for universal jurisdiction and accountability for those who commit these atrocities?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be well aware—she touched on this—of the idea of universal jurisdiction, but that is not in place at present. Of course, I am very happy to meet, along with her, the representatives of the Rohingya community, as I have done before. The UK is a staunch supporter of the ICC and we remain committed to working with all our international partners to secure justice for what has taken place in Rakhine. It will be a long process. The Burmese Government have told the UN Security Council that they are ready to proceed with the domestic investigation. That will need to be credible, transparent and impartial and will need, in our view, to have an international component.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): As a result of the tens of thousands of rapes in Rakhine province, there are many thousands of pregnant women whose babies may well be abandoned in Bangladesh. Will my right hon. Friend update us on what will happen to those children, should they be born as a result of rape?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she does on this. Like many Members throughout the House, I have been absolutely appalled by the reports of extensive sexual violence in Rakhine, including in graphic and harrowing testimonies on television programmes on both Channel 4 and BBC 2 in the last two evenings. I reassure her and the House that UK aid is already providing comprehensive counselling and psychological support for 10,000 women in Rakhine and more than 2,000 survivors of sexual violence. Medical aid is also being provided to assist 50,000 safe births.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Save the Children estimates that 60% of the 500,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are children. What action will the Government take at the UN Security Council to avoid a lost generation from that community?

Mark Field: I fully appreciate those grave concerns. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the issue of the Rohingya is not one that has emerged only since last August. In many cases, it goes back to the late 1970s. There have been various episodes leading to this, and as he rightly points out, the risk is that it will have an impact on forthcoming generations. We will continue to work with all our international partners, as we are with the EU, to get sanctions to ensure that there is no impunity for those who have brought about these terrible crimes. This is a long-standing issue that will require a patient approach within the international community. Please rest assured that we are very much taking a lead in our role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Apart from UK humanitarian aid, what review is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office carrying out to ensure that we do not support the military regime in Rangoon in any other ways?

Mark Field: I know that my hon. Friend takes a strong interest in these matters. It is important to recognise that, although we were at the forefront of stopping support for the Burmese military last September, there has been a military dictatorship since 1962, and it is for our diplomats on the ground in Naypyidaw and Rangoon to identify the elements—and there will be elements—in the military with whom we need to maintain open discussions. It has perhaps been rather easy to blame all this on State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, but there are elements within the military with whom we will need to maintain an engagement.
Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), two weeks ago the Government proposed a draft UN statement arguing for a credible, transparent investigation into war crimes against the Rohingya and stated that those responsible must be held to account. What is the current status of that proposed statement?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that there has been a great deal of co-operation with the Opposition Front-Bench team. We all recognise that these are terrible issues on which the UK political parties, irrespective of colour, need to work together on behalf of the international community.

We are awaiting the ICC’s decision on whether it has jurisdiction over the deportation of the Rohingya from Burma to Bangladesh on the basis that Bangladesh, unlike Burma, is a signatory to the Rome statute. The Security Council could refer Burma to the ICC, but we know that currently there is insufficient support on the Security Council, and a vetoed attempt at referral would, in our view, do little to further—[Interruption.] It is wonderful to do this as a duet, Mr Speaker, and I could continue doing so, but I hope you will appreciate that these are very serious matters about which people feel very strongly across the House and the country, so I hope you will indulge me for one more moment. We will ensure as far as possible that we do nothing to enhance the role of the Burmese military, and an early push for a Security Council resolution would, in our view, undermine our position.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister of State. I say this principally for the benefit of new Members who might not have heard me say it before: I once asked a predecessor of the Clerk of the House why it was that Foreign Office questions always seemed to take longer than other Question Times, to which, having consulted his scholarly cranium, he replied, “Mr Speaker, I think it is on account of the fact that when Ministers consult his scholarly cranium, he replied, “Mr Speaker, I think it is on account of the fact that when Ministers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office address the House, they feel they are addressing not merely the House, or even the nation, but in fact the world.”

G7 Agreements

14. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What agreements were reached at the 2018 G7 meeting in Canada.

Jeremy Lefroy: I welcome the statement from the G7 on support for effective measures to promote further verifiable nuclear arms control and disarmament. Will that be on every agenda of G7 Foreign Ministers meetings, and will the UK be taking a lead?

Boris Johnson: As my hon. Friend knows, and as I said in answer to an earlier question, we are increasingly concerned about nuclear proliferation. As the House can readily see, that issue is now at the absolute top of the global agenda, and he can be sure that the UK will continue to push it at the G7 and elsewhere.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We come now to topical questions. Needless to say, those who lost out on substantives can well hope to be called in topical questions, so they should not beetle out of the Chamber unless they are exceptionally busy people with many commitments and fuller than average diaries.

Topical Questions

T1. [905305] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am deeply saddened by the loss of life in Gaza, where peaceful protests are being exploited by extremists. I urge Israel to show restraint in the use of live fire, and I take this opportunity to repeat the UK’s commitment to a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the shared capital.

My other priority is to preserve the gains made through the Iran nuclear deal. I am working closely with my French and German counterparts and will see them in Brussels later today.

Stephen Timms: My constituent Tofila Ndele, a British citizen, was arrested when visiting family members in Congo last September. There has been no explanation for his arrest, and no charges have been levelled against him. I was grateful to the Secretary of State for raising the subject with the Congolese Foreign Minister in March. What progress has been made since then in securing Mr Ndele’s release?

Boris Johnson: UK officials have visited Mr Ndele regularly since his detention in September last year, most recently in March. They have lobbied for improvements in the conditions of his detention, and recently secured the first visit from a family member since his arrest. My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa raised the matter with the Congolese Foreign Minister in April.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. From now on, obviously, we need a sentence from each colleague.

T2. [905306] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I recently held a community engagement event with the Tunisian ambassador to the United Kingdom. Can the Minister confirm that security co-operation between the UK and Tunisia is now excellent, given that TUI and Thomas Cook have resumed flights to Tunisia?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Yes. Tunisia has worked extremely hard at reviewing and improving its security. We are in constant contact with the Tunisian authorities, and we hope that many British tourists will visit the country this summer and beyond.
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I begin by thanking the Foreign Secretary for leading our cross-party efforts over the last two weeks to destroy the Prime Minister’s “customs partnership” proposal? I trust that he finished off the job earlier this morning. Unfortunately, however, that leaves us with his own crazy Mad Max—I mean max fac—proposal. May I ask him a very simple yes or no question, which has already been asked several times by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee? Does he believe that cameras are physical infrastructure?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising this matter, because it may provide her with an opportunity to elucidate the Labour party’s policy on the customs union for the benefit of the nation. I seem to remember that at the last general election, Labour Members campaigned on a platform to come out of the customs union. Now they say that they want to stay in “a” customs union—a customs partnership. Their policy is absolutely clouded in obscurity. If the right hon. Lady wishes to part those clouds of confusion, this is her moment.

Emily Thornberry: We are quite willing to exchange places with those on the other side of the House. All we would ask of them is that they call a general election.

I do not think that that constituted even an attempt to answer the question that I asked. Like the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary seems to be unable and unwilling to state the blindingly obvious. So much for plain-speaking, bluff authenticity.

Let me try another key question about the max fac proposal. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm—[Interjection.] He does need to listen, otherwise he will not understand the question and will be unable to answer it. Can he confirm that if the technology on which his proposal relies takes five years to become fully functional, the UK will be obliged to remain part of the customs union, and to be bound by single market rules, until at least 2023?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Lady had an opportunity to be clear about what Labour wants to do. Conservative Members have been absolutely clear. The Prime Minister has said it time and time again: we are coming out of the customs union, and to be bound by single market rules, never happen again?

Mr Speaker: Order. What we need from the hon. Gentleman is a sentence with a question mark at the end. I do not wish to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman, of whom I am very fond, but we are very short of time. Blurt it out, man.

Hugh Gaffney: Craig Mallon died six years ago, after just one post-mortem; his mother died recently, broken-hearted. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that case?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): May I draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to a new all-party group that has been set up to investigate deaths abroad in suspicious circumstances?

T9. [905314] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Last year I visited St Lucia as part of a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation, meeting representatives from St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. Britain’s vision post Brexit and its implications for the Commonwealth family of nations was a topic of discussion. Can my right hon. Friend give us an assurance that following the successful Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, we will make every effort to strengthen our economic and diplomatic ties with those island nations?

Boris Johnson: I certainly can, and I can tell my hon. Friend that at the Commonwealth summit I was able, as she may recall, to announce the opening of 10 new UK delegations, many of them in the Caribbean or the Pacific.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Yet again we are witnessing appalling violence and loss of Palestinian lives in Gaza: 58 dead and 2,271 injured, over half of them wounded by live ammunition. This must end under international law and human rights must be upheld, so what immediate steps will the Foreign Secretary take to ensure that the horrors seen in Gaza yesterday never happen again?

Alistair Burt: Ever since it became clear that these protests were going to continue and the risk of confrontation was very real, we have been at pains to work with both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government to minimise and reduce the tension. It is a matter of horror and regret to us that yesterday’s events happened; we will continue to urge restraint on all responsible and seek the peace agreement that is so urgently needed.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to take this opportunity to congratulate the former Prime Minister of Malaysia on his re-election.
after an interval, and pass on the best wishes of the British people to the Malaysian people during this important transition?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughts. The recent election in Malaysia was historic: the outcome, while a surprise, represents a genuine victory for democracy and is a testament to the Malaysian people. Our relationship with Malaysia is of course both deep and long-lasting, and I look forward to working closely with the new Prime Minister and his Government on many of our shared interests.

T6. [905311] Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): While I greatly welcome the fact that democratic and peaceful elections have been held in Iraq, the results and outcome are far from certain. Will the Foreign Secretary give his assessment of the future stability and security—and future direction—of Iraq?

Alistair Burt: We are pleased that the elections have passed off as peacefully as they have. We look forward to working with the new Government, and the reconstruction and stability situation, which has been encouraged by recent conferences in Kuwait and other places, should help the future of Iraq.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Hezbollah’s arsenal of rockets supplied by Iran is now estimated at 150,000. Does the Minister share my concern at Iran’s malign influence in the region, and what recent discussions has he had with his Israeli counterparts about the threat posed by Hezbollah?

Alistair Burt: We are in regular contact with the state of Israel about threats to it. Hezbollah’s increased weaponry is part of that, and the supply of weapons to Hezbollah contravenes UN resolutions. That threat to Israel is very real.

T7. [905312] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether he still believes in, and has to abide by, Cabinet collective responsibility?

Boris Johnson: Of course.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): After years of kleptomaniac behaviour by the Kirchner husband and wife team in Argentina, President Mauricio Macri is struggling to get the Argentinian economy back on course. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to helping Argentina and President Macri with the International Monetary Fund and other organisations?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about Argentina. I will be going there at the end of the month to pursue the current improvement in relations taking place between our two countries.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): President Erdoğan of Turkey, who is currently visiting this country, has called snap elections for 24 June. Those elections will be held under a state of emergency, severely curtailing the freedoms of expression, assembly and association, and the right to take part in public affairs. They will also introduce an executive presidency with wide-ranging powers that many see as an attack on democracy. What is the Government’s view?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the right hon. Lady that we had a conference with our Turkish friends only the other day and that, although the relationship between the UK and Turkey is very strong, as she knows, we took every opportunity to raise our concerns about human rights and the repression of the media.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The stated position of all British Governments for a long time has been support for a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the heightened violence on the Israeli-Gaza border and the casualties coming from it now make that possibility look even more remote?

Alistair Burt: It may be difficult, and it may be remote, but if it is the right answer we should continue to pursue it, and we will.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A sentence each, short and preferably without subordinate clauses, the first to be delivered through the brilliant brain of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

When the Prime Minister meets President Erdoğan later today, will she raise with him the Turkish military invasion of Afrin, the numerous civilian deaths and the persecution of the Kurds, who have so often stood side by side with the United Kingdom in resisting ISIS?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly reassure the hon. and learned Lady that the Prime Minister will be raising the very difficult situation in the north of Syria.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What assessment have the Government made of the human rights and political situation in Burundi at the moment?

Harriett Baldwin: We are very concerned about the situation in Burundi. There is a referendum there this week and, as my hon. Friend will know, Her Majesty’s Government continue to send messages about the need to respect the Arusha peace accords and to respect democracy in Burundi.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): This Christian Aid week, the charity is campaigning to highlight inflexibility in the approach to internally displaced peoples. Will the Minister, along with officials from his Department and the Department for International Development, agree to meet representatives of Christian Aid to see how best we can address that growing situation?

Alistair Burt: I am very happy to do that. The situation of internally displaced people is very important to the UK, and we are working with others on the possibility of a UN high-level panel later this year. I would be very happy to meet Christian Aid once again.
Mr Speaker: Peter Grant: a sentence.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the Zimbabwean Government understand the importance of proper reparations for UK citizens who have been the victims of serious crimes committed allegedly by associates of the present and previous Governments of Zimbabwe?

Harriett Baldwin: As we call on the Zimbabwean Government to hold free and fair elections this year, we are also making representations to them. I have personally made representations on behalf of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent to the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Foreign Office website says that the European single market is key to Europe’s and the UK’s place in the global economy. Does the Foreign Secretary agree with that?

Boris Johnson: I think that whatever the website used to say about the single market, it will shortly no longer apply to the UK.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The UNESCO world heritage site of Socotra has reportedly become the latest front in the war in Yemen, with Saudi troops landing there in response to the United Arab Emirates apparently occupying the island. What is the Minister going to do to protect that unique and special environment and its people?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, but I would advise the House to be a little cautious about some of the reports coming out in relation to Socotra. I spoke just this week to the Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister of the United Arab Emirates, and the circumstances on the allegations being made are not particularly clear at present, but I can reassure the hon. Lady that we will be able to make a further statement about that in due course.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Bahraini criminal court has today locked up and taken citizenship from 115 people in a mass trial, of whom 53 have been given life sentences. Will the Minister look again at the co-operation between this Government and the Bahraini authorities, which only gives credence to their farcical regime?

Alistair Burt: As was indicated earlier, the relationship with Bahrain recognises the pressures brought about on that Government, but the challenges that they are trying to meet in relation to human rights and other matters will continue to be part of our dialogue. We will continue to raise difficult issues publicly and privately with the Government of Bahrain.
Speaker’s Statement

12.39 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Foreign Secretary to put her urgent question, it may be helpful to the House if I respond to the point of order that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) raised yesterday, in which he suggested that advice had been given by those offering advice on behalf of the House authorities that, in order to comply with the new data protection regime due to come into force on 25 May, personal constituency data gathered prior to the recent general election should be deleted. Despite vigorous inquiry yesterday by the House authorities and the contractor commissioned by the House authorities to support Members and their staff, no trace has been found by those responsible of such advice having been given.

It may be of help if I set out the actual situation as has been advised to me, and therefore as I understand it to be. Under the general data protection regulation and, indeed, existing legislation, there is no prescribed retention period. It is up to each Member to have a policy that either states for how long he or she will keep data, or sets out the criteria that that Member will use in making such decisions. That is clearly set out in the templates provided by the training company commissioned by the House. Members will shortly receive a letter from the Leader of the House. The Chair of the Administration Committee also wrote to Members last week with advice from the Information Commissioner’s Office addressing typical cases encountered by Members.

The Commission discussed the programme of GDPR assistance to Members at its meeting yesterday evening, and I can confirm that training and advice will continue to be provided for some time. I understand that the ICO accepts that full compliance on 25 May is unlikely to be achieved by many organisations or individuals, but it will expect the basics to be in place: a demonstrable plan of action and an evident will to implement it.

Our casework supporting constituents is invaluable, but as it involves processing often sensitive personal data, it is particularly important that we engage seriously with the GDPR regime. I am sure that we will all strive to do so.

Gaza Border Violence

12.43 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the violence at the Gaza border and its impact on the middle east peace process.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): As I said in the statement I put out from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office yesterday, the violence in Gaza and the west bank has been shocking. The loss of life and the large number of injured Palestinians, including children, are tragic, and it is extremely worrying that the number of those killed continues to rise. Such violence is destructive to peace efforts.

We have been clear that the United Kingdom supports the Palestinians’ right to peaceful protest. It is deplorable, but true, that extremist elements have exploited the protests for their own violent purposes. We will not waver from our support for Israel’s right to defend its borders, but the large volume of live fire is extremely concerning. We continue to implore Israel to show greater restraint.

The United Kingdom remains committed to a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital. All sides now need to show real leadership and courage, promote calm, refrain from inflaming tensions further, and show with renewed urgency that the path to a two-state solution is through negotiation and peace. We agree with the United Nations Secretary-General’s envoy that the situation in Gaza is desperate and deteriorating and that the international community must step up efforts.

We call on the special representative of the Secretary-General to bring forward proposals to address the situation in Gaza. These should include easing the restrictions on access and movement, and international support for urgent infrastructure and economic development projects. We also reiterate our support for the Egyptian-led reconciliation process and the return of the Palestinian Authority to full administration of the Gaza strip.

We must look forward to and work urgently towards a resolution of the long-standing issues between Israel and the Palestinian people. Now more than ever, we need a political process that delivers a two-state solution. Every death and every wounding casts a shadow for the future. The human tragedies should be used not as more building blocks for immovable positions, which will inevitably lead to more confrontation, but as a spur for urgent change. Yesterday’s tragedies demonstrate why peace is urgently needed.

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Yesterday’s horrific massacre at the Gaza border left at least 58 dead and almost 3,000 injured. Our first thoughts today are with those Palestinians who are mourning their loved ones or waking up with life-changing injuries. What makes yesterday’s events all the worse is that they came not as the result of some accidental overreaction to one day’s protests but as the culmination of six weeks of an apparently calculated and deliberate policy to kill and maim unarmed protestors who posed
no threat to the forces on the Gaza border. Many of them were shot in the back, many of them were shot hundreds of metres from the border and many of them were children.

If we are in any doubt about the lethal intent of the Israeli snipers working on the border, we need only look at the wounds suffered by their victims. American hunting websites regularly debate the merits of 7.6 mm bullets versus 5.5 mm bullets. The latter, they say, are effective when wanting to wound multiple internal organs, while the former are preferred by some because they are "designed to mushroom and fragment, to do maximum internal damage to the animal." It is alleged that this was the ammunition used in Gaza yesterday against men, women and children.

On the very first day of violence, the UN Secretary-General called for an independent investigation into the incidents, and last night the Kuwaiti Government asked the UN Security Council to agree a statement doing the same, only to be vetoed by the United States. Although I agree with every word of that Kuwaiti statement, it is easy to see why the US vetoed it, because the statement was critical of its Jerusalem embassy move.

Will the Minister of State take the initiative, not just in supporting a new Security Council statement but in helping to draft a new statement making no criticism of any party and no link to any other issue, but simply calling for an urgent, independent investigation into the violence in Gaza to assess whether international law has been broken and to hold those responsible to account—a statement to which no country could reasonably object, not even the United States, unless it is prepared to make the case that there is one rule for the Government of Israel and another rule for everyone else.

I believe the investigation must be the start of an effort at the UN and elsewhere to bring urgent and concerted international pressure on the Netanyahu Government to lift the illegal blockade of Gaza and to comply with all the UN resolutions ordering them to remove their illegal settlements and end their illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

If yesterday's deaths can act as a catalyst for that action, at least they will not have been in vain. In the interim, especially as the protests resume today, will the Minister of State join me in urging the Israeli forces serving on the Gaza border to show some long-overdue responsibility to their fellow human beings and stop this vicious slaughter?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for both the question and her response, and I join her in what she says about the victims. We have no side here except with the victims, and all our concerns should be how to prevent there being more victims. She made a series of allegations about the use of live rounds and the like. It is precisely because of such allegations that of course there should be an investigation into this. The UK has been clear in urgently calling for the facts of what happened to be established, including why such a volume of live fire was used; we are supportive of that independent, transparent investigation. Our team at the United Nations is working with others on what we can do on that. Different forms of inquiry are possible through the UN and we have to find the right formula, but it is important to find out more of the facts and we will work on that.

As I indicated earlier, I spoke just this morning to Nikolay Mladenov, the UN special envoy dealing with the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Gaza, about looking forward in relation to Gaza. As the right hon. Lady rightly indicates, and as we all know, the years of pressure in Gaza, which come from a variety of different sources, not just the blockade—this also involves the governorship and leadership in Gaza—have contributed to the most desperate of situations. I am sure she has been there recently, as I was a few months ago. As I said some months ago, compared with when I was last there, in 2014, the situation in Gaza was more hopeless and more desperate, and the need to address that urgently is clear.

May I say in conclusion to the right hon. Lady that an element was missing in her response? She did not mention any possible complicit Hamas involvement in the events. In all fairness, if we are to look at the circumstances of this, we need to take that into account. It is easy and tempting to take one side or the other, and if any of us have made statements about this in the past 24 hours, we see it is clear that the views out there are completely binary. There is no acceptance by those who support the state of Israel of an understanding of the circumstances of Gaza, and there is no understanding by those who have supported the Palestinian cause of any circumstances that might affect Israel and of what the impact would be should the border be breached and there be attacks on the Israeli side of it. The UK will not get into that. As I have indicated, we are clear that we need a political solution to this. At some stage, we need to hear from the sort of people who in the past understood both sides and were prepared to work together. Their voices were stilled not by their opponents, but by extremists on their own side who killed those working for peace in the past. Unless we hear those voices for peace again, we will not resolve this and we will be back again. I am sure the right hon. Lady will help us, with her colleagues, in taking that view, because we have to think of the victims first and see how we can prevent there being more victims in the future.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Even allowing for Hamas’ wicked manipulation of the Palestinians, does my right hon. Friend accept that the response of the Israeli defence force was a wholly unacceptable and excessive use of force, and that it was totally disproportionate? May I also say, to my shame, that I hope our Foreign Office will indulge in a little less limp response to this terrible situation?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, for, again, recognising both sides of this. An independent inquiry has been called for precisely to find out the reasons for the extent of the live fire. On the Israeli border, it is clear that repeated statements by the IDF on its concern about a breach of the fence, the statements it has had from Hamas and others, and previous attacks on the Israeli side of the border indicate what would be likely to happen should there be a breach of the border fence by Hamas operatives. Preventing that and stopping the border being infiltrated is a serious thing. But the extent of the live fire and of the injuries beyond the fence, the number of people involved and the sort of
people who have been caught up in this give a sense of why my right hon. Friend raised that question. If we do not also question that, as well as the engagement of those who might have been involved in inflaming the protests, we would not be doing our job correctly, so we will do both.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Like other Members, I am absolutely appalled by the killing of demonstrators, including children. This is a long and protracted conflict, which is not helped by the reckless move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. The UN has an important role to play, and I am glad the Minister acknowledged that. Does he agree with yesterday’s statement by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination? It called for the “immediate end to the disproportionate use of force against Palestinian demonstrators... an impartial and independent investigation” — that would of course draw evidence from both sides—and ensuring that Palestinians “enjoy full rights” under the human rights convention. What moves has he made to ensure that the US will sign up to that as well?

Alistair Burt: Again, I am not responsible for the actions of the United States in relation to this. We have said what we have said about the embassy; it is not a move we supported. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said yesterday that it was “playing the wrong card at the wrong time”, so our views on that are clear.

In response to other parts of the hon. Gentleman’s question, we think that the need to establish the facts of what has happened means that an independent investigation is necessary. The rights of all, both of Palestinians and of those who might be subject to violence from extremists who have come from Gaza and from those who operate under the rule of Hamas, have to be sacrosanct for everyone. I go back to a position I will speak about again and again in this statement: unless those on both sides understand the needs of the other, we will not get to a solution.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that the blockade was only partly to blame for the bad government in Gaza—in that festered hellhole. But he must concede that one reason it is a festered hellhole and a breeding ground for terrorists is that each and every time there has been an attempt to improve the livelihoods of the Gazans, by doing something about their water, about their refuge or about their quality of life, Israel has blockaded it. That is the problem.

Alistair Burt: The restrictions on access to Gaza are clearly part of the pressure placed upon Gaza and people in it. The United Kingdom has made repeated representations to Israel about easing those restrictions, and we will continue to do so, but there are activities perpetrated by those who govern Gaza that add to the pressures there. Recently, there have been difficulties between different Palestinian groups in relation to energy, power and salaries in Gaza. I recently met people from the Office of the Quartet to talk about work that was being done on new power plants and on water purification plants. We will continue to support that work because it is one bright spot and we have to continue with that as we deal with the politics as well.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday’s events were truly horrendous, and it is very important that all the facts surrounding what happened are identified and exposed. Does the Minister have any confidence that this will include the facts about Hamas’s involvement, starting from its role in destroying the chances for peace after Israel left Gaza in 2005 and forcibly removed the settlers and soldiers there? Will this include Hamas’s postings on Facebook over the past couple of days, which advised the demonstrators to hide guns and knives in their clothing before breaking the barrier into Israel’s territory and attacking Israeli civilians across the border?

Alistair Burt: It is important that any investigation is able to uncover all aspects of what might have happened if we are to do proper justice to those who have been caught up in it. The hon. Lady occasionally speaks bravely about matters that some would perhaps like to gloss over and it is right that she raises those, just as it is right for the Government to recognise that although Israel has the right to protect its border, it must make sure that its actions are commensurate with international human rights law. The concerns that she expressed and the incitement to violence that we know is there cannot be glossed over by any of us. If we are to deal with this issue properly and see a resolution in the future, that has to be understood, rather than wished away.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): All the innocent deaths are a real tragedy for the families and for everyone in the middle east. Will my right hon. Friend accept that Hamas and Islamic Jihad have fired thousands of missiles on to Israeli territory, despite the withdrawal from Gaza; that Hamas has built tunnels to get from Gaza into Israel; and that there have been terrorist attacks on the aid crossing and the pipelines? Is it not the case that Hamas is using some of these civilians as shields to bring terrorists into Israel?

Alistair Burt: I hear from the House that occasionally colleagues say things that are not agreed with by others, but to deal with this issue sensibly, we have to understand both sides. We know that what my right hon. Friend said has significant basis in truth, in terms of what has come out from Hamas to Israel—the statements, the incitement and everything else. The UK’s role should be clear; we have to understand the origins of this situation, but above all we have to recognise that those who have been in control of events have not grasped the sense of urgency and that this is not a political matter designed to rally their various bases and keep the confrontation going. It is not a matter that will settle itself and it is not something that will manage itself; it is something that has to be ended. Unless they grasp the urgency created by the tragedy yesterday, there will be another. Our voice will be consistent on the urgency of dealing with the matter. That is the position that I hope we continue to take.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If colleagues will forgive me, I think I can probably say without fear of contradiction that the Minister of State is almost universally respected in the House and very widely liked. Nobody enjoys hearing the Minister of State more than Mr Speaker. I say very gently, just as a guide, that I am quite keen to
accommodate all colleagues on this matter. The Minister of State's answers are up to him, but if he can beat that in mind, it would be hugely appreciated.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): All countries, Israel included, of course, have the right to defend themselves, but there is no justification—none whatsoever—for the IDF shooting at and killing unarmed protestors inside Gaza. Although I agree with the Minister that the fact that there is currently no peace process at all is the greatest tragedy of all, and that we must continue to strive for one with the courageous political leadership that will involve, will he not agree in return that the very least we can do in these circumstances is to tell the truth about what is going on? Had it happened anywhere else, I think the condemnation would have been unequivocal.

Alistair Burt: It is of course crucial that the truth is both uncovered and spoken about. Any breach of international humanitarian law and any use of live fire in circumstances that would breach it would be wrong. I noticed the right hon. Gentleman's statement yesterday. It is the United Kingdom's job to support an examination of what happened, partly to expose it but partly to remind people of the importance of bringing these circumstances to an end.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Even the staunchest friend of Israel would recognise that yesterday's bloodshed was just appalling and deeply, deeply distressing, but when there is such a highly orchestrated and deliberate attempt by the Hamas regime to use legitimate protests as a cover for trying to breach the security zone and bring chaos and bloodshed on to Israeli soil, what role does my right hon. Friend see for the international community in putting pressure on the Hamas leadership to pull back from this really dangerous activity?

Alistair Burt: It is difficult. As we know, Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation, but the efforts being made in the Palestinian body to try to seek a reconciliation, which can come only with the Palestinian Authority on Quartet terms, where violence has been renounced, are part of that process. We certainly urge that that process continues and succeeds but, where there is clear evidence of extremism that has caused people's deaths, that must be brought out and condemned.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Similarly to what I said to the Minister, if colleagues could be brief, that would help. There is no obligation to deliver a statement. What is really required is a pithy question, and I think we will get one from Layla Moran.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As you know, Mr Speaker, I am the first MP of Palestinian descent. Where it not for the Nakba—we are commemorating 70 years of that today—perhaps I would not be here, so it would be remiss of me not to press the Government. I absolutely agree that Hamas is partly responsible for this situation, and in between Hamas and a very extreme Israeli Prime Minister, we have the blood of children. Does the Minister not agree, however, that the two sides are not meeting as equals, at whatever peace process table, and that now is the moment to give recognition to the Palestinians, so that we have hope, because that is also what has died this week?

Alistair Burt: I hear what the hon. Lady says and recognise her background and achievement in being here. The recognition of a Palestinian state remains open to the United Kingdom, at a time when it is best designed to serve the cause of peace. That will remain the UK's position.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why are those of us who have had the chilling experience of entering and leaving the prison camp that is Gaza never really surprised, no matter how grotesque the violence gets?

Alistair Burt: I do not think we are ever really surprised because the seeds of the conflict are so deep and at times there seems to be little attention given to dealing with them rather than using them in various ways. The inevitable consequence of not dealing effectively with the issues on all sides is what we saw yesterday.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The respected Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem said yesterday that the use of live fire against demonstrators in Gaza “evinces appalling indifference towards human life on the part of senior Israeli government and military officials.” If Israeli human rights defenders can see that, is not the White House's response, absolving Israel of all responsibility for the deaths, as reprehensible as it is short-sighted for peace? Is it really too much to expect our Government to speak with the same clarity as Israeli human rights defenders?

Alistair Burt: I respect B'Tselem. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we share the concerns about the use of live fire. This is an issue on which we are not in agreement with the views of the United States of America.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): We can all agree that an effective peace process is vital if we are to avoid tragedies of the kind that occurred yesterday. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that Hamas is a serious roadblock to a peace process, and condemn it for that?

Alistair Burt: It is clear from the allegations and evidence that there is likely to have been extremist exploitation of the perfectly proper march. It is for that reason that an independent investigation must cover all aspects. Those who have contributed to extremism and deaths do indeed need condemnation.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does the Minister not agree that the large-scale use of live fire against people who are unarmed should be strongly condemned, wherever it happens in the world and no matter what organisations might try to influence or organise protests? At a time when sober, serious foreign policy is urgently needed in the middle east and the US's reckless and irresponsible embassy move means that it is not providing it, does the Minister...
agree that EU Governments should be working closely together urgently to pressurise the Israeli Government to change tack?

Alistair Burt: I fully understand the hon. Lady’s position and have already indicated our concern about the use of live fire, which has to be investigated further. On the US position, we will do all we can. The US will remain a central part of what needs to happen in Israel, but it does need to give a greater sense of understanding of some of the underlying issues than on occasions its statements suggest. We will work with our partners because they should be part of the solution. Yesterday’s timing and yesterday’s event—that split-screen—will be one of the images of 2018. We must make sure that we use what happened yesterday as a cause for peace, not as a further cause for confrontation.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The situation in Gaza has been desperate and deteriorating for decades. It is 14 years since British citizen Tom Hurndall received the kind of treatment that is now being meted out to hundreds if not thousands of Palestinians on the border, protesting through the rage and despair that they feel after all this time. Given that it is now some years since William Hague said that the two-state solution was in the last-chance saloon, if we simply repeat platitudes about the need for a two-state solution, are we not limiting our ability to think really constructively about how we are to end this tragedy for both the Palestinians and the Israelis?

Alistair Burt: Continuing on from what was said by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and by my hon. Friend, there is room for engagement in this situation and in the imaginative opportunities for the future by more than just the United States. These are not platitudes. The fundamentals remain the same: how do we guarantee the existence and the security of the state of Israel, which is fundamental, and yet provide justice for the Palestinians in relation to all that has happened? That is what needs to be worked on, and we will dedicate our efforts to that.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The death toll on the Gazan border was truly terrible, and the violence must stop, but Hamas must end its cynical exploitation of the peace process and the Israeli defence forces must show restraint and do all they can to minimise civilian casualties. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me—I think that he does—that the lack of a peace process is at the heart of this problem and that unless we commit to redoubling our efforts to achieve a two-state solution, which is the only lasting path to peace, we will see further violence?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Lady is right. We will redouble our efforts, but we cannot want peace more than the people involved. It will need leadership in the region itself to demonstrate the determination to see the answer that we need, but she can be sure that we will do all we can to bend our efforts in that direction.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I draw the Minister back to his response to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) when he referred to the independent investigation? Does he think that that investigation could look seriously at the role of Hamas, a proscribed terror organisation, in this process and get access to the people that it needs? How does he think that it could come to a reasonable independent conclusion that we all want to see in this House?

Alistair Burt: The short answer to my right hon. Friend is that we do not know. That is important in setting out the terms of an investigation. Again, we can all see the opportunity in this investigation. There will be people calling for it to come up with different answers right from the very beginning, but we can approach it only on the basis of honesty—if wanting to find out what happened and all parts of it. Just because it might be difficult to investigate the circumstances surrounding Hamas is no reason for its involvement not to be included.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): At times such as this it is easy to despair and say that there is no solution, but surely what is needed by the Palestinians captured by the Hamas leadership in Gaza, and by the Israelis captured by the same despairing political system, is lasting peace, and that can come about only if there is a reactivation of the plan put forward in 2002 by Saudi Arabia and adopted by the Arab League. What are our Government doing to get a regional peace initiative?

Alistair Burt: There is much in what was just said by the long-standing and respected member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Arab peace initiative remains a strong base as a possibility for the future. It is determination and urgency that we have to bring to this. I suspect both him and the Committee, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), may have something to say and a contribution to make in relation to this.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Hamas has a record of using innocent men, women and children as human shields to cover terrorist activity. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning Hamas and calling on it to stop sacrificing the people of Gaza?

Alistair Burt: As I have answered a number of times already, Hamas’s part in this has to be opened up. It is clear from statements already intercepted that it was prepared to use any breaches in the fence for its own purposes, and it is clearly one part of this terrible event. The questions illustrate my sense of concern about the binary view of all this. There are many parts to trying to solve and deal with this, and it is the responsibility of the United Kingdom to make that clear, but my hon. Friend was right to raise concerns about Hamas’s activity.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Having worked in Gaza for almost a year and a half as a surgeon, I am one of the few people in this Chamber who has seen the result of live ammunition and what it does to the human body. Various Members talk about breaching the fence, but most of those injured were nowhere near the fence. More than 200 children and 17 medics were injured. They were not trying to invade Israel. How will the British Government push for an inquiry, and will they understand that, while Hamas
may have manipulated people to encourage the scale of the protest, the despair that I see when I visit Gaza is the underlying cause? If we do not get a peace process, that will get worse.

Alistair Burt: We all defer to the hon. Lady’s contribution and expertise in terms of her work in Gaza and the efforts that she has made, and there is much in what she says that everyone should acknowledge and take note of. The despair and the hopelessness in Gaza are indeed prime movers in people’s concerns and in their wanting to see a change. The United Kingdom recognises that. That is why some of our efforts today at the United Nations will be in support of the UN Secretary General’s special envoy as he looks to do things in Gaza and for Gaza to seek to relieve that pressure. It is one part of the equation, and the hon. Lady was right to raise it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his calm and measured approach. What assessment has he made of the role of President Abbas in this whole terrible incident? He has been giving a substantial number of anti-Semitic statements over the past few weeks. Does he not have a role in de-escalating the position?

Alistair Burt: President Abbas has been a long-time supporter of a two-state solution and a condemner of violence. He apologised for his recent speech in Ramallah in which he made some remarks about the holocaust, and realised that it was not a contribution to the understanding and peace that was necessary. We continue to see President Abbas as a voice for peace in the region and we need to work with him and others, but greater leadership needs to be shown all round, on both sides of the equation, to get the answers that we need.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Under what criteria do we continue to sell arms to the Israelis?

Alistair Burt: Under the same criteria as we do to everyone else. We recognise that Israel has many threats against it and the sale of arms is covered by the same rigorous criteria as apply to all other arms sales, and that will continue.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The New York Times has published photographs and evidence that some 30,000 to 50,000 people in Gaza have been at the border fence, and that, I believe, is larger than the size of the standing Israeli army, so, sadly, I can understand how these events have happened, tragic as they are. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that taking a unilateral view that it is only Israel to blame merely encourages Hamas to do worse?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right: to take a binary view on this issue without any regard to any other side is not right. The only way of getting to the truth of it and revealing who has been most responsible is to understand that there is more than one party involved. Even so, just dealing with this incident in itself will not be sufficient, which is why we must remain fixed on the need for a political process, a better future for Gaza and a solution to the politics that have given rise to this.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Israel has a right both to exist and to defend itself, and there is little doubt that Hamas has been involved in organising, encouraging and exploiting confrontation in Gaza, but it cannot be right to use live ammunition to kill more than 50 protesters and to injure many others. Does the Minister of State agree that those actions will not only cause dismay to Israel’s many friends in this country and around the world, but breed further resentment and hatred in the families of those killed who are grieving today? We should not overestimate the UK’s influence in these events, but will the Government at least use their voice to encourage conciliation and dialogue, and to avoid a repeat of the recent appalling events?

Alistair Burt: There is a great deal of sense in what the right hon. Gentleman says. I said in the conclusion of my response to the urgent question that the shadows of yesterday will be long—in the deaths and injuries—as they are every time there is a confrontation in which lives are lost, wherever that may be, in relation to this long-running issue. That is why it is necessary to express concern about the use of live fire and find out more about what happened yesterday. Above all, the situation must be used not simply as an opportunity for one side to blame the other, but as an opportunity to try to end these circumstances forever.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): May I commend the Minister on his statement following yesterday’s awful events and associate myself with his comments? Will he confirm whether the Government consider the use of mortars, explosive-lined tyres, Molotov cocktails, flaming kites painted with swastikas, meat cleavers and other weapons to constitute a peaceful protest?

Alistair Burt: No. Again, people have seen what they have seen in relation to parts of the protest. Let me be straight about the situation as far as I can see it. It is as wrong to say that everyone who took part in the demonstration is a terrorist as it is to say that everything was perfectly peaceful. We know that the truth lies in between. Of course, those who went to a protest armed and ready for confrontation may have been playing a part in raising the temperature, with some of the results that we saw yesterday. It is so important to examine the circumstances and call to account all those who may have had any responsibility to ensure that these deaths and injuries do not happen again.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Yesterday’s abhorrent massacre was a fire fuelled by a narcissistic American President who is content to watch the world burn. Never have I felt so strongly that he should not be allowed the visit the UK. If the planned trip goes ahead, I for one shall be joining the tens of thousands of people who will line the streets in protest. I implore the Government to cancel his visit.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady makes her points very strongly. It is not the view of the United Kingdom that the best way in which to engage with any country, particularly an important power and friend such as the United States, is in the manner that she suggests.
Engagement, explanation and working together are the best ways in which to deal with the concerns that we have and the areas where we differ on policy.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Too many people in this place have already made up their minds about who the guilty party is in this situation, so may I praise the Minister for his balanced view from the Dispatch Box? He is absolutely right that this is not a binary issue, but I urge him to continue—as I think he has done already—to differentiate between protestors and those who have used children as shields, and have gone to the border with the sole intention of breaching it to kill innocent civilians.

Alistair Burt: Yes, I do my best to make that distinction. But some of the allegations have to be fully tested until we find out more about what happened. I stand by my remarks that the best way in which to deal with yesterday’s tragedy is to do our best for the victims of killing or wounding and to look forward to a better future for Gaza and the region.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Assault rifles, sniper rifles, components for aircraft ammunition: that is just a small selection of the export licences granted last year by this Government to British firms selling to Israel. I condemn violence on all sides, but given the slaughter in Gaza, the condemnation from across this House and the outrage in the international community, how on earth can this Government continue to allow the arms trade to profit from mass murder by the criminal Israeli Government? There is one practical thing that the Government could do to put pressure on the Israeli Government: end the arms trade.

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom continues to operate a very strict arms regime in terms of sales. I have already mentioned the legitimate uses of arms by a country that needs to defend itself. Any allegations of breaches are of course part of our consideration on future sales and the like, as the hon. Lady knows well.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to take this measured tone. As he alluded to, the ratcheting up of the situation over many years has made no small contribution to the tone. As he alluded to, the ratcheting up of the situation to manipulate political opinion and that the role of the international community should be to identify partners for peace so that we can get the peace process back on track?

Alistair Burt: I hope that I have tried to demonstrate that the United Kingdom takes the path that my hon. Friend would suggest is the appropriate one to deal with the tragedies of yesterday and to look towards a better future.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Israel rightly uses security as a reason to continue the blockade in Gaza. While I was over there recently, I met a mother who had just given birth to triplets, but she was to be removed from the hospital in Jerusalem where she was receiving care because she was a security risk. A woman who has just given birth is not a security risk to be removed from her children; but as soon as somebody removed my babies, I would certainly become one. What are the Government going to do to ensure that people seeking desperate healthcare outside Gaza—in Jerusalem—are able to get it?

Alistair Burt: I have two responses to the hon. Lady. First, the human circumstances that she describes take us back to comments made earlier by colleagues on both sides of the House about the depth of resentment built up over a lengthy period due to the way in which all this has been handled. We have talked about the ability of politics to have divided and separated people and build them into situations where they cannot see one another as anything but an enemy. That is at the root and heart of this issue. Secondly, on the specific aspect of the hon. Lady’s question, we do raise with the Israeli authorities the subject of movement for medical help, but it should also be recognised that there are many occasions when that help is given. That is an undisclosed part of the relationship between the two.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What conversations has the Minister had with his counterparts in the Egyptian Government, who have great influence...
both through having a dialogue with Hamas and through partnering with the Israelis regarding the Gaza military blockade?

Alistair Burt: That is a very good question. Personally, I have not had many conversations with the Egyptian Government recently, but I know that our representatives in Cairo do. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Cairo has an important role to play. It has played an important role in dealing with terrorism in the Sinai and relationships with Israel, and in opening up to some degree what is happening in Gaza and helping with the reconciliation process. Egypt is a valuable partner in this push for peace and a better future in the region.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The widespread public distress from Israeli human rights organisations such as B'Tselem reflects the fact that there is deep concern and distress about these horrendous deaths across the spectrum, even given the conduct of Hamas. But the truth is that this is not the first time that such a thing has happened at the Gaza border in recent weeks. The international community knew that the embassy move would be a flashpoint. Like Mr Speaker, I have great faith in the Minister’s persuasive powers, so will he tell us what he did before this week to talk to the Israelis about how they managed peaceful protests, which he has recognised the Palestinians have a right to undertake, and what will he do differently as a result of yesterday?

Alistair Burt: Since the protests were planned, I have been in contact with his excellency the ambassador to the state of Israel here and with my counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister Hotovely, in Israel. We have discussed the background to the protests. On all occasions, I have urged restraint in a likely reaction to those who would challenge the border. In recent times, tactics may have changed in relation to trying to use more tear gas to move people away from the border, but these are matters for the state of Israel. Since these situations were contemplated, we have been in regular contact with the state of Israel about how it would meet the challenges that it was likely to see at the border.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): We have seen Hamas officials actively encouraging protestors to be martyrs and bussing rioters to the border for them to sling Molotov cocktails and fireballs across it and to tear down fencing. Does the Minister share my concern that Hamas is using civilians as a cover to incite violence, and will he join me in calling on Hamas to abide by the Quartet’s principles of non-violence?

Alistair Burt: I think I have used this quote before. In one of Seán O’Casey’s plays about Ireland, a young man said to his mother that he was prepared to die for Ireland, and the mother said, “Everybody is prepared to die for their countries—when are people prepared to live for their countries?” The horror whereby people might be prepared to encourage more bloodshed to demonstrate a political point is very real in the area. If there is anything we can do, we have to break into that, as others have done in other areas of conflict.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Yesterday’s needless bloodshed, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the ongoing abuse of Palestinian human rights demonstrate that Hamas has no better friend, or indeed recruiting sergeant, than the current Israeli Government. Given the realignment of US policy exemplified by its embassy move, is it not time for all friends of Israel, including this Government, to say plainly to the Israeli Government that their actions undermine their own peace and security and that, as B’Tselem’s executive director argued only yesterday, defending the border is not a licence to kill?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman makes his own points. I can assure him that we speak regularly and plainly to the Government of the state of Israel, but we also make the point that ultimately a state’s security is not just about its weaponry and walls; it is about the relationship with its neighbours and others. If a peace process is to get anywhere, that has to be an essential part of the future as well as weaponry and confrontation.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The loss of innocent life is completely unacceptable. We have talked about the US moving its embassy to Jerusalem, but the other key impediment to peace in the middle east is the expansion of the illegal settlements by the Israeli Government. What is the United Kingdom’s position on this matter?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Our position is very clear and has been restated. We oppose the settlement process, which we regard as one of the obstacles to peace in the area, and challenge what we consider to be illegal demolitions. Again, only an overall agreement will deal with those issues as part of the long-standing difficulties between the Palestinians and the state of Israel.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): We are on a very dangerous path when even some respected Palestinian figures are moving away from the idea of a two-state solution towards a struggle for one-state control. Does the Minister not accept that this is exactly why we should be moving swiftly towards recognising the Palestinian state while there is still one to recognise?

Alistair Burt: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, which has been made many times before. I recognise the force of it. However, recognition of itself would not change anything on the ground. It remains for the United Kingdom to make a judgment about that, as I indicated earlier, but we will have to pursue other paths as well. Her point about moving away from a two-state solution is a reminder of the danger that if we cannot find a conclusion to this, others will find it for us, and it will not be good.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The violence at the border in Gaza is deplorable, but the demonstrations were deliberately provocative. While imploring the Israeli Government to show restraint in their actions, does the Minister agree that the Palestinian Authority now need to show calm and courageous leadership to do all they can to help and encourage the people of Gaza to turn away from the evil and manipulative Hamas and back to peace? [Interruption.]
**Alistair Burt:** My hon. Friend deserves to be heard. The Palestinian Authority have been in regular contact with Hamas. I think that the Palestinian Authority share the despair of many others in relation to the circumstances in Gaza. They have recently made attempts to seek a new political solution in Gaza that will lead to a unified authority that can only be accepted by people outside on the terms of the Quartet. We continue to see members of the Palestinian Authority as those who, if they keep driving for that and driving for peace, will be proper partners in the process.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I recall that in this House on 15 January 2009, the then Member for Manchester, Gorton, Gerald Kaufman, said:

“My grandmother was ill in bed when the Nazis came to her home town of Staszow. A German soldier shot her...in her bed.”

He continued:

“My grandmother did not die to provide cover for Israeli soldiers murdering...grandmothers in Gaza.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 407.]

That should apply to anybody else—whether 58 or 2,000 more. Will the UK Government borrow from the late Gerald Kaufman’s language, and state that Palestinian lives are as precious as Israeli lives and that those who reportedly cheered yesterday in Israel, “Burn them, shoot them, kill them,” are beyond contempt?

**Alistair Burt:** All lives are indeed sacred. That anyone, in any circumstances, should cheer the results of actions in which people lose their lives means that they are losing a connection to something very valuable. It is the duty of this House, notwithstanding the anger and upset that we often feel, to try to find a way through. The hon. Gentleman’s concern that all lives should be held in the same regard is absolutely correct.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): Bearing in mind that the two-state solution is the only one on the table, who does my right hon. Friend reckon should be the honest broker to take this forward?

**Alistair Burt:** Well, I wish there was more on the table than there currently is. There is an urgent need for that process to be relinked. We await hearing from the US envoys. I know from personal experience that they have been working extremely hard on this, but they have to come up with something that is realistic and just and that provides the possibility of working on both sides, not something that will be too one-sided.

As for honest brokers, as I indicated earlier, the United States position has probably changed in relation to some of the decisions made recently, but it is very clear that it remains an important partner. During the recent visit of Vice-President Pence to the region, and also new Secretary of State Pompeo, we urged that there should be meetings with the Palestinian authorities, and we will continue to urge that. But others will, I hope, have a role to play when proposals come forward.

**Shabana Mahmood** (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The fate of the people of Gaza is to be condemned to live in an open-air prison camp and to be shot dead when they protest and remind the world of their despair. The actions of the Israeli military yesterday are indefensible on any measure. So may I press the Minister to agree that now really is the time to take the one measure that we have at our disposal to send a message to the Israeli Government: formally and immediately to recognise the state of Palestine? It may not change realities on the ground, but it would send a message. We have so few options; he should take this one, and take it now.

**Alistair Burt:** I hear what the hon. Lady says, and I have answered the point before. Certainly, looking at what can be done in the circumstances, we are all searching for something new, but that starts from the base of some of the comments made today. We have to find leaders who are prepared to do what Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Rabin did many years ago—to reach out to others and overcome the extremists on their own side. The United Kingdom has to be clear about support for that process and look at any measure that will assist in it.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I just gently observe what will be evident to everybody because you can see the Chamber: all remaining would-be contributors are situated on the Opposition Benches. I would like to accommodate colleagues. May I appeal to people who have pre-prepared scripts that they feel the nation must hear to consider possibly—just possibly—reducing or, dare I say it, even abandoning them and just asking the question? It is up to you, colleagues, but if you ask long questions, you do so in the certain knowledge that you are reducing the chances of one of your colleagues, with whom you normally feel great solidarity, having the opportunity to contribute. I am sure that you would not want to do that because it would be uncomradely, and none of you is going to behave in an uncomradely manner.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Like me, many of my constituents want to know why the British Government refuse to condemn unequivocally the shooting dead of unarmed civilians. Would the Minister care to enlighten us?

**Alistair Burt:** I made it very clear in the statement yesterday, as I have today, that we have great concern about the extensive use of live fire. As I said earlier, if there is evidence of a breach of international humanitarian law in the deaths, that should indeed be condemned, but we need to find out more, and that is why we support an independent investigation.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): The Minister speaks of balance, but no balance has been expressed by the US Administration, who have rightly condemned Hamas but said nothing about the carnage unleashed on civilians by the vastly superior IDF. The Minister has said that the UK disagrees with the United States Government’s position, but will he undertake to convey to them urgently the fact that their failure to be unequivocal and make absolutely clear that the level of violence was unacceptable will simply delay any political solution to this crisis?

**Alistair Burt:** Certainly in our conversations with the United States, particularly when we have differences of policy, we indicate why we differ and why we feel in
particular circumstances, whether it is in relation to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or this, that their stated objectives may not be achieved by their policy. That is a part of the discussion that we will continue to have.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): In this utterly depressing and heartbreaking situation, in the centenary year of the Balfour declaration, will the British Government undertake to ensure that both halves of that statement are fulfilled—that as well as protecting Israel’s right to exist, we defend the right of the Palestinian people to have exactly the same rights and international status as Israelis?

Alistair Burt: The Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made it clear at the time of the commemoration of Balfour that there were indeed two parts to that declaration, and the second remained unfinished business. That is still the view of the United Kingdom Government.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Israeli Government have a moral duty to minimise civilian casualties in defence of their borders. The loss of life yesterday was a horrendous tragedy, but to be clear, Hamas members are not freedom fighters: it is a terrorist organisation sponsored by Iran and using civilians as a human shield. Does the Minister agree that a new reality whereby Iran is in Syria, Hezbollah runs Lebanon and Hamas controls Gaza means that Israel faces grave security concerns? Is it not time for the United States and the Arab League countries to show responsible leadership on an equal basis and jointly sponsor a new political dialogue aimed at rebuilding trust and a new peace process between Israelis and Palestinians?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman understands this situation extremely well, having held my post in the past, and knows the risks in the area. He is right to explain the risks that Israel feels all around it. He is also right to suggest that, unless we get something new into the situation to understand it and bring the confrontation to an end, we will not see progress. Whether it is led by just the United States or others, it is essential that we put something new into the process, otherwise we will be back here again.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues are delightfully incorrigible. A number are now developing a little technique of signalling to me that they intend to be very short, therefore trying to persuade me to call them earlier than some other colleague.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Since 30 March, 97 Palestinians have been killed and more than 12,000 injured. I have heard words of concern expressed by the Minister, whom I greatly admire, but I implore him to use the word “condemn” and stop the trend of those in the Foreign Office to be mealy-mouthed when these killings happen. I implore our Government to take a leadership role and condemn the attacks.

Alistair Burt: There is much to condemn all round. We have heard from colleagues on both sides of the House about activities that are rightly to be condemned. As I indicated earlier, deaths that have resulted from breaches of international humanitarian law, whether perpetrated by the IDF or anyone else, would rightly be condemned.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): What is the UK doing at the Security Council to ensure that an independent inquiry happens, and where is the Foreign Secretary?

Alistair Burt: The Foreign Secretary is on his way this afternoon to see the Foreign Minister of Iran about matters we discussed earlier, and he was already committed to work after Foreign Office questions. As far as the United Nations is concerned, there will be a meeting later on today. We intend that work progresses on some form of independent inquiry, notwithstanding the difficulties that have been put forward, but I think there is widespread recognition around the world that we must get something in place that will enable some of these questions to be answered and act as a springboard to something rather better in the future.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Trump peace plan is said to be in its final stages and ready to be published following the disastrous move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. Will the Minister promise that this Government will not slavishly follow the policy of the United States but look to bolster an alternative with the international community?

Alistair Burt: I think we have proved relatively recently that we are not a slavish devotee of US foreign policy. There have been other occasions when we have clearly differed. We will make a judgment on what comes forward in relation to a possible peace proposal along the lines that I have indicated earlier. It has to be workable. It has to have the opportunity of bringing in those who would support it from neighbouring Arab states and others. There clearly has to be an element of justice in it. It has to secure Israel’s interests as well. We will make our own judgment on it, but we will work with partners to see that it provides the basis of success. I made the point earlier about urgency—we cannot just kick the can down the road further, because we all see what happens.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): If there was proof that UK arms exports were being used by the IDF at the Gaza border, would the Minister feel it was right for the UK Government to suspend those export licences?

Alistair Burt: If that was proved, it would be likely to add to the element of risk that is considered when an arms sale is contemplated. It is a category that would have to be taken into account when deciding whether further sales could be given. It is a big “if”, but it is already in our very rigorous arms export criteria to make sure that, if such circumstances come about, that is part of the process of considering whether further sales should be allowed.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We have been issuing stern condemnations of Israeli behaviour for decades, and all the while, the occupation has become more entrenched, illegal settlements have mushroomed...
and Palestinians have less land, rights and freedoms than ever before. Surely it is time now to move from empty words to tangible actions, starting by banning the trade from illegally occupied territories. The trade and products of businesses in the illegal territories should be banned from the European Union, and the British Government should take the lead on making that happen.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but that is not a view that the United Kingdom takes. We are not part of the boycott, divestment and sanctions process. We believe in giving consumers the choice, and that is not a road down which we are going to go.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The South African Government have recalled their ambassador to Israel. The Irish Government have summoned the Israeli ambassador to Dublin. Are the British Government considering either diplomatic route?

Alistair Burt: I am not aware of a formal calling in, but we are in regular contact with both the Government of the state of Israel and the ambassador here, and that will remain the case.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Government’s failure to condemn the actions of the Israeli Government and the reckless, inflammatory behaviour of the Trump Administration shames this country, but even more shameful is the equivocation about arms sales to Israel. Last year, this Government approved £216 million-worth of arms export licences to Israel, and they do no checks on how those weapons are used. Given the scenes that we have witnessed in recent days of children being gunned down, how on earth can the Minister stand before the House and continue to justify those arms sales to Israel?

Alistair Burt: If the hon. Lady wants to make a link between the two, she will need to prove her allegations. We have no evidence to suggest that there is any link. On the checks, before an arms sale is considered, it has to go through the criteria, which consider the possibility of the risk of use in conflict. That work is done and that will continue to be done. That is the way in which we consider whether there is a degree of risk. If she wants to make an allegation that British weapons are particularly used, she may do so and of course that will be considered. We have no evidence to suggest that that is the case.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Minister said earlier that he did not know whether British-supplied arms were used in the massacre yesterday because it is not the policy of his Government to inquire about what happens to them after they are sold and the checks take place before sale. Will he now make it his policy to find out whether arms supplied in this country were used for the mass slaughter of unarmed protesters in the violence yesterday?

Alistair Burt: What I said earlier is that we have no evidence to suggest that they were. I also said that all the extant arms sales licences in relation to Israel that are in process would be checked from the start of the protests in order to cover that issue. Of course, should any evidence come forward, we would be extremely concerned. We do not have a policy of checking all the end uses because it is not possible to verify, but consideration of where arms might be used is a part of the criteria in supplying them in the first place. Those are the checks that are made, but of course I am extremely concerned. Should there be any serious allegation and any evidence, of course that would be important to our criteria and to the Commons Committee that looks into that.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Minister is taking a calm and measured approach in his conversations with the Israeli Government, which is right, but the situation on the border is urgent, so may I ask him whether he is prepared to convey, in the strongest possible terms, a sense of the duty that the Israeli Government hold to tell their soldiers to show restraint, particularly in relation to the use of live ammunition?

Alistair Burt: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s question. In our contact with Israel up to now, we have been very clear in relation to that. The IDF has itself said what it considers to be its rules of engagement and it is a matter for the IDF, but we have persistently—right from the beginning of the risk of the sort of confrontations we saw yesterday—used the term “to use restraint”. We mean it and we know what we mean, and we engage very closely with the Israeli Government in relation to what they have been doing.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): There has been much talk today of the terrorism on the Gaza side of the border fence, but if you kill 58 and injure 2,000 unarmed civilians, including children, is not that an act of terrorism and, if it is, should we not proscribe the IDF as a terrorist organisation?

Alistair Burt: I think the hon. Gentleman is probably taking himself into extremely dangerous and serious waters. It is because of allegations like that that we need an independent inquiry to find out what has happened, but I do not share the view of the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Due in no small part to the myopic and reckless policies of President Trump in moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, it is appalling and very saddening to see the slaughter of unarmed civilian protesters in Gaza. Whether it is protesters being shot in the back or children shot while standing hundreds of metres from the border fence, the Israeli authorities are clearly killing and maiming those who pose no threat to them. If this was Iran, the Government would utterly condemn it, so will the Minister condemn the Israeli authorities today?

Alistair Burt: I repeat the comments that I made earlier: we are extremely concerned about the use of live fire and the implications behind that, and about the deaths and injuries caused. That is why the United Kingdom supports an independent investigative inquiry into what has happened.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I add my voice to the condemnation of the use of lethal force by the IDF against predominantly unarmed
civilians. I do share concerns about the role of Hamas in this. I have huge regard for the Minister, but he has been very hazy on the details of what he is specifically doing and what the Government are specifically doing to restart the peace process. He mentioned leadership, which is absolutely key, and there is too little of it, so will he in the next two weeks come back to this House with a statement on what he is specifically going to do?

Alistair Burt: I will do my best to help the hon. Lady now. The situation is that, by and large, the work of the envoys appointed by the United States President holds the keys to the middle east peace process, and all parties involved are waiting for those to come forward. Those envoys have been engaged with Governments in the region and with various parties. It is really urgent that they come forward. Until they do, none of us has a clear sight as to what those are. They have held them very close, but they have also made it clear that, when they are ready to announce something, others will be engaged. The test then will be what exactly it is, but as I said in answer to the question from the hon. Member for Derby North (Lab), there are areas where we continue to have concerns, whether in relation to settlements or anything else. All I can do is make it very clear to the House and to the hon. Gentleman that we repeat these concerns—we are very direct—and, again, there will be no resolution to this if each side digs in and claims that it is already doing everything it can. There are fundamentals relating to the security of the state of Israel that it will never compromise, but we think that ensuring a better relationship with its neighbours and taking some of the actions urged on it by others is a better way to look to its future defence than the direction it sometimes takes.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Israeli Government seem to get away with a level of disproportionate violence that is not tolerated elsewhere and they continue to ignore multiple United Nations resolutions, so can the Minister tell us specifically what he can say to the Israeli Government to persuade them to play by the international rules that the rest of us seek to apply?

Alistair Burt: Israel makes it very clear that it does seek to abide by international rules-based decisions, but there are areas where we continue to have concerns, whether in relation to settlements or anything else. All I can do is make it very clear to the House and to the hon. Gentleman that we repeat these concerns—we are very direct—and, again, there will be no resolution to this if each side digs in and claims that it is already doing everything it can. There are fundamentals relating to the security of the state of Israel that it will never compromise, but we think that ensuring a better relationship with its neighbours and taking some of the actions urged on it by others is a better way to look to its future defence than the direction it sometimes takes.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Fifty-eight Palestinians were murdered yesterday, six of them children, one of whom was eight months old. Does the Minister really believe that the Israeli response was proportionate to the threat or, coming in this historic week, should we see it as a deliberate attempt to undermine the peace process?

Alistair Burt: I do not believe that this is a deliberate attempt to undermine the peace process. The Israeli authorities did not start these protests, the marches or anything like that. It is clear from the reaction around the world to the events of yesterday that Israel has a lot of questions to answer in relation to what happened. I cannot therefore see any sensible connection between the two, but it is absolutely true, as I have said, that this is an area of deep concern for all of us.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Following the massacre of unarmed Palestinians by Netanyahu’s apartheid regime, is it not time to support the boycott, disinvestment and sanctions campaign until such time as Israel complies with its obligations under international law? If that is a step too far, will the Minister at least press for a review of the arms export licence criteria, because they are clearly not satisfactory if they allow us to continue selling arms to Israel, given the appalling events that we witnessed yesterday?

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Is not the killing of unarmed child protesters enough for the Minister and the Government finally to work with others not just to see the end of the blockade of Gaza and stop the illegal occupation of Palestinian land, but to suspend arms sales to Israel and recognise the state of Palestine?

Alistair Burt: As I have said in response to each of those questions before, the circumstances that we saw yesterday were the culmination of many different things. But of course the death of any child in such circumstances must be investigated to find out how a child might be in such a situation. Each and every death and wounding has to be the subject of inquiry and investigation if we are to find out some of the facts behind it, but again, we must move on to a better resolution to these circumstances.
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that recent events have coincided with the clamping down on and shrinking of the space for criticism of Israel, and that—more specifically—Israel’s human rights record? Will he condemn the deportation of Human Rights Watch workers from Israel?

Alistair Burt: The word “condemn” is easy to use; the issue is about trying to get some practicalities out of the situation. Israel’s immigration policy is a matter for itself as ours is for us, but we have already drawn attention to the fact that Israel’s use of it in some circumstances—in respect of human rights defenders and those with different political views—does not make for the opening up of political space. Some time ago, I gave a clear answer to a question about whether the United Kingdom would be dissuaded from talking to B’Tselem, Peace Now and one or two other such organisations. The answer is absolutely not.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We cannot talk about a peaceful solution while unarmed protesters are killed in search of it. The situation is untenable and intolerable. Does the Minister agree that we need a radical rethink in our approach to the conflict, and that we could start by recognising Palestine as a state, so that both Israel and Palestine are on the same level?

Alistair Burt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that whatever has been considered until now is not achieving the end objective. We hope for more from the peace process; if that does not come, we will have to think of more radical, in the hon. Gentleman’s word, suggestions. The same basics of protection and security for the existence of the state of Israel, together with justice for a Palestinian state, have to remain the bulwarks of what the international community can take forward, but must ultimately be agreed by the parties themselves.

Mr Speaker: I express the confident hope that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), a legendary campaigner, will not require more than 20 words.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Palestinians have a right to nationhood and Israel has a right to security, but does the Minister not recognise the wise words of the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames)? Now is not the time for a “limp response” from our Government but the time to be unequivocal: there can be no justification for a thousand people being shot and no justification for the intrusiveness of the President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister of Israel, who are a fundamental obstacle on the road to peace.

Mr Speaker: I think the words were grouped.

Alistair Burt: The circumstances of yesterday’s killing and wounding of protesters were shocking and tragic, and that is why we need an investigation into all those circumstances. Beyond that, we have to find ways to bring these confrontations to an end. That will take a long political process in which the United Kingdom must be engaged. That is why it must be very clear that it needs to keep up its contact with both sides to make sure that we do not fall behind the binary lines being set up by many to prevent contact from one to the other. We need to make sure that we can keep channels of communication open between those who ultimately have to make decisions.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Consecutive Foreign Secretaries have stated that the building of illegal settlements is narrowing the window of opportunity for a two-state solution. What are the UK Government doing at the United Nations to make sure that the UN resolutions are abided by?

Alistair Burt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we support resolutions in the terms that he mentions, and we support those such as the Norwegian Refugee Council who provide legal support to those who will take to the Israeli Supreme Court actions against such illegal demolitions. We provide support in a practical way—we support the UN resolutions as well as continuing to make it clear that the settlement process is one of the obstacles to peace in the area.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): How does it help the cause of moderate voices in Gaza and elsewhere in Palestine when they look to one of the supposedly great diplomatic powers on earth—the United Kingdom—and see a complete refusal to recognise the evil done to people yesterday? How will that help them to persuade the Palestinian people that one day they will be able to trust the United Kingdom as an impartial ally to build a peace process?

Alistair Burt: Nothing that I have said today should give those people any such thought. The suggestion of evil has come from many quarters in respect of those who have put protesters in the way of harm or those who might have breached international humanitarian law. Our condemnation is perfectly clear.

As I said earlier, we are determined to recognise that these tragedies must not find yet another cause—another date to be remembered and another thing to take people out on marches for in the future. There will be all of that—as I said earlier, the shadow of any of these deaths or injuries will be long—but the situation has to be used as an opportunity to go for something peaceful and find a way through the confrontations rather than anything else.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): There is a deepening crisis in Gaza when it comes to medical support and equipment—including, following yesterday’s horrific attacks at the border, for amputees, including children—as well as in reconstruction and rehabilitation. What can the Minister practically do to offer more support to the people of Gaza and ensure that they get real medical support and the rehabilitation that they need?

Alistair Burt: In my role as DFID Minister, I should say that we have already been in touch with those concerned about medical supplies in Gaza. We work through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and other UN agencies. Clearly the effects of the past few weeks will have increased the pressures and concerns. I am looking urgently at whether there is even more that we can do, although we have responded to some concerns already.
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Given the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people in Gaza and the illegal occupation of the west bank, how confident is the Minister that Israel will ever allow any of the kind of investment and development he said is needed in Palestine—in Gaza, in particular?

Alistair Burt: I have some confidence in that. As I said some time ago, I recently had a meeting with the economic development adviser to the Quartet, looking at infrastructure development in Gaza, in which Israel will take a part. As we know, Israel remains concerned about the governance of Gaza, but ultimately anyone in Israel has to know that the people of Gaza cannot keep on as deprived and hopeless as they are, lacking some of the basic facilities of life. To go there, smell the sea and recognise what is happening with sanitation is dreadful. The United Kingdom will keep up its efforts to work with others and ensure that Israel recognises that it has a part to play, notwithstanding its security concerns in relation to Gaza, which are real.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister gives sincere answers at the Dispatch Box, but the reality is that demolitions and settlement expansion continue, as well as the illegal blockade of Gaza. Now there has been this unprecedented violence against unarmed protesters. As others have said, actions speak louder than words. Can the Minister explain to my concerned constituents why he does not support their call for an arms embargo on Israel?

Alistair Burt: That is simply because Israel does face defensive threats, and a complete arms embargo would not be the right response or called for. The hon. Gentleman could go through the arms export criteria with his concerned constituents and see how the House and the Government handle them, how they are challengeable in the courts and why that remains the basis for any decision made on arms exports, which are constantly reviewed.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Our Government back a two-state solution, but recognise only one of the states. Given yesterday’s shocking events, surely they could send a powerful signal, make good on the overwhelming vote in this House in 2014 and, along with 137 other nations, recognise Palestine. If the time is not right now, will it ever be?

Alistair Burt: I recognise the force of the hon. Lady’s question, as I did earlier. We have no definitive set rule on this matter. It remains open to the United Kingdom to make such a decision when we consider it is most conducive.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Israel has a right to exist and a right to defend its borders, but it has to use that right with responsibility and there is no doubt that it well and truly overstepped the mark. Was the Prime Minister given a pre-warning before the US decided to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem? If so, what was her response? If not, what does that say about our relationship with America?

Alistair Burt: I do not know the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question. If I remember rightly, if there was advance notice it was pretty short, simply because it is a sovereign decision for the United States and Israel. On the relationship, this is always a very difficult point: if the relationship is such that our views are always in line with the United States, people claim that we are a poodle of the United States. Where our views clearly differ, we are accused of losing the special relationship. The truth is that if we disagree, we disagree openly and clearly. We did not agree with this decision on the embassy, for some of the reasons we have seen and experienced.

We still feel great concern about the symbolism of the move. It means one thing in Israel and to Israelis, and something completely different to others. We were alert to that and to the sensitivity of others, and we will continue to press those in the United States. Notwithstanding its rightful support for the state of Israel, the US sometimes does things that it thinks is in support of the state of Israel when they actually might make its life rather more difficult.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Not a single Palestinian needed to be killed or maimed in the current protest. That they were was the result of the choice of munitions and tactics deployed by the Israelis. I appreciate that the Minister wants to see all sides of the issue in the longer term, but does the current crisis not demand a more robust response from the Foreign Office, which might just save some lives in the short term?

Alistair Burt: In terms of saving lives in the short term, we have continued today, as a result of yesterday’s events, to maintain our contacts with both the Israeli Government and the Palestinian authorities through our consulate in Jerusalem and through the embassy in Tel Aviv. We do not need to draw attention to the events of yesterday to say that the pleas for restraint we have made over many weeks have clearly not had the desired effect on those who might have been in a position to exercise it. It has not happened. We will continue to make them, but the evidence of the dreadful circumstances yesterday should make everyone who played a part in it pause and realise what they have done, and bring the conflict and violence to an end so that we can get a chance to get other things moving forward.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality is that even as we stand here today, the blood of innocent men, women and children continues to spill on the streets of Gaza. I join other hon. Members in condemning the attacks on civilians in the strongest possible terms. Will the Minister inform the House what steps he has taken, along with the international community, to put an immediate stop to this unlawful massacre? Why will he not accept the call from Members that now is the time to recognise the state of Palestine?

Alistair Burt: I think the power and emotion with which the hon. Gentleman speaks is shared by an awful lot of people throughout the Arab world and in many other places. The sadness is that that voice has been heard before and heard way too often. It is the Government’s job to try to make those who are responsible for the circumstances that give rise to such upset and anger realise that there may be steps they can take to make sure those circumstances do not occur again. That is what we are doing. The answer to the hon. Gentleman’s second question is that at present we do not agree with him that the time is right, but should the time come we will.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the Minister, for whom I have the greatest respect, share my outrage and sorrow that the Israeli Defence Minister, the man in charge of the Israeli snipers killing Palestinians, has declared that there are no innocents in Gaza?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s comments, which I appreciate very much. The statement she quotes is not one with which I agree. I think there have been other statements from Israeli Ministers that everyone in Gaza is a terrorist or that there is no such thing as a peaceful march. The truth is that a lot of people were taking part in the march for perfectly proper reasons: to express their concern about the despair and the hopelessness that we talked about earlier. Equally, it is true to say that there were those who knew that they could exploit it and did so. But the blanket condemnation of everyone in these circumstances does not help a proper understanding of those circumstances, and the hon. Lady is right to draw attention to such comments.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): In the festering hellhole that is Gaza, everyday life is extremely difficult. The World Health Organisation has long raised concerns about access to adequate medical care on a routine basis for Palestinians living in Gaza. What assurances can the Minister give to the 3,000 victims injured yesterday that they will be supported with proper medical care?

Alistair Burt: As I indicated earlier, we take such concerns extremely seriously, and they are one of the issues we raise. If we want a normalisation of relations, and if we want to decrease the sense of bitterness and upset, ordinary humanitarian considerations have to be a prime concern. We will continue to raise these issues and work very closely with UNRWA and the WHO. We recognise that there are particular pressures at the moment, but joint and combined work between Israel and those in Gaza might help to break down some barriers. We will do all that we can to support it.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Minister says that recognising the state of Palestine will not change the facts on the ground, but he must accept that the facts on the ground are changing now because hope is bleeding to death. He says he is waiting for the right moment. If he goes ahead with the appalling President Trump’s ill-advised visit to this country, that is the moment at which we should say to the President and to the world: we recognise the state of Palestine.

Alistair Burt: I will hear many suggestions for when the right time to recognise the state of Palestine might be, and there are many reasons why that might be connected with other things. All I can do is assure the right hon. Gentleman that the decision to make a declaration will remain ours, independent and based on the best consideration we can give it. Tempting though particular offers may be, we have to make our own decision on that at the right time.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What fresh impetus can be given to the resettlement of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees across the middle east region who are now grandparents? That terrible situation can fuel a lot of resentment, anger and fear.

Alistair Burt: Again, the hon. Lady raises a factor that does not always get the attention it needs: those who are confined in camps around the region, hosted by states that have been supportive over time and supported by the excellent work of UNRWA. We continue to support that work, but she is right. The right of return has been a key part of the discussions between the various parties who will ultimately make the agreement in relation to the peace process. It will remain a key part of the issue, but the parties themselves must come to a solution. We support those who are in these difficult circumstances, and the sooner their position is regularised the better.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I have written to Ambassador Johnson to condemn, in the strongest terms, the provocative action by the Trump Administration in moving its embassy, which led to the depressingly predictable bloodshed on the border. Is the Minister really saying that he has not done the same?

Alistair Burt: I would not put it in the same terms as the hon. Gentleman. Just because the United Kingdom seeks to be measured in its responses, we should not make the mistake of thinking that they do not come without emotion, determination and a real concern for affecting change.

I think I have said before at the Dispatch Box that I have done this for too long. We have all been here. We have had debates for years about the future of the area. We cannot go on with this, because each time it gets worse and more difficult. We must not use tragedies to find yet more reasons to build up support for the particular position of one side or the other. Over 30 years in the House I have seen the binary nature of this dispute get worse. The people who used to reach out to each other are no longer able to. The organs that used to be able to put forward a moderate position in Israel and on the other side find it more difficult to do so. That has only given those who want to build more barriers the freedom to do so. We have to challenge all that.

In dealing with the United States, a valued partner in the region but one that does not always get it right, we are very clear and very direct. We hope that the events of the past few days will lead people to realise that this situation cannot be managed and cannot simply drift. It will not go away of its own accord. We all have a greater determination to bring it to its end. Members’ comments will be valuable in that.
Point of Order

2.20 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether there is any way for the House and the country to mark the death of Captain Robert Nairac, George Cross, who was murdered on this day 41 years ago. He was my captain in the first battalion of the Grenadier Guards, and I think it is appropriate—especially at the moment, when there is so much concern about our veterans being dragged before the courts in Northern Ireland—that we mark the lives of our brave soldiers, especially Captain Robert Nairac.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I served with Robert Nairac and it is worth reminding everybody in the House that this brave man’s body has never yet been found and no one has ever owned up to where the body was left. His family have never had the ability to grieve or to bring an end to their grieving for a man who served his country so bravely.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Gentlemen for their points of order. They have succeeded in bringing the House’s attention to the concerns that they have raised about the death of their comrade.

The ten-minute rule motion is not moved.

DATA PROTECTION BILL [LORDS]
(PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Data Protection Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 5 March 2018 (Data Protection Bill [Lords] (Programme)) and 9 May 2018 (Data Protection Bill [Lords] (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Message

(1) Any Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(2) Proceedings on that Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. —(David Rutley).

Question agreed to.

Data Protection Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

After Clause 141

DATA PROTECTION BREACHES BY NATIONAL NEWS PUBLISHERS

2.22 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees to Lords Amendment No. 62B proposed instead of the words left out of the Bill by Commons Amendment No. 62 but proposes amendments (za) to (a) to Clause (Review of processing of personal data for the purposes of journalism) inserted by Commons Amendment No. 109 and amendments (c) to (f) to the Bill in lieu of the Lords Amendment.

The House should be aware that some printed editions of today’s Order Paper do not include all the amendments that I am about to refer to.

We had a thorough and illuminating debate on the Data Protection Bill in this House just a few days ago, when we heard a range of perspectives from all sides on press regulation. This House plainly and clearly voted against the proposed Opposition amendments, and I thank all Members for their contributions and their constructive engagement.

Since that comprehensive debate, an amendment has been sent back by the other place for us to consider. The amendment would require the Government to establish a statutory inquiry into data protection breaches by national news publishers. It is essentially similar to new clause 18, which was proposed and defeated in this House last week. During the course of the Bill, we have repeatedly acted to take into account amendments made in the other place and to directly address concerns expressed by Members of this House. We have gone out of our way to offer concessions at every stage to make sure that the system of press regulation is both free and fair. On Report last week, we gave the Information Commissioner the powers that she needs so that those who flout the law are held to account for their actions.

We introduced a data protection code of practice for the press; guidance on how to seek redress, which fits with the Independent Press Standards Organisation’s new system of binding low-cost arbitration; and a review by the Information Commissioner’s Office of how the new system is working.

I listened to the entire debate in the other place yesterday, and I understand some of the concerns raised there, both from those who essentially want to reopen the Leveson inquiry and those with deep concerns about the impact of that on the sustainability of the free press. Today, I am proposing further amendments to try to strike this vital balance and ensure that in future we have a press that is both free and fair. I hope that hon. Members will agree that this action can bring matters to a close.

I am proposing five further amendments to strengthen the system. First, we will strengthen the ICO’s review. Amendments (a) and (f) give the commissioner stronger powers to compel evidence to ensure that the review that she will undertake is both robust and comprehensive.
Secondly, we will widen the ICO’s review. Amendment (za) broadens the remit to include looking at good practice in the processing of personal data for the purposes of journalism. Thirdly, we will make the review permanent. Amendment (zd) will ensure that unlike the inquiry proposed in their lordships amendment, the ICO-led review will not be a one-off, but part of the media landscape, with a review every five years thereafter.

Fourthly, we are determined that there can be no backsliding on the media’s commitment to low-cost arbitration, which we welcomed the introduction of a few weeks ago. Amendment (c) will ensure that a report on the use and effectiveness of that arbitration is laid in Parliament at least every three years and that a copy is supplied to the devolved Administrations so that they can take action in areas of devolved competence. Fifthly, amendments (d) and (e) bring all these matters automatically into force without the need for a commencement order in order to show good faith. I think that this significant set of amendments is a better approach than amendment 62B—proposed by the other place—which is unnecessary for a number of reasons.

Jan C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that amendment (c) will allow him to judge the effectiveness, personally, of the alternative dispute resolution procedures? Is he not giving himself the power to mark the press and their regulatory bodies?

Matt Hancock: No. The purpose of amendment (c) is to make sure that a report is laid on the effectiveness of that arbitration. With this set of amendments we propose that this House can continue to debate and scrutinise the effectiveness of the self-regulation of the press without requiring statutory regulation, which we seek to avoid.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Just to follow up on the question about the Secretary of State being able to examine the paperwork of the press, what happens if the Secretary of State of whatever party is not happy with what he sees?

Matt Hancock: That will be up to the Government of the day. We are trying to ensure that the welcome moves by IPSO in the last few weeks can be debated by this House and sustained. I think that the low-cost arbitration that it has brought in is good for the press and good for ordinary people who want redress from the press. I want to see it continue, and this report will consider whether it does.

Ian C. Lucas: The right hon. Gentleman has just said that it would be up to the Government of the day. The whole purpose of the Leveson process was to stop politicians having direct control of the press. To my astonishment, he seems to be proposing exactly that.

Matt Hancock: No. I do not want to see amendment 62B from the other place in the Bill precisely because I do not want to see statutory regulation of the press; I welcome the self-regulation of the press, because we want the press to be free.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): There is a slightly wider constitutional issue, which I hope the Secretary of State will get on to a minute. We passed the Bill in the House and sent it to the other place, having checked out the new clauses, and the single argument that was made by the noble Baroness was that we do not have enough of a majority, which is why the other place was justified in returning the Bill to the House. Does my right hon. Friend not think that that is a rather absurd argument to make?

Matt Hancock: I think it is very important that the elected House, having considered the question and in supporting a manifesto commitment of the party in government, should have its say. That is absolutely right. It is a very important constitutional argument, but I am also making an argument of substance. The approach that we are proposing is the right one—that we do not have statutory regulation of the process, but that we in this House can debate a report on what is happening in the press and the self-regulation of it. I think that is the best way to take this question forward.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I fully support what the Secretary of State is trying to do. Does he see a rather worrying undemocratic tendency in the other place—it does not like the result of referendums, the EU withdrawal Bill, which was a manifesto Bill, or this manifesto Bill, and now it wants to regulate the press because the press point out the errors of its ways?

Matt Hancock: I support the Salisbury convention: if something is in the party of government’s manifesto and this House passes it, the other place should be very careful about sending it back. Indeed, the Salisbury convention says it should not. I hope that the vote of the House today is respected, because we will then have considered this question twice. We have made concessions, taking on board legitimate concerns, but ultimately the House will have decided its view, having considered the question twice, so I think my right hon. Friend asks an important question.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the noble Baroness is factually wrong and that the House does have enough of a majority? It was passed in this House and it is not the business of the unelected Members of that House to tell the elected Members of this House whether they have done a good enough job.

Matt Hancock: I have a lot of sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. The best course of action now, given where we are, is to vote for the Government’s position and make the point incredibly clear.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I will not venture into this attempt to rewrite the British constitution to stop the House of Lords giving the Commons the right to consider things a further time; we will save that for another day. On the important matter of regulation, does the Secretary of State agree that the key point is that institutions such as a free press need independent regulation, as other great institutions in the country do? It might be set up by statute, but it needs to be independent. That it is set up by statute does not mean it will be run by Ministers in a politically biased fashion. That argument could be used to dismiss many other respected regulatory bodies in all kinds of areas across the country.
Matt Hancock: I welcome the fact that we have self-regulation of the press and that IPSO has been set up. Unlike when the Leveson inquiry took place, we now have an effective self-regulator that has introduced low-cost arbitration. The crucial thing about this self-regulator is that it has now committed itself to having compulsory low-cost arbitration, which it has not had until now.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Nobody in this or the other House should ever fail to stand up and question the press. We know what has happened in the past, and people should always question the press, but there is a line, and it is that line to which the Government are adhering today. I have full respect for the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and his campaign, as he knows, but there is a line, and that line should not be crossed. I hope that the Secretary of State will always challenge the press, but are we not right to hold that line, which Members of the other place they have not done?

Matt Hancock: I agree comprehensively with my hon. Friend, who set it out incredibly well. I want to take a look at the precise details of amendment 62B, because it is unnecessary. First, it promises to look into the reporting restrictions around arrests, but this work is already under way. Indeed, I have committed to working with hon. Members to get this done, but this work is already under way. Indeed, I have committed to working with hon. Members to get this done.

Matt Hancock: Secondly, it promises to look into the reporting restrictions around arrests, but this work is already under way. Indeed, I have committed to working with hon. Members to get this done, but this work is already under way. Indeed, I have committed to working with hon. Members to get this done. First, it promises to look into the reporting restrictions around arrests, but this work is already under way. Indeed, I have committed to working with hon. Members to get this done, but this work is already under way.

I fully understand the strength of feeling on the issue of press standards. I supported the original Leveson inquiry, the three substantial police investigations and the two Select Committee investigations. There has been no shortage of inquiry. I am focused instead on getting the system right for the future. The amendment is unnecessary at a time when we should be coming together to face the challenges of the future.

I am fully aware of the distress caused and of how lives have been affected by false allegations, how hacking was used to access the most intimate messages and how personal information was obtained through blagging and deception, but much has changed since the inquiry. While our press are not perfect, the culture that allowed phone hacking to become the norm has gone, and, with the newly strengthened IPSO, this country now has the most robust system of redress for press intrusion that it has ever had.

Ian C. Lucas: In his intervention, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) just talked about the importance of an independent regulator. Is it not the case, however, that IPSO is not independent? It was set up by the press and its terms of reference are those of the press; it is not an independent regulator. It is about time the Government accepted that. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Matt Hancock: No, I do not. Our proposal, which does not involve statutory regulation, is the best solution to this challenge and will ensure the separation of press and state, which is at the heart of our freedoms. It would be wrong to cross that line.

Mr Duncan Smith: This is a fundamental point. The big difference between this and the way we regulate agencies and others out there is that the latter do not in turn regulate and watch over this place. The press must be free from the idea of statute specifying how they are to be regulated. I completely agree with the Secretary of State that it is better that the press set up the process and we watch over it.

Matt Hancock: Furthermore, IPSO has now been granted powers to require front-page corrections—we saw it recently flex its muscles and use this power. When two years ago Sir Joseph Pilling concluded that IPSO largely complied with Sir Brian’s recommendations, the one major omission was compulsory arbitration. IPSO has now introduced compulsory low-cost arbitration, which the major national newspapers have signed up to, so that claims can be made for as little as £50. With the five further concessions today, we are clear that this will be the start of a tougher regime, not the conclusion.

We now have the basis of a stronger and fairer system in which everyone has accessible recourse to justice when things go wrong but in which the press are free to challenge those in power and bring them to account.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): IPSO and its so-called compulsory arbitration are wholly inadequate. The only independent redress is through the courts, but that is much weakened because, under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, no win, no fee arrangements are no longer available, so the public actually have no clear independent remedy.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman has clearly not been following the debate. IPSO’s introduction of low-cost arbitration and the guidance on how to access it will ensure a stronger system of self-regulation.

All sides in this debate agree that our press must be free to report without fear or favour, to uncover wrongdoing and to hold the powerful to account. It is now a more difficult time than ever to produce high-quality journalism that does hold power to account. It was journalists who helped to bring Stephen Lawrence’s killers to justice; it was journalists who uncovered appalling child abuse, such as in Rotherham, and gave a voice to its victims; and it was journalists who reported on horrific allegations of sexual abuse in football, which led to many more victims coming forward.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) put it last week, newspapers are under threat from online media platforms that do not employ a single journalist.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We all recognise and applaud the examples the Secretary of State has given, but they do not excuse the bad behaviour
by other sections of the press. Our concern is not with journalists who behave ethically and well at all times; it is with those journalists who do not, so could he address that point?

Matt Hancock: If that is the hon. Lady’s concern, she should vote with the Government this afternoon. She should listen to the journalist who uncovered the thousands of victims of sexual abuse in Rotherham, and who said that with statutory regulation under section 40 it would have been effectively impossible for him to do his job. We do not propose statutory regulation of the press, because we want the press to be free, but also to be able to make public stories that are sometimes uncomfortable to print.

The pressure is on the press because of new online publications. That is important, because if we as a nation lose high-quality journalism, we will lose the capability to hold the powerful to account on behalf of victims of all sorts of abuses of power. Clickbait, fake news and malicious disinformation threaten high-quality journalism. Why does this matter? Because a foundation of any successful democracy is a sound basis for democratic discourse, and that is under threat from these new forces that require urgent attention. A weaker press would mean poorer coverage of courts, of council chambers and of corruption. Why are we acting in the way in which we propose to act today? Because I believe that it will ensure that the press are fairer, while safeguarding their essential freedom. Fundamentally, the sustainability of our media underpins the sustainability of our democracy, and our efforts must be focused on that.

Let us not sleepwalk into a society in which high-quality journalism has been decimated and our democracy is damaged as a result. We all benefit—every single one of us benefits—from what a free press gives our country and our democracy, whether or not the coverage is good for us as individuals: the scrutiny, the uncovering of wrongs, and the catalyst for debate. Protecting those benefits is today’s challenge. Now is the time to look forward, not back, and to come together to build a vibrant, free and fair press that holds the powerful to account and rises to the challenges of our times.

I oppose amendment 62B, and I urge every Member in the House to do the same.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Last week, colleagues asked, “What is so special about the second part of the Leveson public inquiry?” Leveson part 2 is that rare thing: an inquiry into a national scandal that the newspapers are not calling for.

If any other industry were subject to serious allegations of illegality, corruption and corporate governance failure, our national newspapers would be in the vanguard of calls for a public inquiry. That is not happening here. Here, the tabloid press are on the one hand warning about a chilling effect on investigative journalism, and on the other arguing that they should not be subject to any further investigation.

We believe that this new amendment addresses the legitimate concerns of local newspaper editors in specifically excluding local and regional publishers. I accept that it is a concession, and Labour Members respect that.

The Secretary of State seemed to become confused earlier when making the case for section 40. Section 40 has gone, and I can clearly state that if the amendment is passed, we will not seek to push the case; we recognise that there is no majority in the House for it.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend go a little further? Is he saying that the Labour party has dropped section 40 for good in the case of all newspapers, and that whether in opposition or in government—we will never bring back punitive damages for newspapers in order to get them to sign up to a state-sponsored regulator?

Tom Watson: I am saying that, although my hon. Friend stood on a manifesto commitment to push section 40, I can envisage no circumstances in which I would move that motion. I cannot speak for the rest of the House.

What the amendment would do is ensure that we proceed with an inquiry which was solemnly promised to the victims of phone hacking by those on all sides, and which Sir Brian Leveson believes should go ahead. Prior to Leveson, the only newspaper that admitted hacking was the News of the World. Since then, in recent court cases, The Sun has settled with claimants at a cost of millions rather than face a full public verdict. The Mirror Group never admitted hacking during Leveson, but, years later, it has. Even The Sunday Times is alleged to have used a blagger for 15 years, yet that was never properly explained to the first part of the Leveson inquiry. Leveson part 2 will achieve something new: the answers that the civil and criminal trials have not and will not get at. Newspapers cannot settle their way out of the conclusions of a national public inquiry that will examine not just illegality, but improper and abusive conduct.

2.45 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that it is somehow the tabloid press that is objecting and campaigning against Leveson 2. However, it was The Guardian that said, back in March, that Leveson 2 would be “like a driver learning to steer by looking in the rear-view mirror at the road behind rather than the one ahead.”

Does the hon. Gentleman not see that that illustrates the fundamental weakness of expecting Leveson 2 to address the question of where the media should go from here to improve behaviour in future?

Tom Watson: It is true that The Guardian was very critical of section 40, and, indeed, its pioneering former editor, Alan Rusbridger, spoke out against it, but he has said today that there is no real reason that people could give for opposing Leveson 2. I have spoken to a number of local and regional editors in recent months, and they have privately said that they have great concerns about section 40, but regard Leveson 2 as a problem for national tabloid newspapers—which is why the amendment explicitly rules out local and regional papers.

Mike Wood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way again?
**Tom Watson:** I am afraid that other Members want to speak, and we have a limited amount of time. I tried to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question as comprehensively as possible.

I think that the Lords have listened to the Democratic Unionist party, and have adjusted the amendment to meet their concerns. Although DUP Members are not in the Chamber today, I know that they will follow the debate closely before we vote. I am not one of those who do not respect their position. They are representing the needs of their constituents, and they do that well. Last week we did not manage to convince them, but I hope the new amendment shows that their concerns have been heard loud and clear. I think that of all the parties in the House, the DUP prides itself on its commitment to the United Kingdom. We ask DUP Members today to give all UK citizens justice by voting for the amendment.

During the Bill’s passage, we have been told that the press has cleaned up its act. Indeed, the Secretary of State has talked about a new culture in the papers since Leveson 1. Let me quote from a letter written by Figen Murray, whose son Martyn Hett was murdered by a terrorist in the Manchester Arena bombing last year. While she was at the Etihad stadium waiting for news—still not knowing whether her son was alive—her youngest daughters stayed safe at home. During that time, there were seven or eight journalists at their door, and journalists calling their phone. Figen Murray says:

> “What upset me most about the media intrusion we have had was the fact that my youngest daughter...heard from a journalist on our doorstep that her brother died. You cannot unhear what you hear. She was a child and this was absolutely not fair, fiercely unethical and cruel.”

I ask colleagues to put themselves in that position. You are a teenager, and you find out that your brother has been killed by a terrorist bomb from a journalist who turns up at your door while your parents are out searching for him. It is unimaginable.

Martyn’s mother goes on:

> “Whilst a lot of noise is being made that press behaviour has improved since the Leveson Inquiry, I totally disagree. As a family we have had first hand experience that this is not the case.”

In case after case, we have seen not just new evidence of wrongdoing that was never disclosed to part 1 of Leveson, but new wrongdoing, new abuses, and new victims. That is why Leveson 2 must proceed.

Let me say finally that we cannot possibly have time to consider this last-minute, far-reaching, highly irregular manuscript amendment today. It appears, ironically, to give greater powers to this Secretary of State and all subsequent Secretaries of State to interfere with self-regulation of the press. Whatever we disagree about on Leveson, no one wants this; that was the whole point of the royal charter system. So I say to colleagues today—in fact I am begging them—that this may be our last chance to deliver on that promise to the victims. The whole House supported a Leveson inquiry in two parts, and Sir Brian Leveson himself says that the inquiry’s work is not done. All I ask today is that colleagues think about the promises we all made; let’s keep our word and keep this amendment in the Bill.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I remind colleagues that this is a short debate? I hope that they bear in mind when making their contributions that it will finish at 3.22 pm.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I want briefly to say three things.

First, I have brought four successful libel actions against the media. I hope not to have to repeat that. There are many other times that I could have taken action, but chose not to.

Secondly, this House has to choose whether it wants to be Lord Ellenborough, a prosecutor, or William Hone. Their exchanges were well-illustrated in Ben Wilson’s history “The Laughter of Triumph”. In 1817 Hone was prosecuted for seditious blasphemy when he was actually exposing abuse. If given that simple choice, it is right for those in this House, and in the House of Lords, to defend the press—not to say they are in the last-chance saloon, but to back them to hold themselves to the standards they have voluntarily accepted.

Thirdly, I want to make one small point to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on the data protection issue. We must find a way for journalists under the IMPRESS code to have the same data protection rights as those under IPSO. I hope he will remark on that either today or very soon.

We must try to bear it in mind that not every journalist remains consistent. Some of us might today have received a letter from Sir Harold Evans, who was editor of The Sunday Times when Jonathan Aitken and I were the only Conservative MPs to say that John Biffen was wrong to allow the takeover of The Sunday Times to go ahead.

Harold Evans said at that time that he would supply me with information demonstrating that what we were saying was right, but three days later he went in with Rupert Murdoch and we heard no more from him until he wrote his own book saying how he did not really enjoy working with Rupert Murdoch. I would take consistency from many people, but I do not expect it of Sir Harold Evans.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Like many others, I read with interest the Government’s proposals published this morning in response to Lords amendment 62B, and I have to say that they are not entirely without merit. Indeed some of what is contained in the Government’s proposals around extending the power of the Information Commissioner is interesting and sensible and could even be considered appropriate. Had those proposals been contained in the original draft of the Data Protection Bill, or even had they been introduced as a Government amendment in Committee, I may have been convinced that they were genuinely held beliefs. However, at the risk of being cynical, I fear that for these proposals to appear now, at this very late stage, it is more about staving off a possible Back-Bench revolt than any great principled belief, because what is on offer is simply too little, too late. Therefore, as we did last week, the Scottish National party will today again give its full support to establishing the second part of the Leveson inquiry and will vote against the Government’s offered concessions this afternoon.
We have always said that individuals should be able to seek redress when they feel they have been the victim of press malpractice and that it benefits each and every one of us in this country to have a media that is both transparent and accountable. The Scottish National party is committed to ensuring that the practices which led to the initial Leveson inquiry never, ever happen again. As I said last week, we have insisted from the outset that if there is to be a second part of the Leveson inquiry the distinct legal context in Scotland must be taken into account and the devolved competences respected. In those circumstances we would be happy to support the setting up of Leveson 2. We are confident that the proposal that has come back from the other place has been fashioned in such a way as to address all of our concerns, and we fully support the setting up of the second part of the Leveson inquiry.

This afternoon, Members will have a second chance to do what we did not do last week: make good on the promise that this House gave to the people of the United Kingdom in 2012, when the then Prime Minister said of the second stage of the inquiry:

“That second stage cannot go ahead until the current criminal proceedings have concluded, but we remain committed to the inquiry as it was first established.”—[Official Report, 29 November 2012, Vol. 554, c. 446].

Earlier today the Secretary of State said that much had changed in the behaviour and culture of the press since the phone-hacking scandal, but surely no reasonable person believes that the circumstances and behaviours of certain sections of the press have changed to such an extent that they need no longer be examined by this inquiry. Like the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), I read the letter from Figen Murray this morning. If the Secretary of State and other Members feel that this inquiry is no longer relevant, I urge them to read that letter, because the treatment of her family by certain sections of the press following the death of her son Martyn in the Manchester Arena attack last May borders on the unbelievable.

Members need to be aware of how important this is: people in this country have to believe that we in this House are taking this issue seriously. I worry that sections of the press have not travelled as far as we would have wanted them to—and as certain Conservative Members believe they have—since 2012. The setting up of a second Leveson inquiry is not just important and necessary; it will also fulfil a solemn promise made to the people of the UK by their Government, and I urge Members across the House to do the right thing today and support the establishment of a second Leveson inquiry.

Mr Duncan Smith: I rise briefly to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s submission today from the Dispatch Box. I do not believe that moving to Leveson 2 would in any way resolve any particular problems. I have no idea, even after all the answers I have heard in the debates undertaken, what exactly it is that everyone expects Leveson 2 to produce that we do not already know. I suspect that in many cases it is about carrying on and grinding that wheel further and harder, and eventually almost getting even with the media.

I, like my right hon. Friend and most Members, have had cause to deal with the media over things that have been said or done incorrectly. I do not take that as the reason to pursue this beyond where it is at the moment. I agree with my right hon. Friend that self-regulation under the IPSO formula is infinitely better than anything that was in place before, particularly with the low-cost arbitration process of which he extolled the virtues. I would have thought that many of my right hon. and hon. Friends accepted that that was one of the last sticking points in terms of how the press regulate themselves.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Does my right hon. Friend not accept that one of the purposes of examining what went wrong in the past is to establish how such extensive criminality was allowed to grow in our press and exactly where the responsibility for that lay so that it is not repeated? Would he also apply the argument that there is no point in looking into the past to, for instance, the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, which was held to ensure that we minimise the danger of great errors being made in future such situations?

Mr Duncan Smith: I believe that most, if not all, of that was done in the original Leveson inquiry. My right hon. and learned Friend and I will not necessarily agree on this point, but, as has been pointed out time and again, since that period the courts themselves have vigorously pursued individuals who have breached the law. It was argued at the time that the courts could not do that, but they have demonstrated that they can.

The courts have shown that anybody who breaks the law can be pursued. They are being, and have been, pursued by the courts—and not all of them successfully, by the way. It has been demonstrated that independent courts can pursue and find fault with such individuals, and many have gone to prison as a result. So I am not sure that Leveson 2 would advance the sum total of our knowledge about what we need to put right. I think we know that that is the case. The question for us is whether this is best done in statutory form by a Government insiting that they can define exactly what those regulations should be, or whether it is best done by a media and press that recognise that those abuses now have to be dealt with, otherwise their own reputation will fall by the wayside.

3 pm

Reference was made earlier to the campaign in which the Daily Mail was involved, in which it broke the law by naming people who had not been convicted or even charged. It took risks in that regard, and it is that kind of risk that I want to see continuing, because that is the hallmark of our rather rude and often aggressive and abrasive media who get to the truth more often than they fail.

Sir Peter Bottomley: An important correction is that it was not actually breaking the law. It exposed itself to substantial challenge in the civil court.

Mr Duncan Smith: I take that correction. Maybe I was going a bit over the top. None the less, that is itself a measure of how far some of our media are sometimes bound to go.

I do not agree that we should go further, although I recognise that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has tabled further amendments. In recognising those, it is also important to recognise that I think that this issue is settled. I shall simply end by saying that freedom is not always perfect and that those who fight for it often need to be held to account because they go
too far and abuse that privilege. That notwithstanding, I believe that we are beginning to meet the challenge. It will not be perfect, but I would prefer the mistakes to be made by a free press, knowing full well that they regulate and chase authority, and if for one moment they look over their shoulder and believe that this House has caught them and put them in a statutory bind, that would be worse for our own freedoms.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I am glad to follow the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), because I want briefly to address some of the points he has made. What is this amendment from the other place about? It is not about a new system of regulation for the press. It is about one very simple question, which is whether we should go ahead with the Leveson 2 inquiry that was promised when Leveson 1—which was intended to be a two-part inquiry—was set up. The right hon. Gentleman asks what that would achieve. I think that it would achieve three things, and that is what I want to talk about today.

First, it would answer the question, what is the truth about what happened? It is really important to answer the questions that the right hon. Gentleman asked about this. When the inquiry was set up, it was done on the understanding that, pending criminal investigations and trials, Leveson 1 could not look at who did what to whom, as Sir Brian said, and that that would happen in part 2 when the criminal investigations were over. So this second inquiry was envisaged right from the start. There are material questions to which we do not know the answers. For example, how widespread was the hacking and other criminality at News International? How many other papers engaged in such conduct? What was the role of electronic logging and where did it take place? If we do not have Leveson 2, we will not find out the answers to those questions. So the first reason for having it would be to establish the truth about that.

Secondly, Leveson 2 would tell us why all this was allowed to happen, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said. There are questions to which we still do not know the answers. What were the failures in, among other things, corporate governance at News International and elsewhere that allowed this wrongdoing to go on? Did the police fail to investigate because of their close relationships with the press? Did the politicians do the same? These are highly material questions that go to the trust in some of our most important institutions. So the second question that I hope this inquiry, if it is set up, will look at is why those things were allowed to happen.

The third, and in a way the most important, question is what lessons we can learn for the future. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) read part of a letter from Figen Murray, the mother of Martyn Hett, and I urge Members across the House to look at that letter in the 20 minutes or so that we have left before we vote. It is important to say that the majority of the press do not engage in such activities, but that letter shows that a minority of the press engage in the most abusive and intrusive activity, as they did against that mother and her family who had just lost a loved one. Those people do not know where to turn. They do not have faith in IPSO, the regulator, and they are not going to go to the courts. What are they to do? It is for people like them that we need to have this inquiry, so that we can learn the lessons and ensure that there are no more innocent victims.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am listening carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, and I put this point to him. Does he not agree that such a case as he extols is not the sort of case that should now prove or test the IPSO process? In other words, if the media are as they say they are, such a case will, when evidence is brought, immediately bring opprobrium and retribution down on the heads of those journalists and possibly result in their being banned as journalists. I think that the right hon. Gentleman should test it in that way, rather than looking for another inquiry, which might come up with nothing more.

Edward Miliband: I have two answers to that. First, this has been tested, and there were no fines, no systematic investigations and no equivalent front-page corrections. Secondly, there is no substitute for a systematic look at these issues and for asking why that culture was allowed to exist and why in certain cases it is still allowed to exist.

Conservative Members rightly express concern about the freedom of the press, and they must vote in the way that they think is right, but this is not about the freedom of the press. The National Union of Journalists, which after all represents journalists, states:

“No allowing Leveson 2 is bad for journalism and bad for the public”.

The NUJ’s concern is that the ongoing actions of the minority are undermining the brilliant journalism that we have in this country. It therefore believes that it would be better for our trust in the press if this inquiry were to go ahead.

John Redwood: But does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that the media landscape has been transformed out of all recognition in recent years by social media and the internet, and that further investigation into this history will not illuminate the modern system at all or help us to deal with the difficult questions of fairness between the traditional media and the new media?

Edward Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This is why social media and fake news are at the heart of the terms of reference recommended by Sir Brian and are included in what has come back from the other place. I hope, on the basis of his intervention, that we might have his support for this process, because I see no other vehicle that could achieve what he has just said he wants to achieve.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): MailOnline—which, through massive investment, has possibly become the English-speaking world’s most successful website—has opted out of IPSO. What does that say about the Mail group’s commitment to responsibility?

Edward Miliband: What it says is that compulsory arbitration, which is what is being promised as part of the IPSO process, is not compulsory, because it is not universal. That is one of the most important things that should be achieved as part of this process.
Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Going back to the example of the bereaved family and the gross intrusion into their privacy and grief, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons why such families choose not to use the current system is that it runs the risk of things that have been wrongly said about lost loved ones being repeated in the media as part of the process?

Edward Miliband: My right hon. Friend makes an important point.

I hope that right hon. and hon. Members across the House will think about our responsibilities to the victims, about the promises we made and about the fact that this inquiry has a clear purpose. Only this inquiry can get to the truth about what happened and enable us to learn lessons for the future. That is why I will be supporting what has come back from the other place.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I find myself in a difficult position, because I have come into the Chamber still undecided on how I am going to vote. The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) again makes the case for Leveson 2. The Secretary of State has spoken powerfully and made the case that the additional amendments will create more safeguards. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), has spoken with great passion, and I agree with a lot of what he said.

My problem is this. We had this debate last week, and, with heavy heart, I voted against my party because I thought that Leveson 2 was right. I still think Leveson 2 is right—it is not about additional regulations, but about finding out what happened in the past and perhaps guidance for the future. Where I struggle is with the wonderful publication called, “Forward Together, Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future”, which, in case my colleagues do not know, was our manifesto for the last general election. I am reading it for the first time today. On page 50, it states clearly that “we will not proceed with the second stage of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press.”

That is unfortunately in the manifesto.

I have a dilemma. What has changed since last week? The Lords have removed “local press” and the Minister has taken some of the concerns on board. The House thought about the matter and some of my Conservative colleagues voted for Leveson 2. The Bill went to the other place, which virtually sent it straight back, despite the Government manifesto commitment. The question of the Salisbury convention therefore clearly comes into play.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The manifesto appears to have had quite an effect on my hon. Friend. I hope that he will tell me where I can get a copy; I never received one. Has he discovered who wrote that document, which I will tell me where I can get a copy; I never received one. That is why Conservative Front Benchers are no longer bound by that? I am going to think about it and make my mind up.

Mr Bone: I will end soon because others want to speak. I just wanted to make the point that I voted against the manifesto on a three-line Whip last week, but my argument and that of others lost. Should I be bound by that? I am going to think about it and make my mind up.

John Grogan: Like the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), I have been contemplating the relationship between what is in a party manifesto and how Members should vote. I am glad to hear the deputy Leader of the Opposition say that manifestos are just guidance because our manifesto undoubtedly committed us to Leveson 2.

When I first heard about the amendments on Leveson 2 last week, I sought guidance from much more eminent Members than me who were tabling amendments. In one case, a Member said that it was just a copy-and-paste job from the original Leveson 2 recommendations. Someone else told me that it was all to do with corrupt police. I therefore looked carefully at the terms of reference of Leveson 2 and found that about half were to do with corrupt police. That is hardly mentioned in the Lords amendment. The reason is that Lord Leveson wrote to the Home Secretary saying that, because of the extensive inquiries that had taken place:

“I am inclined to agree that there is little public interest in re-opening many of these same investigations again. I also agree that the guidance from the College of Policing regarding Media Relations represents significant change.”

In other words, all that section of Leveson 2’s original terms of reference has gone and a whole range of other things has been added.

3.15 pm

I treat the manifesto on which I stood seriously. I assure my local Momentum branch that I have read it seven times and there were even occasions during the general election campaign when I could recite from it for purposes of debate, but the amendment envisages a very different Leveson 2 inquiry.

Let me draw attention to a couple of matters. Lord Leveson wrote to the Home Secretary and said that he was worried about the Cliff Richard case and we therefore have a clause about that. Who was involved in the Cliff Richard case? I speak as a vice-chair of the all-party group on the BBC.

Paul Farrelly: Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Grogan: I will not because there is little time. I am a great fan of the BBC, but it was involved in the Cliff Richard case, yet it is exempted from the inquiry by another clause.

The Kerslake report has been mentioned at length. I have read it not seven, but a couple of times. It is damning about many practices that happened after the Manchester bombing. By the way, it praises the only journalistic organisations that it mentions. It praises the Manchester Evening News, and it praises the BBC for having only one reporter approach any victim. However,
John Grogan:

it is very damning. It may have been freelancers or people who work for the main news organisations who abused their position—it does not name them.

There is no civil servant closer to the Labour party than Bob Kerslake. When there is a problem, Bob Kerslake is sent to sort it out. It is therefore interesting that in his recent report, which was published on Tuesday 27 March, he recommends not Leveson 2, but strengthening the IPSO code.

It was a little grudging, but I think that the deputy Leader of the Opposition said today that he cannot envisage circumstances in which we would go back to the absurd idea of imposing punitive damages on newspapers. He said that he could not speak for others, but he is the deputy Leader of the party, so I presume that he is speaking for the party.

Tom Watson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s comments. He stood on two manifestos—for the 2015 general election as well as that of 2017. When I campaigned for him, he heralded our work on setting up Leveson. I regard section 40 as gone—I hope that gives him the reassurance that he seeks.

John Grogan: That is very helpful. When my hon. Friend, as well as my right hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), were in high positions in government, some of us on the Back Benches talked about the concentration of media power, and we did not do enough about it.

Tom Watson: I will not give way because I am being urged to conclude. We should not look back in anger at all those frustrations, but plan a progressive media future and we should not subcontract that to a judge.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I will be extraordinarily brief because not much more needs to be said. The House’s view is settled and its will is clear. Those at the other end of this building are asking us to consider effectively a rehash of new clause 18, which this House debated at length, analysed and rejected. We debated that new clause on Report prior to Third Reading. We do not need to rehearse those arguments.

Members of all parties are absolutely right to say that victims need to be at the centre. I am confident that the Secretary of State and his team, through some of the concessions that have been introduced today, even at this late stage, have the victims at the centre of their thoughts.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I will not because time is so brief. The will of the House is settled and the other place should not throw the Bill back at us. We have made the decision and we just need to get the measure on the statute book.

Ian C. Lucas: I want to say a word about Sir Brian Leveson. The first part of his inquiry was greatly valued and welcomed by all parties. Sir Brian Leveson said that he fundamentally disagreed with the Government’s decision not to proceed with part 2 of the inquiry. We should respect his view, and we should also keep the promise made by both sides of the House to the victims of press intrusion. This is very straightforward, and we should therefore support the Lords amendment.

Mike Wood: The role of the House of Lords is to scrutinise, to inquire and, where possible, to improve. That is not what is happening here. What is happening in this case is that the House of Lords is asking this House, which has considered this question in great detail in Committee and on Report, to go back and change its mind, thereby rejecting conventions established by Lord Salisbury and Lord Carrington. Agreeing to the amendment would set a very unfortunate constitutional precedent.

I hope this House will reaffirm the decision it took last week, and previously, and that their lordships will then recognise the democratic legitimacy of this House and the manifesto commitment made by the Conservative party, which is now in government.

Christine Jardine: I believe the other place has given us a compromise to reassure those who are concerned about section 40 and its impact on local newspapers and those who are concerned about any threat to the freedom of the press, which none of us in this House wants to see undermined in any way.

Please look at the Lords amendment as an effective way of carrying forward and adhering to the promise made to the victims of press intrusion, and of looking for a more constructive future relationship between the press and the public in this country.

3.21 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G).

That this House disagrees to Lords Amendment No. 62B proposed instead of the words left out of the Bill by Commons Amendment No. 62 but proposes amendments (za) to (a) to Clause (Review of processing of personal data for the purposes of journalism) inserted by Commons Amendment No. 109 and amendments (c) to (f) to the Bill in lieu of the Lords Amendment.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 289.

Division No. 157

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allam, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto

Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
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
Brokenshire, rh James
Tellers for the Ayes:
Kelly Tolhurst and Mims Davies

NOES
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alex
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhuyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thompson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Data Protection Bill [Lords]
15 MAY 2018

Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mrigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibbon, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Healey, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingworth, George
Hollins, Mr George
Howell, John
Hudleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadson, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leitwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, rh Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McEvoy, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, rh Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Prestis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, rh Sir Richard
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alex
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Thompson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgeon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Sarah
Chapman, Douglass
Chapman, Jenny
Charalamous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, rh Kenneth
Clywd, ry, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddon, John
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Mr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris

Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Fivette, Caroline
Foxglove, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gladstone, Mary
Gosdick, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hardy, Emma
Hammond, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hogsdson, Mrs Sharon
Holliern, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh 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
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Mattheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norriss, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peachcock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheeran, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, rh Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeh, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Sharmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stephens, Jos
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, rh Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twick, Derek
Twick, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittlefield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Phillipa
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Smith and Thangam Debbonaire

Question accordingly agreed to.
Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As indicated on the Order Paper, the Speaker has certified that the Bill relates exclusively to England on matters within devolved legislative competence. As the Bill has not been amended, there is no change to that certification.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is required for the Bill to proceed. It has been tabled and is available in the Vote Office. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak) indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON IN THE CHAIR]

3.38 pm

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Will Members leaving the Chamber do so quietly?

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Committee do sit in private.

The Second Deputy Chairman: I am afraid that that is not from the Scottish National party and is not a member of the Government. Well done to him; he is making a very powerful point. The Government talk on a regular basis about how Parliament is taking back control. Does he feel that that has been represented by the fact that this is the first time that the House has had the opportunity to take back control?

Pete Wishart: Let me say quite candidly to my hon. Friend that what we are waiting for is the moment when my English colleagues spring into action with this opportunity—perhaps this one-off opportunity—to meet in their English Parliament and to discuss the weighty issues of state that require that English-only attention.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the absence of any opportunities for English Members to speak on English issues, why is he taking up all the time?

Pete Wishart: Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that he may not take this seriously, and Conservative Members may not take this seriously, but I understand the importance and the significance of this English Parliament sitting in this House of Commons and I will not deride that opportunity. I stand here inviting English Members to get to their feet and to explain passionately and eloquently why they need this opportunity to debate these English-only Bills.

English Members have every right to be outraged that they have not previously had these opportunities. That is why, given that they have this opportunity today, I am fully expecting them to spring to their feet to ensure that this Parliament is properly respected. I will tell you something, Dame Rosie: Scottish National party Members fully respect the right of English Members to speak in their Parliament. We expect to hear speeches full of passion from hon. Members who have this fantastic opportunity in front of them, because we know that the English voice must be heard. It is a voice that demands its right, and today all of England will be hearing from its proud tribunes as they get to their feet in vast numbers to articulately and compellingly put that English voice. I remember why we have this Parliament, and I remember those speeches when we changed Standing Orders so that we could secure this Parliament. Can you remember, Dame Rosie, all these perfidious Scottish Members of Parliament coming down to this Parliament to make sure that that voice was going to be overridden by Caledonian votes; the hordes coming forth on that border to make sure that the outcomes were to be influenced by Scots Members of Parliament. I remember the eloquence with which that was put, why that had to be rejected, why the English Parliament was necessary, and why English votes for English laws had to be an enduring feature of this House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman protests too much. We all know that, deep in his heart, he loves being here. He loves engaging in the Union Parliament; he would be bored stiff in Holyrood.

Pete Wishart: I wholeheartedly congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being the first English Member of Parliament to speak in an English-only debate in a Legislative Grand Committee of the quasi-English Parliament who is not from the Scottish National party and is not a member of the Government. Well done to him; he is
charting and pioneering a way for all his colleagues now to follow. Speak in your English Parliament and raise your English voice!

3.45 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I just want to be the second English Member to speak in this important debate. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that maybe the English are not rising to their feet in great numbers because we are so much more united and happy with our lot in life, and we are happy with this particular Bill. If he wants to visit my constituency to see how happy we are, he is welcome at any time.

Pete Wishart: I suspected that it might have been something like the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes. Conservative Members are just so united; of course there is no fissure within the ranks of the Conservative party on the big issues of the day. Here was I thinking that there were a party and a Government in crisis, who cannot determine a means of withdrawing from the European Union. But no, they are not in crisis. They are all quiet because they are all totally united on the big issues of the day. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting me right on that point.

This great Parliament, in this green and pleasant land, is free from Scottish intervention, even though every contribution is made by a Scot.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I intervene for fear that people in the Chamber today think that the hon. Gentleman’s voice is for all of Scotland. It is not for all of Scotland—it is for a small part—and Scotland may not be proud of his behaviour in the Chamber today.

Pete Wishart: We have now heard from three Government Members. In fact, the hon. Gentleman is another Scottish Member to add to the growing list of people who are now prepared to participate in the English Parliament. I have a question for the hon. Gentleman, and I will give him an opportunity to think about it. We think that English votes for English laws is the most appallingly invidious measure that has been passed in this place. It divides the House on geography, and is one of the most invidious measures that has been passed in this place. I am not prepared to accept this on behalf of my constituents. I wonder whether he is. That is the big question today.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the measure divides the House on geography, but he is not right to say that it divides the House on nationality, because Members representing English constituencies who may not be English—I happen to be a Welshman—can take part in these debates and vote. The hon. Gentleman is right about geography, but wrong about nationality.

Pete Wishart: What we have, therefore, is a House that is divided upon nation. The last time I had a look, this was English votes for English laws. No other Parliament in the world divides its membership based on that type of geography. We are exclusively alone when it comes to conducting our business on such a basis. Lest the hon. Gentleman forgets, this is the United Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. To pursue a measure that divides us, based on constituency geography, is not only totally and utterly invidious, but ludicrous and unworkable.

So we have this wonderful Parliament, but England said, “No. Never again. We will make this Parliament ours. We shall banish these Scots.” And it did. England created this fine institution—this Legislative Grand Committee, the voice of England. And what a transformation.

Andrew Percy: I just want to be the third English Member to speak on this issue. The hon. Gentleman is not presenting a wholly correct picture. Those of us who actually support the principle of English laws did not want to ban anybody or see Scottish Members thrown out of here. This situation is a reaction to the fact that I, as an English Member of Parliament, have no say on the matters that only affect Scotland. For the purpose of fairness, given the devolution settlement that we have, it is therefore perfectly reasonable for only English Members to vote on certain matters that only affect England.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because there was quite a lot in what he said that I could go along with and almost support. I understand English Members of Parliament wanting that English voice. Of course they have constituents to represent who demand that they have their say in all this. There are a couple of elegant solutions that might actually deliver that.

The first is Scottish independence. The second is a little concept that seems to exist perfectly well in a number of parliamentary institutions the length and breadth of Europe and the rest of the world—it is called federalism, where the hon. Gentleman has his Parliament, we have our Parliament, and we all get together as equals to decide on the stuff that we are going to reserve. What we do not do is make the Parliament of the United Kingdom a de facto English parliament and think that there will be no issue with that. That is no solution. It is what we have just now—this unsatisfactory arrangement that divides this House, is unworkable, and is an embarrassment to this House in how it operates.

Let us have a look at how it operates, this fine institution—the English parliament; the voice of England.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman has rolled out for everyone his grievance at being excluded from this discussion into which he wants to have some input. Perhaps he could tell us what it is in the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill that he finds so offensive that he wants to say something about it, because I have not heard anything about it yet.

Pete Wishart: I am just at the very beginning of my introductory remarks. I want to come to this fine Bill—this fine English Bill. I have lots and lots to say about the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council
Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill. Believe, me, the right hon. Gentleman will be more than satisfied when I get on to the substance of this Bill, because there is lots and lots that has to be properly—

Sammy Wilson: This right hon. Gentleman, along with most other people in this House, will be more than satisfied when the hon. Gentleman sits down.

Pete Wishart: Let me say to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the papers I have here are just a few of my brief speaking notes.

I am being very serious in all this. I know there can be a little bit of banter about English votes for English laws—how embarrassing, unworkable, stupid and ridiculous it all is—but this is a serious Bill that requires attention. The thing that surprises me more than anything else is the lack of interest from my English colleagues. We will do this job on their behalf. If they are not prepared to get to their feet to speak to this fine Bill, it will be left to Scottish National party Members—

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) rose—

Pete Wishart: But here is the genuine voice of England. I think the House awaits the right hon. Gentleman's pronouncements with great interest.

John Redwood: I am grateful for the introduction from the hon. Gentleman. His misguided mockery serves his cause ill and serves this House ill. He well knows that we have had a proper constitutional debate about how some symmetry can be put into the asymmetric arrangements that we inherited so that each part of the United Kingdom can make its own decisions on its own measures, and this is the result. England now has the right to veto a measure that the Union Parliament wishes to impose on England if it does not meet with the approval of England. It is the weakest form of devolution of any of the four countries in our Union. The reason there are not English Members queuing up to speak on this measure is that we agree with it. We like this measure and we wish to go through. If the hon. Gentleman is a true friend of England, he will now sit down and let this Bill pass.

Pete Wishart: I think I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I would describe his intervention as half-hearted at best. His heart was not really in it, I do not think. He is one of the great defenders of the tradition of an English Parliament and English rights. Is he really satisfied with these woeful arrangements for this House? I am all for English democracy and making sure that English Members get the opportunity to design and progress their own legislation, as is required by their constituents, but to describe what we are doing today—this embarrassing mess—as a solution is below the right hon. Gentleman.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I have just heard the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) invoke a fantastic principle: a member nation of the United Kingdom has the right to veto a measure of the Union Parliament. He said that English Members can veto what the Union Parliament chooses. Can Scottish Members have that right when it comes to Brexit? Can we veto the imposition on a country where 62% of people voted to remain in the European Union of being taken out of it?

John Redwood indicated dissent.


Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend hits the nail right on the head. In this wonderful institution—the quasi-English Parliament—it seems to be all right for English Members to demand that they get their way and that they determine their legislation. But I remember the Scotland Bill 2015, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) will too. I remember something like 97% of all Scottish Members of Parliament tabling amendments to that Bill, only for them to be overwhelmingly and comprehensively rejected because of the Government majority. It seems to be all right for English Members to get their own Parliament when it comes to these things, but when we have our say on important reserved issues in this House, it is completely and utterly ignored.

John Redwood: The hon. Gentleman must know that his colleague, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), has completely misconstrued the arrangements. No member country of the Union has a veto over Union matters such as withdrawal from the EU. Scotland not only has a complete veto over Scottish legislation but is in sole possession of Scottish legislation in a way that we English Members are not for English legislation.

Pete Wishart: I will leave the right hon. Gentleman to take that up with my good friend from Na h-Eileanan an Iar, who I have to say I find much more convincing when it comes to some of the great constitutional issues of the day. I am more than persuaded by my hon. Friend's eloquence.

Sir Edward Leigh: So what is in the Bill? What is wrong with it?

Pete Wishart: I beg patience from the hon. Gentleman. There is so much to say. I have done my study on the Bill, and I think it is important. I have a list of 425 English towns where the Bill will have an impact—I have everything from Aylesbury all the way through to Witham and Wisbech—and I am going to go through every single one of those towns to speak about how some of the curtailage-related issues are being dealt with. I do not want to leave out any part of England. It is important that no part of England is left behind in these debates, and if English Members are not prepared to speak about their constituencies, it will be left to Scottish National party Members to do it. We will not shirk our responsibility to ensure that the English voice is heard. That is our job today, and I am determined that we will fulfil it.

Andrew Percy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will give way for the last time.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry that I am not the real voice of England; I do not know what that makes me. The hon. Gentleman suggests two solutions to this problem: one is Scottish independence, which the people of Scotland have rejected, and the other is federalism, which the people of England clearly do not want, because all
polling shows that there is not majority support for an English Parliament. So what is the SNP's policy? Does it want to force independence against people’s will, or does it want to force a system on England against the will of the English? It would be nice to know which undemocratic solution it wants.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire may have been drawn down certain paths. I have been listening carefully to what he has been saying, and I have given him some leeway, but I remind him that the motion before the Committee is that the Legislative Grand Committee (England) consents to the Bill. I hope he will not be drawn down other tracks and will confine his remarks to that proposition.

Pete Wishart: For that, I am very grateful. I cannot believe that I have been drawn down constitutional cul-de-sacs by the outrageous contributions we have had from hon. Members. I will now ensure that my remarks are confined to the Bill, which is very important.

We have to find out why the Bill is important. It is important because in 2017, in the Autumn Budget statement, the Government said that they would legislate to give effect to two of the Chancellor’s commitments, one of which was to retrospectively reinstate particular features of business rates revaluation practice which applied before the judgment of the Supreme Court in Woolway (VO) v. Mazars UKSC 53. That is important, and it is one of the reasons why we are doing this. There is another probably much more important reason why we should consider the English-only parts of this important Bill and make sure that we understand and debate it properly during this Legislative Grand Committee. The Bill will give local authorities in England the discretion to charge a council tax premium of up to 100% on long-term empty dwellings.

4 pm

That is why it is so important to consider this important Bill, and we need to use the opportunity of this Legislative Grand Committee to look at the motives behind the Bill’s design and at the reason why there was a requirement on the Government to bring it to this House. We want to make sure that the Bill is properly considered —given all the significant amendments that were brought forward on Report—and we have an opportunity in this Legislative Grand Committee.

Let us have a look at some of the history and background of why we want to hold this debate and why this Bill is so important. For over 50 years, the practice of the Valuation Office Agency in identifying the unit of assessment for business rates, known herewith as the hereditament—if I have said that right—was based on the leading decision of the Court of Appeal in Gilbert (VO) v. S Hickinbottom & Sons Ltd 1956. Keep the year 1956 in mind.

When considering the question of a separate hereditament for rating purposes, Denning LJ said, absent a definition in statute, that the following general rule applied. I want to read the ruling in full so that it is properly understood and so that we know exactly the reasoning behind Lord Denning’s decision in making the said judgment. I think the Committee is looking forward with great anticipation to hear what Denning LJ had to say. He said:

“First take the case where two or more properties are within the same curtilage or contiguous to one another, and are in the same occupation."

Think about that:

“the same curtilage or contiguous to one another”.

Then Lord Denning said:

“In that case they are, as a general rule”—

There are sometimes exceptions to rules, but he said, “as a general rule”. That is important when we are designing the generality of a rule in legislation, because it is important to understand that when there are general rules, there are often exceptions. He said:

“In that case they are, as a general rule to be treated for rating purposes as if they formed parts of a single hereditament.”

When this ruling was required, he was clearly stating that the general rule applying to the curtilage and to contiguous dwellings was generally what we should pursue and follow. I think his lordship was right: we must make sure we do this.

However, and this is important, Lord Denning then said:

“There are, however, exceptional cases where for some special reason they may be treated as two or more hereditaments.”

He went on to offer some examples, and I am sure hon. Members are absolutely glued to their seats waiting to hear what those examples might be. He gave the example of the case in which

“one part is used for an entirely different purpose”.

Let us think about having a house and using different parts of it for different purposes. That is an important distinction to make. I know that in my house I have bedrooms, kitchens and sitting rooms, so I use my house for different purposes. It is therefore quite right that, when he made the ruling, Denning was quite clear in saying that parts of a house are sometimes used for different purposes. That is an important lesson from a very important man.

Sir Edward Leigh: Is the hon. Gentleman seeking to take a leaf out of the book of the Irish nationalists in the 19th century and, by filibustering and talking complete rubbish, bore the Union to death?

Pete Wishart: I take great exception to what the hon. Gentleman has said. This is an important Bill; he may not be interested in the words of Denning LJ, but my colleagues and I are. We want to make sure that this House is aware of the weighty views of Denning LJ, whoever he may be.

So there is a general rule. It had been the practice of the Valuation Office Agency that where units of property were contiguous—that means “touching”, I believe—and in the same occupation, they received one rates bill. I think the Government have been really generous in offering examples of how all this might work. That is why, when considering a Bill such as this, it is very important that we take everything into account.

The exceptions are important. The general rule, obviously, is as well—because a general rule is a guiding principle on how we approach these issues. But the exceptions are also important because they could lead to precedents.
This is where we start to get into dangerous territory. In elegant legislation, the general rule applies nearly universally. When legislation has a number of exceptions, we start to get into certain territory—I know how difficult it is for the Clerks to design legislation with too many exceptions. We have to be careful when designing legislation. When the generalities of rules and what we want to achieve in legislation tend to be universal in concept, it is important to understand exceptions and all the other things that may influence future legislation by becoming precedent.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech that legislators across the world should pay attention to. Will he expand on not the generalities but the exceptions? The House could really do with fully understanding how exceptions lead to further complications. Will he enlighten me?

Pete Wishart: I always enjoy enlightening my hon. Friend, although it is usually not necessary. I feel obliged to try to offer further enlightenment on these particular issues. There are other examples. I gave the example of my house, but my hon. Friend is a crofter, and I am pretty certain that his is a single dwelling on the isle of Barra—in fact, I know it because I have seen his place on several occasions. I know how he utilises his land and I am pretty certain that, when it comes to him, the generality of the rule applies. His dwelling is generally designed for the purpose of crofting and habitation. I am pretty certain that his property is not contiguous and that there is no such issue with his land. I am looking at my hon. Friend and—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman must bear in mind that he should face the Chair. Although he likes looking at his hon. Friend, it is better to look at me.

Pete Wishart: It is always a joy to look at my hon. Friend, Dame Rosie, but I will try to resist for the purposes of my brief contribution to this Bill today.

Sammy Wilson: Has the hon. Gentleman noticed that the longer he goes on, the fewer of his hon. Friends he has to face when he turns around? Maybe that should be a lesson to him: he is getting a bit beyond what even his own hon. Friends will tolerate—let alone the rest of the House.

Pete Wishart: I am glad that I have been able to detain the right hon. Gentleman long enough to get his attention. I know he is very much enjoying this short contribution to the debate. Look at my hon. Friends, sitting here and making sure that this important issue is discussed and debated. They think that this is important, and that is the lesson that goes forward today.

David Linden: Does my hon. Friend think that if we encouraged our hon. Friends with £1 billion, even more of them might come into the Chamber and sit alongside the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson)?

Pete Wishart: Actually, I am looking forward to seeing the right hon. Gentleman’s hon. Friends join him—it is always nice to see our friends from Northern Ireland here. We may not be as well endowed with largesse from the Government in order to secure a majority, but we will muddle through on what we secure from the Barnett formula.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman will return to the subject of the debate.

Pete Wishart: I want to get back to the rule, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it is the key issue in the Bill, one that must consume and concern the House more than any other. The rule was widely understood and accepted by ratepayers. It was generally understood and I think everybody appreciated what was happening. Representatives in the Valuation Office Agency are responsible for assessing business rates. However, the rule received negative judicial treatment in the 2015 judgment of the Supreme Court in the Woolway v. Mazars case. As a result, the VOA has had to change its practice. The practice is now that separate units of property in a shared building should be treated as separate rating units and should therefore receive their own rules irrespective of whether they are in the same occupation and are contiguous.

That is what we are here today to consider properly. This is an important issue. I will try to list some of the towns and cities—hon. Members will represent some of them—throughout the United Kingdom where it will apply and where it is important. I will start with Abingdon-on-Thames, where there will be dwelling houses that are contiguous and which may or may not be part of the general rule and may have exceptions. There is Acrington, Acton, Alcester, Aldershot, Alnwick, Alston, Altrincham, Ambleside, Amersham—I think we can see where this is going—Andover, Arundel, Ashburnham, Ashby-de-la-Zouch—I [Laughter.] Hon. Members are laughing at my pronunciation. I challenge them to get to their feet and say Auchtermuchty. There is Ayrminster, Aylesbury, Bakewell, Bampton, Banbury—Madam Deputy Speaker, I could go on and go on.

Sammy Wilson: Since the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about those towns and wants to highlight the problems facing their residents, will he tell us whether he has visited any of them? Does he even know where they are?

Pete Wishart: Looking through the list, I spent a lovely hour in Berwick-upon-Tweed and I remember a lovely cup of tea in Bexhill-on-Sea in one of its very fine restaurants, but I am sure hon. Members do not want me to go through the whole list and describe the very many hours I have spent.

I shall spare the House the 35 pages of towns, villages and cities included in my list which are represented by English Members who are not doing their job. I will now give them the opportunity to get up and speak on behalf of their constituents, I hazard a guess that they are probably better at it than I am, as a Scottish National party Member of Parliament. I think that my English colleagues are probably just a little bit more qualified, experienced and skilled to speak on behalf of their own constituencies than I am, so I am perplexed as to why it has been left to me to do this job. So I will now, having provided a little bit of encouragement, give them the opportunity to do it.
This is an absolute and utter farce, Madam Deputy Speaker. Regardless of anything else, this speech has pointed out just how ridiculous this practice is. I am just about the only Member of Parliament who has spoken in Legislative Grand Committee. I could speak for another hour if required, but I know Labour Members are keen to move on to the next business and I will accommodate that. We should be profoundly ashamed of the way we operate the English votes for English laws procedure. It has become an embarrassment to this House and makes this place look at its most ridiculous: bells ringing, maces going up and down, and nothing ever actually happening. It is time that we brought this farce to an end. I appeal to hon. Members from England. This has not worked. We have tried it. We have seen what it is like and nothing ever happens. Join us now to ensure that we rid the House of this embarrassment and go back to a united House with one class of MP where we can all have an equal say. Join us and let us end this farce.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the Committee consents to the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M(6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair; decision reported.

Third Reading

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This Bill, above all, promotes fairness; it promotes fairness for hard-working business rate payers hit by a tax hike that they could not have anticipated—the so-called staircase tax—and fairness for those who struggle to find somewhere to live while properties lie empty for years. That is why we moved quickly to introduce the Bill and ensure that ratepayers, in particular, receive the urgent help that it will provide. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions and support in helping us to achieve this aim.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for his input and constructive attitude in the Bill Committee. I very much look forward to working with him on future local government measures.

Lastly, I thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for his input and constructive attitude in the Bill Committee. I very much look forward to working with him on future local government measures.

In conclusion, this Bill delivers on our commitment to fairness and supports those in our country who want to build a better life. It is a Bill for those looking for a place to call home. It is a Bill for small businesses. It is a Bill that I hope we can all welcome, and I commend it to the House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the constructive and positive way he has approached the Bill, from the early conversations about the technicalities to his contributions in Committee, and I repeat his thanks to the Committees that have been involved in this. It is utter that a lot of work has been done to engage and to iron out the wrinkles in the Bill. I hope this reinforces the offer we made some time ago that, where measures are not
controversial and have the support of the sector, we will work constructively to take them through Parliament. I hope this will be the first of a number that local government wants to see come forward.

I do not know whether it is in order to refer to a previous stage, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I thought the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is not in his place, took something of a liberty in the Legislative Grand Committee in trying to hijack a debate that affected English parliamentarians and English constituencies for what is an age-old debate about English votes for English laws. It almost belittles the detailed work done in many Committee sittings, where the hard work of making law has been happening but in a more constructive and mature way. I would not want us to lose sight of that. People watching on television—if anyone was watching it—might have been left with the inaccurate impression that Parliament was not doing its job and that this is a superficial way to pass laws, which is not the case at all.

Turning to the Bill, we support the measures relating to the staircase tax and the Supreme Court ruling. We recognise that it was a quirk of the system when the matter went to court and that it was not the original intention of legislation, but there remains concern about the financial impact on local authorities. In private meetings and in Committee, we requested a breakdown of the implications for each local authority in the country, but we have not to date had that information and so have not been able to assess the impact of this financial change on each local authority.

The Government will say that that is because the Supreme Court ruling meant that some local authorities were, for a short period, financially better off than had the ruling not been given, but many councils set their budgets based on that financial information, so some will face a net loss when, because of this change, money they were expecting from business rates does not come in. For some, the loss might be very minor, but for others it could be significant, depending on the make-up of properties within their local authority area. It would therefore have been reassuring to see that list today.

The agreement between central and local government is that, where central Government makes a change to the financial settlement and rules and regulations that has a net effect on local government budgets, councils ought to be compensated. Local Government and the Local Government Association—I declare an interest as vice-president of the LGA—are concerned about what it means when the Government make changes that can materially affect the financial base of local authorities but then do not provide financial compensation. Notwithstanding that, we recognise that the Government have heard the calls from business and ratepayers and have taken action. That should be welcomed.

Empty properties are a big issue. There are around 200,000 empty properties in this country at a time of a housing crisis. We know that 120,000 children in this country are without a permanent home and living in temporary accommodation. So the housing crisis is very real. Part of the problem with the Bill is that it addresses some types of empty property but not others. About 20% of properties in parts of London are empty. They are owned by wealthy individuals and institutions, but in requesting a review. Requesting a review of rateable value may cause it to increase dramatically, and there is a risk that by asking for a review, small businesses could lose out as a result of what is otherwise a very good measure. I ask the Government to consider how we can ensure that they will not have to pay large sums of money as a result of new valuations. However, I—along with, I am sure, all other Members—support the Bill. It is a very important measure, and I trust that it will become law as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.
Housing and Homes

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That this House has considered housing and homes.

I am delighted to be leading this debate in my new role as Housing Secretary. I pay tribute to the reforms so ably led by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid).

I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House as I consider the next steps on the Government’s housing agenda, but our priority—my priority—remains to build the homes our country needs. It is to deliver on the ambition of families and of those starting out in life to have a home that they can call their own, to give people security in their homes, and to take further action to combat homelessness and rough sleeping.

I know there is more to do to fix the broken housing market, and to provide the opportunities and, quite simply, the stability that previous generations took for granted and that is being denied to today’s families and young people. It feels unfair, and that is because it is; they are being held back through no fault of their own, and as a result our country is being held back. So we need to act to help people and address the fact that we simply need to build more homes. This Government understand that and understand what is needed: more homes of the right type and quality and in the right places. We must ensure that they are affordable and that the housing market works for all parts of our community.

We are making good progress on housing supply. We have delivered over 1.1 million homes since 2010. In 2016-17 some 217,350 new homes were delivered, the highest number in all but one of the last 30 years. Since 2013 we have helped over 158,000 households on to the housing ladder through our Help to Buy equity loan, and 81% of them were first-time buyers. At the autumn Budget we cut stamp duty for first-time buyers, benefiting 69,000 households to date, and also announced over £15 billion of new financial support for house building over the next five years. This brings our total support for housing to at least £44 billion over this period.

However, I know we need to do more to deliver an average of 300,000 homes a year by the middle of the next decade. It will not be easy, but we are determined to get there, and this requires a major push in three areas: improved planning and faster build-out; delivering infrastructure; and diversifying the house building market.

Siohbhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the last time the Government’s target of 300,000 homes in a year was met was in 1969, when not only was the private sector developing, but so too were the councils and housing associations? What can he do to ensure that councils and housing associations can expand their activities?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady will be aware of the borrowing cap issue and how we have made changes around that, and I also gently point out that when her party was in power house building starts fell by 45% in 12 years and the number of homes purchased in England fell by over 40%. I make that point to underline that there are challenges that have existed for many years under a number of different Governments, and that is why this Government are determined to make progress and address the key issues that I have highlighted.

First, on planning and build-out, this Government recently set out a bold and comprehensive approach via our new national planning policy framework. This will help us to build more high-quality homes in the places people want to live. The consultation recently closed and my Department is looking carefully at the responses we received. The framework implements reforms from the housing White Paper and further steps announced at the Budget. It also strengthens our commitment to protect the green belt. Our framework makes it clear that local authorities must pursue all options, such as brownfield land and increasing density on urban sites, before looking to the green belt. Alongside this, we have announced our intention to consult on a permitted development right to build upwards.

The framework also clarifies how our new method of assessing housing need will work. It will help all communities to have a clear understanding of the homes they need while maintaining the importance of local and neighbourhood plans.

Planning permissions are up. That is good news, but a planning permission is not helpful if it is not turned into a home. That is why our housing delivery test is tackling unjustified delays in housing delivery. Local authorities must be accountable to make sure that homes in their area are not only planned but delivered.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I welcome the point that the Minister makes about building on brownfield sites first, but how much credence is he going to give to residents groups who have objections to building on the green belt? An example would be the Kings Hill estate in Coventry, around Cromwell Lane and Westwood Heath. All those residents are objecting to building on the green belt, so how seriously is he going to take their views?

James Brokenshire: This is why I made my point about the national planning policy framework and how it fits within the local plan structure, with which I know the hon. Gentleman will be more than familiar. We are looking carefully at the thousands of representations that have been made—as I have said, the consultation closed in the last week or so—to ensure that there is protection for the green belt.

This is equally about understanding what lies behind the slow build-out rates. Work is being done on this by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), and his report is due by the Budget this year. If he finds evidence of unacceptable land-banking, I again say that we will not hesitate to act.
Our second focus is on the facilities needed to deliver homes faster. We are making serious investments in roads, schools and communities. For this reason, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer doubled the housing infrastructure fund to £5 billion in his autumn Budget. Soon after, we announced the first initiatives of the fund. They involve 133 marginal viability fund projects worth a total of £866 million, and they have the potential to unlock up to 200,000 new homes.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some excellent points. He referred to the requirement for local authorities to have up-to-date local plans. He might be aware that York, which adjoins my constituency, has not had a local plan since the 1950s, which has put added pressure on other local areas such as Ryedale and Hambleton. Will he commit to stepping in to write local plans for authorities that do not bring forward their plans in good time?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Local plans are central to setting out how and where local authorities expect to meet residents’ needs for new homes. He has highlighted one council that has had issues, and we will certainly be monitoring the position in York closely. If further significant delays occur, intervention will be reconsidered. We have decided that intervention will continue in three local council areas—Castle Point, Thanet and Wirral—and we will now send in a team of planning experts, led by the Government’s chief planner, to advise on the next steps in that intervention.

As I have already highlighted, this is about looking at infrastructure. That includes projects that are part of the housing packages that we have agreed with the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. We have launched a new, more assertive housing agency, Homes England, which will work to secure land and unlock development on brownfield sites. We are also reforming the system of developer contributions so that developers will know the contributions expected of them and local communities are clear about the infrastructure that they will get alongside new homes.

Thirdly, we want to see a wider range of house builders helping us to deliver more homes. In the past, more than 60% of new homes were delivered by small firms. Today, the number is less than half that, despite the fact that SME builders are keen to contribute. This is why we are supporting these builders to deliver and grow through our home building fund. Over 70% of the original £1 billion short-term home building fund has already been allocated to support SMEs, custom builders and innovators in helping us to deliver more than 25,000 homes. At the autumn Budget, this Government added another £1.5 billion to the fund.

It is right that we are taking action in these areas, but we must not lose sight of the basic issue of fairness. With this in mind, I was delighted that the Tenant Fees Bill was introduced to Parliament soon after my appointment. This very welcome measure delivers on our commitment to end costly letting fees, putting more money in tenants’ pockets. The Bill will also cap tenancy deposits, ensuring that the deposit that they pay at the start cannot exceed six weeks’ rent. For too long, tenants have been stung by unexpected costs such as double-charging for the same services. The Bill will put a stop to such unfair practices, and it complements other measures we have taken to make renting fairer.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about fairness. What will he do to ensure fairness for those who buy new houses? Sixty-nine per cent of new houses in the north-west were sold as leaseholds, purely and simply so that home buyers can be financially exploited into the future. What will the right hon. Gentleman do to ensure fairness for them?

James Brokenshire: I will come to the point about leasehold that the hon. Lady highlights, but first I want to finish considering some of the issues in relation to tenancies.

Last month, the Department set up a database of rogue landlords and agents and introduced banning orders. That will make it easier for local authorities to act against rogue landlords and agents to protect tenants. We will shortly consult on options to support landlords to offer longer tenancies to those who want them.

Buyers, too, are getting a fairer deal under this Government. We are determined to make the process of buying a home easier, cheaper and less stressful. As part of that, we put out a call for evidence. That has helped us to identify some practical steps we can take to achieve this goal.

We are also cracking down on abusive practices in the leasehold market. We will legislate to ban the development of new build leasehold houses, except in exceptional circumstances. We will restrict ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I want to comment on the point about renters. We often hear that people are forced to move frequently because they do not have long tenancies. My right hon. Friend might be interested to know that the average length of a tenancy in the private sector is 4.3 years and the most common reason for its coming to an end is the tenant wanting it to.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for putting those facts on the record. However, all the reforms for buyers and renters are united by one aim: to improve fairness, standards and affordability across the board.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On new build leaseholds, is my right hon. Friend prepared to consider an exemption for the retirement market where retirement living has particular requirements? Is he prepared to meet a delegation of hon. Members to discuss that?

James Brokenshire: I would certainly be happy to meet my right hon. Friend and others to discuss that issue. I note his points, although we maintain our views on the broader issue of abusive practices in the leasehold market. However, I will certainly listen carefully to him and others.

Affordability has become an issue and that was why the Prime Minister pledged a further £2 billion of investment in the affordable homes programme, increasing its budget to more than £9 billion. In the spring statement, we allocated an additional £1.67 billion of that funding to London, where the affordability crisis is most acute. That money will enable London to build a further
The Secretary of State may be new to the job, but he has been in government since the start in 2010. Surely he cannot look at the Government’s eight-year housing record and conclude that more of the same is what is needed. After eight years of failure on all fronts, how is the answer more of the same when, since 2010, we have seen 1 million fewer under-45s owning their own home and the lowest level of home ownership for 30 years? How can the answer be more of the same on homelessness when it has risen every year since 2010, and we now have 120,000 children growing up with no home? And how can the answer be more of the same when private renters face rents that are soaring way ahead of incomes? The average rent is now £1,800 a year more than before.

Finally, house building rates are still lower than they were at their peak under Labour, and fewer new social rented homes were started last year than at any time since records began.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that last year’s figure of 217,000 additional homes is the second highest in the past 25 years. Completion levels have risen 30% and starts have risen 85% from their low points under Labour. He must welcome those increases in activity in the housing market.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is a hard-working, loyal Back Bencher, and I have to give him credit. He is making some of the same arguments the Secretary of State made when he said the Government are making good progress on supply. In truth, a full decade on from the worldwide financial crash, house building is still below the level it was before that global downturn.

Siobhain McDonagh: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the article in The Huffington Post at the beginning of the week, suggesting that 1,000 homeless families from Birmingham have been housed tens of miles away from their schools, families and jobs? Does he agree that that is probably because London councils are busy placing their homeless families in Birmingham, because that is the only way they can afford to house them, given the public purse spent £1 billion on temporary accommodation last year?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. The number of families—now nearly 80,000—living in temporary accommodation because there are no homes available, let alone homes in their own area, is a scandal that shames us all. I am interested to hear what the Secretary of State has to say. It is not just in Newham; he has been in government since 2010, since when his own council has seen a fivefold increase in the number of families without a home living in temporary accommodation.

The Secretary of State said that we are now investing more in affordable homes, and he cited £9 billion, which of course is the figure for the rest of this Parliament. Even if that money is spent, spending will still be half the level it was in Labour’s last year. To give people a measure of it: in Labour’s last year, spending on building new, badly needed affordable homes was £4 billion; and last year, under this Government, whatever they say, it was less than half a billion pounds. No wonder we saw 40,000 new social rented homes started in 2009, in that last Labour year, and last year we saw fewer than 1,000.
The £28 million for the Housing First pilots is welcome, but let me gently say to the Housing Secretary that that is a small drop when compared with the £996 million the National Audit Office says is the annual cut in the Supporting People programme since 2010—a programme to help the homeless. Finally, the right hon. Gentleman makes the welcome argument that we need more social rented homes, but what does he say to the residents in his own area, where 6,022 are on the council waiting list and the number of new social homes rented homes built last year was zero? He has a lot to pick up on and a lot to learn.

We have seen eight years of failure on all fronts since 2010, and it is no wonder that the Prime Minister admitted that housing was a big part of why her party did badly at last year’s general election. As the Secretary of State has said, as the Prime Minister has said and as I have argued, the housing market is broken, and housing policy is failing to fix it.

I say to Conservative Members that at the heart of Tory policy is the wrong answer to the wrong question. Ministers talk big about total house building targets, but what new homes we build and who they are for is just as important as how many we build. Simply building more market-priced homes will not help many of those who face a cost-of-housing crisis, because that can influence prices only in the very long term. We have to build more affordable homes if we want to make homes more affordable, and the public know that. It is why eight out of 10 people now say the Government should be doing more to get new affordable homes built.

The public expect much more of Ministers—more urgency, more responsibility, more investment and more action to fix this broken housing market. That is why Labour has set out a bold, long-term plan for housing. We have made the commitment, with the plan to back it, that under a Labour Government we would see 1 million new genuinely affordable homes built over 10 years: the largest council house building programme for more than 30 years, building those new affordable homes at a rate we have not seen in this country since the 1970s. The very term “affordable” has been so misused by Ministers that it is mistrusted by the public, so Ministers should drop it and replace it with a new Labour definition linked to local incomes, not pegged to market prices.

We must build for those who need it, including the most vulnerable and the poorest, with a big boost to new social homes built as part of the programme, but we should also build Labour’s new affordable homes, both to rent and to buy, for those in work and on ordinary incomes, who are priced out of the housing market and being failed by current housing policy. These people are the just-coping class in Britain. They are the people doing the jobs we all depend on—IT workers, delivery drivers, call centre workers, teaching assistants, electricians and nurses. They are the backbone of our economy and the heart of our public services. This is the same Labour aspiration that led Aneurin Bevan to talk of the “living tapestry” of mixed communities as he led the big house building programme after the second world war.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman’s leader is a keen fan of rent control to cap the total level of rents. Although that may superficially sound attractive, the right hon. Gentleman will understand the impact it will have on the prospects for that market; we may see people leave that market, so there will be fewer homes. Is he too a keen advocate of rent capping?

John Healey: I am surprised if the hon. Gentleman has not already done so, but he should read the housing manifesto that I launched with the Labour leader during the election campaign last year. It pledged longer tenancies, with a cap on the rent increases during that period. I shall come to the Labour plans for private renters in a minute. This debate is about differing views and very different visions of the housing problems that people face and the solutions that the country requires.

Our determination to get built the new genuinely affordable homes that are needed in this country was redoubled after the terrible Grenfell Tower fire. When the Grenfell survivors who contributed to our review say that “tenants were victims before the fire” and “we’re treated as second class citizens in social housing”, it is clear that radical, root-and-branch reform is required, so we will build more and we will build better, as the public sector has always done in housing. We will have leading-edge standards on energy efficiency and smart-tech design, so that Labour’s new affordable homes will be people’s best choice, not their last resort.

A huge majority of us in Britain aspire to buy our own home, yet the dream is currently denied to millions, especially young people facing a lifetime locked out of the housing market. We set out in our Green Paper a plan for Labour’s living rent homes, which would have rents set at no more than a third of average local household incomes and would be aimed at ordinary working families, young people and key workers—those who need to be able to save a bit for a deposit or who need a bit more to spend on the other things they need.

Labour’s low-cost home ownership home would be a new type of low-cost home, called first-buy homes. Again, they would be discounted, so that mortgage payments would be no more than a third of average local incomes. Crucially, the discount on those homes would be locked in so that it could potentially benefit not just the first-time buyer, but future first-time buyers.

Mr Jim Cunningham: In the past, local authorities were able to handle housing crises, such as when way back in the ’60s they were building 300,000 homes a year. Having said that, local authorities also built houses for sale, helped first-time buyers and actually offered mortgages. It was the Thatcher Government who abolished that. Can we not do something about that?

John Healey: My hon. Friend might be interested to read the fine detail of the Green Paper that we launched last month, because it makes the commitment to look into enabling local authorities once more to provide mortgages for local people who may find the mortgage market closed off to them.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman just committed to a policy of permanent discount. Is he aware that lenders generally do not involve themselves in those types of purchase, because
they find the perpetual discount is very unattractive on repossession? When we had similar products in the past, such as the price discount covenant, only one or two lenders got involved and they required relatively high deposits.

John Healey: I have less concern than the hon. Gentleman about that. I recommend that he read the Green Paper. The point of Labour’s proposal is to create almost a parallel market that is permanently affordable to local people who are in work and on ordinary incomes—the very people the Government are currently failing and to whom the housing market is closed. [ Interruption. ] I give way to the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon). No? I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker. Labour’s policy on home ownership is about first-buy homes, first dibs for local people in all new developments and tightly targeted Help to Buy. That is the real hope that first-time buyers need.

I promised to come back to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) on private renters. Since 2010, the number of households renting privately has gone up by more than a third, and there are now 5 million households renting privately throughout the country. The one thing that we cannot do is see a slide back to those bad old days around the time of the second world war, when we had private rented housing that was unregulated, overpriced and badly maintained, and it was the only default housing for people earning ordinary incomes. What is needed is very clear: it is Labour’s plan for legal minimum standards, longer tenancies, a cap on rent rises and local licensing to drive out the rogue landlords. They are similar consumer rights that we all expect and all have in other markets, but not in housing.

Finally, the tragedy and unforgivable scandal of the rising levels of homelessness in this country, particularly of those sleeping rough in the streets, is that we know what works because we have done it before. We did it before when the country was faced with rising homelessness in the early 2000s. Our action as a Government then led to the independent Crisis and Joseph Rowntree Foundation homelessness monitor to declare that, by 2009, we had in this country seen what it called an unprecedented decline in homelessness. We back the new Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—we pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—for steering it through. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak, and that we have a limited time. We will start with a time limit of five minutes.

5.2 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): It is clear from what we have already heard that the Secretary of State, the Government’s previous housing White Paper and Labour’s Front-Bench team all agree that house building is in crisis, and I agree with that. There are many possible solutions, but I wish to propose just two in the limited time that I have, which, if we start now, could be big and bold enough to make a difference.

The first is to overhaul our slow, expensive, uncertain and conflict-ridden planning laws to give people a legal right to build up, not out, in towns and cities without needing planning permission. I am talking about creating good-looking four and five-storey town houses and mansion blocks rather than sky-high tower blocks, and about giving back local character to our town and cityscapes by letting councils issue local design codes, so that new buildings match local architectural styles or use local materials, killing off town estates of identical homes, which all look the same no matter where one is in the country. Building up, not out, will transform house building, whether it is to own or to rent. Most of Britain’s towns and cities are, on average, two storeys tall, so going up in four or five storeys in urban areas would almost double, at a stroke, the amount of buildable living space in British homes.

Britain’s housing associations are right behind the idea. The scheme would attract much-needed new investment to regenerate and save tired or rundown town and city centres. It would be greener because building in towns and cities would cut urban sprawl, taking pressure off green fields, and letting people live closer to work and commute less. It would also encourage those small and medium-sized builders that we were hearing about before and new entrants to the house building industry, breaking the power of the big housing developers which currently ration supply to keep prices high. This would make housing cheaper for hard-pressed 20 or 30-somethings, whether they want to rent or buy.

My second idea is to get people building faster once planning permission is granted and to give local communities a share in the value that is created when permission is given. At the moment, the value of an acre of land goes up by at least 10 times—often by a whole lot more—when it gets planning permission.

[James Cartlidge]
That happens before a single brick has been laid or a single home has been built. The value of actually designing and building beautiful houses to rent or buy is far less than the trading gains made by land speculators.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Should not the Government at least look seriously at land value taxation? It is about time that we had a proper review of how the issue that the hon. Gentleman is describing can be capped by land value taxation.

John Penrose: The hon. Gentleman leads me to my next point.

The current situation is the wrong way around. It should not be easier to buy land, do nothing, aim to get planning permission and then flip for a profit than it is to build houses. From a moral and an economic standpoint, design and construction should be the things that add value to land, not hope or speculation. Planning permission is a huge and value-creating decision. The decision is taken by each local community, so they should see some of the value that is created. We need a tax on the speculators’ profits, paid straight to local councils on the day that planning permission is given or changed, in order to fund the local services that turn dormitories into communities.

Mr Bacon: It is great to hear a radical speech. I hope that those on the Government Front Bench are listening carefully. Will my hon. Friend come to the next Right to Build expo, which is run by the Right to Build Task Force, and speak about lowering the barriers to entry so that more new players can come in? For example, governors of high schools or NHS trusts wanting to use housing as a recruitment and retention device should be able to get involved in this space.

John Penrose: I would be delighted to accept my hon. Friend’s invitation.

Fortunately we do not need a new tax, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned, to achieve this value acquisition. Here’s one we prepared earlier—the community infrastructure levy. The levy nearly does what we need and could easily be tweaked so that it does what we need by making it simpler and broader with fewer exemptions. It would be simpler, faster, cheaper and more predictable for developers, planners and landowners alike. Best of all, the revised community infrastructure levy would completely replace the hideously overcomplicated section 106 agreements, with all their uncertainty, unpredictability and lawyer-friendly viability assessments.

Finally, in order to get developers building faster, councils should be able to charge business rates and council tax starting from the day that planning permission is granted, rather than when developers finally get round to start building. We could give big developers a few months’ grace to get their crews on site, but then the meter would start running. They would have a huge incentive to build and sell promptly, rather than to take their time.

Equally important, the same forces would apply to the hedge funds that own derelict brownfield land in town and city centres. These sites already have old, unused permissions, so the clock would start ticking immediately. Just think of the enormous shot in the arm—the jolt of adrenaline—that we would give to urban regeneration projects everywhere, right across the country, if the owners could no longer sit on them for years waiting for something to turn up.

As the Government’s housing White Paper says, the only way to make homes more affordable to rent or buy is to build a whole lot more of them. I agree. There is no time to waste, otherwise house prices will continue to spiral and we will lock another generation out of the dream of a place of their own.

5.8 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am glad that this is a general debate on housing, because it allows me to draw attention to the different directions of policy throughout the UK and the results of these policies. The UK Government have said that they want to reassure voters that they are taking the housing crisis seriously, yet the facts suggest the very opposite. I was actually quite happy to hear the Secretary of State say that the Government are looking into the Housing First scheme, which I believe was developed in Finland, and is about providing people with security and stability as a starting point. That seems like a step in the right direction, but again the facts show a different story. House building has fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, evictions are at record levels, and a mere one in five council homes has been replaced when sold.

Crisis says that 9,100 people are sleeping rough across Great Britain at any one time. We see homeless people all the time. Quite often we pass them coming into work, at Portcullis House and the underground station. Crisis has said that unless there is a significant shift in Government policy, the number of rough sleepers is projected to increase by 76% in the next 10 years. When it surveyed councils for its report, “The homelessness monitor: England 2018”, it found that 70% said that they had difficulties in finding social housing for homeless people last year. It is important to stress that homelessness does not just mean rough sleeping, as I know that many Members are aware. It includes people staying with friends and family, and people living in overcrowded conditions or in poor conditions that affect their health.

In their manifesto for the general election, the Tories included a flagship pledge to build a new generation of social housing. Everybody knows that this is something the UK is crying out for, yet within weeks of the election the Government U-turned on that pledge.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady said that house building had fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, yet in 2008-09 new housing starts were 88,000 and last year they were 163,000. Where does she get her figures from?

Mhairi Black: Hold on and I will tell you. [Interruption.] Did the hon. Gentleman say, “From the Labour party manifesto”? Actually, they were from an article in The Independent. I will be happy to send it to him.

What adds another layer of incompetence and complication to all this is that there seems to be total denial on the Government’s part as to the further negative impacts that universal credit is having on the housing crisis. A report this month from the Scottish Government has shown that in East Lothian, for example, 72% of social housing tenants claiming universal credit were in arrears, compared with 30% of all tenants. Similarly, any action to tackle barriers to landlords offering longer
and more secure tenancies has been kicked into the long grass, with the Government instead announcing yet another consultation to add to the 15 already ongoing consultations relating to the private rented sector. The Scottish Government are taking a different ideological and political direction in the areas where they can. The SNP scrapped the Thatcherite right-to-buy policy, freeing up thousands of homes from falling into private rented properties, and we have at least attempted to put back in place some safeguarded housing stock for future generations. Since 2007, we have built more homes per head than in England and Wales—48,000 more than England’s rate, equating roughly to a town the size of Paisley. The Scottish Government have now delivered nearly 71,000 affordable homes since 2007. But we decided that that still was not good enough, so when we set a target of wanting 30,000 affordable homes by 2021, we decided, no, we are going to increase that to 50,000. We know the kinds of pressures that we are putting on ourselves, but, as we are all aware, this issue desperately needs the attention of Governments.

The Scottish Government are attempting to do all this while being saddled with paying £453.8 million in mitigating the effects of and protecting people from the very worst of Tory austerity. The Scottish Government fund the full mitigation of the bedroom tax, which would otherwise affect over 70,000 individuals who would lose an average of about £650 a year. If this is the good that the Scottish Government are able to do under intense pressure, often through no fault of our own, let us imagine what good the UK Government could do if they just made a simple change in direction.

5.13 pm

Adam Holloway: (Gravesham) (Con): I am going to speak about street homelessness, because what I observed recently in the seven days that I spent living on the streets of London and in my constituency was a very serious problem of accommodation for single men, and particularly single men who are mentally ill.

Twenty-seven years ago I did the same thing for several months, living as a homeless person but also a homeless mentally ill person. Some things were very similar, as we would expect, and some were very different. What was very different this time was that people like the Mayor of London, Westminster City Council and the Prime Minister are at last taking this problem enormously seriously. What was also very different was that, by my reckoning, about 60% of homeless people in London are born overseas. Indeed, when I was camped out in Covent Garden, I was sleeping next to a very nice Italian and Romanian couple. What is the same, though, is that the same mentally ill and drug-addicted people are still roaming the streets of our cities. The kindness of the public and of churches, mosques, gurdwaras and the staff of amazing organisations such as St Mungo’s was also the same.

What I learned this time round is that it is complicated. Each individual has a different reason for being on the streets, and their problem is not primarily homelessness, although of course that is a problem; it is the reason they are homeless that we need to address if we are going to get anywhere. For example, on one night I was camped out behind the goods-in entrance of McDonald’s by Westminster station. I am sure many Members have seen all those people taking this horrendous drug Spice. I was sleeping next to a young man from the north of England who was an alcoholic, and he had four cans of beer by the time I woke up on the Saturday morning. He showed me the keys to his home, which was somewhere north of London, but was on the streets because he was lonely and an alcoholic.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and it enriches this place to hear the experience of those who have been on the frontline. Does he agree that his experience underlines why we should not jump to conclusions and generalisations about those who are on the streets, but should deal with each case on its merits?

Adam Holloway: Absolutely. We have to segment the homeless as much as we can. The Prime Minister has made an extraordinary commitment to end street homelessness within 10 years, but if we are really serious about solving the problem, we have to see people as individuals. We have to differentiate between different groups. We have to accept that some people have made a lifestyle choice. We have to ask whether the large number of foreign nationals really are here looking for work. We have to be honest and have the courage to look at whether the provision of services to homeless people is enabling able-bodied people to live on the streets, where they quickly get into a whole other load of difficulties.

We also need to think about whether public kindness is enabling addiction. The guy I slept next to outside the McDonald’s goods-in entrance got £30 on the Sunday night from kind members of the public, but that was enabling his addiction. Indeed, one of the homeless workers told me after I had finished making the programme that someone they looked after who was a heroin addict and was in a wheelchair, having lost a leg, firmly believed that if the public had not been so kind to him, he would have sought treatment a lot earlier, but he was able to continue with his addiction because of that kindness from the public.

We also need to accept that we cannot add to our population year after year and not build new homes and not expect that to have some knock-on effect on the people at the very bottom. We also have to accept the impact of the cost of housing. I was sleeping in the doorway of a shop on Tottenham Court Road, and two or three of the people there were actually going off to work, but they slept there because they would rather not, and probably could not, afford to spend £1,000 a month on housing. We need to look at whether, by lumping everyone together, we are making it harder for people who are in the direst need. Most of all, in this welfare state of ours, we need to try to rescue the people at the very bottom from roaming the streets of our cities.

I am making a brief speech because I had a Westminster Hall debate on this subject recently, and others wish to speak. We need to look at the root causes of homelessness, look at each individual and rapidly intervene when they need it, for the mentally ill and the drug addicted, otherwise we will get nowhere.
5.19 pm

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I would like to spend the few minutes available to me in this debate to talk about the financial abuse that arises from the growing practice of selling newly built houses as leaseholds. Over 1 million houses in England and Wales are leasehold properties, and 15% of new build houses in England are built and sold as leaseholds. In the north-east of England, the latest figures—from 2016—show that 69% of newly built houses are sold as leasehold, many of them in my constituency. That is a much higher figure than in any other area or region in England, so the issues that arise are particularly prevalent in the north-west. Many constituents have come to talk to me about problems that have arisen from buying their dream home as a leasehold and suddenly finding out that it is not what they thought it was going to be.

I want to talk about two estates in my constituency—Gateacre Park and Cressington Heath. In Gateacre Park, 40 properties sold as leaseholds were newly built houses on 250-year leases. The roads in the development are to be adopted by the local authority at the end of the work, so there are no maintenance charges. In Cressington Heath, homes have been sold on 999-year leases. It is a private estate, and the roads are not to be adopted when it is finished, so people will be expected to pay ongoing maintenance charges into the far future.

A number of constituents have come to me to complain that not only were they not aware of the full extent of the issues involved in the meaning of leasehold property or of the ongoing financial obligations, but that many of them, having been promised that they would have the option to buy their leasehold, have discovered that, even on a long lease such as one of 250 years, they will be charged up to 20 times the ground rent. A figure of £5,600 has been quoted to people on the Gateacre Park estate, when it should not in reality be any more than about £2,000. On the Cressington Heath estate, people have been given different figures covering anything up to £17,500—£12,500, plus of course the freeholder’s legal fees—all to escape the escalating ground rents that are being charged.

I therefore welcome the fact that the Government have decided they will do something about this issue. They will prevent the sale of new houses as leaseholds—that is good and welcome, although it has not of course happened yet, and we await the legislation—and make the ground rent a peppercorn rent. However, my concern is that many existing leaseholders are already being exploited, and how far will the Government’s proposals help them? They are stuck in limbo: they are unable to sell their property except at a discount, because there is increasing awareness of the problems of buying leasehold houses, which is affecting the price of properties. I know of constituents who have lost sales as a consequence of their revealing that their houses are in fact leasehold properties.

There is another issue on which I would like a response from the Government. I do not believe that their proposals deal with the ongoing issue of freeholders increasingly selling the freehold—at inflated prices, but none the less agreeing to sell the freehold—but importing many of the restrictive covenants into the transfer document. I am not at all sure that it is lawful under the leasehold reform legislation. Some technical legal points have not been litigated, so I am not sure that that is lawful.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that some companies see the leasehold issue as so toxic that they are moving away from it altogether, as a local company has done in my constituency?

**Maria Eagle**: I welcome that fact, but what tends to happen is that companies add an extra £5,600 or so on to the initial purchase price and then put restrictive covenants into the transfer document.

I have constituents who have been told that into the far future, even when they are freeholders, they will have to pay to get permission to change their mortgage provider, paint their door a different colour or make any alteration to their garden or property. That is not a proper freehold; it is finding a way to make sure that restrictive covenants can carry on, be sold on and then used financially to exploit people who have such restrictions in their deeds—whether in a lease or in a transfer document when the freehold is transferred.

I want the Government to go further than they have so far said they will go and consider banning some of these ridiculous restrictive covenants from being put into transfer documents as well as into leases. If they were to do that, I might be able to welcome their package of measures rather more than I have been able to so far.

5.24 pm

**Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I acknowledge the Government’s commitment to bettering the housing market, to which end a total of £44 billion of capital funding, loans and guarantees has been pledged, up to 2022-23.

As we have said, more than 1.1 million houses have been delivered since 2010—217,000 last year—and a target is in place to deliver 300,000 net additional homes per year on average by the mid-2020s. House building needs to be tailored to each region and met with the appropriate infrastructure, and I am pleased to say that the Government have taken measures to address that, with the £866 million fund specifically designed for housing-related infrastructure. It has already funded 133 projects.

However, it is time to consider how those incentives can be more effectively unlocked and rendered less bureaucratic—a source of concern for those who are in the industry and those facilitating developments more generally. National development plans need to both make way and create incentives for local authorities to engage in house building and infrastructure building. The “development control” mentality has not served everyone well for the past 50-plus years. In my view, real localism—not just the lip-service variety—will work more effectively with a network of unitary authorities with realistic tax bases relative to their cost bases that do not excessively hem in their urban or even suburban core with significant council tax implications.

I am pleased that that is now policy at Northampton Borough Council. It has endorsed that vision, which will assist the town’s prosperity in all sorts of ways. In the context of today’s debate, it will allow expansion without the risk of conflicting local plans, allow better
highways and housing integrated working and promote joined-up thinking between housing, social care and health.

I want to mention compulsory purchase orders, which I have reservations about. Although they can boost success in the short term—notably, with some of the developments in the 1950s and 1960s—they have to be used sparingly where compelling national or local key interests are at stake and not just for convenience.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of those local pressures could be the need for a local authority to deliver brownfield regeneration? That might be in multiple ownership and otherwise would not be brought forward for good use—new homes and new commercial premises.

Andrew Lewer: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. I have been careful in saying that the power has to be used sparingly in identifying a key interest and not that it should not be used. However, private property rights are, after all, the basis on which there is democracy in a free market economy and they should, generally speaking, be the default. Forcing people out of their homes or off their land for a common good can get out of hand, and we need to be aware of that.

Northampton, the town I represent, is extremely ambitious and focused on delivering the growth agenda. It has bold plans for private and council housing. Building the new north-west link will give the town a much needed full ring road to cope with the projected new housing being built around its edge. That need is a common, justified and long-standing grievance in Northampton. Northampton MPs have made speeches referring to the problem going back to the 1970s.

Like me, the local authority in Northampton is a supporter, not a member, of the Government—a critical friend—and its ideas include the lifting of the housing revenue account borrowing cap further than already intended and allowing mechanisms to encourage builders, such as charging fees when undischarged planning approvals become a year or two or more old. Northampton and the borough council have the plans and the vision. They are ready to translate that on to a broader and more unified—indeed, unitary—canvas, if the good actions the Government have taken to date to support them and our house builders can be improved and, yes, built upon.

5.29 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Housing is a central issue in my constituency, where, as across England, we face an acute housing shortage. For many years, home ownership grew in the Thames valley and across our country, with young people expecting to reach for many people, particularly for younger people in areas like Reading and Woodley in my constituency, where house prices have risen to unheard of levels. Much of the new housing being built is aimed at the more expensive end of the market and private rented accommodation is often very expensive, and some of it is poor quality and poor value for money.

We desperately need homes that are genuinely affordable. There is a severe shortage of council housing, affordable homes to buy and good-quality private rented accommodation. I welcome the Government’s interest in prioritising brownfield land. In my constituency and in many other former manufacturing towns in England, there is a huge amount of brownfield land that can be built on without eating into the countryside or public open spaces. Indeed, Reading Borough Council’s local plan has identified enough former light industrial and commercial land to provide almost all the housing needed until 2036. The council has also identified land to build 1,000 council houses. Reading Borough Council, like many other councils, is doing what it can to help.

The Minister will know that Reading Borough Council had plans to build 1,000 homes to meet the rising demand for accommodation. However, this had to be scrapped following the 2015 summer Budget delivered by the then Chancellor, George Osborne. The former Chancellor made a serious mistake when he changed the financial rules, making it harder for councils to borrow and pay back the cost of building council homes from the rental income gained once the houses are occupied.

By contrast, I was proud to stand on Labour’s manifesto commitment, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), to build at least 1 million affordable homes over the next five-year Parliament. Our record in government is clear. Between 1997 and 2010, we saw 2 million more homes built, a million more home owners and the biggest investment in social housing in a generation.

In the eight years since 2010, we have seen home ownership falling to a 30-year low and the lowest number of new social rented homes on record. The Government have cut investment in publicly funded affordable housing and relied instead on big developers to build, giving them too much control over what gets built. That is why in my area both Labour-run Reading Borough Council and Conservative-controlled West Berkshire District Council took the Government to court, winning a High Court challenge that means they and other councils can insist on more affordable housing being included in developments in accordance with their own local plan priorities. I hope that the Minister will consider that as a matter for potential policy change.

As I mentioned earlier, renting in my area is often expensive and can be poor quality. In my constituency, we have a particular problem with Victorian terraced houses that have not been fully modernised. Reading Borough Council and other Labour councils in Oxford and London have improved the regulation of landlords and have stood up for tenants, but much more could be done if the Government made it easier for councils to regulate the private rented sector.

At a local level, I have campaigned for a new deal on housing for young people, families and other residents who have been hit hard by the housing crisis. I am
working with local councillors and other MPs to tackle this issue and to press for a new approach. In Reading East, as I have mentioned to the Minister in other discussions, this approach could involve much more use of brownfield sites, tighter regulation to encourage developers to build more affordable homes, allowing councils to build council houses once again and protecting renters by giving councils more powers to regulate landlords.

The current housing situation is indeed a crisis; it is unacceptable and unsustainable. Young people and other groups have a right to decent and affordable housing, and I will continue to press the Government for the new deal on housing that those renters and owners deserve—a new deal that Labour would deliver.

5.34 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): We all know the importance of housing because we all hold surgeries and have families coming to see us, telling us their personal stories about the impact that the current housing market has on them. We need to build more homes. When I talk to people who develop and build homes, they still complain about the length of time it takes to go through the planning process. The Government really need to look at that.

We need to incentivise those who get planning permission to develop. I am not sure whether I would wholly agree with a penal tax system, but some kind of stick and carrot is needed to give people an incentive to get on and develop. When I drive around Poole, I see sites that have been sitting there for several years. One would think that if there were tax advantages to developing or tax penalties, at a modest level, that might just tip those sites into being developed.

We need to be more ambitious with our plans for helping young people to buy. The Help to Buy scheme is not ambitious enough, nor is the help to buy ISA. Bearing in mind the billions that we poured into the banks, it is a moral, social issue to do our best to get more people buying their own home, if it is right for them and they can afford it. We also need to understand that building is not the only solution. Managing the housing stock is very important. Local authorities talk about voids—these are empty properties—and we ought to be doing rather more to assist local authorities in making sure that the housing stock is being fully and efficiently used.

Mr Bacon: My hon. Friend mentioned the delays in the planning system, which still exist. He might be interested to know that when I visited the Netherlands in January, I was shown projects for which, because there is much greater planning certainty, planning consent is often given within two weeks.

Sir Robert Syms: That might be too efficient for the British system, given that everybody has to have their say. Nevertheless, I think we could do a lot better than we are doing.

There are a number of other areas in which we can do better, including managing the housing stock. I think there are something like 2 million empty flats over shops that are not being used by families. We all know about the major, substantial and probably permanent changes to the high street. We are over-shopped—many areas will never have shops, partly because of the impact of the internet. Perhaps the Government ought to be a bit more ambitious in turning some of those shops into homes. That would have the added win of bringing people back into our town centres and making them nicer places to live.

Our probate system is inefficient. At any one time, about 1 million homes are hung up in the probate system and cannot be sold because they are going through those legal processes. Why can we not look at the probate system to see whether we can clear houses through it before probate is granted or to try to just speed up the whole process? It is expensive enough as it is, and many homes cannot be used during that time.

In some parts of the country we are still demolishing homes, which cannot be a good thing to do. It is bad environmentally. Why do we not encourage more homesteading and give homes to people if they are willing to take them and do them up? These things can be done and they would increase the housing stock.

My final point is to do with private renting, which we all know has taken the strain over the past 10 to 15 years. We also know that many leases are for only 12 months. For peripatetic, young, single professionals, that is not a problem, but if people are married with two kids in a local school and they work locally, it is a problem, because first, there is the uncertainty each year about whether they can stay where they are; and secondly, quite often, for a variety of reasons—perhaps because the landlord wishes to sell or to put the rent up—families are forced to move. We should not forget that when families move, there is a very high cost. That includes the removal van and sometimes the cost of getting new bits and pieces, and so on. If a family with a child doing GCSEs has to move three or four times, it is not good for that child always to be moving into different homes.

If we are going to give security to people, it is right that we should give security to people who can buy. The social housing sector generally gives security to people, and of course we need to build more council homes, but we also need to give more security to those in the private rented sector. Somehow the Government, perhaps through tax incentives or capital gains incentives, ought to try to ensure that leases of three years or five years are available to families. That would take some of the pressure off families with children, who would feel much more content with their lot. Many of the 1.9 million people renting in London cannot afford to buy, so this is a big market, and a politically sensitive market: if people do not feel they have a stake in the country, and if they feel unsettled, they may well take it out on the party in government at the ballot box.

We need to be more creative and forceful in building homes, we need a better planning system, we need to manage our housing stock better and we need to address the glitches in the market so that we can increase the number of homes available. Ultimately, however, we also need to remember those who can only rent. We have no choice but to go to the private rented sector. They need rather more help from the Government than they are getting at the moment.
Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for this brief opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I am pleased to follow the thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms). I want to raise three quick points on the percentage of social housing in developments, the role of housing associations and registered social landlords, and leasehold issues and reform post-Grenfell.

Housing is the biggest issue in Poplar and Limehouse and Tower Hamlets in east London. Many of the problems the hon. Gentleman mentioned about voids and empty properties over shops do not exist in east London. Everything that empties is taken up almost immediately. We have 25,000 people on the waiting list, so there is huge pressure to use everything available.

On social homes, in the London mayoral election before last, Labour fought on a policy of 50% of new developments being social housing; the Conservatives fought on a policy of the market deciding. The 50% was probably not affordable for developers, but zero is a complete abandonment of responsibility. There has been a collapse in social renting in London since 2011-12. We now have affordable rents, but in my constituency, around Canary Wharf, affordable rents of 80% are just not tenable for local people: 700-square-foot one-bedroom flats at £400,000 and 900-square-foot two-bedroom flats at £500,000 is certainly not affordable for local people and key workers, as described by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the shadow Secretary of State.

In response to the point the hon. Member for Poole made about managing stock, when Labour came to power in 1997, 2 million homes in the social sector were below the decency threshold. We spent billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money bringing them up to standard, with new kitchens, bathrooms, double glazing, central heating and security. The method of delivery was mostly through housing associations. In the past 10 years in particular, we have seen changes to housing associations, with more mergers and acquisitions and bigger units. That is probably unavoidable, because the sharing of back-office functions makes them more efficient, but it is changing their ethos and attitude and taking them further away.

There are a lot of great registered social landlords in my constituency—Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association, Tower Hamlets Community Housing, Swan, EastendHomes and others—doing fantastic regeneration work, looking after local people and bringing private property for sale and rent to market. I would like to know, however, how the Government assess the success and failure of RSLs, because there are some bad ones out there. Is it just the housing ombudsman that can proclaim an RSL a bad organisation, or can the Government issue sanctions?

On leasehold, I accept a lot of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) made about gaps in leasehold reform, but I give the Government great credit for their progress on leasehold reform: more staff in the section in the Ministry, more senior positions, positive statements from the Prime Minister, Secretaries of State and Ministers and others, clear promises on ground rents, the consultation on commonhold, the Law Commission reporting, examination of property management companies and their failures, representation of residents, first-tier tribunal working and more. I give the Government great credit. A Conservative Government in 1993 tried to reform leasehold and made some progress but failed. Labour tried to do it in 2002 and failed. This time the Government must get it right, and we on the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform will do everything we can to help.

One area of extreme concern on which the Government are not making any progress concerns the bills faced by leaseholders for the removal and replacement of cladding, and waking watches and temporary fire alarms in those blocks where the cladding is demonstrated to be unsafe. Social landlords and councils have said that they will foot the bill, but private freeholders and developers are saying that leaseholders must foot the bill. Some of these leaseholders are facing bills of tens of thousands of pounds. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership is doing everything it can to advise them, but they do not have protection under the law. I know the Government are saying that they want freeholders and developers to pick up the tab, but we need to hear from the Government how much progress they are making, because people are at the end of their tether out there right across the country.

My constituency contains the second highest number of leasehold properties in the country, and the highest number of leasehold sales took place there in 2016. The failures identified at Grenfell are not just social housing failures; they involve private blocks as well. This goes across the piece, which is why the public inquiry and Dame Judith Hackitt’s review are so important.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I must reduce the speaking time limit to four minutes.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): The Government have set out an ambitious target for house building. I welcome the Secretary of State’s recognition that everyone deserves a home of their own, which is something with which we can all agree. According to projections by the Ministry, the number of households in England is expected to grow from 22.7 million in 2014 to 28 million in 2039. There are a number of factors behind that, but I am sure we can agree that it is a significant increase, and we must be mindful of the effects on existing communities.

We have successfully delivered more than 1.1 million new homes since 2010, and I welcome that commitment, as well as the help for first-time buyers with schemes such as starter homes and Help to Buy. The latter has already helped 387,000 people to buy a home of their own, and to get a foot on the property ladder. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention the genuine concerns that have been voiced in my constituency, and others across the country, about the effect of house building on communities. More consideration needs to be given to the need for the views and concerns of local communities to be taken properly into account in areas where house building is taking place.

It is not just a case of opposition to developments for their own sake, and it would be wrong to label those people nimbys. However, when concern is expressed...
about the way in which the developments will affect their quality of life and the strain that they will place on local services, action must be taken to ensure that those problems are remedied. The scale and design of such developments can cause resentment from the outset, but basic remedial action can often alleviate opposition. Building and infrastructure must go hand in hand, and section 106 agreements must be implemented sooner rather than later.

More consideration needs to be given to the provision of services such as schools and doctors’ surgeries, and to ensuring that homes are not built where flooding occurs and already congested roads are not made worse by additional vehicles. We need appropriate infrastructure, sympathetic design and landscaping, and highways that are as safe and uncongested as possible. Clear aims and guidance should be given to local authority planning departments on those objectives, so that problems do not occur from the moment that the houses are built.

Again, I welcome our ambitions to give people homes of their own. However, I urge my colleagues in the Ministry to take genuine concerns on board. I urge them to build to give people homes of their own, but also to plan to ensure that those people, and the existing community, have the quality of life that they so deserve.

5.48 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):
We are facing a situation in which, for the first time, children can expect to earn less than their parents, and, after decades in which the number of houses built has failed to keep up with demand, we have reached a crunch point at which home ownership is so impossibly expensive that it appears out of reach to a whole generation. The only solution is a long-term, sustainable programme of council house building, along with the provision of genuinely affordable homes.

As we have only a limited time in which to speak, I want to talk about the lucky few who have already realised the dream of buying their homes, but have found that it is all not quite as nice as they expected. As we already heard, 69% of houses built in the north-west in recent years have been leasehold, and as we know, leasehold is a can of worms. I hoped that the new Secretary of State would be present to hear for himself how rancid the whole business is.

According to research in my constituency, of those who purchased a leasehold property using a solicitor recommended by the developer, a staggering 92% said they were not fully informed of the ground rent terms when they bought their home. The result is that they have been unable to sell on their property. The illusion of home ownership is very real to them. The true owner of their property is likely to be an unaccountable, faceless investment company based offshore.

This matters because many of these accidental tenants have found that some of the terms in their lease, particularly in relation to ground rent, are so onerous that they cannot sell on their property. In one sense they are on the property ladder, but it is a ladder that only has one rung, and it is a rung that they are trapped on. If they find they are unable to move, they might want instead to improve their home and build an extension, but the permission fees for doing so, which are also in the lease, are so outrageous that it is not a realistic option. The term “fleecehold” has been created to describe these practices; the term sums up the avaricious nature of these freeholders quite nicely.

We all remain hopeful that there will be a satisfactory legislative solution to achieve a straightforward, efficient and fair process of enfranchisement either through Government legislation or my private Member’s Bill, but many thorny problems remain, particularly with covenants that involve fees and charges being levied on the home owner even after the freehold has been bought. And of course we need a thorough sort out of the fees that apply in the lease so that those who are not in a position to purchase the freehold are given confidence that those fees are reasonable.

In terms of fees that lie with the property regardless of the tenure, I refer to Gleeson Homes. It proudly proclaims to sell only freehold properties but it has a huge number of covenants that come with the land, and it is those that come with a fee that I am most interested in. Permission fees are levied for extensions and so on even if people just want to put a shed in. It says charges start at £200, but it does not say what they can rise to, and perhaps most ominously it says retrospective fees can be expensive. I really do not know why Gleeson wants to put itself in the position of a planning authority, but the key issue is that there are numerous ways in which developers can choose to earn funds but it does not always have to be through a series of opaque charges that are not always apparent to the home owner at the time of purchase.

We need developers to come clean with a full audit of everything that comes with the property that has an ongoing cost implication. The best way to do that is to undertake a Select Committee inquiry into the whole leasehold scandal so that we can have full transparency. There are many questions a Select Committee ought to ask. Why did developers decide to embark on this industrial-scale scam? What is the extent of ongoing charges that attach to properties? What were developers reporting to shareholders at the time they opened up this additional revenue stream? How did the lenders and the lawyers miss the fact that these leases might render the homes unsellable? What did those running Help to Buy think they were helping people to buy? And who exactly are the beneficiaries of those leases now?

If we are serious about meeting the housing needs of this country, we have to get a full understanding of how the cowboys, the spivs and the speculators were allowed to hijack this vital element of national infrastructure so that it is never allowed to happen again.

5.52 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who made some interesting remarks.

We also have to mention in the debate that the housing crisis, such as it is, is a localised crisis; too often in this Chamber we feel that London and the south-east represent the whole country. The housing crisis is particularly acute in the south-east, in constituencies such as mine, and there is huge demand for housing. However, that problem, such as it is, did not come out of a clear blue sky. It has evolved over the last several
The abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers was an example of the Government trying to help people—perhaps not in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), but certainly in constituencies such as mine—and it was widely appreciated. People were very happy to hear that that was what the Government had done.

On the subject of leasehold, I happen to share many of the sentiments that have been expressed today. The property law relating to leasehold is extremely complicated. Anecdotally, I know that, in the part of north-west London where my parents live, for example, flats with 125-year leases are being sold for huge amounts of money. Obviously, the value of those properties will decrease substantially as the lease runs out, and there is clearly a sense that developers are using leasehold law to rig the system for their own benefit. We should absolutely be looking at that and trying to stop it happening.

I am sorry to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) is no longer in his place. He made a brave speech earlier, in which he rightly distinguished between homelessness and the housing problem and the more particular problem of rough sleeping, which he rightly suggested was a much more individuated problem than is often suggested. Unlike many people in this House, he has actually experienced rough sleeping. I remember the initial programme that he did 27 years ago—[Interruption.] Well, he has been out on the street. That is more than I have done, and I suggest that it is more than most Opposition Members have done as well. They may mock and ridicule him, but he has actually made that step. He made some very pertinent remarks about the nature of rough sleeping, and he spoke particularly about drug addiction and alcoholism. The social problems associated with rough sleeping should not be used to obscure the wider problems of access to property and of rising prices keeping younger people out of the property market.

5.59 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I wonder how many of us here have experienced living in a home that is not fit for purpose and its damaging impact on a person’s physical and mental health. How many of us here have had to struggle to scrape together agency fees, find a deposit to put down on a rental property and find the first month’s rent, while still paying all the other basic bills, paying for essentials for the family and dealing with the added constant pressure of thinking about how ever to come out of the cycle of renting rather than owning a property? Countless times, well-meaning people have advised me, as a non-homeowner, that renting is throwing money away and that I really ought to save for a deposit on my own property. I think I can speak for most private renters when I say that, of course, that is everyone’s preferred route, but it is increasingly unlikely to happen because of the cost of living compared with income.

People who rent are faced with significant up-front costs and often very short tenures, and they have to pay more fees and find large deposits every time they move. Young people in particular have to move more often and, in England, the length of a let is so short that they face those up-front costs time and again.

Then there is the real problem of what the rented property is like. A home should not damage someone’s health, but we know that housing conditions can affect
a resident’s health and wellbeing in the most appalling ways. Housing conditions such as cold and damp can affect health, as can factors such as the accessibility of the home. One estimate put the cost of poor housing to the NHS at £1.4 billion a year in England. With a growing private rented sector in England and Wales, that cost is likely to increase.

Do not get me wrong: several million people live relatively happily in rented homes, but a substantial minority do not. Some 756,000 households live in privately rented properties that are likely to cause residents to need medical attention.

Since becoming an MP, I have witnessed at first hand the poor conditions that some people are living in. In the worst properties, you can smell the problems before you see them. Damp and cold have a distinctive smell. Working taxpayers in my constituency are paying private landlords for families to live in homes where the state of disrepair is jaw dropping: cupboards lined with black mould; broken and dangerous appliances—it is simply not good enough.

I want to speak briefly about homelessness. It is important to recognise that the rise in homelessness can be traced directly to decisions that the Tories have taken since 2010, despite their keenness to ignore and deny that. There have been 13 separate cuts to housing benefit since 2010, including the bedroom tax and breaking the link between private rented sector housing benefit and private rent. In addition, the National Audit Office has revealed that vital funding for homelessness services has fallen by 69% since 2010.

I am of the opinion that a home is a right, that a home should be comfortable and in no way damage a person’s health, and that people should be able to stay in the area where they were born if they want to do that.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): When my hon. Friend says that housing is a right and particularly that it is a right not to live in damp housing, does she agree that, thanks to the efforts of a Labour Member, tenants can now take their landlord to court, but they need legal support to do that?

Laura Smith: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

I am of the opinion that someone should be able to aspire to buy a property; that good-quality council housing should be available to those who require it; and that those who rent out properties have an obligation to look after them and the welfare of those they are making money out of. Finally, I am of the opinion that the only way that the housing and homelessness crisis in this country can be solved is by getting rid of this out-of-touch Conservative Government.

6.4 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith).

During the recent Public Accounts Committee inquiry into homelessness I, like many, was surprised to discover the large number of people who, although they are not technically classed as homeless, are living in temporary accommodation. More than 77,000 families are housed in temporary accommodation, which has a negative impact both on those living in often substandard accommodation and on the councils that pay to provide it.

Children living in temporary housing for long periods miss, on average, 55 days of school a year, which can have a devastating effect on their academic attainment. Not only that, temporary accommodation is the single largest item of councils’ homelessness expenditure, costing around £1 billion a year.

Despite more money being provided to tackle this issue, rising accommodation costs are affecting other areas of homelessness funding, leaving spending on prevention, administration and support down by 9% in real terms between 2010 and 2016. Ironically, to break the cycle and reduce costly demands, prevention action is key but, as most of the money is spent on lose-lose temporary accommodation, it is the ultimate Catch-22.

That is why the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the funding to which the Minister has committed are vital and will provide a shift in policy, focusing on prevention and ensuring that everyone who is homeless, or threatened with homelessness, will be able to get advice and support from their local authority. I am pleased that, in my area, Chichester District Council has already taken the initiative and appointed a dedicated homelessness officer to support those who are in this situation or at risk of needing temporary accommodation.

In the near term, building more houses is the only solution. The shortfall in housing stock has created price inflation, meaning that, nationally, house prices are nearly eight times annual earnings, but that is not uniform across the country. In areas such as Chichester, for example, house prices are more than 12 times annual earnings, pricing many young people and those on average salaries out of the market. That represents a dramatic change, considering that house prices were four times average earnings when many of us were buying our first home.

The ratio is still the same in some areas. Where I grew up, in Knowsley, house prices are still just over four times the average salary, which explains why many of my young cousins, with their partners, can still afford to buy their first home in their 20s. An affordable home in Chichester is currently categorised as 80% of the market rate. With an entry price of more than £300,000, Members can do the maths and see the problem. In expensive, high-priced areas, renting, let alone buying, a home without help is impossible. We therefore need genuinely affordable housing, such as social housing, to be prioritised in more expensive areas.

The Government’s estimated 25,000 social-rent homes to be delivered over the coming five years is a step in the right direction. However, we must make sure those homes are in the right places, where there is the highest need. In Chichester we should be more ambitious on social housing development, rather than expecting market drivers alone to rebalance the housing market.

Both my parents and my grandparents grew up in council houses, which was the only route available for them to be able to afford a family home, and many people across my constituency need the same. To get to grips with our housing and homelessness problem we need to encourage the building of genuinely affordable homes in Chichester. We must continue to be innovative.
to get the right amount of the right type of housing in the right areas to continue the dream of home ownership for all.

6.8 pm

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Oxford is now the least affordable place in Britain to buy a home, with the average home costing 16 times average salaries. Rents have rocketed, and we now have up to 60 people rough sleeping on our streets of a night. That has happened despite huge local efforts to improve the situation.

At least half of new developments in Oxford must be affordable housing, of which 80% must be at social rents. We have one of the strictest regimes in the country for landlord registration. The council is establishing a new local housing company and is investing to ensure that our council homes are of a decent standard, and we have retained full council tax relief for low-income families, despite Government cuts.

Even with that local effort, rents and purchase prices are massively out of reach for many. The lack of affordable rental properties, as well as three other factors, is fuelling our rough-sleeping crisis. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) referred to this, and my estimation of the other factors driving this has not been plucked out of the air; it comes from my discussions with professionals, many of them former rough sleepers, who know what is driving the massive increase in Oxford from a time when on some evenings we would have not a single person sleeping rough. Now up to 60 people sleep on our streets on some evenings. The three factors that have driven that, in addition to the lack of affordable housing, are: benefit cuts and freezes; cuts to hostel funding by our county council, as a result of central Government cuts; and cuts to support services in mental health and in addiction services.

Despite that, we are trying to do what we can as a city to improve the situation: we have 180 beds now for rough sleepers in Oxford, with more coming next year; we have a new specialist hostel being set up in Cowley; and we had innovative joint working between our churches and our rough sleeping services over the winter to try to unlock additional places. However, all of that has been against the grain of wrong-headed Government policies, which are stopping my city from being a city for everyone, with many of them former rough sleepers, who know what is driving the massive increase in Oxford from a time when on some evenings we would have not a single person sleeping rough. Now up to 60 people sleep on our streets on some evenings. The three factors that have driven that, in addition to the lack of affordable housing, are: benefit cuts and freezes; cuts to hostel funding by our county council, as a result of central Government cuts; and cuts to support services in mental health and in addiction services.

It is estimated that another 25,000 homes need to be built by 2031 to keep up with demand in my city. That is an incredibly tall order, given the green belt around Oxford, which is no longer suited to our population’s needs. The Secretary of State suggested that the response was just to build on brownfield land or to build up, but there is not a lot of brownfield left in my city. Although we are increasing the density of housing in my city, I would like Members who have children to reflect on whether we have gardens for our homes and whether anyone here lives in a highly dense area, for example, a tower block, with their children and without a garden. There may well be, but I do not imagine there are very many Members who do, and if it is good enough for us, it should be good enough for our constituents and we should provide them with a decent place to live, particularly for their families.

Meeting current demand is also unachievable given the woefully low levels of public investment in housing, which was described ably by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). That is compounded by foolish policies such as the changes to right to buy, which have made it harder for councils to build and, thus, further pushed up private rents.

The Secretary of State is no longer here, but I wish to finish my speech by inviting him to come to my city so that he can talk to those families in need. He will be able to talk to the overcrowded families—those whose children are sharing tiny bedrooms—and to those people sleeping on the streets to find out from them what needs to change.

6.12 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who made a considered contribution to the debate. I thank Members from across the House for their appreciation for my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which has as its centre the aim of reducing the number of people becoming homeless in the first place. Prevention is clearly better than cure, but we have to face up to the fact that, although we can attempt to intervene and to prevent people from becoming homeless, we have to build more homes across the piece that are affordable for people to rent and to buy. That means we have to be radical in our thoughts. The Secretary of State set out a range of things that can be done, but we know that some things need to be done straightaway. He rightly mentioned the Housing First pilots, which I strongly support. However, there are only three pilots, in three parts of the country, whereas this is a nationwide problem. So when my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing answers this debate, I look forward to hearing him say how quickly we will roll out the lessons from the pilots right across the country, so that rough sleepers in other parts of the country can gain the benefit of Housing First, because that is key.

One challenge we face is the unaffordability of housing. One point I lobbied strongly for in the last Budget, and which, I am pleased to say, the Chancellor acceded to, was funding for a national rental deposit scheme and help-to-rent projects. We are yet to hear from the Department as to the various different options that will be rolled out on that. Helping people to rent and providing the deposit would enable 30,000 families to secure their own home, because the one thing they cannot do is raise the deposit to start paying the rent and have a home of their own. We need to be in a position whereby we encourage that process.

Across the piece we are paying out £1.7 billion a year to fund temporary accommodation in this country, and people are in temporary accommodation literally for years—that cannot be acceptable.

We see the price of housing to buy escalating and rents escalating, too. We have to be radical in our thought processes as to how we deal with that. One of the biggest issues is the price of land in the first place. The cheapest land is agricultural land. Speculators move in and get options on that land. When planning permission is granted for alternative uses, the price of that land
suddenly escalates. Those people then sell the land on and make money on those options. That cannot be acceptable. We see other challenges in retail or commercial land being transferred to the housing usage class, and there suddenly being a dramatic increase in the land value.

We have to take the land value out of the price of housing in the first place, to reduce the cost of people owning their own homes or, indeed, renting a home. At the same time, we force local authorities to sell their land to the highest bidder, and when they do so, the price of the housing built on that land comes back in the form of a huge housing benefit bill when people rent that housing. We have to close the gap and take the value of the land out of the equation completely.

Older people are now going to be renting well into their retirement—

Mr Bacon: Given that housing benefit, which my hon. Friend just mentioned, takes up 3% of public expenditure and costs some £26 billion every year—it has cost £363 billion, more than a third of a trillion, in the past 20 years—would he like to see more of that money going into the creation of new dwellings for ordinary people at prices they can afford, rather than enriching more private landlords?

Bob Blackman: Yes; my hon. Friend anticipates where I was going. We should tell local authorities, and all other public sector bodies, to gain planning permission for homes to be built on their properties. Instead of paying out huge amounts of housing benefit, we should compensate the public bodies directly from the Treasury for the value of that land, which can then be used for public services. We should then ensure that the rents and prices in the properties built are commensurate with the cost of building those properties, over an extended period of time. Once people have been tenants for 10 years, we should give them the right to buy those properties at the price they were 10 years prior, and then reinvest that money into further new housing. I am a great supporter of the right to buy, but one challenge that we face with it is that we need to invest its proceeds in building new housing.

Those are some of the radical solutions; I cannot do them justice in four minutes, but I hope that we can get some answers from my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing. Finally, may I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests?

6.17 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who had many very good ideas, but we have to talk about the green belt in London. There is enough land to build a million homes that are 10 minutes from tube and train stations and an hour’s journey away.

What is the green belt? What is the land that I am talking about? Is it nice, pleasant and green—somewhere we would wish to spend the day with our families? No. I spent my bank holiday going around and looking at some of these sites. I started over in Hillingdon, where I saw an illegal waste tip and stood on 20 feet of rubble that could be land on which we could build 3,500 new homes. I went along the A40 to Ealing, where I saw an illegal waste tip and stood on 20 feet of rubble. I then went to the piece de résistance: a tyre-changing shop and car-valeting service at Tottenham Hale, where a housing association had had its application for housing turned down because it was green belt.

At some point, we have to stop being frightened of the title and inspect what land makes up this designation. I do not want to build on a park that children use, or on rolling green fields that people enjoy on their bank holidays, but I do want to build on scrappy bits of land that nobody in their right mind would choose to regard as green belt.

Mr Bacon: Well said. Carry on.

Siobhain McDonagh: I would love to, but I do not want to stop anyone from speaking.

I ask hon. Members from all parties to support my early-day motion on this issue and to support the contribution that we have made to the consultation on the national planning policy framework, which has Members from both sides of this House, academics, housing associations and businesses saying, “Yes, stop it. Please look at the green belt.” We cannot keep talking about building more homes unless we have the means and the land to provide them, and we do, if only we all got a backbone and started looking at what we call the green belt.

6.20 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I welcome this debate, and I am glad that the Government have made housing a key priority in this Parliament.

Much has been made of the affordability of houses. Although I recognise that a lack of housing supply and the unaffordability of housing for individuals and families are problems in many parts of the country, it is important that the policies implemented to solve them also take into account the situation in areas that experience low values.

My constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South, and indeed the whole city, poses a number of housing challenges, which often contrast with the national picture. A largely industrial city, Stoke-on-Trent is characterised by an abundance of Victorian terraced stock and a large number of undeveloped brownfield sites. Consequently, the local housing situation can be labelled “low value”. We have, for instance, the second-highest number of properties in council tax bands A to D.

Such a low-value market creates its own problems of viability. There is little incentive for developers to consider brownfield sites, as the remediation costs coupled with the low eventual sell-on prices render most schemes unprofitable. Even the restoration of existing terraced stock, or the conversion of empty commercial properties to residential, is a challenge. In other areas, developers may land bank to generate excess profits at the expense of local housing supply. Unfortunately, in Stoke-on-Trent, land banking can often be the harsh reality that we face of land owners simply trying to avoid excessive losses. Of course, in many cases, profits are a matter of subjectivity, but where we have sites that fall into negative equity from the costs of redevelopment there does need to be some incentivisation.

Of course, in many cases, profits are a matter of subjectivity, but where we have sites that fall into negative equity from the costs of redevelopment there does need to be some incentivisation.
A further potentially unseen consequence of persistent low-value markets is the lack of contribution that can be demanded of developers to aid infrastructure development to support planned and future building works. The community infrastructure levy, for instance, is a much simpler way to raise such funds when compared with the complexity of section 106 agreements, but is often not suitable for low-value markets, only further suppressing marginal viability. Indeed, there has been a far lower take-up rate of the CIF within lower-value areas.

I welcome the measures that the Government have already taken to address some of these issues, including the £3 billion home building fund, the £3.5 billion private rented sector guarantee scheme and the £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund. The latter has already made a difference, with £10 million of marginal viability funding from the housing infrastructure fund awarded to the city.

In 2015, Stoke-on-Trent City Council secured housing zone status, making it one of 20 pioneer authorities outside London. The council has also recently established Fortior Homes, a wholly owned company, in which it will initially invest £50 million to act as that catalyst for development, as well as stimulating the market, particularly in the PRS sector. I hope that Fenton town centre will see those developments coming forward in the very near future. What this recognises is that specific housing products within a market can be untested, and despite high potential demand there can be an unwillingness by private investors to take the risk of that first step—having the confidence to invest.

We also see demand for a range of different types of living. Yes, we need housing that people can afford, but we also need more family homes, more homes for the elderly, more tenures that have the flexibility of PRS and more executive homes for people to grow into. We have started to see those executive homes—I was very pleased to open the final phase of Wedgewood Park recently—but it is crucial that we do not lose sight of the unique and sometimes contrasting challenges in housing markets in low-value areas such as Stoke-on-Trent.

6.24 pm  

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I will focus on York’s local plan during the short time I have to speak. We do not yet have a local plan, but it will be debated at full council on Thursday.

Although the Government’s planning and housing policies are clearly not delivering what is needed in our communities, I believe that City of York Council should at least try to follow what the Government have set out, rather than detracting from the figures with smoke and mirrors. Allow me to focus on those figures. The planning process requires 1,070 homes to be built, yet the council’s submission will only include plans for 867 homes. In fact, the NPPF for 2018 demands 1,135 homes, so York is 268 homes short. The former Secretary of State wrote to the council’s leadership about this. However, the council is determined to submit its plan with inadequate provision. This will clearly not address the real housing crisis in York, which has already been eloquently described by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), as York is a mini Oxford in so many respects, and it is absolutely essential that our city has the housing that it needs.

I want to the Minister to focus on these points. Over the past five years, 1,458 student housing units and 2,737 flats and town houses—mainly exclusive, luxury apartments—have been built in York, only 5% of which are affordable according to the Government’s own definition. They are therefore completely inaccessible to my constituents. Seven residential care homes have also closed, with only 27 replacement units, in a city with an ageing demographic. Since I have been elected to this place over the past three years, zero social housing has been commissioned in the city, even though we have a housing crisis and just 73 houses were sold under right to buy in the last year.

York is not an affordable city by any stretch of the imagination, and we are seeing an escalation of the crisis. That is why I need the Minister to focus on the local plan, which will be landing on his desk any day now. He also needs to look at the wider context of the local plan, including transport. Our city is suffocating under the air pollution caused by gridlock, yet high-density housing is being built in the heart of the city. Yes, we want to see the development of brownfield sites, but it will just add to the traffic crisis. The local plan that will soon be submitted relies on old data, not the most recent data, so it will not set out the real scale of the crisis.

When the Minister receives the local plan, which will go to the inspectors, will he ensure that all people in the local community are involved in the next phase? It is clear that the Government will have to intervene in the submission. It is therefore really important to listen to the expertise that has built up regarding what is actually needed for our city for the sake of the local economy and for our public services, which are unable to recruit the vital staff that they need. Of course, we also need to ensure that we have a transport system that is built for the future.

As we all know, York is an amazing city, but there are many people in crisis. The housing crisis means that there has been a sharp rise in homelessness in the city, and there are people with complex housing needs. This situation needs to be addressed. I trust that the Minister will say in his response that he will give the issue his attention from today.

6.28 pm  

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

Instead of looking at the broader policy, I will focus on a specific constituency case. Although planning is generally the key responsibility of the planning authority—in my case, Babergh District Council in South Suffolk—this is an issue for Parliament because it concerns a loophole in retrospective planning that has caused great distress to my constituents Clare and James Frewin of the village of Bures St Mary. I was councillor for Bures St Mary before I became an MP in 2015, and the last planning application that came before me—to which I objected—was an application to build six houses on a former slaughterhouse behind the Frewins’ grade II listed property on a very steep hill in the village of Bures.
As the development has gone on, it has become very clear that these properties, which are built just behind the my constituents’ back garden, are far higher than was given permission for. In fact, in January this year, the developer himself, Mr Steve Dixon of the Stemar Group from Southend, confirmed that there was a height difference of at least 1.7 metres. My constituents then commissioned an independent survey from Randall Surveys LLP, which found that the height difference was in fact 2.6 metres. That is the same as one floor of an entire residential property. Imagine, Mr Speaker, that someone is building a house behind your back garden, where your family enjoy their time, that is almost 3 metres taller than they were given planning permission for.

The key thing is that all we can do in this situation is ask the council to request that the developer seek retrospective planning permission. It is true that in theory the council could put a stop notice on the development, but the problem there is that if the developer gets planning permission, they can sue for any damages resulting from the stop notice. Obviously, therefore, the council is very reluctant to use it.

In this case, the real problem is that the developer in question simply does not give a damn about my constituents. In fact, he has been extremely aggressive with them. He has trespassed on the Frewins’ property. He has told Clare Frewin—this was overheard by another constituent—“If you had as much money as me, you would not live around here,” and he described the village as “scum”. Actually, Bures is a very beautiful village on the Suffolk-Essex borders, so I do not know what this builder from Southend understands by beauty. Imagine being in my constituents’ shoes, Mr Speaker. They have this development behind them that they did not want. They have to accept that it has been approved. It is being built far higher than the builder was given permission for, and he just carries on building it. He ignores all their concerns. He does not engage with the local community but rides roughshod over them.

We in Parliament have not given the district authority the right powers to deal with that, because it can itself be liable to legal action. I would like to see some kind of review of retrospective planning permission, so that where the developer is clearly causing detriment against the public interest, a stop notice can be issued. It could be appealed against, but whether it was upheld or even rejected, the builder would not have the right then to sue the council for damages, because it had acted in the public interest.

This case has caused great dismay in Bures and across South Suffolk. The impression given is that the system is weighted firmly in favour of the developer, who cares not a jot for my constituents. I want a system that better represents my constituents, so that they are not subject to people riding roughshod over them with planning permission they have been legally given. Instead, we should have a system that is weighted fairly between both sides of the argument.

I want to focus my comments on private rented accommodation and fairness. We all know that there are many fantastic private landlords out there across the country who offer a high-quality service for the people living in their accommodation, but we also know that there are many who do not. The issue of fairness concerns who pays to regulate this sector. Who foots the bill for dealing with some of the problems that are identified? We have all, I am sure, had constituents come to us and say that they have had problems with their accommodation. One of my constituents came to me with her baby who was suffering terribly from asthma because of the damp in her private rented accommodation. I spoke to Hull City Council’s housing team, whose fantastic housing manager, Dave Richmond, dealt with the case and the landlords had to resolve the problem.

But what about all the people who do not go and see their Member of Parliament? What about all those to whom it would not even occur that they could go to their MP and they could help them to deal with the issue? Who goes to check that private rented accommodation is of a high standard? I have had this conversation with Hull City Council. I am sure that it would love to be able to go out there and check that some of the accommodation that people are living in meets the standard that it should, but who pays the bill? People who live in Hull are paying their council tax to deal with problems that are caused by private rented accommodation and private landlords. Can anyone name me another type of private organisation where the general taxpayer foots the bill to deal with problems created in its own industry?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that that is why selective licensing schemes, which allow private landlords to be charged for some of that enforcement, are important? Does she share my bemusement and even frustration that the Minister has still not signed off numerous selective licensing applications, including mine in Brighton and Hove? The Government have been sitting on those for months now, and we are still not able to move forward in many of our cities where councils want to do exactly what she says.

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. That is exactly the point that I wish to make.

The Ministry’s data shows that in Kingston upon Hull there were a total of 22,132 properties in the local authority area with a housing health and social care rating category 1 hazard—all of them in the private rented sector. A category 1 hazard is one that poses a serious threat to the health or safety of people living in or visiting a home. It is estimated that the cost to the council of dealing with all those issues would run to £23.5 million. Surely that bill should not have to be footed by the people who live and pay their council tax in Hull.

I absolutely agree that there should be a local licensing system whereby those who own private rented accommodation make a contribution to the regulation and maintenance of some of their properties, but that is the only fair way to do it. I am calling on the Ministry to make it easier for local councils such as Hull City Council to introduce landlord licensing, so that they
can check that all these people living in private rented accommodation are not living somewhere that is a hazard to their health.

6.36 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

Planning and housing are hot topics in my area, as neighbourhood plans, the Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council plan and the Greater Manchester spatial framework are all currently being worked up, and people are rightly focused on the need for brownfield use and green-belt protection.

I welcome the Minister’s comments on the importance of green-belt protection. The Campaign to Protect Rural England recently launched its “State of Brownfield 2018” report to highlight and reinforce that very issue. It analysed the potential use of brownfield land to address our housing shortage and its findings were quite stark. An examination of the recently published brownfield registers from across the UK found that there is enough space on brownfield land to build at least 1 million new homes, with more than two thirds of those homes deliverable within the next five years. That would mean that three of the next five years-worth of Government housing targets could be met through building homes on brownfield land that has already been identified, thereby easing pressures on councils to release green-belt land unnecessarily and preventing the unremitting creeping loss of countryside. Local authorities must be empowered and use powers to refuse planning permission for greenfield sites where there are suitable alternatives on brownfield land.

The draft Greater Manchester spatial framework was published in 2016 but was widely criticised for focusing too little on brownfield land and too much on development on the green belt. Indeed, Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, was elected a year ago pledging to “radically rewrite” the framework and promising a “substantial reduction” in the loss of green-belt land. Currently across my borough of Stockport, more than 12,000 homes are proposed on green-belt land. Shockingly, 8,100 of those—67%—are planned on the green belt in my constituency of Cheadle. I look forward to a radically reformed proposal.

Greater Manchester has 1,000 hectares of underdeveloped brownfield land across 400 sites that has not been earmarked for use. That is enough land to build 55,000 homes. The revised spatial framework is an opportunity to further redevelop our major town centres, and we should be radical in our approach. We need a more ambitious attitude if we are to ensure that our town centres benefit from the investment generated by urban regeneration schemes.

We also need to see more co-operation between local authorities. I was encouraged when that was reflected in the Localism Act 2011 and reinforced by the Secretary of State last autumn, with the introduction of a requirement for local authorities to publish a statement of common ground. Councils already have a duty to co-operate with bordering authorities, as set out in the Localism Act. However, under the new proposals, they will have 12 months to set out how they are working cross-county to meet their local housing needs.

This issue is particularly pertinent to my constituency because, as I have already mentioned, the number of homes proposed to be built on the green belt is considerably high. Stockport Council, for example, has argued that, by calculating housing need at the Greater Manchester level, over a 20-year period, 18,720 fewer homes could be built on the green belt than under GMSF and 5,680 fewer than under the current national methodology.

In my constituency, the strength of feeling is a concern and most evident in the activities of local neighbourhood groups. I very much want to mention the Woodford neighbourhood forum, which was set up in October 2013. The people who are part of the forum have worked unremittingly hard on their local plan and I urge the Minister to listen to local voices as he takes this policy forward.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

6.40 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I thank everybody who has participated in the debate. We have heard some incredibly thoughtful, welcome and, in some cases, unexpectedly radical contributions. That drives home just how important an issue housing is up and down the country.

However, we have a Government who have failed to do anything over the past eight years to help those who are suffering in this housing crisis. Speeches by Members on both sides of the House have given a glimpse of how across the board the Government are failing. Whether it is statutory homelessness, social house building, rough sleeping, home ownership or the proliferation of temporary accommodation, there is not a sector that has not suffered as a result of eight years of austerity.

To give one example, rough sleeping has increased by 169% since 2010. Crisis predicts that, without substantial changes in Government policy, it will increase by a further 76% in the next 10 years. I cannot be alone in being alarmed by the fact, as the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) said, that children in temporary accommodation lose out on 55 days of school on average. I think that we should all have a great sense of urgency about tackling this issue, rather than waiting for 2022 or 2027 to get to the heart of tackling it.

The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, has said that she does not know why rough sleeping is going up. Perhaps she should listen to the 70% of councils that said that they had difficulty finding social housing for the homeless. Even worse, almost 90% of councils have said that they have struggled to find private rented accommodation.

I welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was driven through by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). It has huge promise, but we know that the resources that will be delivered to local authorities, which are expected to deliver on every element of the Act, will not match those demands. Schemes such as Housing First are a drop in the ocean compared with the losses of the supported people funding, which the Conservative Government decided to cut.

All of that is no surprise. We know that social house building is hitting historic lows under this Government. In the last year, during the now Home Secretary’s time
at the MHCLG, £817 million was handed back to the Treasury that was meant to be used to build affordable homes and support local authorities. That is simply unacceptable. Where private house builders are building, the Government have been slow to close regulatory loopholes that harm consumers.

We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) about the issues in their constituencies. Sixty-nine per cent. of new build properties in the north-west are being sold as leasehold, and that figure is higher than anywhere else in the country. I am sure the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood in Gateacre Park and Cressington Heath will be delighted to hear that their MP is so active on their issues. The fact is that 999-year leases are being given out and maintenance charges continue in that period. That will be incredibly prohibitive. There are charges up to 20 times the ground rent to purchase the leasehold. People have been misled and exploited, and there are clearly issues with covenants in transfer documents. The House must give its attention to those issues when leaseholds are discussed, as I hope they will be later in the summer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston was absolutely right to call these “fleecheholds.” He said that his constituents were unable to move up the ladder because the leaseholds were far too restrictive. I have seen the same in my own constituency. Constituents in Cambridge Park and Limber Court are in retirement villages, on fixed incomes, and they cannot sell their properties. We also have to think about what we can do retrospectively to try to deal with legacy issues when it comes to people selling leaseholds to freeholders who simply want to make as much money as possible out of people. The Government are taking action on the issue, which I welcome, but we have to make sure that we tackle the issues that have been brought to the House this afternoon. To be laid back in any way about this matter would not be acceptable to any of our constituents.

If the Government turned around tomorrow with the money and regulation changes required to seriously start to challenge the housing crisis, that still would not be enough. House building itself faces a crisis, with skills in the building industry in seriously short supply. The Federation of Master Builders warned earlier this year that small and medium-sized house builders are facing the worst skills shortage on record. Demand for carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, electricians and plasterers is outstripping supply. Two thirds of construction SMEs are struggling to recruit bricklayers. Who will build the 300,000 houses the Government say they want to build?

Then there is the £250 million that has been put into a flagship Government scheme to boost starter home constructions: it has not led to a single property being built. What a betrayal of young Britons who are struggling to buy that all important first home! I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Matt Rodda) for his work standing up for young people in his constituency. He says that the wrong kind of housing for local people is being built. It is too expensive. He urges the proper use of brownfield sites, and I hope the Minister has listened. That is a snapshot of the situation across the country.

I turn briefly to the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). It is telling that there are 25,000 people on the council waiting list in his constituency. The number of social homes being built has collapsed. The idea that affordable rents should be 80% of market rents means that in reality they are anything but affordable for his constituents. He was absolutely right to raise that issue. The private rented sector is therefore often the only option available. Perversely, one of the leading causes of homelessness is the end of an assured shorthold tenancy—the numbers have quadrupled since the Government came to power.

Rents are rising faster than incomes and there are 900,000 fewer homeowners among the under-45s. Renters are spending £9.6 billion a year on houses that the Government class as non-decent. My hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) discussed really important points about the quality of private rented accommodation. Hopefully, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) is promoting, will make its way through the House rapidly so that we can start to tackle properties that are simply not suitable for anyone to live in, impacting not only on people’s physical health but on their mental health.

There are also the issues around tenant fees and the expenses of people in rented accommodation, who may not ever have the opportunity to be anything but renters. What can we do for these people? In Oxford East, someone has to earn 16 times the average salary to be able to own their own property. That is an extraordinary figure. It cannot be a city for ordinary people—all those who are “just about managing”, who the Government have spoken so regularly about. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central was clear that the provision of homes in her city was inadequate and that property there was too expensive. Only 5% of homes are affordable there—surely far beneath what the Government would expect.

We know that building affordable homes is a good investment. The Government currently spend 95% of their housing budget on benefits to support people in their homes. In the 1970s, over 80% of Government housing spending funded homes, with just a fifth spent on housing-related benefits.

I would just like to mention very quickly the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who was absolutely right as well as very brave to mention the classification of the green belt. Too often the assumption is that the green belt is a national park or an area of outstanding natural beauty and not, as she described, a tyre replacement plant.

Labour has a plan: the Government have empty words and eight years of failure. On every graph to measure housing failure, one can pinpoint clearly where Labour left office and when the Conservative party took charge.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I welcome all the contributions to the debate, those from across the aisle as well as from the Government Benches.
[Dominic Raab]

The Government are more determined than ever to make sure that this country is one where the dream of home ownership can become a reality for aspirational working Britain and where, at the same time, we address the challenge for generation rent, whether people are in the private or social sector. We delivered over 217,000 new homes to rent or buy in the last year alone, the highest in all but one of the past 30 years.

This must be the point of departure, not the point of arrival. We are ambitious to go much further, first through planning reform, including the revised draft national planning policy framework and reforms to developer contributions. That is fundamentally to delivering the homes the country needs, and fundamental to ensuring they are the right homes built in the right places to the right quality. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) argued clearly and cogently, density is a key part of that, which is why the NPPF says that local plans should significantly raise minimum densities in towns and cities, and on other land well-served by public transport. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) spoke powerfully about the importance of this particular policy measure and I recognise that he wants the Government to go further.

The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) spoke about the need to preserve garden space when we utilise density. Planning reform also means giving greater weight to the need to put suitable brownfield land to good use. Arguments on that were made on both sides, including by the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham (Mary Robinson). As the shadow spokesperson said, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) gave us an iconoclastic blast at the prevailing consensus around green belt, which I will certainly reflect on. Under the revised NPPF, we will also hold local authorities to account through the new housing delivery test to make sure we have a stronger focus on getting homes built, because people cannot live in a planning permission. There can be no ducking or diving; councils must build the homes that their communities need.

We must also deliver the infrastructure to support house building, a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). People rightly ask, when they see a new development near them, will the roads be congested, will local schools have enough places and will it mean a longer wait to see their GP? We are investing £5 billion, so local authorities can secure vital infrastructure in areas where housing need is greatest. Through our marginal viability funding, and through the £4 billion from the latest tranche of Forward Funding, which goes to larger-scale projects, there is the potential to deliver 200,000 homes in relation to marginal viability and over 400,000 new homes from the Forward Funding pot. That is the way the Government will deliver more homes, while at the same time building the stronger communities we all want.

At the same time, we will not shrink from holding developers to their responsibilities. The most recent figures show that 684,000 homes with planning permissions granted have not yet been completed. That is far too high. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is leading a review of the gap between the number of planning permissions granted and homes being built. He will make recommendations in the autumn for closing the gap. It will be important in addressing the concerns expressed so eloquently by my hon. Friends the Members for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). Where planning permission is granted, we believe it should be viewed more like a contract for delivery, not the start of an endless haggle that exhausts councils and frustrates local communities.

At the same time, we recognise that central Government have a lead role to play. We must lead by example. Releasing surplus public sector land has the potential to increase the supply of new homes and meet our ambitions. We are pressing all Whitehall Departments to release more sites, with the capacity to deliver 160,000 additional homes. Of course, that offers a special opportunity for us to provide more affordable housing for the teachers, nurses, veterans and all those key public sector workers who should be able to afford to live in the communities that they serve with such dedication.

Our mission is not just to build more homes, but to deliver housing that is available and affordable to everyone in our society, especially the most vulnerable. Strong speeches were made by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, including the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). The Government are committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022 and to eliminating it by 2027. We are backing that ambition with £1 billion of funding and with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which has just come into force. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) for all his work in this area, and for having the guts and gumption to see what it is like at first hand and to look at the issue through the eyes of someone who is sleeping rough.

The Housing First pilots launched last week have put £28 million into helping those who are either sleeping rough now or who are at risk of rough sleeping. This aims not only to keep a roof over their heads but to help them to address the underlying challenges that lead to rough sleeping, from mental health problems to alcohol abuse. I welcome the support from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) right the way across to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). It is also important to recognise the restlessness of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) to go even further than those existing pilots, and that point was very powerfully made.

More broadly, 357,000 affordable homes have been delivered since 2010. More council houses have been built in the last eight years than in the whole period in office of the last Labour Government. Those are the facts. We believe that anybody who works hard and aspires to own their own home—

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Dominic Raab: I will not, because I have such a short time, and I want to address all the points that hon. Members made on both sides of the House.
We believe that anybody who works hard and aspires to own their own home should have the opportunity to realise that dream. Right to buy has helped nearly 2 million to realise their aspiration to own their own home. I recognise that the shadow Housing Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), referred to the Labour party’s Green Paper, which recently vowed to scrap right to buy—there was not a lot made of that in his speech. The public will note that while Labour’s Front Benchers may enjoy owning their own cushy homes, they now oppose extending the same opportunity to those in our country for whom that is currently beyond reach. Government Members understand why people dream of owning their own home. That is why we will launch our £200 million pilot to make the Conservative dream of a property-owning democracy a 21st-century reality for the next generation.

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Dominic Raab: I will not. Only the Conservatives are serious about reviving the dream of home ownership and only the Conservatives have a credible plan to achieve it. Our Green Paper on social housing in England is a historic opportunity to address this crucial sector, from landlord-tenant relationships to, frankly, some of the ignorant and offensive stigma that too many social tenants suffer today. This Government—a Conservative Government—are dedicated to eradicating that prejudice, recognising the hard work that so many social tenants put in, valuing the pride that they take in their neighbourhoods, and restoring the respect and dignity that they deserve. We will publish that groundbreaking report before the summer recess. That is our mission: to reverse the decline in home ownership for the teachers, nurses, shift workers, couples working overtime up and down the country, and all those who dream of owning their own home.

Too many feel that the housing ladder has been pulled up beyond their reach. We must grasp the opportunity to right that wrong, to build the homes that Britain needs, whether to buy or to rent, to make them more affordable and to make the Conservative dream of a property-owning democracy a 21st-century reality for the next generation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered housing and homes.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

That the draft Package Travel and Linked Travel Arrangements Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.——[Wendy Morton.]

Question agreed to.

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

INTERNATIONAL IMMUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES

That the draft European Organization for Astronomical Research in the Southern Hemisphere and the European Space Agency (Immunities and Privileges) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.——[Wendy Morton.]

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Royal Bank of Scotland closure in Kyle of Lochalsh

6.59 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I rise to lodge a petition on behalf of those using the Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Kyle of Lochalsh, one of the 62 RBS branches in Scotland earmarked for closure. The news came as a bombshell to people living in that part of my constituency. If it closes, its customers will be approximately one hour from the next nearest RBS branch, in Portree. When RBS talked about closing the branch, it said, as it did of many others, that very few people were using it regularly. It stated a figure of 51 people. I have discovered that the branch actually has 2,436 customers and deals with 25,000 transactions a year—very different from the picture RBS has been painting. We also know from information published in the Daily Record yesterday that RBS is actively encouraging customers to sign up for the mobile app to move them away from using the branches that we need to save. I am delighted that Kyle has been given a reprieve until the end of the year, but I am calling on RBS to support the branch sufficiently to make sure it stays open.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Ross, Skye & Lochaber, Declares that the proposed closure of the following branches of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland in the areas of Kyle of Lochalsh, Beauty & Mallaig, will have a detrimental effect on the 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.

[Po02145]

NatWest Ferryhill

7.1 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I rise to present a petition against the closure of the NatWest branch in Ferryhill, which will leave it without any bank branches whatsoever. I would like to put on record my thanks to Hannah Smalley of Ferryhill, who helped to compile over 1,000 signatures in opposition to the closure.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that NatWest Ferryhill is due to close on the 4th June 2018 and this will have a detrimental effect to the local community. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of NatWest Ferryhill branch. And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Po002149]
Mr Speaker: Before we come to the Adjournment debate, in the light of its subject matter—the contribution of Arsène Wenger to the profile and performance of English football—it is pertinent, though sad that it is my duty, to report to the House the death this morning of the former Aston Villa and Bolton defender Jlloyd Samuel. If Members are not aware, or if others present are not seized of this fact, I have to report that he died in a car crash. He was a Trinidad and Tobago international. He played 199 times for Aston Villa and no fewer than 83 times for Bolton. Tributes have been paid to Jlloyd Samuel from across the world of football, and tonight we extend ours.

Arsène Wenger

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

7.4 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Arsène Wenger’s extraordinary record and longevity over 22 years and 1,235 games is not the main reason why I initiated the debate, Mr Speaker, but given that both you and I are wearing Arsenal ties, I thought that perhaps I could deliver some of the highlights of his record. In his first season he rejuvenated a fading team with his new ideas, and he won the Premier League in the following season. He repeated that feat in 2001 and 2002, before making history in 2003 and 2004 with his “Invincibles” team, which went through the entire season unbeaten. I believe, Mr Speaker, that that will never be seen again.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I have always had the greatest respect for the hon. Lady, but I now understand that she is an Arsenal fan, so my respect goes through the roof. I give way.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment. My constituents would not forgive me if I did not remind him that during that “unbeaten” season, Arsenal did in fact lose to Middlesbrough in the Carling cup, although they were unbeaten in the Premier League. However, that season was absolutely incredible. I think there could be no better tribute to Arsène Wenger than the occasion when, during the “Invincibles” season, the Pompey fans at Fratton Park, despite having lost 5-1, were singing, “Can We Play You Every Week?”. That, I think, is testament to how widely respected and how glorious the football was that was played in that “Invincibles” year.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Lady is spot on. She hedged her bets beautifully by referring to her local side as well. She is absolutely right. I remember taking my sister to see that side. I believe it was when we had put five past Wolves. I remember turning to her and saying, “This is probably as good as it gets.” Sadly, that turned out to be the case, but at least I was there. I will reminisce a little more as we go on.

What I described earlier was, of course, the third Premier League crown, but Arsène Wenger also claimed seven FA cups, more than any other manager. While, sadly, the European Champions League eluded him—Arsenal were beaten finalists in 2006—qualifying for the Champions League in 19 successive seasons is another British record. That record would justify a debate in its own right, but it was Arsène Wenger’s commitment to the core values of British sport and society that led me to apply for the debate.

Some have asked why I have time to hold a debate of this type when the trains do not work in my constituency. I say to them that we in Parliament have plenty of time during the day to talk about the things that do not work, or could work better—and as you know, Mr Speaker, I spend a lot of my time doing just that—but it is also important for us to celebrate success and the contributions that people make, not when they have left us and gone to the great stadium in the sky, but while they are still
with us. I hope that our constituents will connect with Parliament when it focuses on an activity that millions in this country enjoy. For them, it is not just a passion but a way of life.

Let me say, Mr Speaker, that you look resplendent in your Arsenal tie today. You are, of course, an enormous Arsenal fan. It was my good fortune to bump into you and to say that I was keen to hold this debate. I thought, for the reasons that I have outlined, that it would be fitting not only for me to apply for the debate, but for you to chair it. I am also delighted that the Sports Minister is with us. She is a Minister of many virtues. Her support for her football club is, sadly, the one stain on her great character: she is a Spurs fan. Sadly, there is no St Totteringham’s day for Arsenal fans this year, as indeed was the case last year.

Mr Speaker: There is no cure for it.

Huw Merriman: There is indeed no cure for it, Mr Speaker. We can only hope.

I am delighted to be opening the debate. I want to focus on a number of contributions that Arsène Wenger has made in different spheres. First, I want to touch on his vast input in making the game the financial export that it is for this country. While it is true that we do not export as much as we once did, football is one of the industries that we export exceptionally well. I believe that it is the fastest-growing export across the globe. A recent study revealed that the annual revenue from Premier League clubs had hit almost £5 billion, double the combined total revenue from the leagues in Italy and Spain. Premier League clubs contributed £2.4 billion to the Exchequer, and are responsible for the creation of 100,000 jobs in this country. The strength of their appeal abroad is demonstrated not just by the £3.2 billion of rights sold overseas, but by what will happen in the next three years. China, for example, is bidding 14 times the previous value.

I observed the strength of this export last weekend, when I was in the small African country of Djibouti—the 14th poorest country in the globe, where there is terrible poverty. The young boys and girls whom I met were not only kicking a football around with great joy, but wearing the shirts of the premier clubs more than those of any other league. In particular, they were wearing a lot of Arsenal strips. I was there with UNICEF, supporting Soccer Aid in the work it does in countries like Djibouti.

With his brand of attacking football, there was a tripling of our global fan base across the world, and I would argue that a large part of the success and the money that has been put into the Exchequer is down to Arsène Wenger. I am delighted that the Leader of the Opposition, another great Arsenal fan, has joined us, and I would be happy, if it is not against convention, to take an intervention from him.

Arsène Wenger has also contributed to the changing culture and behaviour within sport. It was put very well by one of our former players, and a great hero of mine, Ray Parlour, who revealed the full extent of the horror of the once notorious drinking culture at Arsenal in the following way:

“I’ll always remember the first pre-season tour with Arsène Wenger. New French lads had come into the team. We worked our socks off and at the end of the trip Wenger said we could all go out. We went straight down to the pub and the French lads went to the coffee shop. I’ll always remember the moment Steve Bould went up to the bar and ordered 35 pints for five of us. After we left the bar”—

I am amazed he can still remember this—

“we spotted all the French lads in the coffee shop and they were sitting around smoking. I thought how are we going to win the league this year? We’re all drunk and they're all smoking, and we ended up winning the double that year.”

Much of the reason for this end-of-season transformation is summed up by another Arsenal great, Lee Dixon, who said of Arsène Wenger:

“There is no doubt he changed the face of English football. He was the first. It was all him. His legacy is not only Arsenal based. It is English football-based because of where the game was when he came in and how clubs and players operated. The physiology side of the game, the social side, training—he came in and ripped up the handbook. Everybody said, ‘Who is this fella?’ and the next minute they were all copying him.

The advancements in terms of science and facilities and all the support available for elite athletes is testament to him. I truly believe he pushed the button to start all of that. It is easy to lose track of the fact he was the great innovator.”

And so he was.

The third point is how Arsène Wenger built our club in the modern era and balanced its books, rather than using the largesse of petrodollars and oligarchs to do so. In 2004, Arsenal not only won the third of Arsène Wenger’s premiership titles but, as we have mentioned, went the entire season unbeaten. Never one to rest on their laurels, Arsène Wenger and the Arsenal hierarchy recognised that to close the gap on the richer clubs around us, the club had to increase its stadium revenue.

Highbury, which gave me the greatest pleasure over my years as an Arsenal fan sitting at the clock end, had a capacity of only 38,000, half that enjoyed by our rivals Manchester United in 2006 at Old Trafford. The move to the Emirates Stadium was funded by the sale of Highbury to housing, increases in match-day and commercial revenue and, sadly, selling one or two of our best players each year, all to balance the books. It could be said that Arsène Wenger was the forerunner of former Chancellor George Osborne, with perhaps the difference being that Arsène really did balance the books.

Unfortunately for us, our rivals did not need to look at such sound economics to underpin their transformation because something else that we did not know about was afoot at that time: everything changed when Roman Abramovich arrived at Chelsea in 2003. Of course, he was not the first sugar daddy to arrive in English football, but he was the first who seemed to have and fund a bottomless pit. I recall our former vice-chairman, David Dein, capturing the scene when—[Interruption.] Great man indeed. When, as you may remember, Mr Speaker, Chelsea put in a bid for the great Thierry Henry, David Dein joking:

“Roman Abramovich has parked his Russian tanks on our lawn and is firing £50 notes at us.”

Fortunately, we did not sell Thierry.

Where Abramovich began, Sheikh Mansour at Manchester City continued, and others from the international playgrounds have joined in. Some owners paid for a plaything and some of those clubs paid for it by going to the wall—Portsmouth being one such example. West Ham did not even have to bother paying for a
Arsène Wenger's fourth contribution was his ability to be the best of talent from abroad. We have embraced him and he has embraced us. It may seem hard to believe today, but when he took over at Arsenal, only one other premier league club had a foreign manager in place: Ruud Gullit at Chelsea. Arsène Wenger was the first foreign manager to win the league. In taking a great British institution and enhancing it with flair, ideas and panache honed in France and Japan, he has shown not only what talent from abroad can do to deliver change in this country but what our country can do to embrace those from abroad.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. As the MP who represents the Arsenal stadium—the old and the new—I have been through the pain and the pleasure of the building of the new stadium. Throughout the whole time that Arsène Wenger has been manager, he has ensured that Arsenal has made an enormous contribution to the local community. Arsenal in the Community has been very successful for local grounds and clubs all over the borough. I have never forgotten taking a large group of primary school children to the Arsenal stadium one evening, where Arsène Wenger gave them a very interesting talk about how he had learned English. He told them that they should all learn foreign languages in order to create a more generous and peaceful world. He has a wonderful ability to communicate with people of all ages and all footballing abilities. I think that the future of football has to be community based, with much greater fan participation in the running of our clubs.

Huw Merriman: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I think it is fair to say that those words do not come out of my mouth often, but he is absolutely right about what Arsenal does for the community. It has always been a special community club. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, when we had violence in our stadiums in times gone by, all stadiums had fencing round the edge of the pitch, but Arsenal never did. It was the only club that did not have fencing, because it was always community based. It was also the first football club to become a Disability Confident club. It has always been a pioneer in its community, and it has also ensured great diversity. Our fans have always had that diversity, and it should therefore be no surprise that a manager should come from abroad and that we should embrace him as one of our own. I believe that Arsène Wenger is the best example of successful immigration in this country, and I would like to think that it is thanks to him that immigration is widely proclaimed as doing fantastic things for this country. I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s comments.

The fifth element is not so much a contribution as the part that I find so sad about the end state for our great manager. This relates to the challenges that many people now face from social media and the prioritising of the demand for instant results over time and reasonableness. Everyone has an opinion now, no matter how qualified or otherwise they might be, and complex technical analysis is now delivered in one word and a hashtag. As a traditional fan, I almost wonder whether football is now passing me by, when there is so much anger, menace and vitriol being poured out on social media. This cannot do anyone any good.

It saddens me that the latter years of Arsène Wenger’s reign coincided with the rise of social media platforms that were incredibly unfair to him and that, after he had delivered so much to our club, he should be subject to jeering at the railway station in Stoke-on-Trent, for example, with fans chanting “Wenger out” after everything he had done to earn their respect. I felt ashamed to be a fan of the club if those people were also professing to be fans. I worry that our leaders in sport, industry, public services and, indeed, politics are now subject to a 24/7 barrage of abuse in which they are told that they are wrong and everyone else is right. They are not allowed to have an opinion or to stand on their own record. What will that do to encourage others to take their place?

Despite failing with her political beliefs, my mother successfully indoctrinated me with a love of Arsenal that I have to this day. There are 100 million of us across the globe. Some have great notoriety: the Trump family, Osama bin Laden and—it gets even worse for the most successful women’s team in the land? Wenger has been hugely successful not only in men’s football but in women’s football, and that Arsenal Ladies is the most successful women’s team in the land? None of those were incredibly unfair to him and that, after he had delivered so much to our club, he should be subject to jeering at the railway station in Stoke-on-Trent, for example, with fans chanting “Wenger out” after everything he had done to earn their respect. I felt ashamed to be a fan of the club if those people were also professing to be fans. I worry that our leaders in sport, industry, public services and, indeed, politics are now subject to a 24/7 barrage of abuse in which they are told that they are wrong and everyone else is right. They are not allowed to have an opinion or to stand on their own record. What will that do to encourage others to take their place?

Huw Merriman: Mr Speaker, you are absolutely spot on. I can think only of the words “Piers” and “Morgan” when you conjure up those sentiments. However, I am delighted to say that Piers Morgan is now a convert: I was contacted by “Good Morning Britain” and I understand that he is calling for an honorary knighthood for Arsène Wenger. That means that for the first time I find myself in agreement with Piers Morgan.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. I cannot believe that I am here, witnessing and enjoying the debate. It is important that we recognise Arsène Wenger’s contribution, not just to Arsenal football club and football in this country, but to football around the world. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Arsène Wenger has been hugely successful not only in men’s football but in women’s football, and that Arsenal Ladies is the most successful women’s team in the land?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have talked about Arsène Wenger’s managerial tenure, which has delivered great success. He has been a pioneer in the women’s game as well. Interestingly, again, we are now getting left behind by the money of Man City, but we are forcing everyone to compete.
I want the Minister for Sport to be able to respond, so, on behalf of 100 million Arsenal football fans, millions more fans across the world and all those in this country who admire success, dignity, class and devotion to an institution, I thank Arsène Wenger for everything he has achieved and I wish him even more to come in the years ahead.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman very warmly and I call the Tottenham-supporting Minister for Sport.

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): It gives me enormous pleasure to respond to a debate that epitomises a man of strength, commitment and pure dedication; a man who has faced much adversity over time but has always come out of it stronger; a man who despite his often stoic appearance has an air of mischief about him that occasionally bubbles to the surface in the guise of a cheeky grin—but enough about my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman); we are here to talk about the legacy of Arsène Wenger.

We are discussing 22 years of football history in this Adjournment debate, but I fear that we have made history here tonight: we have found a topic for debate on which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not in his place to intervene. I hope that the good folk of PARLY app can be supported through this difficult time.

Like you, Mr Speaker, I was just a spring chicken when Arsène was appointed manager of Arsenal in September 1996. Let us just pause for a moment to reflect on what the United Kingdom looked like 22 years ago. It was the year of genetic engineering with both the birth of Dolly the sheep and the Spice Girls, but it was also the year of break-ups, with two royal divorces and the end of the original Take That. While an army of fans of Gary, Robbie, Howard, Mark and Jason had a special hotline set up to help them to get over their disappointment, there was no such support for the legion of reds crying into their scarves as they questioned the future of their legendary but ageing back five of Seaman, Dixon, Winterburn, Bould and Adams.

No one thought of those fans when Arsenal got knocked out of the FA cup in the third round, lost to Villa in the semi-final of the Coca-Cola cup, finished fifth in the table and, worst of all, failed to beat Villa in the semi-final of the Coca-Cola cup, finished fifth in the table and, worst of all, failed to beat Tottenham all season. But the trauma of that season’s failure soon passed into history when, annoyingly for us Spurs fans, the then vice-chairman of Arsenal headed over land and sea to tempt the holder of the mighty Japanese league’s title of manager of the year to take over the reins of Bruce Rioch at the second greatest north London club, Arsenal.

At his first press conference in England, Arsène Wenger said, “The main reason for coming is that I love English football, the roots of the game are here.” He may have come because he loved English football, its raw passion, style and pace, but he leaves having arguably had the greatest influence of anyone on the profile and progress of football in this country.

Wenger’s impact was instant. Arsenal finished third in his first season and then won the first of his three league titles and seven FA cups the following year. He built a squad that respected him and played for him, and through his analytical approach to every football match, he developed an often unbeatable team, including the legendary “Invincibles” who went entirely undefeated throughout the 2003-04 season.

In modern football, it is seen as a remarkable achievement for a manager to last longer than two or three seasons in a job, so the fact he led one of the most successful teams in the country for 22 seasons is an incredible feat. To give a sense of perspective, since Arsène Wenger took charge at Arsenal, Tottenham have had 11 different managers, Liverpool have had seven, Chelsea have had 12 and the current champions, Man City, have had 13.

Anna Turley: For a Tottenham fan, the hon. Lady is providing good testimony on one of the country’s most successful and fantastic managers. She and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) have not really talked about Arsène Wenger’s commitment to fair play. Who could forget that Arsène Wenger offered to replay the game against Sheffield United when Kanu deliberately knocked the ball into the goal, not knowing the rule about passing the ball back to the goalkeeper? Arsène Wenger’s commitment to fair play and to the values of the game, as an inspiration manager and mentor to so many people, are testament to the class of the man.

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I have coached and managed football teams, and I have also refereed young players, who behave how they see the legends behave. Fair play is a key part of what the FA is trying to deliver at the grassroots, and the likes of Arsène Wenger have been great advocates for that.

Arsène Wenger ensured that Arsenal qualified for the UEFA Champions League for an incredible 19 seasons in a row. Many of those years were during a time when club budgets needed to be balanced to finance the cost of the Emirates Stadium, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle mentioned.

Arsène Wenger brought a number of previously unknown players from far and wide to play in England over the years and turned them into legends of the game, including the likes of Vieira, van Persie and Henry. He has for ever been a champion of youth academy football and of giving young players a chance, such as Ashley Cole, Jack Wilshere, Cesc Fàbregas and many more. He has pioneered a confidence in the young when other managers have not been as brave.

Arsène Wenger brought many other things to football, including an understanding of how a good player can become a great player by living healthier. When he arrived, he immediately set about improving the nutrition of his players and famously introduced broccoli to the team’s menu. If he ever revealed how he managed to do that, I am sure it would be a bestselling parenting manual in no time.

I have read that Arsène Wenger is such a perfectionist that, if players insisted on having sugar in their morning tea or coffee, he supposedly showed them a special technique for stirring it so that the granules dissolved properly. Back on the pitch, he developed a style that, at times, saw some really attractive football, living up to the expectations of the beautiful game, or as the late, great Brian Clough once quipped:

“Arsenal caress a football the way I dreamed of caressing Marilyn Monroe.”
[Tracey Crouch]

Although many people may have chanted “Boring, boring Arsenal!” from their seats over the years—not me, of course—the jealous truth is that at times they were anything but.

Beyond the men’s squad, Arsène Wenger has also been a keen supporter of investment in the women’s game and recently said how pleased he was that Arsenal were willing to spend money to innovate and dominate in women’s football for the majority of his time at the club. Arsenal have won 58 major trophies since forming in 1987, and they pride themselves on doing it by playing the Arsenal way or, as some might say, the Wenger way.

Equally, as the Leader of the Opposition said, Arsène Wenger has been an incredible supporter of the excellent Arsenal in the Community scheme, which delivers sport, health, social and education programmes to more than 5,000 individuals in the local area every week. He has spoken of the importance of the game giving back to people from all areas and backgrounds, and he has stressed how crucial it is that those in need in the local community are given an opportunity to engage and benefit from the community’s unique connection to a club like Arsenal.

This mirrors precisely the Government’s sports strategy and how we believe sport should be used as a powerful tool for individual and societal change. It turns out that Arsène Wenger, with his desire for healthier diets, his views on sensible spending and a history of orderly exits from Europe, is far more aligned with Government policy than we have ever given him credit for—a career in politics must surely beckon.

While mentioning politics and being nice about reds, I should say that Alastair Campbell alerted me to a brilliant Arsène quote he included in his book “Winners: And How They Succeed”. It goes as follows:

“We have gone from a vertical society to a horizontal society where everybody has an opinion about every decision you make, everybody has an opinion on the Internet straight away. Basically the respect for people who make decisions is gone because every decision is questioned. So one of the most important qualities of a good leader now is massive resistance to stress... Many people underestimate this challenge.”

As we in this place face the political and legislative equivalents of formations, substitutions and season-changing decisions, I am sure we all empathise with his words.

Whatever Arsène Wenger chooses to do next, I am sure he will continue to succeed. Whether that is in England or abroad, the legacy that he has left at Arsenal will no doubt be strong and I am sure will continue to benefit football in its far wider sense in this country for years to come. For fans of the other 19 Premier League clubs, I am sure we all have mixed opinions as he departs the greatest league in the world. You knew what you got with Wenger’s Arsenal: a formidable opposing team that, one way or another, created memories for both sets of fans. So after 22 years of torture, tactical masterfulness and the temerity to win titles at the ground of their greatest rivals, it will be interesting to see what happens next in the Gunners’ history. In the meantime, Mr Speaker, I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Arsène Wenger, farewell, thank you and bonne chance.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 16 May 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Government Procurement: Small Businesses

1. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [905315]

3. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to enable a wider range of businesses to bid for and secure public sector contracts. [905317]

11. Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [905327]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Small businesses are the engine of our economy, and we are determined to level the playing field so that they can win their fair share of Government contracts. That is why, last month, I announced a range of new measures, including consulting on excluding bids for major contracts from suppliers who fail to pay their subcontractors on time and giving subcontractors greater access to buying authorities to report poor payment performance.

Mark Pawsey: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I recently met small businesses at the Rugby branch of Coventry and Warwickshire chamber of commerce, many of whom told me that they were put off from tendering for public sector contracts by the complexity of the process. I know that Ministers have worked hard to break down barriers, so what steps is he taking to get the message across that there are real opportunities for business among small companies?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. As he says, we have already removed complex pre-qualification questionnaires from low-value contracts, but this afternoon I will again be meeting the small business panel, which represents small businesses up and down the country, and we will be discussing exactly how we can further simplify pre-qualification questionnaires and associated bureaucracy.

Priti Patel: The UK’s fantastic small and medium-sized enterprises drive innovation and help to deliver our public services. What barriers has the Minister identified that he will tackle to ensure that we can see more small businesses from around the country tender for Government contracts?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right: I am committed to breaking down barriers for SMEs supplying the public sector. That is why, over Easter, I announced that we require significant contractors to advertise their contracting opportunities for SMEs on Contracts Finder. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has appointed an SME champion in each Department, and I have personally written to strategic suppliers to remind them of their obligation to pay subcontractors on time.

Craig Mackinlay: A report that I published in conjunction with the TaxPayers Alliance earlier this year found that some public sector organisations are spending up to seven times more for a ream of photocopy paper than others. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the public sector spends taxpayers’ money more wisely in everything that they incur and spend, and will he undertake to read my report?

Oliver Dowden: I will, of course, undertake to read my hon. Friend’s report and respond directly. It is precisely for this reason of getting good value for the taxpayer that we established the Crown Commercial Service to increase savings for the taxpayer by centralising buying requirements for common goods and services such as photocopy paper.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): FCC Environment has public sector contracts across 160 constituencies, yet it refuses to pay its workers sick pay. The workers in Hull have been out on strike for more than 30 days after one of their colleagues developed cancer and had to return to work after a month because he could not afford to be off work. Will the Minister please look at reforming the rules for procurement so that no companies can exploit workers in this way and not pay them the basic right of sick pay?

Oliver Dowden: Clearly, all suppliers are subject to the general law of the land, which covers many of those points. In addition, we have introduced a supplier code of conduct, which looks exactly at those corporate responsibility points, and we review it continuously, and we will review it with such cases in mind.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Today’s Carillion report clearly demonstrates the urgent need to deal with the late payment culture in the construction industry, which is hitting many subcontractors. Most important and pressing for me today, four months after the Carillion collapse, is the ongoing shutdown of the Midland Metropolitan Hospital. I have raised the matter with the Cabinet Office several times, with Health Ministers, and even twice here in the Chamber with the Prime Minister, so when will the Government stop dithering and start work again on this much-needed hospital?

Oliver Dowden: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is very passionate about this issue. I can reassure him, rightly again, that we remain absolutely committed to
getting the new hospital built as quickly as possible, and
we are supporting the trust to achieve that while ensuring
that taxpayers’ money is spent appropriately.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Although
we warmly welcome moves to open up Government
contracts to SMEs, the fact is that they are still being
crowded out by big suppliers that regularly fail to
deliver, including G4S with its youth custody provision;
Capita with its failing Army recruitment contract, among
many others; and, of course, Carillion. Will the Government
introduce a new requirement that firms cannot bid for
new Government contracts while they are still failing to
meet quality standards on their existing public sector
jobs?

Oliver Dowden: Individual contracting Departments
clearly keep the performance of all contractors under
review. The hon. Gentleman says that we should ensure
that small businesses can bid for Government contracts.
I announced a range of measures over Easter precisely
to deal with that issue. Indeed, we have introduced a
requirement for all subcontracting opportunities by
principal contractors to be advertised on the Contracts
Finder website, which gives SMEs a great chance to bid
for work.

House of Lords Reform

he has made of the potential merits of the recommendations
of the report of the Lord Speaker’s Committee on the
size of the House of Lords.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe
Smith): On 20 February, the Prime Minister wrote to
the Lord Speaker to respond to the Committee’s
recommendations. The Prime Minister has committed
to do her bit to reduce the size of the House of Lords by
continuing the restrained approach to appointments
that she has taken so far.

Neil Gray: Is not it even a tad embarrassing for the
Minister that while their lordships have come forward
with proposals for reforms of the outdated and bloated
House of Lords, this Government propose to do nothing
to reform it?

Chloe Smith: No. We made it clear in our manifesto
that reform of the House of Lords was not a priority.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Minister
agree that the size of the House of Lords now makes it
ungainly, that it is politically unbalanced and that it has
become democratically very detached? Is not it time
that we looked in more general terms at the future of
the House of Lords?

Chloe Smith: The key point is that we do expect the
House of Lords to do a good job, but we also expect
the House of Commons to be prime and to be able to
do its job.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does the
Minister realise that her Government’s refusal to reform
the upper Chamber combined with the provisions of
the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill mean that, for
the first time ever, the unelected House of Lords will
have more power over devolved matters in Scotland
than the elected Scottish Government. As a democrat,
how can she justify this outrageous situation?

Chloe Smith: I have two points. First, I am actually
very pleased and grateful to the House of Lords for the
consideration that it has given to the EU withdrawal
Bill. It has provided important scrutiny, in particular of
the devolution clauses for which I and my right hon.
Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are
responsible. Secondly, I think that many Members of
this House would agree that there are many fine
representatives of the Scottish people in this very Chamber
who do a very fine job, and I welcome them to their
places.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Although
constitutional reform is important, will the Minister
ensure that the Government remain focused on delivering
the services that the British people need?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend has it exactly right.
There are many more important issues in the minds of
the electorate. These issues were of course discussed at
length during the last general election, when, as I have
said, our manifesto was very clear that we did not think
that reform of the House of Lords was a pressing
priority.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In
any discussions that the Minister may have with the
Lord Speaker’s Committee, would she be able to impress
on its members the need to ensure that the will of the
people of the United Kingdom in leaving the EU ought
to be uppermost in the minds of the lords and that they
overlook that at their peril?

Chloe Smith: This sits with the theme to which I
already alluded, which is that we think that the House
of Commons should have rightful primacy. Indeed, that
is where we see elected representatives of the British
population who are able to carry forward—in the instance
to which the hon. Gentleman refers—the will of the
British people in leaving the European Union.

UK Constitutional Integrity

4. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is
taking to preserve the integrity of the UK.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister
for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The
constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom is vital
to the security and prosperity of all four nations. That is
why the EU (Withdrawal) Bill respects devolution, while
allowing common approaches to be maintained to secure
the common market of the United Kingdom.

Fiona Bruce: Yesterday the Scottish National party’s
Brexit Minister said:

“There is no such thing as a single market in the UK.”
Does the Minister agree?

Mr Lidington: Mr Russell has always been perfectly
constructive and sensible in his approach to negotiations,
and I am obviously disappointed that so far the Scottish
Government have not felt able to join the Welsh Government in agreeing to the sensible compromise that is on the table. What has been made very clear to me by Scottish businesses, however, is that the UK common market matters a great deal to their prosperity.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the minister aware that we can have integrity and maintain integrity as well as having access to this vital £600 million market? Is he further aware that a small businessman in my constituency, after hearing him on the Radio 4 “Today” programme, phoned me and said “I feel suicidal.”?

Mr Lidington: I am sorry if constituents feel that way after talking to the hon. Gentleman. The important point about small businesses is that they need to be able to sell freely to customers and to get supplies from contractors in all parts of the United Kingdom freely without erecting new internal trade barriers within our kingdom. That is what the EU withdrawal Bill makes possible.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that UK-wide frameworks are good for business and good for jobs? Does he share my regret that Nicola Sturgeon wants to damage the integrity of the UK?

Mr Lidington: Constitutionally, nationalist politicians are quite entitled to pursue their political objectives. The Government’s responsibility is to ensure that Scottish businesses and Scottish consumers are protected and that they do not risk extra burdens or higher prices as a result of obstruction in the UK internal market.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Conservatives are isolated in the Scottish Parliament, as five parties voted—[Interjection.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Linden, I have high hopes of your prospects of statesmanship in due course, which are not aided by you waving an Order Paper in an eccentric manner. [Interjection.] Order. The same goes for Scottish Conservative Members. Mr Kerr, you are a most amiable individual, but you do tend to become very over-excitable. Calm yourself, man, calm yourself.

Patrick Grady: Last night, four out of five parties in the Scottish Parliament voted by an overwhelming majority to withhold legislative consent for the EU withdrawal Bill. How would this Government, in ignoring the decision of the democratically Scottish Parliament, preserve the integrity of the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: I have been very heartened by the degree of cross-party support in the Welsh Assembly and in the House of Lords for the sensible compromise that the Government have put on the table. As I have said repeatedly to Scottish Ministers, my door remains open to consider any practical proposal they want to bring forward, even at this stage, but I would urge the Scottish Government to think again.

Cyber-security

5. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy is supported by £1.9 billion-worth of investment. It sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and assets, to deter our adversaries and to develop the skills and capabilities we need.

Richard Benyon: With cyber-attacks on public services in other countries and a highly publicised attack on our own NHS, does my hon. Friend agree that cyber-security is not just the responsibility of people at the top of our businesses, public services and agencies, but is actually the responsibility of every single employee, and that we have to get that culture across our public service estate?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Cyber-security is a responsibility of all businesses and individuals. It is precisely the objective of the Government’s national cyber-security strategy to get that point across.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is undeniable that the UK is in the grip of a digital skills gap, yet despite the Government’s national cyber-security programme, the problem is getting worse. Fewer students are taking up technology-based A-levels, and those who do are underperforming compared with their counterparts in other subjects. What conversations has the Minister had with his Front-Bench colleagues to ensure that digital technology is integrated across the curriculum and that teachers of all subjects are given the training to help them inspire the next generation into closing the digital skills gap?

Oliver Dowden: I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. We are a world leader in digital technology, as I repeatedly see when I visit the Government Digital Service, which has an extensive training programme. In addition, one of the first three of the Government’s new T-levels will focus on digital.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has just sent me a most gracious letter of apology in respect of a matter for which he has no reason whatsoever to apologise. I think we ought to hear the fella.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I received a letter last week from Greater Manchester police that informed me that on 18 April I was involved in a vehicle collision in Salford and that, if I am convicted, I will face a fine of £1,000 and get six points on my licence. As many Members will testify, I was in this place on 18 April. This is a clear example of identity theft. Greater Manchester police have been most helpful and told me that it is likely that a drug dealer in Manchester has stolen my identity. You will be interested to know, Mr Speaker, that he has put down my occupation as “cobbler”. I would be interested to know what the Minister has to say.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has got his point on the record with considerable alacrity.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman’s profession should have been orator and statesmen; that would have been a better description. He is absolutely right that we should be working with the police, and that is why one of the measures in our strategy is to deter and disrupt our adversaries, which includes states, criminals and hacktivists.

Public Life: Intimidation

6. Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of intimidation faced by people in public life.

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The trend of increased intimidation can seriously damage our democracy. That is why we will be consulting on recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake legislative changes, for example, to remove candidates’ addresses from ballot papers and create an electoral offence of intimidating candidates. An electoral offence will reflect our view that elections and candidates need to be better protected.

Mr Clarke: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will be aware of incidents designed to intimidate people from being involved in public life, including a recent incident where a brick was thrown through a Conservative candidate’s window in Liverpool. Does he agree that it is vital that all involved in public life seek to encourage a culture of respect and tackle those who seek to intimidate people?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That was a shocking incident, which I hope all of us on both sides of the House would find abhorrent. The candidate had her one-year-old daughter in the room when the brick was thrown. That is a salutary lesson to us all. Such conduct deters people from participating in politics. That is why we have to look at removing the requirement on local addresses, but we also need leadership from the top. That is why we have introduced a respect code, which I hope the Labour party will eventually follow.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): People who intimidate those in public life are thugs, wherever they are on the political spectrum. Can the Minister tell us what will the Government do to avoid their disenfranchisement?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend has great experience, and he is absolutely right that we have to crack down on that kind of behaviour and make it clear that we must allow debate with respect, so that people want to and feel confident to get involved in politics. I just hope the Labour party will get its house in order and bring in a respect code as well.

Voter Registration

7. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that people with no fixed address are able to vote.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): People with no fixed address can register to vote at an address or place where they spend a large part of their time. The Government have and will continue to work with homelessness charities to make sure that the paperwork required to register without a fixed address can be easily accessed.

Kate Green: The voter ID pilots in the recent local elections required people to produce a passport, bus pass or utility bill with their address on it—you will see the irony, Mr Speaker. How likely is it that someone of no fixed abode could produce those documents, and what will the Government do to avoid their disenfranchisement?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We had those pilots just a few weeks ago, and I look forward to a full evaluation of their impact. We believe they have been successful and that very few people were negatively affected by them. I look forward to working with the Electoral Commission on the next steps.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): People with no fixed address can register to vote through a “declaration of local connection” form. Will the Minister look at reforming that form so that, given the stigma associated with its name, it is no longer called that? The form also states that if people have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, they have to report it. That requirement is a disgrace and needs to be removed.

Chloe Smith: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in looking at such things—not only the form he mentions, but paperwork to assist people with a visual impairment or those who need to register anonymously. This Government can be proud of those achievements, and I would be happy to discuss his points further with him.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Three thousand eight hundred: that is the number of people nationally with no fixed abode who are registered to vote. Does the Minister agree that that is woefully under-representative of the number of homeless people and families in this country? One way to make it easier for people with no fixed abode to register to vote would be to remove the requirement to print the form. Why is the group of voters with the least access to a printer the only one that has to print out their paperwork?
Chloe Smith: As I said in my first answer, homelessness charities and other organisations that assist homeless people are very able to help them with the form, and that is very important. I would also say that this Government are working across the breadth of what we need to do to support those who are homeless, and I regard the ability to register to vote as just one of those pieces of work. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office chairs the taskforce that is looking at how to reduce and eliminate rough sleeping, and that is important work.

**Topical Questions**

**T1. [905330] Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** Since our last Cabinet Office questions, the Government have reached an agreement with the Welsh Government on changes to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and an inter-governmental agreement on the establishment of common frameworks. I welcome yesterday's decision by the National Assembly for Wales to grant consent to the Bill, and I place on record the Government’s commitment to act along the lines of the inter-governmental agreement respecting devolution, and to seek consent in our dealings with all three devolved nations.

**Gavin Newlands:** Groucho Marx once said, “These are my principles, and if you don’t like them—well, I have others.” In homage to Groucho, the Scottish Conservatives used to have principles on clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but they have abandoned them to become isolated, as theirs was the only party to vote for legislative consent in the Scottish Parliament yesterday. Is the right hon. Gentleman ashamed—not just a tad embarrassed—on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives?

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman has a question to answer. He and his party support continued membership of the European Union. The powers in the Bill allow for the temporary carrying forward, for a time-limited period, of the frameworks that already exist, and to do so when that is in the interests of Scottish jobs and Scottish consumers. What is the hon. Gentleman’s objection to that?

**T3. [905332] Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of my constituents have written to me about rolling out voter ID across the country. What assessment has the Minister made of the recent trials?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** We believe that the recent trials have been successful. As I said earlier, we will be evaluating the pilots fully and then taking careful decisions about next steps. We remain of the view that voter fraud is a crime that should be stamped out, and it would be very good if other parties in this place joined us in that belief.

**T2. [905331] Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): One of the most shocking elements of the whole Carillion fiasco was the fact that the Cabinet Office saw a letter from Carillion’s accountants in mid-December with a proposal that would have allowed £360 million extra to be put back into the public purse. Will the Minister explain what he did when he saw that recommendation, and why the money was not put back into public purse?

**Mr Lidington:** As a matter of fact, I took up this office on 8 January 2018. I do not think the picture the hon. Gentleman paints is an accurate one. It was only in January that we were presented with details—full details—of what Carillion proposed. It would have been wrong for the Government to bail it out for private sector failures of judgment.

**T4. [905333] Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the civil service in the devolved Administrations receives as much support as the central civil service, and how is he maintaining standards and objectivity across the United Kingdom?

**Mr Lidington:** My Department supports consistent standards of devolution awareness across the civil service. The Cabinet Office runs a cross-Government learning campaign, in partnership with the devolved Administrations, to ensure that there is good practice throughout the United Kingdom.

**T7. [905336] Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): Why did the Government continue to award contracts to Carillion after it had announced a profit warning and its shares had fallen by 75%, making it an obvious risk to the public purse?

**Mr Lidington:** As I set out in detail in my evidence to the Liaison Committee, three of the contracts were actually awarded before the profit warning. The two from HS2 Ltd were part of a joint venture. The other joint venture partners stepped forward, in line with their contracts, to ensure that the project continues with no additional cost to the public purse.

**T5. [905334] Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): We know that having a job massively reduces reoffending, so will the Government commit to lead through their own example by giving ex-offenders a fair chance of a job?

**Mr Lidington:** I strongly support Ban the Box and other such initiatives. The Cabinet Office will work hard with other Government Departments to ensure that we maximise opportunities for ex-offenders to be given that second chance.

**T8. [905337] Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Estimates show that 4,000 people in the five pilot areas were turned away because they did not have the required ID, so will the Government now abandon their plans for voter ID?

**Chloe Smith:** The data so far from the successful five pilots does not seem to provide evidence to support the Opposition’s scaremongering. Most people’s experience of the pilots was very positive. We will evaluate the next steps before returning to the House with the way forward.
Mr Speaker, may I say how appropriate it is for the House to recognise the bravery and hard work of PC Jonathan Wright and PC Craig Nicholls in apprehending the killer of Jo Cox? When Jo Cox was killed, this House lost one of its best.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Simon Hoare: Animal welfare and environmental standards are clearly key for British agriculture, but will my right hon. Friend reassure UK farmers that food security and food production will be recognised and at the heart of future UK agriculture policy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point—he is absolutely right to do so. As we leave the European Union, as he will know, we will have the opportunity to deliver a farming policy that works for the whole industry. That is why we are asking for the views of everyone involved or with an interest about the development of a policy that reflects the reality of life for food producers and farmers, the opportunity to improve our farmed environment and the issues that my hon. Friend raises. Our food has a great reputation—a very high reputation—for quality that is built on high animal welfare standards, strong environmental protections, and the dedication of farmers and growers right across this country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you for welcoming PC Wright and PC Nicholls to the Chamber today, Mr Speaker. They did great work, as indeed do police officers all over the country. It was right that you should recognise them on behalf of all of us.

It is Mental Health Awareness Week. I join the Prime Minister in wishing Harry and Meghan all the best, and I thank Harry for his work to highlight the need to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health, and the ability for us all to talk about mental health to ensure that people do not suffer in silence on their own—particularly young people, who are often so grievously affected by this.

When the Prime Minister wrote at the weekend that she wanted “as little friction as possible”, was she talking about EU trade or the next Cabinet meeting? [Laughter.]

The Prime Minister: I think the right hon. Gentleman knows full well that this Government have a policy of leaving the customs union and of ensuring that, as we do so, we have as frictionless trade as possible with the EU, we have a solution that ensures we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and we have an independent trade policy. But if he is talking about friction, perhaps he could reflect on the fact that this month, the shadow Health Minister in the Lords voted for a second referendum; that at the weekend, the shadow Brexit Secretary refused to rule out a second referendum; and that on Monday, the shadow International Development Minister tweeted in favour of a second referendum. Perhaps when he stands up he could put the minds of the British people and this House at rest and rule out a second referendum.
Jeremy Corbyn: The divisions in the Cabinet mean that there has been no progress in negotiations for five months. The reality is that members of the Cabinet are more interested in negotiating with each other than with the European Union. The Prime Minister’s promise of “as little friction as possible” is in stark contrast with the earlier commitment that this would be “friction-free”, so will she explain how much friction she is willing to accept? Businesses and workers in those companies need to know.

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that we can continue to trade in as frictionless a way as possible. The suggestion that trade is entirely frictionless at the moment is not actually correct. We have set three very simple objectives for a future customs union. We will say to the House that achieving those objectives, which I have just set out, will not be easy—it will be difficult. Some will say, “Forget about an independent trade policy”—that is not the position of this Government. Some might say, “Don’t worry about the Northern Irish border”—that is not the position of this Government. It is absolutely right that we aim to achieve those three objectives. The right hon. Gentleman talks about progress. We will be publishing a White Paper in a few weeks showing how much progress we are making.

Jeremy Corbyn: Ministers are no nearer to agreeing a White Paper than they are a strategy for going forward. I remind the Prime Minister that UK has the slowest economic growth of all major economies, and its growth overall is slower than that of the eurozone. The Government’s uncertainty and recklessness are putting jobs and investment at risk. Last week, Airbus confirmed that its space contract would move abroad post Brexit and that it was considering its overall position in the UK because of the Government’s complete lack of clarity. How many other businesses have warned her that they too are considering their future in this country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about preparations for the negotiations and the White Paper. Let us remember what his position was—[Interruption.] His position was that we should have triggered article 50 immediately after the referendum, with no work having been done in preparation for the negotiations. He would not even have had a white page, let alone a White Paper, to base his negotiations on. What would that have led to? It would have led to what Labour does every time it is in government—it would have sold Britain out.

Jeremy Corbyn: May I congratulate the Prime Minister on record numbers of zero-hours contracts, record numbers of people in in-work poverty, and a record of wages lower today than 10 years ago? May I also congratulate her on formally dividing her Cabinet into rival camps—as if it needed doing—to consider two different models? As a process of parliamentary scrutiny, I hope that both Sub-Committees will report directly to the House so that we can all make up our minds on the rival factions in her Cabinet.

While the Prime Minister’s Government dither, the Dutch Government have now begun training the first batch of extra customs officials to deal with the reintroduction of customs checks for British goods at Dutch borders. In October, the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson said, “HMRC”—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will complete his question more quickly if Members do not shout—[Interruption.] Order. Mr Colin Clark, I do not require your assistance. You are an amiable enough fellow, but no assistance for the Chair from you is required.

I want to accommodate Back Benchers, and I will do so today, as I always do. I am concerned about people who want to ask questions. If people do not want to ask questions, they must shush and listen, and if they do want to ask questions, they had certainly better keep schtum.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is a very straightforward question. How many additional HMRC staff have been recruited to deal with Brexit?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are indeed making preparations for all contingencies, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced money which has been allocated to Departments to make those necessary preparations.

May I correct what the right hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his question? He referred to zero-hours contracts. In fact, if we look at the figures, we see that
almost two thirds of the increase in employment in the past year has been in full-time work, more than three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, and about 70% of the rise in employment since 2010 has been in highly skilled work. Perhaps, when he stands up, the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the jobs that have been created under this Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: The question that I asked the Prime Minister was, “How many more HMRC officials have been recruited?” She has not answered it. Let me help her; and say that if more are being recruited, as is being claimed, they will not even make up for the cuts made in the last eight years. It seems that the Dutch Government are more prepared for dealing with Brexit than the British Government.

We have had 23 months since the referendum. We have just 10 months in which to complete negotiations, and the Government are in complete disarray. On both sides of the negotiations, the reality is dawning that deadlines are at risk of not being met. More and more jobs are at risk as more and more businesses openly consider the options for relocating their jobs. The Government are so busy negotiating with themselves that they cannot negotiate with anyone else. If the Prime Minister cannot negotiate a good deal for Britain, why does she not step aside and let Labour negotiate a comprehensive new customs union and living standards backed by trade unions and business in this country? Step aside, and make way for those who will negotiate it.

The Prime Minister: What we have seen under this Government are more jobs being created, and more high-paid jobs being created. We have delivered on our December joint report on Brexit, and in March on the implementation period. Let us look at what we would see from the Labour party. With Labour Members, you simply cannot trust a word that they say. They said that they would strike new trade deals, but what do they want? They want to be in a customs union that would ensure that they could not strike new trade deals. Promise broken. They said that they would scrap student debt, but after the election they went back on that. Promise broken. They said that they would tackle anti-Semitism. Promise broken. Only the Conservative party can be trusted by the British people to deliver a Brexit that is in the interests of British people, and to deliver opportunity for all in a Britain that is fit for the future.

Q3. [905340] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Yesterday we had the fantastic news that real wages are rising, which, combined with the threshold where people now begin to pay tax, will mean people in North Warwickshire and Bedworth keep more of the money they earn and have more money in their pockets. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming this good news, and does she agree that we need to keep backing our workers and great local businesses to deliver even more well-paid jobs?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the good economic news, not just that more people are in employment but that real wages are up. I note that when I challenged him to do so, the Leader of the Opposition was unwilling to welcome the number of jobs that have been created in this country that mean there are more people with a regular income to look after their families. And as my hon. Friend says, the news that real wages are up means more money in people’s pockets under the Conservatives.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in wishing Ramadan Mubarak to all Muslims preparing to start the month of Ramadan today.

Last night the Scottish Parliament voted by 93 votes to 30 to refuse consent to the withdrawal Bill. The Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens all voted to refuse consent. The Conservatives are isolated and out of touch with the people of Scotland. Will the Prime Minister respect the will of the Scottish Parliament and work with the Scottish Government to amend the withdrawal Bill?

The Prime Minister: We have been working with the Scottish Government for some time now, as we have been working with the Welsh Government, on this issue. First, decisions that the devolved Administrations are able to make before exit will continue to be able to be made by them after exit. What the Bill does is set out a mechanism that respects devolution and lets us maintain the integrity of our own common market as we work out the long-term solutions. That is a reasonable and sensible way forward. The Welsh Government and now the Welsh Assembly, including Labour and Liberal Democrat Members of the Welsh Assembly, agree with that. I think it is right that we go ahead with measures that not only respect devolution, but ensure we maintain the integrity of our common market.

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister wishes to respect the Scottish Parliament, she should respect last night’s vote. It is very simple: the Tories are seeking to veto the democratic wishes of the Scottish Parliament. This is absolutely unprecedented. If this Government force through the legislation without the consent of the Scottish Parliament, the Prime Minister will be doing so in the full knowledge that they are breaking the 20-year-old settlement and the Prime Minister reassured the House that the withdrawal Bill will not go through without the consent of the Scottish Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are disappointed that the Scottish Parliament has not granted its consent; we have been working hard in recent months to find a way through on this issue and clause, and the effort put into this has been shown by the fact that the Welsh Government and Assembly have given their consent to this Bill. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we want to ensure the integrity of the United Kingdom’s common market, and when he talks about the democratic will he might wish to recall the fact that it was the democratic will of the Scottish people to remain in the United Kingdom.

Q5. [905342] Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The 12 in-bed provision at Rothbury Community Hospital in my constituency was removed without adequate consultation back in September 2016. The Save Rothbury Hospital campaign and I have worked closely together to get transparency on that decision and return the in-bed provision for our vast
and sparsely populated Coquet valley. Does the Prime Minister agree that the NHS should be investing in community hospitals, which can provide that low-level nursing for convalescence and palliative care for my constituents and others, and will she support our campaign to get it back?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to be raising this issue on behalf of her constituents in the way that she is. I understand this issue is currently being considered by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel, which will then advise my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary. I am sure my hon. Friend will recognise that, as the issue is under an independent review at present, I will not go into further detail on the specifics, but on the general point I wholeheartedly agree with her that community hospitals are a vital part of the range of services we want to see in our NHS.

Q2. [905339] Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Why is it that over half the young people referred for specialist mental health treatment by their GP are not receiving care?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will know that we have been doing much to improve the facilities of treatment for those people with mental health problems. We are putting record levels of money into mental health. We are also making a number of changes—for example, increasing the training of teachers and other members of staff in schools better to identify mental health problems among young people and to ensure that they can be properly dealt with. Is there more for us to do? Yes there is, because for too many years in this country, Government after Government did not treat mental health problems in the way that they should have done. We have recognised the need to raise awareness of mental health issues earlier, and this Government are putting more money and facilities in to ensure that those with mental health problems are properly treated and given the treatment they deserve.

Q10. [905347] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Derbyshire’s Labour police and crime commissioner is advertising for two new members of staff at a combined cost of more than £90,000 while also increasing his council tax precept. Given that this will take the commissioner’s office staff numbers up to 19, excluding the commissioner and his deputy—which is actually more than the number of police officers in Erewash—does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour is again prioritising jobs for the boys over brave boots on the ground?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As she will know, we have protected police funding since 2015. For 2018-19, including council tax, there will be an additional £460 million investment available to policing, and we have been able to do that because of the balanced approach that we have taken to our economy. As she points out, however, it is police and crime commissioners who are locally accountable for the decisions that they make, and she is absolutely right to raise this issue and the decisions made by her local police and crime commissioner on behalf of her constituents.

Q4. [905341] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Figures released by the OECD on 27 April show that inward investment into the UK in 2017 slumped by 90% in comparison with 2016, which is one of the largest one-year drops in foreign direct investment ever recorded in any country. It is crystal clear that if this downward trend continues, it will have a catastrophic impact on steel and the other manufacturing and service industries that are the lifeblood of our economy in Aberavon, in Wales and in the UK. In order to reverse the profound market uncertainty that has caused FDI to plummet in this way, will the Prime Minister now confirm that she is prepared to keep an open mind on our country rejoining EFTA—the European Free Trade Association—and remaining in the European economic area? Will she also recognise the fact that there is a strong cross-party consensus for—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry; this is an extremely important question, but Members really do need to be sensitive to the fact that lots of other people want to ask questions.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks at what we have seen in the past few months, he will see company after company announcing investment in this country, which is leading to more jobs here. Yes, as we look ahead to leaving the European Union, we need to ensure that our customs arrangements will meet the three tests that I set out earlier: an independent trade policy enabling us to do trade deals around the world; as frictionless as possible a border with the EU; and ensuring that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is exactly what the Government are working to produce.

Q12. [905349] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As we approach the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with the victims and their families. Very sadly, far too few of the survivors have a permanent home to call their own. In advance of Dame Judith Hackitt’s long-promised review of building regulations, will my right hon. Friend update the House on the work that the Government have done to ensure that buildings across the UK that are of similar design to Grenfell Tower are safe, so that we do not have a repetition of that terrible tragedy?

The Prime Minister: As we approach the anniversary of the appalling tragedy that was the Grenfell Tower fire, our thoughts are with the victims and survivors and all those affected by that tragedy. My hon. Friend refers to rehousing. There are 210 households in total that are in need of a new home, and I understand that 201 households have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation.

On the issue of the safety of buildings, the fire and rescue services have visited more than 1,250 high-rise buildings, and immediate action has been taken to ensure the safety of every resident. Councils and housing associations must remove dangerous cladding quickly, but paying for these works must not undermine their ability to do important maintenance and repair work. I have worked closely with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Housing Secretary, and I can today confirm that the Government will fully fund the removal
and replacement of dangerous cladding by councils and housing associations, estimated at £400 million. The Housing Secretary will set out further details later this week.

Q6. [905343] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I join hon. Members in paying tribute to Tessa Jowell—an amazing woman, politician and friend. Some remember the Olympic games as Tessa’s crowning achievement, but those of us who were closest to her know that they were not what she was most of proud of. As a true memorial, and in the week in which the Government can find £50 million for grammar schools, will the Prime Minister commit to funding Tessa’s proudest achievement: Sure Start?

The Prime Minister: We all recognise the significant contribution that the late Baroness Jowell made in the various roles that she undertook in government and to the various issues that she championed. Sure Start centres remain a key part of delivering the best start in life for every child, but we have built on that legacy by introducing 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and 30 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds. Just as importantly, we are focusing on quality, with 94% of early years providers now rated good or outstanding, the result of which is a record number of children ready for school. We will continue to work to ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

Mr Speaker: In warmly welcoming him back to his place, I call Mr Owen Paterson.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to register my heartfelt thanks to all the staff at the Midland Centre for Spinal Injuries at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in my constituency. Without their extraordinary skill, professionalism and simple human kindness, I would not be here today.

The House of Commons Library confirms that an estimated 63% of Members of this House represent constituencies that voted leave. Does the Prime Minister agree that should those Members not support her by voting for her programme of taking back control by leaving the single market, the customs union—any customs union—and the remit of the European Court of Justice, they will be denying the democratic vote of their constituents and doing lasting damage to our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my right hon. Friend in commending the work of all at the Midland Centre for Spinal Injuries, and we are pleased to see him back in his place in the Chamber.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that this Government are delivering on the vote of the British people, which was to leave the European Union. As we do that, we will ensure that we get the best Brexit deal for the United Kingdom. I consider it to be a matter of politicians’ integrity that having given the choice to the British people we should then deliver for them on that choice.

Q7. [905344] Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): This afternoon, 1,000 handwritten letters will arrive at Downing Street asking the Prime Minister to intervene personally in the stalemate between NHS England and the drug company Vertex to get the cystic fibrosis drug Orkambi issued to patients in the UK without delay. One of those letters is from seven-year-old Luis, who says:

“Dear Mrs May,

Please can you give Orkambi to me so I will feel much better and won’t have to spend so much time in hospital.”

What is the Prime Minister’s response? Will she?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. Cystic fibrosis is obviously a terrible, life-limiting condition, and it is right that patients should have access to cost-effective, innovative medicines and technologies. The issue has been taken up by Members from across the House and, as the hon. Lady mentioned, there is an ongoing dialogue between NHS England and Vertex, but I am keen to see a speedy resolution to the negotiations. I understand that several Members have asked to see me about the issue, and I am happy for that to happen.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): The freedom of the press was upheld in a series of votes in this place last week. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is still important to hold newspapers’ feet to the fire on standards? Will she join me in encouraging further progress in this area?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This House has voted to uphold the freedom of the press, which is an important underpinning of our democracy. Of course we expect high standards from our press and, as he will know, arrangements have been put in place to ensure there is that opportunity, through various bodies, to deal with the issue. It is important that everybody in this House is ready to accept—although we do not always agree with what the press say, and sometimes what they say is uncomfortable—that the freedom of the press is an important part of our democracy.

Q8. [905345] Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Health Secretary is in listening mode and has referred the plans for downgrading Huddersfield Royal Infirmary back to the trust. Now, here is the challenge. Nationally, how will the Government fill the 34,000 nursing vacancies, recruit the 47% of vacancies in GP surgeries, increase funding for community NHS services, fix Kirklees Council’s social care funding gap of £9 million a year and protect our NHS so it is free at the point of use in its 70th year?

The Prime Minister: It remains true that, to uphold its principles, we are putting more money into the national health service. In November 2017 my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that a further £10 billion is going into the national health service. I have said that we will have a review for a long-term plan for the national health service, which will include multi-year funding. The hon. Lady refers to the numbers of doctors and nurses, and we have more nurses and more doctors in our national health service today than we did when we came into government.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): A growing number of university students are struggling with their mental health and, tragically, suicide has
risen among students. My right hon. Friend has shown her commitment to mental health among young people with the plans for mental healthcare in schools. Will she make the mental health of university students her next priority?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend of course raises an important point. As she says, we have put a focus on the mental health of children in schools because we know that a significant proportion of mental health problems start before a child reaches the age of 14. She makes an important point about university students, and that is certainly something I will look into.

Q9. [905346] Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Erasmus+ is the EU programme that, for 30 years, has given 600,000 people from the UK—apprentices, students, businesses and workers—the chance to train, study or volunteer abroad. The Government have said that Erasmus+ is safe until 2020 but have made no commitments to keep it thereafter. Erasmus+ is being forgotten about. Keeping all those benefits, especially for younger people, many in Blackpool, is one thing that unites both leave and remain. Will the Prime Minister make sure that Erasmus+ is now a top-line item for her Ministers and give us this pledge today?

The Prime Minister: We have not forgotten about Erasmus, or indeed a number of other programmes that give opportunities for universities and students here in the United Kingdom. We have said there are certain programmes that we wish to remain part of when we leave the European Union, and Erasmus is one of those we have cited that we may wish to remain part of, but of course we are in a negotiation with the European Union and we will be dealing with these matters in that negotiation.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are looking resplendent in your Arsenal tie.

I was fortunate enough to go to Djibouti, an African country with great challenges, with UNICEF. I am sure everybody in this House will want to see the UK do more with trade in Africa. Given that 485 of us voted to allow the Prime Minister to trigger article 50, does she agree that we should support her leadership and support the UK in getting the best deal so that we can trade with Africans and help lift them out of poverty?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. When we leave the European Union we will be able to negotiate those trade deals in our interest, and not rely on Brussels negotiating trade deals for us. We will have that independent trade policy, and certainly we will be looking to do trade deals with a number of countries in Africa. I took the opportunity at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to speak to a number of leaders from Africa about just this issue.

Q11. [905348] Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): In February 2015, after the publication of the Casey report on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, the Prime Minister, in her previous role, said that if resources were needed, they must be provided. However, the Fusion bid has received only just over 30% of the funding requested. This funding is desperately needed to support survivors of CSE and to pursue convictions against the perpetrators. Will she ask the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary to authorise the rest of the funding as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that, obviously, we were all appalled at the revelations of what had happened in terms of CSE in Rotherham and, sadly, in other parts of the country. I will ask the Home Secretary to look at the issue. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, certainly as regards police funding, there are arrangements whereby bids can be put in to the Home Office. Those are properly considered and discussed with the police force in question, with decisions taken on that basis.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): My constituent Sharon Hollman went through the devastating loss of her teenage son, who committed suicide. She is seeking a serious case review by Kent County Council about multi-agency failings that meant he did not get appropriate mental health support. This week is Mental Health Awareness Week. What reassurance can the Prime Minister give to my constituent and others about the need to ensure that we have appropriate mental health support for children and that lessons are learned from this tragic loss?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the sympathies of the whole House will be with Sharon, because no parent should have to endure the agony of burying their child. May I reassure my hon. Friend that we are absolutely committed to seeing mental health services improve on the ground? That is why we have committed to making an additional £1.4 billion available to improve children and young people’s mental health services, and we have committed to ensuring that by 2020-21, 70,000 more children and young people each year will have access to high-quality NHS mental health care. On the specific case she has raised, I know that my right hon. Friends the Education and Communities Secretaries will be happy to look into the detail of it in order to ensure that lessons are indeed learned.

Q13. [905350] Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I have been working with a group of parents who have adult children who were seeking long-term accommodation. They were advised and encouraged to use the support for mortgage interest scheme. The Government have since abolished the scheme and replaced it with a loan, which has caused a great deal of hurt, concern and confusion. Mencap has asked for this group of adult children to be exempted from the changes. Will the Prime Minister meet me, Mencap and a small representative group of parents to see how we can put right the hurt that has been caused and make sure that these people have the proper accommodation available for them?

The Prime Minister: I will look into the specific issue the hon. Gentleman has raised and ensure that the appropriate Secretary of State meets him to discuss the issue with him.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Russian military naval activity in the north Atlantic is at its highest level since the 1980s. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the funding of the Royal Navy under this Government?
The Prime Minister: I am pleased to make the House aware, once again, of the significant funding that is going into our defence forces—into our armed forces—including a significant investment in the ships of the Royal Navy. I am pleased to have been on the Queen Elizabeth, the new aircraft carrier, which is a fine representation of the commitment we put into our defence spending. As my hon. Friend will know, a modernising defence programme review is taking place, involving the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and No. 10. We will be looking, in due course, at any changes that need to be made to ensure that our defence capabilities do indeed meet the threats we face.

Q14. [905351] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We must continue to have the closest possible relationship with the single market if we are to avoid taking a major hit on our economy, but time is rapidly running out for us to negotiate a bespoke new deal. What possible reason can there be for the Prime Minister not giving Members of Parliament the earliest possible opportunity to vote in this place on the European economic area?

The Prime Minister: This House has had and will continue to have many opportunities to debate these issues in relation to the European Union and the United Kingdom’s future relationship with it. There will be not only the meaningful vote that has been promised, but the voting on the European withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill that will come before this House and on a number of other relevant Bills for our Brexit.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Thousands more homes across North Yorkshire will receive access to superfast broadband thanks to the Government’s investment in North Yorkshire County Council. Much of that will be connected with fibre direct to the premises. Does the Prime Minister agree that fibre represents gold-standard broadband and that local authorities must use all their powers to ensure that developers install fibre broadband when building new homes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes the very important point that access to superfast broadband is important not only for individuals but for people who run businesses from home and in their community. It is important that we look ahead and that, when local authorities put these arrangements in place, they provide the best opportunity for people so that not only people’s personal interest in accessing broadband but the interests of the local economy can be met.

Q15. [905352] Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My constituent, Jan Steyn, is an incredibly hard-working Church of Scotland minister, who has made North East Fife his home over the past seven years. He has been denied leave to remain because he temporarily served the Scots Kirk in Paris. Will the Prime Minister meet me and the Church of Scotland to discuss this issue?

The Prime Minister: I will ensure that the Home Secretary looks carefully at the case and is in touch with the hon. Gentleman.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrats have become the midwives for the Scottish National party’s crusade to tear apart the Union, leaving only the Scottish Conservatives as the party that wants to get on and make a success of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I share my hon. Friend’s disappointment. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), we have worked long and hard with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government on those proposals. The Welsh Government and the Welsh Assembly have accepted them; Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the Welsh Assembly voted for them. It is a shame that it was not possible in the Scottish Parliament for agreement to be reached with the Scottish Government. As my hon. Friend said, we all want to deliver a Brexit that is good for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Following the completion at the end of the year of the Boundary Commission’s review, which will apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, reducing the number of Members in this House, has the Prime Minister further considered the resulting relative increase in the size of the Executive in this place? May I urge her not to apply the policy that is currently being applied to Northern Ireland of not having any Ministers, refusing to appoint any and allowing civil servants to run the place?

The Prime Minister: Obviously we will look at the consequences of the proposals for the number of elected Members of Parliament in this House. I wish to see Ministers in Northern Ireland, able to take decisions for Northern Ireland. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that depends on our being able to get agreement among the parties for reinstating the Northern Ireland Executive and allowing the Northern Ireland Assembly to play its full part in the affairs of Northern Ireland. We will continue to work with all parties because I believe that it is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland for that devolved Executive to be reinstated.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): This year of all years, millions of people wish to remember the sacrifices of our servicemen and women in conflicts around the world, but in my constituency, Hillmorton branch of the Royal British Legion tells me that there is a danger that its annual parade will not take place because of challenges in arranging road closures. Will the Prime Minister meet me to see how that situation and perhaps others across the country might be resolved?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely agree that it is right that we commemorate the contribution of British and Commonwealth military and civilian servicemen and women involved in the two world wars and later conflicts. As I understand it, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport co-ordinates the event in London, but perhaps the Secretary of State for Transport will need to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter, although I suspect that it also involves local authorities and the police in his area. I encourage those discussions. We do not want any of the commemorative events not to take place because of a lack of arrangements being put in place for them.
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Lakes line from Oxenholme to Windermere has seen 160 cancellations in the month of April and 72 cancellations in the first week of May alone, risking the potential futures of GCSE students as they try to get to school and are left stranded, people trying to get to work, and the hundreds and hundreds of people visiting what is Britain’s second biggest tourist and visitor destination. Will the Prime Minister join me in saying that that is an outrage; will she use her office to ensure that Northern has the franchise removed from it; and will she undo the damage to the Lakes line by keeping the Government’s initial promise to electrify that line?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is aware of the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I understand that the Department for Transport is working with Northern Rail to identify the nature of these issues and to see a quick resolution of them.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Despite clear evidence of potentially criminal wrongdoing, our regulators and law enforcement agencies seem unwilling or unable to take action against those at the highest level responsible for the business banking scandals at RBS, Lloyds and HBOS. Will the Prime Minister do everything that she can to make sure that those people are held to account regardless of their status, seniority or background?

The Prime Minister: This is an issue that my hon. Friend has not only raised today but been a tireless campaigner on, and he is absolutely right. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and it is vital that lessons are learned from what happened at RBS and at HBOS in Reading. As he will know, the Financial Conduct Authority has reported that there were areas of widespread inappropriate treatment of firms by RBS. That was unacceptable. He will also know that the events at HBOS in Reading constituted criminal activity for which those responsible were brought to justice. The independent FCA is currently investigating matters arising from both of those cases. I look forward to receiving its conclusions, but it is important that we do ensure that this matter is fully addressed, and addressed properly, so that it does not happen again.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): If, like Jane, the Prime Minister had worked nights at Sainsbury’s for the past 30 years, how would she regard its plans to cut her pay by £2,000 as one of 13,000 people due a pay cut in 2020? Does she agree with boss Mike Coupe that those people are “in the money”, or does she see it as an insult to Jane’s hard work, her determination, and her abilities in just about managing?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the hard work that many people such as the hon. Lady’s constituent put in day in, day out to keep our economy going. I will look at the issue that she has raised, but these are commercial decisions that are taken by the employer and by Sainsbury’s.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.
always done over the past nine years, and no one and nothing will stop me doing my duty by the House of Commons.

If the Secretary of State wants to respond to the point of order, he is very welcome to do so.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):
It is in the statement.

Mr Speaker: Very well. I will indulge the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

Crispin Blunt: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Seven minutes ago, The Guardian’s “Politics live” with Andrew Sparrow said:

“East coast rail franchise to be brought back under public control.”

It appears that someone has broken an embargo, or something has gone wrong, because I guess that that is what the Secretary of State’s statement is to be about. Will you put investigations in place to find out why that statement has been made before we have had the opportunity to listen to it from the Secretary of State?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order; and I respect his sincerity, but it is not for me to initiate inquiries on this matter. I say two things to the hon. Gentleman whose point I otherwise take very seriously. First, let us see what is in the statement, and whether in fact there has been a leak. Secondly, were it to transpire that there had been, that would be a matter to be laid squarely at the door of the Department whose statement it is, and it would be incumbent on the Secretary of State in those circumstances to initiate any such inquiry. At this point, we should hear the statement. I thank the Secretary of State for approaching the Dispatch Box to deliver it.
East Coast Main Line

12.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future of the east coast main line. As was made clear in the point of order that we have just heard, it has been quite important to try today to handle the release of this information in as controlled a way as possible. We did, of course, approach the Opposition earlier this morning, and explained how we were going to communicate the information to them. My officials shared this statement with the Opposition parties shortly after 12 o’clock, at approximately the same time that Stagecoach was itself told about this—both would expect to be given warning of what is a significant and, for them, market and price sensitive announcement.

Let me set out what I have to say today. The House will recall that, back in November, I set out details of our rail strategy, and our plans to integrate the operation of track and trains. I also indicated that one of the key parts of that plan was to address what were then well-documented problems on the east coast main line by creating a new, integrated rail operation on that route.

In February, I gave the House an update on the financial problems on the east coast main line, and indicated that the current franchise would run out of money within months. This is not because the route is failing—it continues, and will continue, to generate substantial returns for the Government, and the most recent figures show passenger satisfaction at 92%. The route has its challenges, but it is not a failing railway. However, as I explained in February, Stagecoach and Virgin Trains got their bid wrong and they are now paying a price. They will have lost nearly £200 million paying a price. They will have lost nearly £200 million

Virgin Trains got their bid wrong and they are now paying a price. They will have lost nearly £200 million meeting their contracted commitments. This means that taxpayers have not lost out because revenues are lower than predicted; only Virgin Trains East Coast and its parent companies have made losses at this time.

As the Brown review said in 2013, in an effective railway industry franchises can occasionally fail. But we do not, and cannot, expect companies to hold unlimited liabilities when they take on franchises—they would simply not bid for them if they had to. This means that franchises sometimes do fail, which is why a Conservative government previously created the structures for the operator of last resort control to shape the new partnership. On the same day, we will start with the launch of the new, long-term brand for the east coast main line through the recreation of one of Britain’s iconic rail brands, the London and North Eastern Railway.

The team that have been working for me since last autumn to form the operator of last resort will take immediate control of passenger services, and will then begin the task of working with Network Rail to bring together the teams operating the track and trains on the LNER network. I am creating a new board, with an independent chair, to oversee the operation of the LNER route. The board will work with my Department to build the new partnership. It will have representatives of both the train operating team and Network Rail, as well as independent members, who importantly will ensure that the interests of other operators on the route are taken into account. I will appoint an interim chief executive sooner with our long-term plans for the east coast main line through the recreation of one of Britain’s iconic rail brands, the London and North Eastern Railway.

When the new LNER operation is fully formed, it will be a partnership between the public and private sectors. In all circumstances ownership of the infrastructure will remain in the public sector, but I believe that the railway is at its strongest when it is a genuine partnership between public and private. The final structure of the LNER will need to be shaped in conformity with the primary legislation that governs the industry, but my objective remains to move to a situation that leaves one single team operating the railway, with the simple goal of ensuring that they continue the work of the existing operators in improving services for passengers.

The rigorous process that we have followed underlines our commitment to ensuring that businesses operate under fair but fair rules. This Government are willing to take tough decisions when necessary to ensure that we build a stronger, fairer economy for all. I do not want these changes to cause passengers any anxiety at all. I want to reassure them that there will be no change to train services, the timetable will remain the same, tickets purchased for future travel—including season tickets—will continue to be valid, and customers will continue to be able to book their travel in the normal way. The ambitions that we have for services will also continue.
I want to reassure staff that the changes will not impact on their continued employment. It will be no different from a normal franchise change. Indeed, I want the LNER to have employees at its heart, so I am instructing the new board, working with my officials, to bring forward proposals that will enable employees to share directly in the success of the LNER as a pure train operator and subsequently as the new partnership. I am pleased to announce that Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands and the former chief executive of John Lewis, has agreed to provide the team with informal advice about how best to achieve this.

I have already set out my plans to restructure the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchise, following the successful delivery of the Thameslink programme. I have indicated that we will separate it into two or more franchise after the end of the current contract in 2021. We have not yet reached a decision on how to operate Great Northern services. However, I have had initial discussions with the Mayor of London about the possibility of transferring some of these to London Overground, as recommended in Chris Gibb's report. Any change will be subject to consultation, but there is also an operational case for integrating Great Northern services from King's Cross into the new LNER operation. I am asking my officials and the new LNER board to do feasibility work on this option.

I have also taken official advice about the future of the passports currently held by Virgin Holdings and Stagecoach, determining whether they are fit and proper to operate on our railways. A multidisciplinary panel has considered the situation and recommended that both companies continue as train operators. The panel advised that there is no suggestion of either malpractice or malicious intent in what has happened. Clearly we have to be vigilant about future financial commitments, but in my view those organisations have paid a high financial and reputational price for what has happened. This Government operate firm but fair rules in their dealing with business, and I have been advised that it would not be reasonable to remove or place conditions on the companies' passports. However, this decision is provisional and will be subject to further review at the point at which the VTEC contract is terminated.

It is vital that we remember the benefits that the railway has seen since privatisation. Passenger numbers have doubled. New trains with new technology are being rolled out right across the network. Innovation has driven up passenger satisfaction. We are seeing a huge amount of private investment in the future of our railway, and the lessons of the financial failure of the east coast main line are already being, and must continue to be, learned. But our ambitions are bigger.

In the rail strategy that we published last year, we began to look at the future of the industry in order to make the private sector model fit for changing travel patterns and new technology, and to focus on a better quality passenger experience. These advances would not be possible if we returned to nationalisation and lost private sector innovation. This work will conclude in time for the spending review to ensure that we improve how we enhance the private sector drive to improve services for passengers in the coming years in a way that is fair for taxpayers and passengers.

Of course, the passengers on the east coast main line are the most important people in all this, and 92% of them say that they are happy with their travel experience. The steps I have put in place today will help to deliver even more for them, with the recreation of one of Britain's most iconic rail brands; the start of the proper recreation of an integrated regional rail operation; and the arrival of the brand new intercity express trains later this year, the majority of which will be built at Hitachi's plant in Newton Aycliffe in County Durham, continuing to support 700 jobs in the north-east. I believe that this strategy will set this railway on a path to a better future. I commend this statement to the House.

1.8 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): May I just comment on the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown)? I was given sight of this statement 30 minutes before I entered this House. I was not given an electronic copy, I was not allowed to take one away and, as I sit here right now, I have still not been provided with a copy of the statement. I consider this absolutely reprehensible. The Secretary of State does this every single time—relying on confidentiality and market sensitivity. Every single time he treats me with contempt, Her Majesty's Opposition with contempt, and the House of Commons with contempt. It is about time he changed his ways. This is a shameful practice.

Today, the i newspaper reported that the millennial railcard announced in the 2017 Budget has been scrapped because the Treasury will not agree to fund it. In that case, why did the Chancellor announce it? This Government have nothing to offer that age group other than spin and broken promises.

In the past year, the Transport Secretary gifted Virgin and Stagecoach a £2 billion bail-out after they had failed on the east coast main line at the same time as awarding those same companies a lucrative contract extension on the west coast main line. Yet he has the audacity to come to the Dispatch Box and say that it is not reasonable to remove or place conditions on their passport. It is absolutely ludicrous. Three times in under a decade, private companies have failed on the east coast main line. Its only successful period was from 2009 to 2015 under public ownership, when £1 billion was returned to the Treasury. It was the best-performing operator on the network before being cynically re-privatised on the eve of the 2015 general election. The then Secretary of State for Transport said:

"I believe Stagecoach and Virgin will not only deliver for customers but also for the British taxpayer."

What nonsense! Report after report by the Public Accounts Committee, which described the Government's approach as "completely inadequate", and by the Transport Committee detail the failure of the privatised franchising system on its own terms. The Government's incompetence has been disastrous for passengers and led to misery for millions of people.

We have been here before many, many times, year after year. The Secretary of State and his predecessors have stood at the Dispatch Box and told the House that privatisation is being reformed. We have had reform, reform and reform. We have had bail-out after bail-out.
Rail companies win; passengers and taxpayers lose. There is a definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and again and expecting different results. This is the situation we find ourselves in today. Franchising remains at the heart of the alleged partnership. No amount of tinkering can solve the failings of a broken privatised system where the public take the risk and the train companies take the profit, aided and abetted by the Transport Secretary.

Can we really believe anything that the right hon. Gentleman says? Rail investment is promised; rail investment is cancelled. He makes claims about technology despite his civil servants telling him that it does not exist. No one takes his announcements seriously. Every announcement is a smokescreen to divert attention from the failures of his rail franchising policy. The east coast main line is but one vulnerable rail franchise. What about Northern, TransPennine, Greater Anglia and South Western? Will there be bail-outs for operators on those lines who fail to meet their targets?

Let us be clear about the privatised public sector operator of last resort—how ridiculous is that?—on the east coast main line. These companies—multinational Canadian engineering company SNC-Lavalin, Arup, and big-four accountancy firm Ernst and Young—are not running the east coast main line for nothing. This is Conservative-style public ownership—more private profit. Only Labour’s version of public ownership will deliver what the railway needs.

There is a clear solution to the problems on the east coast main line. It was a successful public company between 2009 and 2014. The last Labour Government. I am just sorry that the Secretary of State will not accept the stark staringly obvious answer: an integrated railway under public ownership, run for passengers, not for profit.

Chris Grayling: The first thing to say is that I could have done what has been done previously and made a stock market announcement at 7 am this morning, and not come to the House first. I actually chose on this occasion to come to the House first to provide the information, albeit price sensitively, in the best possible way. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman does not believe that there is a more appropriate way to handle such an issue than making a 7 am announcement to the stock market, as has been past practice.

The hon. Gentleman talks about nationalisation. Let us deal with this issue head on. Labour has spent the past few months desperately trying to take us back into the ambit of the European Union. Let me explain this to him very simply: his policy on rail nationalisation is illegal under European law. It is all well and good Labour Members arguing that we should nationalise the railway. It is not true today and it was not true when National Express collapsed. The reality is that this is the best way to take forward what has been a difficult situation on this railway on a path that I believe in and I think the public believe in: it is better to bring back the operation of track and train, and that is what we will do.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the railcard having been scrapped. That would justify his not believing everything he reads in the papers.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. As I understand it, with the formation of LNER there is no bail-out and nor is there any renationalisation, which will be widely welcomed. On the basis that taxpayer value has been protected, will he say what extra investment might be available to LNER, whether there will be opportunities for private sector investment and whether he will open up the line to open-access competition?

Chris Grayling: The latter point is really important. We want open access to continue. This line has some excellent open-access operators. The system we are putting in place will do nothing to preclude that from happening. I am very clear that that has to continue and that the interests of both the open-access operators and the freight companies needs to be protected as we take this forward. I assure my hon. Friend that that is what will happen.

I want to continue to see private investment in our railways. The Labour approach would mean that each year the railways were competing for public capital with schools, education and the rest. That is something that Labour Members do not quite understand. The railway gets more investment through a partnership between the public sector and the private sector than ever it would through their renationalisation policy. Going back to the days of decline and failure under British Rail is their way for the future. We just have to look at what is happening in France, where people are desperate to move away from that model because it is not working.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Let us go back to 2012 and look at the failed west coast main line franchise. Back then, when Virgin was going to lose out, it was happy to go to court. It ran a public campaign—“Keep Virgin on the west coast”. Oh, how it squealed: we were to feel sorry for it. What happened? Yes, it got a direct award. Returning to the here and now, it gets to walk away from this franchise—no harm,
no foul. We do not hear it squealing now. It is an absolutely sick joke. Virgin should not be allowed to bid for future franchises.

On this franchise, it is not just Virgin Trains East Coast that got its sums wrong. We keep hearing about how it got its sums wrong, but that means that the Department for Transport got its sums wrong when it assessed the tenders. Where is the due diligence? What is going to happen within the Department to make sure that it does not make the same mistakes in future? What about the other consortiums that lost out if VTEC got its sums wrong? Do they now have grounds to go to court having missed out because the Government awarded the franchise to a company and now just blithely say, “Oh, it got its sums wrong. Don’t worry about it—that’s what happens with some franchises. They get their sums wrong, and we move on and re-tender.”

Will Virgin and Stagecoach be allowed to bid for the new partnership? That really would be rubbing salt into the wounds of this process. Richard Branson has blamed Network Rail. He says, “It’s not our fault, guv—it’s Network Rail.” What is the truth in this? How much of this problem has been caused by Network Rail, and is that going to be sorted out? Will the Secretary of State please devolve Network Rail to Scotland, so that at least the Scottish Government can take care of these matters in Scotland? The current system cost an extra £60 million last year. He says that this is not a failing railway and that Virgin and Stagecoach are reliable. In fact, what we have is a failing Government.

Chris Grayling: If we want to find a failing Government, we just need to look north of the border. I do not plan to devolve responsibility for Network Rail to the Scottish Government because I do not believe the Scottish Government are capable of overseeing it properly. They are messing up education and health in Scotland. They should concentrate on doing the things they already have right before they take on any extra powers.

The hon. Gentleman talks about there being no harm to Virgin-Stagecoach. It has just lost 20% of its market capital. Most people running a business would say that that is a pretty big blow. It is not happy about that, and nor will any of its shareholders be. We have changed our approach since this franchise was let. There are new risk-sharing mechanisms in place. Most recently, we did not accept the highest bid for the last franchise we awarded, and we have to continue to work on this. I have asked my hon. Friend the rail Minister, to work closely with colleagues in the Treasury to identify the best way to ensure that we have the right risk-sharing mechanisms for the future, so that we look after the interests of passengers and the taxpayer.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the new partnership and the bids. This is a completely different paradigm. This is not another franchise bid in two years. We are looking at shaping a different kind of railway, and we will set out plans for that to the House in due course.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that all planned investment in the line will continue and that the extension of direct services to Middlesbrough will be unaffected?

Chris Grayling: I have every intention of continuing to meet the commitments to new services in the original VTEC document. The only complication that has arisen is around engineering works by Network Rail and when those take place, but there is no intention to withdraw any future service plans. Most will be able to start on time in 2019. A small number may be delayed beyond that, but that will be for reasons outside the control of the train operator.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In November 2014, the then Secretary of State promised that the new franchise awarded to Virgin-Stagecoach would run for eight years and return £3.3 billion in premium payments to the taxpayer. He said:

“These figures are robust and have been subject to rigorous scrutiny, including by independent auditors.”—[Official Report, 27 November 2014, Vol. 588, c. 1080.]

The Secretary of State must take responsibility for this serious repeat failure. If Virgin-Stagecoach got its figures wrong, so did his Department, and he should apologise to passengers and taxpayers for that failure. The Transport Committee will be subjecting this failure to detailed scrutiny, but what does the decision today mean for other franchises that we know are struggling to meet their obligations?

Chris Grayling: There is no other franchise today in the same position. We are seeing some changed patterns of ridership on the railways. For example, people are choosing to travel to work three or four days a week and work from home one day a week, and we are doing careful work on what that means for the future. As I said, my hon. Friend the rail Minister is working on that very issue and any implications for the future of franchising. The reality, as I keep saying, is that this railway has continued to deliver a higher contribution to the taxpayer and a higher level of customer satisfaction than it did prior to 2014.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): For the residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed, the east coast main line is critical infrastructure, until the Secretary of State manages to dual the rest of the A1 all the way through. Can he confirm that there will be no disruption and that my constituents will be able to continue using what has always been an excellent train line?

Chris Grayling: I can give that commitment. I hope that it will become an even more excellent train line, though passengers may be tempted away, as tomorrow I will do the formal opening of the last link of motorway-grade road between London and Newcastle—something that should have happened a long time ago but did not happen in the 13 years when the Labour party was in power. It is this Government who are bringing better transport services to the north-east.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): This is the third time that a private franchise on this line has failed. The Secretary of State just told the House that when it is fully formed, the new LNER operation will be a partnership between the public and private sectors. Can he clarify that, until that time, it will in effect be a publicly run service? If so, he could have made a considerably shorter statement if he had just got up and said, “For the time being, I am renationalising the east coast main line.”
Chris Grayling: It will be a publicly run service, and over the next two to three years, we will be developing the new model of the future. As I say, the operator of last resort is a publicly run service—so, yes, it will be, and we will be making the transition to the new arrangements over that period.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Further to the Secretary of State’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), he will know that extra services between London and Shipley and Bradford are scheduled to operate from next year onwards. What reassurance can he give that those extra services will operate? Can he ensure that Network Rail privatises the work required, so that those extra services are in operation on time, because they are very important to the local economy in the Bradford district?

Chris Grayling: My recollection is that the Bradford services and the ones going through my hon. Friend’s constituency are due to start next year, and I know of no reason why that should not happen.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Shipley) (Con): Further to the Secretary of State’s answer to my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) to discuss those projects and how the east coast main line might be able to progress them further?

Chris Grayling: I would be happy to do that. I want to see services on this route develop, and I want to see new destinations and new kinds of service. Of course, once High Speed 2 opens, there will be an opportunity for a whole raft of new services on this route, because of all the extra capacity that will be freed up.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I wonder whether I could first address the point of order. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think the Secretary of State said that all Opposition parties had been informed of the contents of the statement before we came into the Chamber. That was not the case for my party. We had no notification at all, other than an email with a heading saying that there would be a statement. We did not receive an electronic notification until two minutes past 1 o’clock, when we were all already in the Chamber. Could the Secretary of State comment on that?

The Government cannot simply go on bailing out failing rail franchises. There will be a knock-on effect on other rail franchises, and what are other companies to do if there is a further reduction in economic growth and they are finding it difficult? Are the Government going to bail out every one of them, or will they take the opportunity to look at how public ownership works in this case and examine the future of the railways?

Chris Grayling: I will make two points. The custom and practice is to provide an advance copy of a statement as per normal. It will be a publicly run service, and the Secretary of State has responded to it.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Franchising on this line has failed repeatedly. The Secretary of State could make himself incredibly popular in my constituency, which is the birthplace of the railways, if he just stood up, looked behind him and said, “My name is Chris Grayling, and I have just nationalised a rail line.”
Gentleman’s point of order at the end but not in the middle of the statement. I will wait with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat upon my brow to hear his point of order at the appropriate moment, and I am sure I will hear it.

I was in the process of calling somebody from the Government side—Mr Iain Stewart.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that nothing he has announced today will affect the investment in new rolling stock and the introduction of the new Azuma trains on the east coast main line? In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, may I give him a cheer for reintroducing the LNER brand back into our railways? LNER was one of the four great private railway companies that developed our railways in the last century.

Chris Grayling: I give my hon. Friend an assurance that the Azuma trains will be joining the network later this year. They will deliver a fantastic new service for passengers, and they will indeed be LNER Azuma trains instead.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that he was not aware of any problems with other franchises. Perhaps he was not in the House during Prime Minister’s questions, when problems with the Northern franchise were identified. Private companies are walking away from franchise bids in Wales and the east midlands. Is this not clear evidence that the rail franchising model is broken, and that the answer is a truly integrated railway under public ownership?

Chris Grayling: First, the number of firms asking for passports to apply for franchises is actually increasing, not decreasing. As I keep explaining to Opposition Members—they are causing as much trouble as they can for the Government over the European Union, instead of working together in the interests of this country—what they are proposing is illegal under European law.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for taking this tough decision and bringing forward his plan for a public-private partnership for the east coast main line. Will he confirm what this decision will mean for the customer experience before and after 24 June? What will be the travelling public’s experience as a result of this decision?

Chris Grayling: The travelling public are the most important people in all this. Tomorrow, and indeed on 25 June, they should notice no difference to the timetable or the tickets; they can buy tickets in advance. The difference is that from that point on they will notice a change to the trains, which will become LNER livery trains. Later this year, there will of course be brand-new LNER livery trains, providing a much better experience for the travelling public—and a more reliable experience at that.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Secretary of State said in his statement that there is “no suggestion of either malpractice or malicious intent in what has happened.” Does he agree with me that what has happened smacks of a pattern of failure and incompetence, and that he, as the Secretary of State, should take responsibility?

Chris Grayling: Clearly the Government have to act in a situation like this, and we have done so: we have acted decisively. The reality is—I stand by what I said—that there is no malicious intent. A major corporation has made a major mistake, and it has paid a price equivalent to a fifth of its market capitalisation, which is a big cost for any business.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who asked about open access. The Secretary of State was clear that open-access services will be maintained, but may I ask him to go further? In preparing for the end of the current deals in 2021, may I ask him, instead of going back to a failed nationalisation model or indeed of relying on the evident fragility of the franchising model, to consider greatly extending open-access rail to cover the entire line once the current deals are over?

Chris Grayling: I know my hon. Friend is a great believer in open access, and I think that this line proves that it can make a real difference. I give him an assurance that we will do all we can to continue to encourage open access to maximise the capacity of the railway network.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The voters along the east coast main line in England were the strongest voters in the country for Brexit, and when they voted to leave the European Union, they, including my constituents, did not vote to give away the benefits that will come from it. They saw one of the big benefits of that vote as the ability to nationalise the rail industry. Why is this Secretary of State snubbing those Brexit voters and kicking them in the teeth?

Chris Grayling: I know we have travellers on this line who believe they are getting a better service than they have before, and I believe that most of them would agree with me that reuniting track and train is the best way of delivering performance. This is not actually about ownership. If a railway has operational challenges or is operating at capacity, it does not matter who owns or controls it, as the problem is still going to remain. If it were taken back into the public sector and then starved of capital, as would inevitably happen, we would end up with a railway that did less well for the future.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s reconfirmation of the break-up of the Govia Thameslink Railway franchise in 2021, and also the £300 million of engineering investment that is going in, but will he please re-emphasise that the company must make sure that bus replacement services are not stranding passengers during periods of engineering work?

Chris Grayling: I am aware of the issue at Gatwick the weekend before last. My understanding is that the problem was relatively short lived, but lessons have to be learned from that incident, just as they particularly had to be learned from the previous one. The company needs to get this right. The engineering work has to be done, but we cannot leave people stranded in massive queues on a Sunday as a result.
Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Three times in under a decade private companies have failed the east coast main line. It was successfully managed by a public company between 2009 and 2015. Why will the Secretary of State not accept that obvious solution to the problems faced by the east coast main line?

Chris Grayling: I do not believe that that is the long-term answer. We are actually taking the line back into state control now. The whole point is that, during those years, the railway contributed less to the public purse, had lower levels of satisfaction and employed fewer people than it does today, and there must be a lesson in that as well.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is the involvement of private companies through the private-public partnerships managing our railways that has helped to foster more competitiveness, particularly in relation to services and ticket prices?

Chris Grayling: That is right. I cannot understand why the Labour party is so fixated on recreating British Rail just at the time when our friends in France are going to step away from that model and actually move closer to where we are. That is Emmanuel Macron’s vision to create a better railway. The Labour party seems to want to go in exactly the opposite direction and to return to a situation that the French say is not working for them.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned that independent members “will ensure the interests of other operators on the route are taken into account.” Will this include First ScotRail, which operates the local service—it is itself operating at capacity and facing its own crises—on the east coast main line in my constituency of East Lothian?

Chris Grayling: We have to make sure that the new organisation—I have talked about this with the rail regulator, which has been involved since the start of developing this concept—has a duty to make sure both that space is available for other operators and that, in relation to the support and the service provided, there is no discrimination against other operators, such as regarding whether the signals work and so forth. This has to be structured in a way that protects such operators, whether in the case of First ScotRail in the north, or other operators in the midlands and the south.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I have served on the Transport Committee for the past few years, during which time we have examined the challenges that face train operators as a result of record investment in our Network Rail assets. Is it the Secretary of State’s view that the issue on the east coast main line is so acute that the only way to fix the Network Rail assets is to have it all as one operating entity?

Chris Grayling: On a rail network that is operating absolutely at capacity all round—when there are very few, if any, spare train cars; and when anything that goes wrong is hugely disruptive to the timetable—a joint operating team that is able to plan train services and engineering works as part of that same team, rather than in two different organisations, is a much better way to operate a railway. My vision for the east coast main line, and indeed for other parts of the rail network where we are taking steps down the same path, is to create such a joined-up approach of managing track and train together. In my view, that is the best way to make a congested railway work more effectively for passengers.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that Stagecoach and Virgin Trains got their bid wrong, which presumably means that they undercut their competitors. Should there not be a consequence, with Virgin and Stagecoach denied the right to bid for other franchises?

Chris Grayling: First, there is no legal basis for taking that step. Secondly, it is interesting that the Labour Members always demand that we stop international companies getting franchises in the UK. They seem to want to drive out of the industry a company that has made a huge mistake and paid a big price for it, but which none the less has been a successful transport operator in the UK for a long time. We should take sensible decisions in the interests of the country and of passengers. That is what I am doing.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): It is clear that there are unique infrastructure challenges on the east coast main line, many of which affect my constituents. What steps will the Secretary of State take to resolve those challenges, and can he assure me that the creation of the new partnership will solve them?

Chris Grayling: That is very much my aim. I will ask the new joined-up board to consider how we can bring digital technology to the signalling on the line. There are not enough train paths, and the way to sort that for the future is by moving to a digital railway. This is an area in which we can supplement public investment—we are putting in a record amount over the next five years—with private investment so that, for example, we unlock the potential of digital technology to create even more capacity on our railways.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on following the advice I have been giving him in this Chamber and partially implementing Labour’s 2015 transport manifesto, which I had a hand in writing, by bringing track and train closer together. I also congratulate him on his decision to bring the Great Northern line under the control of London’s Mayor, thereby recreating Network SouthEast from the days of British Rail. His decision to run the railway from 24 June shows that that is legal under European law. I urge him to go further and ensure that the private sector knows there is an operator of last resort ready to step in, so that we have a public railway operated by public servants and working in the public interest.

Chris Grayling: I think people already know, if they did not know before, that there is an operator of last resort. The legal position, as the hon. Lady will know, is that existing European law already provides for a separation of track and train. The new European rail package that comes into force in the autumn goes further by making it illegal to let any public contract without private sector competition and a private sector alternative. That will make the Labour party’s policies completely illegal.
What matters is what works for passengers. On bringing the operation of track and train back together, I think we both agree—I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s comments. We may disagree about overall ownership structures or the overall approach to privatisation or nationalisation, but a single team operating the two will take joined-up decisions in the interests of passengers. In my view, that is the right way forward.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What was the line’s contribution to the taxpayer between 2009 and 2015, and what has it been subsequently?

**Chris Grayling** (The equivalent contribution since the current franchise started is roughly—if I remember correctly; this is just from memory—£200 million more for the taxpayer. It is certainly the case that the franchise has been contributing more to the taxpayer since Virgin Trains took over than was the case when it was under state control. The Labour party always seems conveniently to forget that, but it is the truth.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I receive daily communications from constituents who are frankly fed up with antiquated, unreliable and overcrowded trains, including, but not exclusively, on the east coast main line. The Secretary of State has long promised improvements in investment but has failed to deliver. When will he get a grip on rail in the north?

**Chris Grayling**: I keep saying to the hon. Lady that what she wants is a Government who are providing brand new trains. The first are already being introduced. On the trans-Pennine route, the completely refurbished new trains are already in operation. The first of the new-build trains are due to arrive within a matter of weeks. I expect the first Pacer trains to go to the scrapyard later this year. The new Hitachi-built trains arrive on the east coast main line later this year. The railways are about to go through the biggest transformation of their rolling stocks since the steam engine. I hope she and her constituents will welcome that.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State shares my view that the idea that a rebranded British Rail is the great solution for all our transport problems is faintly ridiculous. What learning from the experience of dealing with this particular franchise is being taken to the Great Western Railway, which will have a franchise soon?

**Chris Grayling**: We have to ensure that the risk-sharing mechanisms are right, which is why I have tasked the rail Minister with looking in detail at franchise contracts. On Great Western, I want a very close relationship and deep alliance—if not one step further than that—between Network Rail and the train operator. We have to ensure for all future franchises that we do not get ourselves in a position in which the franchise can fail in this way.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It looks to me like the Secretary of State’s golden ministerial touch has worked again to produce a catalogue of failure: his Department’s failure; the franchise agreement failing; incompetent train operators; and taxpayers and passengers losing out yet again. Does he plan to make an announcement about a £500 million bailout of Crossrail, which was reported in the newspapers at the weekend, again adding to the disparity in investment between north and south?

**Chris Grayling**: Opposition Members keep quoting what they have read in the papers. When there are things to tell the House, I will tell the House, as I always have, Mr Speaker. I counsel Members not to just pick up newspapers.

On the disparity in investment between north and south, the flagship project for the next five years is the £2.9 billion trans-Pennine upgrade, which is by a country mile the biggest rail investment project for the next five years in the Network Rail investment programme.

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): The Secretary of State’s statement mentions the break-up in 2021 of the Thameslink and Southern Rail franchises, but I urge him to break them up sooner rather than later. The new timetable changes affect passengers in my rural constituency, with stations at Berwick, Wivelsfield, Seaford, Lewes, Plumpton and Polegate all losing significant services. Will he bring forward the break-up of the franchise?

**Chris Grayling**: Let me touch briefly on the question of the new franchise. The big change to timetabling is not just in my hon. Friend’s area, but all around the country. It is being driven by Network Rail, which ultimately controls timetabling across the network to try to make a very complicated pattern of services fit together. After 20 May, there will be some fantastic enhancements to services around the country. Some tough decisions have been taken about levels of demand and ridership. If colleagues have individual concerns, the rail Minister and I will be very happy to sit down and talk about them. This is a massive and broad change that will deliver far more for passengers.

**Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision, however reluctantly he reached it, but he seems to have no comprehension of the gravity of what is happening on our railways. Northern passengers were promised a better service when the franchise was awarded a couple of years ago, but that service is dirty, overcrowded and increasingly unreliable. That is having a major impact on our economy. Will he join me, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and cross-party MPs, and, in the public interest, step in to strip this arrogant, out-of-touch company of its franchise?

**Chris Grayling**: Let us be clear about two things. First, the Northern franchise is co-managed between Rail North—part of Transport for the North, on which the hon. Lady’s northern colleagues sit—and my Department. They are delivering a massive investment programme. I would add a cautionary note. Performance issues need to be addressed and we will address them, but it would be a huge mistake to disrupt the investment programme that, over the coming months, will start the transformation of all those dirty old trains that should have been replaced a decade ago but were not. The new trains are being built. The first ones are starting to arrive and she will see a transformation that is long overdue.
Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State attributing all the problems on the east coast main line over the last few years to the franchise holders and none of them to his Department and him?

Chris Grayling: I attribute the problems on that line to two things: first, an unrealistic bid that has failed; and secondly, old rolling stock that is being replaced and an infrastructure that needs an upgrade and is going to get it. That is what has caused the operational problems—notwithstanding that, passenger satisfaction on that railway line is 92%, which I think is pretty good.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The cross-party Public Accounts Committee said last month that the Department for Transport’s forecasted earnings from the east coast franchise were wildly wrong. Given today’s announcement, how can we have faith in the Secretary of State’s Department’s handling of it, and will he now apologise for presiding over yet another privatisation disaster on our railways?

Chris Grayling: What I have done is take decisive action to deal with a problem that needs to be addressed to make sure that we protect passengers. That is what everybody would expect.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is the one who wrote the letter saying that he would not hand over suburban services to a Labour Mayor of London, but in today’s statement he has had to eat his hand over suburban services to a Labour Mayor of London, but in today’s statement he has had to eat his hand over suburban services to a Labour Mayor of London. In south-east London, my constituents face a worse service, with less choice of destinations as a result of the new franchise, so will he now reconsider the position with regard to the Southeastern franchise and allow the Mayor of London to take it over and give a better service to my constituents?

Chris Grayling: The issue remains twofold. The Mayor of London’s business plan for the Southeastern franchise provided virtually no new investment at all. There was a handful of extra services on the Nunhead line, and the rest of it was on a wing and a prayer. I think that the new franchise document specifying improvements for passengers will deliver, not just in London but across the whole of the Kent and south-eastern area, because this is not a London franchise.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): May I remind the Secretary of State of a previous experience with public-private partnership on the railways—namely that in the London underground? It was forced on the Mayor of London and Transport for London, who resisted it very strongly. The scheme collapsed in disorder, very expensively. Tube Lines and Metronet—the two private companies involved—stuffed their pockets with money before it collapsed back into the public sector. Is that not going to happen again with this scheme?

Chris Grayling: I remind the hon. Gentleman that that problem happened when Labour was in power, which proves that they are not good at setting up contracting arrangements.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows, because I have raised it repeatedly, about the appalling service that my constituents are receiving from Northern Rail, with delays, cancellations, overcrowding, and trains running through stations without stopping when they should. Now the new timetable removes station stops all together. Will he finally take action to ensure that a compensation scheme that recognises the disruption that my constituents have suffered for months can actually be put in place to give them some measure of recompense for the disruption that they have suffered?

Chris Grayling: We continue to keep the matter under review. We are moving to Delay Repay 15 and looking at other ways of tightening performance on the railways, but the big difference to travellers in and around the Manchester area will come from the arrival of new trains and the completion of the works on the Bolton line, which have caused more disruption than I would wish. I am less than happy about the delays that have taken place and I am putting as much pressure on Network Rail as possible to get it sorted.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The whole reason that we have this statement from the Secretary of State is that the current franchise arrangements were broken. I urge him, in the new franchise, to include not-for-profit and the part-nationalisation that he has announced today. That would avoid the embarrassment of a Secretary of State having to come to this House to announce that further down the line and costing taxpayers money.

Chris Grayling: As I keep saying in respect of what I will bring to the House in due course, as we make further progress towards the implementation of what was the east coast partnership and is now the London North Eastern Railway, this is a different paradigm, and it simply will not operate in the way the hon. Gentleman has discussed.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the well known but now even better publicised problems with the rail franchising model, might this not be the moment for the Secretary of State to review the Co-op party’s recent proposals for rail reform, including a series of new mutual, not-for-profit train operating companies that are able to operate in the private sector, but are publicly owned, and able to attract significant private investment?

Chris Grayling: As I said in my statement, one of the things that I am looking at on the east coast route is how we secure significant employee participation in its success. I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman suggests. I think that we need a different approach. That is why the LNER model that we will be developing over the coming years will be a revolution for the railways.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he wants to protect passenger interests and ensure value for money for taxpayers, but in Bristol, as across the country, fares have gone up three times faster than wages since 2010. He also says that he wants to support investment and improvement in the railway. We have some new stock, but we have had our electrification cancelled in Bristol, despite massive disruption for constituents in Lawrence Hill and Easton. When is he going to sort out our electrification and when will he
accept that the favour that he has just done for the people and passengers on the east coast needs to be done for the passengers in Bristol, so that our rail service is no longer failing?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady is being a bit churlish. She is getting brand new trains for Bristol and the best ever train service to London. We are in the process of dualling the Filton Bank. We are working with the combined authority mayor for the Bristol area to develop the plans for the Bristol metro, MetroWest, which I regard as one of the most important projects for the country—[Interruption.] MetroWest is rail. It is going to be one of the most significant developments that Bristol has seen for a very long time, developing the kind of suburban rail network that it really needs.

Points of Order

1.56 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order from the shadow Transport Secretary. We are very pressed for time as a result of the statement and the brouhaha surrounding its handling. I am keen to progress, but not before hearing the hon. Gentleman.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for indulging me. Words are very important. In response to the question raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) about the provision of the statement prior to its making, the response was that Opposition parties had been provided with a copy of the statement. That is simply not the case. I asked for a copy of the statement and I was provided with it after the Secretary of State sat down. For clarity, I had sight of it with the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for minutes—30 minutes—before that statement started. I simply ask that the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box to clarify the position and to apologise for giving the wrong impression.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. If the Secretary of State wishes to respond, he can.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As I indicated to you earlier, my officials provided a copy to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) so that he could prepare his response to my statement in good time—about 45 minutes, in fact, before the statement started. I judge that to be the best way of approaching what is a market-sensitive announcement, and it did not require me to do what is done, for example, on Budget day, when no advance notice is provided.

Mr Speaker: I think that this matter is best continued, if discussion on it is required, outside the Chamber. I have made my position clear on the subject of the statement being made today. I say this to the Secretary of State, who is not responsible for scheduling; there will be people who feel very unhappy that on a day when we have an Opposition day debate on Grenfell, which is highly subscribed, a very substantial amount of time has been taken up, inevitably, by this statement. People will be very unhappy about that. I say to Members on the Treasury Bench that they ought to think about these matters extremely carefully from now on, because my priority is to defend the rights of the House of Commons, and I will do that against all comers. I have never been worried about the verdict of the Executive, and I am not going to start now.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has again said that he provided copies of the statement. The Liberal Democrats asked for a briefing with him so that we could have some understanding of the statement that was going to be made, but this was refused. I gleaned my information from a reporter on the way into the Chamber, when they said to me, “You’ll be talking about trains today.”
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted follow-up point of order, and I intend no discourtesy to her—she is an extremely assiduous Member of this House, but she is also a relatively new Member and therefore what I am about to say is intended in no sense as a discourtesy but as a clarification. Statements are made available to Opposition Front-Bench teams as a matter of courtesy, and in my experience that has always been extended to the principal Opposition party and ordinarily to the third party. I must emphasise to her, even if it is disappointing to her, that it is up to a Minister to determine to which Opposition parties to make the statement available. Beyond the official Opposition there are a number of Opposition parties, but that, I am afraid, is emphatically not a matter for the Chair; rather, it is for Members. I appeal to all those involved henceforth to seek to agree these matters outside the Chamber in the spirit that the House and—at least as importantly—the public expect: namely, in the spirit of mutual respect.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—I am sorry, I have largely lost my voice; there may be many who rejoice. I am enormously grateful to you for your statement yesterday in response to my point of order the day before. I meant no disrespect to any of the House authorities, and I do not think that anyone is attempting to mislead anybody at all, but the matter of the general data protection regulation and how it affects Members of Parliament is a complicated business. I am conscious too that the law has not fully gone through Parliament, so there are elements on which people cannot yet give solid advice, but lots of MPs have approached me over the past 24 hours concerned about what they should and should not be doing.

Members want to do the right thing by the law, but they also want to do the right thing by their constituents, and lots of staff have had the fear of God put into them about what might happen if we get this wrong. I wonder whether you might consider, once the law has gone through Parliament, bringing in the Information Commissioner to host a session for all Members so that we can hear from the horse’s mouth the clearest possible advice and thereby do the best by our constituents and by the law. I understand that political parties may be providing advice as well, but in the end we all share the same ambition, and it would be better if it were done with all Members.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He makes a very reasonable and fair suggestion. I thank him both for making it and for doing so in the terms he has. I do not want to dwell on the matter, but I think there might have been—I am learning as we go along—some confusion as a result of differences between briefings from House officials, which will have been volunteered in good faith and with some expertise, on the one hand, and those proffered by political parties, on the other. I say that on the basis of people having told me of different briefings they have received.

Any confusion is inadvertent but nevertheless unfortunate. I cannot guarantee that the Information Commissioner would be willing to come to the House for a meeting hosted by me, because the occupant of that office does not answer to me, but it is a constructive suggestion, and yes I am happy to make that approach, and I hope it will go ahead. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is satisfied for now, on the back of yesterday, that nobody is disputing—I certainly would not—his complete honesty. There is some confusion and an argument about what is and is not the case, but he is a very distinguished parliamentarian, and I will always treat him with respect.
Banking (Cash Machine Charges and Financial Inclusion)

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

2.3 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit cash machine charges; to require banks to enable free cash withdrawals from current accounts in other circumstances; to require the Financial Conduct Authority to supervise an access to banking standard; to impose penalties for breaches of that standard; to establish a financial inclusion fund, and provide for amounts received in such penalties to be paid into that fund; and for connected purposes.

Recently LINK, which set the funding formula for ATM operators, consulted its members on proposals to reduce from 25p to 20p the interchange fee paid to ATM operators by banks when cash is withdrawn. The first phase of the cut will take place on 1 July 2018. This proposed reduction in the funding formula has led to concerns that many ATMs will become financially unviable and therefore may be forced to close or charge a fee to remain in use.

The Bill seeks to remove the option for ATMs to become fee-charging by banning fees. I take this position, first and foremost, out of principle, as I do not believe that anyone should have to pay to access their own money. However, a ban on ATM charges makes it a practical necessity that an appropriate funding formula for free-to-use ATMs be devised. In supporting this objective, the Bill seeks to provide a legal requirement for access to cash withdrawals through ATMs or other means where there is a demand for it. Such demand would be established through a full market review of the ATM network by the Payment Systems Regulator. There has been no recent review of the demand for access to cash, and as we transition towards a cashless society it is important that we fully and comprehensively establish where demand remains for cash in order to target resources effectively.

Further, the Bill would create a new access to banking standard, borrowing on the existing 2017 access to banking standards, but strengthening them by placing the enforcement of the standard within the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority, rather than the Lending Standards Board. The new standard would introduce a financial inclusion penalty for banks that fail to meet the minimum threshold, with any funds gathered being used for community reinvestment in alternative financial services.

The most concerning thing about LINK’s announcement is that it did not include any consultation with the public. The only people LINK asked were its own members, three quarters of whom are the card issuers and banks that must pay the interchange fee. As a result, LINK could be accused of a conflict of interest, as the majority of those consulted had a financial incentive to see the funding formula reduced.

Owing to this failure to consult, the first major evidence gathered about the public’s views has happened after the fact. Research by the consumer group Which? has found that 44% of those 1,200 members surveyed used a cashpoint at least once a week. Nine in 10 said that access to the free-to-use network was important to their daily lives, with more than half of them describing it as essential for their day-to-day lives. Likewise, a poll of small businesses by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 59% of retail businesses felt a cash machine was useful to their business, with 50% saying their nearest free-to-access cashpoint was already over 1 km from their business.

In my own constituency, we have seen banking services gradually pushed out to the two larger towns of Rutherglen and Hamilton at either end of the constituency, with towns in the middle, such as Cambuslang, left with no bank branches. In fact, there are now more ATMs in the Houses of Parliament than in the entirety of Cambuslang main street. These reductions have a real-world impact. Among other concerns, I often hear from small businesses on Cambuslang main street that rely on small, impulse cash purchases that the ATMs have run out of cash. That has a direct impact on their day’s takings, and yet their views on changes to the interchange fee have not been sought.

I accept that we are moving towards a cashless society, but we are not there yet. People budgeting on a low income, older people and those who are not as confident with advances in digital banking all stand to lose out if we force progress towards a cashless society. We know that dealing in cash costs banks money, which is why we cannot leave it to banks alone to dictate the pace of change. It must be driven by consumers. Without intervention to remove the option of ATM charges, bank branch closures and the reduction of the interchange fee will mean pay-to-use ATMs becoming the norm. We only have to look to the USA, where a similar reduction in the interchange fee has resulted in an average charge of $5 for a withdrawal from a machine not owned by the customer’s bank.

LINK accepts that it wants to reduce the overall number of ATMs and says it expects this reduction to happen in city centres, where there are large clusters of ATMs, but there is simply no way of guaranteeing this effect. With different ATM companies working to different models across the UK, it is inevitable that there will be unintended consequences, and it is people in rural communities or smaller urban towns such as the ones I represent who are most likely to lose out.

The assurances that there will be a financial inclusion programme to incentivise at-risk machines where there is not another free-to-use ATM within 1 km sounds good in theory, but there is no evidence that LINK has the capability or resources to monitor the 70,000 ATMs across the UK. Once a machine closes it can cost between £7,000 and £10,000 to have it reinstated, meaning that once an ATM goes, it is likely that it is gone for good.

There is a high risk that LINK’s strategy will fail. That risk is currently borne purely by the public, not by the banks or the network that made the decision. The Bill seeks to shift the risk away from the communities who still rely on ATMs. If there is no option for an ATM to turn pay-to-use, the onus will be on LINK and the banks to ensure that it remains financially viable using the interchange fee. Of course, that does not remove the risk that the ATM operator will close the machine altogether, which is why the Bill seeks to provide a legal requirement for access to free cash through
The Bill also seeks to address the wider issue of how banks are serving our communities. To our great frustration, it appears that currently they can effectively do what they please when pulling out of those communities. I believe that the access to banking standard serves as a good base to shape a system to protect access to banking infrastructure, but, the Lending Standards Board does not have the powers to enforce it effectively. The Bill therefore proposes to shift the responsibility to the Financial Conduct Authority, and enable the FCA to impose a financial inclusion penalty to provide funds for communities who have been cut off by their banks.

Similar legislation in the US requires banks to provide funding for alternative financial services when they close or relocate. The financial inclusion penalty proposed in the Bill would impose a fine on a bank that does not live up to the access to banking standard, or does not take voluntary action to provide alternative services when it pulls out of a community. The penalty would extract funds that can be used to finance alternative financial infrastructure such as credit unions, banking hubs, or free-to-use ATMs.

To be blunt, ATM charges are a rip-off. Over the last few years, the public have supported banks. Their hard-earned taxes were used to bail them out. In response to that, our communities are being ripped off by the banks at every turn as they relentlessly pursue their mission to extract funds that can be used to finance alternative financial infrastructure such as credit unions, banking hubs, or free-to-use ATMs.

I am pleased that the Bill has secured support from members of the three main parties in the House. Let me end by saying that, whatever happens to it after today, if we want to protect the communities whom we represent from being ripped off further, we need to take action. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will support those efforts.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ged Killen, Alex Sobel, Gareth Snell, Stephen Doughty, Mr Paul Sweeney, Danielle Rowley, Dr David Drew, Anna Turley, Chris Stephens, Stephen Kerr, Kirstene Hair and Bill Grant present the Bill.

Ged Killen accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November and to be printed (Bill 210).
The timing of this debate is therefore important. It is also important, in part, because we expect the Government's Hackitt review of building regulations and fire safety to be published tomorrow. This is a chance for the Government to show their commitment to a complete overhaul of the failed system of building safety, and I will deal in a moment with the steps that Labour believes are necessary. Above all, however, it is a chance for the new Secretary of State to make good the other failings of his predecessor, and our motion calls on him to report to Parliament sometime before the anniversary of the fire on 14 June to explain exactly how the Government have done that.

Let me deal first with the rehousing of Grenfell residents. From day one, the Government backed Kensington and Chelsea Council to do the job. On 18 December last year, the then Secretary of State told the House:

“I am confident that the council is capable of that”.—[Official Report, 18 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 773.] 

The council promised residents:

“We are committed to rehousing you to permanent social housing within twelve months.”

However, 11 months on, only one in three of the families are living in a permanent new home. No one wants to bring up children in a hotel room, and residents tell us about the defects in the properties that they have been offered: properties with damp and leaks, properties without enough bedrooms, properties that are not properly furnished, and tenancy terms that are different from those that they had in the tower. The Government could have stepped in—should have stepped in—at any point in the last 11 months, both to help to make the homes that were needed directly available and to send in commissioners to help to run the council when it was clearly failing. They could have acted at any point, but they did not. I hope that when the Secretary of State responds to the debate, he will not give the same answers that we have heard for 11 months, and I hope that he will act to accelerate the pace of help and rehousing for the Grenfell families.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Constituents of mine observed that in the immediate aftermath, in the complete absence of any visible presence of representatives of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea or any sort of officialdom, it was people power—mosques, voluntary organisations and the like—that stepped into the void, along with, eventually, the London Borough of Ealing and SportActive, whose members you hosted in your rooms yesterday, Mr Speaker, and which runs the Westway sports and fitness centre. Does that not underline the need for better inter-agency and inter-borough partnerships should such a disaster ever befall us again?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and to be fair to Ministers some of them, like me and other Members, were down in Kensington very soon after the fire, and were overwhelmed by the good will there and the response of the community and the volunteers who came from all parts of the country. But Ministers were also embarrassed, as they conceded, by how poor and slow Kensington and Chelsea was from day one. I pay tribute to other councils, particularly London borough councils, that have since sent in good people to help try to get that bad council to do the job properly.

Let me turn to other tower blocks, because there are 65 local authority areas around the country with at least one block that has failed the safety test, is non-compliant, is unsafe and is unlawful. Directly after the fire, on 17 June, the Prime Minister caught the mood of the country and promised:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to…keep our people safe.”

But 11 months on, when more than 300 other tower blocks have this same dangerous Grenfell-style cladding but just seven have had it removed and replaced, things are not working.

We have thousands of families living in homes with unsafe materials tacked to the side, thousands of people buying and renting homes in these tower blocks, and others trying to sell their flats and finding that they are worthless or that their landlord turns around to them as leaseholders and says, “You’ve got to pay all the costs.”

I say to the Secretary of State that when people’s lives are at risk, it is the Government’s clearcut duty to get all suspect buildings tested and all the work done to make them safe, but that is not happening. For 11 months Ministers have refused to ensure that private block owners, not residents or leaseholders, pay for the urgent work that must be done; they have refused to release the location, ownership, and safety testing status of other high-rise blocks so that residents know where they stand; they have refused to confirm what materials are safe, meaning that landlords who have taken off cladding do not know what to put back up; and they have refused—until today, under Labour pressure—to help fund vital safety work in social housing blocks. Even now they have refused to fund what we and fire chiefs say is necessary to ensure safety: the retrofitting of sprinklers in all high-risk high-rise blocks. Only Ministers can make that happen, and the new Secretary of State has the chance to act where his predecessor would not and make good on the Prime Minister’s pledge of 17 June.

Finally, let me turn to the Hackitt review of building regulations, which is due tomorrow and has already been briefed to many people, including the press it seems.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentions compelling landlords to carry out remedial work to blocks with inappropriate cladding on the outside, and I understand the imperative and rationale behind that, but where there is not a contractual obligation on the landlord to do that—where the building is occupied by long lease holders—by what mechanism would he force them to have that work carried out?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman serves on the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, and he puts his finger on an important question that only the Government can deal with. Are the powers to require testing clear? Are the powers of enforcement on landlords who will not do the right thing—will not test or will not make their building safe when it is confirmed as having suspect cladding—in place? There are question marks over that, and it is part of the action that the Secretary of State must now take. I also say to the hon. Gentleman that the principle of councils having the power to step in to take control or confiscate buildings where landlords are not doing what
is required and they have had notice to do that is exactly the same principle that the Select Committee that he is a member of recommended in cases where private property owners are breaking the law and will not do what they are required to do and requested to do by local councils. The recommendation is that councils are then given the power to step in and do the work for them.

Kevin Hollinrake rose—

John Healey: I will not give way again, because of the pressure on time.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): When I was appointed to my new role, I was clear that one of my biggest priorities was supporting everyone affected by the unprecedented tragedy at Grenfell Tower and ensuring that we learn from it so that nothing like this can ever happen again. That is why one of the first things I did was meet some of the bereaved and survivors as soon as I could, and why I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this important debate.

Today we are also remembering those who died and were injured in theRonan Point disaster 50 years ago. This feels especially poignant as we prepare to mark the first year since the Grenfell fire next month. These milestones will be extremely painful for those who have suffered so much, and I know that the thoughts of everyone in this House will be with them. With our focus today on the terrible events at Grenfell, I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to helping them rebuild their lives as we remember their loved ones. In doing so, I want to pay tribute to the incredible way in which the community itself has come together to support and comfort one another, and to thank local charities and other groups who have been on the ground from the very beginning.

In the fire’s aftermath, our immediate priority was, quite rightly, to support those affected, with Government Departments and public services pulling together and playing their part to offer help with everything from business support to advice on benefits. This includes vital work by the NHS and voluntary sector organisations to offer emotional and mental health support to over 6,000 people. The dedicated NHS Grenfell helpline also remains available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In total, over £46 million of national Government funds have already been spent to support recovery following the Grenfell Tower fire, and we have committed to spend a further £34 million. This includes funding for rehousing, new mental health services, investment in the Lancaster West estate, and a new community space.

As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has fairly flagged up this afternoon, one of the most urgent issues has been rehousing people who lost their homes. The latest figures from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which is responsible for finding these new homes, show that of the 210 households that need to be rehoused, 201—over 95%—have accepted offers of temporary or permanent accommodation. Of these, 138 households have moved into—64 into temporary accommodation and 74 into permanent accommodation—so while progress has been made, there is no question but that this has been too slow. As a result, some households will still be in emergency accommodation in June.

It was always going to be a challenge to respond to an unprecedented tragedy on this scale. It has taken time to purchase suitable homes and to adapt and refurbish them to meet people’s needs and the highest safety standards, but this is clearly not good enough, and it is understandable that the community will feel disappointed and let down. I, too, am very concerned, especially to see people who have accepted an offer of a permanent home still living in emergency accommodation. I am therefore establishing at pace what further action could be taken, by the Government or by the council, to speed up this process. The council now has more than 300 properties available to those who need them, and my Department will continue to work with it to ensure that people are given whatever support they need to be rehoused as swiftly as possible. This is part of the wider work we are undertaking to ensure that, after a slow and confused initial response to the fire, the council is delivering better support to those affected and rebuilding trust.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this Government will be judged on actions, not words? I stood in this Chamber and asked his predecessor for a timescale for those residents
being permanently rehoused. If we are not going to do it within a year, will the Secretary of State give me a timescale within which it will happen?

James Brokenshire: The fairest answer I can give to the hon. Lady is that we obviously want to see that happen as soon as possible. That is why I have made my comments about assessing what further steps can be taken with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea at pace to establish what further support can be given. I spoke to the leader of the council yesterday on this very point, and I will certainly continue to do so in the days ahead.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Kensington and Chelsea has had 11 months and it has failed terribly to deliver for the survivors of the Grenfell fire. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is now time for him to send in the commissioners?

James Brokenshire: I would say to the hon. Lady that we set up the independent taskforce and put it in to support and challenge the council to deliver an effective long-term recovery plan with local people at its heart. That was an important intervention that we took, and the taskforce’s valuable work so far has highlighted the need for the council to do more to listen to the local community. We in the Government have been playing our part to make this happen through the important work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, and, of course, that of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Grenfell victims, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service. He has helped to ensure that the voices and views are heard right across Government and are at the centre of decision making about the future of the site.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): People who are familiar with the area will not underestimate the difficulty of rehousing people, because they perhaps understand it better than some in the Government have done—hence the Prime Minister’s three-week target. If I understand the Secretary of State correctly, only a third of those in need have been permanently rehoused. I think he needs to say a bit more, given that there is a finite number of people and that Government and council resources are available, about how he is going to ensure that everyone is satisfactorily and permanently rehoused within a fixed time.

James Brokenshire: As I said earlier when I relayed the figures, nine people have not accepted an offer. I know that the council is doing work at pace with its contractors to ensure that the necessary work is undertaken to enable people to move into those homes. I know that that is what the hon. Gentleman would wish to see, and it is also what I would wish to see. That is why I have made the point about working with the council to challenge, to pressure and to see what support can be given to it, if need be, to make that process speedier. This is a question of having the contractors there and doing the practical work to ensure that the necessary improvements and modifications are made to those homes. That is absolutely at the heart of the work that we continue to support the council with.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State say more about the situation for Grenfell survivors who are in temporary accommodation? As a London MP, I know that this London housing crisis means that people are living in temporary accommodation for years rather than months. If that turns out to be the situation for Grenfell survivors, it will add a further injustice to the tragedy that they have already faced. That issue needs to be addressed upfront with a plan for the permanent rehousing of those residents who are now in temporary accommodation.

James Brokenshire: I absolutely hear the point that the hon. Lady is making about the need to see families moved from temporary to permanent accommodation. We need to ensure that the necessary homes are there, and to work carefully and sensitively with the families to ensure that they are confident and comfortable with making that step. We need to be guided in part by those families, and we need to support and work with the council to do all that we can to ensure that those homes are available.

The wishes of those affected by these terrible events are also central to the ongoing public inquiry, which was debated in Westminster Hall earlier this week. On Friday, the Prime Minister announced her decision to appoint two further panel members to sit with the chairman, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, on phase 2 of the public inquiry’s work. They will help to ensure that the inquiry has the breadth of skills and expertise it requires and, I hope, provide reassurance to the bereaved, the survivors and the wider community.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne touched on the Hackitt review. The Grenfell fire has raised wider questions about building safety. That is why last year, my predecessor—now the Secretary of State for the Home Department—and the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), commissioned Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. In December, she published her interim report. This showed that there is a need for significant reform of the regulatory system and for a change in culture in the construction and fire safety industries. The Government accepted Dame Judith’s findings and we are implementing the recommendations in the interim report that relate to us.

Kevin Hollinrake: I sit on the Select Committee that took evidence from Dame Judith Hackitt. We had concerns about her interim findings, and we had correspondence with her following that session in which she admits, in relation to building regulations:

“There is currently a choice between using products of limited combustibility or undergoing a full-system test”.

She goes on to say that “the former is undoubtedly the low-risk option.”

Could we even conceive of a situation in which we would not take the lowest-risk option in that regard?

James Brokenshire: Dame Judith will be publishing her report tomorrow. I appreciate some of the questions that have been raised with me, and the point that my hon. Friend has just made. I think it is right that we should see the report when it is published, and I intend
to make a statement to Parliament to allow further questioning on it. I am conscious of the timeliness of this debate and of the need for others to participate in it.

It is essential that work should proceed at pace. To that end, we offered financial flexibilities such as additional borrowing to local authorities last year, and we have been listening to what social sector landlords have been telling us about the cost of removing aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding systems. We know that the expense involved means that social landlords are having to take decisions about how to prioritise important services, repairs and maintenance work, and new supply. That is why, as the Prime Minister announced earlier, the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of dangerous cladding by councils and housing associations, with costs estimated at around £400 million. This will ensure that local authorities and housing associations can focus their efforts on making cladding systems safe for the buildings that they own.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State. In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, the Prime Minister promised that all the necessary assistance would be given to ensure that tenants were safe. In Birmingham, there are 213 tower blocks—10,000 households—and the West Midlands fire service has recommended a range of measures, including the retrofitting of sprinklers, but not a single penny has yet been forthcoming. As a matter of urgency, will the Secretary of State look into the repeated representations that have been made by Birmingham City Council for the necessary financial assistance to ensure that the city’s tenants are safe?

James Brokenshire: This announcement is all about providing financial support to ensure that the works can be carried out swiftly. If the hon. Gentleman has specific points about Birmingham City Council, I will certainly look into them, and if I need to add anything else, I will certainly do so.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that I updated the House by way of a written statement, as promised, on our investigations into the failure of a fire door at Grenfell Tower. To reiterate, our independent expert panel has said that the risk to public safety remains low. However, we have informed the manufacturer’s customers about the performance issues with such doors and have advised building owners about the action that they should take. My Department will continue to work with the sector to consider what further support building owners may need to address any issues quickly.

We also need to improve building safety and rebuild public confidence in the system, and issues have been raised about the need to listen to residents and understand the experiences of people in living social housing, which is why we will shortly bring forward a social housing Green Paper to look at how well social housing is serving those who depend on it.

In conclusion, 71 people died last June in the greatest loss of life in a fire in a century, and a 72nd resident from the tower passed away earlier this year. The toll on those who survived and the wider community was also on a scale unseen. I am determined that we will not falter in our support for them or in our efforts to find the answers they need and deserve. There is still much to do, and I hope that Members across the House will work with us to deliver a legacy that is truly worthy of the Grenfell community—a legacy that never forgets what happened and one that ensures that no other community has to go through what they endured.

Mr Speaker: I am as grateful to the Secretary of State as I was to his shadow for his commendable brevity.

2.42 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party is pleased to add its support to this Opposition day motion. From the outset, we have urged that no stone should be left unturned in ascertaining the causes of this terrible tragedy, ensuring that appropriate lessons are learned and, most important of all, seeking justice for the families of the victims and for the survivors. I am particularly grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for facilitating the meeting with survivors and relatives of the dead in your rooms last week. It was of huge assistance to parliamentarians such as myself to meet those people, and no one could fail to be impressed by their immense dignity and by the strength of the campaign that they have fought so far. I was particularly privileged to meet the husband of the 72nd victim.

The evidence to suggest that the deaths could have been avoided is mounting and compelling. I know that this is a matter for the inquiry, but it bears mentioning again today that we know from newspaper reports that costing proposals to fit the tower with panels that would not burn were apparently dropped amid pressure to cut corners on costs. We also know from the Grenfell Action Group’s blog that the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation had been repeatedly warned that Grenfell Tower was a potential deathtrap. I look forward to the inquiry reporting on those matters in due course, but as I said in the Westminster Hall debate earlier this week, it is a disgrace that it has taken 11 months of campaigning by the bereaved and the survivors to wring from the Prime Minister a concession that a special panel should advise the judge at the inquiry. That should have been a no-brainer in the light of the Macpherson inquiry, and it is ridiculous that it has taken so long to get to that stage.

In Westminster Hall, I also addressed other issues relating to the legalities of the inquiry, so I will not repeat them because I want to ensure that there is time for everyone to speak today. However, I will endorse what Shelter said about the disaster. The charity said that we need a national conversation about some of the broader issues of policy and about our society that the tragedy has highlighted, particularly the role of the management organisation and wider issues around the treatment of social housing and its tenants. We also need to know that the Government will deliver on some of the promises that have already been made. In Westminster Hall on Monday, as today, there were many fine words, but the reality is that this Government have three times let their pals at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea get away with breaking their promises about the housing, which is an absolute disgrace. Those broken promises did not just happen in a void; they occurred against a background of previous broken promises and failings.
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is quite right that the Secretary of State highlighted housing, as have many Opposition Members, and housing and the lack of it are of great concern. However, I also hear that many families are failing to get access to the essential mental health services that they need after the disaster. Will the hon. and learned Lady comment on that?

Joanna Cherry: Again, it is a no-brainer that these people need immediate access to the best mental health services that public money can provide. If, as seems likely, none of this should ever have happened in the first place, and if the responsibility lies at the door of the state, there will be all the more pressure on the state to provide the necessary services.

I am conscious of the time pressures today, so I will not say much about the position in Scotland other than that building standards are devolved. Scotland has stricter building regulations in relation to some of these matters, but the Scottish Government are not complacent and have set up a ministerial working group that has made some important announcements.

I really want to spend some time discussing social housing, which is the big issue that comes out of all this. It is not for the inquiry but for this House and this Parliament to address the problems relating to a lack of social housing in England—I am not sure about Wales. As I have said, it is a disgrace that the promises to rehouse people have been broken because there is not enough housing available to rehouse them in the community that belongs to them and in which they grew up. What is the Secretary of State going to do about those broken promises? In my view—some of the survivors think the same—deadlines should now be set, and if the council cannot meet them, it should be put into special measures. This tragedy has raised profound concerns about how social housing is provided and managed in England, and Parliament needs to look at that.

When I met survivors and the bereaved, they told me that they were sickened and angered by the stigma attached to social housing. They said, “We are not poor people. We work hard and contribute to society. All we want is somewhere affordable to live in our own community. Is that really too much to ask?” I direct that question at the Secretary of State. Is it really too much for these people to ask for somewhere affordable to live in the community where they work so hard and contribute to our society?

Helen Hayes: Does the hon. and learned Lady agree that the 11-month delay in the Government committing any funds to the replacement of flammable cladding has compounded and magnified the injustice of Grenfell Tower, leaving councils that already do not have enough money to deliver social housing scrambling around to re prioritise urgent major works and unable to deliver the necessary changes?

Joanna Cherry: I agree wholeheartedly. This is a question of priorities and of where funds are committed. I understand that the council has huge reserves, so could it not dip into them to meet the requirements?

Even with a squeezed budget and without adequate powers to fully resist Tory austerity, the Scottish Government have managed to commit to an ambitious programme of home building, and I want to say a wee bit about that to show what can be done even with that squeezed budget. In the last Parliament, over 33,000 new affordable homes were built in Scotland, including 6,000 council houses. In this Parliament, £3 billion has been invested by the Scottish Government to deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes—of which 35,000 will be available for social rent—security of tenure has been introduced in the private rented sector and, most importantly, we have abolished the right to buy.

I know the right to buy is a sacred totem for some Conservative Members, and I understand the desire many people have to buy and own their homes, but the reality is that selling all the social housing without replacing it will set up huge problems for the future, which is exactly what the Government have done.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not time that we stopped using the words “affordable housing” when really we should be talking a lot more about social housing?

Joanna Cherry: We need have both affordable housing and social housing. The point is that not everyone can afford to buy their own home any longer, especially in this great city of London, where prices are out of the reach of most people, including most Members of Parliament. Building affordable homes and providing social housing has to rise to the top of the agenda in England. It has already done so in Scotland, and the record of the Scottish Government shows what can be done where there is a will to act. I urge the Government, as a result of this tragedy, to address the issue of social housing and to put it to the top of the agenda.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Colleagues will realise that a large number of Members want to speak so, to start with, I will impose a four-minute time limit.

2.51 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Mr Speaker for throwing open his apartment last week so that 100 MPs could meet Grenfell survivors and Grenfell families.

Monday’s debate on the public inquiry was humbling, and the response from the Grenfell United group was humbling, too. I met the group afterwards, and I met them on Parliament Square before the debate. They have carried out their campaign, liaison and dialogue with the Government and Members of Parliament with such dignity, dedication and resolve. It is important that we continue to make sure that people are at the centre of every decision we make.

When I read out the names of the 72 victims on Monday, the response from the Grenfell families was humbling. It took me a minute and a half to read out the names, but it was so significant for the families to know that their loved ones were named in the Official Report. That was very humbling for me. The small moves we can make do help.

Of course, there are much bigger moves that we have to make. There are people who are still concerned about their housing, and 14 households are likely still to be
without a permanent home beyond the anniversary of the fire, which is 14 households too many. This should have been done a long, long time ago. I know that this is not for want of effort or concern. This is an ever-complicated process, and it has been getting more and more complex as the number of households affected, beyond the ones that were lost, and the scale of the situation have become apparent.

I was in touch with the leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea ahead of Monday’s debate, and I was updated on the reasons why those 14 households might remain without a permanent home beyond the anniversary. Those reasons include the levelling of floors; awaiting feedback from residents; internal fire-door work; finalising resident requirements, including flooring where freehold permission is required; the removal of old gas infrastructure within a particular property; and awaiting resident input on kitchen design. There are a number of different things, but we hope that they do not take too long.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea bought 307 new homes, at a cost of £235 million, but Grenfell United residents are concerned that, in some cases, they are the wrong homes. There are people with mobility issues, and we have heard about the mental health issues. I have spoken to someone who had been living on an upper floor, above the fire, and their children clearly do not want to live on the first or second floor of a block of flats—they would like a ground-floor flat.

Going back to where I started, it is important that we make these residents the heart of our decisions and our process.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I was also at the event in Speaker’s House. The woman I spoke to was very realistic. The borough found a property for her, and works needed to be done, including works to make it fire compliant, which is what is taking the time. Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps more effort needs to be put into getting the works done?

Paul Scully: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct. We need to put every effort into getting these works done now. For every day that these people are in inappropriate temporary accommodation, their suffering is extended and prolonged.

Karen Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to do it and not just talk about it?

Paul Scully: I totally agree, and I was just about to come to that. I welcome the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to his place. The Government have been listening for so long and have been responding well—I know the Prime Minister is listening—and the Secretary of State, in his own redoubtable way, will add extra energy and bring a fresh pair of eyes. He is a man of action, and I suspect that it is because of his intervention that we now have two extra panel members on the public inquiry and that the Prime Minister has announced £400 million towards fire safety in other blocks. That is of particular interest to me because, ever since the fire, I have been liaising with people in my constituency, including residents of Chaucer House and Balaam House, to make sure they are in some way satisfied. It is not just people in north Kensington but people across the country who are worried and concerned about the safety of the property they call home. The funding is very welcome news.

In terms of action, we have already talked about the Hackitt report, and the Royal Institute of British Architects has said that desktop studies should not have a place in fire safety and that non-combustible panels should not be used. We really do need to look at how much further we can go. Whatever Dame Judith says, can we go a little further so that we do not just talk about the fact that Grenfell should never happen again but that we make sure that it does not happen again?

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I will shortly be leaving to sit on a Committee, so I apologise that I might not be in the Chamber for the wind-ups.

Like others, I praise the dignity of the survivors and families of Grenfell on what might be our last opportunity to discuss Grenfell before the one-year anniversary. I praise the ongoing fight for justice. Civic society—not just in Kensington, but much more widely—has come together to support these families and raise money, with people helping each other. That includes the firefighters who risked their lives on the night of the fire and who, only a few weeks ago, ran the London marathon, some in full kit, to raise money for Grenfell.

It is worth acknowledging the fact that residents, many of whom were in tower blocks in Kensington, Westminster and Hammersmith, watched the tragedy unfold from their windows. They watched the horror and have, for the whole of the past year, looked out at an 18-storey tomb. What that does to people—some are worried about their own safety—is unimaginable. Much as the services, including mental health services, have tried to rise to the occasion, we know that those services have not been wholly adequate.

I have two quick points. The first, of course, is the issue of rehousing. At the meeting here in Parliament two days after the fire, I stressed the importance of getting people rehoused—and permanently rehoused—quickly. Many of those families had already been through the homelessness system and had been placed out of borough. They know what it is like to be in temporary accommodation, and they know what it is like to be insecure and to be moved around for years. No wonder they do not trust either the Government or the local authority to secure their housing.

Understandably, it will take time to place individual families, and their needs and circumstances have to be taken into account, but the wider picture, as has been mentioned, is the chronic shortage of social housing. Only today, the Chartered Institute of Housing reminded us that in 2016, out of 270,000 homes started across the whole country, just 5,000, or 2%, were social housing. There is a very long way to go.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the “Who owns England?” blog found, through a freedom of information request, that nearly 2,000 properties were lying empty in Kensington and Chelsea, and that some of those had been empty for between 11 and 15 years, with many owned by offshore trusts? Obviously some of that was taken into consideration during the passage of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill.
Ms Buck: I am grateful for that intervention, and I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) will refer to that issue.

I have a particular question I want to put to the Minister. I am concerned about the fact that even after the fire, housing associations in inner London, including in Westminster and on the border, including in Hammersmith, were selling vacant properties on the open market, including family-sized properties. I am not saying that those properties would have been suitable for Grenfell families, as they may not have been, but they would have relieved the general pressure on housing and homelessness in inner London, and perhaps created other opportunities. I am also aware that, even as we speak, Kensington and Chelsea Council is considering planning permission for developments in the borough where there is a net loss of social housing. Again, those social housing places may not have been appropriate for Grenfell survivors, but they would have reduced the pressure. The Minister needs to stop this and deal with it.

I, like others, welcome the slightly overdue but genuinely welcome investment in fire safety and the removal of the cladding. I would like to know from the Minister whether this will be retrospective. The six 20-storey towers of the Warwick and Brindley Estates have had their cladding removed, at considerable expense, and we would like to know whether we will be able to draw upon that money.

Finally, on the issue of the Hackitt review, there are concerns about desktop studies and the ability to use combustible materials. We will see tomorrow, as there will be a statement, whether the review confirms some of our concerns. I am clear that it does not look as though the Hackitt review or the Government fully understand the nature of mixed tenure in some of our blocks. We know there are issues to address on social housing and on leaseholders, which I am sure others will address, but many social housing blocks contain leasehold properties, and the fact that we cannot access them or ensure that they are available for fire safety works, including the retrofitting of sprinklers, is a real worry. It does not look as though the Hackitt review has fully taken that on board and it needs to do so.

The Grenfell tragedy must never be repeated, and neither must the disastrous aftermath of that tragedy, which let people down so badly. Some progress has been made, particularly with this announcement of additional money, but at the moment neither the issue of housing nor the issue of fire safety have been fully dealt with, even a full year after that appalling tragedy.

3.2 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Grenfell Tower tragedy as we head towards the first anniversary of this most horrific fire, which took so many lives and caused enormous suffering and devastation. We are all keen to ensure that such an event is never repeated.

I am very aware that this Government have given the survivors of Grenfell and relatives of the deceased enormous support, through both resources and financial assistance. Like many, I am grateful for the priority that the Government have given to the survivors and also to the circumstances of the fire, in order to ensure that such a disaster is never allowed to happen again in this country. Since entering the House, I have been fortunate enough to have served as a vice-chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, under the distinguished chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), and I am pleased that so many members of that group from both sides of the House are in the Chamber today. As one would expect, much of our time over the past 11 months has been taken up with the aftermath of the Grenfell fire tragedy. I am very grateful to our secretariat, Mr Ronnie King, the former chief fire officer for Mid and West Wales fire service, whose experience has guided us fully through many hours of evidence and witness participation, which has given us a valuable insight into this terrible disaster.

Many points have been highlighted to our group, and they have raised many matters that we expect to be examined in and covered by the public inquiry into this fire headed by Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Like many Members, I am grateful to the Prime Minister for adding two additional members to the panel ahead of phase 2 of the inquiry, thereby bringing an additional breadth of skills and diversity of expertise. That was requested by the campaigning groups, and the members of those groups will now have additional confidence in the inquiry itself.

The all-party group was grateful to Dame Judith Hackitt for attending one of our sessions. She gave a comprehensive insight into the structure and remit of her independent review of building regulations and fire safety. Dame Judith’s interim report pointed out six broad areas for improvement, which have been heavily highlighted and will be taken on board by the Minister for Housing and the Secretary of State. I am pleased that the Government have committed to implementing all the recommendations which fall directly to the Government to deliver. Like the whole House, I look forward to Dame Judith’s full report, which is being published tomorrow.

I have already said that the Government have made support available for survivors, families of the bereaved and members of the surrounding community, but—there is a “but”—it still appears that some of those in need are unaware of all the support that is available. Perhaps the Minister would like to update the House on all actions that his Department is taking to ensure that those in need are aware of the help available to them. I believe that the same can be said for those in need of mental health support—this is, of course, Mental Health Awareness Week. I know that the support is available, but clearly not all survivors or bereaved families know that, or will even admit that help is needed and accept that help after such a traumatic event. I look forward to the Minister’s summing up and to the many other contributions that will be made by colleagues on both sides of the House.

3.6 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I will leave the discussion of cladding and the Hackitt report to others, and I will instead focus on the dire state of rehousing our Grenfell-affected households—it is shameful. Let me remind the House that I am talking about my community: some of my friends are who put their lives away, and some who lost close family. As it is Mental Health Awareness Week, let me announce that I have also had my Time to Talk counselling treatment. It does
not make you better, it does not make the anger go away and it does not make the sadness go away. Perhaps you cope with it better, but it does not actually heal.

Ministers have said over and again in this House that those responsible will be held to account, but the failing council under police investigation—those responsible for the deaths of 72 cherished individuals—the failing council responsible for the deaths of 72 people who are now gone has failed—and it does not actually heal. The taskforce report of December last year demanded culture change at the council. Some of the faces have changed, but the culture of disrespect towards social tenants, and the shambolic organisation behind it, with which I have daily contact, remains in place. My office is now dealing with about 100 Grenfell-affected households, comprising nearly 250 people. More are coming every week, as months go by, and they are still in emergency accommodation. The Grenfell-related housing statistics we have heard weekly from the council and successive Ministers are not the whole story. There is a lack of candour about those statistics. To put it politely, the figures have been spun. In November, there were not 210 Grenfell-related households needing rehousing. I had a full tally from the housing department at the time and there were 376 such households, because this includes the Walkways—homes to which people are afraid to return or cannot abide to return. The number of children who needed rehousing at that time was 323, of whom more than 200 were in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which is an infringement of their human rights. I have asked the council four times to update these figures and it will not do so—what on earth is it hiding?

The numbers have been spun because of the division between those from the tower and Grenfell Walk, and those living in the Walkways, many of whom are reliving the horror every day as they look through their windows. Some have returned, but many cannot. Keeping children in a bed and breakfast for more than six weeks is illegal, and there is good reason for that. We saw on ITV recently a mother whose four-year-old was regressing and talking like a baby, and struggling at nursery. I know of many schoolchildren who are unable to keep up with their studies, falling into depression at a young age and wanting to take their own lives, and of students who have dropped out of further education because they simply cannot cope, while their parents are barely hanging on. Meanwhile, we are subjected to a barrage of platitudes and spin from Ministers—and, indeed, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State or this week’s Housing Minister are not rehousing people. We ask the Government once again to send in commissioners to take control of this shameful process. If the Government continue to sit on their hands while tutting their disapproval, they should think about this: some Grenfell-affected people may not make it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I understand that there have been interventions, but because of that, after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. Even then, it might not be possible to get everybody in.

3.12 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Last July, following the general election, we gathered in the House to debate the inquiry into Grenfell. Many of us also attended the gathering in Speaker’s House, and I will never forget the conversation I had with someone who had lost two relatives in the fire. They described how they had spoken to their relatives on a mobile phone, instructing them to go down to the ground floor, and then had a different conversation when their relatives went to the top of the building and lost their lives. I do not know how those people are coping with the trauma they have suffered.

I join others in saying that the disaster should never have happened and that it has brought great shame on our nation. My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon...
and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) is the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for fire safety and rescue, which I chair. It has existed for 18 years, and we have been served by two wonderful secretaries, Douglas Smith and now Ronnie King. We have 29 active members and we have given countless recommendations to all sorts of people about what should have happened.

I gently say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that I do not want to hear anyone in the House say that there are lessons to be learned. There is no point in saying that unless we take action. The lesson to be learned is that when good advice is given, it should be taken.

The all-party group wrote to the previous Secretary of State, now the Home Secretary, with several recommendations, which the Opposition spokesman mentioned. They include the mandatory implementation of automatic fire sprinklers; the retrofitting of sprinklers—it is crazy that we build new buildings but it is not mandatory to have sprinklers in them; the introduction of a legally binding requirement for the use of non-combustible materials; the full publication of all information used to secure approval of building materials; the introduction of a legally binding requirement for new builds to have multiple escape routes; the introduction of regulatory provisions for the better assignment of responsibility; accountability at key points in the build chain, through to building handover; the creation of a national fire safety agency as a non-departmental public body answering to the Home Secretary; and the necessary revision of the statutory building regulations and approved documents to achieve those goals.

I fully accept that the Government have already acted on several points, and I look forward to Dame Judith Hackitt’s report tomorrow. However, our regulations and enforcement mechanisms are unchanged from those that failed to stop Grenfell. I regret that I did not shout louder as the chairman of the all-party. There is blame—I understand that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Earlier, the hon. Gentleman said that we always say that we will learn lessons, but we never actually implement them. That is a valid point.

Sir David Amess: I agree. It is no comfort to the traumatised victims when we engage in all this. Action is needed. I therefore hope that tomorrow, when we have the report and the statement, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his team of Ministers will not just say that there are lessons to be learned, but will take action and accept recommendations, not least those of our all-party group.

3.17 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Just a year ago, following the tragic and horrific fire at Grenfell, the Prime Minister promised to “do whatever it takes to keep people safe”.

Nearly a year later, every piece of failed safety regulation and every piece of flawed guidance that was in place before Grenfell is still there. That is not acceptable.

Although it is welcome that the Government have belatedly found the funding to help with the remedial works on social housing blocks, they have offered precious little to people living in privately owned blocks. I want to focus on the plight of leaseholders, who feel that the Government have abandoned them and hung them out to dry.

Let us consider briefly why this cladding is on buildings in the first place. Following the deadly Lakanal House fire in 2009, when six lives were lost, an inquest was held. It reported to the Government in 2013. The coroner told the Government that the fire safety regulations were confusing, not fit for purpose and needed to be revised, but the Government did nothing. The same ACM cladding with a polyethylene core continued to be put up on residential buildings. It was put on Grenfell in 2016, and Grenfell went up in flames 2017 with such lethal and tragic consequences.

If the Government had acted on the coroner’s advice after Lakanal, people would never have died in Grenfell Tower. The cladding is on buildings because the Government did nothing to correct the flawed regulations when they were told they were a problem. The moral duty to act was on the Government, but instead of accepting that, the previous Secretary of State made an art form of palm off the blame on anybody else. In this Chamber, he said that it was the responsibility of developers, freeholders, managing agents and insurers, even though there is no proven legal obligation on any of those people to pay for the removal of cladding. The two first-tier housing tribunals found leaseholders responsible for the costs. However, the previous Secretary of State said that he wanted no costs to be passed on to leaseholders, yet he took no action to ensure that. Leaseholders have been left living in unsaleable homes, fearful for their safety, and in fear of unaffordable debt that is often more than they earn in a year.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Constituents in Bromley and Chislehurst have exactly the same problem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as was mentioned earlier in the debate, the difficulty is that there is no mechanism for enforcing a moral duty and no means whereby leaseholders can get recompense? Should the Government consider some emergency funding comparable with the help that is being given to those in publicly owned blocks?

Mr Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes the legal point much more eloquently than I could. I hope that the Secretary of State will listen to that.

Here is a proposal for what the Government might do. First, they should fund the removal and replacement of flammable cladding on all residential blocks on which it is found, whether in the private or public sector. We simply cannot leave leaseholders living in limbo, their lives on hold for years while these issues are dragged through the courts at a snail’s pace. If it turns out that developers, freeholders or whoever are legally liable, the Government can then claim the money back. My guess is that it will turn out that the Government are liable for failing to correct guidance and regulations that they knew were flawed for years before this happened.

The Government’s first priority must be the protection of human life. We cannot allow any more Grenfells. It is not acceptable just to leave this cladding on buildings in which people are living. This dangerous cladding must be taken down, wherever it is found. No more delays, no more Grenfells; let us get this cladding taken down.
3.21 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I spoke about Grenfell Tower in the Westminster Hall debate on Monday, and wish to reiterate some of the remarks I made then.

This is a very important issue for Government Members. For too long, we have hidden behind technocratic debates and technocratic assertions of how much money we have spent or whether the sprinklers were in the right place. I think too few Members on the Government Benches understand the emotional charge of the debate about Grenfell. It was an appalling tragedy. It has been described, quite rightly, as a national scandal.

I know the area reasonably well: my mother had two cousins who lived in Trellick Tower when it was social housing, so I spent time there and know the area. One of the problems is that in the ’80s the people who lived in the tower—people who lived in social housing—felt far more like members of the community than perhaps is the case now. Today, the suspicion is that as the royal borough has got wealthier and wealthier, the political class—the people running the borough—have forgotten some of the less-advantaged members of their community. It has become very much a place of bankers, millionaires and hedge fund owners, and I have heard that the people who lived in Grenfell Tower had felt more and more isolated over the past 20 or 30 years.

For people on this side of the House—for Conservatives—this is a very big problem. Members on these Benches do not often like to talk about inequality, but in this instance there was an issue of a polarised society between the have and the have-nots. The suspicion has always been that the borough and the political forces that shape people’s lives have been less and less involved in and interested in the lives of more vulnerable people, poorer people and immigrants.

That is a huge challenge for my right hon. Friend who has just entered his post as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. His tenure will very much be judged by his response to this appalling tragedy. As other Members have said, we can debate this endlessly—we can use warm words and exchange speeches—but I suggest to my right hon. Friend that he should have an action plan and a list of tangible things that he wants to achieve that can actually benefit people on the ground. There is no end of words and speeches but, as people have said, we need action. Frankly, the Government and the Conservative party, which was in charge nationally and locally, will very much be judged on the outcome. This is something from which we should not be allowed to walk away.

Karen Lee: It is about not just action, but timely action. The Prime Minister has made an announcement on the removal of the cladding, but yet again there is no timescale.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I fully endorse what has been said about that. One of the difficulties and sadnesses of this whole process has been that although the Government have given with one hand, what they have granted has been perceived as having been given slowly, grudgingly and reluctantly. A situation like this is all about hearts and minds. As a Government and a party, we have to bend over backwards to ensure that people have trust in or a modicum of respect for the process. If there is any hint or suspicion that people do not care, or if people feel that they have to jump over a series of administrative hurdles, we will lose a huge amount of good will from the people who matter the most in this tragedy: the victims and their families.

3.24 pm

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate, but it is nothing short of outrageous and frankly shameful that we are debating this motion today, because the rehousing of all the survivors from the Grenfell Tower should have been done as a matter of course and should be complete by now.

A great tragedy and injustice of the Grenfell fire is that it was so easily avoidable. As we all know, the residents had repeatedly raised their concerns and asked for maintenance work to be carried out, and they had spoken of their fear that they would not be listened to until disaster struck. The warnings were not listened to, and the horror that befell the residents of Grenfell Tower was the consequence. This disaster should have marked a decisive moment in British politics. It should have shocked the Government into acknowledging the injustices and their neglect of working-class people, including people of colour and migrants.

It is hard to conclude that the Government have acknowledged that injustice. Eleven months on, two thirds of survivors are still stuck in budget hotels or temporary accommodation. Eleven months on, only seven of the 311 tower blocks with dangerous cladding had it replaced, with residents in blocks such as Castlemaine Tower in my constituency still going to bed each night knowing that their block is not safe. Eleven months on, the Government still do not know how many tower blocks are unsafe, with some councils, such as Wandsworth, not even releasing the information. That is 11 months during which the survivors of the disaster have not been able to begin to rebuild their lives, and 11 months of residents in tower blocks living in fear.

The Government promised that they would take action. Immediately after the fire, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), said that he would support Kensington and Chelsea Council in rehousing all survivors within a year. I think we can all fairly conclude that Kensington and Chelsea Council has failed the people of Grenfell. The Government must not allow a year to pass without all survivors being adequately rehoused, and they must not allow a year to pass without taking comprehensive action to fix our broken system of building controls and checks.

When the Minister responds to the debate, will he promise that all survivors will be permanently housed in good social housing before the anniversary of the fire? Will he pledge to undertake a comprehensive reform of fire safety checks and controls, including ending the use of desktop studies and not allowing combustible cladding and insulation to be used on high-rise tower blocks? We need a Government committed to doing justice for those affected. The best that we can now hope for is that the Government will not let a year pass.

3.27 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): As I said earlier this week, on Monday, Grenfell Tower was quite simply an horrific tragedy that will doubtless have a profound
effect on us all for the rest of our lives. It is therefore right that we work together to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

As of 12 April 2018, 304 buildings across the country have been identified as being clad in potentially dangerous material. These are a mixture of public and private social housing, public sector buildings, and private sector residential buildings. The scale of this problem shows that there remains a real danger of this happening again—more so because the remedial work has been far too slow. In some cases, the pace has necessitated the employment of fire watch officers.

Currently, of the 158 buildings with cladding in the social sector, remediation work has begun on 104—that is 66%—and has only been completed on seven of them. That is not good enough. I know that Ministers are fully supporting local authorities in their remedial cladding work, including where they need financial flexibility and support. I am pleased to say that no local authority seeking financial flexibility for remedial cladding has had their request denied. I understand that funding for this work is being provided directly from central Government. These delays have been caused by the necessary engagement with construction services to ensure that renovations are carried out correctly, accurately and in a way that can reassure tenants and the wider public. Tenants need to know that they are living in a space that is safe; they need to be able to sleep peacefully at night, without care.

Although I recognise that the pace of change has been slow, the Government have been moving forward at a pace commensurate with safety and security, which is vital. I say that as someone who is disappointed with the pace of change here, but also as someone who believes that we should work together to address these issues, rather than use these delays as a justification to rush our response to this dreadful tragedy. This is a truly complex situation and we must come together and take time to deal with this issue properly. We must also recognise the progress that has been made so far. Ministers have made progress with the reform of the building regulations—another area covered by the motion today. We all know that there will be an independent review regarding building regulations and fire safety led by Dame Judith Hackitt. An interim report published in December pointed out six broad areas for improvement, rather than use these delays as a justification to rush our response to this dreadful tragedy. This is a truly complex situation and we must come together and take time to deal with this issue properly. We must also recognise the progress that has been made so far. Ministers have made progress with the reform of the building regulations—another area covered by the motion today. We all know that there will be an independent review regarding building regulations and fire safety led by Dame Judith Hackitt. An interim report published in December pointed out six broad areas for improvement.

In conclusion, we must see that survivors are permanently rehoused. We must see a reform of the current building regulations. That might take time but we must see that the job is properly done.

3.30 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The east end of Edinburgh is a very long way away from North Kensington, but in this debate today I want to place on record, on behalf of the people whom I represent, our solidarity with the victims of Grenfell and our support for their campaign to get the answers as to why this happened to them. I say that not just because we are motivated by a sense of outrage that this could happen, or a sense of empathy for the victims, but because we have a direct material interest in making sure that this never happens again. That is why this inquiry is not just a matter for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, nor indeed for London or for England, but a matter of concern for the entire United Kingdom.

I want to see the fullest possible inquiry, and I want to see an inquiry that is not scared to investigate—without fear or favour—and to take on some of the vested powerful interests that are no doubt at play in this debate. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has decided that she will appoint independent advisers to assist the chair, but, like others, I am somewhat bemused that it has taken so many months of campaigning, 150,000 people to sign a petition, and a parliamentary debate for this most reasonable of requests to be met. I hope that that does not give us an indication of how the Government will deal with the inquiry as it goes forward. We need more Government intervention and we need it to be swifter and to have greater force.

I know that the Minister’s hands were not on this decision or on the delay in appointing these people, but what is vital now is that these independent advisers have the confidence of the people who were most affected by this disaster. Therefore, I would like to secure a commitment from him that there will be consultation with the victims of Grenfell in determining who should take up the position of these advisers.

On the point about rehousing, it beggars belief that people are still living in hotels and temporary accommodation almost a year after the disaster. Frankly, it underlines all the declarations of commitment and concern that have come from the Government. The Government must intervene. I want to hear from the Minister that he will set a deadline by which Kensington and Chelsea Council have to provide a report on the rehousing of every person affected. If that deadline is not met, the Government should take the council into special measures and make this a national responsibility. Unless that happens, there is no guarantee that this will not drag on and on. The matter is of course compounded by historical context. I agree with the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) when he remarks that it is clear that public administration in this area has been conducted for too long on behalf of the well-off and the content, and it has ignored people at the other end of the scale. That must change and it must change quickly.

3.33 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This was an appalling tragedy. I understand the situation as a London MP, but it has had consequences across the country. It concerns me as a former fire services Minister and as a former Minister dealing with planning matters in the Department for Communities and Local Government. I know that the Secretary of State wants to get this right; he starts with great good will. The best thing we can do is to ensure not only that the causes are discovered, but that the lessons are learned. I will not touch on building regulations issues today—I will perhaps save that for tomorrow—but I do want to hark back to my intervention on the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I am pleased that the Government have made increased public funding available to ensure that cladding on council-owned or housing association tower blocks is replaced and rectified. That is the right thing to do.
The Secretary of State’s predecessor said that the owners of private blocks should ensure that the costs did not fall upon the leaseholders. Morally that is right, but there is no legal mechanism for enforcing that.

The Northpoint building in my constituency was converted from offices to flats in 1999 by Alfred McAlpine, and the flats are on long leases. The building was certified as compliant in 1999. It was then checked in 2009 after the Lakanal House fire, and was held to be compliant. A subsequent check after the Grenfell Tower fire led to it being classified as category 3, which is the worst level of combustibility.

There is no suggestion of any negligence on the part of the contractors or those who carried out the previous investigations—certainly nothing that will found any cause of action on behalf of the leaseholders. There is nothing in the lease to suggest that any breach of duty by the managing agents, the freeholders or anyone else involved in that building would remove liability from the leaseholders. The findings in recent litigation in the upper tribunals have, in fact, gone against leaseholders and in favour of freeholders. Freeholders are often commercial companies that have a fiduciary duty to their shareholders. I am afraid that moral obligations are not going to be enough.

In this case, Alfred McAlpine, through a series of mergers and takeovers, ended up as part of the Carillion Group, which is now in liquidation. The prospect of there being any redress for the leaseholders of the Northpoint building, even if there were a legal mechanism, is non-existent. The Minister should therefore look into the Northpoint building, even if there were a legal mechanism, there being any redress for the leaseholders of the Group, which is now in liquidation. The prospect of being not going to be enough.

We need something that assists them. It may be that something can be recovered at some point if people are found to be at fault, but we need a bridging arrangement to enable leaseholders to carry out remedial works. They often have very little equity because the flats are virtually unsaleable, and they are either first-time buyers or downsizers so are financially pressed at the best of times. I suggest that some bridging arrangement to help them through that period would be a practical means of ensuring that the Government meet that moral duty, which there is currently neither a legal nor a practical means of achieving. Such an arrangement would give a greater degree of parity between those in the private sector and the Government’s welcome approach to those in the public sector.

3.37 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have a few minutes to speak in this debate, and because it is only a few minutes I want to focus on Khadija Saye, who died on the 20th floor. My interest in this is not wholly impartial, because Khadija worked for my wife as an intern. She was a beautiful 24-year-old woman with her life before her. She was really going to emerge as a fantastic artist and had already done some formidable work that was on show at the Venice Biennale.

Even though Khadija lived on the 20th floor, she died on the ninth floor of Grenfell Tower. I think that her mother was found further up, on the 16th or 17th floor. Khadija died, frankly, because the state failed her. The state told her to stay put and she stayed put. When she did leave, even though obviously she got spilt up from her mother, she did not quite make it out. Had she set about leaving earlier, she would probably be with us today. It is that business of state failure that I ask the new Secretary of State to reflect on.

When we have a Prime Minister who says that people will be housed within three weeks, that compounds state failure. When we have a community that ask for representation on an inquiry that speaks to them and their experience, and it takes so long to get that, that is state failure. When there are other people living in social housing and big tower housing blocks fully aware that the vast majority of Members of Parliament have not experienced living in a tower block, have not experienced social housing, and do not have families who have experienced it, and it takes this long to get a commitment to help fund the replacement cladding, that is also state failure.

I implore the Secretary of State to reflect hard on what “social” means. In the economy around us, “social” clearly has to mean something. That is why there is now so much emphasis on social housing and not just affordable housing. Affordable housing has come to mean something that might speak to a political class because they find it affordable—just—but certainly does not speak to many ordinary people. Let us put back in the “social” if we are to rebuild trust and make a commitment to Khadija and her mother Mary who died, and all those others who lost their lives, but also to the people who witnessed this most awful atrocity.

3.40 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who captures the tragedy so effectively in his words.

So much of what I would have said has already been said incredibly effectively by colleagues across the House that I would just like to reflect for a moment on one particular issue—the purpose of the cladding and why it was there in the first place. It is actually there to improve the standard of living of residents in these blocks by ensuring that they have better insulation and therefore their flats—their homes—are more comfortable and warmer places for them to live. I would like the Minister to reflect on the standard of living of these residents. Whatever comes later, we must offer people safety and reassurance, but also the right standard of living.

3.41 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for this brief opportunity to speak. It is a pleasure to follow the very brief—hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), who does the House a great service in giving us extra seconds. I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position. Much is expected of him and his ministerial team. He has a huge challenge in this area.

The key conclusion already drawn about the Grenfell fire is that it should never have happened. The various inquiries—the inquest, the police’s criminal investigation,
the Dame Judith Hackitt review and the public inquiry—should give us confidence that there will be conclusions to reassure all of us. However, in an age of such scepticism and cynicism, it is easy for society to be worried about the outcomes. The first element expected to report is the review led by Dame Judith Hackitt. The police and public inquiries will naturally be expected to be more fundamental in their conclusions. Clearly, the public inquiry will be the chance to examine, minute by minute, what happened leading up to the fire, the development of the fire and the conclusions.

Dame Judith’s conclusions might not be so explicit, but much is expected, especially with regard to the review of the fire guidance included in Approved Document B, which guides the building regulations. The Government have been expected to review Approved Document B and have been promising to do so since 2011. Other matters such as sprinklers and desktop studies ought to be included in her review’s recommendations, as well as the ban on combustible materials as part of the external envelope of buildings, already mentioned by a number of colleagues. Another positive recommendation ought to be to relocate fire safety enforcement from the Home Office to sit alongside building and housing regulations in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. There is logic to that suggestion.

Can the Secretary of State assure us that he and his team will see Dame Judith’s report tomorrow not as a conclusion—especially if it falls short on a number of the explicit recommendations expected by the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety rescue and others—but just as a starting point?

Finally, the PM’s announcement of more money for social landlords for removal, replacement and remedial work is very welcome. We need the same fund to be available to leaseholders.

3.43 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are so many questions that have either not been answered or inadequately answered in the past year that all I can do is go over some of them very briefly and hope that the new Secretary of State will take some heed.

First, with regard to the seat of the fire, yesterday saw the publication of the results of the inquiry by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy into the type of fridge freezer that we have known, almost since the date of the fire, was the cause. All it says is that there was a low risk from these types of fridges continuing to be used. There is no indication of what the fault was, whether it was a manufacturing fault, or how the fire actually started. We know, as Which? has told me during the debate, that it was a plastic-backed fridge. We know that plastic-backed fridges cause fire to spread incredibly quickly compared with metal-backed fridges, and there is a big campaign now to stop that type of fridge being sold. That needs to be looked at.

Of course we need to look at the issue of fire spread, and not just cladding or what should have retarded the spread of fire but what may have accelerated it. We need to look at things such as sprinklers, the means of escape and, as has just been mentioned, the advice given to residents in this situation. What we need is prescription. That is the message coming from RIBA, the Local Government Association, the National Housing Federation and Shelter, which I met this morning. We need architects, designers and builders to be told how buildings should be built to make them safe—for example, only using non-combustible materials or having more than one means of escape.

I understand that we will return to this tomorrow morning, but all the indications are that Dame Judith Hackitt’s review will not go down that route. Instead, it will go on about safe systems and systematic answers. With respect, that is not sufficient. I want my constituents, as I am sure every other Member here does, to feel safe and know that they are in safe buildings that will not catch fire and that, if the buildings do catch fire, that fire will be easily retarded.

The other main issue, as Members have said, is housing. It is about not just the rehousing of the people from in and around Grenfell, but the replacement—probably not on the Grenfell site—of the social housing that was lost. It is about the wider lessons to learn.

I am glad that there will be a Green Paper on social housing, but I say gently to the Secretary of State that there will have to be a sea change in the way the Conservative party has dealt with social housing over the past 10 to 20 years if it is to really make a difference to the security, safety and decency of social homes. I hope that he will be committed to that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), I have seen examples of the disposal of good-quality homes, the failure to replace them and the insecure conditions in which people have been made to live. Grenfell has shown that that is the problem, but it is a problem that goes much wider than Grenfell and is one we need to address.

3.46 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I want to briefly add to the comments that I made in the Westminster Hall debate on this subject on Monday. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for opening that debate.

I want to say two things. First, I ask all Members of the House not to say about Grenfell that this should never happen again. I was the local councillor for Lakanal House when it went up in flames in 2009, and I have to tell everyone that it is too late; it has already happened again. Grenfell is this disaster happening again. We all need to consider the reasons why we failed to learn those lessons. It is very important that we stop thinking about the fact that we ought to prevent future disasters when we are already staring in the face the repetition of a disaster. In addition, the secondary tragedy of the Government’s failure to respond to disaster, as happened after the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, looks set to happen again. The lack of faith that people felt in institutions of the state at that time is, I feel, on the horizon now.

My second point is that Ministers, especially the Secretary of State, should not think there is nothing they can do about that lack of faith. They should not think that people will necessarily lose faith in the Government and what they do because of this disaster. There are things that they can do about it, such as implementing the charter that Bishop James Jones called for in his report on the experience of the Hillsborough families. We know that the Bellwin scheme and all the
things we have in place at the moment are way out of date. I know that from the New Ferry explosion in my constituency. We should learn the lessons of Tessa Jowell’s life in responding to disaster and implement James Jones’s charter. In addition to the other measures that we need, the Government should bring forward the public advocate mentioned in the Queen’s Speech. That way, as the Minister said, people will have a legacy.

3.49 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Each of these deaths was completely avoidable. As concerns about the safety of the building were repeatedly ignored. The people who have died were failed. The survivors of the tragedy at Grenfell were failed. They were failed by their local council, and they have been failed by central Government since the fire. They were failed before, during and after this whole avoidable tragedy.

Those affected by this tragedy deserve justice, and those responsible for the refurbishments and the failure to ensure the safety of residents with the appropriate fire safety measures should be held to account and face criminal proceedings. Having spoken to survivors of this tragedy, I know there is distrust in this Government’s ability to review properly what happened in the build-up to the fire and during the aftermath. In fact, one of them told me that they had “lost hope for the future”.

It has taken the Prime Minister 11 months finally to hear the voices of campaigners, such as those at Grenfell United, and to appoint an independent and experienced panel for the public inquiry. Understandably, many people are asking why this important appointment has taken this long to agree. There is genuine concern that the fight for truth about Grenfell could last decades, much like the grave injustices of Hillsborough and the murder of Stephen Lawrence. But through the hard work of the survivors at Grenfell United, there is hope that by implementing the recommendations of the inquiry for survivors, bereaved families and thousands living in tower blocks up and down the country, a catastrophic tragedy like Grenfell Tower fire, which should never have happened in the first place, will never happen again.

3.50 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I want to commend the Fire Brigades Union for its work on the night of the fire and for its support for the bereaved and the survivors since then. I will depart from my script to say that, about a week after the fire, I visited the site, and I popped into the Latymer Christian centre next door. To say that the grief and pain was raw is just an understatement. I ended up in tears; seriously, I did.

For me, this debate is about two things. First, there is the failure permanently to rehouse the people who still need rehousing. Let us have a timeline—a clear timeline—for that. Secondly, there is the failure to say when that cladding is coming off. Let us have a date for that—a timeline again—because the people of Grenfell deserve better. This Chamber needs to hear those dates.

3.51 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am sorry that our debate has been cut short by the statement earlier, so Members did not get to speak for the length of time they wanted and our response has to be so short.

A little under a year ago, when we met in this place after the worst fire for over a century, Mr Speaker said: “There will be no more tragic matter treated of in this House in this Parliament than that which is before us now”.—[Official Report, 26 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 352.]

Time does not diminish the tragedy for those who lost their loved ones, but the time that has passed should have helped us to do right by those people and to do more to ensure that this does not happen again. As so many powerful and reflective contributions today and in Westminster Hall earlier this week have told us, the Government’s response on every point and at every turn has not been what it should it have been. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottemham (Mr Lammy) so powerfully said, this has been “state failure”. The Secretary of State spoke with compassion in his wide-ranging speech and struck a different tone by accepting his Government’s failings, but he did not give us the commitments and answers that we and many watching this debate wanted to hear.

Eleven months ago, the Government promised that all survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire would be permanently rehoused within one year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said, two thirds of survivors are still in hotels or temporary housing. We heard so powerfully from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) about the impact of that on the children who are falling into depression and dropping out of education. When will everyone be rehoused? As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, will the Government look at the wider problems of the under-supply of social and affordable housing? The Secretary of State said that he wanted to speed up this process. When he has finished looking at that, will he come back to the House and tell us what is to be done?

Eleven months ago, the Government promised that all tower blocks with dangerous cladding would be made safe. As the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) said, over 300 buildings so far have been identified as unsafe, but only seven of them have had their cladding removed. The Government have today announced £400 million to fully fund the removal and replacement of dangerous cladding, which is welcome but obviously questions remain. What is the £400 million based on? Where is that money coming from? Is something else to be cut? Will this pay for all 158 social housing blocks to have their cladding removed? What is the Minister’s definition of dangerous cladding? What about the private blocks? As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said, there is a complete lack of clarity about who is responsible for removing cladding in private blocks. Are the Government accepting, given the announcement today of that £400 million, that there are significant deficiencies in building regulations that need to be looked at?

Eleven months ago, the Government promised there would be significant reform of the current system of building regulations. It has been widely reported that the Hackitt review will not recommend bans on combustible material on tower blocks and nor will it abolish desktop studies. On the Labour Benches, and I think on all sides of the House, we pray that that is not true. If it is true, we pray that the Government go further than Hackitt and that that is the start and not the end of the process. I think there is unprecedented support across this Chamber.
for a ban on combustible cladding, a ban on desktop studies and a publicly accountable system of building control.

To use the lives of those who died as a vehicle for point-scoring would make us all monsters, but not to call out and hold to account the Government’s failure to act—to act well, to act quickly, to act now—would make us worthless to those survivors who need us now.

I therefore say to the Government that it is not too late to put this right. As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) says, there is no point in saying to move on to a brighter future. I reassure the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and others that it will set out recommendations for far-reaching reform of the regulatory system. We will also publish our Green Paper on social housing by the summer recess. That follows the social tenant workshops that we have conducted across the country; the final one, which I attended, was hosted by Grenfell United. That Green Paper was inspired by the cri de coeur from the Grenfell community—a challenge to reform social housing and address the stigma and prejudice that too many social tenants face up and down the country.

I share the restlessness of hon. Members across the House to relocate the survivors more swiftly, to bring accountability and justice to this most horrific of tragedies and, ultimately, to bring some solace to those brave souls picking up the pieces of their lives and determined to move on to a brighter future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the commitments given by the Government that all survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire of 14 June 2017 would be permanently rehoused within one year, that all other tower blocks with dangerous cladding would be made safe, that councils would get the funding needed to carry out remedial work and that there would be significant reform of the current system of building regulations; and calls on the Government to make good on those commitments, to lay a report before Parliament and to make an Oral Statement by 14 June 2018 setting out how it has met those commitments and discharged its wider duties in response to that national disaster.
Leaving the EU: Customs

4 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before the House: all papers, presentations and economic analyses from 1 January 2018 up to and including 16 May 2018 prepared for the European Union Exit and Trade (Strategy and Negotiations) Cabinet sub-committee, and its sub-committees, on the Government’s preferred post-Brexit customs arrangements including a Customs Partnership and Maximum Facilitation.

This is, frankly, a desperate state of affairs. We are two years on from the referendum and five months away from the deadline for the withdrawal deal, but the Government still cannot agree on the most basic of Brexit issues: our future customs arrangements. Each week we see a new attempt, and each week we see it fail, with a Cabinet—a war Cabinet—and two Sub-Committees of warring factions. Yesterday we at least saw some agreement: the agreement to kick the ball down the road for another month as the Government agreed to publish a White Paper on their negotiating position, but without any agreement on what will be in it.

The Prime Minister is clearly in a difficult position. Every time she tries to make progress, a Cabinet Minister is waiting to trip her up. As an Opposition, it is tempting to take responsibility, because there is a majority in this House that believes in a sensible approach to delivering the decision of the referendum. That starts with our customs arrangements, which is why we have tabled this Humble Address motion to seek the publication of the papers and analysis on the Government’s two post-Brexit customs options: the Prime Minister’s favoured proposal of a customs partnership, which has of course been dismissed by the Foreign Secretary as “crazy”; and the so-called “maximum facilitation” option, which the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy rightly warned would put jobs at risk. Both have faced serious criticisms of their technical detail and may be illegal, according to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

The Brexit Secretary, who is unfortunately not in the Chamber, has dismissed the customs partnership as “blue sky thinking”, but when looking at the maximum facilitation option, I was struck by his words. I want to quote him precisely:

“Faced with intractable problems with political pressure for a solution, the government reaches for a headline grabbing high-tech ‘solution’. Rather than spend the resources, time and thought necessary to get a real answer, they naively grasp solutions that to the technologically literate ministers look like magic.”

Those were the words of the Brexit Secretary. As it happens, he was speaking in 2008 about ID cards, but was he not prophetic in anticipating today’s “intractable” problem? However, it is not intractable; there is a solution.

It is clear to everyone that the Government are in a total mess, locked in a fight over two options, neither of which is practical or acceptable to the EU, but this House has an opportunity to sort out the mess. There is a majority that respects both the result of the referendum and our duty to protect the livelihoods of the people we represent. The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) rightly described the conflict in the Cabinet as an “ideological cage fight”, adding that Parliament may soon be “making the decisions”. Frankly, it would make a better job of it. There is a majority for a new and comprehensive customs union, both here and beyond the House, among all those who recognise the importance of protecting our manufacturing sector, of securing frictionless trade with the EU, and of honouring our obligations on the Good Friday agreement and the border in Ireland.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Paul Blomfield: I will give way briefly, but I am conscious of time and of the number of Members who wish to speak—interventions will cut into their time.

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I heed his admonition. Does he agree that peace in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is crucial, especially given the background work done by Members on both sides of the Chamber and everyone’s heartfelt desire to maintain peace in our time?

Paul Blomfield: I would, of course, and I am frankly distressed that those who favour the most destructive Brexit are so casually willing to dismiss that if it gets in the way of their objectives.

Let me return to the breadth of support for a comprehensive customs union outside the House. The director-general of the CBI, Carolyn Fairbairn, has described it as a non-ideological and practical solution. Crucially, she pointed out:

“If we don’t break the impasse on this customs decision, everybody will be affected—manufacturers, services companies, retailers. An awful lot hangs on this now.”

Her view is shared across business and the trade unions.

Those who seek the deepest possible rupture with the EU, no matter the cost, have been developing their arguments against a customs union, so let me address them. Some have warned that being in a customs union raises prices for food and clothing through the common external tariff. I hope that they will also reflect on the response of British farmers and clothes producers to their idea of unilaterally cutting our tariffs, presumably to zero.

I have also heard the absurd argument that developing countries would be disadvantaged by a customs union with the EU. Current customs arrangements serve developing countries well, as 49 of the poorest countries have tariff-free access to the EU market through the “Everything but Arms” policy. If the approach would be so damaging, perhaps the Government will explain why they propose to replicate the entire EU regime on market access for developing countries—the general system of preferences—after Brexit.

The most frequent objection, of course, is that a customs union would prevent us from signing trade deals with other countries—it would. That sounds significant, but the significance is largely symbolic. We can and do trade with non-EU countries without trade deals. The EU is our biggest trading partner, but the US is our biggest national trading partner, and that is
[Paul Blomfield]

without our having a trade deal. Some people talk about increasing trade with China once we are free of a customs union, but Germany trades four times as much with China as we do.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): How helpful does the hon. Gentleman think that the publication of all these documents would be to the people we are trying to negotiate with?

Paul Blomfield: The right hon. Gentleman misses the point. He should listen to his own International Trade Secretary, who has talked clearly about a customs union.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: I am happy to give way—I enjoy the cut and thrust of debate—but interventions will cut into the time for other Members to speak.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman talks about missing the point. I do not want to be rude, because he is making an interesting speech about the customs union, but the actual subject of the debate is whether or not these documents should be released. We are talking about an important constitutional precedent. We have been run by Cabinet government since George III. The hon. Gentleman has not even addressed that as an issue.

Paul Blomfield: I intend to address it as an issue as I conclude my remarks, so I will come back to that.

The Government’s own analysis shows that none of their ambitious proposed new trade deals will go anywhere near compensating for the loss of a customs union with the EU. Free trade agreements with the United States, China, India, Australia, the Gulf and south-east Asia would add just 0.3% to 0.6% to our GDP, but moving to a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU would hit our growth by 5% over the next 15 years. Despite the number of air miles that the International Trade Secretary has clocked up, India has said that it is in no rush to strike a trade deal with us, while Japan has said that it is prioritising the EU for a trade deal.

Working with the EU in the future and seeking deals for a market of 650 million, we can build on the full or partial free trade agreements that we already enjoy with 68 other countries through the EU, as well as the EU deals just concluded with Japan, Singapore and Mexico. If we are confident about our country, and if we are ambitious for its future, we should recognise that we have nothing to fear from a new, comprehensive customs union and everything to gain. It is the best way to support jobs, particularly those 2.1 million in manufacturing, and it is an essential step towards avoiding a hard border in Northern Ireland.

When we previously heard the argument about playing into the hands of those with whom we are negotiating in the EU27, it was as bogus in relation to the other papers that have been released as it is to these papers. Members who insist on a customs partnership or the maximum facilitation model should be confident that the Cabinet papers will stand up to parliamentary scrutiny, and the constraints that were laid down previously provide for the confidentiality that is right for this place. Others who share concerns about those models should also want them to be subjected to proper scrutiny.

This is one of the most important decisions faced by the country since the second world war, but the Cabinet is unable to agree. Parliament therefore has a deep responsibility to stand up for the people whom we represent, and we need access to the information in order to do so. I hope that the House will approve the motion.

4.13 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I felt that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), while setting out as best he could the Opposition’s approach to various aspects of European policy, rather neglected to address the key significance of the motion that the Opposition have tabled, which is about the requirement for the public disclosure of current Cabinet Committee papers and which raises important matters of constitutional principle.

The House should not mistake me: I believe passionately in the accountability of Ministers to Parliament. No Minister who possesses a grain of sense approaches questions in the Chamber, let alone a Select Committee evidence session, without a strong sense of trepidation. I still remember what I learned, many years ago in my first Parliament, from watching that magnificent parliamentarian the late Gwyneth Dunwoody using questions and interventions during Committee sessions to spear Ministers who had not bothered to master their brief before appearing in front of her. So I believe in Parliament, but I also believe strongly in Cabinet government, and in the proper constitutional relationship between Government and Parliament. Of course, as Ministers we have a duty to keep Parliament informed about Government policy, but effective Cabinet government also relies upon certain principles.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and then to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), and then I will make progress.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): If the right hon. Gentleman is such a believer in Cabinet collective responsibility, what does he make of the conduct of the Foreign Secretary, who continually and consistently undermines the Prime Minister and her position? What does he think will do more damage to our negotiating position: publishing some documents or the conduct of an incompetent Foreign Secretary?

Mr Lidington: I will explain later why I believe the implications of the Opposition motion would be extremely damaging for the quality of Government decisions under Governments of any party.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I fully support the position the Minister is taking. Does he recall that when Labour Governments were giving away powers of self-government right, left and centre at Nice, Amsterdam
and Lisbon, they never shared their reasons or the negotiations they had beforehand, even though the issues were deeply contentious among Conservative Members. I wonder directly to the vote to leave the European Union?

Mr Lidington: Wishes are always expressed by Members, usually those in the Opposition parties at any given time, for Governments to divulge more about internal discussions between Ministers, but I think the right constitutional principle is that the roles of both the Executive and Parliament need to be respected.

Three key principles are at issue in this debate. First, there is the need for confidential and frank discussion between Ministers in Cabinet and Cabinet Committees, and after eight years in Government one general truth that I have learned is that a policy proposal always always benefits from discussion among colleagues, who bring different perspectives and interests to bear.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), and then I really must make some progress.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful argument, but beyond the doctrine of collective responsibility and making sure that one can have conversations in government, in what world does it make sense that we should disclose our own Government papers—our own Government secrets—to the other side in a negotiation?

Mr Lidington: I will want to say a bit more on that point in a few minutes, but first I want to finish what I have to say about collective responsibility.

Discussions between Ministers need to be frank. That was very well set out by a former very senior Labour Secretary of State, Jack Straw, in a statement that was quoted with approval by the Chilcot committee in its report. Mr Straw said in 2009, in explaining a Cabinet decision to veto the release of minutes of one of its meetings, that dialogue in Cabinet and Cabinet Committee “must be fearless. Ministers must have the confidence to challenge each other in private. They must ensure that decisions have been properly thought through, sounding out all possibilities before committing themselves to a course of action...They must not be deflected from expressing dissent by the fear that they may be held personally to account for views that are later cast aside.”

Those were principles that previous Labour Governments upheld in fulfilling the responsibilities of government, and it is a measure of how far today’s Labour leadership has fallen that it should be abandoning those principles today. We cannot have that kind of honest, open discussion in Cabinet or Cabinet Committee if people know that at any time their views could be made public by means of a resolution of the House.

The second principle—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I am not giving way at the moment.

The second principle is that officials must be able to give frank advice to Ministers in confidence. That includes memorandums and other papers provided to Cabinet Committees by some of the most senior officials in the civil service. There are Labour Members present who have themselves served in government; they know that those in the professional civil service used every ounce of their professional skill to help them, as Labour Ministers, deliver the objectives of the elected Governments in which they served. I have to ask: what would those Members say to those officials about a motion that might result in the making public of the advice of professional civil servants—people who of course can never answer back themselves—which they had thought was being given to Ministers in confidence?

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Minister accept, though, that his argument is fatally undermined by the fact that members of the Cabinet are discussing these matters in public, in the newspapers?

Mr Lidington: I am deeply old-fashioned in my views, and I believe it is an enormous privilege to serve in a Cabinet. I also believe that discussions should be frank and unconstrained within the Cabinet, and that Cabinet Ministers should agree on a collective Government policy and be prepared to defend that policy in public afterwards.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if such a motion were to be passed, less would be said in Cabinet papers and they would no longer contain the same candour? That is something that we should try to get away from. We had quite a bit of it between 1997 and 2010, when decisions were not taken through collective Cabinet responsibility.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend speaks from experience, and he is completely accurate in what he says.

The third principle was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover when he talked about international relations. All Governments have to negotiate with other sovereign Governments and with international organisations, and it is a cardinal principle of our system of government that Ministers and officials need to be able to prepare the British negotiating position in private. Indeed, as recently as December 2016, that was also the view of the right hon. Gentleman, and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who said:

“I fully accept that the Government will enter into confidential negotiations...I do...accept that there is a level of detail and of confidential issues and tactics that should not be disclosed, and I have never said otherwise.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2016: Vol. 618, c. 223.]

It is a source of sadness to me that he appears to have departed from that position in lending his name to the motion on the Order Paper today. I would be happy to take an intervention from him if he wishes to explain to the House why he has abandoned the view that he championed two years ago.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The position I set out was in relation to a motion with pretty much the same terms as this. It was accepted that there was a degree of confidentiality. The argument that is being made now is the very argument that was made then about not disclosing papers that are all in the public domain now.
Mr Lidington: I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman was indulging in a bit of medieval scholasticism there. That was not persuasive. I do not know whether he is now fearful of the Trots in his constituency who are working to deselect him. I do not know what has caused him to abandon the principles that he once stood by. The principles that he stood by in 2016 are the ones that Labour Governments of the past have followed, and I just wish that the Labour party would live up to those principles today.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On that point, is there not an issue of consistency involved? Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which was passed by a Labour Government, there is a deliberate and necessary exemption for confidential information. It would create complete confusion and inconsistency if that principle were to be breached now.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right. The Freedom of Information Act 2000—brought in, let us not forget, by a Labour Government—specifically provides exceptions from the freedom of information rules for Cabinet and Cabinet Committee papers, for advice from officials to Ministers and for information that might harm our diplomatic relationships and negotiations. The wording of the ministerial code expresses the balance between the different duties of Government of accountability to Parliament and of confidentiality in developing Government policy. That is why the code explicitly provides that Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament and the public, notes that we should refuse to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, and says that that judgment should be made in accordance with the relevant statutes and the Freedom of Information Act 2000—so including the exceptions I mentioned.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I have already given way quite a few times, and I am conscious of the large number of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who have expressed a wish to participate in the debate.

Turning to the point made by my right hon. Friend. I think the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), the candour of everybody involved, whether Ministers or officials, would be affected if they thought that the content of their discussions would be disclosed prematurely. Frankly, if details of discussions were routinely made public—

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab) rose—

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab) rose—

Mr Lidington: No, I am not giving way at the moment.

If such details were made public, Ministers would feel inhibited from being frank and candid with one another. As a result, the quality of the debate that underlies collective decision making would decline significantly. That is not in the interests of any Government of any political party, and it is not in the interests of our constitutional democracy. Such discussions also need to be underpinned by full and frank advice on policy options and their implications. No Government of the past have tried to operate in an environment where papers can be finalised and distributed to members of a Cabinet Committee one week and then made public the next. It is simply not possible to do so and not responsible to pursue that as an objective.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales, I invite the House to consider the situation were we to accept the Opposition motion and adopt the practices that the motion embodies. If the motion were carried and the situation that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central advocated became the standard practice governing relations between the Executive and Parliament, we would soon see a deterioration in the quality of policy making within Government, and not greater but significantly less transparency. Indeed, that point was made by Mr Jack Straw, a former Labour Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary, Leader of the House and Foreign Secretary, when he said about regimes that did not have the kind of exceptions to disclosure that are in the Freedom of Information Act:

“The paradox of their situation is that, far from that leading to an increase in the accountability of Ministers and decision makers, it has reduced accountability because it has cut the audit trail. Officials and Ministers have gone in for Post-it notes and oral decisions which should have been properly recorded, or for devices for ordaining all sorts of documents which have nothing to do with the Cabinet or Cabinet Committees as Cabinet documents.”


It was precisely those practices of avoiding the formality of Cabinet and Cabinet Committee agendas, papers and minutes that were severely criticised by both the Butler commission in 2004 and the Chilcot inquiry in 2016. I regret the fact that the Opposition’s motion appears to be moving towards backing a situation in which all those flaws identified by Chilcot and Butler would be reproduced in the future, and I hope that we do not go in that direction.

The justification that we have heard for the motion is that there are special circumstances, but I simply reject the idea that the Government have been insufficiently transparent on the issues in question. On the conduct of the negotiations, the Prime Minister has made important speeches at every stage to set out our approach. We published two White Papers and a series of papers last summer and autumn to set out further details. In December, the Government and the European Commission published a joint report to set out the progress made in the negotiations. The text of the draft withdrawal agreement is in the public domain. We announced only yesterday that we shall publish a new White Paper next month on our proposed future relationship with the European Union. There are six Brexit-related Bills before Parliament, all of which, as usual, are accompanied by impact assessments.

Select Committees have been able to scrutinise our plans for exit, as the more than 100 Select Committee inquiries into such matters testify, and the Government have engaged with all those inquiries. We have provided written evidence, and Ministers and officials have appeared for questioning. The Prime Minister has come to this House on numerous occasions to give statements on EU summits. Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers alone have given evidence to Committees on 35 occasions and have made no fewer than 85 written statements during the lifetime of their Department. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has given 10 oral statements to the full House of Commons during the time he has held office.
It would not be in the national interest to release information that will form part of our negotiating position. In order to ensure good governance, it is in the interest of all of us, including those who might have the ambition of serving at some very distant date in a Labour Government, to preserve the system of Cabinet government that allows for good and well thought through decisions. 

For those reasons, I have no hesitation in asking my right hon. and hon. Friends to oppose the motion before the House today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As Members can see, a large number of colleagues want to participate, so there will be a four-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

4.31 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I was going to say that I stand here with a sense of déjà vu, but perhaps I should say “already seen” in case I upset those who want to purge these lands of all trace of foreign influence. The SNP will be supporting the motion probably will not be carried, but even if it were carried, we would spend the next six months raising points of order to argue over 14th-century precedent as to whether the Government actually need to pay a blind bit of attention to anything this Parliament might say.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: The hon. Gentleman has just been advised of how little time there is for debate. If he has his name down to speak, he will get his time. If he has not put his name down to speak, I am sorry, but those who have put their name down get precedence.

Would it not be so much better if the Government were simply prepared to trust Parliament with that information in the first place? The Government’s response was not only predictable but was so predictable that I wrote what I am saying now before they responded. They say there is a long-established convention that Cabinet papers are confidential. They say routine publication would prejudice the smooth and efficient operation of Government. They say that publication would place in the public domain sensitive information that could compromise our negotiating position.

I accept there are occasions, maybe the majority of occasions, when any or all of those considerations should predominate and the balance of argument should be against disclosure, but the motion before us does not ask for the automatic release of everything the Cabinet ever does; it asks for the release of some papers in relation to Brexit that the Opposition, including the SNP, believe need to be made available to Parliament in the unique circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

The Government keep telling us we are in an unprecedented situation, and then they ask us to be dictated to by precedent in a situation that is unprecedented. Yes, the confidentiality of Cabinet papers is an ancient convention. In fact, we are reminded that the convention goes back to the days of King George III—that great, wise and all-caring monarch whose glorious reign has been immortalised in film as “The Madness of King George”. What better metaphor could we have for the Brexit process?

If the Government are so thirled to sticking to the fine detail of these honourable conventions, why on earth has the Foreign Secretary still got a job? He has earned more red and yellow cards in two years than Vinnie Jones did in his entire career, but he is still on the pitch—the Foreign Secretary is not on the subs bench just now, obviously—arguing in public with the manager over what the team tactics should be, while some of his colleagues try desperately to calm him down before he gets suspended permanently. In the interests of strict accuracy, I should say that Vinnie Jones is only ninth in the world record list for red cards—or 10th, if we include the Foreign Secretary.

We must also consider the argument that releasing these papers would not be conducive to the smooth and efficient running of Government business. We do not need to release Cabinet papers to prevent the smooth and efficient running of Government business, as the Cabinet is perfectly capable of doing that for itself. The main Opposition party tabled this motion because it is becoming terrifyingly clear that those in the Cabinet are making a bigger mess of the Brexit process every time they meet to try to fix it.

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will give way this once, as the hon. Gentleman has been very persistent.

James Cartlidge: That is very kind. Does the hon. Gentleman think the Scottish Government should disclose all of their confidential papers?

Peter Grant: If the hon. Gentleman had listened, he would have heard me make it clear that I am not arguing, and neither is the motion, that this should be regarded as routine, automatic or standard practice; this is a request in a specific instance. I will explain why in this instance and on this matter those in the Cabinet have shown themselves incapable of fixing it by themselves.

We do not need a Humble Address to mess up the smooth and efficient running of Government business; we only need Cabinet Committees and Sub-Committees in order to do that, as they can do it perfectly well. The Government’s arguments might carry some weight if they could point to some kind of progress—there has been some but not nearly enough. Almost two years after the decision was taken to leave the EU, and five months before, as we know, we need agreement on the Government’s preferred solutions, we do not know even what their preferred solutions are, because they cannot agree on them. Those in the Cabinet are too
busy fighting among themselves, jockeying for position for when the Prime Minister goes, willingly or unwillingly. Almost the only thing they can agree on is that this mess is everybody's fault but their own.

As for the Government's non-plans for our future customs relationship, here is what we know: we know that the Prime Minister's plans are "crazy"; we know there are "significant question marks" over whether they can be delivered on time; we know that the Foreign Secretary is undermining the negotiations; and we know that thousands of people in the car industry could lose their jobs if the Government get it wrong. We know all that because it is what Cabinet Ministers are already telling us in public. If what they are saying in private is more damaging to our negotiating stance than what they are saying in public, heaven help us. Those quotes have come from serving Cabinet Ministers within the past 10 days—that is what they are saying in public. It is hard to believe that what they are saying in private can be so much more damaging that they cannot be allowed to say it—

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) rose—

Peter Grant: I am sorry, but I did say I was taking only one intervention.

We have a Government who claim to be taking back control but who are now seen to be running completely out of control. They claim to be restoring parliamentary sovereignty, for those parts of these islands where such a strange idea actually holds any sway, but they are at best failing to co-operate with and at worst appear to be wilfully obstructing Parliament's attempts to hold them to account. The ducking and diving that went on with respect to a previous Humble Address, on the Brexit analysis papers, has been discussed often enough that we do not need to repeat it now. We also know that the Government are still trying to avoid complying with a recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee's 18th report, published more than three months ago, that they publish details of what work Departments are doing to prepare for Brexit. Two weeks ago, the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee had to take the highly unusual step of publicly rebuking the Secretary of State for not giving proper priority to making him and his civil servants available to give evidence to the Committee. There are probably other instances going on right now, which are not yet in the public domain, where individual members of particular Select Committees will know that their Committees and their Chairs are losing patience with Ministers for either not being available to be questioned or for not providing information on time.

This morning, a hard-hitting report was published by the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on the collapse of Carillion. In normal circumstances, it would have attracted huge attention. A lot of people have not noticed it yet because there are so many other Government failures, Government U-turns and Government fall-outs going on that it is difficult to keep on top of all of them. In publishing that report, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), said:

"The company's delusional directors drove Carillion off a cliff and then tried to blame everyone but themselves".

I hope that she has registered that remark for royalties because I think it will be used an awful lot in future to describe the Cabinet's handling of Brexit.

The Cabinet has miserably failed in its responsibility to introduce credible proposals to avoid what the Prime Minister described as a cliff edge. I suggest that we do for the Cabinet what the Cabinet would do for a failing council or health authority: it is time for this Parliament to take back control and put the Cabinet into special measures.

I do not just want the Cabinet to give us the information. The Cabinet is clearly incapable of taking a decision anywhere near on time, so as well as giving us the information, why not give Parliament the decision? Why not respect the sovereignty, as they call it, of Parliament? Why not agree to a free vote in this place on the customs union? I will tell you why, Madam Deputy Speaker: the Government know what the result would be. It would not be consistent with their red lines or anything that appears in existing Government papers.

Let us have that free vote on the customs union. The European Research Group can quietly go away and spontaneously combust when they see the result and the rest of us can concentrate on turning the bus round before it disappears over the Prime Minister's cliff edge.

4.40 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and I will unashamedly speak on many of the issues that he has mentioned.

I reject the blatant attack by Opposition Members on the functioning of the Government. Today, we see an attempt to undermine our negotiations with the EU. The Opposition will use any means, including a Humble Address, to try to force the Government to reveal their hand. I would have thought that a party so involved with trade unions would be expert at negotiation. Do Opposition Members not respect the referendum result? Are they simply playing politics during a vital negotiation? Industry and constituents alike want us to get on with it, yet here we are again, with the Opposition trying to frustrate the process.

If the Opposition want to avoid a so-called hard Brexit, why are they undermining the negotiations?

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Colin Clark: I will, unlike the hon. Member for Glenrothes.

Neil Gray: I struggle to understand how the hon. Gentleman can suggest that Opposition Members are frustrating the negotiating position when the Foreign Secretary has to be asked whether he still believes in Cabinet collective responsibility. Will he elaborate?

Colin Clark: Given that I have not been elevated to the lofty heights of Cabinet—one day, we never know, I may be—I am unfortunately unable to answer the question for the Foreign Secretary. I am sure that the next time my right hon. Friend is in his place, the hon. Gentleman can ask him himself.

Yesterday in Holyrood, the Scottish National party Government refused to give a legislative consent memorandum to the European Union (Withdrawal)
Bill, despite months of negotiation, despite Mike Russell, the Brexit Minister, saying that he was near to a deal, and despite SNP MSPs who would like to be pragmatic about a deal.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the minutes of the Scottish Cabinet were to be released to the public, they would contain only four words: “We agree with Nicola”?

Colin Clark: I can always rely on my hon. Friend to get to the nub of the matter.

The Government in Holyrood are deliberately undermining the UK negotiations, and I am flabbergasted that the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats have supported the nationalists, disregarding the 2015 Scottish independence referendum and ignoring the Brexit referendum for narrow political gain. That is also why we are here today: for narrow political gain.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman explain at which point during the referendum debate we heard about maximum facilitation proposals or a customs arrangement?

Colin Clark: Unlike Opposition Members, I respect the British people and representative democracy. I trust the Conservative Government to put forward proposals to the British people. The great thing about the British system is that it is a democracy, we will have other elections and we shall be judged on how we deliver Brexit. Conservative Members intend to deliver Brexit and respect the Brexit vote.

Many Opposition Members have held Government positions and the SNP is in government in Scotland, so how can they possibly support the motion? How can they countenance exposing the Government’s negotiating position? How can those members of the official Opposition who have held Government positions possibly table a motion such as this to undermine the Government, knowing, as they do, about the delivery of government? As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) said, would the Scottish Government seriously consider giving us their confidential papers and information about their confidential conversations?

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Included among the papers called for in the motion is the economic analysis. The Scottish Government have published their economic analysis; the UK Government have not.

Colin Clark: It is quite remarkable that the hon. Gentleman speaks about Scotland’s economic papers and performance, when Scotland is now the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, which he is knowingly damaging. It is not Brexit that is damaging the Scottish economy, but the SNP’s determination to make Scotland a poor place for inward investment. I come from Aberdeen, like my hon. Friend sitting in front of me, the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), and it is the most productive part of Scotland. It is quite remarkable how well Aberdeenshire is still doing, despite the Scottish Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) asked of the hon. Member for Glenrothes, would the Scottish Government release their papers?

I would be fascinated to see the papers that have passed between the Scottish Brexit Minister, Mike Russell, and the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, because as we see today, they have set out to frustrate the Government’s negotiation with the EU. We all want the best deal. As parliamentarians, we should see that the motion seeks simply to undermine the Government. I cannot support it.

4.46 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). He said in the middle of his remarks that he would not expect the Government to expose their negotiating position to the people with whom they are negotiating. I was under the impression that the Government did not have a negotiating position, because the Cabinet certainly cannot agree on one. They would expose the position that they have no negotiating position.

Why are we discussing the release of papers? Let us look at the substantive issue. We are six months away from having to have on the table a final deal, which will then have to go through the EU27 and, indeed, through this place, if we are to have a meaningful vote. There are only two more formal EU summits left until this process has to conclude. The Government triggered article 50 with no idea about which direction they wished to go, and the journey has certainly taken them down many cul-de-sacs and dead ends.

We still do not even have a Cabinet position on this issue. To a certain extent, I can agree with the Minister, who spoke for 20 minutes and did not mention the Government’s position on the customs arrangement at all. I can appreciate slightly that he would not want what the Cabinet were saying to each other in private to be released, but all we have to do is pick up a copy of The Daily Telegraph or, indeed, run close enough—if we can run slowly enough—to the Foreign Secretary and listen to what he is saying to journalists as he briefs them behind the Prime Minister’s back. This is a Government and a Cabinet in complete and utter chaos.

We have the unedifying spectacle of the Prime Minister trying to push her favoured customs partnership model to the Cabinet, but the Cabinet cannot agree on it. We then have the Brexiteers in the Cabinet saying that they would rather have this maximum facilitation—we are back to facilitation again, whatever that would mean in a customs context—and the Foreign Secretary calling the Prime Minister’s goals “crazy”. The Prime Minister is too weak to sack or gag the Foreign Secretary—the worst Foreign Secretary that this country has ever had bestowed on it.

Amid all that, the EU negotiators had, in their words, subjected to “systematic and forensic annihilation” both proposals on which the Cabinet cannot even agree.

We have a situation in which, to all intents and purposes, the Prime Minister could persuade the Cabinet to back her customs partnership or, indeed, fold to maximum facilitation, but the EU is saying, “Well, we’re not going to agree to it in the first place,” so all that effort was in vain.

It is really important for the public to see the evidence, the economic indicators, the discussion and the trajectory of the Government for the simple reason that this will
cost jobs and economic growth. Even the Brexit Secretary’s special adviser has said that it will cost the country £25 billion a year to 2030. Indeed, the Treasury itself has said that it could cost up to £55 billion a year by 2033 if we follow World Trade Organisation rules. That is why we need this information in the public domain and why I have been championing a people’s vote on the final deal. It does not matter whether someone voted remain and was a strong remainder, or voted leave and was a strong leaver, because, if we have the evidence in front of us, it would be democratically right for the public to be shown that evidence, so that they can compare it with what we have now and, in the light of that evidence in front of them, we can ask them whether they wish to go down the route that this chaotic Government are trying to negotiate.

The reason why the Government are not putting these papers out has nothing to do with confidentiality of Cabinet discussions. It is because they have nothing to put out, because, first, they cannot agree and, secondly, even if they could agree, it is not in the best interests of this country. As we have always seen with this Conservative Government, they put party and ambition for No.10 first and the country second.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): The Minister for the Cabinet Office put very well the argument about why we need to keep Cabinet confidentiality. It is an essential part of what the Government of the UK should be doing whenever they are negotiating a treaty or any international matters of substance. Quite frankly, it is an absurd idea that this House should be making them look over their shoulder at every single step and unsure about how to proceed.

This Humble Address procedure is archaic and it is being abused here. It is actually quite a childish approach. Before its recent incarnation, it had not been used since the middle of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, there was absolutely no way that Parliament would seek to get the reasons, the tactics and the assessments of our military commanders at Waterloo or Trafalgar. It is quite absurd that this Parliament now should be trying to undermine the Government’s negotiating position.

Our constituents depend on our Government being able to negotiate well on our behalf. They rely on our Government, and confidentiality in these discussions is needed to allow the Government and civil servants the space to make arguments without fear or favour. That would certainly be at risk if this process continues to be abused.

The terms of the motion do not even stand up. I would like your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether the motion in these terms is in fact valid. As I understand it, this type of Humble Address is designed for the Privy Council, or for a Secretary of State and departmental documents; it is not designed for the Cabinet.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Let me just reassure the hon. Gentleman that the motion would not be on the Order Paper if it was either out of order or invalid.

Mr Fysh: Obviously, I accept that position, but may I just say that that is not what it says in Erskine May? [Hon. Members: “Oh!”] I am just reflecting—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not questioning the judgment of the Chair.

Mr Fysh: Indeed I am not. I would never do that. What I am saying is that there is a provision in Erskine May for Parliament to seek an order of the House to release certain documents. I accept that this may be a grey area— an evolving area— of parliamentary procedure. None the less, I genuinely think that it goes to the heart of what the Opposition are trying to do. They are simply trying to undermine the Government’s position and the national interest of our country. That is truly unacceptable and they should withdraw their motion.

4.54 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I have to say to the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) that it was never a good idea to attack Labour’s former Chief Whip.

As a remainer, but also a democrat, my view following the referendum was that we had to respect the will of the people. That meant supporting the Government to trigger article 50, allowing the process of negotiations to begin as soon as possible and offering support to the Government on Brexit if they were acting in the national interest. Any Government post referendum would have had to begin the negotiating process to leave the EU quickly, and any Government would not have found those negotiations easy. However, what we have seen so far from this Government is a shambles that has made this country a laughing stock and damaged business and public confidence in our future.

As hon. Members have said, the specific issue that is the subject of today’s debate highlights the daily farce that we now experience. The Prime Minister has been unable to persuade her own Cabinet to support her preferred customs model and the Brexiteers have united around their own alternative. She sought to resolve this by setting up Cabinet working parties to assess the veracity of each option. Presumably, our future customs arrangements will be decided by a kind of “Dragons’ Den”.

When the Foreign Secretary briefs a newspaper that the Prime Minister’s preferred model is “crazy”, he is not sacked. Instead, the Health Secretary is sent on the airwaves to tell the Foreign Secretary, via the media, to shut up. The Prime Minister claims that stability in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement must be protected by ensuring that there is no hard border. Her allies are then sent out to threaten a border poll if the Cabinet does not support her preferred option— so much for the Conservative and Unionist party. Now we hear that the Government intend to produce a Brexit White Paper, setting out their position on the key issues.

Surely, other than in this incompetent Government, this White Paper should have been published at the beginning of the process, not halfway through.

The truth is that, with the referendum commitment, none of this is about the national interest. It is about party management within the Conservative party. The Prime Minister is permanently conflicted between keeping the Brexiteers happy and saving her job, and acting in...
the national interest on the customs union and the single market to ensure that she does not lose a fragile parliamentary majority. I accept that many Brexiteers believe that they are acting in the country’s interests, but some judge every decision through the prism of their political ambitions to lead a party with a ferociously anti-European membership.

The decisions that we are taking now are probably the most important in peacetime. They are far too important to be left to a Government paralysed by weakness, division and personal ambition. That is why Parliament must now fill the vacuum being left, step up to the plate and build a coalition around the national interest. This means adopting negotiating positions that will do the least damage to United Kingdom businesses’ trade with the European Union, being part of a comprehensive customs union and doing nothing that will undermine stability in Northern Ireland. Of course, ultimately, the decisions of the Commons must prevail, but it is right that the House of Lords fulfils its scrutiny role. It is frankly laughable to hear right-wing Conservatives say that they are opposed to modernisation now calling for the Lords to do what they are told or run the risk of abolition. They simply do not have any sense of irony.

We face the biggest peacetime challenge, other than post war, in our history. More than ever we need politicians who can provide the leadership that this country needs. The Government have failed, so Parliament must now step up to the plate. It is true that the majority voted to leave the European Union, but this did not give any of us a mandate to allow ideological extremism to consign this country to decades of slow growth, wasted potential and permanent instability.

4.58 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Surely the key question that we should be asking ourselves is whether, if Parliament were to pass this motion and the information were to be released, it would undermine our negotiating position. I would argue that that is most certainly the case. Of course it is the aim and objective of those who want to remain in the single market or a customs union to reject an agreement, but there are also practical reasons, and political judgments have to be made.

What do we know already? We know that the Government are intent on delivering the Brexit that was determined by the referendum. We know that they will bring back control of our money, borders and laws to this House, rather than their being based in Brussels. In doing that, they intend to ensure that trade between ourselves and the EU is as frictionless as possible, that we avoid a hard border in Ireland, and that we establish an independent trade policy.

What do we know about the facts and figures? We know that in 2016 we had a trade deficit with the EU of £71 billion. In that same year, the UK had a trade surplus with the rest of the world of £34 billion. The European Commission has predicted that 90% of world economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years will come from outside the European Union, so surely our focus should be on countries outside the EU.

Wera Hobhouse: Can the hon. Gentleman specify which countries he has in mind when he talks about these wonderful free trade arrangements that we are going to have?

Martin Vickers: For the hon. Gentleman even to suggest that the fishing industry has in some way benefited from our membership of the European Union is simply laughable. I would gladly invite him to my constituency so that he can meet the people who were involved in the fishing industry. Very few of them are involved in it now because of the European Union.

To go back to the facts and figures that I quoted, it is noteworthy that only this week Liam Halligan asked in The Sunday Telegraph why, if the customs union is so vital to Britain, we are running a massive trade deficit inside it but a large surplus with nations outside it. We need to ensure that we are able to set our own trade policies so that we can trade freely with the expanding economies in the world, and the reality is that those economies are not in the European Union. We have to widen our horizons. The success of Britain has always been our free trade with the world as a whole.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Vickers: No. I have given way twice already and I recognise that time is running out.

As I said, the Government have made clear their intentions and how they intend to improve things. They have been very clear that we will leave the customs union in March 2019. Any attempt to thwart that is an attack on the democratic process and the clearly defined will of the British people. Some 70% of people in my constituency voted for leave. They did not vote for half-leave; which is what Opposition Members who want to remain in the single market or a customs union are trying to achieve. They wanted to leave full stop—absolutely and completely.

There are many mechanisms that can be used at the border. We can use pre-notification schemes, such as that of the World Customs Organisation and the EU’s authorised economic operator scheme. Those mechanisms are operating and have been tested. The border between Switzerland and the EU is crossed by many more people...
and vehicles than the Irish border. It is not beyond the wit of this Government and this Parliament to come up with a solution. I am confident that a solution can be found. We voted to leave, not to half leave. The motion would undermine our negotiating position and should be rejected out of hand.

5.5 pm  

**Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op):** It is nearly two years since the Brexit referendum, and there are just 316 days to go until the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. I support the Opposition’s motion because the in-fighting and indecision in government is holding back the Brexit negotiations and delaying crucial votes in Parliament. Labour recognises that the only way to ensure that we have the frictionless trade necessary to support our vital manufacturing industries is to secure a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union. A customs union not only is the best way to prevent a hard border in Northern Ireland, but has wide support from the business community and trade unions.

Some 247,000 EU citizens live in the west midlands region, and there are 87,000 across the Greater Birmingham area. The west midlands’ 10 universities attract more than 8,000 EU students each year and employ approximately 5,000 academics who are EU citizens. My constituency is home to both the University of Birmingham and Newman University, and I am proud that many of the students and academics from those great institutions choose to make their home in Edgbaston. However, I wish to focus my comments on business and specifically manufacturing, which are why the release of these papers is key.

The Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands said in an article this week that hard-line Brexiteers risk causing the “unintended destruction” of thousands of jobs in the region’s automotive industry—he was right. The automotive industry employs more than 50,000 people across the region in firms such as Jaguar Land Rover, Aston Martin, BMW and London Taxi Company. There are also numerous component companies such as GKN based in Birmingham. Those companies’ fortunes are inextricably linked to the ability to move goods and parts between the UK and Europe.

The port of Dover handles £122 billion of the UK’s trade in goods in 2.6 million freight vehicles, and 99% of that freight traffic comes from the EU. The port has estimated that, given the lack of physical space, even a two-minute delay to check each vehicle would lead to 17-mile queues on either side of the channel. That is exactly the type of delay that would adversely affect companies in the west midlands, as their products often require several trips across the channel before completion.

Nearly 40% of JLR’s global suppliers are based in Europe. Those suppliers are crucial to the success of JLR, and without their timely and competitively priced parts, production at JLR and all other manufacturers would simply grind to a halt. With seatbelts supplied by Bosch and made in Germany, plastic sealing made in the Czech Republic, wheels from Germany and brake hoses from Spain, it is quite clear that the production of a modern British car relies on an interconnected web of European automotive suppliers. The west midlands has one of the highest shares of goods imports coming from the EU, and 47% of goods exports from the west midlands go to the EU. The region’s higher-than-average reliance on the manufacturing sector, and automotive manufacturing in particular, makes it even more reliant on trade than other areas.

The message from businesses in the west midlands is clear: we need a deal, and we need a deal that works for business. Labour is clear that that deal is a customs union. The west midlands already has higher unemployment and a higher proportion of people with low or no qualifications than the UK average. My constituents simply cannot afford any more barriers to be put in their way when they are seeking employment, and by not entering a customs union, the Government are doing just that. Members of the Cabinet need to put aside their petty differences and rigid ideologies, overcome their stubbornness, and focus on what matters, which is the jobs of people in the west midlands and across the country.

5.9 pm  

**Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con):** When the UK voted to leave the EU, the UK voted to rejoin the rest of the world. The great Brexit prize will be our regaining our ability to strike new free trade deals across the globe, leading the world as a free trading nation, championing trade liberalisation, and directly taking on those who advocate protectionism. If we were to take the advice of some of our colleagues in the Lords or even right here in the Commons, we would find ourselves a vassal state, shackled to the rules of the customs union and unable to set our own trade policy, while not only being absent from the table, but out of the room when decisions affecting us are taken, which is the very worst of all worlds.

The Prime Minister has been clear that we are leaving the customs union, but what has been astonishing is the hokey-cokey approach to the customs union adopted by Labour Members: in and out, in and out, shake the shadow Cabinet all about. They are now taking a position that means that the UK will not be able to set its own independent trade policy. Labour peers have tried to frustrate the Brexit process, while Labour would keep us following EU rules with no say. Some Labour MPs want to keep us in the single market permanently.

**Jeremy Quin:** Like my hon. Friend, I have been very interested in the shenanigans within the Labour party. I know that Labour Members are all fair and decent-minded people, and I therefore trust that they will be releasing all the shadow Cabinet papers regarding their deliberations on this issue. Does he agree?

**Ross Thomson:** I wholeheartedly agree. If Labour Members think it is good enough for the Government to do this, it is certainly good enough for the shadow Cabinet.

Labour still refuses to commit to ending free movement. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) raised the issue of the border with Ireland in relation to “max fac”. Let us be clear that this approach relies on electronic customs clearing, which is standard practice across the EU, following World Customs Organisation principles.

I draw Members’ attention to the EU’s own customs expert, Lars Karlsson, who in evidence to the Brexit Committee said that using new technology is not in
itself new. GPS technology, which most motorists already carry in their cars, has been available for years. Such technology is already in use for the mass tracking of vehicles, and it is used by the likes of Network Rail, and by Uber for taxis. Furthermore, we could extend the authorised economic operator or trusted trader schemes for reputable companies, such as Guinness, which already, despite the different excise duties, has many lorries crossing the Irish border that do not need ever to be stopped. Beyond the scaremongering, an Irish border without any infrastructure is absolutely possible, using both new and existing technology.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, thank you.

To return to the Brexit prize of being able to set our own trade policy, it was on 9 March 1776 that a great Scot, Adam Smith, published “The Wealth of Nations”, in which he outlined a vision of how trade produced prosperity and opportunity. Post Brexit, we can revitalise that vision. After we leave the EU, we can become a global leader in free trade, using trade to spread prosperity and political stability. I was pleased to welcome the Secretary of State for International Trade to my constituency last week, where he heard about the opportunities for fish processing and for oil and gas in trade across the world to increase exports and promote prosperity not just at home, but abroad.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): To cut through all this debate about whether we should stay in the customs union, I seem to remember that our manifesto was quite clear that we were leaving the EU, the single market and the customs union, and that we were going to negotiate a free trade agreement. Surely the whole party and the whole House can unite around that. That is why we are having the implementation Bill and ensuring that all these existing laws are in our law. What could be more simple than a free trade deal? Let us stick to it.

Ross Thomson: I could not agree more with my colleague. Not only was that in our manifesto, but I believe it was in those of other parties so that we would enact the wishes of the British people. I am not surprised that the only party not listening to those wishes is the SNP, because it puts its fingers in its ears to the results of all and any referendums.

I am delighted that the new Department for International trade has undertaken 167 visits overseas. It is clear from the trips that Ministers have taken that a British label on goods is regarded as a sign of quality, as it is for services, and the demand for British is huge. International demand for British goods is growing, and Aberdeen, which I represent—

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ross Thomson: No, thank you.

Aberdeen is well placed to take advantage of this, given that 90% of manufacturing in the city I represent currently gets exported, mainly in oil and gas, and in environmental engineering.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson)—should see it as their job to act simply as a rubber stamp for the Prime Minister of the day, whichever side of the House we sit on. That is why it is absolutely essential that this House is provided with the papers of the House we sit on. That is why it is absolutely essential that the House is provided with the papers and the evidence on which Ministers are making decisions.

Lady Hermon: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity last night to hear the interview on “Newsnight” with the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who talked about the New IRA dissidents—a chilling title—who are willing to exploit Brexit. Will he and his colleagues call on the Government to put redacted copies, so that no confidential names are mentioned, of the Chief Constable’s security briefings to Ministers in the House of Commons Library?
Chuka Umunna: I absolutely support what the hon. Lady calls for. That is very much the reason why I am an advocate of our continued participation not only in the customs union but in the European economic area. Not only would leaving the customs union and the EEA be a bad decision for our economy, with the customs union relating principally to manufactured goods and the EEA being vital for our services, which account for 80% of our economy, but the Irish Government and many others are absolutely clear that to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland we need to continue to participate in both the customs union and the EEA. We know that because others have told us. We know it economically, because our trade unions and our businesses have argued for it. We therefore deserve to see the evidence on which Ministers have decided to take a different view.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not possible to separate the economic issues that relate to manufacturing and to services? Manufacturing needs services and services need manufacturing as part of their work programme, so surely we need to recognise the integrated importance of manufacturing and services to the British economy.

Chuka Umunna: That is absolutely right, and of course it is why I support the motion. However, I would also like to see the Government’s papers that led them to decide that we should not take up the offer that the EU is making to us of continuing to participate in the EEA, in addition to the papers on the customs partnerships.

I want to deal with some points that the Minister for the Cabinet Office made. First, we have been told that we cannot see any of these papers for a number of reasons, but I say to the Minister that this is a Government without a majority, containing members of the Cabinet who said that we should leave the European Union to reassess parliamentary sovereignty. Withholding evidence like this at every step of the way flies in the face of that argument. Secondly, we are told that asking for all this will undermine the Prime Minister. Every single European diplomat, Foreign Minister and Head of Government we speak to will tell us what is doing more to undermine the Government than anything else: dishunesty in the Cabinet and people such as the Foreign Secretary coming out and calling their Prime Minister’s proposals “crazy”. That is what undermines the Government.

I want to make a final observation, because we have talked about the 2016 referendum. This is the way I see it. Yes, the country made a decision to invoke article 50 and start this process, and in some ways, it was like buying a house. We put an offer in to purchase the house. When someone is buying a house, do they immediately go from putting in their offer to paying their deposit, paying the money and completing the purchase? No, they do not—they carry out a survey to check whether the foundations of that house are sound. If the survey comes back and tells them that the foundations are unsound and the house is going to collapse, they do not go ahead and make their purchase.

That is why I believe that 650 people in this House of Commons should not be making a decision of this gravity for 65 million people. They should get a say on the Brexit deal that comes back to us in the autumn, but if Government Members are determined to deny them that, they should at least show them the survey before they insist on carrying out the purchase. Make no mistake—I say this to Members who are parroting Whips’ lines and doing the usual tribal thing—you will not be forgiven. Members of this House will not be forgiven by future generations if they simply dance to the tune of their Whips. We should think very carefully about what we are doing, because we will never be forgiven if we make the wrong decision.

5.22 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Today’s motion shows definitively that the Opposition are unfit to be a party of Government. It is quite simply the height of irresponsibility for the Labour party to demand that the Government should publish confidential Cabinet papers about our future customs arrangements at a time of such crucial negotiations. That would inevitably expose every detail to our negotiating partners in Europe and destroy every inch of leverage that we have with them. No Government could assent to that, and no Opposition worthy of being a Government should ask for it.

Sir Edward Leigh: I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the historical analogy from the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), but it was entirely false, because the Labour party then was not trying to get Cabinet papers revealed—that would have been ridiculous, either in wartime or now. What it was trying to do was bring down the Prime Minister. That suggests that this motion and this debate are not about the truth; they are about trying to bring down the Prime Minister.

Mr Clarke: I agree, and I would draw another historical analogy: it is 60 years ago this year that Nye Bevan issued his famous warning to the Labour party not to send a British Foreign Secretary into the negotiating chamber naked, and that is precisely what this motion would do. It runs directly contrary to our national interest, and the whole country will see how profoundly misguided it is. There is no way of overstating this: every Member who votes for this motion—every one—will be damaging the principles of Cabinet government in the hope of inflicting partisan advantage. It is unforgivable. Coming a week after north-east Labour MPs called for a second referendum—or, as they now euphemistically call it, a people’s vote, as if a referendum were not exactly that—this shows the Opposition in the worst possible light.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Given that documents the Government have produced show a devastating impact of at least 11% on the north-east economy, why does the hon. Gentleman continue to lash himself to the mast of this devastating Tory Brexit, which will harm his constituents and mine?

Mr Clarke: This is the same “Project Fear” prognosis that we heard in 2016, which has been comprehensively rubbishd and which nearly 70% of the hon. Lady’s own constituents rejected—and she continues to lecture me about listening to my constituents and acting in their interests. The Labour party is unreconciled to Brexit, unwilling to deliver it and unfit to run our country, but the Leader of the Opposition should be thanked for giving us
another opportunity to point out the many reasons why Labour’s policy on the customs union and Brexit is so absurd. First, depending on who we ask and on which day, Labour has committed to staying in “a” or “the” customs union, but at the same time says it wants the UK to have a say over future trade deals and arrangements. The whole point is that if we are in the customs union but out of the EU, the UK will have no formal role or veto in trade negotiations, and the EU will have no incentive, let alone legal obligation, to negotiate deals that are in the UK’s interests.

Secondly, Labour’s U-turn towards stay in “a” or “the” customs union clearly breaks a manifesto commitment on which its Members all stood. That manifesto said:

“Labour will set out our priorities in an International Trade White Paper...on the future of Britain’s trade policy”.

We now discover that that White Paper would simply read: “Priority No. 1: give trade policy back to Brussels”.

Thirdly, the EU’s customs tariffs hit the poorest in this country the hardest. The highest EU tariffs are concentrated on food, clothing and footwear, which account for 37% of total tariff revenue, so the poorest British consumers are paying to prop up European industries.

Fourthly, the customs union not only hurts the poorest in our own country; it also supresses the economic growth of the developing world, because EU trade policy encourages cheap imports of raw materials from developing countries, such as coffee, but heavily taxes imports of processed versions of the same good. This means that poorer countries are stuck in a relationship of dependency, whereby there is no incentive to invest in processing technologies, which could lift them from their status as agrarian economies.

Finally, the House should be reminded that during negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, about which Opposition Members made so much fuss in 2015 and 2016, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) gave an impassioned speech to the House in which he concluded that, in negotiating TTIP, we were “engaging in a race to the bottom”.—[Official Report, 15 January 2015; Vol. 590, c. 1108.]

As Leader of the Opposition, he is now proposing a policy that would completely abrogate the UK’s ability to veto such arrangements in the future, let alone influence their negotiation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is utterly two-faced that Labour MPs in this House are asking our Government to publish all their negotiating positions but that their friends in the European Parliament are not asking the European Commission to publish theirs?

Mr Clarke: I cannot improve on that point, other than to say that it goes to the heart of the matter, which is that this is not about our national interest; it is about the Labour party’s domestic political interest. It is shameful and wrong.

The Labour Party, in supporting a customs union, has gone back on the principles of a lifetime, broken a manifesto pledge and sided with corporations over consumers. It would punish the poorest in this country and abroad and subject the UK, one of the largest economies in the world, to a Turkey-style relationship of dependency in which the EU has complete control over our trade and customs. It is desperate for any opportunity to bring down the Government and has chosen to put power before principles and party before country. Millions of its own voters will be watching very closely indeed.

5.28 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on the future of our trade in goods and often the services associated with them—a matter on which I spoke in our recent debate in the House.

The Government have shown that they are not capable of reaching a decision in the national interest. What we are set to receive in the next few weeks will be a fudge between the Prime Minister’s warring Cabinet factions. It is time to trust Parliament to address these complex matters and to give it all the information it needs. I therefore support the motion.

We hear from those who criticise the EU that we need to escape its bureaucracy and red tape, but the irony of the Government’s two customs proposals is that they would lead to more barriers and more delays than we currently experience with the customs union. Let me set out some key points.

First, there is the customs partnership, which could undermine the tariff systems of both the UK and the EU. It would require us to track the movement of every good imported to the UK for which the UK and EU did not have identical tariffs and quotas. That surveillance could multiply exponentially over time. Sussex University’s UK Trade Policy Observatory has said that it is very hard to see how it could work, and even the Government’s own HMRC is reported to believe that the proposal is unviable. Secondly, there is the “max fac” option. To put it simply, that would eventually require some infrastructure on the Irish border, which the Government themselves ruled out in the joint report in December and which the EU would be unwilling to revisit.

Perhaps the worst aspect of this, however, is that even if both the Government’s proposals worked perfectly, neither could be in place by the time we needed them. After the Government had finally made a decision, it would reportedly take up to three to five years for the systems to be up and running. That is likely to take us between one and three years past the end of our transition period. So the choice is very simple, but it is a choice that the Prime Minister is refusing to make. Either we stay in the customs union, or we impose unnecessary barriers and costs on British businesses and infrastructure at the Irish border.

Dr Whitford: It is not just a question of infrastructure at the Irish border as if there were just one checkpoint. There are more than 270 crossings. During the troubles many of them were blocked by boulders, and people had to make detours of 20 or 30 miles. We cannot send the people who live near the border in Northern Ireland back to that situation.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Indeed, I believe that there are more crossings on that border than in all the other EU countries put together. That, I think, is a reality check on what is actually possible.
The practicalities of what those barriers and costs will mean can be assessed through two real-world examples—aircraft or used to support in-service fleets. The just-in-time flow back and forth daily across the EU’s borders to and from the UK, before being integrated into new aircraft or used to support in-service fleets. The just-in-time demands of the aerospace industry require quick and predictable border processes so that parts can reach their destination and repairs can be done in hours. Maintaining that speed for aerospace goods post Brexit is vital.

As for medicines, the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, the industry body for consumer medicines that we all know and use such as Beechams and Calpol, has said that a customs union is crucial to “minimise the additional time and administrative burden” at the border. Ingredients for products that we use daily can cross the UK border up to four times during the manufacturing process.

We know that this debate is taking place in the absence of any credible evidence to suggest that leaving the customs union would be of net benefit to the UK. It is time to recognise that it is not an academic debate that will have no consequences, but a serious debate whose consequences could cost us billions and have an impact on jobs and prosperity for decades to come.

5.34 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): My constituents would be aghast at the behaviour of the Labour party. I represent parts of the Wigan and Bolton boroughs, and those who live there would hardly believe that Labour Members are yet again trying to undermine the British people and give every advantage to the Brussels bureaucrats. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to reject subversive Labour and deliver an honest Brexit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We are now in the hands of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). Let us try to keep the hand of order and debate on track.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): My goodness! That has never happened before.

5.35 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Sometimes I agree with the right hon. Lady but on this occasion I do not. The paper I am holding up now is the kind of ludicrous document we have before us: the “Future customs arrangements” paper. It is the only thing written by this Government on the customs union, and it contains just five flimsy paragraphs on the Prime Minister’s supposedly preferred option. That is not acceptable. Members of this House have a right to scrutinise the Government’s proposals, and this document is for the moment all we have to go on.

At the crux of this debate is the fact that membership of the customs union is crucial for two reasons. It is crucial because it is the only way to protect jobs and investment in my region of the west midlands and across the country. The EU is the UK’s biggest export market and our manufacturers, such as those in the automotive sector like Jaguar Land Rover and in the aerospace sector, rely on a frictionless border with that market. Any delays on the border, any extra cost and any added bureaucracy will put jobs and investment at risk.

Sir Edward Leigh: Has the hon. Lady no higher ambition than to be like Turkey?

Emma Reynolds: Turkey’s arrangement with the EU was agreed when Turkey was on the path to membership; that is not the arrangement the Labour party is seeking with the EU, and to suggest otherwise is, frankly, ludicrous. We are proposing that we remain in the customs union and have a say over trade agreements done with the rest of the world. That is a more responsible policy than the hard Brexit that Conservative Members are preaching.

The other crucial issue in this debate is the border on the island of Ireland. The Prime Minister has made two contradictory promises: she has promised that there will continue to be an invisible border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, but she has also promised that we will leave the customs union. Anybody who has rationally considered this in the round will come to the same conclusion as I have: it is clearly not possible to do both of those things. That is why both the models being considered by the Government have been rejected by the EU. The Prime Minister can have as many meetings of the Cabinet and the Cabinet Select Committee and with Tory backbenchers as she likes, but that does not change the fact that the EU opposes both of these models and neither of them is tried and tested. If she spent a little less time negotiating with her party and a little more time negotiating with our EU partners, she might have made more progress in the negotiations to date.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will not.

Let us briefly consider the two models. Even some Conservative Members seem to be suggesting that the Prime Minister’s preferred option of the customs partnership is illegal, “crazy” and “cretinous”, so she does not even seem to have the backing of her own Members of Parliament. The EU has called it “magical thinking”, and from looking at the detail of the proposal...
it would appear that we would have to track every import into the UK—the EU tariffs would be different from those with the rest of the world—and collect the relevant tariffs, trusting those who say that the final destination is the EU. If it was not for the EU but stayed in the UK, we would not need to track it. That does not sound like a workable proposal to me. It would be a bureaucratic nightmare.

Then we come to the “max fac” option. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson)—it would be nice if he were listening—spoke enthusiastically about Dr Lars Karlsson’s proposals. When the Exiting the European Union Committee took evidence from Dr Karlsson, he admitted that some form of infrastructure—whether CCTV or automatic number plate recognition—would be required on the border. It has already been said that that would go against what has been agreed if we are to retain an invisible border on the island of Ireland.

My last point is that geography matters in trade, and I will leave the House with this point:

“We export more to Ireland than we do to China, almost twice as much to Belgium as we do to India, and nearly three times as much to Sweden as we do to Brazil. It is not realistic to think we could just replace European trade with these new markets.”

Those were the words of the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, in April 2016.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. A great many people still wish to speak, and we have limited time, so after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to three minutes. I call Andrew Bowie.

5.41 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am in your debt.

This is the second time in as many weeks that we in this House have debated as part of an Opposition day debate the customs arrangements after the UK has left the European Union. That is only right and proper, as this is one of the major decisions facing the country today. The arguments for all the options have been rehearsed at length in this place, and it is only right that the information and knowledge that we all need if we were half empty. They are negative and downcast. They are too busy looking back in anger, rather than looking forward with optimism. I am convinced that this Government will succeed in the negotiations. They will forward with optimism. I am convinced that this Government will succeed in the negotiations. They will succeed in building a country that is fit for the future, a country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous country that we can all be proud of.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab): The Minister for Cabinet Office gave all sorts of procedural reasons for why these papers should not be released. He spoke a lot about the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, but he did not mention the people who matter in all this: the British workers who will lose jobs if we crash out of the EU.

Would it take us closer to a resolution of this vital issue? Sadly, I think not. This is not a helpful motion. It is a disruptive and petty motion aimed at creating a distraction from the divisions and flip-flopping of the Opposition on this and practically every other issue, and it shows naivety at the top of the Labour party.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about the debate that takes place within his own party, but surely that is done on the basis of information and knowledge rather than ignorance. Would not the disclosure of these documents provide the information and knowledge that we all need if we are to debate what is in front of us?

Andrew Bowie: I am terribly sorry; I do respect the hon. Gentleman, but I heartily disagree with him on this point. Releasing these documents would set a very dangerous precedent for how Cabinet Government and indeed the government of this country would proceed in the future.

I was heartened by the response of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (James Cartlidge) about Scottish Government papers. He clearly agrees with us on the importance of confidentiality when it comes to Government papers. However, when my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) raised the image of Scottish Cabinet meetings, I could not shake the memory of Margaret Thatcher and her vegetables on “Spitting Image” a few years ago.

I simply do not understand the negativity shown by Opposition Members regarding our country’s future. They are constantly looking at the glass as though it were half empty. They are negative and downcast. They are too busy looking back in anger, rather than looking forward with optimism. I am convinced that this Government will succeed in the negotiations. They will succeed in building a country that is fit for the future, a country that we can all be proud of: a free, prosperous and open country humming with commerce and creativity and trading with countries all across the world. Unlike the party opposite, I actually want our Government to succeed in the negotiations. If we voted for the motion here today, we would be undermining their ability to do that. That is why I support the Government, and that is why I will be voting against the motion this evening.

5.44 pm

Stephen Doughty: The Minister for Cabinet Office gave all sorts of procedural reasons for why these papers should not be released. He spoke a lot about the relationship between Parliament and the Executive, but he did not mention the people who matter in all this: the British public, our businesses and the trade unions that represent workers who will lose jobs if we crash out of the EU with the reckless hard Brexit that the Government are currently pursuing.

It is no wonder that the Government do not want to release such papers and information because, after weeks of trying to prevent papers from being released, we saw Treasury documents that made it clear that, under all the options being pursued by the Government, we will see job losses, a loss of revenue, a lowering of growth...
and an increase in public sector borrowing—all the kinds of things that will have an impact on communities up and down the country. Indeed, documents about nuclear safeguards were released today, and the Government marked each one as red. This information should be in the public domain for the public and our businesses to see.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point. Does he accept that we are already seeing the loss of many hundreds of jobs, particularly in our manufacturing sector and particularly in the west midlands, by virtue of these policies and the uncertainty surrounding them?

**Stephen Doughty**: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point. I have the same worries about businesses in Wales, in south Wales and in my constituency.

This is our biggest decision since the second world war, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) pointed out, we have a total shambles from the Government. Rows are largely being conducted in public, but without the public knowing what the Government know about the real impacts on businesses and on Northern Ireland and the huge inconsistencies in what is being put forward, let alone the risks to our place in the world.

We have heard about the risks of leaving the customs union. We have heard about the £466 billion-worth of current goods trade with the EU. The Brexit Secretary’s special adviser said that there would be a cost of £25 billion a year up until 2030. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has pointed out the issues with customs checks on imported goods. The Home Affairs Committee revealed the lack of preparation at the Home Office, including the lack of recruitment of people to carry out customs checks, and the cost of all that. We have not even left yet, but the Home Office has already had to request up to half a billion pounds that could have been spent on policing. Instead, it is going on preparing for a hard Brexit. We have also heard about the impact on the Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland border, including some excellent points, as ever, from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), but the Northern Ireland Secretary has not even been to Brussels to discuss the issues and the Brexit Secretary went over to Northern Ireland only relatively recently.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) pointed out the risk to jobs, and we repeatedly hear that directly from businesses. Many businesses have come to see me in private to tell me how disastrous the Government’s approach is. The truth is that the Government know that, but they are just not willing to admit it in public. Many businesses are activating major Brexit contingency plans. We have heard about the automotive sector, but the National Farmers Union has also described the scenario as disastrous. The pharmaceutical industry has warned about the impacts, and the Chemical Industries Association has made it clear that the best thing for us is to retain our membership of the single market and the customs union.

I have spoken extensively with the UK Chamber of Shipping about the impact on Welsh ports, including in my constituency, and it warns that the UK is facing an absolutely catastrophe. The same goes for steel, manufacturing, high-tech industries and, of course, the creative industries. We should not forget about the ability of our musicians and creative people to travel across Europe, making incredible products and selling them to the world.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, we cannot fundamentally divorce all that from the arguments about the single market. I favour our staying in the EEA and in the customs union, and the Social Democratic and Labour party—Labour’s partner in Northern Ireland—has said the same. At the moment, however, the Government are riven in two in public and in private. They are unprepared, irresponsible and incompetent, and, what is worse, they know it.

Mr Speaker: I call Paul Masterton—[Interruption.]

Where is the fella? I call Vicky Ford.

5.49 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Cheilmsford) (Con): Our negotiations with Europe are the most complex for a generation. I support transparency, scrutiny and democratic decision making, but it is utterly ludicrous to expect one side at the negotiating table to have a higher level of disclosure on its negotiating position than is expected of those on the other side—the EU. That is why I will not be supporting the motion tonight. It ties our hands.

It is utterly normal in international negotiations for parties to consider more than one option. When the EU wanted to reform the common agricultural policy, there were four options; when it published its recent paper on the future of Europe, there were five options.

We should not somehow blame the Government for being slow in deciding their future option. The Government laid out their options last August, and I was in Ireland discussing it with businesses on both sides of the border within a fortnight, but it was only last Sunday that the Irish Foreign Minister suggested he is open to having more exploratory talks.

I do not blame the Irish for taking time. I grew up on the border in Northern Ireland. I was born and raised in Omagh, where 29 people lost their lives after the Good Friday agreement. I will not jeopardise the Good Friday agreement; I will not jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland; and I will not jeopardise the Union that holds our country united.

We have to find a solution that works. Neither of the two solutions is perfect.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I take at face value the hon. Lady’s comments about her support for the Good Friday agreement, but what is her response to the people in Northern Ireland, including the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who disagree with her, who feel that Brexit risks a hard border and who feel that that would damage peace?

**Vicky Ford**: We have to find a solution that meets the Prime Minister’s criterion of no hard border in Northern Ireland, which is why I want to continue the discussions on the partnership agreement. The partnership agreement is not perfect, and it has never been done before, but we should let the Government continue negotiating and not close down options.
The “max fac” solution is not perfect, either. Some 145,000 businesses that trade with Europe would have to start doing customs declarations for the first time, and it relies on the small business exemption on the border in Ireland, which puts our relationship with Ireland into permanent potential conflict because Ireland would end up having to be the policeman of our door with Europe.

We need to continue looking, but we also need to remember that resolving customs is only part of this discussion. It does not even solve the goods issue. We still need to deal with rules of origin. Incidentally, will the Minister please make sure we look at pan-Euro-Mediterranean cumulation of origin as a sensible option?

Andrew Bowie: Does my hon. Friend agree it is the height of hypocrisy for Labour Members of Parliament to come to the House demanding that the Government disclose confidential papers on our negotiations when Labour MEPs refuse to demand the same of the European Commission in Brussels?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree, and that brings me on to my next point because, actually, there has been a huge amount of disclosure on the direction of the negotiations. When I say that customs union is not a full deal, it is because many other areas, such as services, digital and medicines regulation, have to be addressed both for us and for people on the other side of our borders. That was in the Mansion House speech, but, more importantly, it was laid down just last week in a joint document published by the UK and the EU on the discussion topics for the future partnership.

Businesses need clarity—I understand that—and they will probably need a lot more time to implement whatever decisions are reached. I am sure many businesses will need more time for implementation than we previously thought, but let us take the time to get this right and let us let the Government get on with their negotiations and with focusing on finding the end solution.

5.54 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I want to speak in support of the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who led for Labour from the Front Bench and made an excellent contribution. I specifically want to support his comment that there is a majority in this House for a sensible approach. We would not imagine anything less than good, British common sense in the House of Commons, but I cannot understand why the Prime Minister, having called a general election to determine her Brexit, would not listen to the views of those democratically elected to this place. Instead, the Government’s approach is chaotic. The Minister said our motion would affect the quality of policy making—that is a joke, given what we currently face. The lack of British diplomacy at this crucial point for our country is embarrassing, and the Secretary of State’s whole argument makes absolutely no sense given the Foreign Secretary’s conduct.

This motion is designed to reset that balance and make sure the British people can hold the Government properly to account, because Labour’s approach to Brexit is sensible. It reflects how trade actually is today; we produce goods across borders, not within them. We need an approach to customs that provides for the just-in-time logistics that our modern economy has embedded within it.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend mentioned the speech by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), so does she agree that there are likely to be many other Conservative Members saying exactly the same things in private to the Prime Minister, but that unfortunately she is being held hostage by a group of extremists who shout very loudly?

Alison McGovern: The maths in this is pretty clear, and if I were the Prime Minister, I would listen to the majority of people in this House and not to a vocal minority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) made an excellent contribution, describing all the ways in which our manufacturing business needs a sensible customs arrangement that means we can transfer goods across borders quickly. I simply add that for manufacturing towns up and down Britain that is mission critical. We simply can no longer afford to have places that are left behind, where a factory shuts and is never replaced. Those were the dark days of the 1980s, and we must not have that again, not now.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about multinational supply chains and how it is important not to have delays, paperwork or checks in the middle of that operation. Does she agree that this is about not just customs, but common standards and rules? Anyone in this House, on any side, who thinks that this is just about customs and not about the adherence to common standards and rules is kidding themselves.

Alison McGovern: Perhaps it is because I have learnt a great deal from my right hon. Friend that he pre-empted the next paragraph of my contribution. Labour’s approach has been absolutely sensible to date, but we need one small addition to our policy, which is to support membership of the single market. As he said, other things are needed. We need common standards and, specifically, an agreement on rules of origin, which are necessary to make sure that manufacturing business in this country does not have to expend time, money and energy on constantly calculating volume and what percentage within that will agree with the EU on the EU’s rules of origin requirements. That simply cannot happen, which is why we need membership of the single market.

Finally, this country simply has an ageing population, and although that is a great thing, our country will not financially succeed without a sensible immigration policy. So I simply say to those in this House, and wherever else, who think that the answer to all our woes is to end the approach we have had on immigration to date that we cannot cope with our dependency ratio being as it is. We need a sensible approach to immigration going forward and that should be part of our future relationship with the EU. It is not dramatic or complicated; we just need to take, as the Labour Front Benchers have today, a pragmatic, common-sense approach and listen to the British people.
5.59 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). However, people outside the Chamber watching the debate could be forgiven for wondering what month and what year we are in. Being in here, listening to the arguments that we heard during the referendum campaign, is like groundhog day.

The hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) questioned our voters’ ability to make up their minds about the referendum, but I will take no lectures from him. I say to him and to all hon. Members that people in Redditch—my constituents—knew exactly what they were voting for in the referendum and, on that day, 62% of them voted to leave the European Union. It is therefore my job to come here and deliver a sensible Brexit—yes, I use the words “sensible Brexit”—that protects their livelihoods.

We hear the argument rehearsed time and again that a catastrophe—an economic disaster—is about to hit us all. Yet week after week, our economy confounds that. Since we voted to leave the European Union, British businesses and British entrepreneurs are doing what they have always done and what they do best: creating jobs, innovating, and starting new businesses that provide jobs for my constituents and others throughout the country. We have record high employment in this country. Growing foreign direct investment is coming into our country, creating jobs and benefiting all our constituents.

Brexit—yes, I use the words “sensible Brexit”—that therefore my job to come here and deliver a sensible Brexit. It is astonishing to hear accusations that members of our Cabinet do not have the same opinions. Is it any surprise? There are highly respected Conservative Members who have made their views on the EU clear for decades. Our party does not take the approach that those who enter the Cabinet become clones. Discussions go on in Cabinet—that is a healthy way of finding the best method to address the biggest challenge facing our country. I will not vote for the motion and I support the Government’s approach.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Let us make no mistake: the only way to ensure tariff-free and frictionless trade, as well protecting against a hard border on the island of Ireland, is to remain in the customs union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told me in a recent debate that the Canada-United States border was an example of a customs arrangement that the Government may seek to replicate. However, the Irish Prime Minister, having visited that border, said:

“I saw a hard border with physical infrastructure, with customs posts, people in uniforms with arms and dogs.”

That is not what we want for the border in Ireland.

Matt Western: Having visited Detroit and that border between the US and Canada in February, I can confirm that it takes an average of eight minutes to get through, and that it is what a hard border looks like, with X-ray machines and so on. There would be serious friction on such a border.

Mrs Moon: It is good to hear such first-hand experience in the House. Clearly such an option is unacceptable for peace in Ireland and the efficient customs regime that we seek. Donald Tusk has effectively said that if Ireland does not find the UK’s offer on the border acceptable, the EU will not allow negotiations to move on to trade. If we also consider the fact that the Irish Prime Minister has said that the US-Canada border example “is definitely not a solution”, it is clear that the only way forward is to remain in the customs union.

My constituency of Bridgend has the largest Ford engine factory in Europe. The automotive sector is critical to the wellbeing of many families throughout my constituency—on average, around 12,000 families are linked to work with that factory. According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the introduction of tariffs on trade with the EU because of our leaving the customs union would significantly increase costs. A 10% tariff on finished vehicles would cost the industry £4.5 billion, increasing the price of cars imported to the UK from the EU by an average of around £1,500. Tariff costs and custom burdens on such a highly integrated supply chain would undoubtedly disrupt and undermine the competitiveness of UK manufacturing, and that is without the common standards and rules mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

The Government have said that one of their strategic objectives is “ensuring UK-EU trade is as frictionless as possible”. Automotive experts have made it crystal clear that customs barriers and tariffs would be crippling for their industry. As frictionless as possible is just not good enough. It is no secret that the single market and customs union have been vital for the competitiveness of the sector. In the UK, it has made more than £71 billion in turnover and supports more than 800,000 jobs. That is not something that we can toss away lightly.

To protect jobs and to protect the automotive industry, the Government should be actively seeking to avoid any customs tariffs whatsoever. The only way to do that is in the customs union. My constituents deserve to know what future the Government are taking them towards. They have the right to make the ultimate decision, based on the facts—facts that were denied to them at the time of the referendum. Let them have those facts now, and let us know what the Government know about the risks we are taking as a result of their line of taking us out of the customs union.

6.2 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Let us make no mistake: the only way to ensure tariff-free and frictionless trade, as well protecting against a hard border on the island of Ireland, is to remain in the customs union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told me in a recent debate that the Canada-United States border was an example of a customs arrangement that the Government may seek to replicate. However, the Irish Prime Minister, having visited that border, said:

“I saw a hard border with physical infrastructure, with customs posts, people in uniforms with arms and dogs.”

That is not what we want for the border in Ireland.

6.7 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is with some regret that I speak in this debate, given the way in which Opposition Front Benches have yet again chosen to abuse a parliamentary procedure to make a political point. I agree completely with my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who described this as a Mickey Mouse motion. It is such a waste of an Opposition day debate.

The customs arrangements after the UK leaves the EU will have both political and economic impacts. There have been discussions regarding many models—some that will make our borders invisible and others that will revolutionise the world. I appreciate this wave of technological enthusiasm, but it is important to remember that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee reported:

“We have...had no visibility of any technical solutions, anywhere in the world, beyond the aspirational, that would remove the need for physical infrastructure at the border.”
The Prime Minister has set out three key objectives for the future deep customs arrangement promised in the Conservative party manifesto. Those are the right options, and she should be given the space and flexibility to come up with the solution that works in the best interests of our nation. If she is not able to do so—if she is boxed in and undermined—the consequences will be particularly serious, especially for the island of Ireland.

One popular trope is that we should just walk away and unilaterally impose zero tariffs, and then there would be no need for a hard border—that we just decide to have nothing and that is it. But we are leaving the EU in 10 months and we need to get real. Having zero tariffs with a country does not automatically eliminate the need for border checks, and such a proposal would run into issues under article 39 of the WTO rules. In a no-deal situation, both the WTO rules, to which we would be subject, and the EU rules, to which the Irish Republic would be subject, would require the implementation of a de facto border.

Of course, tariffs are only part of the problem, and arguably they are a very minor one. Non-tariff barriers are far more important, and they are created by inadequately harmonised regulation. Rules of origin could render any tariff-free deal that we strike meaningless for many companies. Product quality-checking issues are far more critical, as they speak to issues such as public health, public safety and animal welfare.

Other examples of borders, such as those in Norway, Switzerland or even Canada, are completely useless for the UK situation. The Swiss border has a level of physical infrastructure for commercial freight that both sides in the negotiations have said that they do not want. Switzerland accepts the vast majority of the EU acquis on goods and it is also in Schengen which, last time I checked, is nobody’s policy position.

It is not possible to know precisely what customs arrangements will be necessary until after the future trading relationship has been determined, so we must let the Prime Minister get on with it. The Opposition are very able when it comes to talking about process—in fact they are obsessed with it to the exclusion of outcomes—but they will soon find out that what our constituents want and need are solutions to the real issues that we face, not just politicking and endless arguments about procedure.

6.10 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There is stalemate within the Cabinet. In the blue corner, we have the Prime Minister leading the charge for a substandard customs partnership; in the purple corner, we have arch-Brexiters pushing for an economy-wrecking maximum facilitation scheme. Neither is workable, and they have both been rejected by the EU, so why are we even discussing them?

We are told that a high-tech computerised system can be used to process people at the border without the need for checks. Do we need reminding that, less than two years ago, this House found Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to be improperly targeting ordinary hard-working people through an outsourced company? Do we need reminding that, just a couple of weeks ago, the Home Secretary resigned because of serious Home Office failings? How can we even begin to entertain the idea that a hi-tech computerised system will give us frictionless trade? Every lorry crossing the border into Switzerland is stopped while drivers’ paperwork is checked. Upwards of 15,000 lorries a day pass through Dover. None of the proposals put forward by the Government would result in frictionless trade; it would be a “frictionful” trading nightmare, and if it is going to be a trading nightmare, why are we even considering it?

For me, there is only one option: a customs union between the UK and the EU. That is the best way to ensure that there are no tariffs or customs checks within Europe. When I talk to businesses, they tell me that they want tariff-free trading with Europe, and they want it without a mountain of paperwork. When I talk to our trade unions, they say that they want workers’ rights protected. They want a deal that raises living standards, not threatens them. If the Government get their way, the burden will be placed on our businesses and our workforce—ordinary hard-working people. Not being part of a customs union will cost far more than any other proposed trade deal, and if it is going to cost us more, why are we even considering it?

We are being told day in, day out, that leaving the European Union will make us worse off, that business will be hampered, that jobs will be harmed and that our rights will be watered down. I fear for this country when the Brexit Secretary presents us with the final deal. I stood up for my constituency of Tooting when I voted against triggering article 50, and I will not hesitate to do the same when it comes to the final deal. I will not vote for a deal that makes Tooting and our country worse off.

6.13 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Well, well, well, it is Wednesday, it is an Opposition day, and we are doing the Humble Address again. That rarely used instrument of parliamentary procedure, which has not been seen much over the past 200 years, has suddenly been used half a dozen times in less than six months. I accept that, effectively, there are two groups within the main Opposition party. Those in the more sensible group—they usually sit towards the back of the Chamber—feel very heartfelt about leaving the European Union and disagree with the principle of doing so. They make it quite clear, through this kind of proposal, that they do not wish that to happen. I respectfully disagree with them and gently ask individuals such as the hon. Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)—neither of them are in their place, although they were here for much of this debate—to reflect on some of the words that they use. There is a genuine view on the Government Benches—and in constituencies such as mine, which voted 63% to leave—that we should leave the European Union, the single market and the customs union, and that there are options and opportunities when we do. To suggest that we are extremists or that we are being overly partisan because of that does nothing for my constituents or for the reputation of this House and how we are debating this issue. Therefore, although I understand hon. Members’ concerns, I ask them to consider their language separately.

My respect, however, does not extend to the Opposition Front Benchers, who are being deeply disingenuous in pursuing this proposal and the suggestions we are in. It was heartening to hear my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), accept that the Labour party’s proposals would mean that it would...
have no control over customs or future trading arrangements—one of the key reasons why 63% of my constituents voted to leave in the referendum two years ago. If that is the case, that is fine, but we should not draw an artificial distinction between having a trade deal and not having trade. The North American Free Trade Agreement quadrupled the amount of trade in that region when it was introduced in the 1990s. We can go out and seek to strike independent free trade deals that will be positive and beneficial to our country.

It is deeply disingenuous of the Opposition to suggest, three quarters of the way through negotiations—three quarters of the way through the Government trying to understand how we are going to strike a new set of deals with the European Union—that we should just throw open the books and show the European Union exactly what we are doing and thinking. The Opposition’s motion misunderstands trading policy, misrepresents the negotiations—probably wilfully—and misjudges the public mood. I will happily vote against it.

6.16 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): With so much mistrust towards politicians, it is important that we all support transparency wherever possible. It prevents abuses of power and is vital for a healthy parliamentary democracy—a clear reason why so many people voted to leave. It is therefore very strange that the Government, who support leaving, are now acting in such a non-transparent way. Why are they against transparency? What do they have to hide? Here is the reason: since 2016 the Government have still not moved on from their position of having their cake and eating it.

The Cabinet are having an internal row about whether to support a technological solution or the idea of a customs partnership. The European Union has already rejected both proposals as being in la-la land. In the case of the technological solution, nowhere in the world is there a customs border without physical border checks. The only exception is the border between Alaska and Canada, separated by thousands of miles of ice. If the technology existed, why would countries such as Norway and Sweden, or the US and Canada, not use it?

A customs partnership would still be de facto a hard border and would not solve the issue of the Irish border. That is contrary to what the Prime Minister promised in the joint statement in December 2017.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: No, I have very little time.

The robust enforcement mechanism that the Government talk about would still mean that there would be physical border infrastructure. The frequency of checks does not take away the principle of a hard border. If the EU believes that the proposals are delusional but the Government believe that they are coherent, how do we establish who is right? That is why we need to see the written documentation from Government officials.

Henry Smith ( Crawley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: No, I have no time.

We want to know what advice Ministers were given. That is why we support the Humble Address motion. I suspect that the Government want to keep Parliament and the people in the dark so that they can leave the European Union at any price. It is time that the Government were honest about the realities of Brexit and let the people take back control of the process.

The meaningful vote is due to come to Parliament in the autumn; 650 MPs have an important role to play, but 650 MPs cannot update, confirm or review the decision taken by 33 million people in June 2016. If we live in a proper democracy, the people must have the final say. The people must finish what the people have started. I look forward to my constituents in Bath having the final say on the deal.

6.19 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): If the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) had indulged me by allowing an intervention, I would have asked her how many such bundles of papers the Liberal Democrats offered to the House while they were in government: precious few, I would suggest.

This is a silly motion. It is a complete waste of the House’s time. It is political posturing at its very worst. It is further evidence of Labour Members’ obsession with process and procedure and their complete lack of interest in the national interest. We should be focusing attention on outcomes rather than processes. I appeal to Labour Members by reading to them the words of someone who is venerated by many of them, including many of their most outspoken remainers:

“If you are trying to take a difficult decision and you’re weighing up the pros and cons, you have frank conversations... And if those conversations then are put out in a published form that afterwards are liable to be highlighted in particular ways, you are going to be very cautious. That’s why it’s not a sensible thing.”

That was said by Tony Blair. I ask Labour Members to consider this: if that was the approach to sensible government of the only leader they have had who has led them to general election victories, then why on earth should it not be the approach of those who pretend, at least, to have aspirations to be the Government of this country? That is something I very much hope we will never see.

I want to make one thing clear. There is one element of our post Brexit customs policy that absolutely must be defended, and that is the principle that we leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. Whichever option the Government pursue, and whichever agreement we negotiate with the EU, it is vital that we maintain our commitment to the Union and have no borders within the United Kingdom. A border in the Irish sea, or at Gretna or Berwick, would be totally unacceptable. We cannot have any part of the United Kingdom kept, in effect, as part of the EU for customs purposes while the rest of the UK leaves. I am glad that the Government have repeatedly acknowledged that fact. We must leave the EU as one country not just because it preserves the Union but because it is the best option for jobs, businesses and trade across the UK.

I conclude with these words from Liz Cameron, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce. In fact, I see that I do not have time to utter those words, but I am sure that Members can find them by googling them.
European Union, with the clear message that we would
Some 58% of them voted in June 2016 to leave the
Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) that Brexiteers
contribute to the debate.

... taking Britain over the cliff edge to what would be a
... taken forward by a hopelessly divided Cabinet that is
... listen to the industry and to the workers, and do not be
... diesel. I say in all honesty to the wide-eyed Brexiteers:
... but from the problems arising out of the transition from
... impacts with 1,000 jobs just gone at Solihull and
... success story of Jaguar Land Rover, but there are mounting
... damaging and harm the British national interest.
... refusing to hear from the industry and the workers in it,
... Conservative Benches are absolutely oblivious to the
... Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). It seems that many on the
... brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham,
... for all the reasons we have heard, not least those set out
... so strongly favour continuing customs union membership,
... linked with that of the European Union. That is why we
... are sent to the European Union. Our destiny is inextricably
... worth £35 million. Some 80% of auto imports come
... day arrive from the European Union, delivering components
... in Germany; plastic sealing is made in the Czech Republic;
... wheels are made in Germany; and brake hoses are made
... Spain. The modern British car relies on an interconnected
... to build on that, with the new engine plant, the skills
... turned around, which has transformed the lives of
... the Jaguar plant in it. I remember the funereal atmosphere
... design from 1,400 to nearly 3,000. The foundations were
... thousands of workers locally, with the workforce doubling
... and more expensive, or will we see the gradual relocation
... EU borders perhaps a dozen times. If we adopt a policy
... car need to originate in the UK for us to benefit from
... border, what will car manufacturers do—will they carry
... seeing the documents would allow us to assess the
... Opposition’s motion for a number of reasons. First,
... seeing the documents would allow us to assess the
... economic impact that the two options will have. As MPs, we have been promised a vote on the final deal
... between the EU and the UK, but how can we vote on
... deal without the information to inform us of the
... economic impact it will have? Neither can we wait until
... we are presented with the final deal to have our say on
... trading relationship. The Government have openly
... are perfectly placed to be a bridge between
... single market and customs union.

**Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington**

is rich in talent but is one of the poorest constituencies
in the country. It is blessed, however, by having the
Jaguar plant in it. I remember the funereal atmosphere
in 2010 when it faced closure, but the factory was
turned around, which has transformed the lives of
thousands of workers locally, with the workforce doubling
in size from 1,400 to nearly 3,000. The foundations were
laid in 2008 by a Labour Government with the Automotive
Council, and we worked with a coalition Government
to build on that, with the new engine plant, the skills
initiative in the supply chain and the investment in
research and development transforming the UK’s
automotive sector into the most productive in Europe.

Highly efficient just-in-time manufacturing is essential
to maintaining the sector’s international competitiveness,
because it relies on the free and frictionless movement
of goods. For example, seatbelts, which are now highly
technical computer-controlled devices, are made by Bosch
in Germany; plastic sealing is made in the Czech Republic;
wheels are made in Germany; and brake hoses are made
in Spain. The modern British car relies on an interconnected
web of European automotive suppliers.

Let us look at the statistics. Eleven hundred trucks a
day arrive from the European Union, delivering components
worth £35 million. Some 80% of auto imports come
from the European Union, while 69% of auto exports
are sent to the European Union. Our destiny is inextricably
linked with that of the European Union. That is why we
so strongly favour continuing customs union membership,
for all the reasons we have heard, not least those set out
brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham,
Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). It seems that many on the
Conservative Benches are absolutely oblivious to the
consequences of their actions. They are wide-eyed Brexiteers
refusing to hear from the industry and the workers in it,
and ploughing ahead with that which would be deeply
damaging and harm the British national interest.

We are determined to continue to build on the great
success story of Jaguar Land Rover, but there are mounting
problems, with 1,000 jobs just gone at Solihull and
workers being transferred there from the Jag. Impacts
are being felt ever more strongly not just from Brexit
but from the problems arising out of the transition from
diesel. I say in all honesty to the wide-eyed Brexiteers:
listen to the industry and to the workers, and do not be
taken forward by a hopelessly divided Cabinet that is
taking Britain over the cliff edge to what would be a
national disaster.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I think we must hear from Mr Henry
Smith.

6.25 pm

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** I am very grateful to
you, Mr Speaker, for affording me a few moments to
contribute to the debate.

We have just heard from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) that Brexiteers
are somehow wide-eyed. I am blessed in Crawley, because
my constituents are very sensible in their approach.
Some 58% of them voted in June 2016 to leave the
European Union, with the clear message that we would
be leaving the customs union and the single market as
well. My constituents are wide-eyed with the possibilities
of global Britain and no longer being tied to the EU’s
single market and customs union.

This country has a fantastic global heritage and more
unique international links than any other country in the
world. We are perfectly placed to be a bridge between
the rest of the world and Europe, given our proximity
and using the relations that we have. I think that is why
a majority of the people of Crawley voted to leave the
European Union. They are not insular in the way they
view the world. They are employed by international
companies located in my constituency—from Gatwick
airport to medical technology companies, financial services
companies and many others—and they see the global
possibilities of free trade. We cannot realise those global
free trade opportunities if we remain locked inside the
customs union. We can only negotiate international
deals with the Commonwealth and with many countries
around the world, including the United States, if we
are outside the customs union and if we achieve a
comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union.

We are talking about negotiations, and I know of no
business that would reveal its negotiating hand when
seeking to make an agreement; I certainly did not when
I ran a business. I know of no other country that would
reveal its negotiating strategy in international forums.
So that the official Opposition can relate to this, I add
that I know of no trade union that would reveal its
negotiating strategy in international forums.

The second reason I am in favour of the motion is to
highlight the importance of Labour’s policy of forming
a new customs union with the EU. A new customs
union is the only way to secure the frictionless trade
with the EU that our economy relies on. As my hon.
Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet
Kaur Gill) rightly pointed out about the car industry,
the manufacture of a car involves goods crossing
EU borders perhaps a dozen times. If we adopt a policy
that adds significant delays and checks at the UK
border, what will car manufacturers do—will they carry
on as usual, accepting that the UK is less competitive
and more expensive, or will we see the gradual relocation
of jobs and businesses to the continent? I genuinely fear
that the latter may be true.

Under current regulations, if we were to leave the EU
without a customs union, 44% of the components of a
car need to originate in the UK for us to benefit from
free trade, but a car is currently about 25% British-sourced. This means that the car industry, but also many others, will see tariffs on goods. The ambitious free trade deal that the Government want will be meaningless without a customs union. That is why we need to be up front and honest about the impact each trading option will have.

The only word that comes close to describing this Government’s handling of Brexit is “shambolic”. We have even heard reports today that the Government are considering scrapping the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill owing to the risks of defeat in this House, and I hope the Minister will clarify those reports and confirm that the Bill will return to the Commons after it has passed through the Lords. As an Opposition, we must do all we can to shine a light on the dangers of a Tory Brexit, and, as we leave the EU, we must do everything we can to protect businesses, jobs and our economy. That is Labour’s guiding Brexit principle, and I urge colleagues to vote in favour of the motion.

6.31 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Releasing this information is part of the job: this is about scrutiny, not mutiny.

As I have said in the House and in my constituency, I want a Brexit that is the best for Bury and Britain, not the confines and machinations of hard-liners among Government Members sitting on their protected bit of green-belt land, not a stand-off in Government two years in, and not a Prime Minister in a spin, announcing ideas, but admitting that they all still need work. And we have not even left yet. The serious point is that current jobs, our future prospects and just-in-time manufacturing rely on getting this right, and peace in Northern Ireland relies on us getting this right. This is detail on which millions of jobs, lives and livelihoods depend, and detail that our real economic growers need sight of.

It is said that the hard-Brexit ideologues are prepared to sacrifice themselves to get what they want on this point, but there is no heroism here. It is not heroic to put a company out of business from the comfort of their places on the Green Benches. It is not heroic to put jobs at risk as they nod with their accomplices across the table at the latest Brexit dinner. No hero takes risks with others’ lives when only they will live without the consequences of failure.

In Bury, we have businesses of all persuasions, ambitions and origins. Each of them tells me about their careful consideration of the implications, threats and, possibly, opportunities posed by leaving the EU, but they all want a customs union. As they weigh up their next moves, they should be enabled to do so with the best information—good and bad—that is available. Giving them such information will better prepare us all, because away from here, the prism through which Brexit is seen is that of communities, families, homes, jobs and prospects. That must also be our approach to Brexit: not deals in the dark, but information brought to light. Sharing the information from these Cabinet discussions is part of doing so.

A customs union is an economically literate plan that is supported by the CBI, as well as employers providing local jobs in Bury and elsewhere. It accepts the result of the referendum, allows us to move away from the stalled state of things as they are and lets us quickly get plans for a post-Brexit Britain. We need a transformation agenda to bring back to Labour the wards and communities in which people voted to leave because they felt left behind; and we need a modern vision for a country dealing with the world. The Government must stop wilfully adhering to threats made by a tiny rump of ideologues and do what is right by this country.

6.34 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Today’s debate reflects the seriousness of the situation in which we have been left. We still have no idea about the Government’s plan for what is next on customs. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is no longer in her place, mentioned groundhog day. It is certainly groundhog day when, two years on, we are still asking: what is the customs plan? We are still asking questions about what the Government plan to do next. This issue is not about this place and it is not about openness; it is about businesses being able to plan, it is about universities being able to plan, it is about individuals being able to plan.

At the moment, we are left with a form of Kremlinology, whereby we have to read between the lines to try to figure out what might be coming next. We have a stale Government with a past-her-sell-by-date leader. She is rolled out to paper over the cracks of a Government infighting behind the scenes. To be fair to the Foreign Secretary, he makes Kremlinology slightly easier by describing the Prime Minister’s own plans as “crazy”. Astonishingly, he is still in post.

What is not crazy are the challenges facing businesses. We know the economic analysis tells us that tens of thousands of jobs will be lost. GDP will be devastated, which means that income for public services will be devastated. We have so many outstanding questions, and not just on customs. What happens to immigration? What happens to research from which we all benefit? What happens to EU nationals?

It is clear that this is not going very well for the Government. If it is not going very well for the Government, then unfortunately it is not going very well for Scotland or any other part of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland where this means so much and should be taken so much more seriously.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman share my hope that the Conservative MPs from Scotland who were elected by hugely remain constituencies might respect that today and vote for the customs union?

Stephen Gethins: Yesterday, the Government and the Tories were left isolated over their current plans.

When they have been questioned about the analysis, the Government apparently told BuzzFeed News that it was not being published because it is a bit embarrassing. I am not surprised it is a bit embarrassing. This is all a bit embarrassing. The situation in which the United Kingdom as a whole has been left is a bit embarrassing.
This matters: it matters to business, it matters to researchers, it matters to EU nationals. Parliament has a role and a responsibility. It deserves to have as much information as it possibly can. Back the Opposition motion and publish!

6.38 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): This Parliament, this country, businesses and the rest of the world are looking on in horror as our Government fight like cats in a sack over two unworkable proposals. No one can believe that a democratic country could put itself in this situation, doing so much damage to our businesses, our jobs and our future prospects.

The Government are refusing to release information on the advice they are getting from all sides, just as they whipped their MPs to refuse an economic impact assessment on the deal itself before we in Parliament have to vote on that deal. Anyone would think that the Government have something to hide: that they have no plan, that they have no strategy for avoiding the economic disaster that their own papers say they are heading for. They are doing everything except listen. They are not listening to those on their own Benches and they are not listening to British business.

Those of us on the Opposition Benches who have spoken to businesses in our constituencies have heard it loud and clear: they all want to be part of a customs union. It will be absolutely disastrous for our businesses if they are not part of a system of tariff-free borders and if they do not have regulatory alignment. Businesses in my constituency are already having to move abroad and set up offices and transfer jobs abroad, because they are being undermined by competitors in the European Union that are undercutting them and going to contractors, saying that UK companies cannot guarantee that they will be part of the customs union, that they will not have tariffs and that they will not have regulatory alignment.

That is why we are losing business. It is happening.

The Government should listen to the Confederation of British Industry and the EEF, which said that “the need for a post-Brexit customs union reflects what EEF and UK manufacturing have long called for… free and frictionless trade can only be achieved by comparable customs rules to those” we already enjoy. That is why businesses in my constituency told me loud and clear at a Brexit summit that I held that they all need to be part of a customs union to carry on trading and to enjoy the preferential deals with the rest of the world that they enjoy as part of the EU customs union. We cannot seek to match that. Australia has just 15 such deals, as does Canada, and they are worse than what we get as part of the EU. The Government need to do the decent thing by this Parliament, this country and by our businesses and make sure that we have transparency.

6.41 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Call me old-fashioned, but what is wrong with the House having papers, presentations and economic analyses on the Government’s post-Brexit preferred customs arrangements, including a customs partnership and maximum facilitation? What is wrong with that? What we have is a Government who are waiting, like Mr Micawber, for something to turn up. That is what it is.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) asked why we have this Humble Address motion before us. I will tell him why: it is because this Parliament is getting stitched up and gagged by the Tories. They would not allow amendments to the law in the Finance Bill. They have threatened the House of Lords. They have statutory instruments coming out of their ears and ministerial diktats will follow. That is why we have this motion. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) told us that this Humble Address was a Mickey Mouse motion. Well, I tell you what: Mickey Mouse is 80 years old this year and he is a well-respected, popular icon—respected by generations and millions of people. If this is a Mickey Mouse Humble Address, I will have them every single day.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) said, “Get on with it,” but what are we supposed to be getting on with? The Government do not actually know. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that this is a shambles, that we are a laughing stock, and he is absolutely spot on. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said that we are undermining our negotiating position. Well, we do not have a negotiating position, so how can we undermine something that we do not have? It was particularly bizarre.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about the threat to manufacturing in her constituency, which the Government do not care about. It is as simple as that. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) referred to Adam Smith and “The Wealth of Nations”. Let me remind him that before “The Wealth of Nations” came “The Theory of Moral Sentiments”. Well, there is nothing moral in what this Government are doing on this particular issue. There is secrecy, intrigue and furtiveness, and there is nothing moral about that whatsoever.

As for the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), what we want to know is: what did he have in his right pocket? Was it a Rubik’s cube or a redacted Brexit Sub-Committee minute? Get it out and let us have a look. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) mumbled something and then sat down. I think some of his hon. Friends should have done exactly the same thing and we might have been able to move on. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said that we need to take time to get it right. Well, we do not have the time because the Government have been dragging their feet for a year or more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said the Government were in chaos, and she was absolutely spot on. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said she wanted to deliver a sensible Brexit—well, get on with it then! We will join them, if they do want to deliver a sensible Brexit, but there is no suggestion they do. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) called it shambolic, and it is shambolic. It is as simple as that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) said there was nothing heroic about putting people out of work, and he was absolutely spot on. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said the Government were not listening, which sums it up, and we are losing business because of it.

In contemporary parlance, the Prime Minister is “shook”—totally unable to stand up to the right-wing press and back the only sensible way forward, which is
Labour’s plan for a customs union. That is what we want. Instead, the Cabinet has been offered two options to decide between. First, we have what the Prime Minister calls a customs partnership. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has mentioned, this partnership would require UK officials to collect tariffs on behalf of the EU for any goods coming to the UK that are travelling onward to an EU state. As hon. Members have said, the Prime Minister’s plan has been described as “crazy” by the Foreign Secretary and as having “significant question marks” by the Environment Secretary, while HMRC sources have called it “unviable” and suggested that Ministers are “having a laugh”.

Perhaps the Minister can clarify: is the Prime Minister’s preferred option “crazy” or merely “unviable”? It cannot be forgotten that HMRC resources have been decimated, with staffing and resourcing slashed by 17% since 2010. Nevertheless, the Government now think it appropriate to use what little resource is left to protect the EU’s customs union for it, without the UK receiving the full economic benefits. This feels like the worst of all worlds.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that even if the Prime Minister can persuade her divided Cabinet and then the EU negotiators to accept one or other of those two proposals, neither would be ready before the end of the transition period? Is it not therefore time for the Government finally to admit that we will be remaining in a customs union with the EU for some time to come?

Peter Dowd: That is a fair assessment from my right hon. Friend. Friend agree that even if the Prime Minister can persuade her divided Cabinet and then the EU negotiators to accept one or other of those two proposals, neither would be ready before the end of the transition period? Is it not therefore time for the Government finally to admit that we will be remaining in a customs union with the EU for some time to come?

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The concept of which I have spoken has been accepted by successive Governments and Oppositions. It was explicitly recognised in the terms of the last motion for an Humble Address tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), which called for documents to be made available on a confidential basis—a principle from which he appears now to have departed. By contrast, this Government have been consistent in respecting their obligations to Parliament.

Whether through debates on primary legislation in this place, Select Committee inquiries, statements to the House, written statements or parliamentary questions, Parliament has been kept updated and informed, and it will continue to be given ample opportunity to scrutinise the negotiations as they progress. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has made 10 oral statements in the House, Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union have made 84 written ministerial statements to both Houses and the Department has answered more than 1,700 parliamentary questions from Members and peers. Ministers from the Department have also appeared before a wide range of Select Committees in both Houses on 34 occasions. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has given evidence before Westminster Committees on 10 occasions and to devolved Committees on six occasions, and looks forward to attending the Exiting the European Union Committee once again next week.

Emma Reynolds: We may have had 84 ministerial statements, but we only have five paragraphs on the Prime Minister's preferred option of the customs partnership in the “Future customs arrangements” paper of last August. When will we get more detail than those five paragraphs on that option?

Mel Stride: It might have escaped the hon. Lady's attention, but we announced this morning that there will be a further thoroughly comprehensive White Paper setting out all these matters, with further detail on the customs arrangements we may be seeking going forward. On customs in particular, I have in this House led many debates on behalf of the Government. I have led the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill through a Ways and Means debate, a Second Reading and four days in Committee. HMRC officials have sat before numerous Committees to provide evidence on the Government's position. Before that, the Government published a customs White Paper, to which the hon. Lady referred, on our future customs arrangement.

Lady Hermon rose—

Mel Stride: I can do nothing but give way to the hon. Lady.

Lady Hermon: The Minister and the House will be well aware of the comments that were made public last night by the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland about the threat from the new IRA dissidents who will exploit Brexit. That is in the public domain, so will the Minister give a commitment that redacted copies of those security briefings will be made available in the Library, or, if not in the Library, to the Brexit Committee and its Chairman? That is already in the public domain through the words of the Chief Constable.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important issue about the security of Northern Ireland, and the first point I would make is that we are absolutely crystal-clear that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for the very reasons she raises. On her specific question about potentially receiving what would be some very sensitive information, albeit redacted, that would be best taken up with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, rather than by me making any specific comment from the Dispatch Box.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still the Government’s firm commitment that there will be no new physical infrastructure on the Irish border and some degree of regulatory convergence if necessary and no customs border down the Irish sea, so this will presumably apply to Dover, Holyhead and everywhere else? Will he confirm that, whatever discussions are going on, quite rightly, in private within the Government, those commitments remain absolutely firm?

Mel Stride: My right hon. and learned Friend will know that the joint report issued in December after the phase 1 negotiations covers exactly the issues to which he refers, and of course the Government will entirely stand by and remain committed to the commitments they made in that statement. The Government have this morning committed to publishing a further White Paper before the June European Council. This will communicate our ambition for the UK’s future relationship with the EU in the context of our vision for the UK’s future role in the world.

We have always been clear that we will not provide a running commentary on the internal work being carried out in the Government on these highly sensitive and vital negotiations. We are focused on delivering on the referendum result in the national interest, and that means having a stable and secure policy-making process inside the Government. It would not therefore make sense, and would go against the national interest, to release information that could in any way undermine the UK’s position in our negotiations, a point the House has previously recognised. To provide details of the confidential discussions between Ministers regarding our negotiating strategy to those in the EU with whom we are negotiating would be a kind of madness that surely even the Labour party would find a stretch.

We have shown our willingness to share sensitive information with Parliament, but we will not do so to the detriment of our national interests. Let us see this motion for what it truly is. It is not a motion designed to assist our country at this critical time in our history, to secure our future outside the European Union or to help Parliament to fulfil its duty to our people. No, this is a motion about something rather less noble. It is a motion designed purely for the purposes of party politics and it should be seen for what it is. We should reject this motion today.

Question put.
The House divided: Ayes 269, Noes 301.

Division No. 158]

[6.59 pm]

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benin, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, rh Ian
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brashaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burr, Clive
Buck, Karen
Cable, rh Sir Ian
Carr, Caroline
Carwardine, Mark
Carter, Geoffrey
Cash, Charles
Cawthorn, Mike
Chard, Peter
Cherry, Joanna
Chicciotto, John
Clappison, Adam
Clarke, Nick
Clifton-Hadley, Peter
Cline, Mike
Cllr, Paul
Clissold, Ursula
Clegg, Rhodri
Cobbett, Anna
Cockburn, Anneliese
Cockburn, Michael
Colburn, Henry
Collins, trevor
Colombo, Chris
Coman, Martijn
Connelly, Ann
Connolly, Eamon
Cook, Andrew
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Corbyn, Politico
Cory, Mike
Costello, David
Cottle, Stephen
Crow, Chris
Crabb, Mark
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creagh, Stephen
Creagh, Simon
Cressman, Chris
Cristina, rh
Crowe, Mike
Cryer, Kim
Crowther, Mike
Crusco, Andy
Cruddas, Jon
Cumberbatch, Paul
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piers, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhersi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughery, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elliott, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
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Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Nic Dakin and

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Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): One in 260 people need Changing Places toilets with an adult-sized changing bench and hoist to have their toileting needs met in a timely, dignified and humane way, so I have great pleasure in presenting this petition, which was gathered together by my constituent Lorna Fillingham, of more than 50,000 names of people who recognise the importance of this issue across this country.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North Lincolnshire and the wider United Kingdom,

Declares that the Government must take urgent action to change building and planning regulations to ensure that changing places/toilet facilities have enough space for two carers.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002148]

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Today, following the campaigning of MPs across the country, the Prime Minister made a commitment to fund replacement cladding for some of the properties at risk following the Grenfell Tower catastrophe in June 2017. Her welcome statement refers to properties owned by councils and housing associations, but it leaves residents in privately owned tower blocks, such as those in Heysmoor Heights, Liverpool, out in the cold. They face bills of £18,000 to keep safe following the horrendous failings exposed by the Grenfell catastrophe.

After Grenfell, Heysmoor Heights was inspected by Merseyside fire and rescue authority—with commendable speed. It was found to have dangerous ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding. Fire marshals were put in place, and all lethal cladding has now been removed and is being replaced.

Heysmoor Heights is a 16-storey block comprising 98 flats, 63 of which are owned by Grainger plc. Grainger has funded the costs of fire safety measures for its flats, but it is unclear whether those costs will be reflected in higher rents or service charges in the future. The private leaseholders face major problems and anxiety. Theirs are modest properties, with a value of between £80,000 and £100,000, yet they are required to pay £18,000. How can hard-pressed residents find £18,000? Is the value of their flats affected by what is happening? Will more work be required, thus requiring more funding? It is unjust for residents to be facing demands to foot the bill to keep them safe because the regulatory system failed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Lady in raising an issue that is gripping the country this week. Does she agree that every social housing provider, local authority and landlord who is paid from the public purse has a duty of care and must ensure that buildings are up to the highest safety standard; and that where that is not the case, they must carry out the work necessary to bring the building up to that standard? That should be their responsibility.

Mrs Ellman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; he makes an important point. Who should pay? Who is responsible for putting the situation right? The position is obscure and complex. The original development company, FM Heysmoor Heights Ltd, was dissolved in August 2014. It went into administration in 2010 after building renovation works were completed.

The current freeholder is an anonymous beneficial owner: Abacus Land 4 Ltd, an offshore company based in Guernsey. It is part of the Long Harbour Ground Rent Fund, which is thought to be worth £1.6 billion. HomeGround is responsible for the day-to-day management of the company. It has appointed the Residential Management Group—RMG—to manage the block.

RMG tells me that an insurance claim—taken out in 2008 by the now defunct FM Heysmoor Heights Ltd—is currently being pursued with Lloyd’s against the original
The ownership of property is of course subject to the public record. I suspect that the hon. Lady may be getting at the fact that even when the Land Registry has a name on the register, it is sometimes tied up with foreign companies in jurisdictions that do not have the same transparency rules that we have for our companies. I will absolutely ensure that my hon. Friend has the privilege to represent. She is fighting an extraordinary campaign she is fighting on behalf of the local residents she has the privilege to represent. She has asked written and oral parliamentary questions, and has now secured this important debate.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing has arranged to speak to the agents of Heysmoor Heights’ freeholder, and I will certainly ask him to ask the agent who the freeholders are, because she has highlighted a very serious issue. We have had a situation in which the residents simply do not know who their superior landlord is. That would not have been acceptable to me in my old job as a property lawyer. I shall make sure that the Housing Minister presses very hard on that issue, and that if an answer is received, it is passed on to the hon. Lady so that she can forward it to her constituents.

Mrs Ellman: Does the Minister agree that it is outrageous that the residents are being asked to pay this bill but the private leaseholders do not know the freeholder’s identity? When the Housing Minister speaks to the freeholder’s agent, will he ask the freeholder to foot the bill?

Jake Berry: The ownership of property is of course subject to the public record. I suspect that the hon. Lady may be getting at the fact that even when the Land Registry has a name on the register, it is sometimes tied up with foreign companies in jurisdictions that do not have the same transparency rules that we have for our companies. I will absolutely ensure that my hon. Friend the Housing Minister presses for the answer to who the freehold owners are. On her point about asking the
The Government have made their testing facilities available housing blocks and public buildings. With regard to the statement tomorrow about the final report to Government from her interim report and look forward and we are taking forward all the recommendations for undertake an independent review of building regulations, At the same time, we asked Dame Judith Hackitt to tests, together with further advice for building owners.

We believe that we have identified all affected social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding, and all the affected social sector buildings that we have identified now have these measures in place.

In parallel, we tested different combinations of cladding and insulation to see which of them meets the current measures. We swiftly identified social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding, and all the measures. We have been in constant and close collaboration with local authorities ever since the Grenfell fire tragedy, but this is not a straightforward task, particularly in cases such as the one referred to by the hon. Lady where building owners either cannot be traced or are proving unresponsive. To support local authorities in this work, we announced in March a financial support package of £1 million to assist the most affected local authorities.

Our measures will also help local authorities to take enforcement action to ensure that hazards in residential buildings in their areas are remediated as quickly as possible. I can assure hon. Members that, as soon as we are notified of buildings with potentially unsafe cladding, we will work with the relevant local authority and the National Fire Chiefs Council to ensure that interim measures are put in place.

In addition, we wrote to local authorities in August asking them to identify privately owned buildings in their area with potentially unsafe cladding and reminding them that that was in line with their statutory duty to ensure that residents are kept safe. The majority of local authorities have recognised the urgency of that work and have provided relevant information to the Government. I wish to put it on the record that we are grateful for all the hard work that local authorities have done in this regard.

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The impact of the Grenfell fire is wide-reaching, and I can assure the House that the Government are absolutely determined to learn the lessons and to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety of residents now and in the future. Earlier today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out how the Government continue to work with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding. That enables us to both ensure that interim measures are put in place with our partners and give building owners clear advice about what they need to do, over both short term and the longer term, to keep their residents safe.

To support that, we have appointed an expert panel to take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of residents of high-rise buildings. Following its 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. I note that the hon. Lady said that the ACM cladding has already been removed from the building as part of those interim measures. We swiftly identified social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding, and all the affected social sector buildings that we have identified now have these measures in place.

In parallel, we tested different combinations of cladding and insulation to see which of them meets the current building regulations guidance. We published consolidated advice in September confirming the results of those tests, together with further advice for building owners. At the same time, we asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent review of building regulations, and we are taking forward all the recommendations for Government from her interim report and look forward to the statement tomorrow about the final report to which the hon. Lady referred.

We believe that we have identified all affected social housing blocks and public buildings. With regard to private sector buildings, which tonight’s debate is about, the Government have made their testing facilities 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 on their building.
have worked with the Leasehold Advisory Service—LEASE—to provide additional funding for independent, free, initial advice so that leaseholders are not only aware of their rights under the lease but are supported to understand the terms of these often complicated legal documents. LEASE continues to provide valuable support to affected leaseholders around the country. If the leaseholders at Heysmoor Heights have not done so already, I would encourage them to get in touch with the Leasehold Advisory Service to get some initial advice about their potential liability. The Secretary of State will also be holding a roundtable on the barriers to the remediation of buildings that have unsafe aluminium composite material cladding.

We are keeping the situation under review. I will specifically draw tonight’s debate to the attention of the Housing Minister. I will ask him to keep the residents of Heysmoor Heights informed, and to keep under review the progress not just of the insurance claim but of the wider question about where liability lies. We want to ensure that costs are not passed on to leaseholders, because they should not be. The hon. Lady quoted the Housing Minister, who said that there is a moral obligation not to pass those costs on to leaseholders. I absolutely agree with both him and the hon. Lady in that regard.

I hope that the points I have made this evening have reassured hon. Members just how seriously the Government are treating the issue of building safety. We will continue to make the case to building owners that we absolutely do not expect these costs to be passed on to the leaseholders of Heysmoor Heights or anywhere else. We will continue to provide support through LEASE to leaseholders who are faced with these unexpected bills, and we will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure that residents feel safe and secure in their homes. We will keep the situation under review. It is important to say that we have not ruled out any options at this stage.

As a proud son of Liverpool, I will finish by directly quoting the hon. Lady: what is good enough for Croydon is good enough for Liverpool and the residents of Heysmoor Heights. Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

US Tariffs: Steel and Aluminium

1. Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on US tariffs on steel and aluminium.  [905353]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Prime Minister and I continue to raise our concerns with President Trump and his Administration about the potentially damaging impact of tariffs on our steel and aluminium industries. We are working closely with the US and our EU partners to secure a permanent EU exemption to these tariffs.

Mrs Moon: Steel tariff exemptions are vital for Tata Steel. Many of my constituents work at Tata in Port Talbot in the next constituency along from mine. The exemption is welcome, but there are concerns about the US placing quotas on steel imports, which will have a major impact on the exports going not just from Britain but from Europe. How does the Secretary of State see himself protecting our export trade once we leave the European Union and do not have its negotiating power behind us?

Dr Fox: When it comes to protection post EU, we will have our own trade remedies measures. But of course the hon. Lady and her Labour colleagues voted against the Secretary of State still think that Donald Trump is a strategic partner. Where we disagree on issues such as steel, we make our voice very clear. We do not support the use of section 232 as a mechanism for dealing with the overproduction of steel. That actually hits the United States’ allies and not the designed target, which was China. Citing national security, particularly in Britain's case, makes no sense at all given that some of the steel that we send to the United States goes into its military programmes.

Leaving the EU: Women’s Rights

2. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that UK trade with developing countries promotes women’s rights after the UK leaves the EU.  [905354]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK is committed to promoting equality and women’s rights in trade in the UK and around the world. We have taken decisive steps to recognise the role of trade in promoting gender equality by signing the WTO’s joint declaration on women’s economic empowerment. We also launched at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last month the SheTrades Commonwealth programme, which will boost participation of women-owned businesses in trade.

Stuart C. McDonald: I very much welcome that answer because a well-designed trade policy can positively transform women's social and economic rights in developing countries. If that is not the case, that can destroy livelihoods, undercut wages and damage vital public services. Will the Minister commit to publishing an assessment of the impact on women of every trade deal that he signs with developing countries?

Greg Hands: I agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s question. I commend the work of some key non-governmental organisations in this space, particularly ActionAid UK. The matter of impact assessments is one for future trade policy and future trade agreements. However, we are not waiting on that to make a difference on ensuring that women can participate fully in trade. I point him to a recent study by McKinsey that showed that, if women participated in the economy on an equal basis to men, there would be an increase of 26% in world GDP—the equivalent of an economy the size of the US and China put together.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We drove this agenda in the EU. Is not the danger rather that, bereft of our influence, the EU will backslide?
Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend is quite right: the UK has been a key driver of that agenda. He is also right that the EU27 may well take a different approach. However, the UK approach remains strongly and resolutely in favour of promoting gender equality in trade and making sure that trade works particularly for women entrepreneurs, who make up a disproportionate part of the online entrepreneurial community.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): This will be my last outing as the Scottish National party trade spokesman: I will be moving to pastures new in Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State and his team. While we do not always agree—in fact, rarely—our discussions and exchanges are always respectful and lively.

The 2013 Rana Plaza disaster is a prime example of how growth in export industries can have devastating results, particularly for women and girls. Jobs were created that were unsafe and had exploitative conditions for the largely female factory workers. Can the Minister assure the House and indeed everyone across the UK that any trade deals he does will not result in the exploitation of anyone, in particular women and girls?

Mr Speaker: May I say to the hon. Lady that I hope in her new role the sky will be just as blue?

Greg Hands: May I first commend the hon. Lady for the constructive role she has taken? She and I have worked together particularly to try to benefit certain businesses in Livingston, her constituency, and in terms of her wider brief.

Yes, of course, we are absolutely committed that future trade agreements will pay heed to the importance of gender rights and a whole series of other rights in those agreements. What we can do, however, in the meantime is make sure that the trade agenda fully recognises gender equality, particularly, as I have mentioned, in relation to the Commonwealth and the WTO. We were one of the 120 WTO members at Buenos Aires in December that adopted the joint declaration on trade and women’s economic empowerment.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Minister often remarks that trade has pulled millions of women out of poverty, but in the Trade Bill Committee the Government voted against ensuring that future trade deals fully comply with the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Has he changed his mind on this and, if so, will he ensure that future trade deals contain effective mechanisms that protect women in the global supply chain from exploitation, poverty wages and the suppression of trade union rights?

Greg Hands: I gently remind the hon. Lady that any trade deals he does will not result in the exploitation of anyone, in particular women and girls.

Leaving the EU: Textile and Fashion Industry

3. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What plans has he to secure export markets and inward investment for the UK textile and fashion industry after the UK leaves the EU. [R]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I am delighted to tell the hon. Lady that 2017 saw our fashion and textile exports up 6%, that a new creative industries trade and investment board is being created and that trade associations are being extensively consulted ahead of the launch of our new export strategy.

Dr Cameron: I am chair of the textile and fashion all-party group, and this week we held a wonderful Commonwealth fashion event, with diversity, talent and young design on show. However, there are issues in terms of intellectual property rights and passporting, so would the Minister demonstrate his flair for fashion and attend the all-party group to discuss these issues?

Graham Stuart: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady. This week, the meeting was on the Commonwealth; the last meeting, I believe, was on China. She is doing a great job with the APPG, focusing on the importance of fashion to the UK economy. It goes without saying that, however poorly dressed I am, I will be thrilled to go along and meet the much more fashionable members of that APPG.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): For more than 220 years, Johnstons of Elgin has been producing some of the finest-quality cashmere clothing, fabrics and accessories. Will the Minister continue to support this great industry, and will he explain what the UK Government are doing to ensure we have more export markets for the textile industry?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend. He is right. Inward investment in Scotland has included Chanel buying Barrie in Hawick and we have trade working groups covering 21 countries. The very formation of this Department means that for the first time we have a Department of State only focused on our international economic competitiveness. For the fashion industry, for Scotland and for the whole of the UK, we will aim to work flat out to build our exports and improve the levels of investment into this country.

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

Mr Speaker: In a moment we will hear from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). He has been chuntering from a sedentary position about the suit worn by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), apparently expressing the hope that it was made in west Yorkshire. That is not a matter for the Chair—I have no idea. It seems to me a most admirable suit, but I have no idea where it was made.

Mr Sheerman: Unlike you, Mr Speaker, the Minister has never been to Huddersfield or visited the Textile Centre of Excellence. I keep inviting Ministers, but I think they are worried because Huddersfield, which is a
great centre in the premier league for fashion, has many employers who are fearful about the future and the 90% drop in inward investment in our country. There is real worry about the penetration of European markets after Brexit.

Graham Stuart: I am pleased to say that the fashion sense of the good people in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is different from his—that is why they are so well dressed. Not only that, but they have a different, optimistic view about the future of the UK outside the European Union, and that is why, unlike the hon. Gentleman, they voted overwhelmingly to leave.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My constituents voted to remain. The Minister is misleading the House.

Mr Speaker: I am sure it was inadvertent. There was not going to be further discussion on this question, but the effect of raising a point of order in mid-question is to preclude any further supplementary questions on the matter. In this case, however, the crime is victimless.

Free Trade Promotion

4. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to promote the merits of free trade to the public. [905357]

11. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to promote the merits of free trade to the public. [905367]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The UK champions the opportunities created by free trade. As I said in my lecture at Speaker’s House last month, free trade increases prosperity, stability and, in turn, security. My Department engages businesses and the public to set out the economic and moral case for free trade: better UK jobs, consumer access to high-quality, well-priced goods and services, and lifting people in the developing world out of poverty.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Forecasts suggest that 90% of economic growth in the coming years will be in countries outside the EU. Does he agree that that gives this country great opportunities to extend our trade with developing nations, which will be of great benefit to them?

Dr Fox: I agree with my hon. Friend that that provides enormous opportunities. Free trade has helped to lift more than 1 billion people out of poverty since 1990, and we will do all we can to continue to support the liberalisation of trade with developing countries. Indeed, we demonstrated that commitment by announcing £18 million to support the WTO’s enhanced integration framework in December at Buenos Aires.

Nigel Mills: A slightly surprising grouping, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State agree that the public might be even more strongly in favour of free trade if they are completely convinced that the right remedies are in place for goods that come from countries that are perhaps not quite as keen on free trade as we are?

The ceramics industry, for example, has a big base in my constituency, so will he ensure that, when we import products from countries that have a state-distorted market, the right powers are in place in the Bill?

Dr Fox: I am grateful for the support that my hon. Friend gives to the ceramics industry. It is, of course, necessary to have an international rules-based system. Where we have problems with that, it is our duty to try to improve it, not to try to break or leave the system.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What optimistic free trade message is the Secretary of State going to give to Welsh hill farmers or Suffolk sugar beet growers?

Dr Fox: The same message that I would give to everybody: free trade is of benefit to consumers and producers alike in the UK and to our trading partners. As I said, it has been one of the main tools through which we have alleviated global poverty.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): One thing that free trade depends on is investment. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to promote outward direct investment by the UK to help those countries with which we would like to engage in greater free trade?

Dr Fox: The Government have recently completed a number of pilot projects on outward direct investment, and ODI can be a major adjunct to our development agenda. I recently visited a Jaguar Land Rover dealership in Johannesburg. It is not only promoting the sale of UK goods abroad, but providing apprenticeships in mechanics and salesmanship for some of the most deprived young people in Johannesburg. Trade and development can go hand in hand.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Those who advocate protectionism often claim that free trade means a free-for-all. It is not. May I urge the Secretary of State to make it clear that free trade means trading within the rule of law, with clear remedies to the benefit of everyone?

Dr Fox: The WTO and the rules-based system is under attack, it has to be said, today. If the WTO did not exist we would have to invent it. There is a need for a rules-based system, otherwise we would have a free-for-all. The alternative to a rules-based system is a deals-based system, which might be fine for some of the biggest economies but would not help many of the smaller developing economies. It is our moral duty to ensure that there is fair play across trade.

Foreign Direct Investment

5. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the level of foreign direct investment into the UK. [905359]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): To ensure that we continue to be a global leader in attracting foreign direct investment, the Department for International Trade has launched a new FDI strategy that will deliver new ways to target support for those projects that create the most value for investors and national wealth. I am
pleased to say that 2016-17 was a record year for FDI projects landing in the UK, showing that the fundamentals of the UK economy are strong.

Victoria Prentis: Will my right hon. Friend tell me why, in his assessment, investors choose to invest in the UK?

Dr Fox: We regularly ask our investors why they put money in the UK and the answers are very similar. They say that the British legal system provides certainty and predictability. We have a skilled workforce. We have a good, predictable regulatory system and a low-taxation economy. We speak English. We have some of the best universities and some of the best access to tech, and we are in a good time zone for global trading. None of those, incidentally, depends on our membership of the European Union.

Leaving the EU: Third-country Trade Deals

6. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What assessment has he made of the potential benefits to the UK arising from third-country trade deals after the UK leaves the EU?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Leaving the EU means, for the first time in over 40 years, we will from next March be able to sign and ratify new trade deals. We are currently party to about 40 international trade agreements and are committed to securing continuity of those agreements. We have also established 14 trade working groups in major markets to explore the best ways of developing new trade and investment relationships post Brexit.

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. He will know, as I do, that international regulatory standards are what fuel international trade. For the continuation of those deals and opportunities, does he agree that regulatory alignment will be necessary to secure the best British deals post Brexit?

Greg Hands: As my hon. Friend will know, we have some good news for him about the implementation period. The UK will be party to those deals up to the end of December 2020. He is also right that there is a very important read-across between what is agreed with the EU on standards, rules of origin and so on. Our commitment remains absolute to have high standards and to encourage the use of broad international global standards of the highest quality.

7. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK maintains preferential market access to those countries with which it currently has such access as a member of the EU after leaving the EU.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government are committed to securing continuity of existing EU trade agreements and other preferential arrangements as we leave the EU. The draft withdrawal agreement confirms EU international agreements continue to apply to the UK during the implementation period. We are working to ensure continuity of those arrangements after that.

Alex Cunningham: The REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—regulations that govern production and other standards are critical to countless chemical companies in my Stockton North constituency and beyond for trade across the world. Will the Minister update the House on the progress to retain them when we leave the EU?

Greg Hands: I met the chemicals industry earlier this week—in line with other industries—in a very useful roundtable at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That work to make sure that the UK benefits from the best possible rules as we go forward is ongoing.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the big opportunities from leaving the EU is that we can negotiate trade deals that best suit the UK, rather than being tied into the other 27 member states?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. That is why we have these 14 trade working groups with major markets around the world. We are in active discussions with those counterparts and we have the benefit, from March next year, of the ability to negotiate, sign and ratify trade agreements with them.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): First, the Government said that they were simply rolling over these agreements on precisely the same terms. Then they admitted that they would have to amend the agreements with Norway, Turkey and Switzerland to avoid rolling over such things as the customs union or the four freedoms that they would rather avoid, but the Minister has still not explained what process this sovereign Parliament will undertake to ensure that these important new agreements are subjected to proper democratic scrutiny. When will he?

Greg Hands: We had significant exchanges on this during the Trade Bill Committee and the scrutiny arrangements are enshrined in that Bill, which I note again that the hon. Gentleman voted against. He will also know that these agreements have already been
scrutinised in this House under existing EU scrutiny procedures, and there are precise arrangements set out in the Bill for how we go forward from here.

**Commonwealth Countries: Trade Agreements**

8. **Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What progress he made on potential trade agreements with Commonwealth countries at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April 2018.

**Dr Fox:** My Department continues to work with the 24 Commonwealth countries that are part of the EU’s economic partnership agreements or other preferential arrangements to ensure that there is no disruption to our existing trade. We also have regular discussions with Australia and New Zealand on our future bilateral trading relationships through our trade working groups. With Canada, we already have an agreement in place in CETA—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—which will form the basis of a UK-Canada agreement once we have left the European Union.

**Mr Seely:** That is good news. Firms in my constituency such as GKN-Melrose, Vestas and BAE Systems export across the Commonwealth and the wider world. Is my right hon. Friend confident that post Brexit, we will be able to continue and grow that trade?

**Dr Fox:** Very confident. I pay tribute to the companies such as BAE and GKN that he mentions in his constituency, which are exemplary exporters. We intend to have an open and comprehensive trade agreement with the European Union. We intend to take advantage of the fact that the International Monetary Fund says that 90% of the global trade increase will be outside Europe in the next 10 to 15 years, and we have a new export strategy to support all exporters, including the ones that he mentions in his constituency.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Ironically, a trade deal between India and the European Union is more likely to be agreed by the remaining EU27, as two of the main stumbling blocks are whisky and visas, which mainly involve the United Kingdom. Therefore, will the Secretary of State advise me, the House and my constituents at the Auchentoshan distillery how they will seek to overcome that when the Government will be all alone?

**Dr Fox:** One of the main problems with India, of course, is the tariff that it applies on whisky. We have been involved in a trade review with India for some months now, and part of the process is to look at the areas where we require liberalisation to bring our two economies close enough to be able to consider a free trade agreement. The high tariff applied on Scotch whisky by India is one of the impediments, and we continue to urge them to reduce that.

**EU Free Trade Agreements**

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that the UK has third-party membership of current EU free trade agreements to maintain compliance with rules of origin requirements after the UK leaves the EU.

**Dr Fox:** The draft withdrawal agreement confirms that international agreements continue to apply to the UK during the implementation period, common rules of origin will remain until the end of 2020. We are keen, of course, to avoid disruption to supply chains, so we are working to secure continuity after this.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am sure the Minister has met motor manufacturers who have warned that they will simply not be able to meet the 60% local content requirement under rules of origin if EU components cannot be included. At present, the UK content is between about 40% and 44%. How will the Minister address that?

**Greg Hands:** I think the hon. Lady is referring to the EU's current set of more than 40 agreements with more than 70 counterparts. That is a matter for active discussions. We are obviously trying to secure the best possible deal for UK motor manufacturers, not only those involved with the finished product but those who provide the components, as part of our talks with third parties.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade** (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, for establishing an independent trade policy, and for export promotion. I am delighted to announce that my Department recently appointed John Mahon as our new director general for exports; he will oversee the delivery of the Government’s export strategy. Later today, my fellow Ministers and I will be in Stirling for the third meeting of the Board of Trade.

**Alex Cunningham:** In the light of the latest mass killing of Palestinian civilians by the Israel Defence Forces, will the Secretary of State review and apply the criteria for arms sales to states that violate international law?

**Dr Fox:** The UK has one of the most robust arms export systems, which we operate under the consolidated criteria in line with our EU partners.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): I welcome the Department’s focus on international trade. I am delighted to hear that the Redditch eastern gateway is included in a project and strategy that the Secretary of State will announce today. Will he update the House on what he will do to bring much-needed international investment into Redditch?

**Dr Fox:** Later today I shall outline a project to attract £30 billion of foreign direct investment to the United Kingdom. Many projects, such as the one mentioned by my hon. Friend, are not necessarily visible to global investors, but our new website will ensure that we can attract more investment in middle-sized opportunities, which will genuinely help to bring prosperity to constituencies such as my hon. Friend’s.
Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): In 2017, Britain sold £216 million worth of military contracts and supplies to Israel and £571 million worth to Turkey. The disproportionate use of deadly force by those nations against Palestinian and Kurdish citizens has been rightly condemned. Does the Minister agree that the UK needs a transparent and human rights-oriented arms trade to ensure that this country does not enable brutal attacks to be made on civilians?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): All export licence applications are rigorously assessed, case by case, against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. No licence will be granted if there is a clear risk that the equipment might be used for internal repression, or in a serious violation of international humanitarian law. However, we continue to monitor the situation in Israel and Gaza closely.

Dr Fox: I did indeed enjoy my visit to Aberdeen, where I was able to chair a roundtable of companies from across the oil and gas industries as well as meeting senior figures from the Wood Group. Representatives of UK Export Finance were present at both meetings, and, as my hon. Friend will know, we are more than happy for UKEF facilities to be made available to the sector.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Given the uncertainty over the future customs arrangements between this country and the rest of Europe, what steps is the Department taking to ensure that training is provided for the additional customs officials who will be needed to deal with the probable extra workload?

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The UK defence and aerospace industry plays a vital role in the country’s prosperity, and Farnborough, in my constituency, has a special place at the heart of it. What steps is the Department taking to support the industry, and will the Secretary of State kindly confirm that members of his team will attend the Farnborough international air show in July?

Dr Fox: I can certainly give that assurance to my hon. Friend. He will also know that in order to improve the functioning of our defence and security exports we are reorganising the Defence and Security Organisation so as to separate the defence from the security elements, because they require different levels and types of Government intervention and contact. I want to ensure that the appropriate skills are there to maximise our defence and security exports.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to secure more trade with India?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): It was my pleasure to address the hon. Gentleman’s all-party group on India only last week, and we have a huge success story. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has talked about the trade audit—the trade review—that we have done with India. I can also report that bilateral trade has increased by 15% over the last year, and we remain the largest G20 investor in India, with British companies currently employing around 788,000 people in India.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It was a pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to my constituency last week where he could see that, from food and drink to oil and gas, Aberdeen is best placed to take on the opportunities of Brexit. I thank my right hon. Friend’s Department for promoting Aberdeen’s £150 million Queen’s Square project this afternoon. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the benefits to Scotland of extending the high potential opportunity scheme, and does it not show that Scotland is better off in the United Kingdom?

Dr Fox: One of the benefits of having a UK-wide Department is that we are able to use economies of scale to leverage international investment into the whole of the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend will be aware that a number of projects in Scotland are being highlighted today during our visit to Stirling, and it is much better to have a UK-wide Department able to bring investment to all parts of the United Kingdom than to have it broken up and fragmented.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—STEM Careers

1. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more women to take up STEM careers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Women and Equalities, on her debut at the Dispatch Box in this capacity I think: Penny Mordaunt.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to be here in my new role as Minister for Women and Equalities on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and I hope all Members of this House will show their support to that cause today.

The Government have committed in our careers strategy to improving information and guidance on STEM careers. We are also raising awareness of the range of careers that STEM qualifications offer.

Vicky Ford: I welcome the Minister to her new responsibilities and thank her for her commitment to women studying science and maths.
In Britain the percentage of women doing engineering is the worst in Europe: fewer than one in five of those studying physics A-level are female. I am going straight from here to the Institute of Physics. Will the Minister back up the Government’s words with action: break the deadlock and support prizes and grants for girls studying physics?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly do that. My hon. Friend can take that message very strongly to the meeting she is about to attend, and I thank her for the work she is doing to promote these careers and qualifications to girls. We fund the Stimulating Physics Network, which provides schools with the means to improve progression to physics A-level. The network provides activities specifically to increase the proportion of girls taking physics A-level.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Of all Ministers, this Minister will be the one who understands the opportunities for girls, particularly those following STEM subjects, in joining the armed forces. The RAF presentation opportunities for girls, particularly those following STEM 2010.

Penny Mordaunt: I agree so much that I signed up myself. I pay tribute to the armed forces for the work they have done in recent years, in particular the RAF, some of whose initiatives have been pioneering. I would like to see more women serving in our armed forces: does she agree?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree so much that I signed up myself. I pay tribute to the armed forces for the work they have done in recent years, in particular the RAF, some of whose initiatives have been pioneering. I would like to see more women serving in our armed forces; our armed forces will be operationally better if that is the case.

Protected Characteristics: Caste

2. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When the Government plan to respond to the consultation on caste as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Our public consultation on how best to ensure that there is appropriate and proportionate legal protection against caste discrimination ran for six months last year. We received more than 16,000 responses, which demonstrates how important this matter is to some groups and communities, and we will respond in due course.

Bob Blackman: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post. She is the third Minister for Women and Equalities since the consultation closed, and I have no doubt that she is going to wade through those 16,000 responses, which will overwhelmingly be in favour of caste being removed as a protected characteristic. Will she agree to meet me so that I can brief her on the feelings of the community on this matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I understand my hon. Friend’s frustration. He has really championed this issue for a long time. I have already agreed to meet him, and I am very happy to do so, but I can reassure him that previous holders of this post have already briefed me and that this matter is receiving my immediate attention.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 requires the Government to amend the Equality Act 2010 to provide for caste as an aspect of race discrimination, and that case law will not be sufficient to do that. In addition to meeting those who advocate removing caste altogether from the legislation, will she also meet the all-party parliamentary group for Dalits, so that we can explain why the will of Parliament must be followed?

Penny Mordaunt: I will be happy to do that, and I would like to do it swiftly. I want to ensure that we take absolutely the right decision. The responses to the consultation were heavily weighted towards one outcome, but I want to know the case law and all the arguments before we take any decision.

Gender Pay Gap: Action Plans

3. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that companies publish action plans to reduce their gender pay gaps.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am delighted that 10,212 employers have now reported their gender pay gap, as of 9 o’clock this morning. That is 95% of eligible employers. Of course, reporting is just the first step, and it is important that employers now take action to close the gender pay gap in their businesses and organisations. Many have already published action plans, and we are working to support employers to take action to close those gaps.

Daniel Zeichner: Of course, had the coalition implemented Labour’s ground-breaking 2010 Equality Act fully, we would be much further down the road towards gender pay equality today. It is all very well publishing the data, but when is the Minister going to show some grit and insist that companies produce action plans, so that we can make some real progress?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman does the Government a disservice, if I may say so. This is world-leading legislation, and I have always been careful to ensure that we share the credit for it with the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who brought the Act into being. We are ambitious about this, but we want to bring business with us. This is about cultural change, and there are really good signs that businesses are now listening to the public’s will that women must be paid fairly and properly.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The new Minister for Women and Equalities made an announcement that was welcomed by the Labour party when she said that sectors under the Government’s remit would lay out plans for organisations to publish their gender pay gap audits. It is good to see that that is one of her first actions, but does it go far enough? Can we be a little bit more ambitious? Will the Government commit further auditing?
Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. We are reviewing the evidence carefully. We know, for example, that more than 10,000 businesses have been having a conversation about their pay policy in a way that they simply were not doing a year ago. We will review the evidence carefully and see what more needs to be done to ensure that businesses are working in accordance with the public will to ensure that these gaps are closed.

Leaving the EU: Effect on Women

4.  Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on women.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I have regular meetings and discussions with ministerial colleagues about the UK’s exit from the European Union. As we leave the EU, we are committed to retaining the rights of workers and all the protections of the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010, including those that particularly benefit women.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Is the Minister aware of how much EU funding specifically focuses on women and addresses the causes of gender inequality? Will she give assurances to the women of Wales and the rest of the UK that they will not pay a higher price when, or should, Brexit spark a downturn in the economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give them that assurance. Protections will still exist in our law, and we will have a dividend from leaving the EU, so we can choose what to spend that money on. It is wrong to scare people with the suggestion that equalities will somehow be watered down.

Freelance Workers: Shared Parental Leave

5.  Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): If she will discuss with Cabinet colleagues the potential benefits for women of bringing forward legislative proposals to introduce shared parental leave for freelance workers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The hon. Gentleman has raised this issue with me in the House before with his usual tenacity and clarity. Family leave and pay entitlements focus on supporting employed parents, because they do not generally have as much flexibility or autonomy in taking time off. However, we are not ruling out further support for self-employed parents, but that must be considered carefully in the wider context of tax, benefits and rights over the long term.

Kevin Brennan: I want the Minister not just to rule it out; I want him to become a champion inside the Government along with his Women and Equalities colleagues. Shared parental leave for freelance workers would be one of the best ways to help women in the workforce to continue pursuing their careers. I ask the Minister to go away and think about that and to become a champion, rather than just someone who does not rule it out.

Andrew Griffiths: I certainly understand the hon. Gentleman’s impatience, but progress is being made. He will know that a self-employed mother who wants to return to work without using her full maternity allowance entitlement can now convert that into 37 weeks of shared parental leave and pay for the employed father or partner. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we are considering the matter with great interest, and I will try to update him as soon as possible.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Given my hon. Friend’s personal interest in this matter, will he join me in supporting the Government’s “Share the joy” campaign to encourage greater take-up of shared parental leave?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my hon. Friend. I assure him that Alice’s arrival into the world has certainly given me a greater understanding of the joy that comes from parenthood. The “Share the joy” campaign is a Government initiative to promote the benefits of shared parental leave, because we want more parents to enjoy that time with their newborn baby. My hon. Friend can rest assured that we will continue to promote shared parental leave to get more parents to enjoy it.

Mr Speaker: I very much hope that the Minister will have today’s Official Report framed and hung up in Alice’s room.

Business: Representation of Women

6.  Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that women are better represented at the highest levels of business.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Diversity is good for business. Organisations with the highest level of gender diversity in their leadership teams are 15% more likely to outperform their industry rivals. There are now no all-male boards in the FTSE 100, compared with 21 such boards in 2011, and the percentage of women on FTSE 350 boards has more than doubled since 2010. However, we know that there is more to do, which is why we commissioned the Hampton-Alexander review to improve female representation at the most senior levels in business.

Simon Hoare: Clearly, progress is being made, but in thanking my hon. Friend for her answer, may I ask how the Government are engaging positively with our business community to help meet the important Hampton-Alexander goals?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who has taken a long interest in diversity matters. Indeed, he is meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), this afternoon to discuss this topic. The Government-backed Women’s Business Council’s recent toolkit, “Men As Change Agents”, calls on FTSE 350 chief executive officers to embrace three asks to deliver the required pace of progress, including sponsoring women from within their organisation with the potential to secure an executive role within three years. My hon. Friend is keen to be an agent of
change, and I welcome his support and that of other male colleagues in driving the progress that we all want to see.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I understand that 7% of FTSE 100 companies have women chief executive officers. By contrast, the figure for businesses in Latvia is something like 47%. What can we learn from Latvia?

**Victoria Atkins:** Of course we are always willing to look at what is happening internationally. The hon. Gentleman will know that the plans in the Hampton-Alexander review are ambitious. For example, they require businesses, before 2020, to recruit women for one in two senior roles that now exist if business is to meet that goal. If it does not, the Hampton-Alexander review panel will look at what more should be done to encourage business to do so.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): One way to encourage more women through to the highest levels of business is strong mentoring. What more can be done to help spread that and roll it out further?

**Victoria Atkins:** Mentoring is just one way, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that sponsorship is very successful in driving women up the career ladder. That is precisely why the Hampton-Alexander review has given help through the Women’s Business Council and the toolkit. We have encouraged businesses to sponsor women within their organisation and to engage CEOs and other senior business leaders as change agents in championing the change required.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Scottish Government have delivered a returners programme to assist women to re-enter the workforce following a career break. Will the UK Government consider doing something similar to ensure that women in England and Wales continue their career progression towards the highest levels of business?

**Victoria Atkins:** Indeed. We have a scheme for exactly that. At the moment, we are looking at how best to spend that money, and I have a particular focus on teachers and social care workers to see if we can encourage them back into their professions. There is a much bigger challenge here for the private sector to make sure that women who have taken a break for caring reasons are encouraged back into the workforce, because we know that financial independence is a critical factor in making sure women have successful lives.

**Domestic Abuse**

7. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on treating domestic abuse as a health priority.

**Victoria Atkins:** The Home Secretary chairs an inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls to ensure that all Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, work together to treat crimes such as domestic abuse as a priority.

**Mrs Hodgson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. She may be aware that, according to the SafeLives report published last year, early intervention through hospitals can reach four out of five victims who would not have reported the abuse to the police. Will she therefore outline what plans her Government have to ensure that all hospitals, in their A&E and maternity units, have onsite domestic abuse support workers?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady identifies a key touchstone for reaching women who perhaps have not been able to find the space or the courage to meet people who can give them help. There is a great deal of work going on, particularly with hospitals, as part of the £2 million package I announced earlier.

11. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Although the Government say that victims of domestic abuse can apply for split payment of universal credit, a survey by Women’s Aid shows that 85% of survivors say they would not dare apply as an exceptional measure, as it would attract further abuse. Is the Minister for Women and Equalities willing to meet me to discuss the importance of delivering split payments as the default to protect the financial independence of women?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady and I have already met to discuss this, and I know that she is greatly concerned. I am discussing the issue with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, and of course the Minister for Women and Equalities will meet her to discuss it further. We are very clear that the DWP and those who work in jobcentres are a gateway to potentially offering support and help to women who present with those symptoms.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Last week, I visited a refuge run by Hestia, the organiser behind next week’s “UK Says No More” campaign—I have spare badges. Hestia tells me that nearly 1 million children every year are affected by domestic abuse, yet there are no meaningful resources to help tackle the mental health issues experienced by those children. What more are the Government prepared to do to provide resources to address the mental health issues of the children affected?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the hon. Lady for that. I know that she is personally very committed to this subject. I was delighted to join Hestia this week at its launch event for a piece of technology that I believe will have a real effect on helping survivors and victims of domestic abuse. We are allocating £8 million specifically to help children who witness domestic abuse in their homes, because we all recognise the great harm this can cause children, both at the time of the abuse and in the longer term. That is precisely why children will be at the heart of the draft domestic abuse Bill, which will be presented to this House in due course.
Gender Recognition Act 2004

8. **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): When the Government plans to launch the consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. [905384]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):** The Government Equalities Office will publish a consultation on the 2004 Act shortly. Our national LGBT survey received more than 100,000 responses and we are using the results to shape the questions in the consultation.

**Sandy Martin:** I thank the Minister for that answer. On this International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, what message will her Department give to the Great British media that discrimination against trans people is unacceptable?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I would be very happy to send that message. I will consult and discuss sensitive issues with the Government. Anything that runs counter to that must cease.

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to her place. May I take this opportunity to recognise the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia? As part of the consultation, will the Government make the necessary legislative changes to allow non-binary people to record their gender as X on passports and on other UK-wide records and identity documents?

**Penny Mordaunt:** If this long-awaited consultation is to have impact and be of good use, it should consult on a wide range of issues, some of which should be the non-binary issues.

**Gendered Online Abuse**

9. **Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with social media companies on tackling gendered online abuse on their platforms. [905385]

**The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James):** The Government are committed to making the UK the safest place to be online. Ministers and officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have had meetings with a range of social media companies to discuss abuse, including misogynistic abuse, on online platforms as part of our consultation on internet safety, to which we will respond imminently.

**Anna McMorrin:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Half of all girls in the UK suffer online abuse and are bullied on social media. Girls are being told what to wear. They are being told to shut up about their opinions. They are being told about how they look. Is it not about time this Government take a serious look at this awful sexism and seek to regulate social media platforms?

**Margot James:** I very much share the hon. Lady’s strong opinions, which are based on the facts: girls are intimidated and bullied disproportionately online, for all the reasons she sets out. I urge her to wait a very short time for our response to the internet safety consultation, which I trust will be robust.

**Domestic Abuse: Support for Women**

10. **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support women who are experiencing domestic abuse. [905386]

12. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support women who are experiencing domestic abuse. [905389]

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins):** This Government have introduced a new offence of coercive controlling behaviour, rolled out new tools such as domestic violence protection orders and committed £100 million to supporting victims of violence against women and girls. On 8 March, we launched the consultation on domestic abuse, which will include not just the draft Bill, but a package of non-legislative measures to take steps to further support victims and target perpetrators of this terrible crime.

**Holly Lynch:** I am grateful to the Minister for that response. However, in 2016, the Ministry of Justice closed the courts in Halifax. I hear from West Yorkshire police that it is now routinely taking up to 12 months for domestic abuse victims to have their cases heard in the neighbouring courts in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield. How have we allowed that to happen? Victims are withdrawing from that process. What are we doing to put this right?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am concerned to hear that. If I may, I will take that away and discuss it with my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice. In west London, the tri-borough scheme includes specific specialist domestic abuse courts. I am currently looking into that, because there may be more that we can do in that regard throughout the country.

**Liz Twist:** At Women and Equalities questions on 29 March, I asked the Minister about the concerns of Women’s Aid and other domestic violence charities about the changes to supported housing funding, and I asked her to liaise with her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Can she assure us that the concerns of Women’s Aid and other charities have been taken into consideration? What discussions has she had with that Ministry?

**Victoria Atkins:** Discussions are ongoing; I speak constantly to my colleagues across the Government about the support we offer to victims of domestic abuse. The hon. Lady will know that we committed £20 million to the domestic abuse accommodation fund, and, like me, she will have been pleased that we introduced the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Act 2018 to help the victims of domestic abuse.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):** Some 16% of the population is disabled, but their representation in our Parliaments, Assemblies and councils is far too low.
It is primarily political parties’ responsibility to support their candidates properly, just as they must also support disabled employees. That is why I am announcing today that over the next 12 months my Department will, with others, undertake a programme of work to help political parties to best support their disabled candidates and to consider how independent candidates can be supported, too. While that work is under way, we will provide up to a quarter of a million pounds to support disabled candidates for elections in the forthcoming year. I shall keep the House updated.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It was an honour and my privilege to have whipped the equal marriage Bill through this House. Will the Minister complete that work by abolishing civil partnerships?

Penny Mordaunt: Although the demand for civil partnerships has tailed off since my right hon. Friend’s efforts were brought to bear on that Bill, they are extremely valued by some people, and others would also like the opportunity to have a civil partnership. We are looking into the issue and have commissioned some additional research into opinions on and attitudes towards civil partnerships, but whatever the outcome of that research, I assure my right hon. Friend that they will not be compulsory.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and welcome her to her new role. In the past 12 months, I have congratulated no fewer than three Ministers on their appointment to the role. [Interruption.] “Get used to it,” I hear from a sedentary position, and that is exactly the problem. Responsibility for women and equalities has been passed from the Home Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to the Department for Education, then back to the Home Office, and now it is with the Department for International Development. To add insult to injury, the Government Equalities Office will see its funding cut by almost half. All that does not really scream a commitment to women and equalities. Does the Minister agree that the Equality Office needs a stable Department with proper funding?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. We do need to stabilise the work of the GEO and to increase what we are doing on the equalities agenda across the Government. We have done some tremendous things in recent years, and we need to build on that work if we are really to address inequalities, not only in the policy areas for which I am directly responsible but across the Government, including in disability, age discrimination and elsewhere. Since I have taken this post, I have given this a lot of thought, and I will make some announcements in the forthcoming weeks.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Equality of access to education and schooling opportunities for women and girls in the developing world is central to their life chances. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support initiatives to widen access to education and schooling for women and girls?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. There are some good tie-ups between the work of the Department for International Development and the Women and Equalities role. I hope that I will be able to help both Departments by being the joint Minister. We spend around £1 billion on education, half of which is specifically to help girls to access good-quality education. Most recently, we announced a further £212 million of funding through the girls’ education challenge, to ensure that almost a million more marginalised girls throughout the Commonwealth can receive good-quality education.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Earlier in questions, the sharing of data and the working together of Departments in relation to domestic abuse and domestic violence was mentioned. Some time ago, I had a constituent whose data was shared, which meant that she had to come out of hiding, where she was being protected, and to move to another place because of that sharing of data by the Department for Work and Pensions. I know that that is something that the Minister is working on, but can she ensure that the highest possible resource and focus is given to this issue, because my constituent’s life was put in danger by the fact that her data was shared with her ex-partner?

Victoria Atkins: I am dismayed to hear that. Clearly, that is not the intention of the amendments to the Data Protection Bill. We have put a declaratory statement in the Bill to encourage and give confidence to all the agencies involved in safeguarding that, under the Bill, they do have the right to share information for the purposes of safeguarding. I am extremely concerned to hear of the hon. Lady’s case, and if she will write to me please, I will look into it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the new Minister, whom I, too, congratulate, now publish the long-awaited inquiry of the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), into the safety of women accessing abortion clinics? Will she also take up the recommendation of 160 parliamentarians, including David Steel, author of the Abortion Act 1967, to introduce buffer zones?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank the hon. Lady, who has run such an effective campaign on this, and the colleagues across the House who have written about this matter to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary? As she knows, the previous Home Secretary, in her capacity as both Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, took this subject extremely seriously, as does...
the new Home Secretary. We are drawing together the evidence and looking at it very carefully, and we will, of course, let the House know the results of that review as soon as we can.

T4. [905397] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to transparency through gender pay gap reporting. Will my hon. Friend update the House on how many employers have reported during the first year of this new scheme?

Victoria Atkins: That is a typically astute question by my hon. Friend. As of 9 o’clock this morning, 10,212 businesses and organisations had responded, and 95% of all businesses and organisations that should have replied had done so, and we are now chasing the other 5%.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The trans community suffers some of the most profound discrimination across the world. Will the Minister advise the House what discussions are being held with her colleagues in the United States of America, where we are seeing an incremental rolling back of the rights of trans American citizens that fundamentally undermines the principles of America’s liberal democracy?

Penny Mordaunt: One thing that I have been conscious of is how the progress that we have made on these issues and on wider issues has been a catalyst for change in other countries all around the world. We in the UK have a very important role to play. Let me give Members one example. At the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government summit, our Prime Minister used the key part of her plenary session to champion the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. We will continue to do that in every nation on earth.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Women used to lag well behind men in terms of workplace pensions. Will the Minister update the House on the current situation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is true that women used to lag behind men in terms of workplace pensions, but at 73% their participation rates are now equal to those of men in the private sector. Thanks to auto-enrolment, 10,000 men and women in my hon. Friend’s constituency now have a private pension. Thanks are also due to the 1,670 employers assisting them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Particularly given her statement at the start of topical questions, will the Minister for Women and Equalities tell us what progress she has made in getting the position of disability commissioner reinstated at the Equality and Human Rights Commission?

Penny Mordaunt: I have been aware of this issue for some time, from a previous brief, and I can tell my hon. Friend that the commission is currently going through a tailored review that will look at the structures it has in place to represent and hear the views of disabled people and enable commissioners to focus on their needs and rights.
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 the week commencing 21 May will include:

Monday 21 May—Second Reading of the Tenant Fees Bill followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill.

Tuesday 22 May—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by general debate on serious violence strategy followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

Wednesday 23 May—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by Opposition day (12th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced, followed by, if necessary, further consideration of Lords amendments.

Thursday 24 May—Debate on a motion on the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 25 May—The House will not be sitting.

Today is International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, a day that is now celebrated in more than 130 countries and which unites millions of people in support of the recognition of human rights for all, irrespective of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. This week is also Mental Health Awareness Week. Two thirds of us will experience a mental health problem in our lifetime, and my greatest passion is that we do everything we can to improve mental health, especially in the earliest years, to give every baby the best start in life. I know that many Members have also worked hard to raise awareness of the appalling impact of brain injuries, and I congratulate all those holding fundraising events this weekend during Action for Brain Injury Week.

Finally, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our best wishes to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle for their wedding on Saturday and all the very best for a long and happy life together.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, but I note, again, that we have only four days of it. Will she tell us what we are doing on 4 June please? She knows that the Procedure Committee has produced a report, “Proxy voting and parental absence”, and we look forward to its being discussed. When will we have time to debate it?

I have to raise breaches of conventions of the House and the way we work together based on trust. The Parliament website states:

“Money resolutions...are normally put to the House for agreement immediately after the Bill has passed its Second reading in the Commons.”

I asked the Leader of the House last week what was abnormal about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill—the boundaries Bill being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—that it should not have received a money resolution after its Second Reading, but she did not reply, so I will try again. I understand that consideration of the Bill in Committee was adjourned again. Have the Government decided not to follow convention any more, and is the Parliament website wrong?

The Leader of the House has just announced that the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill will be given its money resolution on Monday.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Splendid!

Valerie Vaz: Lucky you.

That Bill was the 94th Bill presented in the Session. The Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill was the ninth Bill presented, but it still has not had its money resolution. Why are these Bills being taken out of order? Are the Government now going against convention and practice, and deciding which Bill is worthy? Will the Leader of the House give us a reason today or in writing later?

There was another even more alarming issue this week, as raised yesterday in a point of order by the Opposition Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown). The Statement by the Secretary of State for Transport was wrong on two counts: first, Her Majesty's Opposition were not given any notice of the statement, which might well be in breach of the ministerial code; secondly, the statement was given on an Opposition day.

It took great pressure—from an Opposition day debate and a petition—for the Government to announce a U-turn on Grenfell. In a written statement last Friday, it was announced that two extra experts would sit on the inquiry panel. Scheduling the statement yesterday was a huge discourtesy to the 71 bereaved families who were waiting for that debate. The bereaved just want to get on with their lives, rather than having constantly to lobby the Government for justice.

Will the Leader of the House, as the representative of the House in the Cabinet, raise this breach of convention with the Cabinet and update the House as to whether statements will no longer be given in Opposition time and that we will be given advance notice of statements?

Yesterday, the Parliamentary Secretary at the Cabinet Office said that she is “very pleased and grateful to the House of Lords for the consideration that it has given to the EU withdrawal Bill”.—[Official Report, 16 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 260.] Will the Leader of the House confirm that the amendments have now been agreed, and that the Bill will be brought back to this House next week?

I ask again about the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, which is known as the customs Bill. When will it come to the House on Report and Third Reading? The animal welfare Bill, the immigration Bill and the fisheries Bill have not yet been published. I know that the Leader of the House is interested in the agriculture White Paper, which has been published, so will she tell us when the agriculture Bill will be published?

We now have Sub-Committee A and Sub-Committee B, which are negotiating. Thank goodness we have a free press, because we now know that Conservative Members have been walking into No. 10 and the Prime Minister is also negotiating—that is Sub-Committee C. There are
10 months to go before we leave the European Union, and the Government are still negotiating about the negotiations. With the Scottish Parliament voting against the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, our island's story has become a re-run of the Picts and the Scots, the Angles and the Scots, or perhaps the EVEL and the Scots.

This Government are incompetent and divided. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is negotiating on a customs arrangement instead of responding to the Joint Select Committee report on Carillion. The report, which will be presented later, said that the Government failed to spot the risks because of their "semi-professional part-time" system of oversight. When will we have an updated statement on the fall-out from Carillion's collapse?

It is National Epilepsy Week, so will the Leader of the House use her good offices to ask the Home Secretary whether he has signed the licence for Alfie Dingley's medication? The House will remember that Alfie had 150 seizures a month, but the medicine brought that down to one.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Baroness Jowell, who served 23 years in this House and two years in the other place—a glittering career in public service. This week is National Mental Health Awareness Week, so we should also mention that she was a former officer of Mind, the mental health charity. The House paid tribute to her, but most of us will remember her kindness to us personally. She sent an email to every single person who stood at the Bar of the House of Lords to hear her final speech. She sought me out when I was a new Member in 2010 to give me some support. Her achievements will live on. She used her time in this place not to destroy other people's lives, but to make a huge difference to them, and she has shown that in the change that she has made. No one will ever forget how our country was brought together in 2012.

Finally, we all saw Prince Harry make that long walk behind his mother’s coffin. Now he will walk down the aisle of St George’s Chapel. Diana, Princess of Wales would have been proud of him. We wish Prince Harry and Meghan Markle all the very best for their wedding and their life together.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and questions. First, I join her in paying tribute to Baroness Jowell. She and I had many conversations about what I think was her most amazing achievement, which was the implementation of Sure Start. We shared a passion for the earliest years and a desire to see all babies given the best start in life. I pay tribute to her.

The hon. Lady asked about baby leave. As I have said on many occasions, it is absolutely right that we do all we can in the House to ensure that new parents, whether of naturally born babies or adoptive children or babies, have that vital time with them. We need to find a way to do that. We will look at the Procedure Committee’s report and respond in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about private Members’ Bills. I take very seriously my duty to safeguard the rights of those in this Chamber. I hear carefully all the representations made by hon. and right hon. Members across the House. I would like to point out that some very important private Members’ Bills have made good progress. Those include the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—all of us want to see the eradication of violent attacks on people who are trying to help us—and the superb Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), which will ensure vital support for parents who have suffered the tragedy of the death of a baby or child. The Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), is also making progress; it is vital that those with mental health issues are properly treated. There is good progress of private Members’ Bills.

The hon. Lady asked about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. She will recall that we had an urgent question on that issue last week, when I sought to set out clearly that the money resolution for the Bill will be reviewed once the Boundary Commission review has taken place. It is important to understand that these things are expensive. The Boundary Commission review will cost taxpayers something in the order of £12 million, and it cannot be right that further money, to the tune of more than £5 million, be made available to a completely separate Bill when that work is under way. This is a postponement, and we will come back to it, but in the meantime all hon. Members should be pleased to see the progress of private Members’ Bills on very important subjects.

The hon. Lady asked about the east coast main line statement yesterday. She will appreciate that the Government endeavour at all times to protect the Opposition’s time and to schedule oral statements on alternative days as far as possible. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport outlined yesterday, his statement contained commercially sensitive information, so the Government needed to update the House at the earliest opportunity. On her more general point, I fully agree with the need to provide advance sight of statements in good time, and I will certainly remind my colleagues of the House’s expectations.

The hon. Lady asked about the progress of other legislation. We have six Brexit Bills before Parliament: the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill, the Trade Bill, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, and the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill. Some 28 Bills have been introduced so far, and 14 have had Royal Assent. Hundreds of statutory instruments have been passed by the House, and seven draft Bills have been published. The Government are progressing with their legislative programme, and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will return once we have had the opportunity to fully consider and take into account the views expressed by the other place and what that will mean in this House. We will bring that forward in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about the lessons learned from the collapse of Carillion. She, and I think all hon. Members, will be aware that the Government’s priority has been the continued safe running of public services and to minimise the impact of Carillion’s insolvency. The plans we put in place have ensured that. However, the
Government fully recognise and welcome the report of the joint inquiry of the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and we will respond fully in due course.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the harrowing case of those who suffer from severe epilepsy and who it is believed would benefit from cannabis-based drugs. The current situation, as she knows, is that outside of research, we will not issue licences for the personal consumption of cannabis because it is listed as a schedule 1 drug. We are aware of differing approaches in other countries and continue to monitor the World Health Organisation’s Expert Committee on Drug Dependence, which has committed to review the use of medicinal cannabis. We will keep that under review.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the availability of properties to rent in the private sector that have been adapted for people with disabilities? It is difficult enough for able-bodied people to find properties to rent. That debate would reassure those with disabilities that the House has not forgotten their situation.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an incredibly important matter, and I assure him that the Government take it very seriously. Tenants living in privately rented properties can ask their landlords to agree to carry out adaptations, and landlords should not unreasonably withhold consent. Since 2012, the Government have invested almost £1.7 billion in disabled facilities grant funding, which is a capital grant paid to local authorities in England to contribute towards the cost of adapting a disabled person’s property. About 250,000 adaptations will have been provided by the end of this year.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I, too, welcome the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and of course Mental Health Awareness Week.

In Scotland last week, we had the tragic death of Scott Hutchison, the lead singer of the wonderful Frightened Rabbit. His loss has galvanised all of Scotland and has helped to re-focus attention on young male suicide. Scotland has lost too many of its great artists to suicide. Scott, thank you for your wonderful, inspiring music. You will be sorely missed.

We are going to have to find an awful lot of time for the Lords amendments to the repeal Bill. The Government have been defeated an unprecedented 15 times at the hands of the gallant troops in ermine down the corridor. Can we get some sort of assurance that all these amendments will not simply be lumped together? I hear that the Government have considered that. It is important that no debate is curtailed. These Government defeats mean that for the first time we in this House will have meaningful votes on the single market and the Government’s proposed customs arrangements. What we do not want is this Government reverting to type in trying to close down debate and stop votes happening in this House. We need a guarantee and certainty, today, that that will not happen.

On that theme, I totally agree with the shadow Leader of the House about the progress of the boundaries Bill. After an uncomfortable outing for the Leader of the House last week in trying to defend this situation, it is now time to ensure that we get that money resolution. This issue is not going to go away for this Government.

It is very surprising that we have had no statement from the Government on the Scottish Parliament withholding its legislative consent on the repeal Bill. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that the Conservatives were totally isolated in the 1990s in opposing the development and creation of the Scottish Parliament, and today they are totally isolated in refusing to defend its powers. Just look at them: Ruth’s Scottish Tories have now become Theresa’s hard-Brexit, devolution-threatening, Lobby-fodder Tories. It is absolutely no wonder and no surprise that there are now all sorts of predictions of another wipe-out and the demise of the Scottish Conservatives.

Andrea Leadsom: Let me start by absolutely sharing in the hon. Gentleman’s sadness at the suicide of the lead singer of Frightened Rabbit. That was a great tragedy that demonstrates and highlights the fact that one of the biggest killers of younger men is suicide, and more needs to be done. I absolutely share in his sorrow at that news.

I do love the way that the hon. Gentleman’s fondness for the other place moves in direct proportion to the amount of amendments that it brings forward. It is a delight to see. As I said last week, I suspect that he is secretly hankering after a job in the other place, and I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members would be delighted to see that outcome for him.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that when the EU withdrawal Bill comes back to this place, ample time will be given, as has been the case all the way through, for all right hon. and hon. Members to make their views fully known. The Government are taking account of all the different proposals to improve the legislation, as we have been all the way through. I think that all hon. Members would accept that the Bill now looks very different from how it did when it started in this place. The amendments and the improvements made to it have very much been taken into account by the Government wherever possible.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the legislative consent motion and the vote in the Scottish Parliament. It is of course true that we are very disappointed that the Scottish Parliament has declined to give the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill legislative consent. We have been very clear that our preferred way forward is with the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. We have made a considerable offer to try to accommodate all the views of the devolved Administrations, and we are delighted that the Welsh Assembly confirmed its acceptance on Tuesday.

The Bill has some further stages to go in the UK Parliament, and we still hope that the Scottish Government will come on board. Our door remains open, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to use his good offices to try to persuade his hon. Friends in the Scottish Parliament to provide legislative consent.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Many of us are increasingly concerned by threats to Britain’s native flora from imported diseases, so may we have a debate in Government time on biosecurity?
Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an issue that is dear to my heart. He is absolutely right that we should do everything we can to protect our own wildlife—our fauna and flora—from the threats of imported disease. I know he will be reassured that our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is fully committed to that and is looking at further ways in which we can protect our own environment even better once we leave the EU than we do today.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House said in her statement that she would make every effort to protect Opposition time when Opposition days occur. May I ask her to try to do the same for Back-Bench time? There are two Government statements today, which I anticipate will take up significant time, but there are also two Backbench Business Committee debates this afternoon. The one on plastic bottles and coffee cups, nominated by the Liaison Committee, is important, but the second debate is time-sensitive, because today is the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, so it is really important that that debate is aired this afternoon.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern about protected time. He will of course appreciate that there is a fine balance between making sure that the Government provide timely statements to the House, so that all key announcements are made here, and protecting time for what, as he rightly points out, are two very important debates this afternoon. I would seize this moment to mention to all hon. Members that, if they look at the update in the House news this week, they will see that Parliament has committed to eradicating single-use plastics and being the change we wish to see, so the debate on plastic eradication is very timely.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Rough sleeping is a stain on our communities, and as a London MP I am intimately frustrated by the inactivity of the Mayor. May I ask the Leader of the House for a statement on the measures the Government are taking so that the Mayor could learn some lessons?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important issue. It is vital that we take steps to eradicate rough sleeping. We are fully committed to making sure that everyone has a roof over their head and, importantly, the security they need in their home. That is why we pledged in our manifesto to eliminate rough sleeping by 2027, and to at least halve it by 2022. We have committed £1 billion to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness, but this is not only about money. We are changing how councils approach the issue, so we are implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—a super private Member’s Bill introduced by our hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—to help more people get tailored support sooner when they are at risk of homelessness.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will know that I have raised the issue of antisocial behaviour on a number of occasions, particularly the scourge of motorbikes being used for antisocial behaviour. May we have a debate to look at what other measures we can introduce to deal with that, and in particular whether we can get all petrol stations to stop selling petrol to people driving motorbikes illegally and looking suspicious—as has happened in Hull with Operation Yellowfin, where 12 responsible petrol stations have agreed that they will not serve petrol—as one of the measures to try to tackle it?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for raising this issue again. She brings up antisocial behaviour regularly, and she is right to do so because it is a scourge on many communities. She raises the interesting question of whether those selling fuel could do more, and I urge her to raise that issue at Home Office questions on Monday 4 June.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): If we are to secure economic regeneration for our provincial towns, and particularly our coastal communities, local leadership and the powers available to local authorities are important. We currently have a disproportionate system in which some authorities with Mayors have greater powers and resources, and if areas such as northern Lincolnshire are to compete with them, they will need similar resources. Could we have a debate on that in Government time, so that the Government can lay before the House their long-term plans for local government?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and he raises an important point about greater local devolution. He knows that a core part of the Government’s plans is to put local people more in charge of the area around them. I recommend that he seeks an Adjournment debate so that he can raise specific issues for his constituents.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Is it time for a general debate on the defence of parliamentary privilege? I understand that Mr Christopher Chandler has threatened six Select Committee Chairs with proceedings in the European Court of Human Rights if they dare to probe his links with President Putin. I happen to believe that if a New Zealander who is based in Dubai with acquired Maltese citizenship and a think-tank in Mayfair has suspect links, we should raise questions. Is it time to send a message from this House that we will not be bullied or intimidated by anyone, no matter what their wealth?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s basic premise that nobody in this place should be bullied, and where we believe that there is wrongdoing, we should be free to investigate it. If he would like to write to me about his specific point, I will look at what more can be done.

Mr Speaker: Pursuant to what the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) has just said and the response of the Leader of the House, let me say that I have been approached about this matter in writing. I do not intend now to vouchsafe the details of that correspondence, but suffice it to say this: the principle of parliamentary privilege is extremely important to Members individually, and to the House institutionally. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that it is for the Chair to intervene and seek to prevent a Member from exercising that privilege. That, as a matter of constitutional
and procedural fact, is incorrect. I always urge Members who use privilege to make allegations to do so with care and responsibility, and in respect of the recent examples to which the right hon. Gentleman alluded, I know for a fact—I was in the Chair—that such care and responsibility was exercised by Members from all sides of the House. I will always defend the right of Members to use that privilege, and I do not care who writes to me to exhort me to prevent or limit that right. It will make not the blindest bit of difference.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was grateful for the most important announcement made by the Leader of the House about the money motion for the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, which has support across the House—I noticed that the Chief Whip came in for that, and the deputy Chief Whip is in his place.

I am also pursuing another private Member’s Bill about a bank holiday in June. The country works very hard and we have few bank holidays relative to Europe. It seems to me that we should have a bank holiday in June, as close as possible to 23 June. The trouble is that I am seeking a name for that day. Does the Leader of the House—or anyone else in the House or across the United Kingdom—have any suggestions? The working title for the 23 June bank holiday is “Independence Day”, but I also seek other alternatives.

Andrea Leadsom: I am personally sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s suggestion, and perhaps his birthday could be an alternative day. I am always happy to take up my hon. Friend’s suggestion, and perhaps his birthday could affect my constituents, so may we have a debate?

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on rail franchising and the problems it is now clearly causing for commuters and passengers on long-distance journeys? I asked the Leader of the House about that last week in respect of the experience of my own constituents, and she kindly suggested that I apply for an Adjournment debate. It is quite clear to me, however, from the statement we received from the Transport Secretary yesterday, that this is a much more widespread problem than one just affecting my constituents, so may we have a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that since franchising began there has been £6 billion of private investment in our railways and that passenger numbers have doubled since 1997-98. We are spending almost £48 billion on maintenance, modernisation and renewal to deliver better journeys and fewer disruptions. It is the view of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport that franchising is absolutely key to ensuring a better experience for rail passengers.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the general data protection regulation? There has been some confusion about how it is to be implemented, not least among Members of Parliament and, importantly, our staff. This is so important, because it involves our constituents and their data. Will the Leader of the House update us, please?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this point. I have had a number of representations from Members right across the House on this subject. On 15 May, I wrote a “Dear colleague” letter to all colleagues. I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members received it—they will have received it, but I just hope that it is in their inbox and has not been deleted. As I outlined in my letter, the House authorities continue to work closely with the Information Commissioner’s Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that Members are well supported on the new regulations. Training and a help desk are available, and there is a set of frequently asked questions on the intranet. All that information is available in my letter. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members, if they have any further problems, to please contact my office.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Yesterday I launched the all-party group on domestic violence perpetrators, and the launch was well attended by Members from all parts of both Houses. However, the question was raised: what has happened to the domestic violence Bill? It was promised in the Queen’s Speech. Can we have it before the end of this year, and will the Leader of the House please press her colleagues to get the Bill to the House as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to hear about the hon. Lady’s new all-party group. This is a really important subject, and we are bringing forward a new domestic abuse Bill with an ambition for legislation that will be truly groundbreaking. We have launched a consultation on that Bill. We want to hear from experts, charities and frontline professionals, and, just as importantly, from survivors and those with experience of such abuse.

What I can say to the hon. Lady is that since 2010 we have strengthened the law on violence against women. We have introduced a new offence of domestic abuse and another of failing to protect a girl from female genital mutilation. We have created two new stalking offences. We have criminalised forced marriage, introduced lifelong anonymity for victims of forced marriage and FGM, and introduced a new mandatory reporting duty on FGM. As the hon. Lady will know, we have also introduced in the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill new protections for people fleeing from domestic violence. We take this matter incredibly seriously, and there will be further progress in due course.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend has risen to the challenge I set her at Business questions, when I and other Members from across the Chamber asked for a debate on violent crime. I note from her statement that we are to have one. None the less, buoyed by that achievement and spurred by success, I must demand more. She has also received a missive from me and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for a specific debate on acquired brain injury. It affects very large numbers of people: 1 million people are living with its effects, with nearly 350,000 a year admitted to hospital. She mentioned acquired brain injury earlier, so I am encouraged that this first success will lead to many, many more.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is delighted that we have been able to bring forward Government time for a debate on serious violence.
[Andrea Leadsom]

It is an incredibly concerning matter—right hon. and hon. Members across the House have raised it with me on a number of occasions—so I am very pleased that we will be debating that subject. As to his second request, I am aware of the letter from him and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Although there is a great deal of competing demand for time in the Chamber, I will consider it very seriously.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My constituent Ramatoulie is a British citizen who was born in the Gambia. She recently discovered her birth certificate, issued in the Gambia in the 1950s, which showed that she was five years older than she had previously thought. When she informed British Government agencies, all accepted the new age except UK Visas and Immigration. The Passport Office is now refusing to issue a new passport to her. For the past three years I have spoken to every Immigration Minister and I have written to Government Departments more than a dozen times, but she is still in limbo with no ID and no passport, unable to travel. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the issue or bring Ministers here to explain what has gone wrong, how many other people are affected and when Ramatoulie can get her passport?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning and important issue. He will be aware that there are Home Office questions on 4 June. Equally, if he wants to write to me, I can take it up directly with Home Office Ministers. I have to say to hon. Members, though, that someone discovering that they are five years older than they thought they were would be troubling enough without the further problems that his constituent has had to suffer.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the outstanding service offered to Members by the counter staff of the post office in the Members Library? Does she share my concern that it is impending that this service will be withdrawn, and should not Members be consulted more widely before that happens?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend has raised this issue with me directly. I have written to the Chairman of the Administration Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who has written back to him informing him of the decision that was taken by the Committee to change the opening hours. I absolutely agree about our great gratitude to the staff of the post office counter. I have put my right hon. Friend in contact with the Chairman of the Administration Committee, and I have urged the House authorities to make every effort to consult all Members, particularly through the regular House updates, so that they all have the opportunity to have input into any changes to important services in this place.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Not only am I a member of the Procedure Committee, which produced an excellent report on proxy voting and MPs’ baby leave, but my wife Roslyn is expecting our second child in the autumn. May I therefore ask when the Government will schedule time to debate the report? Is it likely that hon. Members on both sides of the House will have proxy voting in place after the summer?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman in advance—that is very exciting news—and I completely understand. A number of Members are expecting babies in the near future, so I will work at pace on this issue. He will appreciate that proxy voting has considerable constitutional implications and there are various factors to take into account, but I will be working on it as fast as I can.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on parental alienation, which is a growing problem in this country? Parents who are resident with their children are in effect turning their children away from the absent parent, and it is causing a great deal of heartache for many families. It is one of the causes of the suicide rates that my right hon. Friend talked about earlier and is, in effect, a form of child cruelty. Can we do something about this because it is causing misery for thousands of families up and down the country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. I am sure that we have all had people coming to see us in our constituency surgeries who are quite clearly determined to turn their own children against the non-resident partner. It is an absolute tragedy, and the losers are the children. I am totally sympathetic to my hon. Friend, and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their thoughts on this.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House welcome the launch of my new campaign to eradicate litter? I am encouraging schoolchildren in my constituency to devise a poster or a campaign. Can we have a debate in this place on the blight of litter and plastic waste in our constituencies?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her campaign. It is fantastic to see Members tackling this problem head-on in their constituencies. In March I had the great pleasure of clearing up litter in Trowcester with a great group of local volunteers, and we had the great plastic clean-up last weekend, in which the Prime Minister herself took part. It is vital that we continue to raise the issue. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can discuss it with Ministers, and discuss more specifically what can be done to encourage people to stop littering.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Recently, during Prime Minister’s Question Time, I raised the subject of the fatal shooting at Queensbury station. Following that, there has been armed confrontation in the Harrow Weald ward, in my constituency, and three young boys have been shot in Wealdstone high street in broad daylight. One, aged 12, was being escorted by his parents. On Monday, there was another shooting incident in the constituency of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner).

I am delighted that there is finally to be a debate on the serious violence strategy, but given that on the same day we are also considering Lords amendments to the Data Protection Bill—and, possibly, other Lords
amendments—can my right hon. Friend ensure that the debate is given protected time so that all Members have an opportunity to raise these very serious issues, which are blighting London in particular?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the appalling occurrences that have taken place in the last few weeks. Over the bank holiday weekend there were some terrible instances of shootings and knife crime, particularly in London, which were appalling for families and friends and, of course, for the victims themselves. I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend, and I will find out whether we can indeed provide protected time. I recognise the urgency of the need for that debate.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government are currently consulting on a new franchise for South Eastern which will result in the removal of the Victoria service on the Bexleyheath line, apparently because it would be too confusing for service providers to have trains crossing over west of Lewisham. This weekend, however, a new timetable will come into force which says that they can only go to Victoria on a Sunday. It seems that the service is being run for the providers and not for the customers. May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Urnston (Kate Green) in calling for a debate in Government time on rail franchising, so that we can expose the fact that the trains are being run for service providers rather than passengers?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the problems that the hon. Gentleman has raised. He will be aware that Transport questions will take place on Thursday 24 May and he may well want to raise those specific issues then. I hope that he participated in the questions on yesterday’s statement, when there were opportunities to speak to the Secretary of State for Transport directly.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I was going to ask for a debate on the excellent small charities challenge fund, managed by the Department for International Development. However, an urgent situation is developing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Ebola has raised its ugly head again and has now spread to the city of Mbandaka. Given the work that the United Kingdom and others did in 2014 and 2015 to help to stop the spread, may we have an urgent debate on the matter, and on how the United Kingdom and its allies can support the people of the DRC and their excellent health services in bringing this outbreak to an end?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has rightly raised an issue that is of great concern to all Members. The return of Ebola is horrifying: the last outbreak was unbearable for so many people. I encourage him to raise the issue directly with Ministers during International Development questions on Wednesday 23 May.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In this morning’s newspapers, my constituent Marie McCourt tells of her anguish that her daughter’s killer has been granted temporary release from prison. I have asked the Justice Secretary to intervene, but will the Government now introduce legislation—“Helen’s Law”—to ensure that this man, and other murderers who do not reveal the location of their victims’ remains, stay where they belong, in prison?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an appalling situation and I can absolutely sympathise with anybody in that position, where the offender is allowed to get out of prison early. I am totally sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s desire to see that change. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the particular circumstances of that case with Ministers.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Channel 4 has announced the creation of regional hubs and news bureaux. May we have a debate in Government time on why Colchester, as the creative capital of the eastern region and with a world-class university, would be a perfect location for such a site?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on making his pitch very publicly here today. I certainly think that there will be plenty of opportunities for this discussion as the time approaches for a decision to be made.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of cuts to community pharmacies on their ability to carry out their pivotal role at the heart of the health service?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the incredibly valuable role of community pharmacies. He may want to raise that in an Adjournment debate so he can discuss with Ministers precisely what steps he thinks they should take to protect that incredibly valuable role.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): A few weeks ago Councillor David Slater, a sitting county and borough councillor and the former, and longest-serving, leader of Charnwood Borough Council, passed away. David was a selfless and dedicated public servant. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to David’s work and the work done every day across this country by elected local councillors, regardless of party, and may we have a debate on the value that that brings to our communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I think we all know of people who go above and beyond the call of duty in serving the people of this country in councils across the United Kingdom. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his constituent. He may wish to seek a Backbench Business debate so that all Members can pay tribute to those who do such good work in their own areas.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on the crucial matter of mobility benefits for infants with life-threatening conditions? There is currently an anomaly in the system in that they must be aged three to qualify, despite medical assessments being able to be undertaken well before this time. May we have that debate so that children’s lives and the quality of their lives are paramount and their families do not have to spend what is precious time battling the system?
Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Lady says. It is vital that young children are able to live as normal a life as possible regardless of their disability. She may wish to raise that at Work and Pensions questions on 21 May.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Last Sunday, the annual Crazy Hats walk took place in Northamptonshire, when we remember those who have tragically lost their lives to breast cancer and raise funds to support those affected by this dreadful disease. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the remarkable Glennis Hooper, the founder of the charity, who has raised millions of pounds for care in Northamptonshire, and may we have a debate next week on the important role that these charities play in supporting NHS care?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to all those who do so much to support cancer care of all types, and particularly breast cancer care. I have a number of family members who have suffered from this awful disease, which takes far too many lives and damages so many lives. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all who are raising funds to support cancer charities.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The Financial Conduct Authority is currently considering whether to extend regulations that have been successfully applied to payday loan providers to doorstep lenders. This is an important issue for financial inclusion. Could we debate it please in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The behaviour of payday lenders and other high-cost lenders is a scourge for people on low incomes often who cannot afford their incredibly high interest rates. He is right to raise that matter. The FCA has within its remit the ability to look further into this. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise directly with Ministers the progress of the FCA’s review of the cost of payday lending.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): France, Germany, Italy and Spain have built their auxiliary tanker and support ships in domestic yards. May we have a debate on the value of the Ministry of Defence commissioning our three new fleet solid support ships using British yards, British steel and British jobs, which would bring tax and national insurance contributions in excess of £350 million into the Treasury?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises the important matter of how we spend our defence budget, and she is right to ask what more could be done to ensure that British firms benefit from those contracts. She will be aware that the Ministry of Defence seeks wherever possible to ensure that UK companies get the best chance to bid for that business, but that it will nevertheless seek the best value for the taxpayer at the same time as committing to a thriving UK defence industry.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): May we have a debate on the mental health of new mothers?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend and I share a passion for the importance of a secure early bond between babies and their parents, and she rightly raises the need to ensure that all mums have the right level of support, both physically and mentally, in those crucial early years. I am very sympathetic to the idea of a Back-Bench debate on a Westminster Hall debate on this, so that hon. Members can put forward their own thoughts on what more support could be provided to new mums.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Since our exchange last week, Cottrell Park golf course has written to the Leader of the House and to me to say that it is happy for women to play golf competitively on Saturday mornings. Unfortunately, my constituent, Lowri Roberts, remains suspended from the course for having spoken out on this matter. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate on the issue? If we want women and girls to participate in sport, this kind of thing has to stop.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to see that the Sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has walked into the Chamber just at the right moment, and that she heard what he said. I saw the letter from the golf course, and I join him in believing that women and girls should be encouraged to play all sports, including golf, on Saturdays, Sundays and every other day of the week—provided of course that they are getting all their school work done.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Supporting the high street is now more pertinent than ever, and a proven key way of helping to do that is to lower parking charges. Will the Leader of the House support a debate on the impact of lowering parking charges, to encourage Wiltshire County Council and others to recognise the merits of doing that?

Andrea Leadsom: A big issue in all our constituencies is the question of whether we should have parking charges that raise revenues or no parking charges, which helps the high street to thrive. I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend’s request. She might like to raise the matter directly with Ministers at Transport questions on 24 May.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In response to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Leader of the House made the point, perfectly reasonably, that the Government have to balance the rights of Back-Bench Members against the sometimes necessary delivery of ministerial statements. There is not necessarily a perfect balance, but I entirely accept that the Government have to make a judgment on that matter. The House will know that I, too, have to make a judgment about the allocation of time. This is supposed to be a Backbench Business Committee day, and there are two Backbench Business Committee debates, the first of which was lost a few weeks ago, and the merits of which will not be disputed. The Leader of the House herself has referred to the important issue of plastics. The second of those debates, in the name of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), is time-sensitive; it needs to take place today.
However, the Government have chosen to put on two ministerial statements today, which I accept is their right, procedurally, although whether that is altogether popular with the Backbench Business Committee is another matter. I have to make a judgment about balance, and I accept that the statements must take place and that there is interest in them, but we must get on to the Backbench Business Committee debates. More than my recent predecessors, I have tended to try to call everybody on statements, including at business questions; the record proves that beyond peradventure. Sadly, today is an exception, and that is the consequence of the management of the business, which is not in the hands of the Chair. I am trying to fight to defend the rights of Back-Bench Members, and I will always do so. I apologise to disappointed colleagues; they can try another time.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman’s point of order flows specifically from earlier exchanges and therefore, exceptionally, I will take it now if it is brief.

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. At oral questions this morning, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), advised the House that all export licences for military and dual-use goods are examined and issued on a case-by-case basis. In fact, his own Department’s website clearly shows that a considerable number of such goods are exported under open general export licences that specifically exempt the exporter from applying on a case-by-case basis. Have you received any request from the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade to come back to the House to correct the record following what I am sure was an inadvertent mistake?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, has an air of expectation and a plaintive appeal etched on the contours of his face. The short answer is that I have received no such indication from a Minister, and the hon. Gentleman will not take offence if I say that, on this occasion, I think he was at least as interested in giving his views to the House as in hearing any views put to him. He has placed his concern firmly on the record and, having known the hon. Gentleman for over two decades, I can predict with confidence that he will pursue it with a terrier-like pertinacity.

If there are no further points of order—in fact, there cannot be—we come now to the oral statement from the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

11.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): With permission, I will make a statement on the gambling review and the publication of our response to the consultation on proposals for changes to gaming machines and social responsibility requirements across the gambling industry.

In October 2016, the Government announced a review of gaming machines and social responsibility measures to ensure that we have the right balance between a sector that can grow and contribute to the economy and one that is socially responsible and doing all it should to protect consumers and communities from harm. Underlying that objective was a deep focus on reducing gambling-related harm, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring that those experiencing problems are getting the help they need. Following a call for evidence, we set out a package of measures in a consultation that was published in October last year. The package included social responsibility measures to minimise the risk of gambling-related harm, covering gambling advertising, online gambling, gaming machines and research, education and treatment.

The consultation ran from 31 October 2017 to 23 January 2018. We received over 7,000 survey responses from a wide range of interested parties and more than 240 submissions of supplementary information and evidence from the public, industry, local authorities, parliamentarians, academics, charities and faith groups. We welcome the responses to the consultation and, in preparing our conclusions, we have reflected on the evidence, concerns and issues that have been raised. We considered the responses alongside advice that we have received from the Gambling Commission and the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, and we have set out measures on gaming machines, as well as action across online, advertising, research, education and treatment and, more widely, the public health agenda in regard to gambling.

Before I set out the detail of the package of measures, let me say that we acknowledge that millions of people enjoy gambling responsibly and that we are committed to supporting a healthy gambling industry that generates employment and investment. However, over the course of the review I have met many people who have experienced gambling addiction and those who support them, including relatives of those who have sadly lost their loved-ones to suicide as a result of the impact of gambling. In addition, I have visited the incredible treatment services that are there to support addicts. We are clear that gambling can involve a serious risk of harm to individual players, as well as to their families and to the communities they live in, and we must ensure they are protected.

The Government are satisfied with the overall framework of gambling regulation but, as part of our action to build a fairer society and a stronger economy, we believe that when new evidence comes to light, we need to act to target any gambling products or activities that cause concern. It is important to acknowledge that, although gambling-related harm is about more than one product or gambling activity, there is a clear case for the Government to make targeted interventions to tackle the riskiest products, with the objective of reducing harm.
One product in particular, B2 gaming machines or fixed odds betting terminals—FOBTs—generated enormous interest throughout the review process. At consultation, we set out the evidence for why we believe targeted intervention is required on B2 gaming machines, and we set out the options for stake reduction. Although overall problem gambling rates have remained unchanged since the Gambling Act 2005, it is clear that consistently high rates of problem gambling remain among players of these machines. Despite action by industry and the regulator, a high proportion of those seeking treatment for gambling addiction identify the machines as their main form of gambling.

According to the latest available data, across Great Britain 11.5% of players of gaming machines in bookmakers are found to be problem gamblers, and a further 32% are considered at risk of harm. In England, 13.6% of players of FOBTs are problem gamblers—the highest rate for any gambling activity. We are concerned that such factors are further amplified by the relationship between the location of B2 gaming machines and areas of high deprivation, with players tending to live in areas with greater levels of income deprivation than the population average. We also know that those who are unemployed are more likely to most often stake £100 than any other socioeconomic group.

Following our analysis of all the evidence and advice we received, we have come to the conclusion that only by reducing the maximum stake from £100 to £2 will we substantially impact on harm to the player and to wider communities. A £2 maximum stake will reduce the ability to suffer high session losses, our best proxy for harm, while also targeting the greatest proportion of problem gamblers. It will mitigate risk for the most vulnerable players, for whom even moderate losses might be harmful. In particular, we note from gaming machine data that, of the 170,000 sessions on B2 roulette machines that ended with losses to the player of over £1,000, none involved average stakes of £2 or below, but losses of that scale still persist at stakes of £5 and £10.

The response to our consultation has been overwhelmingly in support of a significant reduction in B2 stakes. The majority of respondents to the consultation submitted opinions in favour of a £2 limit, indicating strong public approval for this step. I am grateful for the cross-party work on this issue, and I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has fought tirelessly for this, alongside other Members, including the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whom I also regard as a friend. The latter having been a very strong supporter of change when he was in government.

Elsewhere in the industry, we are, for the time being, maintaining the status quo across all other gaming machine stakes, prizes and allocations. We have, however, agreed to an uplift for stakes and prizes on prize gaming, which we consider to be sufficiently low risk.

We are aware that the factors that influence the extent of harm to a given player are wider than any one product, and include factors around the player, the product and the environment. The response therefore also sets out action on increasing player protection measures on other gaming machines on the high street; increasing protections around online gambling, including stronger age verification rules and proposals to require operators to set limits on a consumer’s spending until affordability checks have been conducted; doing more on research, education and treatment of problem gambling, including a review by Public Health England of the evidence relating to the public health harms of gambling; enhancing protections around gambling advertising, including a major multimillion pound advertising campaign led by GambleAware on responsible gambling, to be launched later this year; and filling the gaps in evidence on advertising and harm, with substantial new research commissioned by GambleAware on the effects of gambling advertising and marketing on children, young people and vulnerable groups.

Looking ahead, we will also be considering the issue of 16-year-olds playing national lottery products as part of the next licence competition for the national lottery. We aim to gather evidence on this issue with sufficient time to consider it fully ahead of the next licence competition. Changes to the B2 stake will be effected through regulations in Parliament. The move will need parliamentary approval and, in recognition of the potential impact of this change for betting shops, we will also engage with the gambling industry to ensure it is given sufficient time for implementation.

In conclusion, we want a healthy gambling industry that contributes to the economy, but also one that does all it can to protect players and their families, as well as the wider communities, from harm. We will work with the industry on the impact of these changes and are confident that this innovative sector will step up and help achieve the necessary balance. I commend this statement to the House.

11.45 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Good morning to you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register.

At the outset, let me warmly congratulate the Minister on her decision today. I am not going to be mealy-mouthed about it: we are absolutely delighted that the Government have decided to deliver a Labour party manifesto pledge. Today, we have had this on FOBTs and yesterday we had the railways taken back into public ownership—it is just a shame we could not make it three with the Leveson inquiry earlier in the week. I genuinely believe this is a great moment; it is the right decision and I applaud the Minister for making it. Having been in government, I know how tricky it is to reach a consensus on these complex regulatory issues, and she deserves recognition from those in all parts of the House for getting this through. We should also recognise that this is a victory for the many people in this House who have led this campaign, particularly my friend, colleague and fellow deputy leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has fought tirelessly for this, alongside other Members, including the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whom I also regard as a friend.

During this process, we have seen how some parts of the gambling industry have stood in defiance of Ministers, civil servants, parliamentarians, clinicians and other professionals, and have sought to delay at every turn common-sense decisions that would have given comfort to those who have been afflicted by these machines.
There is a lesson in this: if the UK is to retain its reputation for innovative, light-touch regulation and responsible gambling, the wider industry needs to start taking its responsibilities and obligations to players seriously. Any Government, whatever their political hue, will be deeply concerned about the situation we find ourselves in: we have 430,000 gambling addicts; 2 million vulnerable players at risk of developing an addiction; and 25,000 young people who gamble every week. It is incumbent on the industry now to show the Government and Parliament its progress on how it shoulders these responsibilities and uses its £13.8 billion a year yield to deal with harms created by gambling. Across the industry we have global leaders in innovative online gambling products who are seeking solutions to these issues through investment and technology. However, too many household name companies have belligerently denied the facts in front of their noses, so our message today is clear: clean up your act or a future Labour Government will do it for you.

In that spirit of unity and cross-party co-operation, I would like to make a few suggestions to the Minister, if I may—[Interruption.] I say that genuinely; there is no need to laugh. We understand there are concerns about revenue reduction, and the Minister has suggested she will increase remote gaming duty to cover this. Would it not be more appropriate to close the loophole that allows British online gambling companies based in Gibraltar to avoid paying tax? Secondly, the Government have chosen not to implement a statutory levy for research, education and treatment at this point, but there was a significant call for that, including from some gambling industry leaders. So will she think again on it, in order to guarantee that resources are available for treatment? Thirdly, we all want addicts to access the most appropriate treatment, so will the Government please start to collect proper data in that area? I have asked a number of questions to Ministers about how many addicts are receiving treatment on the NHS and how much treatment costs the NHS, but we have been told time and time again that the Departments do not hold or collect that data. I am sure we all agree that if we are to understand and better treat this problem, we need better data.

Fourthly, some of the largest companies affected by this decision have argued for restrictions on betting advertising for football in particular. Given that that is also the No. 1 concern expressed by parents, it seems to me that the Government have been hasty in ignoring it.

Finally, our view is that the 2005 Act is no longer fit for purpose. We need a new gambling Act that is fit for the digital age. How draconian that new Act might be is dependent on how the industry chooses to engage with Parliament. We call on the innovative and responsible new leaders of the gambling industry to show us that they take their obligations seriously, and to work with us to alleviate problem gambling.

In conclusion, cutting the maximum stake on FOBTs is a big step in the right direction, but it is just one part of the puzzle. In praising Ministers, I urge the Government to use the new spirit of consensus to introduce a new gambling Act, fit for the purposes of the digital age.

Tracey Crouch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Rather than talk about Labour manifestos, perhaps I should remind the House that it was Labour legislation that caused this issue. However, I will be generous and say that I think it was an unintended consequence of the liberalisation of the gambling industry. I was a staffer in Parliament at that time and clearly remember the significant interest in casinos and supercasinos; much of the discussion about gaming machines was lost in that debate.

The hon. Gentleman raised several key points, starting with the closing of loopholes for operators in Gibraltar. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reminded me that it was his private Member’s Bill on offshore gambling that started the process that led to our changing the legislation to require Gibraltar-based operators to pay their gambling taxes to the Exchequer, so I feel we have already dealt with that issue. While I am referring to the Secretary of State, may I acknowledge his work to progress the response to the review? His support on this issue has been phenomenal and I am incredibly grateful for the work he has done.

We have taken the decision not to introduce a statutory levy at this point. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the comments I have made at various events, when I have referred to this situation as the last-chance saloon. We hope that the work we are doing to reduce FOBT stakes will reduce the vulnerability and the harm, but that is not to say that we do not need to improve treatment services. We are working incredibly hard with the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England to gather together the evidence that the hon. Gentleman cites, so that we can get the right treatment services in the right places. We recognise, as do colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, that treatment services are currently limited, and have perhaps been the Cinderella service in the addictions sphere. We are working on that and have had some great advice from across the clinical spectrum on what we need to do.

On advertising, I fully understand the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, and those of others who have raised the issue. Since the publication of the review we have made excellent progress on strengthening the rules on gambling advertising, including the publication by the Committee of Advertising Practice of tough new guidance on how to protect the vulnerable. From June, a responsible gambling message will appear on-screen throughout all TV gambling adverts, not just at the end, and the Gambling Commission has already consulted on expanding the sanctions for breaching the advertising code. There is much more to come, including the advertising campaign to which I referred, as well as the work to look into how we can protect children that will be done later this year. We are also going to have some research on the effect of marketing and advertising on children and young people. Although we may not have made that tough decision now, it is certainly not a closed issue.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I rise simply to congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on arriving at this decision. This campaign has embraced all the House, including the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who have joined in the efforts, so this is not a day for party political comments. I simply say that back in 2005 many Members from all parties were concerned about the legislation that was going through, not just on gaming machines but
on supercasinos. Does my hon. Friend agree that notwithstanding the fact that there are people in this House who believe this is an issue of choice, when there is clear evidence that normal choice is bent by addiction and by the addictive level in the way that people exercise their choice, that is when Government should step in? This is not about the nanny state; this is about righting a wrong and helping those who need help.

Tracey Crouch: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. As I said in my opening statement, this is not about one particular product, although what we are doing is targeting intervention on the most harmful product, and the most harmful product on our high streets at the moment is the fixed odds betting terminal.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I welcome the announcement by the Government to reduce the maximum unit stake on FOBTs to £2 per spin. This is something that I have strongly campaigned for in my role as vice-chair of the all-party group on FOBTs, alongside other MPs, such as the extremely hard-working chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith).

I praise the Minister for her action on this issue and her acknowledgement of what harm these machines do. I do not believe that we would have achieved this outcome without her continued efforts in persuading her colleagues of the need for action on gambling-related harm.

Gambling-related harm is an issue that rightly continues to receive more attention. It is vital that the Government continue to listen to the many people, such as Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones, and the organisations that are highlighting how gambling is becoming more prevalent, especially among young people. According to the Gambling Commission's statistics, more than half a million children are gambling every week. Therefore, I am glad to hear the Minister say that gambling-related harm is about more than any one product or gambling activity and that the Government intend to enhance protection around gambling advertising, including a major multi-million pound advertising campaign. I welcome the fact that this campaign promotes responsible gambling.

I acknowledge the comments that the Minister made earlier in response to the Opposition that education to prevent gambling-related harm has to be funded. I believe that to fund such education, to promote social responsibility and to safeguard vulnerable groups, the Government should introduce a statutory levy on bookmakers to fund GambleAware and its activities to tackle gambling-related harm.

I welcome today's announcement and hope that common sense and cross-party collaboration can continue in this area. I ask the Minister to work with the Scottish Government on any legislation that may already be devolved, or may be more appropriate to be devolved, to ensure the success of this proposal. Hopefully, this can be a platform to implement more legislation to help those affected by gambling and those who may become problem gamblers.

Tracey Crouch: It was remiss of me not to acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's work on this cross-party campaign and I do apologise for that. I thank him for mentioning the work of Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones, because having that kind of clinical expertise and real insight into the effect of addictions has been enormously helpful.

As I said earlier, we have ruled out a statutory levy at this point, but not forever. We have seen from the voluntary levy a 16% increase in the amount of money going into research, education and treatment, and we hope that from the measures that we introduce today, we will reduce the harm and that we will therefore see a significant rebalancing of the income from the levy with the treatment and the services.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I had the pleasure of speaking with the Minister from the Scottish Government, and I have assured her that we are very happy to work closely together in respect of the devolved legislation that may or may not be required.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It has come to something when Members of this House, particularly those on the Labour Benches, cheer when a decision is made that will put up to 20,000 decent working-class people out of their jobs when there is no evidence to do so. That was even admitted by Adrian Parkinson who ran the Campaign for Fairer Gambling and who, last week, wrote an article in The Daily Telegraph saying that there was actually no evidence behind the campaign that he was running, which has taken in all these Members across the House. By how much has the Minister's Department estimated that the problem gambling rate in this country will reduce as a result of this decision, and what evidence does she have for making that estimate?

Tracey Crouch: Some 176,000 people who play FOBTs are problem gamblers, which is currently the highest rate of gambling activity by product. We respect and understand that this decision may well have an impact on jobs in bookmakers, but we have addressed the harm of fixed odds betting terminals and we are working very closely with the industry to support bookmakers to continue to be able to grow and contribute to the economy. On the impact on problem gamblers, we expect this decision to have a significant impact on the reduction of problem gambling.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I rise to be completely non-partisan and to beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, and that of the Minister, while I say a heartfelt thank you on behalf of the very many thousands of people who have contacted me to say that these machines have destroyed their lives or the lives of those they love and taken away their homes, their dignity, their self-respect. I also say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), a fellow Labour deputy leader, to the Secretary of State and to the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), and a very special thank you to my friend—he is indeed a friend and has been a dear friend to me over this issue—the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). On behalf of everyone whose lives they have made so much better today, I thank them all.
Tracey Crouch: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who has been a stalwart campaigner on this issue. As she pointed out, this is not just about individuals; it is about their families and the communities they live in, which is why it was important we took this decision.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is most welcome that the Government have recognised that my father’s weekly pools coupon, my mother’s visit to the bingo hall and my aunt’s gambling, which, with working-class lyricism, she described as her “flutter on the gee-gees” were a far cry from the brutalising effects of these gambling machines. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, who met me and others, and to his ministerial team for doing the right thing, rather than the easy thing. Will they now do the right thing by taking a very close look at online gambling and particularly online gambling that targets young children by using cartoon images and other devices to draw them in? This is an urgent matter. As Members on both sides of the Chamber have said, this is about social responsibility; and social responsibility is not the preserve of any one party in the House.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right that a great deal of further work needs to be done to protect vulnerable people, particularly children, from the harm of online gambling. We are looking at all those issues, and I expect the Gambling Commission to take a robust look at some of those he raises.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and all those Members who have fought consistently for this decision, but she, like me, will know that there is also B3 content on machines in betting shops, and reducing the stake to £2 on the B2 content means people can now lose money faster on the B3 content. What will she do to research that fact and to make sure that people do not just migrate to the B3 content and that the problem does not thereby continue?

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. We continue to monitor B3 gaming machines—we are concerned about their growth—and to consider increased player protection measures. We continue to keep this category of machine, along with everything else, under review.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the Government’s decision to cut the maximum permissible stake for B2 machines, but on what empirical research did the Minister base her decision to go so much further than the recommendation of the Gambling Commission that £30 or below would offer the necessary protection?

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who started on this journey with me three years ago. We received a significant amount of evidence. The Gambling Commission actually recommended a cut to between £2 and £30, and we have gone to the lowest end, because that is what we think will most reduce harm.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister has told us that when new evidence comes to light, we need to act to target any gambling products that cause concern. Will she look at the problems of online gambling emerging through young people playing video games and third-party websites selling items from so-called loot boxes? Belgium is the latest country to take action. What are the Government doing to work with the industry to tackle this issue?

Tracey Crouch: Quite simply, what is illegal offline should be illegal online. The Gambling Commission is live to this issue and is looking at it closely. We expect it to maintain close sight of the emerging issues regarding vulnerability and gambling being targeted at children.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the impact that these measures might have on online gambling, especially problem online gambling?

Tracey Crouch: The whole review was about reducing the harm caused by problem gambling. This is not just about one particular product. We are looking at the whole suite of products, including online gambling, and that is why we have set out a full package of measures to help ensure that we have a socially responsible gambling sector.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): May I join others in personally congratulating the Minister? This announcement is a considerable personal achievement for her, and she should be very proud of it. My concern relates to the impact on people’s mental health and, indeed, the number of people who lose their lives as a result of gambling addiction. Will she think again about the case for a statutory levy on the basis of the principle that the polluter should pay? The cause of the damage is so significant that there seems to be a powerful case for the industry to contribute to the cost of treatment.

Tracey Crouch: I share the right hon. Gentleman’s views on the connection between mental health and gambling. I met a significant number of gambling addicts who had contemplated suicide, in part because of the problem that they faced. It was desperately sad to hear those stories. We are working with Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care to improve research, education and treatment, and we will continue to ensure that the industry continues to pay what it should pay to support those services.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister on reducing the fixed odds betting terminals stake to £2, given the damage they do to family life and the huge waste of police time involved. May I express the hope that this decision heralds her Department also doing the right thing regarding the scourge of junk food advertising to children that we will need to deal with shortly?

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend serves on the Health Committee and I know that he heard some significant evidence from a professor about the impact of gambling addiction, particularly on suicide rates among young men. I am grateful for his support.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Has the Minister seen this morning’s statement from the British Horseracing Authority, which says that it understands the need to tackle problem gambling, but also points
out the unique relationship between betting and racing? Will the Government outline how they will mitigate any potential financial loss to our great sport, and does the Minister agree that a responsible recreational flutter on the gee-gees is to be enjoyed—and, indeed, is enjoyed—by millions of people across the country?

Tracey Crouch: Many people bet on horses day in, day out, and do so incredibly responsibly. I assure the House that the Secretary of State would not have allowed anything to go ahead that had an impact on horse-racing or race courses. We will be working closely with the BHA, its chairman and its chief executive on how we can take forward this work. The Secretary of State has today written to the BHA to work through some of the transitional issues, and we continue to support horse-racing first and foremost.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): May I thank the Minister for today’s announcement of the £2 stake and the Secretary of State for his personal determination to do what is right by vulnerable families affected by problem gambling? Some 2.3 million people self-identify as problem gamblers. The Minister said that the Department is working with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that treatment services are available. Will Ministers also work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, local councils and charities to ensure that the most comprehensive support services are available to those problem gamblers who need it most?

Tracey Crouch: We will work with all partners that help to reduce the harm of problem gambling. It is worth referencing the fact that it was the local authorities—led by the London Borough of Newham—that responded to this issue by calling for the stake to be reduced to £2.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased that the Minister mentioned the relationship between the location of B2 gaming machines and areas of high deprivation. In the three Hull constituencies, some £9.1 million was lost in 2015-16 on fixed odds betting terminals. Does more need to be done in our schools to raise awareness of gambling addiction?

Tracey Crouch: As the hon. Lady knows, I am very familiar with Hull and its areas of deprivation. There are similar aspects in my constituency, where I have seen an increase in the number of bookmakers and a proliferation of these machines in deprived communities. We are always happy to work across the board with departmental partners to increase understanding and awareness of gambling harm, and we will also do that through wider work beyond schools on advertising.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister on her personal commitment to this and all those who have campaigned so hard. This is a great day. I know that the Minister recognises the devastating mental health consequences of gambling addiction. This also has to be about protecting those who are struggling with their mental health at the moment and in the future, so will she meet me to discuss the next stages of the review?

Tracey Crouch: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I was struck by the Committee’s report on suicide, because in previous work on that really sad subject, gambling addiction has not really been highlighted as a potential concern. I am happy to meet and discuss that further.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Credit cards amount to 10% to 20% of online deposits, effectively funding gambling by borrowing, which we all know can lead to unsustainable debt and further mental health problems. Will the Minister consider banning credit card betting?

Tracey Crouch: As part of the further work that the Gambling Commission will be doing on online gambling harms, it will consider whether gambling using credit cards online should continue to be permitted. We will work to develop a more detailed understanding of that issue and the associated risks of gambling on credit.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Many Islanders are very grateful for this decision by the Minister and the Secretary of State, and I welcome it strongly. Is the Minister aware that on the Isle of Wight more than £19.9 million was lost on these wretched machines between 2008 and 2016? Does she agree that there are many better ways of spending that money? Does she also agree that the gambling industry, in its almost parasitic reliance on these wretched fixed odds betting terminals, has shown itself not to be as responsible as, frankly, it should be?

Tracey Crouch: I am always grateful for support from the Island. I was not aware of those specific statistics, but I am not surprised. We will continue to work with everybody to ensure that we create a responsible gambling industry.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In the House, we are sometimes divided, but I commend the Minister for this action, which we will look back on as a major step forward in public health. In my city of Glasgow, £35 million a year is frittered away on FOBTs. When will the regulations come before Parliament? In the face of a very aggressive campaign by the Association of British Bookmakers, we need to stand firm on this major public health issue.

Tracey Crouch: I know that you, Mr Speaker, and other Members of the House will recognise that there is a process that we have to go through. We expect the regulations to come before the House later this year, with reasonable implementation time following that. I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that there is a parliamentary process that we have to go through, but today we are pleased to announce the policy that the maximum stake will be reduced from £100 to £2.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I strongly welcome this announcement, which addresses an issue that has destroyed far too many lives. I appreciate that advertising is regulated, but we have all noticed the dramatic increase in gambling advertising online and on TV, preying on the vulnerable. What more can we do to address that?
Tracey Crouch: There has been significant progress since the review started, and we will see some significant differences as the year progresses. We have had some firm conversations about the tone and style of gambling adverts, including in-play gambling and “bet now” adverts. A lot of work has been done by the Committee of Advertising Practice to ensure that we work on tone and content and try to reduce some of the harm done by gambling adverts.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I declare an interest: in the '80s and early '90s, I worked in high street betting shops. I very much welcome this announcement. The betting industry has warned that the £2 stake for FOBTs will result in thousands of betting shops closing and up to 21,000 job losses. Does the Minister agree that if outlets do close, it is because they were open specifically to house these machines, and that the real danger to jobs in the bookmaking industry is the deployment of self-service betting terminals?

Tracey Crouch: It is only fair that I inform the House that a significant number of people who work in bookmakers called for us to make these stake reductions or ban these machines altogether because they have seen a change in customer behaviour in betting shops. The addiction of many people to these machines has led to violence and intimidating behaviour towards members of staff, sometimes in single-staffed bookmakers.

While we recognise that there may well be an impact on jobs, we will work closely with colleagues across Government and with partner organisations to ensure that we support members of staff. We are seeing a shift in the way that gambling is done, and there has been significant consolidation within the industry. This industry is changing, regardless of today’s announcement, but we want to ensure that we support the safety of staff.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Before I became a Member of Parliament, I met the then Secretary of State at the Hamworthy Club in Merley, which happens to be the cricket club that I play for, to discuss this very issue with local residents who were concerned about fixed odds betting terminals, and in particular their impact on vulnerable young men. I warmly welcome the statement and the impact that this will have on some of the most vulnerable in our society who are prone to problem gambling as a result of these machines.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s support. That is why we did this. We had to balance the interests of an industry that is an important contributor to the economy with the harm caused by these machines, which have blighted many people’s lives.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am pleased to add my congratulations to the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and the other campaigners. The Minister mentioned the devolved Administrations. Can she assure me that there have been conversations with the Welsh Government? It would be truly awful if this measure did not apply at the same time and in the same way in Wales, through the Wales Act 2017. We do not want to be discriminated against because we live on the better side of Offa’s Dyke.

Tracey Crouch: I assure the hon. Lady that those conversations have taken place, and the Welsh Government were involved in parts of the consultation prior to the announcement.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I add my congratulations to the Minister and to everyone who has campaigned for this change. Reducing the maximum stake to £2 will provide more protection for those with a gambling addiction and some of the most vulnerable in our society. I also welcome the Minister’s comments about looking into online gambling. Is she prepared to say specifically what the Government might do to reduce the stakes in online games such as blackjack, where a phenomenal amount of money can also be lost very quickly?

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Lady is right, and that is why we are asking the Gambling Commission to look at online gambling. Online gambling is evolving incredibly quickly, and we need to ensure that we have the right player protections in place online, as we do on the high street. In many respects, it is easier to track play and understand player behaviour online than on the high street. We continue to take a robust look at online gambling.
Building Regulations and Fire Safety

12.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the publication of Dame Judith Hackitt’s final report following her independent review of building regulations and fire safety.

Members will be aware that my predecessor and the then Home Secretary asked Dame Judith to carry out the review following the Grenfell Tower fire. We are approaching one year on from that tragic event, and those affected are firmly in our minds. I met some of the bereaved and survivors as soon as I could after I was appointed, and that strengthened my determination to ensure that they continue to receive the support they need and that we learn from this tragedy, so that nothing like it can ever happen again. With this in mind, Dame Judith was asked to undertake her review of the existing system as part of a comprehensive response to the fire. I want to pay tribute to Dame Judith and all those who contributed to this important report.

The report’s publication is a watershed for everyone who has a stake in ensuring that the people living in buildings like Grenfell Tower are safe—and feel safe. Dame Judith is clear that the current system, developed over many years under successive Governments, is not fit for purpose. She is calling for major reform and a change of culture, with the onus more clearly on everyone involved to manage the risks they create at every stage, and Government doing more to set and enforce high standards. The Government agree with that assessment and support the principles behind the report’s recommendations for a new system. We agree with the call for greater clarity and accountability over who is responsible for building safety during the construction, refurbishment and ongoing management of high-rise homes.

The Hackitt review has shown that in too many cases people who should be accountable for fire safety have failed in their duties. In future, the Government will ensure that those responsible for a building must demonstrate that they have taken decisive action to reduce building safety risks, and that they will be held to account. We agree that the system should be overseen by a more effective regulatory framework, including stronger powers to inspect high-rise buildings and sanctions to tackle irresponsible behaviour. We agree that there should be no buck-passing between different parts of the industry and that everyone needs to work together to change the system. Crucially, given the concerns raised following the Grenfell tragedy, we agree that residents must be empowered with relevant information. They must be able to act to make their homes safer.

This review has implications for Government as a whole. I am committing today to bring forward legislation that delivers meaningful and lasting change and gives residents a much stronger voice in an improved system of fire safety. Changing the law will take time, but, as Dame Judith acknowledges, we can—and must—start changing the culture and practice right now. As a first step, we are asking everyone involved to have their say on how we can achieve this by contacting us by the end of July. Their response will inform a more detailed statement to the House in the autumn on how we intend to implement the new regulatory system. I will also update the House on progress before the summer recess.

We all have a role to play. For our part, the Government have accepted and have been implementing the recommendations that relate to us since Dame Judith published her interim report in December. First, we are consulting on significantly restricting or banning the use of desktop studies to assess cladding systems. Inappropriate use of desktop studies is unacceptable, and I will not hesitate to ban them if the consultation, which closes on 25 May, does not demonstrate that they can be used safely.

Secondly, we are working with industry to clarify building regulations fire safety guidance, and I will publish this for consultation in July. Let me be clear: the cladding believed to be on Grenfell Tower was unlawful under existing building regulations. It should not have been used. I will ensure that there is no room for doubt over what materials can be used safely in cladding of high-rise residential buildings. Having listened carefully to concerns, the Government will consult on banning the use of combustible materials in cladding systems on high-rise residential buildings.

Thirdly, we will work with the industry to make the wider suite of building regulations guidance more user-friendly.

All this continues our work to ensure that people are safe. Since the Grenfell tragedy, my Department has worked with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding, ensure that interim measures are in place to reduce risks and give building owners clear advice about what they need to do over the longer term to make buildings safe.

In addition, I am issuing a direction today to all local housing authorities to pay particular regard to cladding-related issues when reviewing housing in their areas. Remediation work has started on two thirds of buildings in the social housing sector, and we have called on building owners in the private sector to follow the example set by the social sector and not pass costs on to leaseholders. I find it outrageous that some private sector landlords have been slow to co-operate with us on this vital work. I am calling on them to do the right thing. If they do not, I am not ruling anything out at this stage.

As the Prime Minister announced yesterday, the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of potentially dangerous cladding by social landlords, with costs estimated at £400 million. This will ensure that landlords can focus their efforts on making ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding systems safe for the buildings they own. We want to allocate this funding for remediation as soon as possible. We will announce more details shortly, including how we will encourage landlords to continue to pursue other parties for costs where they are responsible or at fault. We will also continue to offer financial flexibilities for local authorities that need to undertake essential fire safety work.

We must create a culture that truly puts people, and their safety, first—that inspires confidence and, yes, rebuilds public trust. Dame Judith’s review and the significant changes that will flow from it are important
first steps, helping us to ensure that when we say, “Never again”, we mean it. I commend this statement to the House.

12.25 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement this morning. I join him in thanking Dame Judith Hackitt and her team for all the work that they have done on this review. This is, as she says, a complex and confusing area.

Our building safety system catastrophically failed the residents of Grenfell Tower and has proved to be comprehensively flawed when over 300 other tower blocks around the country are wrapped in the same dangerous, unsafe cladding. Dame Judith said this morning: “This is a broken system and it needs to be fixed.”

But while there are some welcome reforms in her report, it will not do that. Why no ban on combustible cladding and insulation? It really beggars belief that the report continues to give a green light to combustible materials on high-rise blocks. I say to the Secretary of State: do not consult on it—do it. Seventy-two people died in Grenfell Tower. Australia had a high-rise fire in 2014; it now has a ban. Dubai had a high-rise fire in 2015; it has a ban. We must do the same. We owe it to the residents and we owe it to residents living today in other tower blocks with the same Grenfell-style cladding. The Secretary of State was here yesterday when MPs on both sides of the House argued for this. Even Dame Judith Hackitt was reported this morning as saying that she would support the Secretary of State if he did this just after ruling it out, of course, in her own report.

There are some steps that Dame Judith recommends that are welcome and that would help, such as clearer duties on those responsible for building safety and new ways for residents to have their concerns heard and acted on. I have to say, however, that too many sections of this report read like an industry insider urging reform without rocking the boat, referring to “culture change”, “clearer guidance”, a “less prescriptive system” and “greater responsibility” from some of those who have been cutting corners to cut costs in the current system.

I say to the Secretary of State that this is a missed opportunity to set clear-cut new standards that ensure that a disaster like Grenfell Tower can never happen again. With regard to what is not in this report, will he explain why and what he is going to do about those matters? They include not only having no ban on combustible cladding systems, but having no ban on desktop studies for safety clearance without testing, no plan for fitting sprinklers, no timetable for new safety regulations in legislation and no powers or tough enough sanctions to compel private block owners to get fire tests done and then get vital safety work done.

The Secretary of State cannot simply hold this report at arm’s length and say it is out for comment and consultation. This review was commissioned by the Government, with a chair picked by the Government, working with support from Government staff. He says that in principle he accepts the recommendations. While I agree that he can endorse some of the recommendations, he must reject others that fall short and he must act where recommendations are missing. If all he does in practice is accept the recommendations, the division of opinion in this House will not be between his side and ours, but between both sides and his Front Bench. This is not a matter of party politics; it is a matter of public safety, public confidence and, above all, a national response that measures up to the tragedy—the national tragedy—of the Grenfell Tower fire.

James Brokenshire: While I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s kind comments on the words of Dame Judith and her team in what I think is a comprehensive report—looking at the end-to-end system and at culture, but also making recommendations on strong enforcement and criminal sanctions—I urge him to look at it very carefully before rushing to judgment on all its different sections. He may not agree with certain sections, and he is entitled to take that view, but I think he will recognise the real intent of someone who is independent and has significant health and safety experience to bring about a shift in a system that, as we mutually accept, is not fit for purpose.

This report will no doubt be subject to further debate, and it is important that there is time for feedback on each of the different recommendations and points that are made, because of the complexity, depth and detail of them, so that we get this right. With a shared sense of what is cross-party and what is cross-community, that is absolutely what we want to achieve. That is why it is important to get feedback on and input into the report’s recommendations.

I underline this Government’s seriousness of intent. That is why I have today said that we will consult on the banning of combustible materials—I look forward to bringing the details to the House in due course—and why I have said what I have about desktop studies. I want to inject a sense of pace into the process. I have acknowledged that the legislation that may flow from this will take time, and we want to work with parties across the House to ensure that it is got right. Equally, however, I recognise that there are steps that may not require legislation that we should get on and take, and I am committed to taking that forward as Secretary of State.

I encourage Members on both sides of the House to look carefully at Dame Judith’s comprehensive recommendations. They should recognise that, on the issue of cladding systems, she acknowledges: “A clearer, more transparent and more effective specification and testing regime of construction products must be developed. This should include products as they are put together as part of a system.”

We also recognise that, and we are bringing forward the consultation I have announced in my statement today so that we can actually make the difference we all want by making these changes and ensuring that our system and our high-rise buildings are safe.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I also welcome him to his new role, in which I know he will perform admirably.

Many of us representing constituencies in London, who were hugely shocked by what happened at Grenfell, have people living in high-rise blocks in our communities, who will be affected by the actions that now need to be taken. I welcome the announcement yesterday of the additional £400 million for local authorities and housing associations. Will he set out what processes are in place for getting that resourcing to local councils?
May I also encourage my right hon. Friend to look at the fact that many councils, such as Wandsworth, are spending much more resourcing than goes purely on the work that needs to be done to replace the cladding on buildings such as Sudbury House in my constituency, including the expense of sprinklers? As he said, it is important that as well as being safe, people also feel safe. Over the coming weeks and months, will he reflect on those costs and local authorities’ liability for them?

James Brokenshire: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. I am in no doubt about the strength of feeling that he expresses. Such strength of feeling exists not just in the House but outside, which is why I judge it right that we consult on this issue and take it forward in the way I have outlined. I look forward to advancing the consultation and to hearing the responses.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): This is a technical report by a leading technician, but it has a glaring omission. For the public and indeed for the people in Grenfell to have confidence in any new system, all combustible materials in external cladding and insulation must be banned. Anything less will not do. I really welcome the tone and substance of what the Secretary of State has said, but I hope he will take this opportunity for a cross-party initiative to ensure that this kind of thing never happens again.

James Brokenshire: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. We will be providing details for local authorities and housing associations about how they can access the funding. We are working at pace to ensure that the relevant information and guidance is given, because I am certainly very conscious that we want to allocate the funding for remediation as soon as possible. I will announce more details shortly.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As he knows, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is taking evidence from Dame Judith this afternoon. Once we have heard from her and had a chance to read the report in detail, I am sure the Select Committee will want to let him have our comments, and we will pass them on before the deadline of 25 July that he has set for such comments to be received.

May I ask about the specific issue of combustible materials used in cladding on high-rise buildings? Shortly after the interim report, the Select Committee called for such materials to be banned. We took up that issue with Dame Judith, and we wrote to the then Secretary of State and other Ministers about it. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is now going to consult on banning combustible materials. Will the consultation on a ban apply to regulations for new buildings and the refurbishment of existing buildings, or does he intend to apply the regulations retrospectively to all existing buildings, so that if the consultation goes in such a direction, combustible materials will be taken off all existing buildings to make people safe?

James Brokenshire: I understand the hon. Lady’s point. Dame Judith is independent, but her recommendations set out the end-to-end cultural and systemic change that it is important to take forward. I have already pointed to her recommendations about looking for greater clarity on specification, and by consulting in the way I have set out, we are taking that forward and reflecting her concerns. I hope that the hon. Lady will acknowledge what I said about the need to clarify building regulations for fire safety guidance, and as I have said, we will be publishing revised and clarified versions of that guidance for consultation in July.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I welcome the positive and constructive tone of my right hon. Friend’s statement? Knowing him, I know that he intends to deliver on it fully. As a former Fire Services Minister, may I associate myself with the former Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), given where our experience leads both of us in relation to combustible materials? The Minister made a welcome comment about owners of private blocks who will not step up to their moral responsibilities and shoulder the cost, and I was glad to hear him say that he rules nothing out. Will he keep in close contact with those of us whose constituents, such as mine in Northpoint House in Bromley, may be faced with a situation where the owners will not, or financially cannot, fulfil those responsibilities, and will he see that leaseholders are not left without any recourse?
James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point about the private sector and remediation, and as I said, I find unacceptable the attitude that has been shown by a number of owners of private blocks. I intend to convene roundtables urgently to make that point crystal clear, and to hear the solutions that are being advanced. As I said, I rule nothing out.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The lack of support in Dame Judith’s report for a ban on combustible materials is profoundly disappointing. The Royal Institute of British Architects, whose members specify building materials, supports a ban and is clear that it is not incompatible with the wider change in regulatory framework recommended by Dame Judith. A ban is already in place in many other countries.

My right hon. Friend is obviously coming under a lot of pressure to ban combustible materials, but this excellent report does not do that job and is not acceptable? Will he ensure that a ban is introduced without further delay?

James Brokenshire: I have made my position clear: the report does an excellent job in setting out end-to-end and regulatory issues, specifically in the point about clarification. That is why I made a clear statement of intent about the consultation on banning combustible material. I have listened carefully; I heard the debate in the House yesterday, where a number of these points were raised. It is important to take this step, get on with the consultation, and ensure that we follow this through.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend is obviously coming under a lot of pressure to ban combustible materials on high-rise buildings, but this excellent report does not do that because it would give a false assurance that that one shot would somehow make everything okay, when it would not. Combustible materials are used in all kinds of buildings and all kinds of capacities, but they do not necessarily mean that those buildings are dangerous.

This report represents the importing of an aviation safety culture into the buildings industry, which is probably long overdue. I look forward to a recommendation, perhaps in the Moore-Bick inquiry, that there should be independent incident investigations to ensure that lessons from incidents such as the Lakanal House fire are learned much more comprehensively than they have been in the past. Will the Minister assure the House that the legislation he brings forward will wait until the Moore-Bick inquiry has reported?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point about this not being some sort of box-ticking exercise, and about the need to assess—as the report does—different systems that operate around the world, including the benefits and weaknesses of prescriptive or outcomes-based frameworks. There is also the whole issue of safety cases, and about who bears responsibility all the way through the chain, and Dame Judith is right in understanding the need for an effective system. I want feedback from all sides of the House on how we take the issue forward, because it matters that we have a system that is effective and works.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State is making the same sort of noises as were made after the Lakanal House fire. A date of 25 July takes us beyond the recess, and means that we will not get a statement about the end of the consultation until September at the earliest, or possibly October. Will he bring forward the end of his consultation so that we can hold his feet to the fire and ensure that we deal with this in a timely manner? The least we can expect is a ban on combustible materials as a testament to the people who died in that fire.

James Brokenshire: I say firmly and fairly to the hon. Gentleman that I intend to make progress. I am certainly not intending to delay or drag things out, which is why I said that I intend to come before the House before the summer recess to give a further update. However, given the nature and complexity of the report, it is right that there is an appropriate time to get feedback on legislation and things that will take time, without delaying where we can actually make progress.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The all-party fire safety rescue group is delighted that Dame Judith’s report has now been published and we can get some action. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s approach to this issue, but he knows only too well that our group will not shut up until the consultation period has closed and we get a ban on combustible cladding. He did not seem to say anything about sprinklers in the statement, so I wonder if he could address that.

James Brokenshire: I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to make powerful points on behalf of the APPG. I welcome that and the undoubted challenge and input that that will bring. Our advice on sprinklers is clear: for new blocks over 30 metres in height, statutory guidance states that sprinklers should be fitted. For existing buildings, it is for the building owner to decide whether to retrofit. Sprinklers can be an effective fire safety measure, but they are one of many such measures that could be adopted and, as Dame Judith Hackitt points out in her report, no single fire safety measure, including sprinklers, can be seen as a panacea.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is nothing wrong with what is in the Hackitt review; it is what is not in there. We do need a change to processes, systems and culture, but we also need to give confidence now to residents living in high-rise buildings where cladding is being replaced. Yes, we do want a ban on combustible materials and guidance on sprinklers and on means of escape. Dame Judith concludes that prescriptive controls alone are not adequate. That may be right, but we do need prescriptive controls, so in the consultation will the Secretary of State take advice from professional bodies not just on combustible materials, and will the Government listen to that advice and respond as quickly as possible?

James Brokenshire: We will listen carefully to all inputs. The hon. Gentleman’s fundamental point is about reassurance and people feeling safe in their homes.
That point is certainly not lost on me. That is why I have said the things I have said today, welcoming and acknowledging the important steps outlined by Dame Judith in her report but equally commenting on a number of other issues as well and on how we are able to make further progress and deliver that overarching safety agenda to which the hon. Gentleman rightly points.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of my constituents in Chelmsford travel to London every day and go to work in high-rise buildings. Can the Secretary of State confirm that any new measures for safety and its enforcement will be considered for high-rise office blocks as well as for residential blocks? People should be as safe at work as they are at home.

James Brokenshire: Many of the report’s recommendations are intended to apply only to high-rise residential buildings, but as Dame Judith says the ideas proposed in her report have a broader application, to a wider range of buildings. We will consider that further. I am sure that we will receive further feedback from stakeholders and consider that when we come to this in the autumn.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Like others, I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has made it clear that he will rule nothing out when it comes to forcing action on private freehold developments such as New Capital Quay in Greenwich. That represents progress. May I test whether he understands the urgent need to break the impasse on such developments? Leaseholders are living with not only the anxiety about the long-term costs of remediation, but the daily mounting costs of interim fire safety measures and the fear that they live in homes that are still surrounded by lethal material.

James Brokenshire: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the uncertainty and the cost of interim measures that may be put in place. One developer in Croydon has done the right thing: Barratt Developments has told residents of the Cityscape flats that it will cover fire safety and cladding costs. The message is that others should be doing the same.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am conscious that it is very difficult to define combustibility in technical terms, so can my right hon. Friend reassure me that during the consultation he will be cognisant of the standards that underpin the words we use? One may say that something is non-combustible, but it can be combustible in certain circumstances. So we want to push towards a ban on our general understanding of combustibility, but that must be underpinned by a definition of the standards behind that.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a point about the complexity and technical nature of this issue. I am sure we will reflect carefully as part of the consultation.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): While welcoming Dame Judith’s recommendations, the new regulatory framework and the sanctions, criminal and otherwise, there is disappointment about some of the omissions this morning. The Secretary of State has done his very best to plug those gaps, but the Government have been promising to revise Approved Document B since 2011. Dame Judith recommends a revision of all the Approved Documents—A to Q. How much longer is this going to take? Will he consider suggesting the relocation of the fire safety regulation and enforcement team from the Home Office to his Department, where it can sit alongside the housing and building regulations section, which seems to be a much better fit?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that a number of points will be raised during the consultation. The hon. Gentleman has just raised one. On Approved Document B, we have already consulted on changes to that. I can tell him that we intend to complete that work and publish a clarified version of the guidance by July.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and Dame Judith’s report. The construction industry is quite wide and diverse. I note that in the report Dame Judith comments that minimum standards were sometimes seen as “a high bar to be negotiated down”. Does he agree that we need the construction industry to look at the report to see what it can do to implement the outcomes?

James Brokenshire: I agree, which is why I made the point that there are responsibilities on all of us. I have set out a number of actions that the Government are taking but there is also a responsibility on the industry itself. Some of the very powerful comments Dame Judith makes in her report require action not just by the Government but by industry and others.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the Secretary of State ensure that there are effective sanctions in building regulations to make sure that those who cut corners in the pursuit of profit are held to account and to provide an effective deterrent? Will he look again at the recent London Assembly report that recommended the installation of sprinklers? It is not good enough to leave it to owners of existing buildings to determine whether to take action. Why is it right that hotel guests are protected by sprinklers, where evidence shows they can eradicate the risk of death, while high-rise occupants are not so protected?

James Brokenshire: I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to look at chapter two of the final report, which sets out a number of different steps on enforcement:

“Failure by relevant dutyholders to comply with either type of notice” —
there is a prohibition or stop notice and an improvement notice —
“would be a criminal offence.”

When he reads the report in detail, I think he will see the seriousness and robustness of Dame Judith’s recommendations and therefore the changes that need to happen.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the fact that he has gone a significant step further forward than the Hackitt review recommendations on the key issue of...
combustibility. In a letter to the Chair of the Select Committee, Dame Judith explains that there are two ways to work with the current guidance: either using products of limited combustibility in cladding systems or undergoing a full system test. She says her clear view is that the former “is undoubtedly the lower risk option.”

It is therefore surprising she is not recommending that approach. However, I welcome the Secretary of State’s consultation. The issue with large-scale tests is that they do not reflect real world conditions, so we will need to consider that in the consultation. Can he confirm that the consultation will consider external cladding and insulation in terms of limited combustibility or non-combustibility?

**James Brokenshire:** My hon. Friend makes some powerful and important points about the nature of a system, the external cladding, how that fits within certain other structures and systems and what that actually means. That is why it is right that we look at the consultation in that way. He points to important recommendations that Dame Judith makes. Equally, she has made clear statements about what system products can and cannot be used for, how they should be developed and their use made essential. When we look at the report, both in terms of its specificity and broad nature, it points to significant change. As he rightly says, I want to consult on combustibility and get on with this.

**Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op):** Fire safety regulations were wrongly covered by the one in, two out statement of new regulation. Will the Secretary of State commit today to excluding fire safety regulations from the statement’s successor, the business impact target, which is currently being devised for this Parliament?

**James Brokenshire:** What I would say directly to the hon. Lady is that we need to get this right. We have had a comprehensive set of recommendations from Dame Judith, which will require legislation. We are determined to look at that carefully to ensure that we are able to consult and get the right legislation before the House. That is my driving priority.

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** I welcome the fact that the Government have committed to covering the costs of replacing cladding on local authority and housing association properties. Has that offer been formally articulated? I also agree with my right hon. Friend’s comments on private developers. As far as I am concerned, they need to stand up, show responsibility and get on with it.

**James Brokenshire:** I wholly endorse what my hon. Friend has said in relation to the private sector. On the public sector, as I indicated in an earlier response, we are formulating our detailed guidance and information to go to local authorities but my intent is to see that that money is deployed as quickly as possible.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** I welcome Dame Judith’s recommendations. Does the Secretary of State now recognise the need for clarity across the building industry? When will new standards be in place?

**James Brokenshire:** We have talked about Approved Document B and other planning guidance. I want that to be out before the summer. We have had some consultation, but we need to make progress. I think that underlines my clear, driving desire to get on with things where we can but, obviously, where longer-term reform is necessary, to consider carefully to get it right.
The industry confirmed to us that trading on WTO terms would mean an increase in the cost of medicines. Merck estimated additional costs to its business alone of £1.6 million a year for import tariffs. The Office of Health Economics estimated a typical pharmaceutical company could expect costs of more than £23 million a year in supply chain, tariff and non-tariff costs and fees. We can expect those costs to be passed on to consumers either in pharmacies or to the national health service, the biggest buyer of pharmaceuticals in our country.

A relationship that is as close as possible, with as close to frictionless trade as possible, would therefore benefit both our country and the rest of the European Union, but the United Kingdom has the most to lose if we do not get a deal. The UK represents only 2.3% of the global pharmaceuticals market, compared with more than 22% for the rest of the EU. It is purely a bigger market than the UK alone.

Beyond the issue of customs and tariffs, there is a further, but related, issue about the regulatory regime that underpins the trade and recognition of products across the European Union. Pharmaceuticals is rightly a highly regulated industry—it has to be—but the prospect of divergence is of key concern to industry. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that each new product—as many as 100 a year—would cost £50,000 each for marketing authorisation in the United Kingdom. We agree with industry that regulatory alignment must ensure that companies do not need to build new facilities, duplicate testing regimes or recruit vast numbers of qualified staff, of which there is already a desperate shortage.

Johnson & Johnson estimated that if there is no mutual recognition of batch testing between the UK and the EU, it would lead to an additional 50,000 tests a year just for Johnson & Johnson, with a cost of almost £1 million a year. Successful British companies such as GlaxoSmithKline have confirmed that they are already spending tens of millions of pounds on setting up sites in the EU to ensure that they can still release products there, in the event of divergence or a lack of recognition of standards.

Without certainty on the future regulatory relationships, companies will either have to invest further in contingency planning or risk losing access to key markets. However, the majority of pharmaceutical companies are not big multinationals, but small and micro-businesses that are unable to afford these contingency measures. A huge and important market is at risk of being closed off to them. We cannot allow that to happen.

The Prime Minister has indicated that the Government recognise the benefit of association with the European Medicines Agency—the regulatory body—but that is not enough. Brexit is already seeing investment flow out of the UK, without a guarantee that it will come back even if a deal is reached. The Government need to provide urgent certainty, otherwise businesses will have no choice but to focus on the rest of Europe, and again, this is something we must avoid.

The EMA, the regulatory body that oversees the rules governing what pharmaceuticals can be sold in the EU, has of course been based here in the UK since 1995. It is currently in Canary Wharf, but as right hon. and hon. Members know, last autumn, the EU announced that the EMA would move to Amsterdam. As a consequence,
more than 1,000 jobs and a prestigious body will be leaving the UK and going overseas. The UK has been an influential part of the EMA since its creation, with the UK’s Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency being responsible for a disproportionate share of the work on the authorisation of new medicines for use in the EU.

For the EU, the loss of our expertise will put pressure on regulators in the remaining states. For the UK, there is a risk that the MHRA will not have the capacity to work alone, even just for the UK market. It is not too late to save some of these jobs and this expertise for our country, and avoid the duplication of work. Given the mutual benefits of the UK working with the EMA, and the challenges for the organisation in relocating from London to its new home in Amsterdam, our Committee has recommended that the Government seek a continued presence for some EMA staff and facilities in the UK, as well as a continued relationship after we leave. It is in the best interests of patients and consumers across Europe, including in the UK, to do so.

Our Committee heard that any regulatory divergence, and any tariffs or barriers at the border, will see the cost of medicines go up. The American Pharmaceutical Group told us that it “firmly believes” that a no-deal scenario will “threaten...the position of the NHS as a world-leading health service”, because it will struggle to access drugs as quickly and cheaply as it does today. For the vast majority of medicines that are supplied to the NHS, the cost will either be borne by the taxpayer or trigger a reduction in the range of medicines available to patients. The Government must secure a deal that does not see that happen.

I give credit to the Government: they have set out a pragmatic approach. We welcome the positive words from the Prime Minister, as well as from the Business Secretary and the Health Secretary in their article in the Financial Times last year. However, as with all the sectors of our economy, the Government now need to turn those words into deeds to secure the best possible deal for the United Kingdom in the interests of business and primarily, of patients.

Throughout our inquiries into sectors, we have sought to find benefits and opportunities from Brexit for those industries, but we have heard no evidence of any real opportunities for any of the sectors we have considered. In already globalised parts of our economy, large untapped markets yearning for British goods are a fantasy. In the responses that we have received so far to our reports on aerospace and automotives, the Government did not dispute our conclusion on the lack of opportunity or the need for close alignment.

For the sectors we considered, we have found specific challenges and risks that Brexit will incur. For civil nuclear, leaving Euratom means leaving an effective nuclear safeguards regime and going it alone. For automotives, “just in time” manufacturing processes are threatened by increased costs and delays at the borders. For aerospace, divergence from European standards would risk our chance of accessing the substantial growth that that sector is experiencing. For processed food and drink, there is a risk that border delays will make products unusable, and costly border delays may cause food prices to rise.

I hope that I have shown the impact of Brexit on pharmaceuticals: customs delays, potential new tariffs, and, in particular, the risks of regulatory barriers to trade. Perhaps there are benefits from leaving the European Union, but we have seen no evidence of what they may be, at least in the sectors that we have considered.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): GSK is based in west London, and I am well aware of the damage that Brexit will do to the pharmaceutical industry. During her investigations, did my hon. Friend see any advantages at all—any indication that, as the Brexiteers maintain, markets will suddenly open up to the industry if we do leave the EU?

Rachel Reeves: We already export to countries outside the European Union. We are a success in that sector. We took huge amounts of evidence in the UK and in Brussels from small and big businesses, and not a single one pointed to any benefits of leaving the EU, or any opportunities we could seize that we do not have today.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The report says that regulatory divergence will cost jobs and investment, and will make certain medicines more difficult to obtain in this country. Is that correct?

Rachel Reeves: I can say to my hon. Friend—who sat in on the evidence sessions with me—that there are a number of issues, which I hope I put across in my statement. Some medicines lose their benefit quickly, and if there are big delays at the border, they will not have the effect that they would have had if they had reached patients quickly. That is one risk. Another is tariffs, which could also be a huge issue. Although WTO rules specify that medicines are tariff-free, they have not been updated for eight years, so many medicines are not included. Currently, medicines that are tested in any country in the European Union can then be accessed in the UK, but that may not be the case after we leave the European Union. For those three reasons, I think that there is a risk to patients from a hard Brexit, at least, or from a no-deal scenario.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): A few months ago, GSK’s chairman told me that the one-off cost of preparation for Brexit would be £70 million and the ongoing costs would be £50 million a year. Today the GSK plant in Barnard Castle is announcing a restructuring programme to cut costs, which will mean the loss of dozens of jobs. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is far more important to have regulatory alignment in the interests of jobs in modern manufacturing than to maintain the Prime Minister’s doomed attempt at unity with extreme hard-right Brexiteers?

Rachel Reeves: I can sense my hon. Friend’s frustration that jobs will be lost in her constituency because of the risks of Brexit. GSK has made it very clear that Brexit will cost it a lot of money. If it is testing its drugs in the UK, it may no longer have access to European markets, because those drugs will not be recognised unless they are tested in mainland Europe. That is creating new costs, as GSK is having to set up new testing facilities in the rest of Europe. If there are cost increases, it will seek to cut costs elsewhere, and the consequences of that will be borne by my hon. Friend’s constituents in Bishop.
Rachel Reeves: Auckland and also by patients in the UK as a whole who may not have access to the drugs. As far as I can see, leaving the European Union will have no benefits for the pharmaceutical sector, or—but most important—for patients.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady and her Committee for this excellent report. As she will know, I have spoken about the threat to Techno Pharma, in my constituency, and to patient safety. Does she agree that it is vital for us to have clarity on the future of medical regulation and what the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency will look like after the UK leaves the EU? That is being lost amid the noise of Brexit, but will it not be a huge issue as we go through this process?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Lady has made an important point about clarity, which I do not think I put across sufficiently in my statement. The industry representatives who gave evidence to our Committee said that they would need two to five years to prepare for any changes in the regime and the trading arrangements with the rest of the European Union, and of course we do not have those two to five years: we have just over a year and a half until the end of the transition period. That is of great concern to the hon. Lady’s constituents, and to patients and businesses across the UK.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Both the EU and the pharmaceutical industry contribute significant sums to medical research and development in the UK. I am thinking particularly of Cardiff University’s School of Biosciences, which does fantastic cancer research, and also—in my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV & AIDS—of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative facility, which has fantastic EU funding for its search for an HIV vaccine. Is my hon. Friend worried about the impact on facilities such as those?

Rachel Reeves: I am worried about those issues. My hon. Friend knows full well that we have benefited disproportionately from Horizon 2020: 13% of the funds have come to this country, reflecting our fantastic research base in Cardiff, in Leeds and across the UK. It is welcome that the Government have guaranteed those funds until 2020, but there have been no guarantees beyond that. As my hon. Friend knows, research does not work on two or three-year horizons; it works on 10 or 20-year horizons. We need clarity, and the certainty that we will receive that investment in key research on matters such as the HIV vaccine that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The Government speak of a pragmatic approach. Do we not have a parallel interest in the European Medicines Agency, and would it not be sensible to retain some role for the UK within it?

Rachel Reeves: The idea that leaving the European Union is about cutting red tape is absolutely ridiculous. In fact, red tape protects us, and in pharmaceuticals that is absolutely crucial. As for the EMA and the MHRA, we will be replicating something that worked incredibly well. Why create a load of new regulators when we had a set of regulators based here in the UK doing a fantastic job? No one doubts that the EMA was doing a good job, so why replicate it now? It makes no sense.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure many Members will concur that British businesses, including those in the pharma sector, desperately need some certainty. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should stop fighting themselves, and should start to make decisions that are in the best interests of the UK?

Rachel Reeves: I absolutely agree. The Government need to get on with negotiating with the European Union, rather than negotiating with their Back Benchers and even within the Cabinet. We need certainty. We need certainty on our access to the single market, we need certainty on our membership of the customs union, and we need certainty on the regulatory framework that will apply after we leave the European Union. Without that, it is incredibly difficult for businesses to plan for the future, to secure the jobs and investment that we need in this country, and, in the case of medicines and pharmaceuticals, to ensure that patients have access—timely access—to the best drugs, and new drugs.

Mr Speaker: In a moment, I shall call the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the expectation that the Government table a money resolution to a private Member’s Bill that has received a Second Reading. Private Members’ Bills represent one of the few legislative powers that are open to Back Benchers, but the Government are making a mockery of the private Member’s Bill process. Refusing to bring forward a money resolution for my Bill amounts to an abuse of Parliament, and Members should urgently have the chance to debate it.

My private Member’s Bill passed its Second Reading unanimously. Through points of order, business questions and an urgent question last week, Members have made it clear that they wish the Bill to be debated and scrutinised in Committee. The Government’s actions are profoundly undemocratic. This is a minority Government who nevertheless seem willing to defy the will of the House.

The Government are running roughshod over parliamentary procedure. Money resolutions have historically been formalities, introduced as a matter of course after Second Reading. Indeed, in multiple representations to the Procedure Committee, the Government committed to this approach. Five months on from the Second Reading of my Bill, no resolution is in sight, however. Statements from Ministers suggest that one may never materialise. The Government have leapfrogged two Bills that were behind mine over it, and those have now been given money resolutions. The only logic here is that this is about what is in the Government’s interests.

My Bill on constituency boundaries gets to the heart of the balance between Back Benchers and the Executive. Cutting the number of MPs without reducing the number of Ministers will increase the proportion of MPs on the payroll, making it more difficult for Back Benchers to challenge the Government.

I believe that the original decision to reduce the number of MPs was politically motivated. The Conservative party stands to win a greater proportion of the seats in a smaller Parliament. By refusing to allow my private Member’s Bill to progress, the Government are abusing their executive power for their own party’s electoral gain. Ministers all but confessed to this when they said they would wait until the Boundary Commission had reported before making a decision about my Bill.

The Government are defying the will of the House and overstretching their executive power in the service of their party’s electoral interests. Members deserve a chance to debate this issue and restore some integrity to the private Member’s Bill process.

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

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member has obtained the leave of the House. Has the hon. Member the leave of the House?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member has obtained the leave of the House. Members attending to our proceedings will want to know what follows. I can advise the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the House that the debate will be held on Monday as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Gentleman’s application.
Backbench Business

Plastic Bottles and Coffee Cups

1.23 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the First and Second Reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide, HC 339, and Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups, HC 657; and urges the Government to accept their recommendations as part of its Resources and Waste Strategy.

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, the Liaison Committee and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time in the House to debate the Environmental Audit Committee reports. I thank my Committee colleagues, too, some of whom are present, for their work on our inquiry last year.

Today, I want to talk about the scale of the plastic pandemic, the solutions we proposed, the importance of the EU circular economy package and how we make producers responsible for their packaging. May I begin, however, by welcoming the announcement on Tuesday that Parliament will phase out most single-use plastics on our estate and introduce a 25p “latte levy”? I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the Chair of the Administration Committee for your support in making this happen.

/Interruption./ Creagh’s law; very good.

We are in the middle of a global pandemic. Plastic is everywhere, from the top of Mount Everest to the depths of the ocean to the north pole. Plastic has been found in every species of animal in the Arctic, from plankton to polar bears. Research by Dr Erik van Sebille at Imperial College London shows that most of the UK’s marine plastic pollution ends up in the Arctic, so the UK has a particular responsibility to clean up our act and protect the Arctic.

In 2015, the UK signed up to the United Nations global goals for sustainable development, including goal 12, “sustainable consumption and production” and goal 14 on protecting our oceans. The UK led in the development of those goals, but unfortunately the Government sometimes seem to think they are something for other countries, not the UK.

Our planet has only one ocean, wrapped around it like a cloak, and plastic bottles make up one third of all plastic pollution in the sea. They break down into micro-plastics, which harm marine wildlife that eat them. After my Committee’s ground-breaking work on rinse-off microbeads, which led the Government to ban their manufacture and sale, we examined single-use plastics, focusing on plastic bottles and coffee cups.

Single-use plastics take five seconds to make, five minutes to use and 500 years to biodegrade, so when we throw them away there is no such place as “away.”

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Has she or her Committee come to a conclusion as to why the Government are seemingly so resistant to oxo-biodegradable plastic technology, which was invented by Professor Scott at Aston University in the 1970s? Does she agree that the Government have no strategy to deal with plastic which escapes into the environment already?

Mary Creagh: I have seen evidence on oxo-biodegradable and I know there are a couple of possible additives to plastics. The research on how and how fast it breaks down is not conclusive. I know it can break down in proper professional composting machines, but the evidence on what happens out in the ocean is not that clear and we do not want an end-of-pipe solution to this problem; we want something at the beginning that is sustainable.

There is a live argument on this and it is going on at EU level between the plant-based plastics manufacturers of the south and those such as us in the north who have a more petrochemical-based approach. I am not a scientist, but I know the jury is out and that scientists have looked at this. It is important that we develop the correct policy and do not just look at what happens at the end of the pipe.

In the UK, we recycle just 57% of our plastic bottles overall; the figure for water bottles is higher. We estimate that 700,000 plastic bottles are littered every day. That litter spoils our streets, threatens our wildlife and ruins our beaches. We are paying for this clean-up through our council tax. Keep Britain Tidy estimates that English councils spend £1 billion a year cleaning up after fly-tippers and litterbugs. We recommended introducing a deposit return scheme to boost recycling rates and create a clear stream of recycled plastic for manufacturers. When the Environment Secretary gave evidence to my Committee in April, he told us that we would not see that product return scheme until 2020, but better late than never and we welcome his commitment. We must also create a market for that recovered plastic, which is why we recommended that Ministers set a target for 50% of recycled plastic to be present in new bottles. I am pleased that Coca-Cola has committed to do that.

We use 2.5 billion coffee cups a year, enough to stretch around the planet five and a half times. Before our inquiry, I—along with most other people—thought that coffee cups were recycled, but they are not. Their plastic coating, which is thinner than a human hair, means that most of them end up landfilled or incinerated. The coffee shop industry has told us that disposable coffee cups are recyclable, but “recyclable” does not mean “recycled”. Paper mills do not want them, and plastics reprocessors do not want them. Just one in every 400 is recycled, which is just 0.25%. There are just three recycling plants in England that can recycle them. Moreover, if someone puts their coffee cup in a recycling bin, in a coffee shop or on the go, it will not be recycled and it could contaminate the other papers and plastics in the bin.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, with which I wholly agree. It seems to me that the principle that the polluter should pay is an important one, and that there should be incentives for individuals to do some of the tidying up as well. I remember as a child scuttling around on Saturdays collecting bottles and returning them to the local shop or off-licence to get the returned deposit. Those sorts of deposit scheme help to incentivise human behaviour. Does she agree with the “polluter pays” principle and that incentives are important?

Mary Creagh: I emphatically agree. I remember the happy days of collecting those bottles. In doing that, we can create an army of litter pickers out in the streets.
I was out in Norway with NATO last week, visiting the Arctic, and there is a full deposit return scheme there. One of the people we talked to told us that his son had made £580 in the holidays last summer by going on a little mission out on the streets every day. I also noticed, when I was at the airport disposing of my single-use plastic bottle in the throwaway scheme, that the deposit would be collected by the Red Cross in Norway. There is an opportunity here for charities to partner alongside the deposit return scheme and to find a valuable new income stream.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am going slightly off the point here, but the hon. Lady mentioned airports. Does she agree that one thing that is little understood is that people are allowed to take their refillable containers to the airport? There are often places to refill them there, but people do not seem to be aware of that fact.

Mary Creagh: I agree with the hon. Lady. I know that Heathrow has introduced refill stations just the other side of the security gates, but the problem is that people are usually already in the queue for security before they remember that they have a full bottle of water. Most people cannot drink half a litre of water straight off. Airports could look at how to dispose of those liquids while encouraging people to keep the bottles. That would result in more reuse. That is a challenge for the airports and the transport industry to think about today.

Reducing and reusing are always better than recycling, and the 5p plastic bag charge reduced plastic bag sales by 83% in the first year, so we know that charges change consumer behaviour. My Committee recommended a 25p latte levy on disposable coffee cups to encourage people to bring their own cups. We want that levy to fund new “binfrastructure”. That is terrible; I am trying not to murder the English language, but I think I have just stuck a nail in there. The Chancellor is consulting on a single-use plastics tax, and I look forward to reading the responses. The consultation closes tomorrow.

Industry is stepping up to this; it knows that it cannot go on with business as usual. Costa has introduced a recycling scheme that aims to recycle half a billion cups by 2020. Unfortunately, only 14 million cups were recycled last year, but that was a good start. Starbucks is trialling a 5p latte levy in 35 central London cafes, and reusable cup usage has more than doubled in the first six weeks, which is very encouraging. The truth is, however, that we need both. We need the latte levy and we need recycling schemes if we are to tackle this problem.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. I am also a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and she is a wonderful campaigning Chair. It is a great honour to serve with her.

The hon. Lady is talking about recycling, and I was recently at a circular economy discussion at which WasteAid said that 2 billion people lived without waste collection and that 3 billion lived without proper waste recycling or reuse. One of the big things we discussed was the use of plastic bottles in the developing world where glass bottles used to be used. Does she think it would be better if glass bottles were used in the developing world?

Mary Creagh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the Committee, of which he is a fantastic, excellent and constructive member. He provides challenge as well as co-operation, which is how we get to a good place and find cross-party agreement.

I remember visiting Juba in South Sudan in 2012 and noticing that there was very little water there for people, and that all the aid workers and visitors were using plastic bottles. There was no waste infrastructure whatever. This is a really important problem, because we know that huge amounts of waste are thrown into rivers in Africa, India and the far east. We need to get that waste out of the rivers. How do we do that? We pay people to do it. It is not just kids in the UK who will collect 5p or 10p plastic bottles; people will do the right thing, but they need a cash incentive to do it. The United Nations has an opportunity to achieve that through the international climate fund. We all tend to think about that in relation to green energy and clean energy, but we need to look at how some of these climate funds are allocated and spent at supranational level, and at how our own UK aid budget could be used to help to set up systems to keep plastic out of the oceans. As I said earlier, there is only one ocean and we need to do more to protect it.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I recently went to Bangladesh, and along the whole beach the plastic litter was waist-high. The amount was huge. I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development about this. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be a good idea to spend some of our aid money on paying people to clean up the mess? It is, after all, going into the same ocean that we use and that everyone else uses. That would help people to clean up their environment, which would also help their tourism, because people will go to a clean beach but not a filthy beach.

Mary Creagh: I agree with the hon. Lady. She makes an excellent point. Bangladesh is absolutely at the forefront of climate change, and much of our aid budget is going there to make homes more resilient, but resilience in communities is also about giving people a good, clean, safe environment to live in and ensuring that the poor have decent incomes.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her suggestion. We actually made that point in our report on marine protected areas and said that there should be a coastal communities fund to help to develop tourism and to enable communities to take ownership of the amazing nature that surrounds them. We do not have tropical rainforests in the UK, but we do have some of the world’s best breeding sites for birds and all sorts of Ramsar wetland sites. Bringing communities closer to
[Mary Creagh]  

nature where they live can only be a good thing. I also want to pay tribute to Sky Ocean Rescue for its work in bringing to a wider audience the good activities that are going on not only globally but locally, including those literally outside our own door to clean up the Thames.

We want the Government to send a clear message to industry that all single-use coffee cups should be recycled by 2023, and that if that does not happen, they should simply be banned and we should move to a system of reusable cups only. Consumers want to do the right thing, and they deserve to know that companies are doing it too.

We have also looked at the UK’s packaging system, which we think needs a fundamental redesign. Producers of packaging should ensure that their waste is dealt with according to the waste hierarchy: reduce, reuse, recycle. How do we make that happen? At the moment, businesses that produce or use packaging have to show that they have recycled it by purchasing a packaging recovery note—a PRN—from an accredited recycler or exporter. We have heard evidence, however, that that system is a blunt instrument that does not reward design for recyclability and that does not penalise the production of packaging that is difficult and costly to recycle. We therefore recommend that the Government should reform the PRN system. They should introduce a fee structure that reduces the cost of sustainable coffee cups and raises the cost of cups that are hard to recycle.

The landfill tax and the PRN system have been the twin pillars of UK recycling for the past 20 years. Most of our waste went to landfill 20 years ago, but we now recycle almost half of it. However, recycling rates are stalling, and recycling needs a shot in the arm to bring it back to life.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is a wonderful advocate for recycling. Does she accept—if she does not, she should have a look at the parliamentary questions that I have asked—that the biggest problem is that recycling is flattening because waste is being incinerated? That must be dangerous at a time of air pollution.

Mary Creagh: Well, most of the waste that we recycle is actually exported, and the recent China waste ban brought that home to people who thought that everything was somehow recycled in the UK. The situation was certainly brought home to the Members who visited Bywaters, the House’s recycling company, and heard about the difficulties it was experiencing—although some of those difficulties have been alleviated. However, my hon. Friend’s question was about incineration. I have visited an incinerator, and it is obviously better to get the calorific heat value from waste instead of landfilling it, because we will have to dig it up in 10 or 20 years’ time and incinerate it anyway, such is the pressure on land use in this country. However, we must ensure that the waste hierarchy is respected, because that is where problems arise. People tell me that they are reopening landfill sites and sending more waste for incineration.

Going back to the PRN system, the Committee could not see where the £100 million a year that the system raises actually goes, so we have asked the National Audit Office to examine the system to follow the money and tell us where it goes.

Turning to the EU circular economy package, it provides for a much more stringent extended producer responsibility scheme. At the moment, the UK has just three schemes, covering electrical goods and cars, whereas France has 14 schemes, covering furniture, tyres, mattresses and infectious healthcare waste. A mattress recycling scheme would create jobs in the heavy woollen industry in Wakefield, Ossett and Dewsbury. We need producers to be accountable for their products beyond the factory gates. Cigarette butts and chewing gum are the most frequently littered items in the country, so why are tobacco companies and sweet manufacturers not paying for the cost of their clean-up? Because it has always been that way. We need to work out how the “polluter pays” principle applies to cigarette merchants and to the chewing gum brigade. Such a move could save cash-strapped councils millions, and the money would go directly to them because they clear up the litter and do the gum-busting. Perhaps they could present the gum manufacturers with the goo that they steam-clean off the streets.

The Environment Secretary told us that he will commit to the EU’s proposed target to recycle 65% of household waste by 2035, but what will happen to that target after Brexit? Who will enforce it? The new environmental oversight body will be able to issue advisory notices, but not fines. It will not be able to take legal action, and it will not be ready for March 2019. Brexit will weaken our waste system. There was an interesting debate in the other place yesterday about whether people would still be able to bring cases to the European Court of Justice during the transitional period, and the Lords Minister was not entirely clear about whether that could happen. We will be watching developments very carefully.

We have achieved a great deal. We have got the Government working with Water UK to roll out a network of water refill points, and supermarkets such as Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Aldi, Lidl and Waitrose are launching a voluntary pledge to cut plastic packaging. The Treasury’s consultation on a single-use tax closes tomorrow, Departments have agreed to end the sale of single-use plastics, and Parliament is going to lead the way as well. A lot has been done, but there is a lot still to do.

We must prevent waste from entering our environment, and that will bring social, economic and environmental benefits. People are happier if the streets and parks are litter-free, our economy works better if we make smart use of limited resources, and our wildlife is protected if we keep plastic out of the sea. When people win, the economy wins and the environment wins. I look forward to a good debate and to hearing about the exciting work that colleagues have been doing in their local areas.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Several colleagues want to speak this afternoon, but the time is limited. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit, because then the debate flows much better, but that means that I have to trust colleagues to take other people’s points of view and right to speak into consideration. I am sure that everybody here this afternoon is an honourable Member and will do so. If speeches last around seven or eight minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have a chance to do so.
If people speak for much longer than that, I will have to impose a time limit. I am sure that I can trust Justine Greening to begin properly.

1.45 pm

*Justine Greening* (Putney) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to contribute to this afternoon’s debate, because its subject matters hugely to my constituents, who have the River Thames running through their community. I echo the points made by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and pay tribute to the work of her Environmental Audit Committee, which has led the way in this discussion over recent years. As she says, we have come a long way.

I remember writing to all the major coffee houses in Southfields just two years ago to ask them to trial a latte levy locally, which I felt the community would have welcomed, but none of them was interested. I remember writing to every single major supermarket in Southfields to ask whether they would trial reducing plastic packaging and allowing people to bring their own containers into the stores instead of having to purchase food and groceries in unnecessary packaging. Again, I was met with stony silence. However, the tide is turning in favour of all such companies stepping up to the plate and starting to innovate.

As a local MP, I launched the Putney plastic pledge initiative, which is about the community coming together to see what we can do to reduce our plastic usage. We have had a fantastic response from shops and businesses, and the Putney business improvement district has been involved. Waitrose has also taken part in the pledge, and I thank it for its efforts. Other parts of the community have been involved, including the local pubs. Young’s brewery is a fantastic local business that runs many of our pubs, and on boat race day it took the step of switching away from disposable plastic glasses for the first time. The reusable plastic glasses can be used not just in Putney on boat race day, but down in Wimbledon for the tennis tournament. The individual actions that businesses are taking will make a big difference over time.

The Putney plastic pledge has gone well beyond that, however, and the University of Roehampton is now considering what it can do to cut down its plastic usage. It has a fantastic record on sustainability, and the students are showing some leadership—I regularly try to get a wonderful latte at the Growhampton café. I also pay tribute to our local schools. At the end of last year, children from the Hotham Primary School council asked me what we are doing about plastics after having seen “Blue Planet II”, and that inspired me to think about what I could do to pull the community together to do more. Schools are now setting about cutting back on their plastic usage. Southmead Primary School has designed a logo for the pledge, and I will be visiting Riversdale Primary School in Southfields tomorrow to see some of the work that it has been doing.

So many of our actions look to the future and aim to protect the environment in which we want the next generation to become adults. Such issues have really captured their imagination and, as much as anything else, showing that this Parliament and Government are responding to their priorities is one of the most important aspects of this whole effort.

As I said at the beginning, this issue particularly matters to my local community. There is sometimes a sense that people who live in the city are somehow less interested in the environment, but nothing could be further from the truth. We really value our environment in my local community, because we know we need to take care of it. We have the River Thames right on our doorstep, and we have the wonderful Wandsworth Park just next door and then Richmond Park. I go running every week on Wandsworth Common. Protecting our environment is hugely important to us, which is why we had a clean-up up on the day before the boat race—the hon. Member for Wakefield talked about how much of a problem we have with plastics in our oceans and rivers. Many of the items we cleaned up were cotton buds and plastic bags—the sorts of things that were never going to degrade, so it needed a human to pick them up and take them away, which is what we did.

We have a long way to go on this, and I thoroughly support the hon. Lady’s challenge to business. Business can really be the innovator in helping all of us be able to cut down, and I would like businesses, particularly supermarkets, to allow consumers more choice so they can more actively choose whether they want packaging by allowing them to take in their own containers. There has to be a way around some of the health and safety laws that seem to get in the way of that being possible.

We must continue to learn from behavioural change. I have to admit that I was delighted when we introduced the 5p levy on plastic bags, but I have quite a lot of bags for life in my kitchen—probably more than I will need over the course of my life. We need to recognise that we are all on a journey in changing our behaviour, and research could inform the next step after the plastic bag levy to cut down on people like me having far too many bags for life.

My community really cares about the environment. The issue of plastics has been a galvaniser for Government and is one of the things we care about in our environment in Putney. Issues such as air pollution and noise pollution, and the impact they have on public health, matter to us just as much. If the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs could apply his almost religious zeal on plastics to noise pollution and air pollution, we would be even more delighted with the progress that is being made.

1.52 pm

*Kerry McCarthy* (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) not only on securing this debate but on her excellent leadership of the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am proud to be a member.

It is clear that the public want us to act. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made a very good speech. She spoke about her local schools and how enthused schoolchildren are about this issue. Just this week I received some brilliant letters from year 4 pupils at Wicklea Academy in my constituency. They demonstrated not only a real understanding of the issue but clear-eyed astonishment that, say, black plastic containers could be used for ready meals when we know they are not recycled. They asked me how that could possibly be justified.
Huge credit must go to “Blue Planet II” for raising awareness and creating momentum behind the campaign. Whenever I mention things like “Blue Planet II” I have to mention the BBC natural history unit, which is of course based in Bristol—the people of Bristol deserve some credit. “Blue Planet II” brought into our homes, in amazing, vivid detail, how wonderful and extraordinary the habitats and wildlife of our seas and oceans are, and just how precious a natural environment it is, which made it all the more distressing when we saw the episode with sea life being cut open and plastic being pulled from the sea life’s stomachs. We saw the terrible damage that plastic pollution can do.

The Government have made the right noises so far, but action has been limited and slightly disappointing. They have promised a deposit return scheme, which is one of the report’s key recommendations. The scheme will be excellent but, in other respects, the action has been limited to low-hanging fruit such as the ban on the wash-off version of microbeads in cosmetic products.

The Government have talked about ending the sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. Again I credit a Bristol organisation, City to Sea, which has been campaigning, particularly on cotton buds, for a few years and has approached all the major retailers and manufacturers, many of which have managed to change their products. In many cases, instead of using plastic, they now use compacted cardboard or something else that is far more environmentally friendly.

The Treasury announced in November, and re-announced this spring, a call for evidence on changes to the tax system to reduce single-use plastics, which, as we have heard, worked incredibly well with plastic bags. I would be interested to hear what products will be banned and what products will be subject to a surcharge. There is a fine line between discouraging use—reducing use to a much lower level but still allowing some use—and banning the products altogether.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who I am generally happy to support and congratulate on the progress he has made on environmental issues, speaks of making the UK a world leader in resource efficiency, but his Department has a marked lack of enthusiasm for the EU circular economy package, which could be transformative not just in how we deal with waste and resources but in the number of new jobs we create in this innovative sector. Most of the really big decisions seem to have been deferred to the already much-delayed waste and resources strategy.

There are three players when it comes to trying to achieve such systemic change: consumers and the choices they make, which is important; the market and its response to consumer demand or to business opportunities, and we are seeing that happen to an extent; and the state, with its ability to regulate, ban, use fiscal incentives or disincentives, set targets and drive forward change. The Government have something of an ideologically driven weakness for the hands-off, voluntary approach—maybe a bit of education, a bit of a nudge, but basically preferring to leave it to consumers and the market, except for the low-hanging fruit I mentioned.

This issue is simply too important and too urgent for such an approach. We are destroying our precious planet, and the Government need to show significantly more leadership than they have shown so far. For example, their response to our report on coffee cups is quite discouraging. They rejected our recommendation of a 25p latte levy, which we have already heard about, and most of the rest was kicked into the long grass where the waste strategy currently resides. I am glad that the parliamentary authorities have this week shown more ambition with their plastic-free Parliament package, which includes a latte levy. I particularly thank Surfers Against Sewage for its work on plastics; it has been brilliant.

In their response to the EAC report, the Government praised the paper cup alliance, which is really a rather weak collaboration of big coffee chains and manufacturers. Like the right hon. Member for Putney, I have written to the coffee chains. I will not name and shame here, but it was interesting to see which companies responded in a reasonably positive way and which were very dismissive. The paper cup alliance has not even set a target for increasing the proportion of coffee cups that are recycled, and its primary intention seems to be to rebrand “coffee cups” as “paper cups” and to get better recognition of them as recyclable, but we have already heard that, although notionally they are recyclable, only five facilities in the whole UK can separate the thin plastic membrane from the paper outer. There is no point going around telling people that coffee cups can be recycled when, in practice, they cannot. As we have heard, all but 0.25% of coffee cups go to landfill or are incinerated.

There clearly need to be measures to develop alternatives to the current cups, such as Frugalpac—there are a number of alternatives on the market. This shows the limits of voluntary action. The RSPB’s excellent 2015 report, “Using regulation as a last resort?” analysed more than 150 voluntary schemes across a range of sectors and found that common to the majority of them were unambitious targets, a lack of transparency, no enforcement mechanism, and an inability to attract widespread industry participation and compliance. That is what happens when we leave it to the market.

Only recently, the Waste and Resources Action Programme, which the Government have charged with delivering on this agenda, has had to make a tenth of its staff redundant because of funding cuts. We need a level playing field, and we need the Government to regulate and pass laws so there is one. Without that, the best practice businesses, such as Boston Tea Party, a small chain of cafés that sells takeaway coffees in Bristol and has announced that it is banning all single-use coffee cups later this year, will lose out commercially to the environmental laggards.

I wish to highlight several key recommendations from the Environmental Audit Committee that we would like to see in the waste strategy later this year. The first is a post-2020 target recycling rate of 65%. Even the UK’s own estimates have found that that would save almost £10 billion over a decade in waste sector, greenhouse gas and social costs. Last year, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), why the UK’s recycling rate had stagnated and whether the Government were opposing an EU target to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. She would not confirm or deny that, and she blamed everyone but the Government for the UK’s poor performance, particularly local authorities, which we know simply do not have the resources to do this, and consumers.
Secondly, we need manufacturers to pay significantly more towards the recycling of the packaging used for their products. We urgently need a new framework for producer responsibility, which we have heard about. The prevalence of items such as black plastic, Lucozade bottles with plastic sleeves, coffee cups that cannot easily be recycled and Pringles tubes—they are the worst offenders as they are made of five different materials, each of which is notionally recyclable, but as one cannot be detached from the other, this is pointless—all point to the weakness of the current system. The Government used to boast that the UK’s system of producer responsibility was run at the lowest cost to business in the EU, but that comes at a cost to society, as cash-starved local authorities and taxpayers are paying 90% of the cost of collection. That is a complete reversal of the “polluter pays” principle.

Thirdly, I wish to highlight the Committee’s recommendation that the Government phase in a mandated minimum 50% rPET—recycled polyethylene terephthalate—content for the production of new plastic bottles by 2023. That would create a UK market for recycled plastic, which at the moment is struggling against low oil prices, as that makes new plastic cheaper.

In conclusion, I hope that we see from the Government a radical waste strategy that addresses the stagnating rates of recycling; the inefficiencies arising from having so many different recycling collection systems in operation; and the poor state of our recycling infrastructure, which has been deprived of investment because of the illogical PRN system. We could be world leaders in waste management and resource efficiency. Now is the time for the Government to seize the moment and act.

2.2 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I must apologise to the House and to the Minister for not being able to say for the end of the debate; I have a pressing engagement in my constituency. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate. It is such a shame it is on a Thursday afternoon, when, like me, many people need to be in their constituency, because it is an important debate and the whole House should be getting behind it.

I was one of the MPs who tried to give up single-use plastics for Lent—like many, I completely failed. I did my level best. My husband even did his level nest. He did the shopping now. He took containers to the supermarket to get things without a plastic bag. He took brown paper bags. However, this was not easy. The one lasting difference it has made is that we have bought a yoghurt making machine and we do not buy yoghurt any more—we make it ourselves. However, it is extremely difficult to manage without single-use plastics. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate. It is such a shame it is in on a Thursday afternoon, when, like me, many people need to be in their constituency, because it is an important debate and the whole House should be getting behind it.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I was one of the MPs who took part in the London marathon. In a slight defence of the marathon organisers, I should say that they did trial paper cups along the route for the first time to try to reduce the plastics. The hon. Lady is right to put what she said on the record, but the organisers are probably mindful of that and that is why we had quite an innovative time this year.

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but there were millions of these bottles on the streets and that is a total waste of resources; after one quick glug, they were thrown away. When I came to London from Derby on the train this week, I saw notices at the station saying, “Keep hydrated. Carry a bottle of water with you.” However, the station had nowhere where people could fill a bottle up with water, although we are given bottles of water on the train. That is unacceptable because those bottles are not recycled.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I, too, took part in the London marathon and I can tell my hon. Friend that having a bottle was far better than having a cup because when you are jogging along you are going to bounce a lot of liquid out of the cup. Would it not be a really important innovation if both the top and the body of the bottle were made of the same plastic, as that would make recycling easier?

Mrs Latham: That would make recycling much easier. In the future, if we have the machines that will take these bottles, lots of entrepreneurial young people will be going to get these bottles and getting the money back. That scheme is a good idea, but we need to change the way people behave; we need to stop them using these things. The London marathon is a difficult case, because people need to keep hydrated when they are running.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), children are really interested in this problem and they really care. They need to be educated about the environment, which tend to throw the rubbish out of the car window. We also need to continue this education when students get to university, because once they get there, they forget many of the lessons they learned when they were younger. We need to continue that education and make sure universities are places where both recycling and encouraging people not to use these plastics in the first place are very high priorities. I am not going to steal the thunder of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who is the Chairman of the Administration Committee, on which I serve, but I wish to mention the steps the Committee has taken and the recommendations of the House authorities, who have done an amazing job. We asked them to look at the problem within the House and they have gone a step further, and we are going to have radical change in this place. The House of Lords has agreed to this, too, so it will take place through both Houses. I am delighted about that, but I am sure we will hear the facts and figures later when my hon. Friend will be discussing this.

I also wish to commend the Foreign Office because it has made a big impact. It has introduced the latte levy and improved it, increasing it from 10p to 50p. The Foreign Office has got rid of plastic cups, cutlery, straws and single-use condiment sachets from all its London staff canteens. It is also providing reusable or biodegradable alternatives.
I am sorry I will not be here to hear the Minister’s answer on this because I am concerned about biodegradable products. I believe they just go into smaller pieces, animals still eat them and this is still going to cause a problem. If we can come up with innovative solutions, we can reduce the overall amount of plastic waste.

I read about a scheme where a community in the south-west took all its non-recyclable waste back to the supermarket at the end of one month. That was a huge amount of waste. The aim was to show the supermarket what a huge problem it is. We heard earlier about products such as Pringles, where the packaging is made of five different materials. I do not know whether some of these plastics are recyclable or not, because the logos are very confusing—given that I am interested in this subject, this is probably a problem for most people.

Instead of just us in this House changing our behaviour, every Department should be instructed to stop using single-use plastics. We cannot criticise other people unless the whole of government, in every Department, be it in London or in places such as the Department for International Development’s office in Glasgow, stops using this plastic. We will then be able to say to people, “We have put our house in order. Will you put yours in order?”

Time is short, so I shall finish by saying that instead of just not using the plastics, we ought to be investing money in trialling ways of reusing the plastics that are used. I understand that in Mexico houses are being built from plastic bottles. These houses are cheap and sustainable, and they will last for 500 years. We should invest in such alternative uses for plastics, if we have to have some of them, instead of just saying that we will burn them or put them into landfill if they cannot be recycled.

It is really important that the Government lead the world, and they need to lead from the front. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is incredibly keen on recycling and all things green, and I commend him for his energy and enthusiasm, but I am unhappy about the environment plan running for 25 years. I would like to see things happen much faster, and I would like the Government to look into investing in alternative technologies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just say that the advice is seven minutes per speech, so can we please stick to that? I do not want to impose a time limit, but I do want to make sure that everyone gets to speak. Please think of the others, especially if people will not be here at the end of the debate.

2.10 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and other colleagues.

It was an email from a constituent that I received in either the latter part of 2010 or the early part of 2011 that first made me think about this issue. It came just in advance of the Welsh Government’s introduction of a 5p levy on plastic bags. For many of us, that was a pioneering step, and quite a novel one. To be honest, we did not know quite how it would go. However, my constituent had no doubts: in his view, it was going to be an absolute disaster. He thought it would deprive him of all his liberty. Moreover, he made the point that if the Welsh Government went ahead with the charge, he would start his own boycott and do all his shopping across the border in England. I did not want too long a discussion with him, but we did end up with an interesting exchange of emails. I told him about the four cloth bags that I keep in the back of my car and always take shopping with me. He responded by saying that as a true Briton—as he described himself—and a passionate believer in the liberty of the individual, he thought that the plastic bag charge was an absolute outrage.

That exchange made me think at the time, and I have thought subsequently, that if people want to introduce changes to protect the environment, there will inevitably be people with whom those changes will not be popular. Many of these sorts of changes involve changes in our everyday lifestyles. At the time of the introduction of the 5p levy, I met someone—I do not know whether he was related to the person who wrote to me—who had another view on the subject. He thought that it was obvious—was it not?—that the people of Wales were going to resort to carrying all their shopping in black bin bags. I confess that I never did see 2.8 million to 3 million people walking around with their shopping in black bin bags thereafter, but it is interesting to think about what happens when changes such as these are introduced.

As was mentioned earlier, those of a younger generation pick up on these issues more quickly than those of us of a slightly older generation, because with their school eco-councils, they are probably much more instinctively aware of this issue than we are. Of course, plastic bottles are a particular case in point. Historically, campaigning radicals have often taken up the issue of the land—I think “God gave the land to the people” was Michael Foot’s favourite campaigning song—but there have been very few references in the English language to water. As we wax lyrical about water companies and whether they should be privately owned, publicly owned and all the rest of it, we forget the fundamental point: water is totally natural. It comes from the ground and we can get it from a tap. I do wonder why we do not make more effort to make water fountains more available. They should be much more common in our country. I really welcome the fact that the Welsh Government are looking into ways to increase the supply of water fountains and similar outlets so that we can access water that way. There is no earthly need for us to have to buy our water in plastic bottles and carry them around with us.

We should also look at examples from other countries. When I worked in Japan in the early 1990s, there was a great debate there about disposable chopsticks—or waribashi, as they are called in Japanese. The schoolchildren of Japan basically took matters into their own hands, and pretty much every school then decided that the young of Japan would bring to school permanent chopsticks, which they carried in little cases, to use every day. The idea caught on in companies and more widely. I wonder whether it is time that we acted similarly and bought bottles that we can refill with water.
Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): My hon. Friend has taken us a slight distance away from the subject at hand, but I must say that I am always willing to listen to any discussion about disposable Japanese chopsticks. On water fountains, when she looks around the Chamber, is she not as horrified as I am to see these carafes and glasses of water? Would it not be an excellent idea to have a water fountain adjacent to the Speaker’s Chair, and perhaps one opposite each of the Front Benches, with disposable, biodegradable cups? Let us start as we mean to go on and let this place be an example to the nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think we will carry on using glasses, which are absolutely environmentally friendly.

Susan Elan Jones: Glasses and glass carafes are very environmentally friendly, but my hon. Friend’s comments are of course very interesting, as ever. I wish to make a serious plea. The hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) referred to the glass bottle scheme of the 1970s and 1980s, and how we all enjoyed collecting extra pennies by returning glass bottles. Around that time, probably in the 1970s, it was the Wombles generation and there was a great deal of interest in all these issues. It sometimes seems to me that we really have not gone a lot further down that road. I hope that we can redouble our efforts and look into more options, whether for plastic bottles or other things, because if we do not, as a society and as a world we will have far, far greater problems.

2.17 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate. Incidentally, all the chopsticks that are used in my home are reusable and washed, and most have been going for around 30 years. This debate is overdue; I say that having read some years ago about the difficulties they have had with rubbish on Mount Everest. There was a report last week about a plastic bag found at the bottom of one of our deepest ocean ravines. And there is just everything in between.

I shall use the few minutes available to draw Members’ attention to the previously mentioned report on the Palace of Westminster’s efforts—like it or lump it, it has now been through the system—to get rid of single-issue and single-use plastics, to the best of our ability. An extensive action paper on the issue was accepted by the Administration Committee, and it was accepted by the House of Commons Commission on Monday. Last week, it was accepted by the equivalent Committees in the other place.

I congratulate and thank the officials who took up the challenge on our behalf and who were exceptionally imaginative in their ideas. As many Members will be aware, we now have a progressive programme to remove single-use plastics. It is going to take us around 12 months. I wrote a letter to every Member to explain it, which means that around a 10th of them have read it. I expect complaints and so on; if Members who are oriented the right way receive complaints, can they put them down and thereby save me from having to respond?

All the usual single-use plastics culprits will go. I can assure the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) that water will be provided from taps, instead of in plastic bottles, the use of which will stop. There will be a tariff on single-use coffee cups. This, of course, is to bully coffee and tea drinkers into using reusable mugs. Disposable catering items, which will remain for a while at least, will be replaced with those made of compostable materials. Some of these items will strike us as being really quite unusual and new. For example, salads and similar are currently presented in clear plastic containers. The new ones will look the same, but our officials have discovered a source of compostable plastic, which was produced—I think—in only 2015. We will certainly test it and see how it goes.

The team looked beyond catering. Plastic bags will be replaced by paper bags. We are implementing a green stationery catalogue. A pilot scheme for reusing packaging for deliveries has commenced. The volume of waste of single-use plastic of delivered goods here is unbelievable. The list of things to do is not endless, but it is long, so I will not be tempted, in the time that I have available, to go through it with all the figures.

Interestingly, the parliamentary Environment Team is now looking at the environmental cost of other materials that we use and comparing and contrasting them. In other words, it is a case of watch this space: we have started and we are on our way. I am an ethnic minority immigrant, as my accent says. I come from a small country, which can be environmentally friendly to the degree of being paranoid. Our approach in the Houses of Parliament now fits that approach, and so it should.

2.21 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and to hear of the changes that are coming to the House over the next year.

Plastics help to make a wide range of very useful, durable, versatile products, and, in their own way, they do contribute to sustainability. Thanks to plastic, our shampoo bottles do not shatter in the shower when they are dropped, our cars and trucks weigh less and therefore use less fuel, and our homes are better insulated and save energy. We ship more goods with less packaging than ever before. However, as we have heard today, and I think that we all agree, plastics come with an environmental cost. None of us wants to see the plastics, or trash of any kind, end up in our countryside, our water courses and eventually our oceans. To challenge this end-of-pipe problem, plastics organisations from around the world have joined together in “The Declaration of Global Plastics Association for the Solutions on Marine Litter”, which is informally known as the global declaration. That was completed in 2011 and, unfortunately, up to now only 75 plastics organisations and allied industries, which represent more than 40 countries, have voluntarily signed up to it. There was a commitment contained in that to take action and, more importantly, to make measurable progress.

I draw the attention of the House to Net-W orks, an organisation in the central Philippines, which deals with recycling ghost fishing nets taken from the oceans; the plastic straw product stewardship scheme in the US and north America; and, indeed, Upcycling the Oceans, the Thailand project to rehabilitate the coastlands by removing the waste from the oceans. I also wish to draw Members’
attention to the UK’s contribution to this declaration, which is called Operation Clean Sweep. In East Lothian, the charity Fidra is championing plastic waste awareness. It often runs campaigns in the past about plastic straws and it is now concentrating on nurdles.

Nurdles are the small plastic pellets that are used to make the plastic bottles, the coffee cups, and the objects that we see. Nurdles are, in essence, raw plastic, and the problem is how they are transported around the world. Sadly, an astronomically large number of these nurdles escape during this process, and end up in our oceans. Like microbeads, once they are in our oceans, they are almost impossible to take out. Indeed, Fidra has used beach clean-ups to raise awareness among children. When schoolchildren went on a nurdle hunt at Yelloweraig, a particularly beautiful beach in East Lothian, they discovered 400 nurdles in just five minutes. It is a phenomenal amount to be washed up on our beaches, and industrial spillage and mishandling is the cause of this nurdle escape. The nurdles then float and travel around the world.

Operation Clean Sweep seeks to educate industry to provide ways and strategies to reduce the loss and escape of these nurdles, but, again, this is an end-of-pipe product. It is before the plastic gets into our chains that we need to look. This in turn brings me to the types of plastic that we use. We should move to a mandated minimum use of rPET content in plastic objects. PET is an acronym for polyethylene terephthalate, which makes up plastic, and when it is recycled it becomes rPET. Is it too much to hope that products such as coffee cups and water bottles could contain at least 50% rPET by, say, 2020?

Plastic cups are the end product of a process that many good people, charities and organisations are trying to make sustainable and reusable. I am thinking of the lobster hatchery in North Berwick, founded by Jane McMinn, Davis Grubb and Jack Dale who see our oceans not as a dumping ground, but as an opportunity. Indeed, the award-winning Seabird Centre in East Lothian sees the results of oceanic plastic pollution miles and miles from these shores. These are the people who are advocating responsibility.

However, our young people and our volunteer groups and charities will not be enough without political and, if necessary, legislative support. The EU is promoting the target of 2030 as the year by which member states should have phased out single-use plastics. The UK Government’s proposal of a 25-year environment plan appears to be, with all due respect, more of a repackaging of existing policies and previous announcements. I sincerely hope that the repackaging is not in plastic.

It is our children who go to the beach clean-ups, and our surfers who use our water. Through the conduit of the plastic whale, which was mentioned earlier, and the nurdle hunts, these people attack the issue with passion, enthusiasm and commitment, but those young people now who are cleaning beaches will be in their 30s by the time these Government policies come in. We owe them more than that.

2.26 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). His speech was fantastic all the way through, but particularly at the beginning when he highlighted the importance of plastic and how it can be used to improve our environment. I thought that that was a really important point to make.

As so often, Bolton West leads the way and sets the agenda, and never more so than when it comes to the environment and recycling. Maiden speeches often set a strong agenda for hon. and right hon. Members, so I hope colleagues will not mind me quoting from Hansard. It says that “our society has yet to recognise that we cannot afford the luxury of wasting so many of our limited resources. We cannot continue for ever adopting the shortsighted attitude of a society in which everything must be disposable, in the short term at least. Today we live in a society where the paper cup and paper tablecloth, and even paper sheets and plastic spoons, are taken for granted. We never count the real cost of these items. Planned obsolescence is now accepted by our society and we are now conditioned not to expect anything to last any length of time.

There are many different ways in which our society wastes its resources. For example every housewife knows, when she empties her shopping bag and puts away the shopping, how much paper, rubbish, cardboard, polystyrene and all sorts of other packaging ends up in the dustbin. We have layer upon layer of excessive and unnecessary packaging, most of which is not needed to maintain the quality of the goods we buy. If one buys a pound of apples in a supermarket today, one buys also a plastic tray and a load of cellophane. The housewife cannot afford the extra cost of all this, and the country cannot afford the waste and misuse of resources in this way.”—[Official Report, 12 November 1974; Vol. 881, c. 292.]

That was not my maiden speech. It was the maiden speech of one of my predecessors—Ann Taylor, Member for Bolton, West. She was speaking in 1974 about the importance of recycling and not having this consumer throwaway society. I look to my colleagues and friends in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—the most exciting and dynamic Department that we have in Parliament—to continue the work they are doing and to pursue this agenda. Let us not wait until 2062 to have yet another debate on this subject. Let us get there; let us do it now.

2.29 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for securing it.

Plastic is one of the most successful man-made materials in history and has brought immeasurable benefits to our everyday lives, but it is causing immeasurable damage to our environment. Back in the 1950s, when the mass production of plastics started, the world produced 2 million tonnes of plastic per year; now, we are producing over 330 million tonnes. We are only now starting to learn about micro-plastics—tiny particles that have made their way into the food chain. A study in the US found that 95% of all adults tested had in their urine a known carcinogenic chemical from plastic, and scientists based at the State University of New York found that 90% of bottled water also contained those micro-plastics. We do not yet know for sure the impact of these micro-plastics on human health, but we do know that it is already too late to find a suitable sustainable alternative.

Voluntary return schemes and reusable cups are all great initiatives, and initiatives that I support, but they do not go far enough. We need a statutory scheme; sustainability must be enshrined in law. The Government
must have legally binding environmental limits on plastic waste, air pollution, soil degradation, resource depletion and biodiversity loss. The 25-year plan includes these, but does not have any specific short-term targets that the Government must act on now. The burden is, therefore, rolled further down the line to whoever is appointed the next Secretary of State, or the one after that, or the one after that.

I am pleased that the Committee has now made concrete proposals that the Government can act on right now. These include the Government implementing a producer responsibility structure under which companies producing packaging are held accountable for the type of packaging they produce and burdened with fees when their products fall below our environmental standards.

We also recommend that the Government introduce a regulation whereby all public premises that serve food must provide drinking water on request. This reform is as much a cultural issue as it should be a legal issue, because it requires more people to feel comfortable asking for water to fill reusable bottles or using glass cups instead of buying water bottles that will later be disposed of. However, because reducing the use of disposable bottles is a cultural shift that will not happen overnight, the Government should introduce a deposit return scheme for plastic drinks bottles to facilitate their recycling.

The most important point, which was repeated throughout our Committee hearings, is that the changes the Government aspire to in their 25-year plan need to be enshrined in law, together with proper short-term targets, so that companies can have the confidence to invest in these policies. Secure in the knowledge that the Government have created a legal framework and an equal playing field for all. Currently, businesses that take such action can face a financial burden. This should not be a cost issue for those at the forefront of action.

The Government also need to establish shorter-term milestones in their plastic reduction targets. A 25-year plan is not enough when imminent action is needed. That is why we are asking that the Government set the target that all single-use coffee cups disposed of in recycling bins should be recyclable by 2023. We are also asking that they set a specific recycling target for disposable coffee cups in their upcoming waste and resources strategy, which is due this year, and a post-2020 recycling rate of 65%.

The Environment Secretary’s rhetoric on curbing plastic waste has been skillful and effective in convincing many that he truly cares about this issue and the environment. He lost no time when he got his new Cabinet role in publishing a 25-year plan full of promises that we could all get behind, but it lacks legal certainty that action will be taken, and that is what we are asking the Government for today.

Wales has a world-class reputation in this area. As a special adviser to the Welsh Government for seven years, I am proud to have played my part in helping Wales to become a leading UK nation when it comes to recycling and waste reduction, as well as the third-best country in the world for recycling. I am also proud that we were the first country in the UK to bring in the carrier bag charge. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) about the period of its introduction—it was truly a difficult time. I was at the forefront of hearing from the great retail lobby as it started to understand what this little Welsh Government were about to do. I am glad to have helped champion that cause and to see England follow—a mere seven years later. I am also pleased that only last week Welsh Ministers announced the key findings of research on extended producer responsibility focusing on reducing waste from six types of food and drink packaging. The “polluter pays” principle is core to resolving many of these issues.

I will finish on a positive note by sharing with the House a campaign we are running in my constituency to make Rhiwbina the first single-use-plastic-free community in Cardiff. I thank local resident Naomi England for helping to run that campaign. Our campaign is about encouraging local businesses to become as plastic free as possible and suggesting alternatives. We are working to roll it out across the constituency and the whole of Cardiff. It is about people in the community taking advantage of offers, playing their part by reusing bags and taking reusable coffee cups with them when they are out and about. That is not, however, a substitute for legislation.

I am particularly proud of one smaller constituent, seven-year-old Nathanael, who goes to Rhiwbina Primary School, and who went home one day to look at the waste that he and his family produced. He wrote to me:

“We noticed that we used a lot of meat trays and fruit/veg trays. We also noticed that these trays cannot be recycled. We also thought that the triangle symbol was hard to see on some plastics. We think labels should be clearer.”

So do I, Nathanael. I thank him for his input, and I hope the Government listen.

2.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The plastic bottles and coffee cups inquiry was my first large-scale inquiry as a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and I thank the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), for supporting me and the other new members of the Committee. It was a pleasure to listen to the evidence to what has proved such an influential inquiry. We have influenced the House and soon, I hope, we will influence Government policy.

Sometimes, sitting in a Committee listening to evidence, something quietly dawns on you, and this happened to me when we heard from the #OneLess campaign. I asked its project manager, Fiona Llewellyn:

“Do you think that there is scope to look at the licences of take-aways and fast food places so they have to provide access to tap water because that’s the area where you see a lot of littering and food on the go”?

She replied:

“One of the reasons we have plastic packaged water is that it is convenient to have on the go, so if we can overcome some of the barriers to convenience for refilling that would be a wonderful step in the right direction to this wider problem of plastic pollution and what you suggest would be very welcome”. That is a type of planning law that we could implement immediately to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles.

The inquiry heard a whole load of evidence. The major measure identified was the deposit return scheme, to which many Members have alluded. Hon. Members
might think that all manufacturers are opposed to the deposit return scheme because it is a cost to their business, but many major companies are supportive. That includes Coca-Cola, which I believe is the world’s largest drinks company. The company set out its support for the scheme in its evidence to the Committee. It actually had a number of recommendations for us, including that we should just have a single scheme, that the scheme should be managed by a not-for-profit organisation and, most amazingly, that the costs should be covered by producers and retailers. That has not come from the Committee, a lobby group or even the Government; that is from one of the world’s largest companies and largest producers of plastic bottles. We should listen to Coca-Cola, which we might have expected to be on the other side of the debate.

During the inquiry, China announced that it would no longer accept plastic waste imports, so we had a separate session on Chinese plastic waste. The Chinese waste ban raises questions such as, where will all these plastic bottles go? We do not have the reprocessing capacity. We also looked at packaging recovery notes, concentrating on packaging export recovery notes. These are the licences needed to export plastic waste abroad. Clearly we are not having any for China because of the waste ban, but with PERNs to export waste, for example, to Vietnam, it is difficult to get a clear audit trail showing what happens to the plastic. We had evidence from Zero Waste Vietnam, which asked, “Why can’t European countries recycle their own plastic materials? Why are we having to have shiploads of plastic waste ban raises questions such as, where will all these plastic bottles go? We do not have the reprocessing capacity. We also looked at packaging recovery notes, concentrating on packaging export recovery notes. These are the licences needed to export plastic waste abroad. Clearly we are not having any for China because of the waste ban, but with PERNs to export waste, for example, to Vietnam, it is difficult to get a clear audit trail showing what happens to the plastic. We had evidence from Zero Waste Vietnam, which asked, “Why can’t European countries recycle their own plastic materials? Why are we having to have shiploads of plastic materials that we are not able to recycle?”

Mary Creagh: There is some anxiety over the word “shiploads”.

Alex Sobel: For the record, I did say shiploads—boatloads of materials. Zero Waste Vietnam is a very proper organisation; it would not resort to any foul language. In that case, a local organisation presented us with evidence that the plastic that we are exporting may not actually be recycled. That is the point of these export recovery notes.

Martin Whitfield: One of the great challenges of recycling is that the bottles and containers are often dirty when they go into system, and thus pollute whole loads. One of the great behavioural changes that we need to adopt is the ability to clean these containers ourselves before we submit them to be recycled.

Alex Sobel: We certainly do not want to see boatloads of dirty waste, so I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We also need a complete audit of our PERN system and should look at reform. If we are to export plastic, which I do not actually agree with, we need to know that it will be recycled when it arrives at its destination.

Although the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) is not in his place, I want to thank him. I have a copy of his letter, which I read carefully this morning. The recommendations of the Administration Committee are not only recommendations for this House; they are recommendations that the Government should consider and which present a holistic approach to tackling the use of plastic. The letter mentions ending sales of plastic water bottles. It also includes the latte levy, which we will not have outside this place, but we will have here. The Committee proposes that we incentivise the use of reusable cups through loyalty rewards and that we get rid of condiment sachets. I was amazed to read how much sauce we eat in this place. We consume 334,800 sachets of sauce a year; we are a saucy lot in this House. I thank the Administration Committee and hope that the Government take on some of its saucy suggestions.

Stephen Pound: It is HP Sauce.

Alex Sobel: Absolutely.

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Stephen Pound: It is HP Sauce.

Alex Sobel: Absolutely.

Mary Creagh: There is some anxiety over the word “shiploads”.

Alex Sobel: For the record, I did say shiploads—boatloads of materials. Zero Waste Vietnam is a very proper organisation; it would not resort to any foul language. In that case, a local organisation presented us with evidence that the plastic that we are exporting may not actually be recycled. That is the point of these export recovery notes.

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Alex Sobel: Absolutely.
I cannot think of many companies in the world that have a more iconic brand than McDonald’s, but the kids, quite rightly, really challenged the organisation, asking questions such as, “Why are you using these plastic balloons that blow away and sometimes end up in Norway or wherever?”

I was challenged not that long ago, during the Easter recess, when I went on holiday to Hammamet in Tunisia. This follows on from the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who is no longer in her place.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I pay tribute to the Sunnyside Ocean Defenders? Those young students were so passionate, engaged and knowledgeable. They were interested in not just plastic, but many different things in the world that they wanted to improve, including the protection of polar bears. I remember clearly that they also wanted to ban wild animals in circuses, which the Department is very keen to do. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing those children down and pay tribute to them and their school.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is, as ever, incredibly kind, and I am sure that that will be a great encouragement to them. I thank him for passing on a personalised plastic bottle—a reusable one, I must add—to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The kids really appreciated that, so I am very grateful.

I want to touch on one or two concerns that I have—as you might expect, Mr Deputy Speaker—as we approach Britain’s exit from the European Union. Scottish National party Members believe that the SNP Government are leading the way on tackling waste, but that must not be threatened by the Government’s attack on the devolution settlement. We very much support the European Commission’s vision that all single-use packaging should be easily recycled or reusable by 2030. Devolution has been vital to ensuring that environmental policies and objectives are tailored to our ambition to meet those needs in Scotland, and I am concerned that any power grab from the UK Government could inhibit that.

I am conscious of time, and I promised not to ramble on, but there is one final point I want to make. I will finish where I started, by talking about the children of Sunnyside Primary. It is a school of conservation, and I am incredibly proud of that. Schools often have Latin mottos, but unusually, the motto of Sunnyside Primary is, “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” When making decisions as legislators in this House, that should always be at the forefront of our minds.

2.49 pm

John McKnelly (Falkirk) (SNP): As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, I too would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee for allowing our concerns to be debated today. In particular, I want to praise the superb and diligent work of our staff and Committee members, led by our Chair, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). It is an absolute pleasure to serve under her chairmanship.

I would like to comment on some points made earlier. The Chair of the EAC made fine points on Norway’s scheme, which I will mention in a minute, and in particular her points on the “polluter pays” principle were not lost on me. I urge all local authorities and organisations to write to the tobacco industry and ask it to plunder its war chest, because I believe they have a sizeable amount of money available for environmental issues. I was also impressed by the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who demonstrated how business and communities are fully behind the whole recycling scheme.

There were many other excellent contributions and ideas from Members on both sides of the House. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned “Blue Planet”. I am very grateful to the Bristol programme makers for producing such a high-quality awareness-raising narrative, which brought the seriousness of this issue into our living rooms. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) highlighted just how important it is for Members to work with the schoolchildren in our constituencies.

The EAC recommendations on plastic bottles and disposable coffee cups are both achievable and sensible. If we need proof—which we should not and do not—there are already packaging deposit return schemes for plastic bottles and coffee cups in 38 countries worldwide. Some, such as Germany, which we know has a huge economy and a large population, have managed to increase their packaging recycling rates to more than 90%. That begs the question: what is stopping this Government taking further steps?

Arguably the best example is Norway’s deposit return scheme, which has achieved an enviable and staggering plastic recycling rate of 97% within three years of its launch. The Norwegian Government decided that the best method would be to tax every bottle that is not recycled, and then leave the operating details of the scheme up to businesses, which is a clear sign of respect and trust from all sides that they will do the right thing and accept responsibility. Norwegian shopkeepers and the public say that they generally favour the scheme, because people are paid a small fee for each returned bottle, and shops benefit from increased footfall when consumers return bottles and spend the money in their stores. That is good business.

Operators of the scheme say that it is more appropriate and sensible for people to pay for drink bottles to be recycled, rather than taxpayers having to pay for litter to be cleaned on streets and beaches. Clearly Norway has taken cognisance of human behaviour. The impartial spectator within us sees the morality of our actions. It is that conscience—the person within—that is the great judge and arbiter of our conduct and that tells us all we are doing something wrong, as we have done. The Norwegian Government have clearly been mindful of that and acted accordingly, so why are we not going further?

In 1984 Sweden introduced a deposit return scheme. Interestingly, in Sweden the process is known as “panta”, which I believe means to return something and get money in return. In the early 2000s, Sweden created catchy commercials featuring musicians to raise awareness and incentivise people to “panta” more. That is good creative thinking, nudging people by creating a word for the scheme, and the public love it. Sweden now recycles something like 85% of its aluminium cans and polyethylene terephthalate—PET—bottles through its deposit return scheme. In contrast, as was mentioned earlier, the UK recycles only an estimated 57%.
[John Mc Nally]

All the environment groups say that the key to reducing waste in the UK is to economically incentivise consumers by placing a deposit on bottles. That in turn will make people less inclined to throw away that money and more inclined to recycle instead. All of us, in all parts of the UK, recognise the litter problem in this country caused by single-use coffee cups and plastic bottles. It is an absolute national embarrassment.

Scotland has come to similar conclusions to those of the EAC. The Scottish Government and business community are already taking steps. For example, the Scottish Government have set up a panel of experts to advise on policy development to tackle plastic pollution, disposable cups and plastic straws. It includes experts on human behaviour, economics, sustainable business, biotech and chemicals, environmental law and waste management, as well as advisers representing the interests of young people and the disabled. It is a truly all-encompassing group. That clearly demonstrates the manner in which the Scottish Government are tackling this problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, the Scottish Government absolutely support the EU Commission’s vision that all plastic packaging should be easily recyclable by 2030. Devolution has been vital in ensuring that environmental policies and objectives are tailored to our ambitions in Scotland and to Scottish needs. Any change to our policies—to Scotland’s distinctive and ambitious approach to environmental standards, regulations and climate change—is completely unacceptable.

We were the first country in the UK to commit to introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. We are good neighbours, so let the Westminster Government leave responsibilities where they lie, with the devolved Governments, and let the parties work together.

As we have heard, innovative companies large and small are competing to bring to market biodegradable or recyclable alternatives to commonplace products. For example, it is now possible to get a toothbrush made of recycled bamboo from a local shop. That is an absolutely wonderful invention. There is now a clutch of young companies selling beeswax-soaked cloth wraps as an alternative to cling film and aluminium foil for food storage. Publishing giant Penguin Random House has joined a new campaign on reducing plastics in the book industry. The campaign Authors4Oceans asks publishers and readers to reduce the amount of plastic they use, and presents greener alternatives to plastic-lined Jiffy bags. Waitrose has donated some £1 million to conservation society beach and river clean-ups, marine and plastics research and an innovative challenge fund.

In my own constituency, the makers of Scotland’s other national drink, A.G. Barr’s Irn-Bru, were so far-sighted that they had a deposit return scheme before I was even born. I am looking forward to visiting Coca-Cola in East Kilbride tomorrow. I recently visited Tesco and Asda in Falkirk to see what actions they were taking in their local communities.

We stand at a privileged moment in time, at the forefront of a socioeconomic transition as it gains global momentum. The door is already ajar; we need only push it. Countries, businesses large and small, and individuals around the world have stopped fooling themselves about the need to put the world economy on a sustainable footing. Corporate responsibility is now not a last-minute thought; it is at the heart and the core of ethical business thinking and policy. The dots have lined up, and we cannot ignore the picture they create. Companies and organisations need certainty of policy to invest their time and money securely. This Government are in a good position to give that certainty, with broad agreement across the whole political spectrum. The Environment Secretary tells us that there is “no doubt that plastic is wreaking havoc on our marine environment”.

Surely a cross-party agreement, and agreements with the devolved Administrations, would not be too hard to achieve.

Here in this Parliament, the Administration Committee is in the process of implementing the EAC’s recommendations and more. Over the next few months, as we have heard, we shall see the end of sales of water in plastic bottles and a latte levy, and throughout the whole estate plastic packaging is to be replaced with compostable or reusable alternatives. If you want to change the world, you get busy in your own little corner, and the EAC has done just that. Personally, I would like to see the introduction of a colour-coded traffic light system on cups and bottles alongside a harmonised “binfrastructure” with appropriate matching colours.

That would remove the existing confusion among the public about where to place single-use items in bins.

I will finish with a quote from the Chair of my Committee:

“The UK’s throwaway culture is having a devastating impact on our streets, beaches and seas. Our report recommended practical solutions to the disposable packaging crisis. The Government’s response shows that despite warm words they plan no real action.”

I agree entirely with that statement and could not have put it better.

2.59 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) not just for securing what I think we would all agree has been an excellent debate, but for her valuable and extensive work on this area of policy. I also thank the other members of the Environmental Audit Committee who have taken part in the debate—my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally)—for the work they have done in bringing this important report to the House. We also had a contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) brought an interesting Welsh perspective to the debate.

When it comes to tackling plastic waste, I believe that the House is united in recognising the need for action. The UK uses 13 billion plastic bottles every year, yet only 7.5 billion are recycled, which means that the remaining 5.5 billion are landfilled, littered or incinerated. As the Environmental Audit Committee report has highlighted, if marine plastic continues to rise at its current rate, the amount of plastic in the sea will outweigh fish by 2050. I do not know who weighs the fish.

Although it is imperative that we do all we can domestically to tackle the plastics ending up in our seas, we must also bear in mind that ocean pollution is a
global issue that requires international co-operation and leadership. As long as there are countries and communities with inadequate or non-existent waste disposal infrastructure, litter and waste will continue to pollute our oceans. Will the Minister confirm the amount of spending that the Department for International Development has put towards improving waste infrastructure in developing countries in the past 12 months?

We have heard that the mix of plastic and paper in the lining of disposable coffee cups makes them very difficult to recycle. Currently, only a small number of specialist plants in Britain are able to process disposable coffee cups. That means that over 99% of the disposable coffee cups used in Britain do not get recycled. That is why the Committee’s call for more research into recyclable coffee cups is so important, as is its call for greater clarity and awareness raising about how coffee cups can be recycled. The problem is that there still remains a significant public belief that coffee cups are easily recyclable, along with other paper or plastic items, when in fact they cannot be disposed of with household recycling.

On plastics, Labour supports the Committee’s call for a plastic bottle deposit return scheme, as was outlined in our last manifesto. While behavioural change and reducing the consumption of single-use plastics is undoubtedly important, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture on waste and recycling, of which consumer behaviour is just one part. Currently, packaging producers pay only 10% of the cost of packaging disposal and recycling, which leaves taxpayers to foot the bill for the remaining 90%. We have heard from hon. Members about the weakness of the current producer responsibility obligations, with our fees being among the lowest in Europe. We know that the PRN system is far from optimal, and that local authority practice in recycling varies quite wildly.

A comprehensive and effective strategy from the Government cannot just rely on righteous indignation and soundbites. We need comprehensive and ambitious reform of waste and recycling, and to look at many of the systemic, design and infrastructure barriers to waste reduction and recycling right across the country. Never has this been so urgent as it is now, with the UK leaving the EU in only a few months and, as we have heard, in the light of the Chinese ban on dry recycling imports from the UK. Although we have had numerous promises and press releases, not one piece of primary legislation has been brought forward by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to date, despite the fact that, as I have said, we are now only months away from leaving the European Union. I am afraid that does not encourage confidence in the Secretary of State’s assertions that environmental standards are not at risk with Brexit and that the UK is well prepared.

Last week, yet another consultation was launched, this time on the environmental principles and governance Bill. However, Shaun Spiers, the chair of Greener UK, says that the proposals will give the environment and countryside less protection after Brexit than exists now. Given the emphasis by the Environmental Audit Committee on the importance of the polluter pays principle, will the Minister confirm whether the precautionary and “polluter pays” principles will be enshrined in law before the UK leaves the EU?

How can the Secretary of State credibly claim to be upholding and improving environmental standards after Brexit when the environmental watchdog he proposes to establish has been described by environmental experts as toothless and lacking adequate scope and powers? Only yesterday, the other place voted to ensure that existing environmental standards are maintained, recognising that inadequacy. The Government’s plan announced in January to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 is all well and good, but will the Minister confirm whether it is on track to be delivered? Does he believe that that ambition could, and should, be achieved sooner, and in line with EU targets?

In summary, I again welcome the important work done by the Environmental Audit Committee on single-use plastics and coffee cups, and its leadership in this area. We must use the current wave of public opinion to make lasting and meaningful change to recycling and waste, and to ensure that environmental standards in the UK are protected and strengthened in legislation, not just in Government press releases.

3.6 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on securing this debate, following her Committee’s reports on plastic bottles and disposable coffee cups. We have heard a number of thoughtful and detailed contributions, and there is clearly cross-party consensus about the challenge we are seeking to address. Members from all parts of the United Kingdom have contributed, since this issue affects the entire UK.

The Government are determined to address the problem of plastic pollution. The Marine Conservation Society’s Great British Beach Clean showed in its 2017 report that, on average in the UK, 718 pieces of litter were collected for every 100 metre stretch of beach surveyed. Litter from eating and drinking “on the go” made up 20% of all the rubbish found on our beaches, which shows the scale of the problem. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, there has been a huge rise in public consciousness about this issue, and I especially acknowledge the producers of “Blue Planet II” for their work they are doing to encourage suppliers to their packaging. Recently, I faced a concerted campaign from pupils from Portreath Community Primary School travelling all the way from Cornwall to London to brief MPs about some of the work they are doing to encourage suppliers to their school to reduce the use of single-use plastics in their packaging. Recently, I faced a concerted campaign from pupils from Mount Hawke Academy, who are campaigning for Parliament to do more. Cornwall is also the home of Surfers Against Sewage, which campaigns nationally against marine pollution. It is at the forefront of the campaign to get parliamentary authorities to do more here to reduce our use of plastics. That campaign has been a success, and I am sure all hon. Members will welcome the steps announced this week by the parliamentary authorities to reduce the use of single-use plastics, including plastic water bottles and disposable cups. The intention to increase the availability of water dispensers is also good.
It is this Government’s ambition to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it. The 25-year environment plan that we published in January outlines the steps we propose to take to achieve our ambition.

A central part of the plan is the aim to use resources more wisely and to radically reduce the waste we generate. I would say our approach is contrary to the picture painted by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). We believe and recognise that sustainable growth can go hand in hand with less waste and a better use of resources. We need to shift our economy away from one of making, using and disposing, to one where we can keep our resources in circulation for longer and maximise the value we get from them. We also want to reduce the environmental impacts of products by promoting reuse, remanufacturing and recycling.

The plan also includes the Secretary of State’s four-point plan for specifically tackling plastic waste: cutting the total amount of plastic in circulation; reducing the number of different plastics in use; improving the rate of recycling; and supporting comprehensive and frequent rubbish and recycling collections, making it easier for individuals to know what goes in the recycling bin and what goes into general rubbish. More detail will be announced in our resources and waste strategy, which we will publish later this year, but we are already working to deliver on this ambition.

We agree with the Environmental Audit Committee that more needs to be done to increase the recycling of plastic drinks bottles. That is why we intend to introduce a deposit return scheme, which is aimed at boosting recycling rates and reducing littering of not just plastic bottles but other drinks containers, subject to consultation later this year. As the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) pointed out, a lot of work is being done right across the UK. The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) invited us to look at some of the work being done in Wales. In Scotland, we are aware that the Scottish Government have been working and looking at deposit return schemes for some time. We are certainly keen to work with them and to learn from the work they have done to date.

We agree that making drinking water more readily available in public places will help to reduce the use of single-use plastic bottles. We are already taking action on this, too. Water companies, through Water UK, have been working to create a network of water refill points across England. We are working with them on this. Water companies in England have committed to publishing their plans for reducing single-use plastic bottles in September 2018.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), has written to a wide range of coffee chains, supermarkets, larger airports and transport hubs to encourage installation of free water bottle refill points. There has been a positive response, with most airports confirming they have refill points, and coffee chains and supermarkets committing to their installation. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) highlighted the challenge in train stations. We are encouraging water refill points in train stations, but they are not necessarily providing the facilities to help people to top up. Network Rail is installing a trial refill point in Charing Cross station, with more to follow, if the pilot is successful, at 16 other stations it manages in England.

The Government have committed to removing all consumer single-use plastics from the central Government estate offices. Within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we have removed single-use plastic cups and are setting a requirement that new catering services exclude all single-use plastics. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as was noted in the debate, has also taken early steps to eliminate single-use consumer plastics from its procurement. We will be looking to other Departments to follow that lead.

I turn now to the issue of plastic straws and cotton buds. We are already taking steps towards reducing the scourge of avoidable plastic waste, with our pioneering microbeads ban and the 5p charge on carrier bags. We recently announced that we would go further and consult later this year on a potential ban on the sale of plastic straws, plastic drinks stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England. We recognise that in some circumstances plastic straws are the only viable option for some consumers, for example people with certain disabilities and other medical conditions. We would therefore be looking closely at providing exclusions for straws used for medical and other essential reasons when the legislation is introduced.

The issue of coffee cups dominated much of our debate. We want to see a significant reduction in the use of disposable coffee cups. I have seen reports in the media that the Government have apparently rejected the latte levy, which the hon. Member for Wakefield talked about, but that is not true. We genuinely have an open mind. Clearly, the 5p single-use plastic bag charge has had a big impact and far fewer are being sold today. These types of incentives can change consumer behaviour. That is why, in his spring statement, the Chancellor launched a call for evidence, which closes tomorrow, seeking views on how the tax system or charges could reduce the waste from a broader range of single-use plastics. The call for evidence is clear that we will consider a levy on disposable cups, and we are seeking views on that idea as part of that call for evidence.

However, we should also give credit to the coffee and other retail chains where they are taking the initiative on increasing the recycling of disposable cups. We are encouraged by the action being taken by packaging companies and retailers—for example, as part of the Paper Cup Recovery and Recycling Group. More than 100 local authorities have signed up and we would encourage more to join. I also understand that some coffee retail chains are already taking action to reduce single-use coffee cups by offering discounts to customers with reusable cups and are putting in place the infrastructure to ensure that cups can be collected for recycling. I welcome the announcement by Costa Coffee that, by 2020, it will recycle 500 million disposable cups, the equivalent of its yearly sales.

We disagree with some recommendations in the EAC report. For instance, we do not agree with the recommendation that the Government should ban disposable cups if 100% of those disposed of in recycling bins are not recycled in the next five years. The reason for that was touched on by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who made the point about
some of the challenges created by contamination. Targets need to be not only challenging, but realistic and obtainable, and we believe that 100% recycling from collection is unobtainable as there will always be contamination in the waste stream, either from the beverage or from other items disposed of alongside the cup. However, we recognise that targets and incentives can be critical to successfully driving the right behaviour. We recognise the need to stimulate markets for secondary materials and, as part of our resources and waste strategy, we will look at the whole system from end to end to make sure that it is working effectively through a range of push and pull factors.

The hon. Member for Wakefield touched on producer responsibility schemes, as did a number of other hon. Members, and she pointed out some of the weaknesses. I think she will be happier with the Government’s position on this issue. We have already committed to reviewing our current producer responsibility schemes so that they can better incentivise producers to be more resource-efficient. We aim to reform the packaging waste regulations to encourage businesses to design their packaging products in a more sustainable way, to encourage the greater use of recycled materials in those products and to stimulate the increase of collection, reprocessing and recycling of packaging waste. As part of our upcoming resources and waste strategy, we will set out options for the kind of packaging waste producer responsibility system that we think will best deliver our ambitions.

We want to support people to be able to recycle more and to encourage people to recycle on the go. We outline some actions to support that in our litter strategy. In addition, WRAP—the Waste and Resources Action Programme—has produced a guide for local authorities on improving recycling on the go facilities. We have established a working group to explore and identify best practice in improving bin infrastructure—my speaking note uses the new word “binfrastructure”, which the hon. Lady used; for the benefit of Hansard, I did not abbreviate it—but there is certainly a great deal that we can do in that area.

To conclude, we believe that this is a very important issue. Our resources and waste strategy will address many of these issues. We also have consultations coming up on banning plastic straws, plastic stirrers and cotton buds, and on introducing a deposit return scheme. I believe that the Government are taking these reports and this issue seriously and that we can work together to achieve these aims.

3.19 pm

Mary Creagh: I warmly thank the Minister for his remarks. In respect of the disposable coffee cup ban, let me say to him that the target must not only be realistic and achievable, but must be set on just the right side of impossible if industry is to make the changes that all of us in the House want to see. I welcomed his warm words, but I exhort him to act quickly. As other Members have said, the waste and resources strategy is now overdue, and is slipping back.

We have heard some excellent contributions from Members who said that they were thinking globally but acting locally. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) spoke of the Putney plastics pledge. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about the great work of City to Sea and Surfers Against Sewage. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) told us about her difficulties in giving up plastic for Lent; we also heard her reflections on the London marathon.

From my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elia Jones), we heard about the difficulties experienced by the Japanese in banning single-use chopsticks. The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) told us that we could look forward to a green stationery catalogue, which is a genuine innovation in this place. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) observed that 40 years ago our colleague Ann Taylor, who now sits in the other place, was reflecting on plastics use. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) explained how Wales came to have the third highest recycling rate in the world. I look forward to my invitation from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) to I Am Döner, where I hope we will be able to pump out some sauce—which he certainly did in his speech. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) talked about the fantastic work of Sunnyside Primary School.

We know what we must do. Our report tells us how we are to get there. It points the way. It explains how we can create jobs, stimulate a circular rather than a linear economy, and do the right thing with a higher recycling rate. We want to see the polluter pay, and I want to see the gum and cigarette butt producers play their part in that. Waste has been a Cinderella industry for too long. We are taking it into the limelight where it belongs, to create green jobs in every nation and every region of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the First and Second Reports of the Environmental Audit Committee, Plastic Bottles: Turning Back the Plastic Tide, HC 339, and Disposable Packaging: Coffee Cups, HC 657; and urges the Government to accept their recommendations as part of its Resources and Waste Strategy.
International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia

3.22 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the international day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

I thank all the Members who supported the application for the debate: I am very grateful to them. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who not only supported the debate but, via the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights—which he chairs—gave a huge amount of resource and support to all of us who will be speaking in it. I welcome the Minister to her place. She often talks about global Britain, but I see that she is wearing global Britain today as well. That is great to see. I know that the whole House will want to express gratitude to the many campaigning and support organisations that have been updating and informing us in advance of the debate, but also—most important of all—for the work they do day in, day out to give voice to some of the world’s most isolated and vulnerable people.

This is an important day to me and for many others. Normally I spend it down in Brighton, where each year a community of people gather in public to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. A little later today, this year’s gathering will take place in the heart of Brighton, where speeches will be followed by performances by the Rainbow Chorus. Then, as always, will come my favourite part of the event: everyone present is invited to make the loudest noise that they possibly can for a whole minute. People will clap, scream, cheer, and bang on any instrument to hand. Let me tell anyone who has not experienced it you make a noise.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. Does he agree that it is incumbent on all of us in this place, not only those who identify as LGBTQ, to stand up and ensure that this sort of discrimination is stamped out in society? I thank him for mentioning Pride. Although I do not identify as LGBT, I have previously enjoyed many Pride events.

Peter Kyle: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments and can assure the House that she is a supporter of the LGBT community in general and also of those of us as individuals who are LGBT; we certainly call her a great friend.

The UK’s equality advances have been profound in recent decades. For millions of people around the world the legal rights and protections we enjoy and the journey towards the normalisation of same-sex relationships in every aspect of life here must seem like another planet entirely. Normalisation is more radical than it sounds, but for a young person questioning their sexual or gender identity to see somebody whose success in science, sport, business or politics is the first thing they know about them and their sexuality the last is more empowering than we often think.

But just because we are on that journey does not mean we have reached the destination. Bill Clinton said that one of the lessons he had learned from his time as President is that once a politician achieves something in office, they can never bank it and move on; they must always defend it and make the case afresh for future generations. In the age of rising populism former President Clinton’s advice seems especially relevant to the equality agenda, and I take this challenge seriously. My argument to present and future generations for why we have to both maintain the existing rights and protections for the LGBT community and LGBT people and continue to press forward is simple: I believe that equality has strengthened our society at every step, not weakened it.

It has also strengthened some of our great institutions. Back when the House was debating whether to allow LGBT people to serve in the military, there was strong opposition, with one Member stating:

“If parents felt that the forces condoned homosexuality, a large number of them would do their best to resist the recruitment of their children.”—[Official Report, 9 May 1996; Vol. 277, c. 489.]

And the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said when shadow Secretary of State for Defence that “lifting the ban would adversely affect operational effectiveness.”—[Official Report, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 289.]

Less than 20 years later things are very different.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In support of what the hon. Gentleman has said, may I point out that one of the Guards battalions in the second world war was widely recognised as being full of gay men and it was reckoned to be the bravest and most steadfast battalion of the Guards?

Peter Kyle: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s comments with an open heart; I am very grateful for them and look forward to learning more about that battalion, because I am very interested.

Bob Stewart: I would not mention the battalion by name.

Peter Kyle: That speaks volumes about the era we are moving on from and that which we are moving towards. Operational effectiveness is not only affected by greater diversity; I would argue that our forces remain the best, most professional and most formidable in the world, but their culture has been vastly improved. When President Trump recently tried to ban trans people from serving in the US military the reaction from Britain’s military high command was not only revealing, but was something we should all be extremely proud of. The Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Jonathan Woodcock, said he was:

“So proud of our transgender personnel. They bring diversity to our Royal Navy and I will always support their desire to serve their country.”

He added:

“I suspect many who doubt the abilities of our diverse service personnel might be more reluctant to serve than they are to comment.”
If I was in a fight, I would want a Sea Lord or two on my side. Well, we are in a fight and, as Bill Clinton warned, there are people not only trying to halt progress, but they are seeking to go back. And this is crystal clear now, based on evidence, that excluding LGBT people from serving in our military would adversely affect operational effectiveness, not the opposite.

The same is true for gay marriage. The inclusion of same-sex couples into one of the oldest and most important of our institutions has not undermined its worth or value, but has proven it fit for the 21st century.

The lesson from these examples is clear: equality is not a zero-sum game. When a trans person serves in the military, it does not weaken the values that lead to an effective fighting team; it strengthens them. When a gay couple gets married, the value of a straight couple’s marriage is not suddenly diminished; it is strengthened by being in a partnership that is understood with empathy by more people. This needs to be understood as we look into the future and tackle the areas where more progress needs to be made. More than a third of lesbian and gay people disguise who they are at work, for fear of discrimination. That figure is even higher for people who are bisexual. It angers me that employers are overlooking so many lost opportunities, let alone productivity, because these are the things that come from a workforce that is at ease and able to celebrate the individual characteristics that make us who we are.

Here I want to pay tribute to Mr Speaker. In his time in office, he has relentlessly championed diversity and equality throughout the Commons. The results have been reflected in the Stonewall diversity index, but even more importantly, they have been part of the lived experience of people of the LGBT community who work here. I have worked in some pretty strange places in my time, especially during my years as an aid worker, but the Chamber here is by far the strangest. Sometimes, it is the most hostile work environment possible, but in my three years here, I have never experienced homophobia. The Chamber is a tough place to work, but it is a friendly place for lesbian, gay and bisexual people to be who they are. I hope that the time will soon arrive when the same can be said for trans people, too. The lesson from every other workplace is simple: this does not happen by accident. It happens only when good and determined people make it happen, and for that the Speaker has my full thanks.

Universities now need to learn the lessons, too. A third of trans students have experienced negative comments and 14% have considered dropping out due to harassment or discrimination by students or staff. The number of hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender has increased in recent years, not fallen, and the importance of engaging employers in the fight for equality is ever more important.

While researching for this debate, I was surprised to learn about some of the issues around bisexuality. For example, I did not know that only 12% of bisexual men were out, compared with 77% of gay men. Campaigners have spoken to me about the lack of bisexual magazines, apps, websites, groups and venues in which to meet and socialise. Because a lot of research covers the LGBT community as a whole, little is done to understand the specific sexual health issues surrounding the bisexual community, for example. These are issues that need addressing as we move forward.

Other hon. and right hon. Members will give more detail about the international issues, and I look forward to hearing them, but I cannot conclude without briefly referencing the international situation. Seventy-two countries around the world still criminalise same-sex relationships, 36 of which are Commonwealth member states. Ninety per cent. of the Commonwealth’s citizens live in jurisdictions where same-sex conduct is a criminal offence. I certainly welcome the Prime Minister’s apology for the UK’s historical role in bequeathing those laws to many of those countries, and her setting up of a £5.6 million fund to help countries to reform their laws accordingly, but we must not relent in our diplomatic pressure to reform those laws wherever they exist.

Here in Britain, we are entering the Pride season, and we will be enjoying the freedom that is denied to so many people abroad. Brighton and Hove Pride is on 4 August, when 250,000 people, including Britney Spears, will be taking to the streets and parks of the great city of Brighton and Hove. The fact that Pride is wrapped up in one big party means that people often do not see how important it is to individuals and to the LGBT community as a whole. I well remember standing hidden in the crowds, watching from afar as people marched, danced and cheered, celebrating who they were. Even though it was happening right there in front of me, it seemed a terrifying distance away to someone who was not yet out. Several years later, after I had come out, I remember marching for the very first time. I had never been so self-conscious in my entire life, believing that every single one of the thousands of people lining the streets was standing there staring at me and judging. How things have changed! Now that I march as a politician, I would love every single one of them to be standing there staring at me. What they are doing, however, is enjoying Pride for what it is today. Everyone in that crowd is there for their own reason.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on a fantastic speech and on securing this debate. The big Prides across the UK and across the world are important, but does he agree that it is vital to have Prides in towns and villages across the UK and the world? The small towns and villages are where the biggest challenges lie for LGBT people.

Peter Kyle: That is a welcome and important intervention. We have big Prides in London and in Brighton, which is the biggest in Europe, attracting over 300,000 people, and those big celebrations have played a key role in our communities for a long time. I was on the board of Brighton and Hove Pride for three years and saw what it took to organise the event. I am well aware of its contribution to our community year-round, distributing the surpluses that it makes in one weekend. However, it is amazing how many other smaller communities along the south coast of England have started their own Prides. Worthing has launched its Pride for the first time this year, and Eastbourne started its Pride last year. I hope that smaller communities will see the benefits of a locally rooted opportunity to celebrate diversity in their community and to allow LGBT people to come out and celebrate who they are as individuals. I grew up in Bognor Regis, a town on the south coast, and I would love the day to arrive on which Bognor has its Pride, which I would visit happily and proudly to represent the people of Hove and Portslede.
How things have changed. Everyone who attends and forms part of the crowd at a Pride does so for their own reasons. Many go to show support for friends or family or the LGBT community in general. We see lots of parents with young children sitting on their shoulders, waving the pride flag, and for them it is presumably a tool to introduce the next generation to the issues surrounding equality, sexuality and gender. For me, however, when I cast my eyes around the crowds of onlookers, I am always wondering how many people are going through the same turmoil I once did. If they notice me, my greatest hope is that they see a comfort and confidence in who I am today, including my sexuality, and that that in turn will ease their journey towards allowing others to get to know all of them, not just the bits that are not hidden. That is what we all aspire to as individuals, and this country should aspire to create the conditions in which that is possible and do what we can to get other countries to follow suit. Until that is achieved, days such as the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia will need to exist, and debates like this will remain as important as ever.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have to introduce a five-minute limit, starting with Justine Greening.

3.37 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, because the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is such an important day for so many millions of people around the world. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for securing this debate and for giving a united House of Commons the chance to speak out about issues that matter to so many of us.

While we use this day to celebrate the progress that has been made in so many parts of the world, we should recognise that we still need to make a huge amount of progress—more so in some places than in others. In my time as Secretary of State for International Development, I had the chance to visit many countries where LGBT people simply do not have the same rights that we have here in the UK. We have to recognise that all countries are on a journey, and we should pay tribute to the many LGBT campaigners around the world who work in countries that have so much further to go than the UK. They often put their lives at risk in mounting such campaigns and being a voice for the people around them who suffer so much persecution.

Being LGBT is still a crime in many countries around the world, and people can end up in jail purely because of who they choose to love. Speaking out against that and being a voice today for some of those people is an important task for the House of Commons. We have a chance to stand up for millions of people who do not have a voice. I reiterate what the hon. Member for Hove said: it is exceptionally important that we use the Commonwealth network to drive change, particularly in those Commonwealth countries that have not moved forward since gaining independence. Yes, we were right to make that apology, but those countries now have the chance and the space to make the changes we have made in the intervening years. I think they can make those changes, they should make those changes and they need to make those changes to decriminalise being LGBT. This is a historic time, and I want to see all Commonwealth countries grasp the opportunity to drive for LGBT equality.

We know that changing laws is crucial, and it is at the heart of how we move things forward in our country. Last year, when we were celebrating 50 years since the decriminalisation of homosexuality began, I had the chance to meet some of the amazing people who were there at the beginning of the campaign, many of them through no choice of their own—many had been prosecuted and therefore found themselves flung into a campaign that they had not particularly chosen. They did subsequent generations so much positive good by being prepared and having the courage to come forward and fight those campaigns, and we all benefit from the hard-won rights they won for the rest of us.

This is not just about changing laws; it is about changing attitudes, too. Laws are the beginning of how countries change, but they are by no means the whole picture. The work done by the Government Equalities Office in getting what I hope will be the biggest LGBT survey under way last year is crucial in allowing ourselves and our country to assess how much progress we have made and where we need to continue making progress. In a variety of areas, whether it is LGBT communities’ experience of crime, health, education or other public attitudes, the results of the survey when they are finally published, which I am looking forward to, will give us a chance to take stock of where Britain has got to and, on the basis of that evidence, to talk about where the priorities need to be for the coming years.

There is no doubt that we can be proud of the laws this Parliament has passed, particularly in recent years, and, of course, particularly in relation to same-sex marriage.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): There is an element of deliberate intervention about this—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Please let us not interfere for the sake of it, because I am sure you will not want your time cut later, Mr Blunt.

Crispin Blunt: Please let me make my intervention, because I want to say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) that her words are important because of her leadership both in the Department for International Development and the Department for Education. All of us, and the wider community, owe her a debt. I remember hearing the news of her coming out at the 2016 Pride parade, and I remember how much pleasure that gave the world.

Justine Greening: I very much appreciate that intervention. We all go on a personal journey, alongside the journey of the countries we are part of, and I think I realised that I needed to be part of the solution. Nothing changes on its own, and I realised I could be a positive step on the road to giving other people the confidence to be clear about who they are. That is why I felt it was so important. I very much enjoyed going to the London Pride celebration last year, and I look forward to being there again this year and in coming years.
I briefly pay tribute to Wandsworth LGBT Forum, which works tirelessly locally, and I wrap up by saying that you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself. That is why this matters so much.

3.44 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow an excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), along with so many others, for securing this debate.

Like my hon. Friend, I want to pay tribute, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the work of the Speaker on these issues. Who could have imagined just 10 or 15 years ago that a Speaker's crest would sit in the Speaker's apartment with the rainbow flag and with "All Are Equal" on the bottom of it? I say that just as Mr Speaker takes the Chair. That has sent out an incredibly strong message—not only in this Parliament, but to many Parliaments and countries around the world.

It is a particular pleasure to take part in this debate, both on a personal level, as an out gay MP and co-chair of the LGBT parliamentary Labour party—I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on the Front Bench, and although my co-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) could not be here today, I am sure she sends her strong wishes to this debate—and because of the fantastic work being done against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in my constituency and in Wales by a range of fantastic organisations.

I particularly want to pay tribute to the work of Pride Cymru—to Lu Thomas and all her team, who do such a fantastic job, taking that event from strength to strength. This is now combined with the "Big Weekend" in Cardiff and it has become an inclusive, family-friendly, open event for all people, whether they are in the LGBT+ community or just allies, friends and neighbours.

I also pay tribute to the work of Pride Swansea. I was lucky enough to be able to go to the reinvigorated Pride Swansea parade the other week, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), and many others. It was a wonderful, happy and inclusive celebration of all that is good about equality in this country and standing up against the three evils we are discussing today.

It was absolutely right of the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who spoke from the Scottish National party Front Bench, to make clear the importance of getting out to our smaller towns around the country. I am looking forward to going to a Monmouth young people's Pride event later this year. It is important that we support those groups and organisations in our smaller towns and communities up and down the country.

I pay tribute to organisations such as Stonewall Cymru that do such fantastic work, and to the Iris prize; we are delighted in Wales to host one of the leading independent LGBT+ film festivals every year. A few weeks ago, it was a particular pleasure to be there to see the Lily Summers award for LGBT+ activism being given to a good friend of mine, Lisa Power, one of the founders of Stonewall. Lily was a remarkable young trans woman in the Labour party in Wales who, sadly, died at far too young an age. She made an incredible difference in her community and it was a real pleasure to see an award in her memory being awarded to someone such as Lisa, who has made so much difference in fighting against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia right from the early days and is continuing to do so to this day.

That brings me to the issue of trans rights. Although we have seen so much progress made on equality in this country, we have much, much more to do, particularly on the issues affecting the trans community. I have had the pleasure of meeting my local trans support group in Cardiff. Good work is being done by South Wales police to root out hate crime, including against the trans community, and I know that members of that community hugely appreciate that work.

I know this has been mentioned, but what a contrast we have seen between our UK armed forces' response to the issue of trans people serving in the armed forces and the response in America. Unfortunately, as we highlighted in the Home Affairs Committee just a few weeks ago, the debate sometimes leaves a significant amount to be desired, and an awful lot of hurt can be done to members of the trans community. I urge that all of that debate be conducted with respect and humanity, with everyone remembering that at the heart of this debate are individuals who have often gone through great hatred and hurt.

It is only right that we talk about the issues faced internationally. I have spoken in this place previously about Chechnya and LGBT rights in Russia, Africa and the middle east. Unfortunately, we have seen Beirut Pride being shut down and cancelled in recent weeks. This is being dealt with by the vice police and other bodies, which is completely unacceptable.

We have seen the Georgian activists having their international day, which we are celebrating today, being cancelled, and we have seen many, many examples of hatred against the trans, gay, lesbian and bi communities across Europe. However, there is much positive going on as well. We have seen a fantastic Pride event in Moldova in recent days, and I met fantastic LGBT activists from across the Commonwealth at an event in your house recently, Mr Speaker. They all set for us an example that there is hope that we can make a change and that we can fight for equality and against these three evils, in this world and in this country.

3.49 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow three excellent speeches, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate.

It is a pleasure also to see the rainbow flag flying from Government buildings today. That is not a token; it sends a signal. I hope that the Minister will be able to ensure that when Pride week comes, the rainbow flag will fly from high commissions and embassies all over the world. Again, that would not be tokenism; it would send a real signal to a number of people who happen to be gay, particularly in Commonwealth countries and throughout the middle east, and who are living in repression and fear simply because they are gay. Please, let us see the rainbow flag flying proudly for that week from high commissions and embassies around the world.
There is a big wedding on Saturday, and I wish Harry and Meghan incredibly well. I want to say to Harry and to Prince William that they have been amazing role models in promoting LGBT issues. They have been absolutely fantastic, and it is more role models that we need. Tom Daley has been a superb role model in the world of sport. I saw in one newspaper recently an article that implied that there was a premier league footballer who was bisexual but not out, and it seemed to be some sort of semi-scandal. The scandal is that in this day and age, in the 21st century, in 2018, anybody should fear coming out because they feel there would be catcalls from the stadiums or whatever. All I can say is that since I came out I have had the two best election results I have ever had. At the most recent election, I got more votes than I had ever had. I am not putting that down to the fact that I am gay, but it certainly has not done me any harm. That is the message that I wish to send out today.

Hannah Bardell: On the hon. Gentleman’s point about sport, particularly football, does he agree that it is incumbent on those in senior positions in organisations such as the FA to send a positive message about what it would be like to come out and the support that people get? Unfortunately, that has not always been the case in recent times.

Mr Evans: Absolutely. During Pride week a lot of the premier league teams wear rainbow laces, and that is superb, but it would be fantastic if in the 21st century more footballers were able to come out as who they are. I attend a lot of conferences with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and I have great pride in telling people that we have more out gay MPs than any other Parliament in the world. That was not the case 20 years ago, and it may well be that football is 20 years behind the curve, but imagine the influence it would have throughout the world if some of the great footballers who are gay were able to come out openly and say that they were. They would be amazing role models.

In Parliament, we have Ministers, Secretaries of State and former Secretaries of State who have happily come out as gay and proved to be role models. The current Taoiseach of Ireland and Prime Ministers of Serbia and Luxembourg, and the former Prime Ministers of Belgium and Iceland are all gay. Again, they are sending a happy signal to the rest of the world that it is okay to be gay and that it is not going to hold back one’s career.

I mentioned the royal wedding earlier. A billion people will tune in to watch that happy event, and I shall certainly watch it, but while I am watching, one thing will flash through my mind, which is that I am a Christian. Clearly, I am a second-class Christian but a first-class gay. Why? Because I would not be allowed to walk down the aisle with somebody I loved and get married in a church in England. My message to Justin Welby is that I understand that the Church in Africa and some other countries is not as progressive as we are, but he really needs to show leadership in our country to ensure that gay Christian people can get married and enjoy a big day, just as Harry and Meghan are going to do on Saturday.

Bob Stewart: I voted against the equal marriage Act, and I was wrong. I was wrong, because I have seen the joy that it has given to so many people. The established Church of our country should follow what this House has decided, and gay people should be allowed to marry in church.

Mr Evans: That is breaking news, and it is absolutely superb. My hon. and gallant Friend has just told us what his views were in the past and what they are today. If he can make that progression, I rather hope that the Archbishop of Canterbury is listening and that he, too, can make that sort of progression, so that Christians in this country can enjoy a big day just as Harry and Meghan will on Saturday.

We need to send a signal. In 72 countries, there are laws against being homosexual. I know that some of them are legacy laws from the United Kingdom, and at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I have apologised for the fact that we bequeathed them those laws, but it does not mean that they need to keep them, because we have not. We have moved on, and I hope that they will be able to do so, too. There are 13 countries in which people can be executed for being homosexual, and two in which that currently happens—it is happening at the moment in Iran and parts of Somalia. It is horrific that the death penalty exists for simply being gay.

At conferences of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we try to promote equality wherever we possibly can. At the last conference in St Petersburg, we put down a motion in one of the committees to say that, at the conference in Geneva, we would discuss homophobia and the fact that there are people who feel repressed simply because they have gay people living in their country. Just at the tail end, when we thought that we were going to get it on the agenda, an attack was sprung on us on the last day by countries mostly from the middle east to take it off the agenda. Uganda was also a prominent fighter against gay rights. The topic was therefore taken off the agenda for Geneva in March. We are now trying to put it back on the agenda for the meeting in October.

There were about 30 countries that voted against discussing gay issues. There was not going to be a resolution, so there would have been nothing for them to vote against. All they were doing was trying to stop Members of Parliament talking about gay issues that occur in their countries. China was one of the countries that tried to stop the discussions, as were Russia, most of the middle east and Uganda. I pay tribute to countries such as Belgium, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand—particularly the wonderful Labour MP Louisa Wall, who has promoted equal rights in New Zealand—Australia and South Africa. We were even supported by Angola and Malawi. That was a superb revelation for me.

All I can say in conclusion is that homophobia is illogical, it is a denial of human rights, it is dumb and it is time that we made it history.

3.57 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate of huge importance, and I am honoured to take part in it. Last month we did indeed see the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit, which was a key opportunity to highlight and
advocate on behalf of LGBT people living oppressed false lives in fear, or in valiant criminal resistance in the 36 of the 53 countries in the Commonwealth in which homosexuality is illegal.

Those 36 Commonwealth countries are among many countries around the world where being LGBT is punishable—people are punished and made into criminals. They also suffer public beatings and enforced sterilisation. It is truly chilling that a person having sex with someone of the same sex can lead to their death in 10 countries around the world. We should remember that although we are in a certain position that the rest of world is not, such positions can be vulnerable.

LGBT people in those countries live with the daily risk of attacks, of rape and of murder. Let us not allow semantics to deceive us when we talk of homophobia, transphobia or biphobia. The word “phobia” means fear—a fear such as arachnophobia, agoraphobia or claustrophobia. The responsibility is on oneself to overcome that fear. What we are dealing with here is not fear but hate, where the responsibility is left to the victim to overcome the hateful effects.

According to the LGBT anti-violence group Galop, hate crimes against LGBT people in the UK rose by 147% in the three months following the Brexit vote. A report by Stonewall Cymru found that attacks on people in Wales had risen by nearly 82% in the five years up to 2017, and that 52% of trans people had suffered a hate crime. Before anyone celebrates that as a reporting success, I should add that Stonewall Cymru has also found that four out of five anti-LGBT attacks still go unreported.

While we can congratulate ourselves on the progress, albeit inconsistent, that we have made here in the UK, we cannot ignore the wider issue, which is that we are living in a time of increased bigotry. Difference is being seized on as a weapon of division, and unfettered hate speech is opening the way to a rise in violence and hate crime. We must not allow free speech to be taken hostage by those who would seek to divide and intimidate. A civilised society will be judged not just on how it treats the majority but on how it stands up for its minority groups and protects them when the tyranny of the majority threatens.

We are honoured to be elected representatives, but we must use our platform to speak up for the rights of all. We must not allow the rights of some in our society to be sidelined or turn a blind eye to oppression in action. Until we achieve a society in which all are respected and treated as equal, in which anyone can walk hand in hand with anyone else, in which being in a same-sex relationship is not a political act, and in which being a trans person of colour does not threaten someone’s chances in life, there is still work to be done.

Human rights, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation or anything else, must continue to progress, and those who stand in the way must be held to account. That is our duty. Human beings are all different. Let us start with difference and move forward with acceptance.

4.1 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate. I was pleased to support him in my capacity as chair of the all-party group on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, which now has more than 80 members from this House and the other place. It is timely that on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia we are here talking about the importance of promoting LGBT rights.

We last had this debate—initiated again through the Backbench Business Committee, which I thank for allowing this one—on 26 October. I spoke then about the fact that we were living in two worlds: great progress was being made on LGBT rights in some countries, while in others we were, at best, standing still and, at worst, going backwards. It is important to understand the reason for that. In that debate, I pointed out that, in a short period—16 years—25 countries had passed same-sex marriage legislation. Since then, Australia has become the 26th, following—significantly—a referendum in which a large majority supported the legislation. In so many countries, then, there has been progress on same-sex marriage, yet in others there has been reversal. In Bermuda, where same-sex marriage was introduced under the auspices of its Supreme Court, it has now been reversed by democratic decision and populism in Bermuda. That is a warning to this place not to be complacent about LGBT rights or—for that matter—human rights; we must constantly guard against their reversal.

At the time, I raised the situation in Russia and urged the Government to press the Russian authorities to say what had happened to their investigation into the treatment of gay men in Chechnya, where there had been appalling brutality, torture, arbitrary detention and even killings. What has happened? Recently, the Russian Government flatly denied that their investigation had produced any results—they simply denied that what happened in Chechnya took place. There is a need, therefore, for scrutiny and continuing pressure on those countries to expose what is happening, and we have to be ready to raise these issues at the diplomatic level.

Stephen Doughty: I have heard at first hand testimony about Chechnya from activists here in this Parliament. Does the right hon. Gentleman also agree, however, that we need to look at the situation in Northern Ireland? It is obviously not comparable to Chechnya, but does he welcome the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Nick Herbert: Yes, I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am just coming to that point.

Still on the global front, there are other countries where the situation is going backwards. Under state auspices in Indonesia, there are calls for criminalisation and for cures for homosexuality, and raids on private spaces. This is all making public health outreach more difficult, which is interfering with HIV/AIDS programmes. That is of great concern to those campaigning for the relief of HIV infections. In fact, the infection rate in Indonesia has increased fivefold over the past decade. The authorities and parliamentarians in Jakarta are now considering a Bill to criminalise same-sex conduct. I could go on with my list. I could talk about what is happening in China or in Zambia. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), should he be called to speak, will talk about what has been happening in Lebanon.
Let us try to look on the bright side. The Government should be commended for the stance that they have taken on these issues. Only recently, the Prime Minister took a very strong stance at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. We still have a situation whereby too many Commonwealth countries—the majority—criminalise homosexual conduct, therefore covering a majority of the population of Commonwealth citizens. The apology that the Prime Minister offered, as well as the willingness to work towards decriminalisation, made a powerful statement.

The Government can do so much. They need to be cognisant of the importance of maintaining pressure. I therefore welcome what the Foreign Secretary said today, when he tweeted:

“Standing up for human rights, including LGBT rights, is an integral part of @foreignoffice work. Societies where people live freely attract world-class talent, business investment & are more stable and prosperous.”

I welcome the work of the Foreign Office in supporting LGBT groups through our diplomatic missions, and through our embassies and high commissions on the ground. Many of our ambassadors and high commissioners do strong work in this area. We need to see more consistency, with more embassies and high commissions offering the support that the best do. That is the message that we should carry to the Foreign Office.

The Government need to be aware that there are domestic issues still to resolve in this country. This is not all about what other countries should do. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned Northern Ireland. It is almost certainly the will of this House that the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Bill passes, and it should be allowed to do so. I understand that it is not the Government who are standing in its way. Hate crime is still a problem in this country, indeed it is increasing, and there are still issues for LGBT asylum seekers. Above all, there are issues for trans people; the consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004 should proceed. These are important issues. We have made enormous progress in this country, but there is still work to do.

4.7 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow so many fantastic speeches and, indeed, a privilege to speak in this debate on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it.

Hon. Members have already reflected on and spoken powerfully of the changes that they have seen over their lifetimes. It is horrifying to think that when I was born in 1978 consensual homosexual acts between adults were still three years away from being decriminalised in Scotland. It is a tragedy to think about how many lives were destroyed by those pernicious criminal laws.

After two steps forward, we took one step back, as decriminalisation was followed by the equally disgraceful piece of legislation that became known as section 28—legislation that undoubtedly prevented schools from being the inclusive and supportive environments that they should have been. Its repeal in 2000 was a gutsy move by the Labour and Liberal Democrat Scottish Executive of the time, against a background of a vicious campaign of misinformation and prejudice that barely left the front pages of the Scottish newspapers for month after month. Thankfully, enhancement and equalisation of civil rights in other fields followed, culminating in equal marriage measures in Holyrood and here in Westminster, after what I think could be described as a significantly more uplifting debate.

I want to finish my progress report by paying tribute to my former colleague and neighbouring MP for East Dunbartonshire, John Nicolson, who introduced his “Turing Bill”—the Sexual Offences (Pardons Etc.) Bill—as a private Member’s Bill in the last Parliament. Although it sadly did not make it on to the statute book, it clearly provoked Governments here and in Scotland into passing their own legislation to pardon those convicted of breaching the pernicious old laws of the past and into righting some of the most terrible injustices.

It is fantastic that Scotland and the UK are regularly listed near the top of the rankings of the best European country for LGBTI equality. It is appropriate that we pay tribute to the activists and campaigners—there are too many to name—who have put themselves on the line in securing the rights and freedoms that we enjoy today. But as other hon. Members have said, there is no room for complacency; and nobody is saying that the job is finished. Some have highlighted the progress that we still need to make on transgender rights. I welcome the work undertaken by the Scottish Government to review and improve the Gender Recognition Act. I very much want to see the same thing happen here, and quickly.

It is fair to say that the effect of section 28 still seems to linger. Making schools a supportive environment for LGBT pupils is not just a matter of repealing that vicious legislation; it is also about positively ensuring that support and inclusive education are genuinely available. I want to pay a huge tribute to two of my constituents, Jordan Daly and Liam Stevenson, for the outstanding work they have done through their Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign, which I know many Members across the House are strong supporters of. I hope that their hard work will help to ensure that, in future, schools can be more fully supportive and inclusive of LGBT pupils in a way that they were prevented from being in the past.

Another sphere that has not always provided a welcoming place for LGBT people is the world of sport. My impression is that sport in Scotland, and particularly football, has previously lagged somewhat behind the efforts to tackle homophobia in England. There has thankfully been some recent positive progress, with the development of the Scottish LGBT sports charter and the equality standard. It was encouraging to see some of the cautiously optimistic submissions to the recent Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry on that subject.

In discussing sport, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the volunteers and clubs that have gone out of their way to promote sport on International Day against Homophobia/Transphobia/Biphobia, and to promote the LGBT community. In the UK, for example, we have various leagues, including a nationwide Gay Football Supporters’ Network league, that provide a safe space
for hundreds—in fact, probably thousands—of football enthusiasts who happen to be LGBT or not. It is something that has been hugely important for me, and I have enjoyed being part of this for the last eight or nine years through Edinburgh’s HotsScots football club. I very much look forward to joining them and thousands of other competitors this summer in the 10th Gay games in Paris, where we will compete against teams from around the globe.

There is much to celebrate across the UK, but there are also serious challenges. It is fair to say that the outlook for many members of our community around the world is often far bleaker. On the theme of sport, Russia will of course be hosting an even more significant sporting event this summer, yet, as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) pointed out, it is among countries that have an appalling recent record on LGBTI rights. The UK Government have a commendable record on making representations to other Governments on LGBTI rights and the repeal of discriminatory laws, but diplomacy, as we heard, is just one side of the coin. Hearts and minds need to be changed more generally, and that is an even bigger challenge.

If time permitted, I would highlight the fantastic work of Pride House International, which made a massive contribution to challenging homophobia and discrimination among Commonwealth countries by hosting an event at the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth games. I understand that when in Russia it will be present at a World cup for the first time. Obviously, it will not have Russian Government support, so if there were any opportunity for UK Government support, FA support or FIFA support, that would be magnificent.

4.12 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I would like to begin by echoing Members’ comments about the significance of today’s debate, on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing the debate.

I do not think I have spoken in my three years in the House about these rights, but let me say at the outset that, as a lawyer, I believe that it is absolutely integral in the rule of law to have equality and diversity recognised. It is only by having those values recognised that the rule of law is sacrosanct.

I am hugely proud that the UK is a world leader in transgender rights and LGBT equality. If we are to achieve social and societal progress abroad, we must continue to ensure that we set an example here in the House of Commons and across the country. I would like to remind the House of the promising and progressive legislation passed under David Cameron’s premiership in the 2010 Parliament, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which gave many people the right to marry those who mean most to them. That was perhaps the moment that I became most aware of the importance of this issue. I married in 2003, and I do not know what it would be like not to have been able to marry the person you love.

I am delighted to say that four organisations in my constituency—Leicestershire police, Conservative-led Leicestershire County Council, the University of Leicester and De Montfort University, just outside my patch—are included in Stonewall’s top 100 employers. That is a tremendous achievement for Leicester and Leicestershire, and it puts them both proudly at the forefront of inclusivity and equality. For almost 30 years, Stonewall has been a trailblazer in promoting equality and acceptance for concerns affecting the LGBT community. I pay tribute to it for that. Perhaps it did not often happen in the past that Conservative MPs paid tribute to Stonewall. Perhaps we are rectifying that mistake today; at least I hope to be rectifying it today.

Equality and acceptance for the LGBT community is not only enshrined in laws made in this place or in our devolved Parliaments and Assemblies—it is also, perhaps more importantly, demonstrated in the everyday actions we all take in helping to create an inclusive and accepting environment for everyone. However, it is important to recognise that, as with most matters, there is always more to be done.

Individuals who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT are disproportionately affected by bullying. That is simply not acceptable in this day and age. I should like to cite a case of homophobic abuse at a Leicester City football match in September last year, where a Leicester City fan shouted an offensive term at Brighton supporters. Brighton is a city known nationally and proudly for its large LGBT community. This offensive behaviour, I am pleased to inform the House, was swiftly condemned by both clubs and by the supporters group of Leicester City—a club that proudly promotes inclusivity and equality for all supporters. The incident was dealt with swiftly by Leicestershire police, who, as I mentioned, are proudly included in Stonewall’s top 100 employers, and are especially adept at dealing with offences of this nature. That recent incident is sadly just one of many homophobic, transphobic or biphobic instances that the LGBT community contend with on a day-to-day basis. I repeat that this is simply unacceptable in this day and age—in fact, at any time.

Equality and inclusivity are the bedrocks of modern democracies. These principles are enshrined in all of us at birth, and we should seek to ensure that they are recognised among all of us in society. I am therefore delighted to join colleagues in all parts of the House in supporting today's International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

4.17 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I add my congratulations and tribute to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate. This is an unusual situation because it is an important debate to have, and yet one that we probably all wish was not necessary. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is no longer in her place, talked about many countries being on a journey. Regardless of the progress that we have made in this country and what we might think of that progress, and while we have travelled further than many countries, we have not yet completed our journey.

One of the things about being a Liberal is that when it comes to protecting and standing up for LGBTI rights, one has a lot to live up to. As far back as 1975, we committed to a gay rights policy with a resolution in favour of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality’s proposed law reform Bill. What sticks out for me about that is that it was 1975—just over 40 years ago. As my
hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, it is unimaginable that it was only 40 years ago that we were first talking of a campaign about full equality for homosexuals and equalising the age of consent for gay sex. If we fast-forward 40 years, at our 2015 conference we overwhelmingly opposed conversion therapy for all LGBT+ people—imagine that in 2015. We have travelled a considerable way, but we should not pat ourselves on the back quite yet, because we have a long way to go.

One of the most significant things for me—so far—was a statement made by Nick Clegg before the 2010 general election. When speaking about equal marriage, he said simply:

“All couples”—

I emphasise, all couples—

“should be able to make that commitment to one another”,
and now they can. Under the equal marriage legislation championed by Lynne Featherstone, of which I am particularly proud, we now live in a society where everyone is able to love equally.

I remember being asked just before the Scottish elections in 2011 whether I would support equal marriage. To me, that was a ridiculous question. What struck me was that if I had two children, one of whom was gay while the other was not, would I not want them to have the same rights, the same protection and the same respect from the law? What a ludicrous question.

Only today, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) has raised the issue of not being able to get married in church. I would like to make him an offer. [ Interruption. ] Not that sort of offer. One of my friends is a Church of Scotland minister, who is gay. If I had a word with him, I am sure that he would be more than happy to oblige when it came to the ceremony.

As I say, we have come a long way, but not as far as we should have done. At the moment, we are increasingly hearing about transphobia. Although the Equality Act 2010 protects trans people from discrimination—regardless of whether they have changed their birth certificate—and we have seen great strides in rights, we cannot rest until LGBT+ people across the globe are able to live freely, without fear of discrimination, marginalisation or criminalisation.

That is so even here in the UK where, as I have said, in recent months the trans community has faced a barrage of transphobia—denigrating their identities, dismissing their rights and defying the tolerance we cherish in this country. Imagine being a teenager who is facing all that: coming to a realisation about their sexuality or their gender identification, and seeing that denigrated every day in the media. It must be terrifying.

It is not only terrifying and unacceptable, but dangerous, because 45% of trans school pupils in the UK report attempting suicide, which is unacceptable. The world is a difficult enough place for our teenagers without adding extra problems.

There is a list—a long list—of things that we still have to do in this country. With an eye to the time, I will not list them, but the biggest thing we have to do is to keep working on our tolerance. We must keep looking at where we can improve the situation—looking at every little thing, as well as the big things—to ensure that all our children live in a country where they feel equal.
tirelessly in this area, particularly Stonewall and the Kaleidoscope Trust, to which I know my hon. Friend—and you, Mr Speaker—have given particular and personal support.

Crispin Blunt: I am grateful for that intervention because it has been one of the delights of my relationship with you, Mr Speaker, that we have been able to work closely together on these matters over the past five or six years.

We continue to show leadership in this area. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting the Prime Minister made a statement about British policy on this issue, and outlined the assistance we are prepared to give to help countries that were unlucky enough to inherit our unhappy laws in this area, which was extremely welcome. However, if we look around the world we see that, progress is not universal and consistent, as it has been in the United Kingdom. On 10 July 2018 the British Government will host the Western Balkans Summit in London, but LGBT issues are not on the agenda, and so far, LGBT organisations have not been invited to participate in the civil society forum, or other forums. In preparation for EU accession, many countries have formally brought many of their laws into line. However, it is not much good for an LGBT activist or group in that country if the law is all right, but nobody is doing anything to change attitudes in society, or to oversee and ensure that the police and other public authorities do what they are supposed to do to uphold the rights that people may have technically but not necessarily in practice.

Mr Nigel Evans: Since we are talking about the international community, let me correct something I said earlier. I said that Iran and parts of Somalia have executed people for being gay, but it is actually Iran and Saudi Arabia. Does my hon. Friend agree that the prospect of people being executed simply because of their sexuality is something that we in this House should fight against?

Crispin Blunt: In far too many jurisdictions the death penalty remains in place. Parts of Nigeria are covered by such a jurisdiction, but there are also parts where someone can cheerfully get lynched. And it is not just Nigeria; this is an incredibly important issue for many people who continue to live in terror around the world. That is why I am delighted that we have had the opportunity to raise this issue again, having had a debate on international LGBT rights last October.

In the time remaining I will reflect on those parts of the world where we are not making progress. Only this week—on Monday night—the organiser of Lebanon Pride was arrested in Lebanon. He spent 12 hours under arrest, and was released only if he signed a declaration to say that he would cancel the rest of the events that he was organising for Lebanon Pride. He had already ensured that there would not be a Pride parade in Beirut in 2018, because the 2017 Pride parade had been cancelled after threats of violence against it by Islamist groups. I hope the Minister will tell us that we will take this up with the Lebanese authorities. We need to support people in this position. The circumstances facing activists in parts of the middle east mean that they need to be incredibly courageous, so I hope the Minister can give me that reassurance.

Finally, I want to turn to the unhappy example of Turkey. We have identified ourselves as fourth in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association’s European report. Turkey is almost at the bottom with only nine indicators—Malta is at the top with 91—yet we have just entertained President Erdogan here on a state visit to the United Kingdom. Can the Minister tell us if these issues were raised with the Turkish President?

4.30 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and I associate myself with everything that has been said in the debate by hon. Members. As a British citizen and a gay man, I am very aware of the level of equality that I can enjoy in this country. I would like to put on record my profound thanks to all parliamentarians, of whichever party, who have helped to bring that about in the UK since the 1950s.

If we are to be a beacon of respect for human rights to the rest of the world, we have a duty to support those people who are not British citizens but who have fled from their country of origin because of threats to their human rights. Even in those countries where capital punishment may not be the official sanction for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgndered, unofficial sanctions are imposed by other members of the society, including the police forces that are meant to protect citizens, making people pariahs, beating them up and often killing them.

This country has a proud history of providing asylum for people fleeing political oppression, but I suggest our willingness to protect people fleeing oppression on every one of the protected characteristics should be every bit as firm as it was for those fleeing communism or fascism. About 6% of asylum claims in this country are made on the basis of sexual orientation, but only a quarter are granted compared with a third of other claims. I would like the Government to review the quality of decision taking in respect of LGBTI asylum claims. The stated policies for determining whether an asylum seeker should be granted leave to remain are relatively sympathetic, but the implementation of those policies sees LGBTI asylum seekers all too frequently detained and their LGBTI status questioned beyond all reasonable levels of evidence. In far too many cases, leave to remain is refused and they are returned to the dangerous situations from which they have fled.

Even if asylum seekers are not repatriated, the detention regime is not LGBTI friendly. People in asylum accommodation are normally required to share rooms. In many cases, this has led to bullying, harassment, physical violence and sexual assault not just from other detainees, but even, in some cases, from detention centre staff. I urge the Government to consider detaining a few LGBTI asylum seekers, and at the very least ensuring they are offered safe, self-contained accommodation if they are detained.

There is a serious issue about the trust immigrants can have in the system when they are the victims of crime, in particular sexual crimes and human trafficking. Far too often, migrants are too afraid of repatriation to be willing to use the law to escape from exploitation.
I believe there should be a default expectation that all those fleeing oppression on the grounds of one of the protected characteristics, whether race, religion, disability or sexual orientation, should be protected in this country. I believe that if our country could give that assurance to individuals from countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria and Iraq, it would strengthen our ability to persuade those countries to protect their own citizens.

4.34 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I was proud to be elected last year, as an openly gay man, and in most respects in this country, for LGB people we have achieved legal equality—except, of course, in Northern Ireland, which other Members have mentioned. I am protected against discrimination in most areas of life. I can marry whomever I want to, if anyone would want to marry me, of course—applications on a postcard. I can date a person in the style that I want, including online, and of course, consensually I can sleep with who I want without fear of persecution.

However, the same cannot be said in many other parts of the world. One of my first trips as an MP was online, and of course, consensually I can sleep with who I can date a person in the style that I want, including online, and of course, consensually I can sleep with who I want without fear of persecution.

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Nick Herbert: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, just this morning, the offices of Sexual Minorities Uganda were raided by the authorities at the instigation of the Ugandan Government in Kampala, breaking up a meeting that it was holding to celebrate “IDAHO” Day? The meeting included diplomatic representatives from a number of countries, including, I understand, the United Kingdom.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is disgraceful. I was in those offices only a few months ago and I hope that the Government will raise this with the Ugandan Government. I hope that if the Ugandan Government keep clamping down, we offer space in our embassy compound for those meetings to continue, as I know other European embassies have done.

Before I finish, I want to touch on the fact that we should not be complacent here in the UK. We must make sure we understand that discrimination and hate crime go on here too. In Brighton we have a fantastic LGBT safety forum, but it reports that the number of homophobic and transphobic attacks has gone up. My colleague who stood in Worthing West at the last election, Sophie Cook, a trans woman, faced numerous instances of assault and abuse. I want to read one or two of the tweets that she gets. For example, a tweet about her standing said:

“Its a trannyfest. Welcome to tranny #Labour.”

Also, “Tranny Corbyn. This is what Britain has come to”—she receives hundreds and hundreds of those kinds of tweets every single week. That is unacceptable. It is unacceptable that we have not had an openly trans person here. We have 300,000 trans people in Britain, by many accounts, and we need to do better on representation in this Parliament. We have a great gay Parliament. Let us move forward to combat transphobia and have a more trans-friendly Parliament as well.
me to believe that perhaps one day it would be OK to be gay. Being elected and coming to this place helped me to move forward in my journey. Many other Members have spoken very movingly about their own personal journeys and the impact that this had on them.

As I said earlier, it is mental health awareness week. I must say, as someone who suffers from anxiety, that taking so long to come out had a huge impact on my mental health. The grey cloud of anxiety was never far away. Coming out has helped me to tackle that and get over it, but I think it important for us to recognise that many young people in particular, throughout the UK and beyond, suffer serious mental health problems as a result of being discriminated against.

I pay tribute to the Glitter Cannons in my constituency. We are celebrating our fourth West Lothian Pride event this year. When I was growing up in West Lothian, I could not have imagined a Pride celebration. Local Pride celebrations are hugely important to young people and families, because they have become very much family celebrations. We see people of all generations there, including children.

Last summer, I worked with the Victoria Derbyshire programme, doing a piece about the journey we have been on across the UK. I thank all the Members who took part in the programme. I will not name them all, because I cannot remember all their constituencies off the top of my head, but many Members spoke, and a couple of them were speaking for the first time about coming out. The programme tracked the changes in society through their personal experiences.

I pay particular tribute to people such as Lord Smith—Chris Smith. It is on their shoulders that we stand. People like me have been able to come out relatively easily, but for them it was hugely difficult and challenging.

We must also remember—I think that this has been said by other Members—that when we change legislation, we do not necessarily change culture. It will take a major and concerted effort to roll back the discriminatory culture and atmosphere that was created in England by legislation such as section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986, which section 28 inserted.

In Scotland, we have been working closely on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—campaign, and I pay tribute to its excellent work. Our Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, is doing a huge amount—as, I know, are the UK Government, including the Minister—to wipe away the effects of the 1988 legislation, which banned the supposed promotion of homosexuality and “the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

That language, and that legislation, shames us all. It was a dark mark on this Parliament. However, working together across parties, and across the UK and beyond, we can change the culture and the language, and make the future better for people throughout the UK and throughout the world.

4.44 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is not often that we can rise to our feet and say that we agree with absolutely everything that has been said from both sides of the House, but that is the case in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. For #IDAHOBIT2018, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, this year’s global theme is alliances for solidarity. The organisation says:

“No battle can be won in isolation. We all need to keep strengthening alliances, especially when we need to ensure safety, fight violence, lobby for legal change and/or campaign to change hearts and minds.”

Nobody loves a celebration more than I do, but as we celebrate we must recognise not just how far we have come, but how far we have yet to go. As a proud ally of the LGBT+ community, I ask the Minister this: when will she start the Gender Recognition Act consultation? Just do it; stop kicking the can down the road. Start the consultation.

There has undoubtedly been progress in the last century for LGBT+ people worldwide, but there remain discrepancies in rights globally, as we have heard today. The Government should note that over the past four years the UK has fallen from being the leading country for LGBT+ equality in Europe to fourth place, which is not good enough. The Government’s delay on the GRA consultation has created a hostile environment for the LGBT+ community. Over the past 12 months LGBT+ people have experienced increasing levels of hostility, hate crime and discrimination and been affected by the cuts to specialist services.

As we have heard, including from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), some of the language used, especially about trans issues, is reminiscent of the language used in defence of section 28 decades ago. On some social media sites there is talk of reintroducing section 28 for trans people; we must not let that happen. Next week marks 30 years since that vicious provision was introduced by a Conservative Government, and it took 15 years of grassroots campaigning and a Labour Government before it was repealed in 2003. We must not go backwards. We must support change and get our domestic laws in order so that we can push globally to change the world for the better.

The last Labour Government did more than any other Government in British history to advance LGBT+ equality, and the next Labour Government will do even more. We will accelerate that work, show solidarity with the struggles for LGBT+ equality around the world and pressure Governments to enshrine these fundamental human rights.

I must say that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) might go viral, not because of his speech but because of the intervention on him by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who said he was wrong to vote against same-sex marriage and he has seen the joy it has brought to people. That is the whole point: fighting for somebody else’s rights does not in any way diminish our own rights. The more we can get that across around the world, the better.

As I always say, the Government are welcome to steal the Labour party’s ideas. We have loads of them; we will give the Government loads and create even more, and we will progress the rights of everybody around the world, especially the LGBT+ community. The Labour party recently set up a Labour LGBTQ+ staff network to champion LGBTQ+ staff, ensure fair representation at all levels of the organisation and make Labour one of
the most attractive and welcoming workplaces for LGBTQ+ people. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), co-chair of the LGBT+ parliamentary Labour party group, for keeping us moving forward on the issue and making sure we are always ahead of the game.

As a country, we need a Government who will take action, not just make announcements. Currently we have a lot of PR but not much substance. I want to know when we are going to see the results of the LGBT survey that started last year; let us see the results so we can work together to move things forward and understand the lived experiences of the LGBT+ community.

I want the Minister to get to her feet and prove me wrong. I want her to say, “No, we’re doing lots of things. We’re going to start the GRA consultation tomorrow. We’ll publish the findings of the Government’s LGBT survey tomorrow.” I want all that to happen. I do not want to argue about this, I just want to move us forward.

When the Minister gets to her feet, it would also be nice if she could update the House on the UK’s commitment as Commonwealth chair for the next two years. It is important that we know what action the UK Government are taking to advance equality and human rights for LGBT+ people in the Commonwealth, bearing in mind that Commonwealth countries’ laws were put in place by the UK during its colonial years, as the Prime Minister has admitted. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Kaleidoscope Trust, which hosted the participation at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting of the largest ever delegation of LGBT+ activists.

I also want to thank the House of Lords, which voted last week to keep a key EU human rights charter as part of British law. Its absence could have seen the destruction of people’s rights, so I thank the House of Lords for doing that. As I continue to work with Pride, Black Pride, Stonewall, the British LGBT awards, the European diversity awards, GLAD—GLBTQ+ Legal Advocates and Defenders—and all the other LGBT+ organisations, I hope that the Government will do the same so that we can continue to move forward.

4.51 pm

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Please will colleagues forgive me if I do not have time to refer to every single speech? This has been an incredibly powerful debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing it. The International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia is such an important date in our calendar, and I am glad that we are marking it with a debate in the House today. We have heard a series of powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, and I pay tribute to everyone who has contributed. The hon. Gentleman made a compelling speech, not just about winning rights but about the need to maintain, protect and nurture them once they have been won. He gave a very personal account of watching the Pride march in Brighton, hidden in the crowds before he had come out, and told us that his Pride journey over the years has meant that when he marches now he positively wants people to stare at him and pay attention to him.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who has done so much, both personally and professionally, in this arena. Everyone across the House recognises the contribution that she has made. I was struck by the last line of her speech, when she said that “you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself”. To me, that sums up the important nature of this debate. I should also like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who touched on the mental health aspect of the debate. That is something that we should very much bear in mind. Indeed, it will continue to be borne in mind as we go through the programme of work that we have planned.

This debate has touched on a wide range of LGBT issues, and I want to give the hon. Member for Hove time to respond at the end. We have touched on domestic and international aspects of the issue. At the outset, it is worth reflecting on how far we have come domestically since the decriminalisation of homosexuality half a century ago. From the equalisation of the age of consent to the introduction of same-sex marriage, successive Governments have made significant progress in advancing equality for LGBT people, who now enjoy the right to marry, to start a family and to change their legal gender to match their identity. As a result, the UK is now globally as a world leader on LGBT rights. We can all be proud of that record, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said. However, they also said that we must not be complacent. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), Australia has recently voted to introduce equal marriage but, sadly, Bermuda has gone back on its legislation in that regard.

I have also listened to the concerns raised about the situation in Northern Ireland. Everyone in the House knows that it is a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, but I am sure that there is impatience in this House on that matter. This morning, in Women and Equalities questions, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Michael Russell) asked whether we can be proud of that record, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) said. However, it is vital that we have the same ambition for LGBT people, who now enjoy the right to marry, to start a family and to change their legal gender to match their identity. As a result, the UK is now globally as a world leader on LGBT rights. We can all be proud of that record, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said. However, they also said that we must not be complacent. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), Australia has recently voted to introduce equal marriage but, sadly, Bermuda has gone back on its legislation in that regard.

In her first speech on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister was clear that this Government are committed to tackling burning injustices. No one should be held back by their sexual orientation or their gender identity. We wish to take a moment to address a couple of the points that have been raised today, the first of which is on the LGBT survey. Last July, the Government launched a national LGBT survey to help us understand the experiences of LGBT people living in the UK. The response was unprecedented. We had the largest response ever in the world to a survey conducted to date, with more than 108,000 people participating. By definition, the survey marks a vital addition to the evidence base, and it will underpin the Government’s LGBT policy in the future. The results will be published in the next few weeks, and I look forward not only to the publication of those results but to a comprehensive LGBT action plan. That will set out the steps that we are taking in response to the survey findings, and a substantial package is being prepared; we are looking at Government services and considering how they can be improved.
The Gender Recognition Act 2004 has also been mentioned. Many trans people, including respondents to the LGBT survey, are clear that the process as it is now is not working for them. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) has canvassed me personally on that point at great length. I was delighted to go to an event in your house on Tuesday, Mr Speaker, which the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee hosted, with your permission and concerted support, although that you were in the Chair in the Chamber. I found it very interesting, and I was concerned to hear some of the issues raised by guests at that event. We have engaged constructively with a wide range of organisations to understand their views. We are analysing the responses of trans people in the LGBT survey, and we are aiming to launch the consultation before the summer recess. I hope that answers the questions put by various colleagues from throughout the House.

The Government recognise that conversations about transgender equality can elicit a wide range of views. Sometimes they stray into abuse and intimidation, and that is unacceptable. As hon. Members throughout the House, including the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Dwyfor Meirionydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) have explained, it must stop.

I turn now to schools, because, sadly, abuse and intimidation are not confined to the adult world. We know that studies such as the Stonewall school report have shown a decrease in bullying towards LGBT people in recent years, but reported rates are still too high. We want our schools to be inclusive, which is why we are funding a £3 million programme to tackle bullying.

Internationally, the UK is doing a great deal. If I may, I will write to hon. Members who have raised concerns about particular countries. Of course, the Prime Minister gave her commitment at the Commonwealth summit last month when she apologised for the UK’s role in the past and outlined her determination to help countries update their law and reflect the progress we have made in this country on this important issue of the rights of LGBT people.

4.58 pm

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to all Members who have spoken today. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) summed up the objective we are trying to achieve when she said, “you cannot be at your best if you cannot be yourself.” Ensuring that people can be their best is what we are all trying to achieve in this Parliament, in the country and further afield.

There was a wonderful moment of drama, humanity and emotion in our debate, and it came from the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Being a gay man, I am partial to a bit of drama and emotion, and it came from the most unexpected source today. He admitted that he had got it wrong in the past, which is a brave thing for any politician to stand up and say. He did a second brave thing by standing up and saying not only that he got it wrong last time, but that he wants a big positive change in the future. That means he has learned from the past. That is an attribute for which we are all very grateful.

We heard a lot of testimonies to you, Mr Speaker, before you arrived in the Chair. I expressed my view that this Chamber can be a hostile place to work but that, as a gay person, I have never in my three years here experienced any hint of homophobia. That is a testament to you and your leadership in this Chamber. If other employers showed the determination that you have, a lot of other people in other workplaces would enjoy the freedoms that we express here daily. We are very grateful for that.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said and the way in which he said it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the international day against homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered.

That the Detention Centre (Amendment) Rules 2018 and the Immigration (Guidance on Detention of Vulnerable Persons) Regulations 2018 be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—[Wendy Morton.]
Heathrow Expansion: Lakeside Energy from Waste Ltd

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)

5 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): We have just witnessed a wonderful debate on International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia that showed both passion and insight into the modern world. I am equally passionate about that subject, but this evening I wish to talk about the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant in my constituency. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on this important issue.

Lakeside Energy from Waste is not just a local energy provider in Windsor; it is an establishment of local, regional and national significance. I have concerns about the plant’s viability and longevity if the third runway should go ahead at Heathrow, or even if it is threatened that the third runway should go ahead at Heathrow, and I will explain why.

The Lakeside Energy from Waste facility is situated on the proposed site of the third runway at Heathrow. The plant is the largest facility of its kind in England and has been in operation for just six years. The cost of relocation is estimated at between £500 million and £700 million and, from what I can see, with all the potential delays and all the other issues surrounding it, the cost could well run to as much as £1 billion. Those are large sums of money.

The site is of local significance because of the number of people it employs—around 300, plus others—so it provides local jobs. Regionally, it deals with 450,000 tonnes of waste each year, which is more than the non-recyclable waste produced in a year by the people of Birmingham and Manchester combined. It is a major national plant.

Some 90,000 tonnes of waste come from west London, 45,000 tonnes of waste come from south London and 30,000 tonnes of waste come from Surrey. Lakeside’s impact is one of national significance because it deals with 40% of the country’s hazardous waste, much of it medical waste. Seventeen NHS trusts, 500 GP surgeries and other medical establishments rely on Lakeside Energy from Waste.

The plant also provides electricity to the grid, powering up to 50,000 homes in the area, and of course Slough Borough Council enjoys the fruits of its labours in providing services to Lakeside Energy from Waste. I will not name the exact figure for commercial reasons, but a very large sum of money is taken in business rates by Slough Borough Council.

Where is the money coming from? Airline charges are currently £22.53 per passenger, and rather than Heathrow Airport Ltd conjuring up the money to relocate the plant, passengers will bear the risk of the debt repayments on any secured loans and of ensuring a return on shareholder equity. Having the customers pay the enormous costs of something that does not necessarily benefit them directly does not seem like a good way to proceed with a national project of this nature. If Heathrow Airport Ltd raises the landing fee per passenger, it will probably have to go up to around £30 or £31, making Heathrow the most expensive airport in the world at which to land. If we are looking to become a more competitive nation, particularly as we head towards Brexit, it does not seem a good idea to proceed with a project that causes enormous challenges for waste recycling and processing and creates a white elephant when it comes to the price.

When considering the plant’s relocation, Heathrow’s financial viability is also called into question. As I said, the cost of relocation looks like it will be about 5% of the cost of the entire project. Looking at the gearing ratio of assets against borrowing, Heathrow is in a parlous position, so I worry that it will not be able to afford to proceed in the first place. We have become
incredibly concerned because Thames Water’s gearing ratio is 81%, and it has been told that it must be reduced.

In 2012, the Civil Aviation Authority said that the National Air Traffic Services gearing ratio should be restricted to just 65%, yet Heathrow’s gearing ratio is already at 87%, before it has even begun the third runway project. If it goes ahead, Heathrow’s gearing ratio will end up somewhere around 91%. This is very worrying. Were I an investor, I would be worried, but as a Government I would be even more worried. As a user of the services of Lakeside Energy from Waste, I would be exceptionally worried that this would create enormous troubles for me, with a lack of continuity in waste processing.

Overall, my main concern is that there could well be a lack of continuity of service for waste disposal. I am also concerned that Heathrow’s viability in coming up with the money to finance the relocation of the operation, particularly without a site having already been identified, is in question.

I have two core questions for the Minister; he will have heard them before, but I want to reiterate them. First, will the Government confirm that they unconditionally accept the Transport Committee’s recommendation that “a condition of approval”—for the third runway—“be specified in an updated” national policy statement “that provides the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant with equivalent recognition as the Immigration Removal Centres and that the replacement of its facilities be accounted for” in the development consent order process?

Secondly, is there a way in which the Government can guarantee that there will be no break in service? If they maintain that “the planning and costs of moving the Energy from Waste Plant would be a matter for the airport to take forward with the owners of the site”. I fear that that responsibility may well be placed on a private limited company, when we are talking about a waste processing plant that is an asset of national significance. Although I hope this will not be the case, let us say that it turns out that Heathrow Airport Ltd is responsible for relocating the plant; who then is going to pay for the necessary local infrastructure—the roads and perhaps even some rail—for the heavy goods vehicles that will need access to the plant?

In summary, I have huge concerns. It is no great secret that I think the third runway is a bit of a mistake. I hope the decision will be changed at some point. In a Government I would be even more worried. For Windsor (Adam Afriyie) on securing this important debate about the effect on Lakeside Energy from Waste Ltd of the Government’s preference for a third runway at Heathrow. I shall address my hon. Friend’s specific points shortly, but wish to begin by providing the House with some general context.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Government announced in October 2016 that their preference for delivering much-needed additional runway capacity in south-east England was a new north-west runway at Heathrow. The Government also set out that they would be taking this preference forward through the development of a national policy statement.

In terms of process, the Government have consulted twice on a draft airports NPS, and the second consultation closed on 19 December. The Transport Committee completed its scrutiny of the draft airports NPS on 23 March this year. I wish to take the opportunity to thank both the Committee for its important and timely work and the tens of thousands of members of the public who responded to our consultations. We are currently giving careful consideration to the Committee’s 25 recommendations and all the consultation responses. The House will appreciate that, during this time of careful consideration, I am not able to discuss either the merits or content of any final airports NPS, or the Government’s response to the consultations or the recommendations from the Transport Committee. Subject to that consideration, I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are on track to publish and lay before Parliament any final airports NPS in the first half of this year. It can then be debated in both Houses and will be the subject of a vote in this House.

Let me turn to the Energy from Waste plant itself. It is clear that should the north-west runway go ahead, it will result in the loss of the jointly owned Viridor and Grundon Lakeside Energy from Waste facility at Colnbrook, near Slough. The Lakeside complex houses a municipal waste incinerator as well as a high-temperature incinerator for clinical and other hazardous waste. The site handles 420,000 tonnes of waste annually, primarily taking waste from a number of authorities, including Slough, Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell and the West London Waste Authority. The site reportedly generates 37 MW of electricity to National Grid.

The high-temperature incinerator primarily provides a waste disposal service to NHS trusts and GP practices. In addition, the Metropolitan and Thames Valley police forces and the UK Border Force use the same facility for the safe disposal of contraband and controlled materials. Lakeside is one of five clinical waste incinerators in the south-east and London regions of comparable capacity. The incinerator at Lakeside has a capacity of 10,000 tonnes, of which 5,200 tonnes were in use in 2016.

In 2016, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, for example, did not send any municipal waste to the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant. More than 33.5 kilo tonnes of mixed municipal waste was sent instead to the Ardley Energy from Waste plant in
Oxfordshire. In terms of clinical waste, Windsor and Maidenhead sent more than half a tonne of clinical waste to the Lakeside clinical waste incinerator. However, it is noted that the majority of Windsor and Maidenhead’s clinical waste—some 1.5 tonnes—was processed at Hillingdon Hospital.

In addition to the Lakeside site, expansion at Heathrow would affect a number of large businesses and facilities such as the British Airways headquarters at Waterside, a large number of airport hotels and the immigration removal centres. The draft NPS is clear that immigration removal centres play a vital role as part of the infrastructure, which allows the Government to maintain effective immigration control and to secure the UK’s borders. Continuous provision of the immigration removal centres at Heathrow is necessary. This approach, which is different from that taken for other large-scale businesses, was taken as immigration removal centres are strategic assets, providing nationally critical infrastructure. The Government believe that it is necessary to require that these be replaced, without interruption of service.

The Airports Commission concluded in its 2015 final report that it would be “necessary” to replace the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant if the HAL scheme was preferred. In its consideration for the site, it noted that, while not of national importance, the site played a significant role in regional and local waste management and had a valuable capability to process clinical waste and other contaminated material.

In reviewing the Airport Commission’s recommendation for the plant, the Government explored its role in UK waste management and energy plans across Departments, as well as seeking confirmation of any regulations or Government policy that would require the plant’s replacement.

Both the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy assessed that the loss of the plant would not impact the UK’s ability to meet environmental targets on either a regional or a national basis. For these reasons, it is the Government’s view that the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant is neither a strategic energy nor a waste asset, and with no regulatory or policy reason to replace the plant it would not be appropriate to mandate that it should be replaced. The Government have therefore taken the view that should the north-west runway scheme go ahead, it should be considered in the same way as other commercial property acquisitions and be treated as a commercial negotiation between the owners and the airport.

Any applicant will need to undertake a commercial negotiation with the owners of the plant to determine compensation. We understand that the site operators are working with Heathrow Airport Ltd and the relevant local and regulatory authorities to replace the facility on a like-for-like basis at a suitable nearby site in the event that any airports NPS is designated and the airport operator proceeds with an application for development consent.

In the revised draft NPS, the Government recognise the role of the plant in local waste management plans. This was changed to ensure that any applicant should make reasonable endeavours to ensure that sufficient provision is made to address the reduction in waste treatment capacity caused by the loss of the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant. Analysis of both NPS consultations and the TSC recommendations continues. During this process, we will continue to review the plant’s status within any final airports NPS.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important debate. I appreciate that many Members of this House will have views on airport expansion, and I can assure them that they will have an opportunity to debate any final airports NPS.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.
Stephen McPartland: The modest changes in the Budget were welcome, but I wonder whether the Secretary of State has seen the recent research showing that food bank demand is growing much faster in areas where universal credit has been fully rolled out than it is elsewhere. Does she have substantial proposals to solve this problem?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. Employment is going up and unemployment is going down, which is reflected in the numbers, but because this is a brand new benefit that takes on people in work and people out of work, we are seeing the number of people claiming double. We are now giving support and career progression to people in work, so we will see the claimant count increase and, in some areas, double.

Margaret Greenwood: The Department for Work and Pensions has been forced recently to reveal that a fifth of universal credit claims are being turned down because claimants are not managing to negotiate the complex application process, meaning that thousands of people are falling out of the system. Claims must be made and managed online, even though, according to an OECD study, 40% of unemployed adults in England have low basic skills. Meanwhile, one in 10 jobcentres are being closed, removing face-to-face support from communities, and the Government are speeding up the roll-out of the full service yet again. What action are the Government taking to identify the factors leading to such a high level of failure?

Ms McVey: Obviously, this benefit is not failing. That is why we are seeing extra support and why we are seeing record numbers of people in employment and record low unemployment. However, the hon. Lady is right to talk about the low IT skills that people have. Part of the universal support we are giving is to educate and to enable people because the IT skills they need to get a job and to get cheaper deals online. That is what we are providing. Again, if they are in debt, we are providing that personalised support. As we close some of the
just those in kinship arrangements, but children who are adopted and would otherwise be in local authority care.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is completely right that in our country someone should be able to have as many children as they want as long as they can support them, but it should not be that the taxpayer has to subsidise them?

Alok Sharma: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the aim of this policy is to strike the right balance between support for claimants and fairness to taxpayers, but of course we do have exceptions in place, quite rightly.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When the Government came up with their two-child policy, did they seek any guidance or advice from China about its one-child policy?

Alok Sharma: I will just report that we have exceptions in place and of course this policy is ultimately about being fair both to claimants and to taxpayers.

Youth Employment

3. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in youth employment.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Youth employment has risen by 150,000 since 2010 and now stands at 3.86 million. The UK has the third highest youth employment in the G7 and the proportion of all 16 to 24-year-olds in work or full-time education now stands at 85%.

Douglas Ross: Youth unemployment has fallen by 43% since 2010. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the work in Moray during Meaningful May, when 93 students have taken part in work placements, taking the total for this year to 330? Will she praise the 186 employers who have facilitated these projects and explain what further the Department is doing to get more young people into work?

Ms McVey: I will indeed welcome the work that is being done in Moray not only by all the work coaches and the businesses there, but by my hon. Friend, who does so much in his local area. On top of that, Scotland has a different system in place, with the youth obligation traineeships supporting work experience, supporting sector-based work academies through Skills Development Scotland, and supporting and getting people excited about going into a job—excited about what they can do and what they can offer Scotland and the world.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit to raising the minimum wage for young people so that they are not subject to lower rates of pay, and to enacting a real living wage, as Labour will, so that this Government’s promise of making work pay is not an empty one?

Ms McVey: Obviously, the hon. Lady will know that we have increased the living wage so that the lowest-paid workers have had the fastest wage increase in 20 years. That is what we are doing. What we will do—we are keeping this under constant review—is give support to young people. First and foremost, there are the apprenticeships, the traineeships, the work experience and the education we can give them, all of which are at record highs.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Tory party launched yet another policy group this morning. Is it not about time that these groups were given
some serious work about how we really tackle youth unemployment, how we get more kids into real apprenticeships, and how we tackle child poverty, which is not going down?

Ms McVey: I might not have said it enough today, so I will put it on the record again: youth unemployment is down 43% since 2010. The number of children not in education, employment or training is down 370,000 since 2010. That is what we are doing. We are providing the building blocks to support young people and to get them into a job, living independently. That is what a Conservative Government does—watch and learn!

Universal Credit: Household Debt

4. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of recent trends in the average level of household debt of people receiving universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Government have taken a number of steps to prevent problem debt, such as capping payday lending costs. We also have interest-free advances within universal credit, and a system of priority deductions to help claimants who are in arrears.

Helen Hayes: A recent Trussell Trust survey found that 70% of respondents were in debt as a result of the initial universal credit wait and more than half had experienced problems with their housing linked to debts and arrears. Advance payments simply stack up more debt, and food banks in areas where universal credit has been fully rolled out for more than a year have seen an average increase in need of 52%. The Secretary of State has it within her power to make further changes to universal credit to stop this avoidable hardship and distress now. Why will she not do so?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady will know, a report that was published last year by the National Federation of ALMOs found that more than three quarters of working-age recipients of housing benefit and universal credit in the private rented sector seeking support has arrears fallen by a third. The key point is to make sure that the private sector is fairly loth to let houses to residents associations and landlords, I already know that the private sector is fairly loth to let houses to tenants on housing benefit and to stop. The Department for Work and Pensions has failed to make significant action to try to improve the situation upfront, not least by providing an additional two weeks of housing benefit for people transitioning to universal credit. People can receive a 100% advance and help with budgeting support, and of course a direct payment is available if landlord or tenant require it.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Could the Minister confirm whether, under universal credit, claimants are more likely to be in work within six months than they were under jobseeker’s allowance?

Alok Sharma: Yes. I can absolutely confirm that under universal credit claimants can get into work faster and stay in work longer than under the legacy system.

Universal Credit: Private Rented Sector Evictions

5. Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): What assessment she has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on the number of evictions in the private rented sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Housing benefit has been paid direct to tenants since 2008. Universal credit replicates that so we would not expect to see a change in landlord behaviour.

Stephen Lloyd: I am very disappointed with that answer because, having had meetings with a number of residents associations and landlords, I already know that the private sector is fairly loth to let houses to people on housing benefit. The same applies to universal credit, the reason being that the payment goes direct to the tenant. I urge the Government to at least have a default, if both sides agree, for the payments to be made to the landlord.

Kit Malthouse: It is deeply disappointing when Members of this House trade their principles for perceived political advantage, as the hon. Gentleman seems to have done on universal credit, having of course previously been a strong supporter of the coalition Government’s reforms. He knows full well that direct payments to landlords are available. I have myself met the two most prominent residential landlord organisations very recently and, if he looked at the data, he would see that the proportion of working-age recipients of housing benefit and universal credit in the private rented sector seeking support has not really changed over the past 10 years.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is reported that the Law Centres Network says cases are now common in which eviction proceedings come to court after the Department for Work and Pensions has failed to pay rent directly to the landlords of universal credit claimants, even though it says on a claimant’s journal account that a direct rent payment has been made. What action is DWP taking to address this issue as a matter of urgency?

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Lady will know, we have taken significant action to try to improve the situation upfront, not least by providing an additional two weeks of housing benefit for people transitioning to universal credit. People can receive a 100% advance and help with budgeting support, and of course a direct payment is available if landlord or tenant require it.

PIP: Back-payments

6. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What progress her Department has made on processing back-payments for personal independence payment claims.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): We understand the urgency of this matter and we remain on track to begin making the first payments in the summer. The exercise to identify claimants affected by the MH judgment will start as soon as we have made the changes to the guidance needed to implement the judgment. We are engaging with stakeholders to update the guidance and once guidance has been finalised I will further update the House.

Peter Grant: Four months without even an update to Members of Parliament does not sound like the matter is being treated urgently by the Government. In January, when the Government were dragged here by an urgent
question to give a statement on the court case they lost, the Secretary of State assured the House that, if I wanted to contact her to arrange a meeting to discuss a particular constituency case, her door was open and she would meet me. Six weeks after I wrote to ask for such a meeting, I got a letter back from a junior Minister saying the Secretary of State was not available to meet me. Will she apologise for breaking the promise she made to me and will she apologise on behalf of my constituents, and the constituents of other Members, who still do not know what the Government are doing to sort out this mess?

Sarah Newton: We have updated the House regularly. I published a list of frequently asked questions and placed it in the House of Commons Library on 28 March. I wrote to the hon. Gentleman on 17 April again offering a meeting and I have yet to hear a response. My door remains open and we are getting on with great urgency to begin the repayments as soon as possible.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): From a PIP application being made to when an award is paid, what is the mode, the mean and the median waiting time?

Sarah Newton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I cannot answer with regards to the mode, the mean and the median, but I can tell him that the average waiting time at the moment is 12 weeks. We have worked very hard to bring down the waiting time so that people can get the support they need as soon as possible.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): As PIP is the entrance to mobility allowance, will the Government join the Treasury Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee in asking for a full National Audit Office inquiry into what is ostensibly a really good benefit?

Sarah Newton: First, I would like to wish the right hon. Gentleman a very speedy recovery. I can see clearly that he has had an injury and I am sure I speak on behalf of all Members when I say that I hope he makes a very speedy recovery. We of course agree that it is really important that the NAO gets on with its work, and the Secretary of State will update the House shortly on progress.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that this very important exercise regarding PIP payments is not likely to require any new face-to-face assessments?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I can absolutely assure him that there will be no need for new face-to-face appointments or assessments.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I have been helping identical twins who have the same genetic condition, which involves learning disabilities and associated health problems. Both were assessed for PIP at different times by different assessors. One was granted PIP and one was rejected. The case has now been resolved, but can the Minister not see that the system is totally unfit for purpose and needs overhauling?

Sarah Newton: The very fact that the hon. Lady says the case has been resolved shows that the system is working. It is very important that we make the right decision first time. I have set in place a whole series of improvements to PIP. We have followed the advice given to us by the independent review of PIP and are working at pace to make the necessary changes.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): As a result of the incorrect guidance produced by Independent Assessment Services, formerly Atos, in relation to daily living activity 6—help with dressing—will the Minister tell the House how she proposes to estimate the number of claimants who have been incorrectly assessed for PIP, and to identify the claimants affected, provide a correct assessment and pay all the arrears due?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question—we had a meeting last week where we discussed this case. The matter was brought to the Department’s attention by the Royal National Institute of Blind People in March. We have looked into the case and are absolutely assured that this is a one-off situation, but it is very important to me that we learn the lessons of how this happened. We are meeting the RNIB on Wednesday to see what further action we can take.

Marsha De Cordova: But does the Minister not accept that the wording of the correspondence that was produced by Independent Assessment Services—sent to her by a number of voluntary organisations, including the RNIB—suggests that the guidance has potentially been widely circulated among assessors, and that for contracted assessors to produce independent guidance on social security law without the Department’s knowledge suggests a serious problem with contract management?

Sarah Newton: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady’s questions. We are very clear that the personal independence payment assessment guide, which is published by the DWP and is on gov.uk, is the guidance that must be used by health professionals. The particular case was investigated and we have made sure that the procedures are in place to ensure that this does not happen again.

Young Disabled People: Help into Work

7. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help young disabled people into work.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I want to make it absolutely clear to the House that I want us all to be as ambitious for disabled young people as we are for all young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential. We have a range of programmes to support the journey to work, including the young persons supported work experience programme, tri-work supported work experience and supported internships and apprenticeships.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the Minister for that answer. Apprenticeships have proved to be a huge success story in Corby and east Northamptonshire, so what steps are the Department taking to help to encourage young disabled people to take up those opportunities and ensure that they are accessible to all?
Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents and it is great to see the number of people with learning difficulties or a disability starting an apprenticeship—it rose to 22,100 this year, 150 of whom are from Corby, which was a rise of 40 people on the year before. We want more employers to offer apprenticeships for disabled youngsters. The Department for Education has made adjustments to the maths and English standards and Access to Work is available.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Would the Minister care to explain to my disabled constituent how new claim rules for Access to Work justify requiring confidential contracts of employment information about the disabled person’s personal assistant, and how do those square with the general data protection regulation?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady raises a very specific case. Of course, I will be very pleased to look into that, but let us be clear: Access to Work is providing invaluable help with assistive technology and people setting up services in their communities to the benefit of all disabled people, including young disabled people. We have recently made a number of changes that have been widely welcomed.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): When I ask young disabled people, “If you were the Minister, what would be your No. 1 priority?”, the answer is always to have an opportunity to work and, for some, to run their own business. The NESTA innovative technology fund was one of the most exciting ways to support disabled entrepreneurs, through prize money and matching them up with mentors. Will the Minister do all that she can to help to reinstate this important opportunity?

Sarah Newton: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we should be as ambitious for disabled people as we are for anyone else, and that includes enabling them to set up their own business. He raises a particularly important scheme, but there have been other innovations through the employment allowance and the support that is available through Access to Work. Indeed, Microsoft has just launched a fantastic new fund of £25 million to help with assistive technology and people setting up businesses.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What assessment has the Department made of the impact of the abolition of the independent living fund on disabled young people?

Sarah Newton: As the hon. Gentleman knows, responsibility for the independent living fund was given to local authorities, which are very well placed to join up services in their communities to the benefit of all disabled people, including young disabled people.

Social Mobility

8. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve social mobility.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): The Department for Work and Pensions plays a vital role in social mobility, including by helping people to enter the labour market or to progress in work and earnings. The number of people in employment across the country is at a record 32.34 million, and that includes historically under-represented groups, among them disabled people. As a consequence, we have reduced the number of children living in workless households by 600,000.

Priti Patel: Training opportunities are vital to boosting social mobility, because they help to get people into work. What is the Secretary of State doing to work with recruitment agencies, such as Prime Appointments in Witham, to enable more people to get into work, especially those in part-time work or on universal credit?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend is living proof of social mobility—her family came here from Uganda, started a newsagents and expanded their business—and is right to ask: how can we get people into a job, and how can we help with recruitment and apprenticeships? I am working with the Recruitment and Employment Confederation to look at those opportunities and also with the Secretary of State for Education—that is where responsibility for apprenticeships is held, but we will do all we can to support my right hon. Friend.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): In Stoke-on-Trent, one of the best ways of achieving social mobility is through our wonderful further education system, so will the Secretary of State please impress upon her colleagues at the Department for Education that properly funded further education, whether that be sixth-form colleges or other establishments, is needed and that they must make sure it is provided?

Ms McVey: I will send the hon. Gentleman’s message to the Department for Education, but in this Department we do as much as we can, whether through traineeships or sector-based work academies, to support young people. It is about choice: do they want a job, an apprenticeship or further education?

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Helping more carers to get into work and stay in work would certainly boost social mobility in the UK. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for coming to Shipley to visit Carers’ Resource. What progress has been made on developing a kitemark for employers to help more carers get into work and stay in work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend raises a very good point: how do we best support carers, who do a vital job to support other people? When I visited his constituency and Carers’ Resource and met some of its carers, they told me they wanted a kitemark—they wanted to know which was a good business, who they could work for, who was deploying best practice. The Department of Health and Social Care is working on this with Carers UK, but we are also starting a new group between Departments, and I encourage Carers’ Resource to take part.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): One of the hardest-to-reach groups of children are those living in kinship care with chaotic family relationships: one moment they might be with their real parents, the next they might be being looked after. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the children’s Minister to make sure they do not slip through the net?
Ms McVey: The hon. Lady is right about kinship care and to ask how we can support kinship carers and those children, which is why I was pleased to be able to say that through tax credits we would be maintaining our vital support for kinship carers. I am more than happy to speak to other Ministers to ensure we give those children and families the best support we can.

Universal Credit: Victims of Domestic Violence

9. Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment her Department has made of the effect of the introduction of universal credit on the ability of victims of domestic violence to claim benefits. [905442]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): Universal credit continues to support victims of domestic violence to claim benefits through a range of measures. These include special provisions for temporary accommodation and same-day advances. Work coaches will also signpost domestic violence victims to expert third-party support.

Jo Platt: I am grateful for the Minister’s response, but the Government have still not committed to assessing the operation of split payments or collecting data. Will they commit to looking at specific areas of new universal credit roll-out, such as Leigh, which has also been highlighted as a hotspot by the local police, to ensure that we are adequately safeguarding victims?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously we take domestic violence enormously seriously at the Department, and we certainly believe that we should play our part in detecting and seeking to combat it. We will keep the position under review. As we have said, we remain open-minded on the issue of split payments. If the Scottish Government proceed with their wish to introduce them, we will note what progress is made, and will review the issue in due course.

Automatic Enrolment: Cheadle

10. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What progress is being made on automatic enrolment for employees in Cheadle constituency. [905443]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Automatic enrolment is a cross-party success story, with more than 9.6 million workers enrolled in pensions saving and more than 1.2 million employers meeting their duties. Approximately 9,000 eligible jobholders have been automatically enrolled in my hon. Friend’s constituency, with 1,600 employers meeting their duties and supporting them.

Mary Robinson: Typically, the young are a difficult demographic to encourage to save early, as retirement seems a distant milestone to them. What steps is the Minister taking to encourage more people entering the workforce to stay in their workplace schemes to ensure that they have steady incomes when they retire?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is right, and younger people agree with that. When NOW: Pensions carried out research, it found that only 4% of its 22 to 29-year-old members opted out. Our “Automatic enrolment review 2017” set out our plans to make saving the norm by lowering the age of automatic enrolment from 22 to 18. When an employee pays in, the employer pays in as well, and the Government pay in the tax relief.

Private Pensions: Windsor

11. Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): What progress is being made on increasing private pension provision in Windsor constituency. [905444]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Private pensions have been transformed by automatic enrolment, which is a social reform of which all Members should be proud. It involves behavioural economics and nudge theory. In my hon. Friend’s constituency, 30,000 eligible jobholders have been automatically enrolled and 2,310 employers have done their duties.

Adam Afriyie: I am delighted with the Government’s progress in helping people to save for retirement, particularly through lifetime ISAs and workplace pensions. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the open banking initiative and the pensions dashboard, the FinTech industry can help to nudge people to save more and create greater competition in the private pensions sector?

Guy Opperman: The pensions industry can and should make the most of the opportunity presented by FinTech. We believe that if it is to succeed, it will be vital for industry and Government to collaborate in the development of the pensions dashboard. As others countries have shown, pensions dashboards are a fantastic way of giving people access to pension information in a clear and simple form, bringing together an individual’s savings in a single place online.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, the question was about Windsor, but the answer was broad and expansive in its scope. The hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin)—as befits a former constituency chairman of mine—is a keen young fellow, and I think that we should hear from him.

Jeremy Quin: Young? You flatter me, Mr Speaker. I already had my excuse: I was going to say that we were all taking a close interest in the Windsor constituency at present. My particular interest, in relation to Windsor pensioners, is in the fact that they are being held back by a lack of knowledge about their pension provision. Does my hon. Friend agree that a properly constituted pensions dashboard would encourage pensioners to take their own fate in their hands, and would encourage accountability?

Guy Opperman: It is true that Windsor is the centre of the universe, and we should all congratulate Prince Harry and Meghan on their marriage at the weekend. It is also true that Windsor, and all parts of the United Kingdom, will benefit from the pensions dashboard. The internet has transformed travel, insurance and other businesses when they have gone online, and we believe
that when the pensions industry comes out of the Victorian age and goes online, there will be great progress for everyone.

**Attendance Allowance: Eligibility Criteria**

12. Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the appropriateness of the eligibility criteria for attendance allowance. [905445]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Attendance allowance is available to those aged over 65, and entitlement is based on the ongoing need for frequent personal care and attention, or supervision, to ensure personal safety. The Government believe that the current long-standing qualifying rules for the allowance are working well. It is a popular benefit. Nearly 1.5 million people are currently receiving it, including 2,000 in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Graham P. Jones: Before Christmas, I raised with the Prime Minister the case of Mr Walker from Great Harwood, in my constituency. Mr Walker was a fit and able pensioner until, at the age of 69, he was run over by a drunk driver. He is now quadriplegic, paralysed from the neck down. He and his wife are struggling, and their Ford Fiesta is of no use whatsoever. He has been released from hospital, and he is not being given the help that he needs. Why is a previously fit and healthy 69-year-old man not entitled to the disability help that he needs—such as a Motability car—because of his age?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman recounts the truly tragic case of his constituent, and of course he will be able to apply for attendance allowance, but that is not the only support available. Clearly he will need support from the NHS and adult social care, where a range of support is available, and attendance allowance can be used on Motability aids as well.

**PIP Assessors: Mental Health Awareness**

13. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What mental health awareness training her Department provides for personal independence payment assessors. [905446]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Assessment providers write and deliver training for health professionals; this includes how to identify the impact of mental health conditions on claimants. We require providers to have mental health function champions who are available to provide advice and support. They must have at least two years’ full post-registration clinical experience in the management of the relevant conditions.

Justin Madders: I suggest the Minister goes back and sees how that works in practice. A constituent came to see me recently about their personal independence payment assessment; they were asked during the course of the assessment why they thought their previous suicide attempts had not been successful. Does the Minister share my disgust at that cruel, inhumane and disgusting way of asking questions?

Sarah Newton: From the way the hon. Gentleman has presented that, of course I would unequivocally agree that it was totally unacceptable. The assessors are not given a script, and we expect them to treat everybody with utter respect and dignity.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On Friday I attended a simulated work capability assessment in Chelmsford and it was very helpful. What progress is my hon. Friend making to ensure that all assessments for employment and support allowance and PIP can be more regularly recorded so that those with mental health and other concerns have greater transparency?

Sarah Newton: I am pleased that my hon. Friend took the opportunity to visit her assessment centre; I am always happy to arrange these meetings so that hon. Members can see at first hand what is usually a very professional, very compassionate assessment. But of course we want to go further and make sure that every assessment is a good assessment, and recording is definitely part of our plans for improvement.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Some 75% of claimants in Wales who appealed against decisions to reduce or stop PIP were successful; that is 8,000 people in Wales who have needlessly worried about having payments stopped. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales were unavailable to comment on this at the Welsh Conservative conference on Friday, but can the Minister tell the House when the Government are going to get a grip on this situation?

Sarah Newton: Some 3.1 million PIP decisions have been made, and 9% of them have been appealed and 4% of those have been overturned. I am absolutely determined to make sure that we make the right decision every time; we should get it right the first time, and we have put in place a whole series of actions to make sure that that is the case.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State accepted that there was a failure of assessment of people with mental health conditions and said that this would be remedied, but we have been told by our job centre that guidance has not changed, and a young man who is suffering from appalling post-traumatic stress disorder in my constituency is still being treated as if he does not qualify. When will guidance actually change? We are still producing more injustices.

Sarah Newton: As I said in answer to an earlier question, we insist and make sure that the healthcare professionals undertaking the assessments are appropriately trained and have the right expertise, and the guidance is kept under constant review to make sure we get it right first time.

**Pension Schemes: Fees and Charges**

14. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of fees and charges applied by asset managers to the investments made by defined contribution and defined benefit pension schemes. [905447]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government recognise that customers need value for money, but lowest cost does not always mean best value. By working with the Financial Conduct Authority, we believe price transparency for trustees can drive effective competition and allow asset managers who can add value to thrive.

Kelvin Hopkins: The Minister will recall my earlier question to him on 9 October last year, but is it not the case that all essentially private pension schemes, defined benefit or not, incur costs and uncertainties that significantly reduce benefits to savers, and the only way to minimise such costs is to establish a universal full-blown defined contributions and defined benefits state earnings-related pension scheme for all?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Financial Conduct Authority published the final rules in September 2017, and that independent governance committees on personal workplace pensions have had rules in force since January. On his discrete point, surely auto-enrolment, with 9.6 million people in this country signed up to it, and the enhanced state pension, which stands at over £1,250 more than in 2010, are the answers to his question.

Disabled People: Financial Support

16. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What financial support is available for disabled people who incur costs relating to their condition which welfare payments are not designed to meet.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): There is a wide range of financial support available to disabled people who incur extra costs relating to their condition which welfare payments are not designed to meet. These include: Access to Work, disabled students allowances, disabled facilities grants, the disabled person’s bus pass and railcard, and VAT relief on certain items, goods and services.

Robert Halfon: I should like to thank the Government for instituting the bursary scheme for disabled parliamentary candidates; that is good news. On another matter, Scope, the charity supporting disabled people, has found that disabled people have £108,000 less in savings and assets, yet when they go to hospital—not out of choice, but because they have to—Scope finds that something like 50% of hospitals are still charging disabled people to park their cars. Will my hon. Friend lobby the Department of Health and Social Care to remove those charges and scrap hospital parking charges for all disabled people?

Sarah Newton: I am pleased to accept my right hon. Friend’s welcome for that good news; it is important that people seeking election should be supported in doing so. I am really pleased to announce today that we have created a new inter-ministerial working group to bring the full force of the Government behind ensuring that every disabled person in our country has the ability to reach their full potential. It is by working across Government that we will tackle issues such as the one that he has just raised.

21. Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): One of the benefits, or non-benefits, that is available is the crisis loan. My constituent, Mr Hayward, has been told by the Minister’s Department that he owes £1,500 in crisis loans taken out 13 years ago. There is just one small problem with that: he did not take out those loans. The Department cannot provide any paperwork to prove that he did so. How can anyone have any faith in anything that happens at the DWP?

Sarah Newton: I appreciate the hon. Lady bringing up that really important case. We will take it away and get back to her.

Topical Questions

T1. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Further to our discussions in this House regarding Motability and my promise to seek a National Audit Office inquiry into it, I am pleased to announce that agreement has been reached and that the NAO will begin its inquiry into Motability.

Layla Moran: I have a young constituent who has PKU, a rare inherited disorder that requires a strict diet and treatment for life. She had been in receipt of the disability living allowance, but now that she has turned 16, she has scored zero in every personal independence payment category. Will the Minister meet my constituent and me so that we can iron out this clear case of “the computer says no”?

Sarah Newton: I would be absolutely delighted to meet the hon. Lady and to go through this constituency case with her.

T4. Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Where are we on the transfer of welfare powers to the Scottish National party Government? Whose court is the ball in?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): We always aim to work constructively with the Scottish Government. Fair Start Scotland is a recent scheme that we are supporting proactively. My hon. Friend makes a point about changes. Introducing changes such as automatic split payments is a complex policy area, and we are having a detailed dialogue with the Scottish Government. There are currently many issues for the Scottish Government to resolve.

Mr Speaker: Of course, balls in court are always preferable to balls out of court. I am sure that that is a point with which the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) will be well familiar.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that the pensions regulator had concerns about Carillion pension scheme deficits in 2014 but failed to act. The Government went on letting contracts to Carillion, despite repeated profit warnings, and failed to act. Do the Government recognise that the consequences of their failure to act include the biggest-ever hit on the Pension Protection Fund—£800 million—and many thousands of pensioners losing out on their pensions?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It was a Labour Government who created the Pensions Regulator in 2004, and I think we can all agree that there are lessons to be learned from Carillion and other recent high-profile cases. However, there are two options. We either try to discredit an organisation and run it down or—this is my choice—support the regulator, give it the further powers that we set out in detail in the defined benefit pension schemes White Paper and stress that the vast majority of employers do right by their employees.

Guy Opperman: I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman as we steer the DB White Paper into legislation, but the legislation is looking at the future—it is not necessarily retrospective.

Alok Sharma: Ahead of the roll-out, my hon. Friend's local jobcentre will speak to local partners, such as the local authority and Citizens Advice, to ensure that claimants are supported as they come on to universal credit. My officials and I will host an induction session tomorrow for all colleagues who have UC rolling out in their area in the near future, so I hope that he will join us.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Being able to walk 20 metres is an essential part of the PIP assessment process, yet Ministers have told me in written answers that they do not have a policy for their assessment centres to have parking within 20 metres, nor do they know which centres have such a facility. Indeed, the centre that I visited recently had double yellow lines outside. Given that not everyone has access to a home assessment, what would the Minister say to somebody who turns up for an assessment and cannot walk to the door?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): That is not only totally unacceptable, but absolutely unnecessary. When people are invited to come along for their assessment, there is an opportunity to talk about their mobility needs to ensure that the centre is totally accessible for them. Each centre must comply with the equality responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, and people are also offered home visits.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the record levels of employment that this Government have delivered in office have predominantly involved full-time and higher-skilled roles?

Ms McVey: I can confirm that. Since 2010, three quarters of the growth in employment has been in full-time roles, nearly 70% of employment has come from high-skilled work and, in the north-west, 227,000 more people are in work and unemployment has fallen by 141,000.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): People with progressive conditions are meant to be exempt from ESA reassessments, although my constituent Glenn, who has multiple sclerosis, has one coming up, but they will not be exempt from a PIP reassessment. Will the Minister commit to removing that cruel and unnecessary burden on people living with progressive conditions?

Sarah Newton: We have worked closely with a range of stakeholders, including the Multiple Sclerosis Society, to develop a series of severe conditions criteria, which mean that people will not be asked for face-to-face reassessments. Wherever possible, we will make decisions based on the paper-based evidence that is provided. We are also working carefully to ensure that those same criteria are applied to PIP assessments.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): With 1,000 more people in jobs in Harlow than in 2010, and with 5,000 more apprentices over the same time, will my hon. Friend congratulate Harlow College and Harlow's jobcentre?

Alok Sharma: I of course congratulate Harlow College, but I also thank my right hon. Friend for the enormous amount of work that he does to promote employment both here and in his constituency.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Recently, two constituents with serious and deteriorating cerebral palsy both scored zero points on their PIP assessments. Both require round-the-clock care, but both were forced to appeal the decisions. Is it acceptable that people with serious and deteriorating disabilities are being forced to go through the courts to get the support that they deserve?

Sarah Newton: It is well worth pointing out that the vast majority of people go through the process and get the support they need, and many more people are receiving higher-level support under PIP than under disability living allowance. However, when I hear of cases such as that, something has clearly gone amiss, so I will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What action are the Government taking to make sure that parents cannot hide earnings from their child maintenance payment calculations?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): The Child Maintenance Service is working hard to improve its recovery efforts and will be increasing the number of individuals assigned to the financial investigations unit. The Child Maintenance Service is working much more closely with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make sure that we have as full a picture as possible of people's earnings and to ensure that people take responsibility for their children.
to curl up, occasionally requiring amputation. It is a very common disease among former miners, and the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council has made it clear to the DWP that there is a link between the use of percussive tools and miner’s claw. Why has the Secretary of State chosen to ignore that expert advice, and will she explain why the condition has not been added to the industrial injuries disablement benefit list of conditions?

**Sarah Newton:** I am working very closely with the independent advisory board, which advises on which conditions should go on to the list for which people can receive severe disability payments. My meetings with the board are ongoing.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): A small number of my constituents do not have the digital skills or the equipment to be able to process their universal credit online. What is the Department doing to help them?

**Alok Sharma:** Ninety-nine per cent. of universal credit claims are made online, and those who need support to gain basic digital skills are offered digital support as part of our universal support offering.

T5. [905463] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): My 20-year-old constituent Lucy has severe autism and learning disabilities. She has been told that she must attend a medical assessment to transition from employment and support allowance to universal credit. Medical advice says such an assessment will cause unnecessary stress and anxiety, but that advice has been ignored by the DWP. Will the Minister commit to reducing this burden on the most vulnerable in society?

**Sarah Newton:** When people apply to go on to universal credit their existing ESA remains in place, so it might be that Lucy was coming up for her regular periodic assessment. It is really important to us that people get the right support but, of course, I will happily meet the hon. Lady to look into this case.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): A number of my constituents have reported difficulty with the Child Maintenance Service on issues such as undeclared income and missing payments. What is being done to ensure that complaints about the CMS are dealt with in a timely manner?

**Kit Malthouse** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is typical of my hon. Friend that the welfare of children in his constituency should be uppermost in his mind. As I said previously, we are putting significant extra resources into the financial investigations unit and into making sure we are able to track down as much of the income as possible of parents who should be paying for their children. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that I recently instituted monthly meetings with the Child Maintenance Service to ensure that it lives up to the high standards of customer service that we expect.

T8. [905466] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): This morning I was contacted on behalf of a constituent who has an inoperable tumour on her spine all the way down to her pelvis, leaving her unable to walk and compounded by arthritis and severe depression. Her ESA has been suspended, her housing benefit has been suspended and she is now threatened with the possibility of eviction. Can the Minister help me make sure my constituent is protected? Can she also help me understand why so many disabled people feel they are living in a hostile environment?

**Sarah Newton:** Of course I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady urgently, because she raises a terrible case. [Interruption.] Let us remember that the vast majority of people claiming ESA or PIP get a really good service and get the benefits to which they are entitled.

**Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): According to The Guardian on Saturday, a report shows that the share of employees who are officially classified as low paid has fallen to 18%, the lowest level since 1982. Does that not show the Conservative party is the party of getting more people into work and ensuring they remain in work? What will the Government do to ensure that that continues?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who does so much for her constituents, is spot on. The report was published by the Resolution Foundation. Over the past eight years, we have got a record number of people into work—we have got 3.24 million more people into work. That was step one. Step two was increasing the pay of the lowest paid, which we have done. Step three has to be about career progression and moving up the ladder, and that is what we will now be doing.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Atos staff are being asked to squeeze extra assessments into their working day, and one constituent had her assessment cancelled several times because the assessors were ill. The two things are clearly linked, so how will the Minister change the system to ensure that staff are not made ill by the job and people like my constituent can get their cash?

**Sarah Newton:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As part of the contract process, we ask healthcare professionals to make sure that they provide a high-quality service. Officials at the Department for Work and Pensions monitor those contracts carefully. We do not ask for extra appointments to be squeezed in.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): A recent report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions showed that there are massive gains to be made by deploying assistive technology to help people with disabilities into work. What are the Minister and her Department doing to extend this technology to people who need it?

**Sarah Newton:** I welcome my hon. Friend’s question. I am pleased that we have got more than 600,000 people with disabilities into work in the past four years, and assistive technology plays an incredibly important part in that. I have recently announced changes to the tech fund in the Access to Work programme, removing barriers so that people have access to assistive technology, and there is much more that we want to do.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The loss of the protected places scheme is likely to have a devastating impact on disabled workers, particularly...
in my constituency, where Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries employs 250 people, half of whom have a registered disability. What has the Minister done to assess the impact this move will have on disabled workers?

Sarah Newton: I am glad the hon. Gentleman asked that question, because this was totally misreported in The Times today; we are not going to close down any organisation at all that is supporting disabled people into work. I have been in ongoing discussions with the sector to make sure not only that we have the existing scheme, but that it is enhanced and mainstreamed into a new, improved programme.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I ask the relevant Minister whether I have got this clear, because I thought that this understanding was given to Parliament: where someone appeals against the loss of their personal independence payment, their Motability car will not be taken away from them until the decision is made by the independent tribunal? Have I got that right?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. If somebody has appealed their PIP decision, they can keep their car.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Unemployment in my constituency now stands at 7.1%, which represents an increase of 1,200 on this time last year. What is the Department doing to support people into decent, well-paid and secure employment?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have record levels of employment across the country. There are more than 800,000 vacancies in the economy and help is available at jobcentres, with one-to-one personalised support.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Minister consider changing how budgeting loans are administered, as they currently do not take into account personal debt and so, ironically, can make budgeting harder?

Alok Sharma: Budgeting loans are indeed available, but under universal credit we also have budgeting advances. If my hon. Friend has any specific cases she wishes to raise, I would be happy to talk to her about them.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Constituents who cannot afford a driving licence or a passport cannot do an initial online verification of their universal credit claim, meaning that they have to wait up to two weeks in order to be seen for a personal appointment. That is driving people to see loan sharks in some cases, so will the Minister look at it?

Alok Sharma: I will look at it, but if the hon. Lady would come forward with specific cases, that would make it easier.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Between 2010 and 2017, the basic state pension rate rose by £1,250. What will the Minister do to ensure that pensioners in my constituency continue to be protected and looked after by this Government?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is right to say that the state pension has been enhanced and increased; the new state pension has gone up to £164-plus. There is fantastically good news on auto-enrolment in her constituency, and I will write to her with the specific details.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituent was called back early for a PIP assessment, which made no reference to the fact that he has an inoperable brain tumour, which has led to his having intractable epilepsy and Parkinson’s disease. Can the Minister explain why he was recalled for an assessment?

Sarah Newton: I am sure the whole House will appreciate that without looking at the details of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent’s case, it is impossible to do that. As I have explained, the process is designed to treat people with compassion, accurately looking at the medical evidence that it is presented, alongside their assessment of their conditions.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend the pensions Minister is doing a lot of work on auto-enrolment for the self-employed. Has he looked specifically at the so-called worker category, in which a person might do their self-employed work for one large firm that could, with willing and regulatory help, roll them into its employee scheme?

Guy Opperman: I would be delighted to take up that specific example and will definitely take it forward. I remind my hon. Friend that 12,000 people have been auto-enrolled in his constituency.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The latest quarterly figures show that in Coventry, 81% of PIP, 76% of ESA, 83% of income support and 100% of jobseeker’s allowance appeals heard by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service were decided in favour of the appellant. Does the Minister accept that the high proportion of successful appeals highlights the flawed nature of the DWP’s decision-making processes?

Sarah Newton: It is really important to put all those numbers in context. Let us be absolutely clear: we want to make sure that we make the right decision the first time and we are working really hard to make sure that is the case. We have recently recruited 150 presenting officers, who now work in the courts, providing invaluable feedback so that we can improve the situation.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I recently had the privilege of attending a Disability Confident event in Ayrshire. What more can the Government do to encourage or incentivise employers to invest in disabled young talent?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for leading a Disability Confident event. Disability Confident is growing from strength to strength. The most recent numbers show that more than 6,500 employers have signed up. Of the largest companies in the country, more than a quarter of the workforce is covered. Each year, we see more people with disabilities go into work.
We are utterly determined to close the disability employment gap and get a million more people with disabilities into work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Ms Angela Eagle.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): My constituent of working age suffered two strokes and has now been diagnosed as suffering from vascular dementia. He has been found to be fit for work, even though he has major problems with his short-term memory. He will have to appeal the decision and faces a wait of up to 30 weeks before he gets any kind of hearing or has his benefit restored. How can this possibly be a system that is working or acceptable?

Sarah Newton: I would of course be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady to go through the specifics of that case.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wishes to raise a point of order that flows from his question, and therefore exceptionally I will take it now.

Stephen Lloyd: Earlier, in response to my question, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) indicated that I said one thing during the coalition and another thing post-coalition on the issue of rent payments to private landlords. The Under-Secretary was not a Member of Parliament at that time, so he will not know that I am on the record, both as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee and with the then Secretary of State, as having consistently opposed throughout the coalition the idea of paying direct payments to tenants and not to private sector landlords.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his perspicacity in raising the point of order, and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of the gravamen of it. If everybody in the Chamber was not previously conscious of the particular stance taken on this matter by the hon. Gentleman over a sustained period, they all are now. I do not cavil at the hon. Gentleman, but in fairness to the Minister—this is why I think no response is required—my sense of the subject was that the Minister’s critique was collective, rather than applying exclusively or in particular to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that that reassures him. He can reassure the good people of Eastbourne that he has volunteered his views with force and alacrity, and they are on the record.
**Tower Block Cladding**

3.39 pm

**John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): (Urgent Question):** To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the action taken and planned by the Government with respect to residents in tower blocks with dangerous cladding, following the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): We are remembering those who lost their lives in the tragedy at Grenfell Tower today as the public inquiry opens. I know this will be an incredibly difficult time for all those affected. The whole House will join me, I am sure, in sending them our thoughts and prayers. I am determined to ensure that no community suffers again as they have done.

To that end, in the days since the fire, my Department has worked with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding; to ensure that interim measures are in place to reduce risks; and to give building owners clear advice about what they need to do over the longer term to make buildings safe. Remediation work has started on two thirds of buildings in the social housing sector, and we have called on building owners in the private sector to follow the example set by the social sector and not pass on costs to leaseholders. I will be holding the first roundtable with representatives from the private sector this week and repeat what I said last week: if the industry does not step up, I am not ruling anything out.

My predecessor and the then Home Secretary asked Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. I welcomed her final comprehensive report last week, which called for major reform. Having listened carefully to the arguments for banning combustible materials in cladding systems on high-rise residential buildings, the Government are minded to agree and will consult accordingly.

In addition, the Prime Minister announced that the Government will fully fund the removal and replacement of potentially dangerous aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding on buildings owned by social landlords, with costs estimated at £400 million. I will be writing to social sector landlords this week setting out more detail.

It is vital that people living in buildings like Grenfell Tower are safe and feel safe. I am confident that the work we are undertaking and the important reforms triggered by the Hackitt review will help to restore confidence and provide the legacy that the Grenfell communities need and deserve.

**John Healey:** As the Secretary of State has said, on this first day of the commemoration hearings at the Grenfell Tower inquiry, we remember the 72 people who lost their lives. We will not forget our special duty as Members of Parliament to do right by them, so it is a matter of deep regret that I must drag Ministers to the House again to explain their response to the Grenfell Tower disaster.

The Government have been off the pace at every stage since the fire. More than eleven months on from Grenfell, how is it that two thirds of Grenfell survivors are still in hotels or temporary accommodation? How is it that the Government still do not know how many private tower blocks are unsafe? How is it that only seven out of more than 300 tower blocks across the country with the same Grenfell-style cladding have had it removed and replaced? How can it be that Ministers offered money to councils and housing association landlords for re-cladding costs and finally agreed to consult on a combustible cladding ban only last week?

Many people will have learned only yesterday that the London fire service has fundamentally changed its safety advice to residents in blocks still wrapped with the same Grenfell-style cladding. In place of “stay put” if a fire breaks out—strong advice given for decades to all residents in all tower blocks across the country, including those in Grenfell Tower—the London fire brigade now says “get out” directly. Do all fire brigades now give the same advice? Do all residents in all blocks with unsafe cladding know that? I say to the Minister that more action, more clarity and more urgency are required from the Government.

When will the Secretary of State publish a clear national statement on evacuation policy? When will he confirm when all tower blocks be re-clad? When will he get sprinklers retrofitted—the Opposition and fire chiefs have argued that they are needed? When will he make public the location, ownership and fire safety status of all high-rise blocks at risk? The information is held by the Government, but Ministers are keeping it secret. We know that the Secretary of State knows—he is the new Secretary of State—that more action and greater urgency is needed. When will we get it?

**James Brokenshire:** May I underline what I said in my opening comments about the importance of remembering and reflecting on the very moving testimony that has already been provided in the public inquiry? It is right that all those affected are able to share their memories of those who lost their lives and, indeed, that there should be no time limit on that process. We all need to reflect extremely carefully on the testimony given.

The right hon. Gentleman raises many points, a number of which we dealt with last week during the debates on Grenfell Tower and during my statement on the Hackitt report. He knows that I have been very clear about wanting to speed up the process, which is why I said last week that it is not a question of waiting for the final recommendations to be fully implemented, and it is why I took the steps that I did in relation to combustible cladding and other issues such as the use of desktop studies. I have outlined that although the consultation on desktop studies closes later this week, I will obviously not hesitate to ban them if they cannot be used safely.

The right hon. Gentleman highlights the advice from the fire authorities. Obviously, we are guided by the National Fire Chiefs Council on these matters, and the London fire brigade has given its advice in that regard. He mentions sprinklers. I would underline the points that I made last week—that is, we have given certain advice regarding the provision of sprinklers on new blocks of over 30 metres in height, but for existing buildings it is for the building owner to decide. As Dame Judith Hackitt rightly pointed out in her report, no single fire safety measure, including sprinklers, can be seen as a panacea.

I have already outlined the further steps that we are taking regarding remediation. We gave further instructions to local authorities last week to further empower them
to take action in respect of identifying buildings. There is no lack of urgency on my part or on the part of my Department when it comes to moving forward with addressing these issues and underlining and recognising the serious concerns that have been expressed. Equally, I have underlined our desire to do the right thing in relation to fire safety. We will be taking the actions that I outlined last week and underlined again today to ensure that we are following this through and pursuing it rigorously.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is considerable interest in this matter, as I would have anticipated, and which I shall endeavour to accommodate, but it might help the House if I advise colleagues that I do not want to run this urgent question at great length. There is another to follow; there will be many further opportunities to debate Grenfell; and of course we have other important business of which to treat. Succinctness personified.

Mr Brokenshire: But it will be, because he now is.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the comments of right hon. and hon. Members across the House that no stone will be left unturned in delivering justice for the victims affected by this tragedy. I also welcome the news that the inquiry has opened across the House that no stone will be left unturned in delivering justice for the victims affected by this tragedy. I also welcome the news that the inquiry has opened today and that the necessary lessons will be learnt. As I said, I am not ruling anything out.

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that Barratt has done the right thing by saying that it will not be passing costs on to leaseholders. It is outrageous that many have acted in the way in which they have by not participating. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) if he were standing, but it will not be because he is not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: But it will be, because he now is.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What can be done to encourage developers to follow the example of Barratt?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight that Barratt has done the right thing by saying that it will not be passing costs on to leaseholders. It is outrageous that many have acted in the way in which they have by not participating. I am this week hosting the first roundtable to consider the next steps. As I said, I am heeding the example of Barratt.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): If we are banning the cladding, which is absolutely right, are we also banning bad work practices to ensure that all installations and all retrofittings are of an acceptable standard, so that there is no compromise with regard to the new cladding put on?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, because it touches on some of the issues in the Hackitt review about a culture change—a culture shift—across the whole sector in terms of the standards that should be applied. That is why I am determined that we will pursue this rigorously and follow through on the recommendations that Dame Judith Hackitt has given.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Last week, the Select Committee welcomed the Secretary of State’s decision to consult about banning all combustible material from the cladding on tower blocks. May I ask him, once again, whether he has given further thought to banning the material on existing blocks as well as on new blocks and refurbishment works? If he is minded to do that, does he accept that the Government would then have a responsibility to compensate building owners for the effects of building regulations that were changed retrospectively?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the action of the Select Committee in this regard. We are obviously working at pace to move forward with the consultation, which is intended to be forward-looking. I hear the hon. Gentleman’s point about building regulations that could only speak to the existing timescale. There is also an issue, which comes through very clearly in Dame Judith Hackitt’s report, about the risks of these sorts of systems and why these building owners need to take their responsibilities extremely seriously.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As a former firefighter and Fire Minister myself, I am really pleased to hear the Secretary of State say that we should immediately, as soon as this report allows us to, ban combustible cladding. That is something that we could do. One thing that we could easily do tomorrow morning is to make sure that there are heat-seeking cameras on every appliance that goes out to any incident in the country. That would provide the opportunity to make sure that there are no hotspots, which could mean that this sort of fire could have been put out much earlier.

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend touches on broader issues of appliances. There is also an issue in relation to electrical safety. Some colleagues may be familiar with some of the building regulations standards in that respect. The Government are continuing to work with the British Standards Institution on a revised standard that is due to be published in July.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While last week’s announcement of money to replace unsafe cladding on social housing is welcome, that still leaves a lot of private blocks, including in my constituency, where leaseholders are facing potentially a very large cost and great uncertainty about when the work will be done. Since the Government’s policy is that those who own the freehold should pay, will the Secretary of State now introduce a low-interest, long-payback loan scheme so that the work can be done and my constituents, and everybody else’s, can get peace of mind at last?
James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for highlighting the really essential issue of private sector leaseholds, where I have made the points that I have. That is why I will be hosting a roundtable this week, with a further roundtable to follow, to inform next steps. I hear what he has said, and all I can say to him at this stage is that I have not ruled anything out.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome the £400 million that the Government have put forward to help remove unsafe cladding. What advice would the Secretary of State give to housing associations on accessing this fund so that they can bring the work forward very quickly?

James Brokenshire: Like my hon. Friend, I would like the funds to be available quickly. That is why we will be writing out to relevant agencies later this week with further details. This is about prioritising the funding becoming available to relevant housing associations and local government, and we will take action this week.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I have just come from the Grenfell inquiry, which began this morning. One of the survivors said to me, “If it was thought that combustible cladding was responsible for the fire and it had to come down, why is not banned?” Can the Secretary of State give some timetable on when combustible cladding will finally be banned?

James Brokenshire: I understand and hear very clearly the call that has been made. There are certain statutory obligations to consult under the Building Act 1984. That is why I have said that I am minded to make this change, subject to the consultation. My officials are working at pace in relation to getting that consultation out, because I hear the very clear message that the right hon. Gentleman is giving about the urgency of this.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What confidence can I give to my constituents who work in tall buildings that they will be as safe at work as people who live in tall buildings?

James Brokenshire: Obviously it is for all building owners to ensure that they are taking appropriate steps. We know that interim measures are in place. As I said to my hon. Friend last week, Dame Judith Hackitt’s recommendations are focused on residential accommodation of 10 storeys and above, but she has said that some of her recommendations may have a broader application, and we will consider that as part of the consultation.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the launch of this inquiry. The Secretary of State will be aware that the fire was started by a faulty piece of electrical equipment. Given that recall of these sorts of products is currently only running at around 20%, what further action can the Government take to ensure that faulty products are fully recalled?

James Brokenshire: The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy effectively leads on that issue, and we will continue to work in conjunction with it, to work with industry and to support action, so that all fire safety issues are at the forefront.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that in Edgware in my constituency, Premier House was recently converted from an office block into residential property, but unfortunately the cladding has remained. Many of my constituents who saved up to buy a property there find themselves in a situation where the owners of the building want to charge them for removal of the cladding. I hear the point that was made about a low-interest scheme, but does my right hon. Friend agree that leaseholders should be afforded the same protection as tenants and not have to pay for that out of their own pocket?

James Brokenshire: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes on leaseholders. Obviously there are legal relationships, but that is why I have underlined the need for us to take further action and to have the initial meetings that I have set out. I have been pretty clear in my view.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The “stay put” policy has been a recognised element of fire safety for a long time, and those of us who have thousands of residents in high-rise towers in our constituencies now want clarity from the Government. My understanding is that the London fire brigade has changed its policy for blocks with particular types of cladding, but are residents expected to know what kind of environment they are living in before deciding whether to stay put or to leave? What will the Government do about that to ensure that there is total clarity, from tonight, to guide people?

James Brokenshire: I understand the concern that the hon. Lady raises. Obviously that advice would normally come from the National Fire Chiefs Council. The London fire brigade has made that specific alteration. I will take further advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council and ensure that we report back to the House as a matter of urgency.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State share my surprise that the Hackitt review did not look in detail at the building regulations? Does he accept the need for urgent revision of the building regulations and clarity on them, particularly with regard to combustible materials, and will he set out the process and timescale for that review?

James Brokenshire: Dame Judith has set out a whole review of the system, end to end, and has taken a comprehensive stance. As I said in my statement last week, I intend to update the House before the summer on next steps. Knowing that certain issues will require legislation and others will not, I want to get on with it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a real issue of enforcement here and that self-regulation, especially in competitive industries such as construction, simply will not work? I suspect that that is what Dame Judith Hackitt was getting at in her report. Given austerity cuts, can he assure the House that enforcement will be strengthened, so that as the regulations are changed, they bite and have an effect?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is right to point out what Dame Judith Hackitt says in that regard—she certainly underlines the need for stronger enforcement,
and indeed criminal sanctions in a number of cases. That will be subject to consultation, as I indicated last week, and we will review carefully the submissions that we receive.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the tone of the Secretary of State’s responses, but can he say a bit more about the issue of desktop studies? I think many people find it very surprising that there can be a desktop study to see whether something will be safe in such a large building.

James Brokenshire: In her interim report, Dame Judith Hackitt recommended that the Government should significantly restrict the use of so-called desktop studies. We have accepted that recommendation, and we are consulting on significantly restricting or banning the use of desktop studies. As I have already said, the inappropriate use of such studies is unacceptable, and I will not hesitate to ban them if the consultation does not demonstrate that they can be used safely.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What advice does the Secretary of State have for landlords who are replacing cladding now? Perhaps the reason why only seven blocks have been re-clad is that landlords do not know what to do. Given that he has said he is minded to ban combustible cladding, why does he not put in place a provisional ban and advise landlords to use only non-combustible materials?

James Brokenshire: There are legal restrictions on me in terms of my obligations under the Building Acts to consult on changes to building systems and regulation. However, I underline that, as Dame Judith points out, the safest approach is to use non-combustible materials, and that is the very clear advice.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Select Committee had an opportunity to review Dame Judith Hackitt’s report and to question her on it. One of the clear issues is legislative change, as my right hon. Friend has mentioned. Will he set out whether that is primary or secondary legislation, and what the timeframe is for the process we will have to go through, because decisions need to be made?

James Brokenshire: The end-to-end approach that Dame Judith recommends in her report will require primary legislation and secondary legislation. That is why I have said I will come back to the House before the summer recess to advise on the next steps, with a comprehensive response in the autumn. I made a commitment to primary legislation on Thursday, and I believe that is what is required, but it is a question of getting it right.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell the House how many private blocks have combustible cladding, and what sanctions will be imposed on companies that are passing on costs to leaseholders? He has mentioned not ruling anything out, so will he provide some specifics to reassure our constituents who are living in those blocks?

James Brokenshire: I can tell the hon. Lady that the latest figures I have are that 304 buildings have ACM cladding systems that the expert panel advises are unlikely to meet current building regulations: 158 are social housing buildings; 14 are public buildings, including hospitals and schools; and 132 are in the private sector, of which 101 are private residential buildings. Obviously, it is a question of the private residential side stepping up to the mark, and owners may well be taking interim measures. However, a sense of urgency needs to be applied, which is why I have mentioned the steps for getting on with making sure that leaseholders do not have to meet such a liability and that building owners meet their obligations.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I note that remedial work is under way on two thirds of public sector blocks where there is unsafe cladding, but what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to make sure that the final third are dealt with as quickly as possible?

James Brokenshire: It is important that we see the public sector estate dealt with as quickly as possible. Obviously, the additional funding of £400 million that the Prime Minister announced last week will go towards supporting that activity. Equally, there is an important point about the other things that may not be being focused on at the moment. Indeed, there is the actual supply side of more affordable homes and other building costs that might not otherwise receive the same focus.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What are the Government doing to ensure that residents of these high-risk buildings are made aware of the new arrangements about leaving in the case of a fire? Eight months since the change of policy there, residents of the privately owned Blenheim block in Hounslow have still not been given evacuation instructions or had a fire drill, and the only people who left the building when several fire engines turned up at one of several recent fires were the paid fire marshals.

James Brokenshire: I would certainly be interested in receiving further details from the hon. Lady about the case she highlights, because it is important that advice is followed and that appropriate steps are taken. I will certainly look into the issues she raises.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): There is an increasing trend for modern high-rise buildings to contain a mix of office, retail, hospitality and residential offerings. Will he ensure that sufficient attention is therefore paid to building regulations on all such buildings?

James Brokenshire: This goes to the general point highlighted by Dame Judith Hackitt in her report about the need for a culture change, and a culture shift across the board on the responsibilities we all hold. That is why I think the report was a watershed moment.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Secretary of State was good enough to agree to investigate why, the best part of a year on, Birmingham’s 10,000 households and 213 tower blocks are waiting for the Government to honour their pledge to provide financial support to make them safe. A sense of urgency is now absolutely vital, so I ask the Secretary of State: how many more weeks or months will they have to wait?
James Brokenshire: I committed to working with the hon. Gentleman in respect of Birmingham, and I hope that he recognises the announcement last week about additional funding. The point is that it is retrospective. I hope that will give him some assurance, but I will continue to pursue it with the urgency he asks for.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): There is no enforceable legal obligation on builders, freeholders or insurance companies to pay for the removal of flammable cladding from private sector blocks, which means that the cladding will remain in place. Leaseholders feel that they are being hung out to dry and that their safety is being disregarded. If the Government believe that they can enforce a moral obligation, why do they not pay to take the cladding down, keep people safe and recover the funds from whoever they believe is responsible for paying for it?

James Brokenshire: I do not want to let the private sector off the hook for its responsibilities. That is why in the time for which I have been Secretary of State I have underlined my commitment and why I will be talking to industry this week and next to underline that clear message. I can then consider the right next steps to ensure that this is followed through with that intent.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Secretary of State and his predecessor have repeatedly said that they wish to see essential fire safety works completed in tower blocks across the country, yet across the country councils are saying that sprinklers are the essential fire safety works that can save residents’ lives in the future. In several cases, they have been told that the Government do not consider sprinklers to be essential. No funding for sprinklers has been provided by the Government. Will the Secretary of State explain how that is consistent with the Government’s stated commitment to do everything possible to ensure that another catastrophic tower block fire cannot happen and will he think again about funding for sprinklers?

James Brokenshire: Sprinklers can be an effective fire safety measure, but they are one of many such measures that could be adopted. As Dame Judith Hackitt points out in her report, no fire safety measure, including sprinklers, could be seen as a panacea, as I highlighted earlier. We have obviously set out clear advice about new blocks over 30 metres, and for existing buildings it is for the building owner to decide, based on risk, the appropriate safety measures to take.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): A study by the Association of British Insurers found that standard UK fire safety testing fails properly to assess risk. Why has the Secretary of State refused to initiate a large-scale programme of testing of suspected combustible cladding other than cladding made of aluminium composite materials?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, we have seen this issue with ACM material. We will continue to reflect on this in the light of Dame Judith Hackitt’s report. There are other issues as well. I made a written ministerial statement on fire doors and issues that have been highlighted in that regard, including on how we intend to follow through with further testing on fire doors to ensure that there are no further issues across the sector.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): A year on, the NHBC is yet to conclude whether the New Capital Quay development in Greenwich was or was not compliant with building regulations at the time of construction. What can the Secretary of State do in such cases to ensure that warranty providers wrap up their assessments and determine claims as a matter of urgency?

James Brokenshire: I am happy to look into the specific issue of New Capital Quay. If the hon. Gentleman will send some more details, I will certainly investigate to establish the facts, the issues and what further action can be taken.
Gaza: UN Human Rights Council Vote

4.8 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on the decision of the UK Government to abstain from voting on the resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council held on 18 May, calling for an independent investigation into recent violence in Gaza.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question.

We abstained on calls for a commission of inquiry into recent violence in Gaza during the UN Human Rights Council session on Friday. The substance of the resolution was not impartial and it was unbalanced. We could not support an investigation that refused to explicitly examine the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas. An investigation of that kind would not provide us with a comprehensive assessment of accountability. It would risk hardening positions on both sides and move us further away from a just and lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, the United Kingdom continues to fully support the need for an independent and transparent investigation into recent events. We call directly on Israel to carry out a transparent inquiry into the Israeli Defence Forces’ conduct at the border fence and to demonstrate how this will achieve a sufficient level of independence. We believe this investigation should include international members. We urge that the findings of such an investigation be made public, and, if wrongdoing is found, that those responsible are held to account. The Foreign Secretary stressed the importance of Israel conducting an independent investigation when he spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16 May.

Richard Burden: Last Tuesday, the Minister assured the House that he endorsed calls for an international, independent and transparent inquiry into the appalling events unfolding in Gaza, yet when United Nations Human Rights Council resolved on Friday to set up a commission of inquiry to undertake precisely that kind of investigation, the UK failed to join 29 partner countries and instead abstained from the vote. The Government alleged that, as the Minister said today, the UN Human Rights Council resolution was “partial, and unhelpfully unbalanced”. May I remind the Minister that the remit of the UN inquiry is to investigate “all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law” and that it calls on Israel and “and all relevant parties” to co-operate fully with the inquiry? That includes Hamas and other Palestinian factions, as well as Israel. Which bit of the resolution and the remit do Ministers not understand?

May I put it to Minister that the Government’s feeble response to last week’s events in Gaza only encourages the culture of impunity that the Government of Israel too regularly display these days, apparently believing that whatever they do, they will in practice never be held to account? Will the Minister confirm that now the UN Human Rights Council has made its decision, the UK Government will get behind it? What consequences should follow if Israel, or anybody else, either refuses to co-operate with the inquiry or is otherwise found to be in breach of international law?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for pursuing this matter.

I draw attention to the detail of the resolution, which names the state of Israel in many cases right the way through. That follows a clear demonstration by the UN Human Rights Council in the past of a biased view towards Israel. I think it was the general nature of the resolution, clearly specifying Israel as opposed to any other, that caused concern. We of course were not alone. This is not a matter on which the United Kingdom is alone. There were 14 other abstentions, including by four other EU members, so it is not a question of the United Kingdom taking one view on this; it is a question of other states believing that if we want to get to the truth, it will have to be done another way.

I said last week, and I repeat, that we want an independent and transparent inquiry. The House has heard me say again today that if it is carried out by Israel, it must have an international element to it. It is very clear that if it is done solely by the Israeli legislative and judicial system, it is unlikely to carry the sort of confidence that the international community is looking for. That is what we will continue to press for, but this resolution in itself will not do the job we all want to see.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye on this important matter, as could have been anticipated. I am keen to accommodate demand up to a point, but as in respect of the previous urgent question I do not wish to run this at inordinate length. There is other important business to which we must attend, so I am looking to move on after approximately half an hour from the start of exchanges. Pithy questions, pithy answers and we will maximise participation.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I very much welcome the Government’s decision not to back a resolution that was one-sided and biased against Israel. Will the Minister urge the UNHRC to desist from adopting these heavily one-sided resolutions as they have done so many times in the past?

Alistair Burt: I thank my right hon. Friend. We have made our position clear about the HRC on a number of occasions. We have expressed concern that elements of the HRC’s work have been clearly biased against Israel and that detracts from the other good work that it does. We will continue to maintain that position, but equally, if this inquiry is not the right vehicle, there must be another.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) on securing it. I join him in welcoming the independent UN investigation into violence in Gaza. While we have already heard debate about the wording of the resolution agreed by the Human Rights Council, I have to say, as I did last week, that that debate is frankly immaterial as long as the objective of setting up an independent investigation is achieved.
The issue today is why the British Government, which claimed repeatedly last Tuesday to support that objective, chose three days later not to vote for it. The crux of that decision was made clear in the Government's statement on Friday, which called for the Israeli authorities to be allowed to conduct their own so-called independent inquiry. If that sounds like a contradiction in terms, I am afraid we should not be remotely surprised. After all, this is the Government that say that Saudi Arabia should be allowed to investigate itself for bombing weddings in Yemen. This is the Government that say that Bahrain should be left to investigate itself for torturing children in prisons. Time and time again we see this: if you are an ally of the Government, you get away with breaking international law with impunity, and you are also allowed to be your own judge and jury, too.

Before the Minister gets up and extols the virtue of the Netanyahu Government, may I remind him of the last time that that Government were allowed to investigate themselves over an alleged breach of international law? In July 2014, four children were blown to pieces on Gaza beach while playing hide and seek in a fisherman’s hut. The resulting investigation: a blatant piece of nonsense, full of basic untruths, exonerating the IDF completely and saying that the old fisherman’s hut was in fact a Hamas compound. That is what an independent investigation by Israel looks like. That, instead of an international commission of inquiry, is what this Government on Friday decided to support, and that is nothing short of a disgrace.

**Alistair Burt:** Of course I read the right hon. Lady’s tweets over the course of the weekend. I remind her that among the other Governments that she was calling disgusting are those of Germany, Japan and, as I said, four other EU partners. It shows how careful we have to be in relation to this. Let me quote what the United Kingdom said in relation to the explanation of vote:

“Our abstention must not be misconstrued. The UK fully supports, and recognises the need for an independent and transparent investigation into the events that have taken place in recent weeks, including the extent to which Israeli security forces’ rules of engagement are in line with international law and the role Hamas played in events. The loss of life, casualties and volume of live fire presents a depressingly familiar and unacceptable pattern. This cannot be ignored.

To that end, in addition to abstaining on today’s resolution, we call directly on Israel to make clear its intentions and carry out what must be a transparent inquiry into the IDF’s conduct at the border fence and to demonstrate how this will achieve a sufficient level of independence. This investigation should include international members. The death toll alone warrants such a comprehensive inquiry.”

If we want to get to the bottom of this and find out what happened, I maintain that the HRC resolution was not the way to do it. We want the inquiry to succeed. That, we believe, is what we defended last week and will continue to pursue.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I say to the Minister that I support the Government’s proposals. Given that 53 of those killed last week were members of Hamas or Islamic Jihad, how would this resolution— [Interruption.] It not only does not mention those two organisations but reaches its conclusions in the resolution’s outline; it has already prejudged the outcome. That is not going to lead to the impartial, international investigation that everyone in this House wants to see.

**Alistair Burt:** The reality, as we can hear from comments on both sides of the House, is that many people have already made up their minds about the events of last week. That is what the British Government must seek to avoid. If we want clarity about what happened, some people must be prepared to say, “We must find out the facts. We must await the facts”. Otherwise, as our explanation said, we only add to those who are already hardened in their hearts, and then we will not get the evidence we need.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): We welcome the Human Rights Council resolution calling for an urgent independent investigation into the horrific killing of unarmed protestors in Gaza. It was a disgraceful decision of the UK to abstain from the HRC vote, and it flies in the face of previous statements from the Prime Minister and other Ministers in this House calling for an independent investigation. Given the mixed messages from the UK Government, will they now set the record straight and make it clear to the Israeli Government that deadly actions against protestors will not be tolerated by the international community? Finally, following this horrific incident, will the Foreign Secretary commit to joining his allies in concerting international pressure on the Netanyahu Government to lift the blockade on Gaza and put an end to Israel’s illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories?

**Alistair Burt:** In answer to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, I refer to what I said earlier. In relation to the second, one thing that was clear from last week’s discussion at the UN Security Council was the recognition that, in the absence of being able to make any serious immediate move on the middle east peace process, which ultimately will be the best way to overcome the issues at the heart of this, the international community—and Israel, Egypt and others with entry into Gaza—should first make changes and drive forward developments, including to infrastructure in Gaza, to change the nature of the lives of the people there. The UK firmly believes that, whatever else might have been behind the events of last week, the long-standing frustrations of the people of Gaza, caused by pressures upon them from more than just Israel but including Israel, should be relieved. We support the efforts that will be made to improve the conditions in Gaza.

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): Given that Gazans did all the dying and the Israeli soldiers did all the killing, how does the Minister expect an internal Israeli inquiry led by Brigadier General Baruch to be less partial and less unhelpfully unbalanced than the inquiry mandated by the UN Human Rights Council?

**Alistair Burt:** With respect to my hon. Friend, until we see the make-up of the inquiry process, we will not know the answer to that. I made it very clear that if Israel is not only to undertake its legal obligations for what has happened on its territory but to fulfil its own processes, an international element to the investigation will clearly be one of the most important things, and that should bring the transparent and independent element that the UK and others have called for in order to find out the answers to these questions.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Human rights are constrained and violence exacerbated by a water shortage that the UN says will render Gaza entirely uninhabitable by 2021. Does anyone have a plan?
Alistair Burt: I said during my statement last week that I had recently met the Quartet’s economic director, looking at existing proposals for improving the infrastructure in Gaza, including the water infrastructure. Again as I mentioned, it is clear to anyone who goes there what the circumstances are and how desperate the water and other situations are. The infrastructure needs improving, and improving quickly, and all parties involved in Gaza need to take steps to make sure it happens.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Israel has maintained a temporary occupation for 51 years. It builds settlements illegally, demolishes homes illegally, confiscates land and water from occupied territory and blockades Gaza by air, land and sea. At what point do these illegal acts ever meet with any consequences?

Alistair Burt: I think that the circumstances of last week indicate—as the United Kingdom Government have said on many occasions—that there is no status quo in relation to Gaza. Conditions are getting worse, and circumstances are getting worse. As we rightly call on Israel in relation to issues such as settlements, in relation to Gaza we remain of the view that until these issues are settled there is no future, and no future for peace in the region.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what this points to again is the need for reform of the UN Human Rights Council? Does he agree that, whatever difficult questions Israel needs to answer about last week’s violence, using this absurd body on which some of the world’s worst human rights abusers play judge and jury on the rest of the world is not the way to deal with that?

Alistair Burt: As I have said, the United Kingdom has had concerns about the UN Human Rights Council for some time, particularly in relation to Israel. We are not alone in that. The Human Rights Council must be impartial and balanced, and it has not always demonstrated those qualities in relation to Israel.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Israeli forces have killed dozens of protesters and injured thousands in an appalling escalation of violence. I am sure the Minister will agree that the lethal use of firearms is legal only if it is unavoidable, to protect life. Given that Israeli officials have authorised soldiers to fire live rounds at people trying to damage or even coming within 100 metres of the border fence, how can he possibly have confidence in an investigation led by those officials rather than by independent voices?

Alistair Burt: As I said earlier, I believe that an independent element in any investigation is vital if anyone is to feel confident about finding out whether or not the circumstances were as the hon. Lady has described them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that 50 members of Hamas and three members of Islamic Jihad were killed, and given that Hamas has now admitted that one of those incidents involved a shootout between its members and the IDF, has my right hon. Friend any confidence at all that Hamas will co-operate with any independent inquiry?

Alistair Burt: That, of course, will be a matter for the inquiry itself. Just as we are not rushing to prejudge an inquiry by not supporting a resolution that we felt would have led to an unbalanced inquiry, I am not prepared to say that there is evidence that Hamas would or would not co-operate with any inquiry into what happened in relation to the allegations made about it.

Graeme Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Minister does not like the UNHRC. He says that there must be another way. There is little or no confidence in the United States acting as an honest broker. What discussions are the UK Government having with other EU Governments about restoring the original United Nations mandate over the occupied Palestinian territories to make a more serious move on an international peace process?

Alistair Burt: I remind the House that we joined European allies—Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia—in the vote last week, so we are indeed talking to our European allies about what might be the best way to proceed. I do not think there is any clear pathway yet beyond what I have already indicated: the inquiry must have a transparent and independent element.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Israel is the only properly functioning democracy in that part of the world, and that it is right for it to be able to defend itself against aggression and terrorism, as it has done so successfully for the last 70 years?

Alistair Burt: By supporting an independent and transparent element in its inquiry, Israel has an opportunity in these circumstances to ensure that its long-standing statement of democratic principles is demonstrated to the rest of the world.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government of Israel will not tolerate any independent scrutiny of their actions, and increasingly obstruct and persecute international and domestic human rights organisations. What representations has the Minister made about the current plan to deport Omar Shakir, the well respected director of Human Rights Watch in Israel?

Alistair Burt: The first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question demonstrates the difficulty of dealing with the issue. He has already made up his mind about all this, and he is welcome to do that, but, as I have said, the United Kingdom Government cannot.

I have made no personal interventions in the case of that gentleman. I said last week that immigration processes were for each individual state, but we have made representations about the closing down of political space. We believe it is much better to interact with people than seek to bar them from a country; however, that is Israel’s own immigration right, as it would be ours.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The UN Human Rights Council has held a total of 28 urgent sessions; not one of them has focused on Iran, North Korea, Turkey, Russia, China, Venezuela, Yemen, Crimea, Pakistan, Somalia and so on, yet eight of those 28 have
been on Israel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that organisation lacks any credibility whatsoever as an impartial observer?

Alistair Burt: The hard truth of what my hon. Friend said stands for itself, and illustrates the degree of difficulty the Human Rights Council now has in relation to Israel in demonstrating its independence and therefore being a credible body. That was one of the influences on the United Kingdom, besides the unbalanced resolution, that a number of our European allies supported.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Minister has stated that the UK decided to abstain because the UK Government accept that the process is likely to be biased. Given the UK’s position that the Israeli Government should lead the inquiry, how can we continue to play the role of honest broker, which has been a very important role for our Government historically, given our unique historical relationship with that region? Can the Minister explain how that is possible?

Alistair Burt: I will endeavour to do so; that is a perfectly understandable and fair question. I draw attention to what we said in terms of the explanation of the vote: “The loss of life, casualties and volume of live fire presents a depressingly familiar and unacceptable pattern. This cannot be ignored.”

We called on Israel directly to “carry out what must be a transparent inquiry into the IDF’s conduct at the border fence and to demonstrate how this will achieve a sufficient level of independence.”

Difficult as it is, the UK taking a more balanced position on this than some enables us to remain in an impartial position in relation to this, which would be lost completely if we jumped one side or the other.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The Minister has pointed out that about a dozen other nations abstained on the motion. Is he able to clarify that their reasons for doing so mirrored those of the United Kingdom, namely that it was partial and imbalanced as written?

Alistair Burt: That was the UK’s view, and that was clearly a deciding factor in relation to our concerns.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened very carefully to the Minister. Having said that Israel must make its intentions clear, can he update the House on the number of arrests made during the horrific events of last week?

Alistair Burt: I am afraid that I have no information on that for the hon. Lady. I can say that since the events of last week I have met the Israeli ambassador here to stress what I said earlier about the importance of independent investigations, but I have no information on what she asked.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar says the purpose of the violence is to breach the border and murder Israelis living nearby. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Israel not only has a right to defend its border but must do so, and that includes using military action?

Alistair Burt: Again, uncomfortable as some of these statements are, it is entirely clear why Israel would seek to make sure that there was no breach of the border. There have been previous incidents in which Hamas operatives have taken Israeli lives, but it is to get to the bottom of what actually happened—the number of deaths, the extent of live fire—that this has been considered by some degree of independent inquiry.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the right hon. Gentleman not concede that the Government’s dismissal of the UN’s resolution as “partial, and unhelpfully unbalanced” is an attempt to muddy the primary question: given that there has been a death toll of over 100 men, women and children in the last six weeks, who is primarily responsible?

Alistair Burt: It is precisely the opposite, if I may say so to the hon. Lady: that issue would not be clarified by an investigation which from the beginning was clearly seen to be biased and in which it would be unlikely that all available parties would co-operate. It is precisely to un-muddy the waters that we are trying to take, difficult as it is, a more independent and unbiased line.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Israel clearly has questions to answer, but can the Minister confirm that Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation, so no one in this place or the UN should be seen as inadvertently defending or excusing it?

Alistair Burt: That is correct, and I am sure that no one in this House actually does that, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making it clear.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The other place recommended last year that the Government stop treating Israel with kid gloves and display some political robustness. This Government’s abstention is worse than weak; it is deplorable. How can the people of Palestine trust our Government when we refuse even to look seriously at these issues, let alone challenge them?

Alistair Burt: I understand the force of the hon. Lady’s response; she is always honest about all these things. I would point to what we said in the explanation of the vote, which clearly raises questions about Israel’s conduct. We seem to be one of the few Governments prepared to consider both sides of these dreadful incidents, and that is why we want to find the truth about what happened.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The United Nations commission of inquiry will be mandated to look at all violations of international law and calls for co-operation from all relevant parties. How do the Government see that as being unbalanced?

Alistair Burt: Mention was made of Israel’s activities a number of times throughout the resolution. There was no mention of Hamas, when it appears to be clear that there was engagement and involvement by Hamas, although no one knows how much. That is a vital part of the investigation, but there is no confidence that it would be part of it.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When the Government came to the conclusion that they could not support the resolution, what efforts were made to try to bring together a resolution that everyone could support, so that there could be a fully independent inquiry?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question. Before any of these resolutions come together, there is a great deal of contact between member states to try to find a way to broker an appropriate resolution. It normally works on the basis of someone putting forward a draft and other parties coming forward with suggestions, but if there cannot be an agreement, something then gets tabled on which people have to vote.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Both America and Israel are our allies, yet we are powerless when the US moves its embassy and we are onlookers when the UN votes to hold an inquiry into the killings in Gaza. True friends offer advice and criticism, but are we now content just to hold hands rather than holding anyone to account?

Alistair Burt: No, I do not think that that is the case at all. As I said earlier, true friends take a position in which they try as best they can to learn all the facts of the circumstances before coming to any conclusions, particularly in an area as sensitive and difficult as this. That is what we have sought to do.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Speaker, that I am not in full voice today. Will the UK set out its criteria for assessing the independence, impartiality and effectiveness of an internal Israeli investigation? What action will we take, should those criteria not be met?

Mr Speaker: That was still the equivalent of a lot of full voices.

Alistair Burt: It was indeed, and the hon. Lady’s questions are always relevant and to the point. Discussions are still taking place among members of the international community to define exactly what the terms will be. I said earlier that I had spoken to the Israeli ambassador last week, and representations have been made in Israel as well. I have indicated what we believe ought to be done.

Yasmin Qureshi (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Do the British Government have any plans to seek support for a fresh resolution that requires an independent UN investigation, or is the matter now closed as far as they are concerned?

Alistair Burt: I do not think that any investigation is necessarily off the cards. In the first instance, the determination will be for Israel to carry out an investigation, and we have said what we have said about what should accompany that in order to convince the international community. What happens after that will depend on the response to that inquiry.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), regardless of the outcome of the Israeli investigation, surely the Government should try to initiate a further resolution to resolve the problem?

Alistair Burt: It may come down to resolutions at the end of the day, but an agreed mechanism, whereby we can find out what has happened in order to ensure that the circumstances do not arise again, is more likely to be effective. However, that would involve a whole series of other issues that relate to Gaza, as I mentioned earlier, and much determination among the leadership of both Palestine and Israel to ensure that the circumstances do not arise in the future.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Protesting adults and children have been shot in the back and shot while standing hundreds of metres away from the border fence. The Israeli authorities are clearly killing and maiming people in Gaza who pose no threat to them. If this was happening in Iran, the Government would
completely and utterly condemn it, so why will the Minister not condemn the Israeli authorities for such actions?

Alistair Burt: I will repeat what I have repeated before—this is clearly set out in the United Kingdom’s concerns about the whole process:

“The loss of life, casualties and volume of live fire presents a depressingly familiar and unacceptable pattern. This cannot be ignored.”

The hon. Lady comes to her own conclusions about what she thinks has happened, but others have different narratives. It is clear that the extent of the live fire has caused casualties that raise prima facie questions about what has happened, which is why we must find out what the answer to that is.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The IDF and people here in this Chamber constantly refer to the “Gaza border” despite it not being internationally recognised. If it is a border, what state are the victims of Israel’s latest shooting spree in? If it is not a fence that entraps 2 million people, will the UK recognise the state of Palestine and push for an independent investigation, not just a whitewash by one party?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman makes a series of assumptions, and I understand where he is coming from. As I indicated last week, the United Kingdom will recognise the state of Palestine when it is conducive to the peace process, but there are more processes that must be gone through. If we are to find out what truly happened in Gaza, there must be a better option than that presented by the Human Rights Council last week.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The international community’s immediate focus after last week’s events was on the number of fatalities, but it is also important to dwell on the consequences for the thousands of injured people. Have the Government offered any additional humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza to ensure that the injured receive the medical treatment that they so desperately need?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s question. The short answer is yes. I am in contact with international agencies that are involved in delivering humanitarian medical aid. Gaza’s medical resources, which are already incredibly stretched, will have been put under even greater pressure following the events of the past few weeks. I am looking to see what further the United Kingdom can do beyond the support that we already give to those who provide such help.

Speaker’s Statement

4.44 pm

Mr Speaker: Last Wednesday, the Government chose to schedule a major transport statement on an Opposition day, thereby substantially reducing the time available for Opposition business. I thought then, as I think now, that this was very badly handled. It was, in particular, disrespectful both to the House and to the 23 Back Benchers who were hoping to participate in the Opposition day debate on the Grenfell Tower disaster.

It was in that context—and in that context alone—that, having expressed my displeasure about the matter quite forcefully from the Chair, I used the word “stupid” in a muttered aside. That adjective simply summed up how I felt about the way that day’s business had been conducted. Anyone who knows the Leader of the House at all well will have not the slightest doubt about her political ability and her personal character.

I love this House. I respect all of my colleagues, and I hold you all in the highest esteem. It is our duty to get on with the business of Parliament: scrutinising legislation, debating issues and standing up for the people we are here to represent. For my part, I shall continue to speak out firmly for the interests of the whole House and if, from time to time, it involves publicly disagreeing with the Government’s management of business, then so be it.
Private Members’ Bills: Money Resolutions

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

4.46 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the expectation that the Government brings forward a money resolution relating to a private Member’s Bill which has received a second reading.

Five months on from Second Reading, the Government have yet to bring forward a money resolution on my private Member’s Bill, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. This is an abuse of Parliament. The Government are making a mockery of the private Member’s Bill process. They are defying the will of Parliament and going against explicit commitments given to a Select Committee. These are the actions of a weak Government who are hiding behind procedure to avoid a vote they know they cannot win. We will not stand for it. We will fight for democracy, and we will always fight for what is morally and ethically right to serve our people.

It is an established parliamentary convention that the Government bring forward a money resolution on private Members’ Bills that have received a Second Reading. Until recently, the Government largely followed this convention; they are now running roughshod over it.

In 2013, giving evidence to the Procedure Committee when he was Leader of the House of Commons, Andrew Lansley said:

“To my knowledge, Government has provided the money resolutions…whenever we have been asked to do so.”

The Procedure Committee’s 2013 report therefore concluded:

“Government policy is not to refuse a money or ways and means resolution to a bill which has passed second reading.”

During debate on the money resolution for the Access to Medical Treatments (Innovation) Bill, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences, clearly stated “I just want to confirm that once the House has given a private Member’s Bill a Second Reading, the convention is that the Government, even when they robustly oppose it, always table a money resolution… Doing so is not a signal of Government support; it is absolutely in line with the convention of the House with all private Members’ Bills, whether we oppose or support them.”—[Official Report, 3 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 926.]

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am following the hon. Gentleman’s speech with great interest and I agree entirely with it so far. Does he agree that the Government must table a money resolution, although they do not have to vote for it?

Afzal Khan: Absolutely. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government can table the money resolution but not then have to agree with it.

The Government have changed their line. Last week, the Leader of the House said:

“money resolutions will be brought forward on a case-by-case basis as soon as possible.”—[Official Report, 10 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 894.]

There is clear water between saying the Government will always table a money resolution and saying that this will be considered on a case-by-case basis. What has changed since 2015? We have had the disastrous 2017 election, when the Government lost their majority.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Afzal Khan: Let me make some progress and then I will be happy to give way. Too weak to defeat my Bill on a vote, the Government are hiding behind a procedure that they know is wrong. The convention is also that money resolutions are brought forward in the order that Bills pass Second Reading. Members will have seen on today’s Order Paper that the Government have tabled a money resolution for a health and social care Bill. It is the second Bill the Government have leapfrogged over mine. The Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Bill was given a money resolution at the beginning of May, even though its promoter came out 13th in the ballot, whereas I came out third.

The only logic to when the Government are bringing forward a money resolution is: what will help them avoid challenge? We know many on the Government side are willing to vote against them on my Bill, both for principled reasons and because reducing the number of MPs will mean that some Conservatives will lose their seats—turkeys do not vote for Christmas. Based on the 2017 general election results, 34 Conservative MPs are set to have their seats abolished or to lose to Labour at the next election, with the list including six Cabinet Ministers and six other Ministers. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Cllose Smith), who is in charge of my Bill for the Government, is set to lose her seat to Labour if the current boundary proposals go ahead. The Government’s motives are clear: this is not about principles, but about electoral maths. This is not just happening with my Bill; money resolutions are part of a pattern of this weak Government abusing Parliament to avoid scrutiny and challenge.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the public will see that a money resolution delayed is actually democracy denied to this Chamber?

Afzal Khan: Last week, the Government made a statement on an Opposition day to crowd out debates on Grenfell and Brexit later in the day. The Government denied the Opposition prior sight of that statement, which ended up being a damning indictment of transport policy. The week before, the Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs called out a Minister and officials for being “slippery” and for “playing games” with the Committee on the incredibly serious topic of Windrush. Looking back, some could say that the Government’s evidence to the Procedure Committee now looks slippery. Of course, we also have the ongoing scandal of the Government first refusing to vote and then refusing to act on Opposition day motions. In Grenfell, Brexit and Windrush, we are talking about the defining issues of our day, yet even on those, this weak Government are comfortable abusing parliamentary procedure to avoid scrutiny and challenge.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and I completely agree with it. Does this not point to a much wider issue,
which is the ridiculous process we have to go through on private Members’ Bill in this House? Is it not time we had a private Members’ Bills process where Bills could not be blocked by filibustering or by the whim of the Government?

Afzal Khan: I agree with my hon. Friend.

My Bill cuts right to the heart of our democracy. The number of MPs who represent our country affects our ability to represent constituents, their ability to hold us accountable, and Back Benchers’ ability to hold the Executive to account. That outcome cannot be dictated by party politics—

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman think that the public, who would be asked to find several million pounds extra, would welcome the money resolution for his Bill?

Afzal Khan: If the hon. Gentleman will wait, I will cover that point.

That outcome cannot be dictated by party politics, yet from the beginning the Government have sought to use boundary changes to gerrymander the political map in their party’s favour. The Conservatives stand to win a greater proportion of the seats in a smaller Parliament.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Afzal Khan: Let me make some progress; I will give way again later.

The Conservatives stand to benefit from disenfranchising the 2 million people who have registered to vote since 2015, some 700,000 of whom are young people under 30. The power of the Executive will be enhanced by cutting the number of MPs without reducing the number of Ministers.

Political parties are important, but partisanship is fracturing our democracy. We can all agree that a boundary review is long overdue. The Bill will uphold the importance of checks and balances. We have been elected to serve the will of the House. My private Member’s Bill passed its Second Reading unanimously. Since then, the support of the House has continued with the boundary review. Of course, that manifesto did not win the Conservatives a majority in this House. For a minority Government to defy the will of the House in this way is deeply undemocratic.

Another pledge in the 2017 manifesto was to address the size of the House of Lords. Over the weekend, the Government tried to bury the news that they were appointing nine Tory peers. Unlock Democracy was right in accusing the Government of cowering in the shade. That has been widely reported as a move to prevent more defeats in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. It seems that the Prime Minister is willing to keep to the letter of her manifesto when it is politically convenient and to abandon other pledges when it is not.

Defying the will of the House is an abuse of Executive power. Their power to bring money resolutions comes from the financial initiative of the Crown—the Leader of the House referred to that initiative to defend the Government last week. It is deeply disingenuous to claim that they are blocking my Bill for financial reasons. Under this Government, boundary changes have always been an issue of electoral maths. How can my Bill be a financial issue when the Prime Minister has just appointed 13 additional peers with all their associated costs? She is increasing the size of the unelected House of Lords, while cutting MPs in the elected Commons. She pays lip service to cutting the cost of politics, but will ultimately do whatever is in her party’s interest.

Afzal Khan: We have three hours for this debate; let me put my case, and then we will debate.

In outright disregard for democracy, this minority Government are abusing their Executive power to defy the will of the House. My private Member’s Bill passed its Second Reading unanimously. Since then, the support that I have received from all parts of the House has been remarkable. During the recent urgent question on this subject, Opposition parties were united in calling for the Government to bring forward a money resolution. The shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), called this “an unprecedented position.” The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) from the Scottish National party called it

“a tactic to thwart the democratic progress of Bills that have been passed in this House.”—[Official Report, 10 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 897.]
the people, not ourselves. Those are the basic principles of modern democracy. Partisan gerrymandering is becoming only more pervasive. I urge the Government to make a meaningful change. I encourage the Leader of the House to go back to her colleagues in the Cabinet and bring a money resolution to the House before our Committee meets again on Wednesday. This weak Government’s motives are transparent. They are not fooling anyone.

5.2 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I welcomed the opportunity to respond to the urgent question asked by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) two weeks ago, when I set out the Government’s approach to money resolutions. I welcome the opportunity to respond again today.

First, I take my responsibilities to this House very seriously. As you said last week, Mr Speaker, we have a responsibility to safeguard the rights of the House and, as Leader of the House, I seek to do exactly that, treating all Members of Parliament with courtesy and respect. I hope and expect that all right hon. and hon. Members will do likewise. I seek to demonstrate day in, day out that my role as Parliament’s representative in the Government is a duty that is at the heart of all I do. Following the many requests I have received from across the House during this Session, the Government have scheduled debates on vital subjects such as baby loss awareness, housing and anti-Semitism. This week, I am making time available for a debate on serious violence following many calls to debate that vital issue.

We have scheduled more negative statutory instruments for debate on the Floor of the House than any Government in any Session since 1997. We continue to provide Opposition and Back-Bench days in line with Standing Orders. We are providing support to more than 20 very important private Members’ Bills that will make a difference to the lives of people across the country, including the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed); and the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). I have been working hard with colleagues right across the House to bring forward proposals on a new, independent complaints and grievances policy, safeguarding parliamentarians and staff alike to make this a Parliament that we can all be proud to work in, and to ensure that this is a place where people are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): When Parliament votes, why do the Government feel at liberty to ignore those votes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will fully appreciate that the Government never ignore the resolutions of this House. I will come to the specifics of the reason for not allowing a money resolution on the private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I endorse what the Leader of the House says about treating colleagues with respect, but she is unwittingly making the argument just made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Almost nothing that she is talking about requires a vote that is binding on the Government. The trend is the same: the Government are running away from anything on which they have to have a vote, and that is exactly what is happening with the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will realise that that is simply not true. There have been countless votes. Many Bills are already going through this place and several have received Royal Assent. There is a great deal of activity in this Chamber and in the other place. We continue to respect views right across this Chamber, and to adapt and amend legislation in order to improve it wherever possible. This Government are showing the greatest of respect to all parliamentarians.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House a very direct question that was posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)? The convention of Parliament is that the money resolution has to be tabled once a private Member’s Bill has had its Second Reading. Second Reading of this Bill happened five months ago, so why has this not happened?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that it is for the Government to initiate financial resolutions to commit taxpayers’ money. It is not without precedent not to bring forward a money resolution when the Government believe that it is not in the taxpayers’ interest to do so at the time. I will explain that further later.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has been quite strong in his language, talking of an abuse of Parliament and accusing the Government of acting in a profoundly undemocratic way. Well, I would strongly put it to him that the Conservative party has done more to support Back-Bench Members than any other in recent history. The Backbench Business Committee was established in 2010, following a commitment in the Conservative manifesto. This has been a much welcomed and successful change. Elections to Select Committees have been introduced. E-petitions have been a huge success, with the Government responding to 125 of them and 22 having already been debated in this Session. We should all be willing to recognise the achievements of the Conservative party in honouring and respecting Parliament. I could go on, but I think I have made the point.

Week in and week out, I raise matters on behalf of Members from all parties with my colleagues in the Government. I assure the House that this will continue.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I remind my right hon. Friend that the European Union (Referendum) Bill, promoted by our hon. Friend, James Wharton—sadly no longer in this House—did not receive a money resolution?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to remind us of that. It is unusual, but there are good reasons why, on occasion, money resolutions are delayed. It is not without precedent.
Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend is a superb Leader of the House. Of course she makes our representations to the Government, but unfortunately the Government do not necessarily agree. A money resolution should have been provided for the referendum Bill; two wrongs do not make a right.

Andrea Leadsom: I always listen very carefully to the views of my hon. Friend, but I am afraid that I must again draw all hon. Members’ attention to the fact that, as set out in “Erskine May”, it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions, of which this is one.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle rose—

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I want to make a bit of progress and then I will give way some more.

I now turn to private Members’ Bills specifically. It is absolutely right that Back-Bench Members promote legislation on causes that they and their constituents believe in. However, as Winston Churchill once said: “Not every happy thought which occurs to a Member of Parliament should necessarily find its way on to the statute book.”

Changes to the law are achieved by way of private Members’ Bills, but it is an important principle that they should make progress only when the ideas behind them have been thoroughly debated and Members are able to win sufficient support from right across these Benches. I gently remind the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton that it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. That is not new, it is not unusual, and it is clearly a constitutional right set out in “Erskine May”. I now give way to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff).

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Leader of the House. Does she agree that it would be appropriate to lay the money resolution and allow this House to debate it in the usual way, and then, if the Government wished, they could vote against it?

Andrea Leadsom: I want to come on to talk about some of the excellent PMBs that are finding their way through—[Interruption.] In specific response to the hon. Lady, money resolutions are brought forward at the appropriate time, and it is for the Government of the day to initiate those money resolutions.

Mr Harper: As a member of the Public Bill Committee, I listened carefully to what the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), said. She did not say that the Government would never bring forward the money resolution. She said that she thought it appropriate given the Boundary Commission’s work, which is quite a long way down the road, to wait until it produced its reports to Parliament and the Government would then reflect further. That seems to me to be a perfectly sensible course of action that should command widespread support in the House.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. The Government have decided not to bring forward a money resolution for the time being, but we will keep this under review and will continue to bring forward money resolutions at the appropriate moment.

Many excellent PMBs are currently being taken through Parliament. In the current Session, over 150 have been introduced so far and 13 of them have passed Second Reading. Of those 13 Bills, two have completed all stages in this House and have passed to the Lords. Two further Bills have also received money resolutions and completed Committee stage, and they will have their remaining stages over the next few weeks. Hon. Members will be pleased to note that there is a money resolution for the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), on the Order Paper for debate later today.

I would like to draw the House’s attention to the number of PMBs that the Conservatives have supported since 2010. Fifty-three private Members’ Bills have achieved Royal Assent since then, and we expect many more to do so over the course of this Session. That is in stark contrast with Labour, which, in the 2005 Parliament, supported fewer than half that number to achieving Royal Assent. Just 22 Bills made it to the statute book on Labour’s watch.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I have endured sitting through two inquiries into private Members’ Bills as a member of the Procedure Committee. It is clear that private Members’ Bills get through only if the Government choose that they should get through. The whole system is dysfunctional. There are a hundred ways in which the Government could choose to kill a private Member’s Bill; they happen to be choosing the money resolution route this time. Would it not be more honest for them just to say, “We do not agree with this Bill”? They need to redesign the entire system, because it is dysfunctional and it misleads the public.

Andrea Leadsom: I have to say respectfully that I disagree with the hon. Lady. I have read very carefully the reports of the Procedure Committee as they pertain to private Members’ Bills. I sympathise with her on sitting through those Committees; I am quite sure that they had their moments. The Government seek to ensure that all Back-Bench Members get the opportunity to bring forward legislation that matters a great deal to them and their constituents. Having considered proposals from the Procedure Committee, we now have a good way for Members to have the maximum opportunity to create new law.

As I say, 53 private Members’ Bills have received Royal Assent since 2010. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing Members well as their private Members’ Bills progress, and I would like to highlight what some of those legislative changes will achieve. First, I commend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for working with Ministers and colleagues right across the House so that his Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill can make progress. That is a vital Bill, with widespread support. The measures in it demonstrate to the public and to the criminal justice system that assaults on emergency workers will be dealt with seriously.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House, and I am enormously grateful to the Government Whips who was enormously helpful in getting my Bill to this stage. But I do not think the Leader of the House should pay me in aid on what the Government are doing. I want her to clarify precisely what she said to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). Is she saying that the Government might bring forward a money resolution if, for instance, the House were to vote down the Boundary Commission’s recommendations? From the Second Reading debate, it seems pretty likely that that is what will happen.

Andrea Leadsom: I will clarify what I said to my right hon. Friend. We will keep the money resolution under review, and once we have seen the existing boundary review’s recommendations and been able to consider them, we will think carefully about what to do next with this private Member’s Bill. It is by no means blocked, but at the moment the Government are considering how to take it forward.

Chris Bryant: Will the Leader of the House give way again?

Andrea Leadsom: No, fond as I am of the hon. Gentleman.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way. This seems rather straightforward. Parliament enacted a boundary review, which is currently in progress and will report in the autumn. To grant public money to start another boundary review would be grossly irresponsible of the House, when the money required by that proposal is the equivalent of 300 new nurses.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The point is that this Bill involves duplication, which cannot be supported because of the cost that it would impose on the taxpayer.

Secondly, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for his work in bringing forward the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill. The Government were pleased to bring forward a money resolution, which was then passed by the House. That Bill will provide much-needed support to bereaved parents, so that they can take time away from work to grieve when suffering the unimaginable loss of a child. I commend the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss for all its work on that matter.

I congratulate him on his work on that important Bill, which will establish a statutory office holder to be known as the data guardian for health and social care. I pay tribute to all those Members for their tireless work on PMBs and for the way in which they have engaged constructively to secure cross-party support.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There can be no better example of cross-party working and collegiate effort than the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill, brought forward by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). When will we see the money resolution for that Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: We will bring forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis. I have just given a thorough run-through of the Bills that have received money resolutions and those that are about to do so, and all others are under consideration, to be brought forward on a case-by-case basis.

Let me now turn to the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton on having the good fortune to be drawn third in the private Members’ Bill ballot and on having the opportunity to introduce his Bill, but let me reiterate what my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution said in Committee on 9 May and what I said to the House in response to the urgent question on 10 May, and then I will set out further detail of our approach to his Bill.

The boundary commissions began the 2018 parliamentary boundary review in 2016 and are due to report their final recommendations to the Government later this year. The reforms brought about by the review will ensure fair and equal representation for the voting public across the United Kingdom by the next general election. Equalising the size of constituencies in the boundary review will ensure that everyone’s vote will carry equal weight and will significantly reduce the cost of politics to the taxpayer. Without such boundary reforms, MPs could end up representing constituencies based on data that are over 20 years old, disregarding significant changes in demographics, house building and migration. As it stands, some constituencies have twice as many electors as others, and this simply cannot be right.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I will give way in a moment.

The commissions have been carrying out some incredibly important work. Initial proposals have been published and there has been a 12-week consultation on them, including regional public hearings. There were 36 public hearings across all regions in England, while Scotland and Wales each held five hearings and Northern Ireland held four, and these responses were then published. The review also involved a four-week period to allow counter-representations to be submitted in response to the consultation. The boundary commissions considered the consultation responses and the counter-representations, and all four boundary commissions then published revised proposals, followed by a ministerial consultation of eight weeks. I am sure many hon and right hon. Members will have taken the opportunity to feed in their views.
**Jo Stevens:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way, but she knows, as does every Member of this House, that the boundary review will be based on information about the electorate that is years out of date, so why not scrap it and do it on the basis of the current electoral register?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As I have sought to explain, a lot of work, taxpayers’ money and consideration have gone into a boundary commissions review that will significantly update the information on the basis of which boundaries are set. It is important to allow the review to be completed, and if I may continue, I will provide the hon. Lady with a further explanation.

The Government have committed to continuing this boundary review, and it is important that we allow the boundary commissions to carry out this work, of which much has already been completed, and we will then consider the findings carefully. Given the need to hear the commissions’ conclusions and the fact that a lot of work has already been carried out at a significant cost to the taxpayer, it would not be appropriate to proceed with the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill at this time by providing it with a money resolution.

**Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con):** My right hon. Friend is making a very good case. My constituents would find it absolutely absurd if the Government committed money to another boundary review without concluding the one that the public voted for in 2015 and committed to again at the last general election in 2017.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend explains the situation very clearly, and he is quite right. Our constituents would not expect us to initiate a new boundary review before we finished the existing one.

The Government have a constitutional duty to initiate financial resolutions in this place, and we are accountable to the people of the United Kingdom for the financial impact of such resolutions. Progressing with this private Member’s Bill might place a financial burden on taxpayers of an additional £8 million.

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** The Leader of the House talks about a constitutional duty. Does she not think that the Government have a constitutional duty to the 2.1 million people who are not on the electoral register and are therefore not included in this review, and a constitutional duty to do right by the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Once the boundary commissions’ review has been completed, the Government will of course consider the recommendations very carefully, but that review is not yet completed so we must allow it to continue to its completion.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The Leader of the House’s constitutional duty is to be Parliament’s representative in the Cabinet. Parliament voted overwhelmingly to proceed with this Bill. What representations did she make in the Cabinet to defend the Bill and promote the money resolution that Parliament had voted for?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can only say to the hon. Gentleman that, as I set out the start of my remarks, I am fully committed to taking into account all the views expressed across the House. I have done and will continue to do so at every possible opportunity.

**Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con):** The Leader of the House is making it very clear that this is a question of timing as much as anything else. There are only about 12 sitting weeks before we are due to receive the boundary commissions’ report. It seems enormously premature for the Opposition to demand that the money resolution is tabled now rather than waiting 12 weeks.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital that we always keep a close eye on value for taxpayers. As I have said, progressing with this particular private Member’s Bill would place a potential financial burden of £8 million on taxpayers. The Opposition may believe that it is perfectly fine to spend this amount of public money on a further boundary review, but, given that we have already committed to the 2018 boundary review, the Government cannot support such extra cost to the taxpayer at this point. With one review under way, plus an incomplete review from a previous Parliament, this review would be the third and would push the total cost of reviewing boundaries towards £18 million. I am sure that many constituents of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton would share our concern at any further unnecessary expenditure of taxpayers’ money.

The other private Members’ Bills in this Session also of course have costs attached, but they are costs associated with unique legislation, not that replicated elsewhere. As I have made clear many times, the Government will keep this private Member’s Bill under review, but it is right that we should allow the boundary commissions to report their recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed.

**Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab):** I am sorry, but the right hon. Lady is talking complete nonsense. Is it not a fact that the Government could lay the money resolution now? The idea that that money would be spent is absolute rubbish, and as for the idea that the Bill will somehow go ahead, would it not be a suitable back-up if the boundary commissions’ review were to fall?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I cannot really understand why the right hon. Gentleman wants to support a Bill if he thinks the money will never be spent to enact it. That would be a ludicrous situation.

**Vicky Ford:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is not only a significant amount of money but that it creates great uncertainty for the current boundary commissions process, so if the Bill were passed, it would be hugely destabilising for the boundary review and, far from making a better situation, would kick the entire issue into the long grass yet again?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need to complete and finalise this boundary review before undertaking any thoughts of a further one such as that proposed by this private Member’s Bill.

**Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** The Leader of the House has mentioned a figure of £8 million. I wonder how many hours of graft by our constituents it would take to generate the taxes to pay for that incremental review. Certainly the constituents of those of us on this side of the House would never forgive us if we enacted something to pay for something we did not need and that was not desired.
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. On this side of the House, we always look for good value for taxpayers’ money, so embarking on a new boundary review before the existing one is finished would be absolute nonsense.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am sorry, but it is completely disingenuous to say that this is a financial issue. For the Tories, boundary changes have always been about electoral maths.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is not correct. The debate is about money resolutions, and they are most certainly financial matters. This Government will always look after the financial interests of the taxpayer.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, contrary to what we have heard from Opposition Members, this is about money? My hospital in Worcestershire is due to receive £29 million from the Government. Does the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) think that my constituents should not have their hospital so that he can have his political project?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to raise the fact that money can be used in various ways, and that duplicating a constituency boundary review is not good value for taxpayers’ money at this moment in time.

James Cartlidge: May I assure my right hon. Friend that I have not had a single email, tweet, Facebook message, letter, or any other form of epistle calling for a money resolution on this Bill, but that I receive correspondence on an hourly basis calling for us to show prudence with taxpayers’ money?

Andrea Leadsom: I can say exactly the same to my hon. Friend. I have not received any representations on this matter from members of the public either. I am quite sure that, if they found out what the Bill proposes to spend on replicating an existing review, they would not be best pleased.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that for once the indignation of those on the Labour Benches is not synthetic? They are trying to keep an unfair electoral distribution, which the boundary review is looking at so that we can actually have a fair distribution of numbers across constituencies. As it happens, that would disadvantage the Labour party. All Opposition Members are trying to do is delay the proper democratic boundary commission process for their own party advantage.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend rightly points to the fact that we are seeking to ensure equal representation. That is at the heart of the boundary review and it is quite right that we should do that.

Some Members have argued that the decision is unprecedented and that money resolutions should follow Second Reading as night follows day, but I am afraid that that is not the case. Previous Governments have had to take similar action and for similar reasons that are in play with this particular Bill. For example, in a previous Parliament the Government declined to bring forward a money resolution, and the Minister at the time said:

“I am sorry to tell the Committee that we have been led to the conclusion that there are such major difficulties of principle involved and such operational costs seem likely to be incurred as to outweigh the benefits and we are consequently unable to support the Bill.”

During the 2014-15 Session, the coalition Government decided not to bring forward money resolutions for two Bills. At the time, the then Leader of the House said: “it is unusual but not unprecedented for the Government not to move a money resolution. There have been previous instances of that under Governments of different parties.”—[Official Report, 30 October 2014; Vol. 587, c. 417.]

In conclusion, I have sought to explain why the Government do not plan to table a money resolution at this time for this particular Bill. This action is not without precedent and we welcome the good progress that is being made by a number of other private Members’ Bills. I also want to assure all hon. and right hon. Members of my own personal commitment to representing Parliament within Government. I am dedicated to championing and safeguarding the role of this House and all its Members, whether through its work in improving legislation, representing constituents or holding the Government fully to account for their actions.

I have outlined the steps I have taken and will continue to take to ensure that the House has the opportunity to debate and scrutinise the key issues that affect people across the UK. I make a commitment today that I will continue to uphold the rights of this House and continue to listen to the views expressed by all Members, no matter on which side of the House they sit. Importantly, whether in this Chamber or outside it, I will continue to treat all hon. and right hon. Members with respect and courtesy, as befits the hundreds of years of democratic tradition in this place.

5.33 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for what she has said. I hope she will listen to what I have to say, too.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) made the application for an emergency debate. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the debate, which is about the will of the House. You have always been a champion of Parliament and I know you will continue to be so. I am disappointed that my hon. Friend has had to take up the time of the House, when we would much prefer to be debating the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and other important Bills from the other place.

My first point is: what has brought us here? My hon. Friend made representations to me as shadow Leader of the House. He was perplexed as to why his important Bill was stuck in a queue, on call waiting. As the Leader of the House will know, I had to raise this important issue with her in three consecutive business questions—on 3 May, 10 May and 17 May. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised it in a point of order on 3 May, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton on 9 May as well as in an urgent question on 10 May. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) also raised it at business questions last week, but unfortunately the Leader of the House has failed to appropriately address the issue and respond to our pleas.

The lack of a money resolution affects not just my hon. Friend but a number of hon. Members across the House. Right hon. and hon. Members have taken the
time to introduce their private Members' Bills to Parliament. They are not, as the Leader of the House quotes Winston Churchill, “happy thoughts”; they go through a process and a procedure. Right hon. and hon. Members are pleased when their Bills have a reading and it is a testament to the importance of their Bills that they have passed Second Reading—that is the will of the House.

The following Bills are awaiting a money resolution: the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton); the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill from the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson); the Overseas Electors Bill from the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies); the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill from the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight); and the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I cannot pronounce his constituency as well as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) did. Those are all important Bills that have not had their money resolution.

The second point that I want to raise is on practice and procedure. Why do we have that? So that there is certainty about the House's rules. The procedures are there for transparency. It is about fairness. Perhaps the Government like chaos and uncertainty, but there is no benefit to society and this House from chaos and uncertainty. The Leader of the House quotes “Erskine May”, and I will quote it too:

“A money resolution is normally considered immediately after the second reading of the bill to which it relates”.

Once a Bill has received its Second Reading, it cannot be right for the Government to delay money resolutions for such a long period of time. I have previously quoted from the parliamentary website—it is there for the whole world to see. I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton said when he spoke about the evidence given to the Procedure Committee by a previous Leader of the House, and about what a former Minister—the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman)—said: it is about conventions. That Minister said that providing a money resolution “is not a signal of Government support; it is absolutely in line with the convention of the House”.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The quotation that the hon. Lady says that 600 is an arbitrary number, but so is 650. However, there is an important difference: 600 is not an arbitrary number; it is the number that Parliament put into law for a boundary review that it legislated for in 2011. Is it not right that we allow the boundary commissions to finish their work so that the House can consider their reports before deciding what steps to take next?

Valerie Vaz: It is an arbitrary figure—it was plucked out of thin air without reference to any evidence. It might have been agreed by the House, but there was no evidence. The Bill would retain the status quo. It would also require the quota to be based on the total number of voters derived from registers of parliamentary electors published for the 2017 general election, or the most recent election thereafter. This would allow the 2.1 million voters registered after 1 December 2015 to be included in the review.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): On the hon. Lady’s point about using the register from the last general election, if the Bill were to go through and further delay might be another two years before proposals or policies come forward—would she still want to use a register that by then would be three or four years old?
Valerie Vaz: This is the most current register—and the 2.1 million people left off the existing register have to be included—but the Bill says that the register from the most recent election should be used.

The Bill would allow the 2.1 million electors to be included in the review. The Government passed a statutory instrument that many in the House agreed with, allowing people to register to vote right up until Thursday 9 June 2016—for the referendum—so they accept that voting is important, and those 2.1 million people should be counted and have their voices heard.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): At the time of the Government’s boundary review, my constituency had 7,000 fewer electors than at the 2017 general election and slightly more than at the referendum. Should we not be using those figures, as my hon. Friend says, otherwise we are denuding my constituency of the ability to be of an equal size to others?

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He makes his point very well. Clause 4 would require the boundary commissions to complete their reports, including in relation to the requirements in clauses 1 to 3, by 1 October 2020 and to report by 1 October every 10th year, rather than every five years, as provided for by the 2011 Act. Giving the boundary commissions 10 years will actually save costs.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does that clause not mean that over time the Bill would save, not cost, the taxpayer money, that it is a case of spending a penny now to save a pound later and that therefore the arguments against a money resolution are null and defunct?

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree. It will actually save money in the long run.

Responding to me following the urgent question on Thursday 10 May, the Leader of the House said that “it is right that we allow the Boundary Commission to report its recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed.”—[Official Report, 10 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 894.]

However, the review is based on a flawed premise. We have had a referendum and we have had a general election, and as a result of our exit from the European Union we have lost further representation by our Members of the European Parliament. The workload of Members of Parliament has increased following local authority cuts and the cuts in advice services: for instance, my local citizens advice bureau has had to cut staff numbers.

The Committee considering my hon. Friend’s Bill has met three times, but has not been able to consider a single clause of it. The Committee is due to meet again on Wednesday 23 May. Will the Leader of the House ensure and expedite the tabling of a money resolution that can be brought to the House? She mentioned that a money resolution for the Bill had been presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), but I had to raise the matter during business questions, and the Committee had to meet five times before the resolution was granted.

May I ask the Leader of the House again—she did not answer this during business questions—whether there will be a reduction in the number of Ministers? If not, we shall have an overpowering Executive who wants to prevent scrutiny by cutting the number of MPs. It is not right for us to have such an overpowering Executive, and it is not right to reduce scrutiny of it.

Finally, let me ask a constitutional question. I do not want to upset people or make them afraid, but some constitutional theorists have suggested that there may be a personal prerogative whereby the monarch does not have to follow the Prime Minister’s advice. An example given during a lecture—perhaps the parliamentary private secretary to the Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), was also at that lecture: she might have been, in 2005—was the gerrymandering of constituencies in the interests of one party, and not in the interests of democracy.

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Valerie Vaz: I have nearly finished my speech.

This is a hung Parliament, whose mandate is different from that of 2011. As we say hello to 13 new peers in the other place, we may be saying goodbye to 50 of us. As the numbers in the other place increase, the numbers in this House decrease. According to every definition of a good Parliament and a functioning democracy, that is not acceptable. More than 2 million people have been ignored by this Government. In the interests of procedural certainty, conventions, fairness and democracy, the Government should act now and grant the money resolution.

5.48 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I think it is a pity that the Opposition have conflated the issue of process and procedure with the issue of substance relating to the particular Bill that we are discussing today. On the issue of process and procedure, I absolutely agree with all those who say that we should be having discussions about money resolutions. Obviously the Government can whip against them if they want to, but I suspect that in the case of this Bill, the House would probably support a money resolution. Perhaps that it why they are a bit inhibited about tabling one.

I do not want to be caught up in the discussion about the merits or demerits of the Bill. However, I must say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that when she was listing all the wonderful private Members’ Bills that are currently before the House, I was very disappointed that she did not refer to one of the 19 that I had tabled for debate on 15 June. I felt that that was a serious omission.
Many of my Bills do not need money resolutions. One of the unintended consequences of this new rule that the Government have adopted is that a well-advised private Member who is successful in the ballot will probably say, “I’m going to go for a Bill that does not need a money resolution, because a Bill with a money resolution faces an additional hurdle.” Let us imagine that a Member wins the ballot and introduces their Bill, but it has probably attracted some awkward customers on Second Reading who disagree with it and want to talk for a long time. The Member will need to have 100 Members present to secure closure; in the past, as night follows day, when they have secured closure and completed Second Reading, they will have a money resolution.

I remember when Austin Mitchell introduced the licensed conveyancing Bill, which was hated by the then Conservative Government and strongly opposed, but the will of the House—I had the pleasure of supporting that Bill—was that that was a really good idea that would loosen up and liberate that rather closed profession and went on to the statute book and has been a force for good. The Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said, all we are talking about is not that the Government should grant or facilitate a money resolution, but that the opportunity should be given to the House to decide a money resolution—that is the issue.

Turning briefly to the issue of substance, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House makes a big issue of the cost of £8.1 million, but let us compare that with what the Government are doing at the moment. On today’s Order Paper there are two motions that seek to abolish Christchurch Borough Council—I hope that they will be blocked, resulting in in deferred Divisions on Wednesday in which the House will express its disapproval. Today, Christchurch Borough Council launched legal proceedings against the Government on the basis that those motions are retrospective and use secondary legislation to change primary legislation retrospectively. On the basis of that and of leading counsel’s advice, proceedings have begun against the Government. Are the Government, in the light of that, going to try and save money by saying, “Let’s resolve those legal proceedings before proceeding down the route of trying to reorganise local authorities in Dorset”? I fear that the Government response will be that they are not going to do that. The Government again play fast and loose with democracy; in this case, in Christchurch where 84% of local people voted against the proposition, but the Government are seeking to override that and at the same time use their ability to fight against the proceedings brought against them in the courts. They are using taxpayers’ money to do that, delaying the whole process and adding to the costs.

I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for some consistency. If the Government are worried about spending £8 million on this, why are they not worried about spending many millions of pounds on fighting a fruitless battle against the people of Christchurch in the courts?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree with my hon. Friend about the rules in relation to expenditure, but it is ultimately for this House to decide what should be spent and what should not, and if the Government wish to test the will of the House on an issue of £8 million there is nothing to stop their doing so. That would be the appropriate way to proceed and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said, all we are talking about is not that the Government should grant or facilitate a money resolution, but that the opportunity should be given to the House to decide a money resolution—that is the issue.

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Mr Rees-Mogg: I am fascinated that my hon. Friend has become such a champion of private Member’s Bills, as he has killed more of them than almost any other Member of this House, and to my mind has played a very useful role in doing so. However, is the Government’s practice not caprice, but constitutional correctness? It is the job of this House to seek redress of grievances, while it is the job of the Government to ask for expenditure, and we are at risk of confusing the two?

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that it has been granted. It is unfortunate that we have to have such a debate under Standing Order No. 24, and the way that the Government have responded to it has been, to say the very least, disappointing.

There are lots of things I call the Leader of the House—I call her charming; I call her helpful; I call her a bit Brexitish—but I think she has been less than sensible in the way that she has approached issues to do with money resolutions in the House, and to continue to defy the majority opinion and view of this House consistently and over a period of time does her no credit whatsoever. The House has made a decision on these money resolutions, and it is incumbent upon the Government to ensure that the rules of this House are progressed.
Where we are just now is very disappointing, not just for the important private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, but particularly for that of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). There is strong and great cross-party support and consensus across right the House for his Bill and for this matter to be progressed to ensure that his Bill at least gets through.

There has been a pattern to what the Government have been doing since they were elected as a minority Government in 2017, which is their failure to acknowledge that they are a minority Government. They already do not appear to engage properly in Opposition day debates, and they certainly do not vote in the vast majority of them; they have stuffed the Standing Committees of the House with a majority of their Members even though they are a minority Government; they have done their best to ensure that the Democratic Unionist party has been given its £1 billion to ensure some of their legislation gets through; and the way they have dealt with private Members’ Bills is consistent with that approach.

But we are not going to let the Government get in the way of our private Members’ Bills. We should say to this Government loudly and clearly, “Get your grubby hands off our private Members’ Bills, because they are far too important and valuable not just to this House but to our constituents right across this country.” Private Members’ Bills are increasingly valued by our constituents, and they want to see legislation progressed through this mechanism; we increasingly see that reflected in our mailbags.

The arrangements for private Members’ Bills are bad enough, what with being at the mercy of the likes of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and, although he has changed his coat today, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) who consistently do what they can to block and filibuster on such Bills. Instead of thwarting private Members’ Bills, it is incumbent upon everybody in this House to ensure that they are properly enabled and supported, because they show this House at its very best.

All of us in this House have a passing interest in ensuring that private Members’ Bills are dealt with properly, because we all want to be champions of private Members’ Bills; we would all like that little bit of a legacy, where we have been able in some small way to shape legislation as a small contribution from our time as Members of Parliament.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that the Procedure Committee in the previous Parliament, and I believe in the Parliament before that and in the current Parliament, has spent a considerable amount of time looking at the private Member’s Bill system and has come up with sensible proposals, such as allowing the Backbench Business Committee to allocate the first four Bills so that Bills that command support from across the House can make progress? That is not dissimilar to the sensible system in the Scottish Parliament where, again, provided that there is consensus, Bills can move forward instead of the Government having an effective veto.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He really gets to the point of what this is about. Private Members’ Bills are popular things. Our constituents like them. This is the kind of work they want to see us doing. They want to see us working consensually together, progressing Bills that are of interest to them. I commend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for going about this in exactly the right way and asking the people of this country what they wanted his Bill to be about, given that he was No. 1 in the ballot. That is the kind of approach that our constituents increasingly want us to take, rather than the usual stuff that we observe, particularly during set-piece opportunities such as private Members’ Bills. Instead of thwarting the progress of these Bills, let us get behind them and support them. Let us ensure that this country gets what it seems to want.

To be successful with a private Member’s Bill, there are three really big tests that a Member has to overcome. First, they have to beat all the rest of their colleagues to get on the ballot. It is remarkable that nearly 95% of Members of this House applied to bring in a private Member’s Bill. That is how popular they are. The Member will have to get into the top 10, or possibly the top 20, in the ballot just to get their Bill to a Second Reading. The second test involves the tough task of getting it through its Second Reading debate. They will need 100 Members down here to ensure that they get the closure motion, but the debates are held on Fridays when we are traditionally with our constituents, hard-pressed as we are to respond to our constituents’ interests. The Member will have to work cross-party to ensure that they have a range of support across the House. They will have to work consensually. They will also be at the mercy of the filibusterer, our good friend the hon. Member for Christchurch, when he gets to his feet to try to ensure that the Bill is blocked and disrupted.

If a Member can do all that and get their Bill through its Second Reading, they will then face the third test: does it meet the approval of the Government? At that point, the Government can simply decide that they do not like the Bill and refuse it a money resolution. That will effectively kill it off, or at least put it into private Member’s Bill purgatory. That is what has happened just now with the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. Why are we accepting this? Why are we prepared to allow this Government to block the democratic decisions of this House and to stop something that is clearly popular?

I have a neat and elegant solution: we need to take the decision out of the Government’s hands. If a private Member’s Bill passes its Second Reading, a money resolution must automatically follow. I have heard the Leader of the House saying, consistently and ad nauseam, that money resolutions are within the gift of the Government. She has talked about the Government’s opportunities and obligations, and she has talked about “Erskine May”. She has told us what the convention is. That does not matter. We could not care less about all that. If there is a convention, we must make a new one. If there is a tradition, we must start to do these things in a new way. If it is in “Erskine May”, let us revisit and review “Erskine May”. If it is in the Standing Orders of the House, let us change them. Let us ensure that we deal with this, because at the moment our arrangements for private Members’ Bills are letting the House down and letting our constituents down. Let us take back control. Now, where have I heard that before? Oh yes, that is what this House is supposed to be doing. How about we demonstrate it in relation to these Bills?
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that we have to show that we in this House are listening to our constituents. Can he tell me how many people in Perth and North Perthshire have spoken to him specifically about the money resolution for the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton?

Pete Wishart: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that I was very impressed with his skills in the Scottish cup final the other day. His recovery technique was absolutely superb. It was the highlight of the game for me. I can also tell him that my mailbag is absolutely full of all types of suggestions for private Members’ Bills that people find favour with, and I am pretty certain that the hon. Gentleman will have had the same experience.

I have another solution to the Government’s approach: if they do not like a Bill, they should come to the House and explain why they do not like it. They should not hide behind process and procedure. They should not try to block these Bills simply because they have the means and the capability to do so. They should argue their case on the Floor of the House. I happen to think that the Government have a case when it comes to the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. They tell us that a boundary review is under way, and yes, of course it is. The House seemed to back it, but the Government did not get a majority in the last election. I think that the Leader of the House has got that one wrong. But let the Government bring their argument forward. We can debate it. If they have their way, and majority is in favour, that is what the Government will do. However, if they do not get their way, and if this House clearly tells them that it wants to pursue a different approach, the Government should listen to that and respect that decision.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I understand the hon. Gentleman’s principled objection to the House of Lords and what comes out of it. Can we therefore take it as read that he will oppose any amendments that come through from the House of Lords on any legislation?

Pete Wishart: That is an absurd argument. This is what it comes to. The Conservatives want to abolish the House of Lords not because it is an absurd circus and an embarrassment; they want to abolish it because it is doing the right thing. That is how absurd this is.

This Government apparently want to cut the number of directly elected Members of Parliament in this House just at the point when our workload is about to dramatically increase as we get rid of our 73 Members of the European Parliament as a result of this Government’s clueless Brexit. The responsibilities that are currently exercised by our MEPs will have to be dealt with by an even smaller pool of Members of Parliament.

Alec Shelbrooke: May I clarify a point that the hon. Gentleman has just made? Is he suggesting that, even after the vote for Brexit, we should keep our MEPs?

Pete Wishart: Of course I am not saying that. I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is missing in all this. We have 73 members of the European Parliament just now, but they will soon be gone. He and I, and all other Members of this House, will therefore have an increased workload. There will be more scrutiny work for Select Committees, for example. The size of the Executive will be the same, because there are no proposals to cut the size of the Government—
Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that if I am being charitable I will say that he has been diverted from the path of virtue by the spontaneous intervention from the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alex Shelbrooke). Periodic animadversion to the membership of the House of Lords is one thing, but a constant and unceasing dilution upon it is another. The former is orderly; the latter is not.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker, and I will not be driven to speak further about the House of Lords by any hon. Member—at least until the end of this debate.

In conclusion, Parliament’s credibility is on the line. The affection that the public have for this House is being called into question due to how we deal with such things. The public like the private Member’s Bill system. They want more of it, not less of it. They want the Government to be supportive and enabling; they do not want them to stymie or to block things with all manner of procedural techniques. Why do we not vow today that we have a lot of affection for our private Member’s Bill system and that we want to see it work? We should support it, and we should start by ensuring that if a Bill gets past its Second Reading, it receives a money resolution and gets through.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the next speaker I will impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches which, as things stand, will probably be of the order of eight minutes or thereabouts. However, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), the Chair of an illustrious Select Committee, has slightly greater latitude, which I know he will not abuse.

6.10 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I say to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Pete Wishart) that I hope that he and his colleagues from Scotland will continue to avail themselves of the opportunity to propose private Members’ Bills in this House for a great many centuries to come.

This debate is confined to the narrow question of money resolutions for private Members’ Bill. We are not here to debate constituency boundaries, even though you have allowed a certain amount of latitude. Mr Speaker, but I should draw the House’s attention to a report published by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in February entitled “Parliamentary Boundary Reviews: What Next?” The report stated that the Government cannot be confident that the House of Commons will support the implementation of the present boundary recommendations in the autumn, concluding that “if it moved quickly, it would be possible for the Government to introduce new legislation to allow for a new boundary review and for it to be implemented prior to a 2022 election”—or 2021. Our sole recommendation was therefore that “the House of Commons should be given an early opportunity to debate the options for reform and to decide whether or not to continue the current boundary review. In doing so the House would need to consider the potential risks of legislating, and establish if consensus can be reached in time for legislation to be passed before the summer. The Government should consider if the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill—the Bill presented by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—“could provide such an opportunity.”

The purpose of that recommendation was simply to draw the House’s attention to the position that we are in. The Government are in danger of leaving the House of Commons with Hobson’s choice when it comes to the timetabling of a vote on the boundary review, which will be in September or October, because it will be very late indeed—if not impossible—to legislate for an alternative boundary review. Nevertheless, it is entirely plausible that the House will vote down the 2018 boundary review.

On 17 February 2000, Oasis were at No. 1 and Tony Blair had not yet been Prime Minister for three years. If somebody born on that day was elected in 2022, they would be younger than the data used to formulate the boundary review. However, that would not be a democratic disaster. Democracy would still work and people would still vote intelligently in their constituencies, but we would be failing in our duty to provide a fair democratic system that commands the public’s confidence.

I rather lament the partisan division that has opened up over the boundary question, and we in the Conservative party must share a measure of responsibility for that. An arbitrary limit of 600 was set in order to “reduce the cost of politics”, but—let’s face it—there was something of an electoral gimmick in that proposal and it did not command confidence. The 5% variation between the size of constituencies that we included in our legislation was extremely controversial, and we have lost some of the consensus around boundary reviews that I used to see in my earlier years in the House.

I am bound to say that there is a certain amount of pots and kettles in all this, and if the Labour party is genuinely seeking a consensus, it could provide the Government with an assurance about how a new boundary review might proceed. I hope such conversations are going on. For example, to use a new boundary Bill as a Christmas tree for things that the Labour party would like to its electoral advantage would undermine confidence in that consensus, but conversations should be happening. That would be better than this rather scrappy debate, which does not serve this House’s reputation well.

Chris Bryant: I wholeheartedly agree with what the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has already said, not least because unless we are able to provide a consensus on such matters there will not be a lasting constitutional settlement. What does he think would happen if the boundaries were voted down in September or October, as was suggested on Second Reading of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, and there were to be a general election next year or in 2020? What boundaries would be used then, and what political confidence would the nation have in them?
Mr Jenkin: I have made that point already. There would be no democratic disaster; we would not be going back to 1832 and rotten boroughs, for goodness’ sake. The boundaries would just be rather old. The electoral data in our constituencies would be up to date, but the data used to draw the boundaries would be out of date. Government Members have argued that traditional boundary reviews have been carried out with rather unequal constituencies, and there is a consensus, as represented by the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, that constituencies should be more equal—that point has been conceded.

I hope that there is a consensus, but the danger is that we are losing the opportunity for this House to make serious choices while we wait for the boundary review. It would be entirely legitimate for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to say that we should not commit to spending more money on a new boundary review until we have decided on the old one. I am simply saying what my Select Committee recommended, which is that we bring forward the decision. The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), is nodding, but her party has many opponents. At the moment I would put something on the Order Paper that would make that decision. She has sat on this report since February, so why have the Opposition not done something more proactive if they feel so strongly about this? [Interruption.] The hon. Lady is now looking aghast, but there are Opposition days on which a resolution could be tabled to give the House the opportunity to decide on the matter.

I just want some consensual, grown-up discussion, and I do not see much of a future in continuing the scrappy discussion that we have had so far. The Select Committee’s report has received a formal response from the Government, and we will be considering it soon. I am advised that I cannot refer to it, but I say, “Don’t hold your breath.” I think it leaves the Government with room for manoeuvre to be flexible and adaptive to the present situation, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will take that message back to the Cabinet.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: An eight-minute limit will now apply to Back-Bench speeches.

6.19 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin).

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing a debate on this very important issue after the House voted overwhelmingly in support of his private Member’s Bill. It is unfortunate we have had to have this debate because of the Government’s wrongful persistence. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing last week’s Standing Order No. 24 application and for granting this debate. It is extremely important that we are able to discuss this issue.

Having listened to the Leader of the House speak of all the great things she has awarded Parliament and this Chamber, of the Bills she has allowed and of how gracious she has been, I should perhaps be on bended knee to await her grace and favour. I am aghast that I should even be here to question this situation.

Unfortunately for the Leader of the House, we are not in China. We are the longest-serving democracy in the world. We are the mother of Parliaments. Parliament is supreme, and her job as Leader of the House is to convey those things—not to block, and not to stand for the Executive rather than listen to the voice of this Chamber. In her speech she mentioned only what has been put forward by the Executive and the reasons why she is still not able to say, “Yes, we will grant this money resolution because it is the overwhelming will of this Chamber that we do so.”

I do not want to deviate too much on the boundary change issue, to which the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex and others have alluded, but these are the figures on which the boundary commissions have been working: 46,107,152 people were registered to vote in 2011; and in 2017, 46,826,481 people were registered to vote, a 2.67% change. This year’s electoral registration figure is 46,148,035, which means the number of people able to vote has reduced.

The big issues for the boundary changes are, first, the number of people actually on the electoral register and, secondly, how registration has happened over the past eight years and how this Executive have made it difficult for people to register to vote. That is the real problem that the Leader of the House needs to address, and she has not yet done so.

Members on both sides of the Chamber have mentioned the cost factor. The Government say the cost of Parliament is too high. Will a Government Member stand up and tell me how many Members have been appointed to the other place since 2010? What is the cost of those appointments?

Mr Harper: Owing to the cost-saving measures implemented both in this House and in the other place, the cost of the other place has actually reduced and not gone up over time, notwithstanding the increase in the number of Members.

Mr Mahmood: More wishful thinking, rather than trying to address the question.

Mr Harper: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mahmood: No. The right hon. Gentleman cannot tell me how many people have been appointed. He cannot tell me the cost of the people who have been appointed. Members of Parliament have a specific role. Unlike Members of the other place, we serve the interest of our constituents and we look after their needs. Our constituents come to us at our surgeries. My constituents continually come to my office, which is open five days a week from morning till afternoon—my office has some of the highest caseloads in the country. As has been mentioned, Members of the European Parliament will soon no longer exist, and we will take on their work load. This is not an issue of arbitrarily trying to reduce the size of the House by 50 Members. To be a proper democracy we have to be held to account. To be able to move forward, we have to think about how we address the needs of the people we represent.

The Government’s proposals would dilute the democratic process, which is why the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton is important. The Bill would address the size of
constituencies and the number of Members. There would be a 7.5% deviation in the size of constituencies, so the boundary commissions need proper, accountable figures. A census should be taken so we have the right sort of numbers that we can trust. The Bill would allow young people to come on to the electoral register, and the registration mechanism needs to be properly addressed to allow that to happen. That is a key issue.

Another key issue is the number of people we have appointed to the other place and the cost of doing so, and the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) could not answer my question. Democracy has a cost, and democracy is not about saving money. It is important for our people that they are democratically represented. That is what this country is about; it is not about making the House smaller and smaller, which would mean people cannot get to their Member of Parliament. On top of that, our constituents have to deal with austerity cuts on a day-to-day basis. We have seen a huge number of people coming forward about that, and now the Leader of the House tells us that austerity will now apply to private Members’ Bills because we do not have the money.

I could tell the Leader of the House about the issues in my constituency and how the Boundary Commission for England has completely torn asunder the communities in my constituency and how the Boundary Commission have the money. It is right that we allow the boundary process, which is for England, to have this vote, as do our constituents who voted, our providing consistency and not mucking around with the proposals for their own constituencies. It is right that we have that democratic process and several rounds of consultation.

This review first started in February 2016 but, as the House knows, it is not the first review. History will not be kind to us, as a House, when it looks back on such occasions. I first entered this place eight years ago and, looking on the Back Benches, I see several other former Ministers who had responsibility for the constitution, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper).

I was a Back Bencher when I first voted on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, which legislated for the initial reduction from 650 seats to 600, thereby saving the taxpayer £13 million a year, and more than £60 million over the course of a Parliament. I thought we had done the right thing then, but I was wrong because, come 2013, there was another vote in which Opposition Members—including Liberal Democrat Members who are not present today, and not only because there are far fewer of them to contribute—overwhelmingly voted for a review of a 600-seat House in 2018.

Opposition Members voted to delay the review and, having reached this point, they now want to kick the can further down the road.

Chris Bryant: I ask the question again: if the Boundary Commission proposals are not carried in September or October 2018, as seems likely following the result of the Second Reading vote on the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), how many parliamentary constituencies will there be under the law in a general election held next year or the year after—650 or 600?

Chris Skidmore: As we know, the current rule will mean there will be 650 and it will remain that way. It is a disgrace that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) said, we are still using demographics going back to February 2001 for our general elections. I was 18 when that last boundary review was passed and, historically, we have never been in this position before—this is unprecedented. We have gone far past the situation of the 1970 decision to delay the 1958 review, and the current delay is unacceptable. Constituencies near that of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) have historically been small. For instance, Arfon has 38,000 constituents whereas North West Cambridgeshire has 95,000. It is unacceptable that when it comes to our parliamentary representation—

Mr Bone: This is an interesting debate on boundary reviews, but may I ask my hon. Friend what on earth it has to do with a money resolution for a private Member’s Bill? Is he in favour of that being laid tonight or not?

Chris Skidmore: No, simply because, as I have stated, it is right that we allow the boundary process, which is only 14 weeks from completion and the Order in Council being laid, to carry on unhindered. Those independent civil servants deserve Parliament’s support. They deserve our providing consistency and not mucking around with this process once more. They deserve the opportunity to have this vote, as do our constituents who voted, through manifesto processes in 2017 and 2015, to restate the case for a reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies. Whenever that vote takes place between 1 September and 1 October, I ask every Member of Parliament who is going through the Lobby to think about how they are going to vote. Our constituents are not going to thank us if we turn around and say we want to increase the number of MPs and that we think it is totally fine that we have 650 Members of Parliament, whereas in France Emmanuel Macron is claiming that 550 representatives are too many and he wishes to cut that number by a third.

In my local authority of South Gloucestershire, residents voted for a ticket whereby the Conservative council administration has successfully taken forward a local government boundary review reducing the number of councillors by 10%, from 70 to 63. That is right because it is cutting the cost of politics and we should also do that in this House. In the vote, Members should look themselves in the mirror and think, “Do I wish to be an
MP who has to turn around and say to my constituents that I voted to protect my job and a bureaucracy, when Chambers across western Europe are looking in the other direction and reducing the number of elected representatives?”

6.32 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), on securing this debate and on the vigour with which he pursues this esoteric yet important issue. At the moment, Mr Speaker, he and I share a standing engagement, Wednesday at 9.30 am, but it is not for tennis, as you might like, nor is it for five-a-side football or even for a nice brisk run as is my preference. Instead, we go to the Committee Corridor every Wednesday to consider the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. It is trapped in parliamentary purgatory: having been overwhelmingly supported on Second Reading, it has been denied a money resolution by the Government. So we meet but we cannot advance the process. We discuss this point briefly and then adjourn, and then we do it again the following week—it is rinse, wash, repeat. We are booked in for Wednesday and I know there will be room in the audience for hon. Members to observe us doing this. At the first meeting, the Minister responsible for this Bill, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, said that no such resolution would be forthcoming as there is already a similar process in train to the one that my hon. Friend seeks to commence. That is an argument the Leader of the House has made today, but there are two significant holes in it. First, the case being made by the Government is not an argument against a money resolution being tabled; it is an argument against voting for a money resolution. It is perfectly reasonable for the Government to think this process should stop and that it would be a bad bit of legislation, and indeed the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) made a passionate argument against it. In which case, let us divide on the matter. But the Government refuse to bring forward that Division, which shows either that they know their argument is weak or that they cannot win a vote—or perhaps it is both those things. Either way, that is not a reason to withhold a money resolution.

Secondly, when the House overwhelmingly voted for this Bill on Second Reading, it did so knowing all the arguments that have been made here. This was well aware of all of them, be they about finances or the nature of the review that is already in progress. W e knew all those things—they are not revelations—yet this House divided and chose overwhelmingly to continue with the process. Now that is being thwarted because it is not convenient for the Executive; the will of this legislature is being thwarted. Now that is being thwarted because it is not convenient for the Executive; the will of this legislature is being thwarted. That is a particularly unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Prior to coming here, I thought that the best argument for codifying our constitution was to protect this place, and the public’s will, from an overbearing and overly strong Executive, but after a year here I have seen that a weak Executive—in terms of not commanding a majority— are just as dangerous to Parliament. Over the year, we have seen that this Government will do lots of things to get through the week: when they lose votes in the Lords, they make more Lords; when they lose votes in the Commons, they rely on secondary legislation; when the Opposition pray against secondary legislation, the Government make it hard to get it on the Floor of this House; when the Government are probably going to lose an Opposition day debate, they do not contest it; and when they might not want to hear what is said during an Opposition day debate, they put a statement on to reduce the time for it. All of those things are not really becoming in a Government; they are desperate acts of a weak Government.

Across this place, all 650 Members, with their different personalities and different reasons for being here, hold different roles: some are in the Government and some are in the Opposition; some are Front Bench and others are Back Bench; and there are first-time Members like me and grizzled veterans, like others. Whatever category we fall into we have one thing in common: we are custodians of this place. As such, we should treat it with respect and not weaken it in the pursuit of our own self-interest. With that in mind, I will be keeping my standing engagement with my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, hoping to move this Bill forward in line with the will of this place. It is time the Government tabled the money resolution to allow us to do so.

6.36 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and I hope he does not include me as one of those “grizzled” old Members. I am a new Member, too, although, obviously, I am substantially older than he. I recently celebrated a birthday, but it was not my 50th, as some have suggested.

I wish to applaud this UK Government for their willingness to engage with many of the private Members’ Bills put forward during this Session. As has been mentioned, from the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) to the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill put forward in 2017, the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), I have seen this Government show they can work with Members of all parties to make real progress. Those are, quite simply, examples of this House at its very best, so I do not accept the idea that this Government are riding roughshod over this House, and I certainly do not do so on the grounds that there has been no money resolution for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill.

The Government have been happy to provide money resolutions for a number of private Members’ Bills, but we also have a manifesto commitment to continue the boundary review process, as I recognise. I am glad to see that reducing the cost of politics will be achieved by leaving the EU; we in this place are positively frugal of all parties to make real progress. Those are, quite simply, examples of this House at its very best, so I do not accept the idea that this Government are riding roughshod over this House, and I certainly do not do so on the grounds that there has been no money resolution for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill.

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private Member's Bill out of hand; all they are doing is saying, entirely reasonably, that we should wait for the boundary review process, which is still going on, otherwise we would have a clear case of putting the cart before the horse: pre-empting the Boundary Commission's recommendations would be not only a waste of money but disrespectful to the Boundary Commission. I therefore do not accept that the UK Government are out of line for not providing a money resolution. Frankly, if hon. Members want to see a Parliament whose independence from the Executive is being undermined by a minority Government, they would do well to look at Holyrood, where they would see a fine example of it.

If we accepted the case that has been made, the Government would have to duplicate the commission's work—there is absolutely no point in doing that—and needlessly spend anything between £5 million and £8 million, as we have heard. I encourage the commission to report substantially before October, if it can, to give us more options. It should embrace the mood of Parliament and broaden the options from the 2017 position. The commission must be pragmatic about the support that it has in this place, but we must wait to hear what it says.

6.40 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this debate, and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting time for us to debate this issue under the auspices of Standing Order No. 24. I am disappointed that it has had to come to an emergency debate, but let us be honest: it is the Government’s pig-headedness on this issue that has brought it to the fore. I say that as a member of the Public Bill Committee that is considering the boundaries Bill, which is in political purgatory.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), has shown nothing but utter contempt for the will of Parliament, which agreed unanimously to the Bill’s Second Reading. I must say to the Leader of the House that the spectacle of a Minister sitting in Committee doing her papers and saying nothing devalues her office and shows what little respect the Government have for Parliament. Far from Parliament taking back control, we see Ministers simply taking the proverbial. Rather than behaving like a humbled minority Government, Ministers are constantly riding roughshod over parliamentary democracy. They have simply not come to terms with losing their parliamentary majority. I say that humbly as someone whose party lost its majority in the Scottish Parliament in 2016.

The UK Government started by bought off the Democratic Unionist party but continued to give it Opposition Short money; and they continue with the charade of DUP Members sitting on the Opposition Benches. To my recollection, the only time the DUP has not voted with the Government was on the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign when the House unanimously passed a motion saying that the women of the 1950s generation should be looked after. The Government ignored that, and thereby continued to perpetrate an injustice against the 1950s WASPI women.

After setting up their grubby confidence and supply agreement with the DUP, the Government began to gerrymander Select Committees, after a lengthy delay in their being set up. The Procedure Committee, of which I am a member, has had to launch an inquiry into the establishment of Select Committees, because of the Government’s actions.

The Government have said that they will just abstain from or, indeed, ignore all Opposition day votes. Is it not remarkable that the Government chose to break that self-imposed convention only when it came to the motion on the release of data about the injustices perpetuated against the black faces of the Windrush generation? The first time the Government chose to take part in an Opposition day vote was to prevent that information from being published.

The real anger in this place today relates to the boundaries Bill, because Ministers want to reduce the number of MPs while they increase the payroll vote of trade envoys and Parliamentary Private Secretaries. Ministers want to reduce the number of MPs while they simultaneously stuff more people into the House of Lords. On Friday last week, when all eyes were on a royal wedding, Labour and the Tories quietly put out the news that they were ennobling another 12 peers on £300 a day. We have the grotesque sight of Corbynite Labour comrades donning the ermine while people in Glasgow are going hungry as a result of British Government austerity.

In recent months, the Government have filibustered debates on votes at 16 because—I do believe this—a clear majority of MPs in this House now supports votes at 16. The Government are too scared to put the issue to a vote. That is exactly what happened to the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). Now, we have the deeply worrying development of the Government withholding of money resolutions for Bills that they could not defeat on Second Reading. Rather than killing the Bill, the Government could at least give it a money resolution and allow it to be debated in Committee. That would allow Committee members to consider the Bill, clause by clause, and amend it if necessary. If at that stage the Government do not support the Bill, they can vote it down on Third Reading.

All these people in the House talk about Parliament taking back control, but I am not really seeing a huge amount of evidence. The Government are already running out of steam—so much so that one transport Bill has been carved into four separate Bills, simply to beef up the legislative programme. We have a Government who are running scared of Parliament, whether by not recalling Parliament to debate Syrian air strikes or in the form of a zombie Parliament with endless meaningless general debates, which make this place look more like a university debating society.

The reality is that Westminster is a place of limited democracy, and the British establishment has rapidly run out of steam. I say to the Leader of the House that Scotland can be governed differently and efficiently, with a fairer Parliament that has the powers of independence, and the powers to conduct the legislative process in a way that is respectful of not only its Members but the people we seek to represent. The sooner we are free from this, the better.

6.45 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am going to talk about the constitutional point in relation to money resolutions, rather than the virtues of
the private Member’s Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), and about the difficulty related to that Bill being a private Member’s Bill. In promoting his debate earlier, the hon. Gentleman said that the situation was democratically quite improper, that the procedures were being ignored, and so on and so forth, but that seemed to me rather to ignore the point that it is usually the practice of this House that the Committee stage of a constitutional Bill is considered on the Floor of the House, just as the Act that the hon. Gentleman’s Bill seeks to amend was. After Second Reading, the hon. Gentleman did not, as he was entitled to—as it happens, as I have done on several occasions—move that his Bill should be put before a Committee of the Whole House, which would have been the correct procedure for a constitutional Bill.

In respect of the money resolution, we are dealing with the most ancient practice of this House and of the constitutional division between the Crown, as represented by Ministers, and the responsibilities of Parliament. Although in this country we do not have as formalised a separation of powers as they have in the United States, none the less we have a separation of powers between that which is done by Ministers and that which is done by this House. What is the role of the House historically? It is to seek redress of grievance by preventing the Government from getting or spending money, or by forcing the Government to change the law to implement that redress of grievance. It is not and never has been the role of this House to seek to force the Government to spend money; the House has always responded to requests to do that.

Therefore, we turn to chapter 32 of “Erskine May”, on page 711, where things are set out extremely clearly. Under the title “Financial Relations Between the Crown and Parliament”, it says:

“It was a central factor in the historical development of parliamentary influence and power that the Sovereign was obliged to obtain the consent of Parliament (and particularly of the House of Commons as representatives of the people) to the levying of taxes to meet the expenditure of the State. But the role of Parliament in respect of State expenditure and taxation has never been one of initiation: it was for the Sovereign to request money and for the Commons to respond to the request. The development of responsible government and the assumption by the Government of the day of the traditional role and powers of the Crown in relation to public finance have not altered this basic constitutional principle: the Crown requests money, the Commons grant it, and the Lords assent to the grant.”

Then there appear in “Erskine May” the rather dubious words “In more modern terms”, before it goes on to say that

“the Government presents to the House of Commons its detailed requirements for the financing of the public services; it is for the Commons, acting on the sole initiative of Ministers, first to authorize the relevant expenditure (or ‘Supply’) and, second, to provide through taxes and other sources of public revenue the ‘Ways and Means’ deemed necessary to meet the Supply so granted.”

The point that is up to the House to debate and then divide on. Does he not accept that point?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** No; I disagree fundamentally with that point. That is why our Standing Orders are as they are. If we look at Standing Orders Nos. 48, 49 and 50, we can see that the requirement of public money is given only at the express request of the Crown, because regardless of whether it is a private Member’s Bill or a Government-initiated Bill, the principle is the same.

**Chris Bryant:** I would argue that one problem with how we do our business is that we do not afford enough scrutiny of the way in which the Government seek expenditure. We are simply unable to fillet things out, which is why we have not voted against estimates for a very considerable period of time. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the simple proposition that, if the number of MPs is reduced, the number of Ministers should also be reduced?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, who is a great constitutional expert, but his point is completely irrelevant to this debate, which is on money resolutions relating to private Members’ Bills. He seeks to widen it to the virtues of the Bill that is being considered, but we need to focus on this basic constitutional principle, which is at the heart of how this place operates.

A Government elected on the basis of popular suffrage come to the House with their demands for expenditure. We as Parliament and the House of Commons hold that Government to account for the expenditure they wish to have. It has never been the role of the House to say that money should be spent if the Government do not wish to propose it.

**Pete Wishart:** What about sovereignty?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman is not focusing on the totality of the constitution. The sovereignty of this House is there to give confidence to the Government of the day. If the Government do not have the confidence of this House, they fall. Therefore, if the Government do not operate correctly in bringing forward their requests for expenditure in terms of their dealings with this House, or if the House does not approve, the Government change.

**Mr Kevan Jones** rose—

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I will not give way again because time is short, much as I would like to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The point of the constitutional differentiation—the separation of powers—is that, as long as the Government command the confidence of this House, they are the sole proposer of expenditure.

**David Linden** rose—

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I will not give way again.

**Pete Wishart:** What about sovereignty?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Of course we are sovereign, but we are sovereign in that we have the ability to dismiss the Government.
[Mr Rees-Mogg]

The separation of powers is very important. If we allowed the House to do all that the Government try to do, we would in effect not have an Executive. We would simply have Committees of the House trying to run the whole Government, which would be completely impractical and a novel constitutional experiment. For very good reasons, we have the Standing Orders we have. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) rightly said that we can change our Standing Orders—we can change Standing Orders Nos. 48, 49 and 50 so that money resolutions are not needed.

David Linden rose—

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have so little time—I apologise.

The House has decided not to change its Standing Orders because it recognises that the constitutional settlement works well. The British people give a mandate to the Government. That mandate is represented through this House. That Government then come to this House seeking to push through their agenda. The House holds them to account and supports or opposes their expenditures. We would be turning our constitutional settlement on its head if we decided that the powers of the Executive are to revert to the legislature. We are here to seek redress of grievance and to hold to account. We are not here to mimic, replace or take over the functions of the Government. Therefore, it is our role to say to Her Majesty’s Government: “You are right. You are preserving the constitution. You are following the constitutional norms.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) made a point about conventions. The one he mentioned is observed more in the breach than in the observance. It has been ignored on many occasions because it is not a rule of this House or of the constitution. That an application for expenditure lies with the Government is not only a rule of the constitution, but a cornerstone of it. Let us preserve our constitution.

6.54 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

In my 11 years as an infant teacher, I found that one of the lessons that children find the hardest to learn is that, just because they do not get the outcome they want does not mean that they get to change the rules. Sometimes there were tears and tantrums, but I have insisted with my own children that they cannot change agreed and established rules part of the way through a game just because they want to win. I would not want to draw any comparison between immature, tantruming children who disregard rules and our Government—that would be unfair to children everywhere.

The principle of accepting that we must all learn to follow the rules, even when it makes us incredibly cross and we do not want to, is crucial. Our constitution is an unwritten one. Some might say that it is based on the trial and error and political victories of our history. It is definitely true that aspects of the constitution have been written to suit the holders of political power at different points in time, but it is even more true that the enterprise has kept working because it is underpinned by shared values and democracy. I celebrate the fact that successive Governments have put aside political advantage for the good of the country and for the survival of this, the mother of all Parliaments.

The Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), has led to this debate. It is through that scope and the question of democracy and representation that this debate must be viewed. That is why I am saying to the Government today that they should put calculations of their political advantage aside and do what is right for our country.

The Government introduced the boundary review in a previous Parliament, under very different political conditions, the biggest difference being that it happened before we voted to leave the EU and therefore to get rid of all our MEPs. It is not a replicating review because it is based on 650 seats, not 600. The comments about money are a red herring, because if the Government introduce the money resolution and vote against it, they will not have spent any money.

Our constitution is based on the idea that Parliament is sovereign, that it will be bound by no previous Parliament and that, to paraphrase John Maynard Keynes, when the political facts change, it can change its mind. That is what the House was doing when it agreed on Second Reading to my hon. Friend’s Bill on 1 December last year by 229 votes to 44.

The Government must not continue to play political games in the face of such a clear mandate from the House by not bringing forward the money resolution. I argue that we desperately need more MPs rather than reducing the 650. In my constituency, not everybody who comes to me for help is on the electoral register. In fact, Home Office delays take a huge amount of my time and work in my constituency, yet none of those people are counted under the boundary reviews in the changes.

The Government do not need to support the money resolution. The terms of the convention make it perfectly possible for the Government to introduce the resolution and oppose it. Many on the Treasury Bench would fancy themselves as statesmen or stateswomen. Indeed, their manifesto prominently featured the words “in the national interest”. If they truly believe that it is not the will of the House that boundaries should be changed, and if they believe that they have the numbers to stop it, they can table the resolution and demonstrate it to us. Bring it on. To do otherwise is cowardly and simply undemocratic.

6.58 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): This has been a wide-ranging debate. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—I congratulate him on introducing the debate—spoke about the reduction of the number of seats and directly about his private Member’s Bill bringing the number to 650, which has slightly muddied the waters when we look at money resolutions.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) put it better than I possibly could when he quoted the facts. There is a responsibility on the Government to put in place the checks and balances on how legislation comes forward. As has already been said, we are but weeks away from a boundary review decision being taken in this House. The Government’s
position is not to dismiss out of hand the Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, but to say that now is not the time to bring it forward, as we should wait until this decision has been made. We are a very long way down the line. The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act was first debated in 2011. I was elected in 2010, so it seems to have travelled through my eight years in this Parliament. Obviously, there is much doubt about whether the order will pass with the proposal to reduce the size of the House to 600 seats. It is a crying shame that, among all other things, we may still end up in a situation whereby we have such unequal seats.

Those who have done election monitoring with the OSCE will know from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe that the maximum difference between seats should seldom exceed 10% and should never exceed 15%. Of course, we are in a situation whereby there are such differences. Let us look at two seats that I picked at random: Wirral West has an electorate of 55,995 and East Ham has an electorate of 83,827. That is a difference of 33%. This is not the time to debate the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. Amending the legislation to review the situation every 10 years does not really sit with the point about updating the registers every five years, but I do not want to get too involved with actually debating the Bill.

David Linden: This is the first speech from the Conservative Benches that has actually touched on what is contained in the Bill. The whole reason that Opposition Members want the Bill to go to Committee is so that we can consider it clause by clause. At the moment, we do not have the power to do that because of the Government’s actions.

Alec Shelbrooke: I say very gently to the hon. Gentleman: patience. Later this autumn, the House will vote on the proposal for 600 seats, as was laid down in statute when the review was pushed forward to 2018. There remains to be very significant work, which may or may not have to be done depending on the outcome of that result. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has intervened a couple of times to ask what happens if that proposal is voted down. I believe the point he is making is that it is laid down in statute that the number of seats has to be reduced to 600 so, even if it is voted down, what are we going to do?

Chris Bryant: Well, if the Order in Council is voted down in the autumn, I think that the legislation will remain as it is and we will have 650 seats on very old boundaries and very old registers, until such time as the legislation is changed somehow or other by this House. That is not in the Government’s interest; it is not in the Opposition’s interest; and it is not in the interest of the country. I suspect that the Government will suddenly say, “Hello, Mr Member from Manchester, Gorton. We’d like to introduce your Bill ourselves.” That is what is going to happen; we all know it.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because that is the point that I am driving at. This has gone on for a long time. The reduction to 600 seats has been talked about in this House for seven years, and we are coming to the vote soon.

In my city of Leeds, I represent 80,000 people. The seat next doors represents 66,000 people—I am rounding the figures. A vote in my constituency is only worth one eighty-thousandth, while just next door a vote is worth one sixty-six-thousandth. That does not actually preach fairness in any way at all, and this goes back to the statistics I mentioned earlier.

My concern is that the politics that come to play in changing the number of seats and the boundaries does not end there. When we arrived at the situation of trying to equalise seats, we said that everybody should be roughly equally represented, which indeed is outlined by the Vienna Commission. But of course, how big seats should be used not to be laid down in law. Instead, it was done by looking at communities and bringing things together. When we move down the road of amending new legislation, we start to hear arguments such as, “Well, actually, let’s set an arbitrary figure by saying plus or minus 7.5%, 10% or 5%; let’s just base it on communities.” That gives an excuse to have very unequally sized seats.

The Government are right to hold up the money resolution at this stage, simply because we are at the end of almost seven years of a process and a vote is coming to the House. I hope that the reduction to 600 seats is passed, because this has been long debated. In fact, I believe that it was the hon. Member for Rhondda who was at the Opposition Dispatch Box during our debates on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. I do beg his pardon—I think he was actually there for the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill.

Chris Bryant: I did both.

Alec Shelbrooke: Yes, the hon. Gentleman did both. I sat through debates on both pieces of legislation. The issue has been well debated and we have to bring the vote forward.

If the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 falls, my concern is that we will rush into the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, start the process again and spend more public money on a process that has already taken years, got us to this point and may be voted down again. We could then see a Bill go to the House of Lords, probably get amended against the Government because there is such a large majority against the Government up there, and then say, “Actually, we’re going to get rid of the idea of equalising seat sizes. We’re going back to community sizes.” We need to be more sensible when we are thinking about starting another two-year process.

Let us face it—this House is not going to vote for boundary changes 18 months out from a general election. That would be, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, said, like turkeys voting Christmas. Somebody said that it is a very esoteric argument; it exercises us here, but it does not exercise the public. If the 2011 Act is voted down—I really hope it is not because this needs to be brought to an end and we do need to equalise seats—we should not just rush in and say, “Right, we’ll do 650 and carry on with the process.” Instead, we should look at the whole thing. Is not one of the problems that when we in this House are voting on our boundaries, we have a fundamental clash of interests?

The reality is that we have now taken so long over this that there is barely a seat in the land that will not have a major change, no matter what it is. A few months
out from an election, people think, “Hang on a minute. I’ve built this incumbency. I’m not going to change it at this stage.” Once again, we would end up fighting—as I believe will happen if the Act is voted down in October—the 2022 election on the boundaries that we have today. That would be hopelessly out of date.

We have to give serious consideration to what happens if the Act is voted down. We should not just rush into a private Member’s Bill on the basis of having 650 constituencies. We need to have a careful look at whether we should, in fact, enact a change that would always take place following the next general election and, crucially, that Members would not get to vote on. We could keep the decision for the independent Boundary Commission, which we can lobby and make changes to. That was done across the parties in Leeds and there were some matters on which the parties absolutely agreed. We should not rush into any changes if the Act is voted down.

The Government have every right to withhold a money resolution on a Bill that seeks to disrupt a piece of legislation that is seven years in the making and is just weeks away from being voted on in the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset said, we could be in a situation whereby we are simply not looking after the public purse, and where we are just spending money willy-nilly on the whim and political argument of the time. That needs to stop. After the vote, if the Government are defeated—I hope they are not—we need time to go away and think very carefully about what we do next. Let us be blunt: as it stands, this system is not fit for purpose.

7.7 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): As a relatively new MP, I am still trying to understand how Parliament works and, in particular, the way in which laws are made. One thing that is clear to me is there is very little chance of legislation being made without the support of the Government. As we all know, the Government control the legislative timetable. Apart from the 13 Fridays set aside for private Members’ Bills, there is no other opportunity for such Bills to become law. Even on those 13 Fridays, private Members’ Bills have virtually no chance of becoming law unless they have been lucky enough to have been drawn in the top 10 of the ballot of private Members’ Bills. Even if the Bill has been drawn in the top 10, there is still the prospect that it may be talked out or will not receive sufficient backing from Members.

For a private Member’s Bill to get through its Second Reading, it must first have been properly debated, which means at least four hours of debate. Secondly, there have to be 100 Members present on that given Friday to make the debate quorate. Thirdly, having overcome those hurdles, the Bill has to secure a majority of Members voting for it to proceed. These are all tall measures for a private Member’s Bill to overcome, so once a private Member’s Bill has navigated these obstacles—and bearing in mind the huge odds stacked against a private Member’s Bill to become law—the Government should surely then make provision for the Bill to progress to its next stages. As I mentioned, the Government have the ability to stop a Bill in its tracks on Fridays by either allowing for it to be talked out or organising MPs to vote against its proceeding to its Second Reading.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) secured such a passage for his Bill. In attempting to stop it progressing, the Government have used three different arguments why the money resolution should not be granted: that it is contrary to the Government’s manifesto commitments, that it has insufficient support and that it is for the Government to decide which Bills should receive a money resolution and which should not. I will address each of those in turn.

There are numerous manifesto commitments that the Government have decided not to take forward. Therefore, the fact that something was not in their manifesto should be no barometer of whether private Members’ Bills should progress. On Wednesday, I am introducing my Terminal Illness (Provision of Palliative Care and Support for Carers) Bill. More funding for palliative care was in the Government’s manifesto, so I am hoping that the Bill will get a smooth ride to Second Reading and have the support of a money resolution for it to progress.

On attracting sufficient support for a Bill to progress, on Friday 1 December, when the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill was being debated in the House, there was a Division on a closure motion, and the result was 229 to 44 in favour of moving to the vote. In the vote on allowing the Bill to progress to its Second Reading, the House voted unanimously in favour. A total of 275 Members were present on that day—42% of all Members—and there was no dissent to the Bill’s progressing. That, to me, indicates huge support for the Bill, yet the Government refused to grant it a money resolution. That argument therefore does not stack up either. Speaking as a member of the Bill Committee, I remind the House that the Committee met three times, only to have to adjourn because we could not make progress owing to the Government’s refusal to grant a money resolution. That is a complete waste of time for Members and staff who are on the Committee.

Hon. Members have said that we should wait until the autumn for the Boundary Commission to report. Earlier this year, however, there was an opportunity to take an indicative vote on whether the view of the commission should be voted on. The Public Accounts Committee produced a report proposing to take an indicative vote on the current boundary review. That would have given an indicative vote on whether the boundary review had the support of this House. That could have been done in February. However, the Government chose to ignore the report of the Public Accounts Committee, which is also made up of Back Benchers.

By their actions, the Government are attacking the parliamentary process, diminishing the role of Back Benchers and acting in an undemocratic way. When the Procedure Committee produced its report on private Members’ Bills on 13 April 2016, the Government responded by saying:

“The Government always endeavours to engage constructively in discussions on money resolutions with Members whose Bills have been granted a Second Reading.”

Even with those private Members’ Bills that have received money resolutions, there has sometimes been an inordinate delay in the resolutions being laid—months, in some cases.
Money resolutions should be granted immediately after Second Reading to get rid of this power grab by the Executive, who, after all, despite all their controls, still cherry-pick which Bills they give money resolutions to, thus holding the rest of the Bills to ransom.

This is no way to do business. The system for dealing with private Members’ Bills needs a complete overhaul. If the Government continue to ignore the will of the House and Back-Bench Members, then I fear for democracy. I hope that we will see changes to the way that business is done in this House and that that happens soon.

7.13 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I want to address most of my remarks to the motion before us. I will touch briefly on some of the points that have come up about the substance of the private Member’s Bill, but I will keep those remarks relatively tight, Madam Deputy Speaker, so as not to stray from the subject of the motion.

First, I want to pick up where my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) left off. He is absolutely right that the Government have the responsibility to bring forward money resolutions and to initiate the spending of money. If we think about it, there is a very good reason for that. In the case of Back Benchers bringing forward a private Member’s Bill under which they propose spending money on a popular cause, people will of course find that very welcome. Members of the public quite frequently like money being spent on good causes. However, if every private Member’s Bill spent a significant amount of money, although each individually might not have a huge impact, collectively they would do so.

That is one of the good reasons why the Government, when bringing forward Bills under their own programme, have to balance the individual measures not only in relation to the good that they do for the money that is spent, but, as my hon. Friend said, in relation to the ways and means—that is, the taxes that have to be levied to pay for those measures. It is therefore right that the Government initiate the spending of money and ask this House to assent to it. That important constitutional principle is worth maintaining.

David Linden rose—

Mr Harper: Of course I give way to my fellow member of the Public Bill Committee.

David Linden: The right hon. Gentleman is speaking at length about the Government having to be careful about how they authorise spending of money and how that money is planned to be spent. Does he have the same feeling about the £1 billion that was bunged to the Democratic Unionist party after the general election?

Mr Harper: I have not really been speaking at length—I had only been speaking for about a minute when I generously gave way to the hon. Gentleman. The Government do have to spend public money wisely. As they said, spending money on the people—the people of Northern Ireland, who had to suffer over many decades from the impact of terrorist violence and a divided society, is a perfectly proper spending of public money.

I, for one, am very pleased that we have got to a situation where the public realm in Northern Ireland is much more peaceful and the communities are living much more closely together. Dealing with some of that legacy of the past is a very welcome and very proper thing for the Government to spend public money on.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I fully appreciate that there is a cost to putting right some of the legacy of the troubles in Northern Ireland, but why was that not an issue for the Government before the general election?

Mr Harper: I do not want to be taken off the central point that I was making, Madam Deputy Speaker, much as the hon. Gentleman tempts me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. For the avoidance of doubt, the right hon. Gentleman is correct. This is a very narrow debate and we must keep to that.

Mr Harper: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was responding to the intervention by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, but I do not want to be taken off the point.

It is proper that the Government have that role of financial initiation. It is also clear that there is a convention that the Government will bring forward a money resolution, but it has not been an invariable convention. There have been a number of examples—the Leader of the House set them out—where Ministers have not brought forward money resolutions. I was intrigued by the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). The private Member’s Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on a European Union referendum was not given a money resolution despite the fact that the then Prime Minister was very keen on doing so. There have been plenty of examples of private Members’ Bills not being given money resolutions.

I repeat what the Leader of the House said, as did the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)—that the Government simply want to wait for the Boundary Commission’s report. One of my hon. Friends, I think, asked whether it could report earlier. It cannot do that because the primary legislation means that it can report only between September and October of this year, and that is what it is going to do. Given that we have been having boundary commissioners look at the parliamentary boundaries since, in effect, 2011, I do not think it is unreasonable that we allow one of those reviews to reach completion and allow this House to make a decision before we then consider what to do. The position that the Leader of the House has set out is not unreasonable. I think the central thrust is absolutely right.

I wanted briefly to touch on some of the points that were made in the debate, before you were in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will not dwell on them at length because they touched on the substance of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). The first is about the timing of his proposed review and about the members of the public who are not on the electoral registers under the arrangement that the current boundary review is considering. That sounds
...significant constitutional measures. Detailed debate on touched on this. I do not think they should be used for my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset when it would have been helpful.

SNP Members protest now, they were not supportive getting that legislation through Parliament. As much as amount of support from the Scottish National party in shrinking it quite considerably and making it more I made modest proposals to reform the other place by debate this issue, because as some Members will remember, that, and I know that work is under way to look at passing the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). If they are worried about voters who were not on the electoral register in the last couple of years, they should ensure that the current boundaries do not take into account voters who have gone on to the register in the last 18 years. That is a much bigger injustice. Allowing the current review to continue and this House to take a view on it is much the best thing to do.

Alec Shelbrooke: If Members are worried about the number of people appearing on the register, is that not a flaw in the argument that we should change to 10-year cycles rather than five-year cycles?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I favour having more frequent reviews—one a Parliament—that are much smaller and less disruptive, rather than less frequent reviews that are much more disruptive because so much population shift has happened. That is a better balance. Indeed, that was what the House decided when it passed the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talked about the House of Lords. The Prime Minister’s nomination of peers was very modest; I think it was 13 in total. If we look at the votes on Brexit legislation, I do not think anybody could suggest that it was anything to do with that, given that most of the votes the Government lost in the other place were by significantly more than that number. They were modest and very reasonable proposals.

There is a very real point about the size of the other place. My understanding is that they themselves recognise that, and I know that work is under way to look at reducing the size of the other place. I hope that some consensus can be reached, so that it can be shrunk. I say somewhat immodestly that I am very pleased when we debate this issue, because as some Members will remember, I made modest proposals to reform the other place by shrinking it quite considerably and making it more democratic, although they did not find favour with the House. Indeed, I do not think we received a huge amount of support from the Scottish National party in getting that legislation through Parliament. As much as SNP Members protest now, they were not supportive when it would have been helpful.

My final point, to come back to the debate at hand, is about what private Members’ Bills should be used for. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset touched on this. I do not think they should be used for significant constitutional measures. Detailed debate on those should take place on the Floor of the House, as we did with the 2011 Act. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) put his finger on it when he suggested that most private Members’ Bills do not need money resolutions because they should not be used for significant areas of public policy that involve spending significant amounts of money. That properly should be the role of the Government, not private Members’ Bills. Private Members’ Bills most often should not require money resolutions because they should not require huge amounts of money to be spent; they should properly be for things that do not require the expenditure of huge amounts of money. We would not then be having the sort of argument we are having today.

In conclusion, the Government are right. The Leader of the House’s arguments are very reasonable. She has undertaken to keep this matter under review, and I do not think we can say fairer than that.

7.23 pm

Mr Keven Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing the debate and on being successful in the ballot.

Private Members’ Bills are important and have been responsible for some major social change in this country. The Sexual Offences Act 1967, which legalised private consensual sex between males over the age of 21, was a private Member’s Bill promoted by Leo Abse. Sydney Silverman’s private Member’s Bill became the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965, which suspended the death penalty in Great Britain, excluding Northern Ireland, if I remember correctly.

Major social change has been made in this country through private Members’ Bills. Sometimes, including in the case of those two Bills, Governments have preferred to use private Members’ Bills to make those changes, rather than to legislate for it themselves. Not as famous as those two Bills was the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004, which I successfully piloted through the House, to limit larger shops from opening on Christmas day. If anyone asks you, Madam Deputy Speaker, why they cannot shop in a large hypermarket on Christmas day, you can say that it is my fault.

The traditional route for private Members’ Bills then was to get selected in the ballot and then argue the Bill through on a Friday. I remind new Members that in those days, we had the formidable Eric Forth in the Chamber, who was the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. I successfully fought him for a few Fridays, and then we did a deal to get my Bill through. It is an important way for Back-Bench Members to get legislation on to the statute book. That was the traditional route, but we now have a blocking move by the Government. When Members put in for the private Member’s Bill ballot in future, they will have to think about whether the Government will ever give the Bill a money resolution.

Mr Harper: I am listening carefully to the examples of private Members’ Bills given by the right hon. Gentleman; the thing they all had in common was that they did not involve spending large amounts of public money. I suspect that most of them did not require money resolutions, and that is the proper role for private Members’ Bills
Mr Jones: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, because we then get into a situation where we have to ask who defines what the amount of money is. That is the point—it has to be down to the House to decide whether a money resolution is passed.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) quite rightly asked what is stopping the Government laying down a money resolution to be debated on the Floor of the House. I am sure there are Members in the Chamber tonight who know that I can speak and have spoken at length on money resolutions. Why are the Government not bringing forward a money resolution to be debated on the Floor of the House? If it is the will of the House that this Bill should have a money resolution, it should go forward. It should not be for the Executive to decide which Bill gets a money resolution. Otherwise, we should just scrap the current system of private Members’ Bills.

I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who is not in his place. He is wrong in the points he made. It is the convention of the House that we do not vote on estimates, for example, but we could, and we could block them. I would challenge him and ask: if the Government are so confident that they are right, why do they not test the will of the House and bring forward the money resolution for debate on the Floor of the House? We all know the reason: the Government do not have a majority and will not dare do so, for fear that they will lose that vote.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government had the opportunity to kill this Bill by voting against it on Second Reading? That is the normal way in which to kill a Bill. Why did they not do that?

Mr Jones: Therein lies the problem. Clearly, there are a number of Conservative Back Benchers who will not vote for the current Boundary Commission recommendations, which I will get on to in a minute, and the Government are not confident about getting them through. Not tabling a money resolution to the private Member’s Bill is a new blocking technique. They do not want to test the will of the House because of their fragile majority—or rather lack of a majority; I do not think they could have carried the Democratic Unionists at that stage. What are the Government afraid of? They should bring the resolution before the House and let it decide.

In terms of the argument that the Bill will somehow be a waste of £8 million, I am taking no lectures from the Government. I remember the coalition Government flipping and changing over whether we should have cats and traps on aircraft carriers, for example, which cost the taxpayer £100 million. There was the decision to renationalise the east coast main line last week; the rebranding of the trains alone is going to cost £13 million. The argument is complete nonsense. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) summed it up very well when he said that the Government would not be wasting money because what will happen, if they lose on this matter, is that they will pick up the Bill as a way of enacting the new boundaries.

May I turn briefly to the new boundaries? I believe in the equalisation of constituencies, which is fair and a part of our democratic process. It is important to have confidence in that, and to keep the link, which is unique in our system, between individual Members and their constituencies and communities. The gerrymandering that was done by the Cameron Government in reducing the number of MPs to 650 has led to the Boundary Commission—and I do feel sorry for it—being given an impossible task. We only have to look at some of the recommendations that have been put forward for the shape of constituencies, with communities put together that have no connection whatsoever. For example, there is one in the north-east that would win a geography prize and, given its odd shape, would clearly not be out of place in Texas in the United States.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, and I apologise to him. There has been a technical problem with the clock, and the number of minutes apparently left to him is not the number of minutes he has left. He has taken two interventions, so I will add on two minutes of injury time, but I would be very grateful if he did the House the courtesy of finishing at 7.33 pm.

Mr Jones: As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, brevity is my style: I will certainly do what you request.

A fundamental part of our democracy in this country is the link between the constituency and the community, but that has been thrown out completely in this process. I do not blame the Boundary Commission for that; I blame the coalition Government. Let us remember that there was a coalition, and the Liberal Democrats signed up as well.

There has also been the argument that the cost of democracy will somehow be reduced. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) asked how many peers David Cameron created. He created 198 in six years, and I understand that the cost of that is an additional £22 million a year.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jones: Unfortunately, I cannot give way because I do not have the time.

This debate is not about the cost, but about the fact that the Government cannot secure a majority in this House. They do not have a majority among their own Back Benchers to support their legislation, and if they were really thinking about the public purse, they would ditch the Boundary Commission review now, adopt the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, so that we can equalise constituencies and get on with the process, which would actually save, not cost, money.

May I finish by making a point about the Leader of the House, whose job is to uphold and protect our rights as a Chamber? I am sorry, but I do not think she is doing a very good job of that at all. She has found herself on this occasion bowing to the inevitable, with a Government who clearly do not have a majority, but want to get their own way at all costs.

7.33 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who was unusually succinct.
I will concentrate my comments on the question of money resolutions, which is the topic of this Standing Order No. 24 debate. I must say that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) put this very well. The nub of this question is whether the right to initiate public expenditure should sit with the House as a whole or with the Government. By requiring Government consent before a money resolution is tabled, we are in effect saying that it is the prerogative of the Government to initiate public expenditure, not the prerogative of the House as the whole. It is the role of the House as a whole to consent to expenditure, but not to initiate it.

The reason for that is twofold. The first reason why it is important to do it that way is that the Government, in their general duties, have to balance the demands of spending and raising taxes. If the House as a whole seeks to introduce measures that require significant expenditure without at the same time raising the revenue to do so, we quite quickly head towards national bankruptcy. That is why we have a Budget each year in which the Government, with an even hand, balance those things. If we simply allowed the House as a whole to initiate unfunded expenditure, we would rapidly go bust.

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman makes a very compelling case for voting against a money resolution, but does he understand that that is not an argument for not tabling a money resolution?

Chris Philp: Perhaps I should elaborate further on the distinction I was drawing about the power to initiate expenditure. The Government rightly have the power to initiate debates and votes on expenditure. In this case, the Government are choosing—this may change, but at the moment they are choosing—not to do so.

The second reason why it is reasonable for the Government rather than the House as a whole to have the power to initiate significant expenditure is that if the House as a whole took that power on itself, the House as a whole would in effect become the Government or the Executive, and rather than having a system of Cabinet Government, the whole House would in effect become the Cabinet and the established system of Government would fundamentally cease to exist. Although this seems like quite an arcane point, there is in fact a profound constitutional principle underpinning it. The whole role of Parliament would fundamentally alter if we took the step being contemplated.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is in effect saying that a Member who is successful in the private Members’ Bills ballot should go to the Government to see whether they will give it their approval before progressing with the Bill. Is that what we should do?

Chris Philp: No, that is not what we should do. I am specifically referring to the expenditure of significant amounts of money that requires budgetary balance—a discipline Labour Members may well want to reflect on.

The right hon. Member for North Durham listed a number of private Members’ Bills over the years, some of which have been very significant, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean pointed out in an intervention, almost all—in fact, all—of the private Members’ Bills that were listed did not require significant expenditure. The distinction I draw is about initiating expenditure and the balance between the Executive and the legislature.

Mr Kevan Jones: That is fine, but will we then get a situation in which, when someone initiates a private Member’s Bill, we get into a debate not about whether it needs a money resolution, but whether it needs what is deemed to be a significant amount of expenditure? As we all know, what is significant in the eyes of one person is different from what is significant in the eyes of others.

Chris Philp: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that the expenditure in this case—I think it is some £13 million—is insignificant; that money would pay for 300 nurses. If Labour Members are seeking to advance the argument that £13 million of our constituents’ money is insignificant, I think they are sorely mistaken. If that is their attitude, it perhaps explains why the deficit they bequeathed us in 2010 was quite so large.

To move on to the process, the Government are taking quite a sensible view by saying that they will wait and see when it comes to the money resolution for this private Member’s Bill, because we have an active process that is currently running and on which considerable time and money have already been expended. There will be a report to the Government and also to the House in a matter of three or four months, and to have two separate processes cutting across and indeed contradicting each other before the House has reached a decision on the first process strikes me as duplicative and wasteful. It is therefore quite reasonable to wait for three or four months—it is not very long: a matter of a few weeks—before deciding how to proceed.

The House itself will reach a decision about the proposed boundaries with 600 constituencies in the month of October, and having waited seven or eight years we can quite comfortably wait until then. At that point, we will of course have a debate about the Boundary Commission proposals, and the fact that the Government are prepared to wait and see with regard to this private Member’s Bill until then hints at some degree of open-mindedness about the outcome of whether we are equalising at 600 or 650 constituencies. That open-mindedness actually shows respect for the House because the Government are saying that they will listen to the House’s opinion in a few months’ time. There are of course good arguments on both sides—in favour of 600 and in favour of 650. The arguments in favour of 600, of course, relate to reducing the cost of and having a more manageable House, but there are clearly good arguments in favour of 650, not least—

Nick Smith rose—

Chris Philp: I want to conclude, as other Members want to speak.

Not least among the arguments for 650 is the fact that we in this House will have more work to do when powers return from the European Parliament, where they are currently exercised. We will have that debate in due course.
The Government are being pragmatic and sensible by keeping the door open for this private Member's Bill until the House makes its decision known. On the fundamental constitutional principle of who initiates expenditure and whether this House acts as a legislature or as an Executive, I think the Government and the Leader of the House are quite right and she enjoys my enthusiastic and unqualified support.

7.40 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):
I shall keep my comments brief, as I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) needs to respond to this very important debate.

I would like to take at face value the comments made by the Leader of the House about her being a champion for the Chamber. I will not go as far as other Members, but I will say that we have to do far more on the rights of Back-Bench Members to secure new legislation. When I presented my private Member's Bill to reduce the voting age to 16, it was not the money resolution that blocked it. We had 150-plus MPs present to move a closure motion, but unfortunately the previous Bill was deliberately talked out by the Government. That is very difficult, because the Bill that was considered before mine was legitimate and important, and was on a subject that was very sensitive. How could I object to that? But that tactic is deployed regularly on Bills with broad support in order to frustrate the process a bit further on.

If David Cameron was serious about reducing the cost of politics, it cannot be right that the payroll vote, as it stands, is the biggest since 1979. The number of people who are paid or unpaid members of the Government—Ministers or Parliamentary Private Secretaries—is high, at 21% of the House of Commons. If the number of MPs is reduced to 600, nearly a quarter of all members of the Commons will be on the Government payroll, which will reduce even further the ability of this Chamber to be independent, to hold the Government to account in the way that a democracy ought to, and to have good governance in place because of that.

Every Prime Minister has the right to nominate Members to the House of Lords, and every Prime Minister in my memory has exercised that right, but it is hypocritical to say that the decision to reduce the number of MPs by 50 is about reducing the cost of democracy while in the same breath appointing more Members to the House of Lords. If that proposed change goes through, there will be 215 more Members of the House of Lords than of the House of Commons, so the second Chamber would be significantly bigger than the elected Chamber.

I want to say this in defence of MPs—

Nick Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jim McMahon: I am not going to, just because I have only about a minute left.

In defence of MPs, we ought to be very careful not to downgrade the work we do to represent our constituents. It is all right to say in a flippant way that there could be fewer MPs and the public would not even notice, but what I can say is that in my constituency on a Friday and Saturday there are people who need help. I do not just come to Parliament to make laws; I go back to Oldham to give people support and to help them navigate the system of Government Departments. We do our best. If Member support is part of the cost, it cannot be right for the Government to have it in mind to reduce the number of caseworkers or researchers who support parliamentary activity. MPs have to be given the right support to do the job properly.

The truth is what we will really be saving is the money around the edges—MPs' salaries and minor travel and accommodation costs—because the staffing contingent, which is the largest budget, will remain the same. Let us be honest about this: it is about gaming the system, in the way that individual voter registration has gamed the system and in the way that we have seen the House of Lords packed—be honest about it, and at least defend it.

7.44 pm

Afzal Khan: With the leave of the House, I thank all Members for their contributions. It has been a wide debate. My Bill has the unanimous support of the House, and the Government should follow the procedures that they have followed and affirmed until recently; and table a money resolution. If they then want to vote against it, they can, but they need to table the money resolution so that we can have a debate. My Bill covers a vital constitutional issue and this cannot happen in the backrooms of Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the expectation that the Government brings forward a Money resolution relating to a private Member's bill which has received a second reading.
The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill takes forward essential measures to promote fairness in the private lettings market by banning unfair fees charged to tenants, as promised in the Government’s manifesto. It is a Bill that we should all welcome. The Bill will make the market more transparent, yes, but it also has the potential to save tenants—especially young people and families—hundreds of pounds. It caps tenancy deposits, further protecting tenants from high up-front costs when renting a home. It also introduces a lead enforcement authority for the lettings sector to support local authorities in their enforcement activities.

These measures have been informed by consultation with the sector and by the scrutiny of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I am grateful to the members of the Committee for the constructive and positive way in which they have contributed to the Bill. We have accepted the majority of the recommendations, which have helped to improve the final Bill.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State is talking about the benefits of the Bill, and it certainly has some, but it would have an awful lot more if he had listened to the complaints about the setting of the deposit at six weeks rather than four. Can he explain why he has gone for a figure that means that only about 8% of renters will benefit and that many others will see their rents go up as a result?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady has intervened early, and that is a point that I will come on to. I would say that that is a maximum level, but I will deal with the specific issue in my remarks.

I am pleased that the Tenant Fees Bill was introduced to Parliament soon after my appointment. It is the latest step in our work to create a housing market that is fit for the future. I have been greatly encouraged by the broad support for banning unfair fees—something that has come through very clearly in our consultation. We have listened and we are taking action. This Government are making sure that everyone, whether they rent or own their home, has a safe, secure and affordable place to call their own.

I am confident that the Government’s ambitious housebuilding programme will transform the sector in the years to come, but it is also important that we help people now. The Tenant Fees Bill will enable us to do this. It will ensure that tenants will no longer be stung by hidden costs. In the first year alone, we believe this could collectively save tenants as much as £240 million a year.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. Will he explain why the impact assessment did not assess the pass-through effects on tenants? With the reduction in fees and so on, how can we guarantee that the costs will not be passed through into rents for tenants?

James Brokenshire: If the hon. Lady looks at the impact assessment, she will see that it has been calculated as a straight transfer through. I know that there will be a lot to discuss in Committee. It covers that pass through—the costs do not represent increased expenditure by letting agents and landlords, but the value of time spent reading guidance and reconsidering business models is also reflected in the net present value in the impact assessment. The hon. Lady will no doubt want to scrutinise this in further detail as the Bill proceeds through Committee.

The costs include unfair letting fees, with tenants facing bills for hundreds of pounds for simple things, such as reference checks, which on the market are often free, or £30 at most. Our consultation has found that tenants have to pay an average of £137 for a reference check. Then they are hit by fees for drawing up a tenancy agreement, for inventory checks and even for just picking up keys for their property. This, I should underline, is all alongside their deposit and the first month’s rent up front. That is just at the start. There are fees on renewal, and fees when they leave the property. Often people are not just paying the fees once; they are put through the same process every single time they have to move home. These are often young people who would rather put that money towards a home of their own, but they have no control over that. Tenants have no power to negotiate, as agents are appointed by landlords. Some use tenant fees to compensate for artificially low rates for landlords. This is simply not fair and we must now move to protect consumers.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The Bill is greatly welcome, but will the Secretary of State do more to bolster the consumer rights of tenants so that they are able to challenge both the landlord and, in some cases, the estate agent, and to make sure that their rights are secured in law?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that point. He will know that clauses 18 to 20 contain amendments to the Consumer Rights Act 2015, so changes have been put in place in a number of different ways.

The Bill protects tenants from paying unreasonably high deposits. Coming on to the point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), we are capping deposits at six weeks’ rent. I stress that this is an upper limit and not a recommendation. We expect landlords to find an appropriate level on a case-by-case basis and we will provide guidance to that effect. In Scotland, tenancy deposits are capped at eight weeks’ rent. A cap of six weeks’ rent, in our judgment, offers a balance of greater protection to tenants while giving landlords the flexibility to accept higher-risk tenants. It will also give landlords adequate financial security, and we believe that is necessary to maintain investment and supply in the sector.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Secretary of State is capping deposits at six weeks’ rent. Does he not agree with me and many of the voluntary organisations
that have provided evidence and information that it would be right to consider reducing the cap to four weeks?

James Brokenshire: The issue was considered by the Select Committee, and we have considered it carefully. We believe that six weeks’ rent as an upper limit strikes the right balance between providing tenants with greater affordability while ensuring that landlords have adequate financial security for their assets.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Bill. It is crucial that we have a vibrant tenancy sector and that we aid it in every way possible, but the Bill must not deter landlords or agents who are acting well, assiduously and industriously. We must ensure that the Bill increases transparency and the competitiveness of the market, while still having a viable and vibrant market.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Let me be clear: the Bill is not an attack on good agents and landlords. We value the important services that they provide, but it will ensure a fair playing field for reputable agents by making it harder for rogues to operate. Letting agents and landlords who represent good value for money will continue to thrive, while those who rely on charging unfair and unjustifiable fees will have to reconsider their business models. We have also committed to regulation to prevent reputable agents from being undercut or undermined by rogues.

My hon. Friend makes her point very sincerely. The interesting point about some of the experience in Scotland is that the number of letting agents in Scotland, according to Companies House, has increased since 2012, when the ban on tenant fees was clarified there. That demonstrates that innovative and good agents can continue to thrive.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I welcome some of the measures that the Secretary of State is taking. Nobody wants to attack good landlords. We still have bad landlords and that is who the Bill is directed at. There is a problem with commitments that landlords make, then break. I have had cases where they have refused to carry out repairs or said, “Take me to court” and that sort of thing. The Secretary of State and I know that ordinary individuals, mainly young people in rented accommodation, cannot always afford to do that. How does the Bill deal with those sorts of issues?

James Brokenshire: The Bill seeks to address the application of unfair fees by, in essence, banning all of them unless they are then reapplied back by the terms of the Bill itself. This is an important step to provide reassurance and to deal with the rogue practices that the hon. Gentleman highlights. In that context it is important to stress some of the other steps that have already been taken in relation to rogue landlords and the abuses in the sector that need to be tackled. This is a further measure to address them.

Turning to the key provisions of the Bill, which apply to assured shorthold tenancies, tenancies of student accommodation, and licences to occupy, these will ban landlords and their agents from requiring tenants and licensees of privately rented housing in England, and persons acting on their behalf or guaranteeing their rent, to make any payments in connection with a tenancy, with some key exceptions: the rent; a refundable tenancy deposit capped at six weeks’ rent; a refundable holding deposit to reserve a property, capped at one week’s rent; a capped payment for changing a tenancy agreement when requested by the tenant; payments in respect of utilities and council tax; and payments in the event of a default by the tenant, such as replacing a lost key or late rent payment fine, capped at the level of the landlord’s loss.

In the Bill, the term “in connection” with a tenancy refers to any payments required by the landlord or agent throughout a tenancy. This is an important point, as we want to ensure that landlords and agents do not just transfer their fees to another stage of the tenancy, such as exit. The proposed legislation will also prevent tenants from being required to contract the services of a third party.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): There are a lot of references in the Bill to upper limits and caps. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is very much a geographical issue? In London and the south-east, tenants have really suffered from being undercut or undermined by rogues. Tenants can pay anything from £175 to £900 just in fees alone. My local citizens advice bureau in Lewes found that on average tenants are paying, for eight weeks’ deposit, nearly £4,000 in advance. This is a real problem for London and the south-east.

James Brokenshire: We intend to provide guidance on those issues. I do not accept that that would automatically be the situation. It is why we have taken the steps that we have in considering what the right action should be in setting a number of these issues. It is important to recognise that the Bill proposes a number of enforcement measures that offer a strong deterrent to irresponsible agents and landlords, and in doing so protects tenants.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that this is very much a geographical issue? In London and the south-east, tenants have really suffered at the hands of letting agents and their fees. Tenants can pay anything from £175 to £900 just in fees alone. My local citizens advice bureau in Lewes found that on average tenants are paying, for eight weeks’ deposit, nearly £4,000 in advance. This is a real problem for London and the south-east.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend highlights the issues that go to the heart of the Bill—that is why I hope that it will command broad support across the House.

The Bill places a duty on trading standards authorities to enforce the measures it contains. It also makes provision to enable tenants and other relevant people to recover unlawfully charged fees. It prevents landlords from recovering their property, via the section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 procedure, until they have repaid any unlawfully charged fees. A breach of the fees ban will usually be a civil offence, with a financial penalty of £5,000. However, if a further breach is committed within five years this will amount to a criminal offence. In such a case, local authorities will have discretion about whether to prosecute or impose a financial penalty. Guidance on that will be issued. They may impose a financial penalty of up to £30,000 as an alternative to prosecution. Local authorities will be able to retain funds raised through financial penalties, with the money reserved for future local housing enforcement.
Finally, the Bill makes provision for a lead enforcement authority to provide oversight, guidance and support, with the enforcement of requirements on letting agents. This includes the ban on letting fees and related provisions.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In respect of fees charged by letting agents, does the Secretary of State agree that there is something fundamentally wrong when a letting agent takes a fee from both parties in the transaction—the tenant and the landlord? That is just not right.

James Brokenshire: I understand. In many ways, that lies at the heart of the Bill—the way in which, effectively, there can be charges in two different directions. That underlines why these measures are important and why, to take my hon. Friend’s point, they are intended to promote fairness.

The Government will always stand on the side of people who are being ripped off and exploited and support them. We are taking this action to address inequalities in the lettings market and to create a market that is fair for consumers. By banning fees for tenants and capping deposits, we are delivering on our commitment to make renting fairer and more affordable. The Bill will make a real and meaningful difference to millions of tenants right across the country, especially for young people and families, and I commend it to the House.

8 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment and welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) to our housing team. This tenant fees legislation is very welcome. We know that the majority of landlords are good landlords, or strive to be, and understand the expectations upon them before they embark on becoming a landlord. However, a number of rogue landlords and letting agents give the sector a bad name, undermine the good work of quality agents and landlords, and they have squeezed tenants for cash in unfair ways, with disproportionate charges for unjustifiable reasons. It is right that the Government are acting to change this unfair system and Labour welcomes that, but it would be remiss of me to fail to remind the House that we first suggested a move to ban letting fees back in 2013. After five years, it is good that the Government are finally acting on this issue. If we get the Bill right, it will have a positive impact on people’s lives on a day-to-day basis.

The overriding purpose of the legislation is to help to shift the balance of power from unscrupulous agents and landlords towards decent tenants—to make renting fairer, more affordable and more transparent and to give tenants greater clarity and control over what they pay. We will all have heard horror stories of agents or landlords charging people excessive fees to secure properties, or throughout tenancies, imposing additional charges with excessively high administration fees. With fewer social properties available, this places great difficulties on those with low incomes, or those who are renting alone or simply cannot afford thousands of pounds in up-front fees. In an increasingly competitive market, that has led to the UK’s nearly 5 million private renters sometimes feeling that they are an easy target from which to extract unnecessarily large sums of money. That is on top of the £50 billion a year paid in private rents.

As the number of private renters is predicted to rise to 5.6 million people by 2021, we should be aiming for a gold standard of contract of understanding between renters and landlords, or their agents. As it stands, there is an inherent tension between landlords who view their property as an asset or investment and a tenant who sees it as their home. We have to take steps to bring those two positions closer together.

Increasingly there are larger, more professional companies recognising the importance of peoples’ home life and striving to provide properties in high-demand areas. They do not use agents, seek to develop a sense of community and aim to retain tenants for as long as possible and keep rents affordable in line with local incomes—in places such as Argo Apartments—and stand in stark contrast to the enormous billboard I saw from Wentworth Estates, boasting that it could guarantee rents for between one and five years for landlords, would provide three months’ rent in advance and could offer “free evictions”.

Caroline Lucas: Does the hon. Lady agree that another way the Government could follow both Labour and Green party policy would be to tackle extortionate rents? The elephant in the room is the need for some kind of rent controls, including rent caps, because although what is in the Bill is a welcome step forward, until we tackle the size of rent increases, we will not be able to provide the homes for the people who need them.

Melanie Onn: Labour absolutely recognises the—[Interruption.] Before the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) leaps on me—before I am able to make myself clear—Labour absolutely recognises the issue of the amount that people are paying in rent and recognises that there could be restrictions on the percentage of increases in rent, not a rent cap.

The pressure in the housing market is rapidly producing new forms of exploitation. For example, an alternative letting agency-cum-landlord service called Lifestyle Club London markets itself as a membership club. Tenants or members pay an annual fee instead of rent. Club staff are entitled to inspect rooms unannounced at any time and fines can be given for anything even as minor as dirty dishes. This is a fast-moving area. We can see that there are wildly differing practices in the world of private rental and that tenants have had difficulty in getting the treatment that they deserve, which is why groups such as Generation Rent and Marks Out of Tenancy have emerged to give a collective voice to private renters on matters of not only policy but practice.

Although the Bill is satisfactory in many respects, it still provides the opportunity for the continuation of an exploitative approach. For example, clauses 1 and 2 detail the prohibitions on landlords and agents applying fees in many circumstances. The cap of £50 for any of those charges is very welcome, but the explanatory notes go on to say “or reasonable costs incurred if higher”. That is a clear opportunity for a coach and horses to be driven through this otherwise very good Bill. We know that some letting agencies and landlords will push these grey areas, and without directly spelling out what charges are permissible and what “reasonable costs” are, there is undeniably room for incorrect interpretation.
Mr Jim Cunningham: I agree with my hon. Friend that there should be some form of adjudication or regulator, whichever way we want to put that argument. The weakness in the Bill, which is a good Bill by the way, is on enforcement, because as most people know, trading standards departments up and down the country in local authorities are totally underfunded.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and I will come on to trading standards shortly.

There is no definition of what a landlord can include as a loss. If this includes the use of agents and agents opt to charge for their time—to replace a key or make some phone calls—charges may amount to far more than Government ever intended them to. This is one of the issues that we have seen with the scandal around excessive charges to private leaseholders: without a specified cap, there is scope for the unscrupulous to run riot.

Jo Stevens: The Bill is obviously necessary because of the bad behaviour of some landlords and letting agents. Without the measures that my hon. Friend set out, bad behaviour by rogue landlords and letting agents will not be prevented. They will carry on doing it because there is no sanction and no enforcement to stop them.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. There is absolutely no point in this House taking through legislation, as good as it is, if it cannot be enforced because it holds no weight in law.

The inclusion of a one-week refundable holding deposit, on top of a month’s rent and six weeks’ tenant’s deposit, is allegedly designed to minimise instances of tenants securing multiples of properties at the same time before finally settling on their preferred property. There has been very little, if any, evidence that this is a regular practice. Additionally, the Government say that there are a number of exceptions to that deposit having to be refunded, including when the tenant provides false or misleading information. Again, although on the face of it, that is a sensible measure, there are no additional protections for tenants if the incorrect information is not their fault. For example, a reference that does not exactly match a tenant’s claims should not immediately mean that they lose that holding deposit.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Despite the fact that I have been involved in this sector for most of my life, and am still involved, I am very supportive of the Bill and the drive to ban tenant fees. That said, on the hon. Lady’s point about holding deposits and the reference fees that tenants pay to the agent or landlord, does she not think it a reasonable concern that if we do not allow a letting agent or landlord to hold back a reasonable amount for referencing, they might be more likely to pick a better-off tenant than some of the lower-income tenants she is seeking, quite rightly, to protect? There are concerns about the commercial behaviour that could result if what she describes was to happen.

Melanie Onn: The point is that poorer tenants struggle the most. That is why we are trying to make the Bill as good as it can be. It comes back to reasonableness and whether there is sufficient rigour in the proposals to ensure that people are properly protected, and that goes for landlords as well.

The Government must bring back evidence during the remaining stages to convince us that this is a legitimate charge to make, rather than a simple amelioration of losses to agents and landlords. It is notable that the Government have opted to cap deposits at six weeks. The Minister should know that in practice this means all deposits will be six weeks, despite most rents being payable on a monthly basis. Shelter estimates that a six-week cap still means that London renters have to find on average a £1,800 deposit and that outside of London the figure is £1,100. Add to that one month’s rent and a week’s holding deposit, and people are looking at needing £3,750 just to secure a property in London and £2,290 elsewhere. That is a huge amount to save.

Wages are not keeping pace with rents and many people struggle to afford a decent place to live. Most low-paid workers are women. Will they be more disadvantaged by these measures than men, and what about those with disabilities, from black and minority ethnic communities or the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community? The Government have not undertaken a formal equalities assessment of the Bill. Will the Minister explain why and commit to ensuring that an assessment of the proposals is undertaken before the Committee stage? There has been an informal but not a formal process on this matter.

As I said earlier, none of the measures in the Bill will matter without their ability to be enforced. There is direction in the Bill for responsibility to lie with local authorities and their trading standards teams. The Minister will be aware that trading standards teams are currently responsible for checking on age-restricted products, agriculture, animal health and welfare, fair trading, food and hygiene standards, counterfeiting, product safety and weights and measures, and they do this despite having endured a drop in funding from £213 million in 2010 to £124 million in 2016 and a halving of their staffing capability—more in some areas.
The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has previously expressed its concern that the public are being let down in respect of its current areas of responsibility, let alone additional responsibilities—particularly ones that will not pay for themselves through the imposition of fines, which are limited to a maximum of £30,000, whose rules are not enforceable because the drafting provides too much scope for interpretation and for which the Government only plan to provide guidance rather than issue regulation to support tenants and those seeking to enforce the measures in the Bill.

Those in the private rental sector are in desperate need of clear and positive action from the Government to protect their rights. I hope we will see a strengthening of resolve from the Government as the Bill goes forward. They must not miss the opportunity to make a good Bill a great Bill, and I urge them to take this chance to make real changes that could improve this sector of our country’s housing market.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues can see, a number of colleagues want to get in. I would rather not impose a time limit, but if Members could stick to about six minutes, we should get everybody in.

8.13 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I will make just a short contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker. I first drew the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a solicitor at a legal practice that owns an estate agents.

As we know, Second Reading debates are about the general principles of a Bill, and that is where I want to concentrate my speech. My instinct is to be very careful about legislation of this nature, or at least to be suspicious of it—in a healthy way, I would like to think. I believe in free markets. They generally produce better services through competition, higher standards and better value for money for the consumer. The important thing about free markets is that there are lower barriers to entry, which helps to create that competitive environment, and with fewer statutory requirements, it is much easier for individuals to set up businesses and create more choice for the consumer.

Introducing regulation does, therefore, have drawbacks. As we all know, it can distort markets, increase rents and have other unintended consequences. It can reduce competition and therefore increase prices and impose barriers to entry, and it often leads to more interference and yet more regulation. A good example is the legal services market—there is far too much regulation in the provision of legal services. When I served on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee several years ago, we looked at this very issue and concluded that it was not the time for regulation, although the Committee was open-minded about the possibility and thought it something the Government should consider later.

The question, then, is whether the time is right now. Quite clearly, the Government think it is. I, too, recognise that markets are not perfect, and it is right and proper that the Government interfere and regulate where appropriate to help markets, particularly where a section of society is being adversely affected, but the goal must always be to improve matters for the consumer. We should take a bit of a history lesson. When assured shorthold tenancies were first introduced, in the 1980s, they changed the housing market dramatically. We must remember, however, that it was a much smaller market back then, with fewer landlords and fewer tenants seeking private rented accommodation. Interestingly, the legislation was introduced because there had been too much regulation and interference in the private housing market. It was an opportunity to free up the market, encourage landlords into the rented market and improve tenant choice.

I fully accept that the letting market has changed fundamentally and radically since the 1980s. Some 20% of our housing market is now in the private rented sector. In many respects, that was accelerated from about 2008 onwards. It is a very different environment. We now have accidental landlords up and down the country—people who unexpectedly have become landlords—and many more letting agencies. It is a thriving industry in a way it was not in the 1980s, and there is a host of tenants with very different needs looking for comfort in the knowledge that when they deal with letting agents they will be dealt with properly and fairly.

We have to recognise that some letting agencies have been exploiting the deficiencies in the housing market. As everyone does, I acknowledge that the property market has changed significantly. In many respects, the whole issue of property ownership is in need of review, right across the spectrum, including the relationship between social housing and the private rented sector. Interestingly, back in 2015, when Carlisle was hit by floods, the people who were flooded did not turn to the social housing market for accommodation, even though it was available; they turned to the private sector. We should recognise, then, that the private sector has a huge contribution to make to the housing market.

It is generally accepted, however, that the time is also coming to look at the nature of assured shorthold tenancies. They were introduced in the 1980s in a different time. Perhaps that is something that in time the Government will look at. Estate agents are often letting agents as well, and it seems strange that someone could go into an office where one side is regulated but the other is not.

The housing market is hugely significant on so many levels in our country. We have to recognise the importance of property as a source of taxation, that many people aspire to own their own house and get on the housing ladder and that it is also a source of capital for business investment, but also that the lack of housing in the various markets affects individuals and families, as we all know.

I have concluded that we now live in such a different market that I will support the Bill. On balance, it is clearly in the interests of tenants, but it is also in the interests of good landlords and letting agents that act with integrity. I encourage the Government to ensure that the Bill preserves a competitive environment for letting agents—that is vital—and that it be enforced in a pragmatic and sensible way to the benefit of tenants and the market. I plead with the Government to ensure that we end up not with too much regulation but with effective regulation.

I believe that the Bill is the start of a sensible review of our housing market at all its various levels and with all its various requirements. I encourage the Government
to look at all aspects of the property ownership markets and the taxation of property, because I think we are in danger of ending up with piecemeal legislation. The ultimate goal must be a working market that benefits everyone.

8.19 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in the debate. Let me say at the outset that I welcome any moves by the Government to put money back into renters’ pockets. I recognise that the Bill is not wholly relevant to Scotland, but I feel that some comparisons can be made with actions that we have taken there.

As someone who was on a low wage and who rented in the private sector for a number of years, I understand the difficulties faced by people in those circumstances. While the demand for social housing outstrips supply, the need for privately rented accommodation will only increase, and, as we have heard repeatedly this evening, when the demand for private rented accommodation is high, those looking at the market can be put at a financial disadvantage. We need to get to the root of the problem. There are a number of ways in which we could seek to solve it. For instance, we could increase the social housing supply, end the sale of council homes under the right to buy, and give renters the protection that they require. Those are just a few of the ways in which we have been able to mitigate some of the worst impacts in Scotland.

Over the last parliamentary term, the SNP Government invested more than £1.7 billion in affordable housing. We exceeded our target of building 30,000 affordable homes, and by the end of the parliamentary term we had delivered more than 33,000. Only six council homes were completed during Labour’s last term of office in Scotland. We have also taken steps to safeguard social housing for the future by abolishing the right to buy, thus protecting 15,500 homes in the social rented sector. In the current Parliament, we have set the target of building at least 50,000 new affordable homes.

Tenant fees were abolished in Scotland in 2011, and the evidence suggests that those renting property have more money as a result. Renters themselves were no more likely to report a rent increase than those in other parts of the UK. However, protecting renters’ rights extends beyond scrapping tenant fees. If the Government are to make real progress on protecting tenants in their homes, they must go further than the Bill suggests.

The Bill contains a number of loopholes, which I hope the Government will try to address. They have amended the definition of a default fee, providing that it should not exceed the loss suffered by the landlord, and have said that they plan to issue guidance on the type and reasonableness of fees. However, more protections are needed to limit what can be charged for and ensure that any loss is reasonable, and there must be a definition of “reasonable”. Agents have already admitted in evidence to the Select Committee that they will try to charge disproportionate default fees to make up for lost revenue.

There is currently a lack of clarity about the circumstances in which landlords or agents can or cannot retain a holding deposit. A holding deposit can be retained if a tenant has provided false or misleading information that materially affects his or her ability to rent a property, but it is unclear what will be considered false or misleading information, and the rule is therefore open to abuse.

I welcome the Government’s intention, but more must be done in the Bill to protect renters, and more must be done generally to protect those in the private rented sector.

8.23 pm

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate. Like my hon. Friends the Members for Carlisle (John Stevenson) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), I am reminded of the work that we did in the Select Committee under the able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). It is also a great pleasure to see him in the Chamber this evening.

In its 2013 report, our Committee recognised and expressed concern about the imbalance between tenants and landlords and their agents. I support the Bill because it goes some way towards creating a balance between the parties involved in the taking up of a residential property tenancy. Back in 2013, we drew attention to the sharp practice and abuses perpetrated by some letting agents, and recommended that agents be subject to the same controls as their counterparts in the sales sector. Most residential property agents are involved in both sales and lettings, and in each instance the property involved will be someone’s home. It makes no sense for only one of those tenures to be covered by regulation. The Bill does not provide for the regulation of letting agents, and I am happy for that to come later, but it takes a step towards it in requiring them to behave in a more professional manner.

According to evidence given to the Committee, letting agents often failed to give renters up-front information about fees. I was therefore happy with our recommendation for a code of practice requiring agents to publish a full breakdown of their fees, which was introduced in the Consumer Rights Act 2015. The Bill goes further by banning nearly all up-front fees for tenants. That is welcome, and was a manifesto commitment from my party in the 2017 general election. It strikes me as wrong in principle for an agent to attempt to take a fee from, or make a charge to, both parties in a transaction. When it comes to the relationship between landlord and tenant, the letting agent is clearly acting on behalf of the landlord, with the landlord’s interests paramount. If up-front fees are banned, there can be no danger that unscrupulous agents will charge both parties.

A letting agent in my constituency has contacted me, arguing that through the national approved letting scheme the sector has reformed itself and the Bill is unnecessary, but it also suggests that there should be “proper comprehensive regulation of all lettings and management agents”, and states that agents currently provide services for both landlords and tenants, which I rather dispute. According to this agent, those services include offering tenants a choice of views at the convenience of existing and incoming tenants, referencing checks on tenants and their guarantors, and even explaining tenancy agreements.

I accept that some of that work supports tenants, but I see no reason why the tenants should pay for it. I believe that when a letting agents engages in those activities,
he does so on behalf of the landlord, who—rightly and appropriately—pays him a fee for doing so. The agent is then remunerated for that work, and, in most instances, goes on to earn a regular income through the management charges involved in the collection of rent.

The national approved letting scheme suggests that agency-trained staff are trained to have the right level of knowledge to ensure that neither the landlord nor the tenant is disadvantaged. It fears that the abolition of fees will cause letting agencies to reduce staff levels and training budgets. I am not at all convinced by that. Before coming to the House, I employed a team of salespeople serving the catering trade, but I never expected the customers of my business to pay for the training of my staff. The NALS also suggests that rents may rise. I think that that neglects the principal feature of any market, which is that the prices set are based on supply and demand.

We know that the private rented sector has increased massively. In 2008 it made up 10% of all households. By the time we produced our 2013 report, it made up 18% of households, with 4 million households renting. Today, 21% of the market consists of the private rented sector, with 4.7 million households renting. That is the highest level for 30 years. More and more people are affected, and it is entirely right that the Government are taking action to protect them.

8.28 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I own one property which I let out.

The Select Committee carried out pre-legislative scrutiny, and we unanimously warmly welcomed the principle behind this Bill. The principle we accepted was that the contract is between a landlord and a letting agent, and therefore it is up to the landlord to pay the cost of that contract; that seems a very simple principle to adopt. Evidence was given to the Select Committee that considerable savings to tenants could materialise from this; there was talk about average fees charged to tenants of £100 or £200, but Shelter gave evidence that they could be as high as £300 or £400 in some cases, so there are significant savings for tenants here.

There could in some circumstances be an increase in rents to compensate, and that would be legitimate if done properly from the beginning, but again there was evidence that if tenants were asked to pay a bit more each month, rather than a lump sum fee, that would help them in most cases. Organisations representing tenants generally accepted that point.

The Select Committee looked at the Bill and recognised that the good letting agents would accept it and willingly comply. The Bill tries to deal with those letting agents that would try to find loopholes to get around the provisions. We concentrated to a degree on default fees and how letting agents might seek to recover money in that way at the end of a tenancy. These were the sorts of matters we considered and made recommendations on.

I will not go into all the areas where the Government accepted our recommendations, because there is quite a long list of them, but I think the Minister will accept that the Bill is better for the consideration of the Select Committee and its suggestions. For example, section 21 notices cannot be used where the letting agent has kept outstanding prohibitive fees; that was a Committee suggestion. I am however disappointed that the Government did not accept our suggestion that we should have a clause about retaliatory evictions not being allowed as a result of this legislation. Indeed, the Committee looked at the issue of retaliatory evictions in our recent report on the private rented sector in general, and I think the Government must now review the legislation on retaliatory evictions and the Deregulation Act 2015, as it is not working at present. The Government are going to come back with some more information on how many cases there have been where a retaliatory eviction has been stopped because of the current legislation. This point might also apply to the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck); I can see retaliatory evictions coming into that as well. Therefore, we must extend the scope not just in terms of this legislation, but in terms of other Bills as well.

We did a lot of work on default fees. We need some specific figures on this, and my understanding is that the Government have generally accepted that default fees should only be related to the cost incurred by the landlord, and that more information will be provided in the guidance the Government issue. The problem is that the guidance will not be available to this House as the Select Committee suggested; it will not be available until consideration in the House of Lords. We are therefore taking the Government’s word that they are going to toughen the default fees powers without seeing that in practice.

Another important issue is enforcement. The Government have accepted the principle of the Select Committee suggestion that a tenant charged prohibitive fees should be able to recover them from the first-tier tribunal. That is the best place to go because it is fairly user-friendly for tenants, although they will often still need some help from advice services or local authorities. The problem is that if a letting agent does not agree to the first-tier tribunal decision the tenant has to go to the county court for enforcement, and that is not a user-friendly place, which might deter tenants from going. We have suggested that the first-tier tribunal might be given powers of enforcement or at least might have to take the case on behalf of the tenant to the county court if its decision is not being complied with. Will the Government look at that? It would also be nice to have a bit more information about their idea of a housing court reform and generally having one place where tenants can go for a whole range of housing issues. That is a good suggestion, but we have not seen any details so far; it would be good if the Government were to come back with some.

On local authority enforcement, we suggested that paying the costs the local authority will incur through civil penalties was not sufficient and that local authorities need extra funding from Government. They have accepted that in principle, but have committed only to doing that
for the first year that the scheme is in effect and have not given any idea of the amount of money. We will need to look at that in more detail.

Finally, we talked about the size of security deposits. We heard conflicting evidence: organisations representing tenants wanted deposits equivalent to four weeks’ rent; landlords and letting agents wanted six weeks. Both made compelling cases, so the Committee suggested five weeks. We also heard some interesting ideas about alternatives to security deposits. We were not convinced that any had been sufficiently thought through to recommend them, but we felt that many of them needed further thought. Will Ministers therefore commit to carrying out a review of the various alternatives to security deposits and report back to the House in due course?

8.35 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). For part of his absence, I had to chair the Committee as we carried out some of the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and agreed the final report that the Committee published. I am pleased that the Government have seen fit to adopt many of our recommendations, which were agreed on an unanimous all-party basis. This is one of the areas that the Government should learn from, across the Departments. Submitting draft Bills to Select Committees and asking them to carry out pre-legislative scrutiny improves the legislation before it comes before the House, and many other Departments could learn from this and use the same method to improve their legislation. I should also like to draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, in that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I have a small portfolio of properties that are rented out.

A key area is the need to strike a balance between landlords and tenants and the agents that they utilise between them. I agree with other Members that it cannot be right for an agent to work for both the landlord and the tenant, and for fees to be charged in both directions. The principle has to be that the letting agent acts on behalf of the landlord and that the landlord therefore pays the costs of the agent. Tenants should not be charged for the purposes of identifying a tenancy. As we in this country increase our dependency on the private rented sector, this is becoming an ever greater problem and it needs to be addressed.

I warmly welcome the Government’s decision to bring forward this legislation, and I am delighted that they have accepted so many of the Committee’s recommendations. However, I want to deal with some of the recommendations that they did not accept, as they are the ones that form the nub of the debate. First, I should like to be just a bit critical about the process of deciding whether a deposit should be based on four, five or six weeks’ rent. Clearly, landlords would like as large a deposit as possible and tenants would like to pay as little as possible. Our concern over limiting the deposit to four weeks’ rent was that most tenancies involve paying rent monthly and that at the end of a tenancy, the tenant might simply skip without paying the last month’s rent. At that point, the landlord would have to enforce and retain the deposit. Similarly, we felt that six weeks would be too long, and that it would be a barrier to many tenants seeking to rent. We therefore struck a balance and recommended five weeks, on the basis that both parties would have something to lose if the deposit had to be relied upon. That is why we arrived at that compromise arrangement, and I am disappointed that the Government did not accept our strong arguments in favour of that compromise. I believe that once a maximum figure is set, it is almost inevitable that all landlords and letting agents will go straight to that maximum level. That has a severe impact and would be an unfair charge for people on relatively low incomes.

The Government have partly accepted the Select Committee’s position on whether fees such as holding deposits can be considered reasonable. If someone goes into a letting agency wanting a tenancy, appropriate fees for reference checks, which are of the order of £20 to £50, are reasonable costs for them to incur, but it is unreasonable for the landlord to pay if someone fails a reference check. The Committee also recommended that if a prospective tenant gives deliberately misleading information, they should lose the holding deposit, which should be retained by the landlord. That suggestion has not been in accepted in full by the Government, and it needs to be considered in detail again.

Another of the Committee’s concerns was that if the first month’s rent is artificially high and then the rent decreases over time, that hidden fee is unfair on the tenant. However, we want it recognised that rents can go down as well as up. The Bill essentially presumes that the cost of a tenancy will always increase and that the rent will increase when a tenancy is renewed. However, the market could determine that rents will come down, particularly over the course of a longer tenancy.

I completely agree with what the Chair of the Select Committee had to say about retaliatory evictions, and we must review the whole process in law. We cannot necessarily do all that in this legislation, but the position could be corrected through provisions in this Bill. Tenants must feel able to complain to trading standards, the housing court or whatever organisation we choose, without running the risk of being evicted. Such evictions cannot be right, and we must draw a firm line under them.

In conclusion, I agree with the current draft of the Bill, but there are some changes that would improve the legislation for all concerned and strike a much better balance between tenants and landlords.

8.42 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). Some Members may be wondering why I, a Welsh Member, am speaking in this debate, because housing is devolved to the National Assembly for Wales, and the Welsh
Government will be bringing their own Bill before the Assembly this year to ban letting fees in the private rented sector. The Welsh Government consulted widely and the consultation’s findings have added to the ample evidence, a lot of which we have heard this evening, that action is needed to address the fees currently charged to tenants.

To highlight a few of the consultation’s findings, 56% of all respondents agreed with an outright ban on unnecessary fees, 62% of tenants said that fees had affected their ability to move into a rented property, 86% said that fees had affected their decision to use a letting agency and, astonishingly, 61% of landlords did not know what their tenants were being charged by their letting agent. I doubt that the experiences of tenants in Wales differ greatly from those in England, so I welcome the Welsh Bill and am pleased that introductory fees will be banned—hopefully throughout the UK.

My constituency has the fifth-highest proportion of privately rented accommodation of any constituency. That is largely, although not exclusively, because it has the third-highest proportion of full-time students of any constituency. Nearly 37% of my constituents live in private rented homes, and much of that number is made up of families. Like many Members, I see constituents in my advice surgery every single week who are living in expensive, cramped accommodation and for whom fees are a constant worry. Such fees are yet another worry to add to insecure employment, low pay, cuts to social security and housing benefits, a publicly funded legal advice desert—when rent arrears get to the point where eviction is imminent, no help is available—and, obviously, eye-watering levels of student debt. Banning letting agency and landlord fees is very welcome. It is a cash cow that has gone on for too long. Some agents are using it as a scam, and it needs to stop.

Other Members with university constituencies will no doubt recognise the picture I am about to paint. Some of the larger streets in my constituency are almost entirely made up of family homes that have been converted into student lets—streets of about 200 properties, each with eight or more students living in it. When I go down those streets and knock on doors to speak to constituents, I add up in my head the total paid every single year in letting agency fees by those residents. On one street in the Cathays ward of my constituency each resident will pay, on average, £200 in letting agency fees. Between them, on that one street, letting agencies are making a minimum of £320,000 every single year. Never mind Ponzi schemes or payment protection insurance scandals, this is a scandal that has lined the pockets of letting agents, some of whom are parasitic, greedy and unscrupulous, and it has gone on for far too long.

As we have heard, these fees, like so many other things, are based on an imbalance of power. Student tenants and low-income families have no power in this relationship. This is what one constituent wrote to me, having had a dreadful experience with a Cardiff letting agency:

“They are LEECHING people for all that they can, and there is nothing to stop them. They are brazen. They know they’re screwing you over, and they know that you know that they’re screwing you over, and THEY DON’T CARE. Because there are no consequences and they hold all the power.”

My experience of representing constituents living in the private rented sector is that the fees charged are almost always completely arbitrary and unjustifiable.

Here is another view from a constituent:

“Students and low earners are bled dry by these lizards, to the tune of hundreds of pounds a year all to live in rotting accommodation which can be dangerous to live in.”

As another example, one student said to me:

“In the small print of our contract it said the letting agency will take 65 pounds from each of us in our student house for ‘professional cleaning’...regardless of the condition the house is left in.” So I was then quite annoyed to find they hadn’t bothered with this ‘professional cleaning’ for us when we moved in. The kitchen was leaking and rotting. A ceiling collapsed within a week due to an upstairs leak. The bathrooms reeked and were mouldy. A microwave nearly caught fire and...exploded but we were told” by the letting agency that “it wasn’t their problem.”

The truth is that many of these fees are completely arbitrary. They mean nothing. At most, they constitute a few minutes of basic administration using tenancy agreement templates and the ability to cut and paste, yet at the moment agencies and landlords can just name their price, so I welcome the Bill.

This racket needs to end, all of it, and fast.

8.48 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am an “accidental landlord”, to use that excellent term. I think 123 MPs are also landlords, so there should be a wealth of knowledge in the Chamber.

I wanted to speak in this debate because I am mindful of the Prime Minister’s speech on 13 July 2016, in which she said her intention is to reach out to ordinary working-class families. As the product of an ordinary working-class family, I am keen for her to do that. I represent the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich, and the average property price in my constituency is only £127,000 and the average income is £25,000 a year, so clearly my constituents are the epitome of hard-working people.

From my perspective, it is therefore incredibly important that this Government do everything they can to protect people who are required to rent because they are not in a position to buy. Clearly, this Government’s aspiration would be for all those people who want to buy to have the opportunity to do so, but we heard the figures earlier and that is not the current reality of this country. We have an ever-increasing rental market. People are forced into a situation where they have to rent because their family is growing or they need to leave home, so it is incredibly important that they are protected.

This is not the good thing about this Bill; it is not just that this is a Conservative party policy. We have others and it is great that we have done things such as increasing the minimum wage and increasing the level above which people need to pay tax. People looking in from the outside this evening will be seeing Parliament say this is the right thing to do. One of the greatest things for me, having been an MP for less than a year, is to come to this Chamber and hear people on both sides say positive things about a particular idea around which we can all coalesce. It was excellent to hear from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and there has been great involvement from the Select Committee; there has been deliberation from people who are very knowledgeable...
on these topics and the Government have responded accordingly. I also appreciate, from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), that perhaps in some ways the Bill has not gone quite as far as some would like. It is a work in progress, but from my point of view the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) sums up what my constituents would be thinking: is it fair that the fee for sourcing a property is paid by both the landlord and the tenant? I do not think so and I do not think the people in this Chamber think so either.

8.51 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). Like him, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as my partner and I rent out properties, although we are also private sector tenants.

I wish to congratulate the Government on introducing this Bill. I was proud to be elected last year on a manifesto to increase rights for tenants, although any Bill should protect the role of good and ethical landlords too. Unfortunately, rogue letting agents have for too many years been allowed to profit from insecure tenancies, with some charging renewal fees every six months. Nearly all charge administration and referencing fees, and huge deposits, which are completely out of reach for low-income families.

I support the broad aims of this Bill, but I would like to draw the Government’s attention to one aspect that continues to leave tenants vulnerable to unfair fees. I have particular concern with schedule 1(4), which reserves the right for landlords and letting agents to charge tenants who are forced to default on their tenancy agreements. I believe people who rent through the private sector could be better supported by this part of the Bill. I understand that some agents and landlords currently charge a full month’s rent for tenants to be granted an early release, then every month’s rent and utilities while a new tenant is found. There are genuine instances where tenants are forced to default on tenancy agreements, which they entered into in good faith, through absolutely no fault of their own: for someone living in the private rented sector who is made redundant from their job, benefits might not cover the rent, and any delays in receiving benefits will leave them in rent arrears. Someone might have had a family bereavement and might need to move to another part of the country or of the world. Someone might have a mental health crisis and need to be admitted to hospital. Someone might be off work with a serious injury and not receive sick pay, or they might need to flee domestic violence. Many letting agents and landlords are unforgiving in such circumstances and trap tenants in situations that they need to escape.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is outlining extreme circumstances for tenants who rent properties. Does he agree that those people probably need legal advice, but do not have access to it when they need it most? Does he feel that the Government should look into legal advice for people who rent accommodation, then find themselves in difficulty?

Dr Williams: I would certainly like the Government to look at what advice and support is offered to people who find themselves in extremis.

Landlords’ loss of earnings do not compare to the trauma faced by tenants in a situation in which they just cannot pay the rent. Some such situations call for compassion. Let us remember that landlords have the right to increase their tenants’ rents as much as they want and can evict a tenant with two months’ notice without loss of earnings, but a tenant cannot leave a tenancy early in extremis. Why should landlords have the flexibility when the tenants do not? Surely, the Government must think more about the protection for tenants in such situations.

Many more children now live in the private rented sector than 10 or 20 years ago. With growing child poverty, any potential for charging households fees beyond the monthly rent and security deposit can be an absolutely debilitating blow to families on the breadline. I urge the Government to look at the Mind report, “Brick by brick: A review of mental health and housing”, which makes for particularly concerning reading. Published in November last year, it finds that the instability of the private rented sector is bad for children’s social, emotional and mental health. As a GP, I see the effect of that instability every week. Some 28% of all children in the north-east live in poverty, and more than two thirds of them are from working households in which one or two parents work full time. Nearly half of working-age people in poverty spend more than one third of their income on housing costs.

There is a strong case for the Government to strengthen the Bill further. Unaffordable housing affects a family’s ability to pay for essentials. From school uniforms to energy bills, to healthy and nutritious meals, families should not have to sacrifice the basics to keep a roof over their head. A healthy and stable home can support healthier children too. I urge the Minister to go away and look closely at schedule 1(4) and to protect people who have to default on tenancy agreements through no fault of their own. Let us think of someone who has lost their job, had a family bereavement or mental health crisis, is off work without sick pay or is fleeing domestic violence; the Bill should grant to tenants in such circumstances more financial protection from any charges from letting agents or landlords. I urge the Government to look into these issues more carefully.

8.57 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): On 3 May 2016, I led an Adjournment debate in which I called for a cap on letting agents’ fees, because they were becoming such a big issue in my constituency. I therefore welcome the Bill, which goes even further.

This issue particularly affects London and the south-east. In my constituency, rent for an average property is close to £2,000 a month. I have worked closely with the citizens advice bureau in Lewes, and it has done a lot of work on this issue. It highlighted how letting agents fees in one of the four towns in my constituency can range from £175 to £922. Coupled with an eight-week deposit, which is standard in Lewes, that can leave tenants paying anything from £3,332 to £3,779. It is just not affordable for someone on the average wage. I was therefore pleased to see in schedule 1 that the deposit is going to be limited to six weeks.

I have two key concerns. The first is about the variety of fees listed in schedule 1. Although the Bill covers holding payments and deposits, several fees that letting
agents have introduced will get around the legislation. Citizens advice in Lewes found that people can be charged around £450 to add a second tenant to a property. A reference check can cost £100, as can general admin. An “express move”—to move within 10 days—can cost around £200, and it can cost another £200 to keep a pet in a property. If a tenant moves out and someone takes over the lease, that costs £300 on average. Some Members have already mentioned the six-month tenancy. Tenants often want a longer lease, to which they are legally entitled, but are not allowed to contact the landlord to negotiate one, because it is in the letting agents’ interest to keep tenants on a rolling six-month tenancy, paying around £150 to £350 every time they renew their lease.

My other concern is enforcement and schedule 3. It is a legal requirement for letting agents to advertise their fees, but it just does not happen and is not enforced. Citizens advice looked at 23 letting agents in Lewes and Seaford. Only one currently advertises its fees. We have legislation and it is not being enforced. I am not clear from schedule 3 who is responsible for the enforcement of the legislation and what happens if they do not do it. I welcome the Bill, but I have those two concerns—the variety of fees not covered, and enforcement to ensure that the Bill works properly for tenants.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to speak on Second Reading and to discuss an issue that is relevant at both national and local level. It is also my pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield).

I welcome the Bill, which has long been delayed—the issue was raised by Labour in 2013 and adopted in our 2015 manifesto. Rising house prices in my constituency mean that the rental market is growing rapidly. Since 2009, median house prices in Reading East have risen spectacularly by 175%, from £197,000 to £344,000. Increasing numbers of young families as well as single people are entering the rental market.

Some renters are satisfied with their properties, but in my experience far too many find themselves footing bills for housing that is in poor condition, or for tenancies without any long-term certainty. Nationally, 1.6 million families with children are renting privately, with their long-term plans depending on the reliability of landlords who can evict them with one month’s notice. Meanwhile, letting fees, burglarising rents, and high deposits present an affordability challenge for tenants. It is therefore in the vital interests of all my constituents that the rental market be maintained as affordable, transparent and accessible. I welcome the Bill as a first step towards establishing that fair and reliable rental market.

The Bill will have a positive impact in abolishing up-front fees to enhance clarity and control for tenants. Letting-agency fees restrict the mobility of renters, thereby removing one of the prime incentives of renting a property. On average, tenants pay £272 per person in fees with each move, on top of rent in advance and deposits. Alarmingly, one in seven tenants are charged more than £500 to enter rented accommodation. Over the past five years, renters have racked up a staggering bill of £678 million in agency fees. Moreover, there is a lack of consistency in setting those costs. Research by Shelter has found broad variations across letting agents—reference-check fees range from £30 to £220, and tenancy renewals cost between £35 and £150. I welcome the premise of the Bill—the measure was initially promised in the 2015 Labour manifesto—but I note that both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have previously voted against a motion abolishing letting fees. I am delighted that the Government have decided to change their mind.

Default fees are chargeable if an agent or landlord incurs costs due to a tenant’s actions. They have been described by agents as a back-door route to reclaiming lost income. Agents have admitted openly to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that they will charge disproportionate default fees to make up for loss of revenue, which is an extraordinary admission from the industry about its intentions to exploit loopholes in the Bill. I am concerned that there will be cases of a brush coming with an associated charge of £45, or of £130 being charged for a missing TV remote. These default fees are set at the discretion of the agent or landlord, and there is no cap in the Bill on the cost to tenants. There is an urgent need to strengthen this legislation to provide limits on what can be charged for and to ensure that any charge made is reasonable. If relevant additions are made to the Bill to resolve this flaw, the legislation’s good intentions will be preserved.

The second aspect of the Bill that I would like to discuss concerns tenancy deposits. Although I am glad that the Government have decided to issue a cap on tenancy deposits, I am disappointed that the Select Committee's recommendation to cap deposits at five weeks’ rent has been rejected, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned. The Government have opted for a six-week cap, which means that renters in the south-east of England will still have to find an average of £1,800 to place a deposit. This is at a time when the majority of landlords already take deposits for six weeks or less. As such, the Bill will not change the realities of access to housing for renters, particularly in an area such as mine.

Thirdly, I voice my support for robust enforcement. I am glad that tenants will be given access to a first-tier tribunal to enforce the regulation, and I am pleased to see penalties being put in place for breaches of the rules. However, sufficient funding must be released to allow for the enforcement of the ban on letting agent fees. Without proper resourcing, the measures in the Bill are likely to fall short.

In general, the Bill has the potential to make significant savings for tenants in—and enhance the transparency of—the private rental sector. I am pleased that the Government have listened to calls to make private renting fairer and more affordable. In fact, as I mentioned, the Labour party has been campaigning for these measures for a long time. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) first recommended them in the Letting Agents (Competition, Choice and Standards) Bill in 2013. The Bill requires further scrutiny in several important areas—most obviously, the provisions on default fees. I ask the Government to provide further protections against the exploitation of tenants in this regard.
With proper amendments, the Bill can present a good first step towards balancing the rental market. I urge the Government to listen to these points.

9.6 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Although it is true that some renters pay many hundreds of pounds in fees to letting agents, I want to point out that the solution proposed by the Government may merely shift the cost of the burden, not to landlords and lettings agents, but back to tenants in a different way. Banning letting agency fees means that the money will have to come from somewhere else, at least as far as legitimate services from respectable letting agents are concerned. Landlords may well be forced to, or at least will, increase rents across the tenancy to cover the costs anyway.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that however appropriate this legislation is—and it is appropriate—it is at least in part because of the unscrupulous actions of some letting agents, and not all letting agents should be tarred with the same brush? CGT Lettings and Morgan Associates in my constituency do a good job by their tenants and can be expected to continue to do so.

Andrew Lewer: I entirely agree.

These new rules are quite complex and there will be a bureaucratic cost to councils, letting agents, landlords and therefore tenants. The rules trigger the new burdens doctrine, and I hope that this will be accounted for in the legislation. I still think that a simple rule allowing letting agents to impose a maximum fee of 100% or 150% of monthly rent might have solved this more straightforwardly, as long as there were additional safeguards for those receiving housing-related benefits and others.

As I said last week on housing and, before that, on the energy price cap, I am a critical friend and a supporter, rather than a member, of this Conservative Government. Although I accept the need to intervene at times to ensure that fairness is maintained in the market, we also have a strong commitment to providing more houses and making people’s lives easier. The focus needs to be the key objective of having new homes in which the private rented sector will have a role, rather than just the “ban and regulate” type of legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) have just said, let us remember that there are hard-working people in the sector. We should not draft legislation purely to punish those who behave unscrupulously at the expense of the far more numerous examples in the former category.

I would like to acknowledge the work of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, on which I sit. Over the past few months, it has held evidence sessions with stakeholders and done significant work to improve this Bill so as to avoid more costly and inefficient enforcement. Indeed, that work has been sufficient, notwithstanding my reservations, to secure my support in the Lobby, because there is a problem to be tackled, even if this proposal has some Jim Hacker in it as well as some King Solomon.

9.9 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The Liberal Democrats have long fought for renters’ rights. The Bill is in many ways the result of the hard work of my colleagues in the other place, who have campaigned tirelessly for a ban on letting fees and for private rented sector reform. I am therefore pleased that the Government have listened and will make the sector fairer for my constituents in Bath and people across the country. However, the Government could be much more ambitious. The Bill introduces a ban on letting fees, but currently does not include provision for local government to enforce fines if the ban is breached. What is proposed is a self-financing system, and that often does not work in practice. Equally, we must ensure that the Bill covers all fees. We cannot permit letting agencies to attempt to bring in fees under an alias or to exploit the default fees loophole, as a couple of Members have already pointed out. We need more information from Government to understand how this issue is being addressed.

Many landlords are not badly intentioned, but we must do more to stop those who abuse the system. There must be compulsory registration for landlords. There must also be public access to the Government’s database of rogue landlords, and those landlords should not be able to obtain a licence for houses in multiple occupation. There should be support for longer tenancies; I completely agree with the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). We should have Government-backed loans to help people to afford a tenancy deposit. By tackling rogue landlords and supporting those struggling to afford a deposit, we would be reducing the key factor behind the rise in homelessness.

The housing crisis is denying young and vulnerable people in my constituency access to a place to call their own. The Bill is a step in the right direction. I am pleased that a practice that was a nice earner for some but an injustice to the young and most vulnerable people will now end. However, I urge the Government to be far more ambitious if we are truly going to make a difference to renters.

9.12 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to join this happy debate with a lot of consensus on both sides of the House. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who reminded us that success has many parents and that that is a happier position to be in than the orphan without any parents.

Much has already been said, so I just want to add two or three thoughts. Last year, I became, with my wife, an amateur landlord. As this Bill took shape, I spoke to constituents who were tenants, agents and landlords, and I looked it in the light of our own experience. I quickly came to the conclusion that the market was not acting as effectively as it should, fundamentally because tenants are not equal partners in the negotiations and lots of family landlords inevitably devolve decision making to agents. As both the current and previous Secretaries of State have said, and as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), said today, a small—I repeat, small—number of rogue agents have spoiled the situation. As the supply-and-demand equation has altered, so, in turn, tenants have become more squeezed.

Fundamentally, the role of agents in this process has changed. They are evolving quite radically from being an intermediary in an analogue age to a landlords’
compliance department in a digital age. Today, their fundamental role, which is very important, is to keep landlords and themselves out of trouble—indeed, even out of jail. The reason for this is not least the complexity of the law. Regulations need to be enforced. Most amateur landlords need high-quality agents to ensure, for example, that smoke detectors and fire exits work, that boilers are checked and that insurance is adequate. There is much more besides all the important environmental health provisions that councils are responsible for ensuring do not get breached. I believe that the role of agents therefore is to focus on keeping landlords within the law and providing a good service to tenants. A commission agent is fundamentally different from a compliance department.

I welcome the Bill and everything that Ministers have announced. I note one or two caveats from colleagues. I think that the fundamental goal of saving some £240 million a year in unnecessary fees will be welcomed across the country. The compromise on capping security deposits at six weeks’ rent—it is eight weeks in Scotland—seems sensible, but no doubt there will be further debate on whether it should be five or six weeks.

The Bill will not solve all the problems—the supply of housing is still too small and the prices are still too high for many tenants—but it is a chance for agents to adapt their business model in the way I have suggested, for landlords to get their properties in order and for tenants to help keep landlords straight. Because rents have risen, there is a risk of poor and even dangerous homes being rented by landlords who are cutting corners to tenants who are trying to cut costs. I urge Ministers to look at how they can work with local authorities to ensure that that risk is not increased and that local authorities seize the opportunity to levy fines where they are needed and to provide the resources for their housing departments to keep housing of the quality that we, and above all tenants, deserve.

9.16 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I presented a petition to the House on behalf of my constituents back in June 2016, calling on the Government to take action to curb letting agent fees. In responding to the petition, the Government gave no indication that they were considering any action on fees other than requiring letting agents to publish a full tariff of their fees. That response was very disappointing.

The publication of tariffs in my constituency has simply confirmed what private renters have always known: that fees are enormously variable and that in many cases a combination of fees, holding deposit and tenancy deposit can run into hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds each time a tenant moves. Letting agent fees are no small matter financially, whether someone is trying to save for a deposit to buy their own home or simply trying to keep their head above water and make ends meet. The instability that many private renters face means that they are not only paying high fees, but can be forced to pay them every six to 12 months, so they face the utterly dispiriting experience of seeing what little savings they manage to accumulate being wiped out again and again each time a tenancy comes to an end.

Fees, combined with spiralling rents, are one of the reasons why many renters cannot afford to buy. They are also one of the reasons why many of my constituents who are in the greatest housing need and on long waiting lists for genuinely affordable social housing increasingly fear the private rented sector, if they are able to access it at all. So I welcome the Government’s change of heart on letting agent fees. I welcome the adoption of a Labour policy, and I welcome the Bill.

The Bill seeks to iron out a significant confusion in the letting agency market, which is the question of who the client is. Since landlords procure the services of letting agents and have a choice about which letting agent to choose, and letting agents provide a service to landlords in finding them tenants, the landlord is the client. Tenants do not have a choice about which letting agent to go to in order to access the type of home they require. They cannot decide that they like a particular property but would prefer to rent it via a different agent. As such, they are not the client. Any services the letting agent provides that involve the tenant, such as obtaining references and credit checks, are simply part of the process of securing that tenant for the landlord who is their client. It is therefore not fair or reasonable for two different parties in a letting transaction to be charged for the provision of services. No other part of the estate agency industry operates in that way, and there is no justification for it to continue.

While I welcome the Bill, there are some important ways in which it can and must be improved. The first and most significant relates to default fees. The Bill allows for default fees to be charged by landlords and agents of tenants but does not specify any parameters for that. Great concern has been expressed by many witnesses to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s pre-legislative scrutiny inquiry on the Bill and others that the provisions relating to default fees are simply a loophole that will allow arbitrary sums to be claimed from tenants by the back door.

Although default fees have to be specified in the tenancy agreement, there is in practice no way for a tenant to identify and challenge unfair fees at the point at which a new tenancy begins—and by the time they are being charged, it is too late. Letting agents’ representatives admitted in evidence to the Select Committee that they would try to charge disproportionate default fees to make up for a reduction in other fees. This would be completely unacceptable, and while I welcome the Government’s intention to provide further clarification, it is vital that this is absolutely watertight if the Bill is to succeed in its main objective of reducing cost to tenants.

Secondly, I am concerned that the Bill is insufficiently clear on the circumstances in which an agent can retain a holding deposit. In circumstances where a tenant has willfully provided false information, it may be acceptable for an agent to retain the costs of undertaking checks, but we know that there are many circumstances in which incorrect information can be provided where this is not the fault of the tenant. For example, the tenant may be unaware that their credit rating has dipped, or an employer may hold out-of-date salary information, and there are many other such circumstances. The Bill must ensure that tenants are protected against incorrect information being provided by someone else. The failure to do so could result in tenants who have lost a proportion
of their savings being prevented from accessing another home, with dire consequences. I urge the Government to ensure that the Bill is sufficiently robust on this matter.

Finally, I must emphasise that although the Bill is a welcome step, there is still much more to do to reform the private rented sector and to redress the imbalance of power that exists between landlords and tenants. The Government have shown a willingness to adopt Labour policy with regard to banning letting agents’ fees. May I urge the Minister to go further and legislate for longer and more secure tenancies, intervene to address the spiralling rents that cause hardship for so many of my constituents and act to stop revenge evictions because the current legislation simply is not working? We need comprehensive reform of the private rented sector to give security and stability to the increasing numbers of my constituents who are reliant on it, and in particular for the growing numbers of children living in private rented accommodation on whom the need to move frequently can have a particularly harmful impact. While I welcome the Bill, there is much more to do, and I urge the Government to go further.

9.22 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Conservative party on delivering yet another 2015 Labour election manifesto pledge. Page 62 of our 2015 election manifesto, which I stood on, pledged to ban unfair letting agent fees. I have some news for the Conservative Members, however, because we had a new manifesto in 2017, which was even more popular than our 2015 manifesto: it led to their losing seats and to our gaining them. The 2017 manifesto went even further:

“Labour will make new three-year tenancies the norm, with an inflation cap on rent rises... We will legislate to ban”... all... “letting agency fees for tenants. We will also empower tenants to call time on bad landlords by giving renters new consumer rights.”

It was a little bit disappointing that this Bill did not go quite so far. However, if the Government wish to continue their work in implementing Labour manifesto pledges, I am sure that they will meet no resistance from Labour Members and that it will be met with a great deal of praise from those who are suffering in the private rented sector.

The scandal of letting agent fees has gone on for far too long, and an audit of the private rented sector in Brighton and Hove shows exactly how out of control the fees are. In Brighton, agents’ fees start at £500 just for a holding fee, which is of course, as we have heard, non-refundable. If someone decides not to go for the property, they will lose the money. In the house buying world, someone can put in a bid for a property, agree an offer and get very far through the negotiations, but they can drop out with no financial charge. That seems manifestly unfair: for the rich, or for homeowners, there is one rule; and for renters, there is another whereby, if someone decides to change their view at the last moment, for whatever reason, they are charged. Ending that is a great opportunity that has been missed in the Bill.

In Brighton, admin fees are also common, at £250 on average per tenant, tenant substitution fees are as high as £420, and guarantor fees are £190. All in all, it costs more than £1,000 and we have not got started on the deposit. We have heard the same story from many constituencies throughout the country, particularly those in the south-east. We also have check-in and check-out fees, which are as high as £270 per check-in or check-out.

How has it got this bad? There is, of course, a fundamental power imbalance in the landlord-tenant market. Often, young and insecure workers have no choice but to take what they are given, pay the fees and, sometimes, to do it with a smile because otherwise they would be rejected by the landlord. That is, of course, why it has been necessary in Brighton to establish renters’ unions. There are renters’ unions in my constituency such as Acorn, and I applaud the work it has done to fight for renters who are being abused by agents. We have heard a lot of talk about this being about only a few agents, but I am afraid that in my city it is, I think, a large number of agents. I would even go so far as to say that the majority of agents use these dirty tactics. That is why the Bill is needed; it is not about a few rotten apples but a systemic failure in the market.

The Minister will have received the same advice as I and many others have about some of the things that need to change, particularly the loophole in paragraph 4 of schedule 1, which has been mentioned, regarding tenants who have to pay a default fee. Again, that takes me to the point about the equality of the sides in this argument. While we still have no-fault evictions, where a landlord can decide to evict a person with notice and there is no charge or fee against the agent or landlord and no reimbursement for the person losing their house a few months early, it seems to be totally unfair to have any default fee on the other side without the situation being equally balanced. If the Bill were to introduce an equal default fee for no-fault evictions, this would be a measure that I could probably come to support.

Of course, the Bill also fails to provide a comprehensive definition of default fees and creates the ability for fees to be reintroduced by any other means. Of course, we know that in a capitalist world capitalism will use those loopholes to its best advantage. It seems that the Government never learn that if they do not close down loopholes to its best advantage. It seems that the Government never learn that if they do not close down loopholes, the people who will be abused are our constituents. I guess that it will take a Labour Government to implement Labour manifesto policies properly, but I support this measure, even if it does not quite yet go far enough.

9.28 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This has been an important debate, which has seen excellent contributions from across the House. I want to highlight in particular those made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) as Chair of the Select Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who painted such a powerful picture of a student city and the arbitrary and unjustifiable fees to which those students are subjected.

As has already been said, it is always flattering for the Opposition when a Government steal our good ideas, but the serious point that all of us on the Opposition Benches want to make tonight is that we welcome the Bill, we welcome its intent and we want to work with the Government to get it right. Introducing an outright ban on up-front letting fees is absolutely right and, as the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) said, it is right and proper that the Government should intervene.
As we know, the Bill has been some time coming. The Government voted down a private Member’s Bill on this topic in 2013. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said, the proposals to ban letting fees were put to the House in 2014 and the Conservative party, including the Prime Minister, voted them down. In 2016, my constituency predecessor and then Housing Minister dismissed this policy as a bad idea, just eight weeks before his Government briefed the policy as part of their autumn statement. That is all in the past, however, and we are delighted we won the argument in the end.

We welcome the Bill, but we think it could go further and give private renters the rights they need. The Government have backtracked on their original plans to cap deposits at rates tenants want. They have put a major loophole in the Bill for a minority of unscrupulous landlords to exploit, they have kept costs for holding deposits at an unreasonable level and they have passed potentially high fees beyond year one for enforcing the Bill on to local councils.

It is right that we challenge the Government to go further, while welcoming the Bill’s overall aims. As the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, 21% of the market is now privately rented. It is no longer just young single people and students: England’s private rented sector is home to 1.6 million families with children. Average rents are now almost £1,500 a year higher than they were in 2010. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) said, there is a link between paying more than a third of income on rent and one’s mental health. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, in her constituency people are increasingly fearful of the private rented sector, if they are able to access it at all. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) painted a picture of the wider reforms that are needed if we are to really tackle the private rented sector. There is certainly much more to be done, but we welcome the Bill.

I want to press the Minister on a few small points. Security deposits are a barrier to entry for many people trying to access the private rented sector. The proposal to cap deposits is welcome and a long overdue admission by the Government that the current market price is just too high. The Department’s own consultation found that more than nine out of 10 tenants want to see a cap, but we do not believe that the proposals in their current form are fit for purpose, because the cap is above what the market has already settled on and will not make any difference to the majority of tenants. Shelter’s most recent private landlord survey found that 55% of landlords ask for four weeks’ rent as a deposit, while only 6% ask for more than six weeks.

Citizens Advice also found that the most common amount is four weeks. It argues that a six-week cap will just help 8% of private renters. The Government’s own consultation on the policy found that two thirds of tenants wanted a cap of four weeks or less. Instead of listening to tenants and experts, the Government have risked making a deposit of six weeks’ rent the norm, rather than the maximum. This is a particular concern in high-cost areas such as London, where a six weeks’ rent deposit will see tenants paying £2,000 based on medium rents.

The Mayor of London is calling for a three-week cap. Experts such as Shelter and Citizens Advice are saying it should be no higher than four weeks. As set out by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is calling for a five-week cap. Clearly, there are some different views. It is a shame that the Government have bowed to pressure from trade associations and backtracked on their original plans to cap deposits at four weeks’ rent. I really hope the Minister will be open to discussing this in more detail in Committee. We on the Labour Benches will thank the Government for that if they do so.

On default fees, although the majority of landlords and many agencies operate fairly and responsibly, excessive fees imposed on tenants for minuscule breaches are still far too common. Some examples highlighted by Shelter include: a £40 administration fee for every phone call or letter to chase overdue rent; a £40 charge for a late rent payment; and mystery shopper evidence that appears to show agents making up fees for things on the spot. The Government have allowed a potentially serious loophole in the Bill by not banning default fees.

There are several issues that we do not have time to go into tonight, but there are big question marks over the effectiveness of statutory guidance in such areas. In the energy sector, the continued use of back-billing by companies in defiance of Ofgem’s guidance meant a licence requirement was eventually needed.

It is important that we get this right and do not leave a loophole for unscrupulous landlords and letting agents at the heart of the Bill. As the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), the lettings industry admitted in evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that some agents may seek to charge disproportionate default fees in order to recoup revenue that is lost as a result of the legislation.

Turning to the enforcement duties in clauses 6 to 8, as with any legislation of this sort, effective enforcement is key to its success. As we have heard today, the suggestion that the Bill should be completely funded through civil penalties jeopardises its chances of working effectively. Serious concerns have been raised about the ability of trading standards to enforce the measures properly, as no extra funding is earmarked beyond year one for enforcement—of course, we very much welcome the announcement of £500,000 in Government support in year one. Trading standards are under-resourced and overstretched to an unprecedented degree, and therefore, this proposal seems misguided. I hope that the Minister can offer us something during the Bill Committee to deal with that issue.

In conclusion, unlike other sectors in which consumers can expect certain standards with clear redress, repair and replace provisions, in practice they have fewer consumer rights in renting a family home than they do in buying a fridge-freezer. Today’s Bill is a step in the right direction, but it is not yet perfect. Although it will give comfort to renters, it will not tackle their wider problems. The Conservatives have so far turned a blind eye to the pressures that England’s rapidly growing number of private renters are facing. We hope that the new Secretary of State will continue on his course of coming in and
changing things that are not right and will work with us to make the Bill work. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) called for a gold standard for renters and landlords and for us to take the Bill from good to great. I am sure that that is something the Government would support.

9.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate and I thank the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) for her constructive support for the principles of the Bill. I very much look forward to discussing the details with her in Committee.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who could not be with us tonight. She deserves enormous praise for the way she has brought the Bill to the stage in which we are discussing it tonight, through her tireless engagement not only with colleagues across the House, but the sector at large, and extensively with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I thank her for all her work. She is the reason that we are talking about a Bill over which there is so much agreement.

I start by agreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson). Like him, I am a committed believer in the power of free markets and competition. I approach cases of caps and bans with some scepticism as well, so I am pleased to tell him that after careful consideration of the Bill’s provisions, I came to the same conclusion as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham): that this Bill does address a failure of competition and a failure of the free market, which Government Members believe so passionately in. There is an inherent unfairness in a situation where a potential tenant is faced with a monopoly provider of a letting agent, and it does not strike any of us as being right. That unfairness was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and is most clearly evidenced in the charging of double fees, where letting fees are charging fees on both sides of the transaction. This is evidence of the broader imbalance in the market that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) highlighted, and the Bill seeks to redress the balance between landlords and tenants.

We have heard many helpful contributions from members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on both sides of the House. I pay tribute to its work and in particular, to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), as well as their colleagues. They did an excellent job. It is worth pointing out that I counted 19 separate recommendations of the Select Committee’s report and the Government were pleased to accept 15 of those. I hope that that speaks to the value that we place on pre-legislative scrutiny—/Interruption./ We should not dwell too much on the differences that separate us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East and many other hon. Members asked about retaliatory evictions, and I am pleased to say that the Government are considering the Committee recommendations arising from its wider inquiry into the private rental sector, including on retaliatory evictions, and will reply in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South raised the issue of new burdens funding. I can tell him with my other hat on—as a local government Minister—that there is probably no more passionate defender of new burdens funding than me, so I will ensure that the funding is there for our local authorities to enforce the Bill properly.

That brings me to the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). She asked about enforcement and about the fees that would be charged and gave examples of exorbitant £200 or £300 fees charged when tenants want to add a second tenant to their contract or request permission for a pet. I am pleased to tell her that the Bill seeks to end that practice. Such fees will be capped at £50 or reasonable costs, which I hope gives her some comfort.

Enforcement is, of course, incredibly important. I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend and others that there are multiple avenues by which tenants can seek enforcement of their rights: first and foremost, through redress schemes, which the Government made mandatory for letting agents some years ago and are consulting on making mandatory for landlords today; secondly, through trading standards authorities and district councils where they are not the trading standards authorities; thirdly, on the advice of the Select Committee, through the first-tier tribunal; and, if none of that works, subsequently through the county court. The fines, starting at £5,000 and scaling up to potentially unlimited fines, are significant and will act as a deterrent to errant landlords.

Mr Betts: On enforcement, does the Minister accept that going to a county court is quite an experience for a tenant and would probably put them off, and does he therefore accept that the first-tier tribunal itself should take the matter of enforcement to the county court on behalf of tenants who have already won their case?

Rishi Sunak: We do not fully agree with the hon. Gentleman on that particular point, but I hope he takes comfort from our having accepted his recommendation that in the first instance the first-tier tribunal be available for tenants to take cases to and that this will serve as a benefit to them.

On fines, in criminal cases parties will be liable to potentially unlimited fines and banning orders. I think that the combination of all those things will serve as sufficient deterrent to errant landlords.

In conclusion, the Bill will save millions of tenants hundreds of millions of pounds and will deliver fairness. It is one of the many measures the Government are taking to fix the broken housing market, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

TENANT FEES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Tenant Fees 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 Tuesday 12 June 2018.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—

(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

TENANT FEES BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Tenant Fees Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State;

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—

(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown)(Lab/Co-op):

On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to ask how I might put the record straight. I have a lodger, not a tenant, and I want to be very clear, for transparency purposes, that while the Bill does not affect that relationship, I do derive an income from that lodger, as my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests states.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think the matter has been clarified.

Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill (Money)

Queen's recommendation signified.

9.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under the Act by the Secretary of State.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for bringing forward this important Bill. I once again confirm the Government’s support for and commitment to it and our desire to see it succeed.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I was going to let the shadow Minister come in first, Mr Bone.

9.44 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that we can hang on for a couple more minutes before hearing the contribution of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone).

There is well-recorded Labour support for the Bill. The use of data has the potential to improve every aspect of the NHS by, for instance, transforming the way in which we diagnose illnesses such as cancer, and improving the patient experience by ensuring that every clinician at every stage has access to the complete picture. However, as we know from experience, the use of data in the NHS can be controversial, with high levels of suspicion among patients.

That suspicion is not unfounded. Official figures show that more than 100,000 patients were caught up in NHS data blunders in 2016-17. The number of serious data incidents has doubled in a year, and now, on average, there is one every three weeks. Last year it emerged that NHS Shared Business Services had failed to deliver just under 709,000 letters from hospitals to GPs’ surgeries, and that the correspondence had been left in an unknown warehouse. Those examples show the importance of effective, modern data protection laws with robust safeguards, which are central to securing the public’s trust and confidence in the use of personal information within the NHS. The establishment of a state-backed national data guardian for health and social care is one of the ways in which we can improve practice across the NHS and increase public confidence.

That said, the Government have fallen a long way short of their data aspirations. All hospitals and GPs were expected to be able to access GP records by 2014, and by 2015 patients were expected to be able to see all their own records online. We are some way from that, but the direction of travel is clear, which is why the Bill is so important.

The need for a data guardian is obvious, and we will support the motion, but it would be remiss of me not to mention that we are discussing a money resolution for the 94th Bill presented in the current Session. By an
amazing coincidence, we have already heard extensively today from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) about his Bill, which was the ninth to be presented but for which there has still been no money resolution. Do we know why that is?

It cannot be right for the Government to decide when to accept the will of the House, or whether to accept it at all. Money resolutions have historically been formalities introduced as a matter of course after Second Readings, but now we see Ministers picking and choosing when to listen to the sovereign body of this country. The Government are defying the will of the House and overstretching their executive power in the service of their own electoral interests. Nothing in this debate will change that, but one day they will be sitting on these Benches again, and they may come to regret having played so fast and loose with Parliament.

9.47 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for what he has said about the Bill. I completely understand his closing remarks, and I will try to deal with that dilemma later. It is very strange that a money resolution should be proposed for Bill No. 94 before one has been proposed for Bill No. 9. I also thank the excellent Minister—I think that we may be meeting tomorrow to discuss the Bill—for introducing the motion.

We had a long debate earlier today, which was technically about money resolutions following Second Readings. It was not particularly concerned with the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, but Members became carried away on that subject. What we should be doing tonight is deciding whether the expenditure for my Bill justifies a money resolution, but I can understand why Opposition Members—and, perhaps, some Conservative Members—feel that we should not pass the motion because it would leapfrog a Bill on which there was a substantive debate in the House and a very large vote. My Bill was given a Second Reading only because of a money resolution; that is perhaps my only achievement for the fact that some years ago I got the House to accept that in Second Reading debates we can deal with money resolutions following Second Readings. It is only fair to say that I can understand why Members might want to oppose this money resolution. It is not necessarily because they are against this Bill, but it does stop the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill having much chance of making progress.

Let me, however, explain what the Bill is about. The role of health and social care national data guardian has already been established, but the Bill would put it on a statutory footing. I thought that the need for a money resolution was a little arguable, as the Government were already paying for the same services, but the Department has estimated that it would cost £700,000. Does my hon. Friend think that is a fair estimate, or does he have a different view of the cost of the Bill?

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am grateful for what my hon. Friend said because I am, as he knows, one of the supporters of his Bill, so I am very grateful that we have got to this stage, too. It is said that the cost will be approximately £700,000. Does my hon. Friend think that is a fair estimate, or does he have a different view of the cost of the Bill?

Mr Bone: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, but I would like to deal with that later in my remarks.

There is the following deferred Divisions motion on the Order Paper in the name of the Prime Minister:

“That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Mel Stride relating to the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill.”

That is interesting because under Standing Order No. 49 automatically there has to be a debate of up to 45 minutes on a money resolution, so I am not sure why that motion is on the Order Paper. The new version of Standing Orders published on 1 May is in the Vote Office today, and consideration of such a resolution automatically can go through the moment of interruption.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): We have just allowed a money resolution to go through on the nod in relation to the Tenant Fees Bill and I think the sums involved are much higher than £700,000, yet under Standing Orders we were not allowed any separate debate on that. Can my hon. Friend explain why his Bill for £700,000 has 45 minutes but a much more expensive Bill has nothing?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I do not think we need to consider that.

Mr Bone: Mr Deputy Speaker, I wanted to get credit for the fact that some years ago I got the House to accept that in Second Reading debates we can deal with the money resolution; that is perhaps my only achievement in Parliament. But it is right that if the money resolution does not follow Second Reading immediately there has to be a 45-minute debate, and the Department of Health and Social Care estimate of the cost is £700,000.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Up to that sum.

Mr Bone: No, the Department has estimated that these costs will be approximately £700,000 per year, so actually I suppose they could exceed that. To me, that is quite a lot of money. We have to make sure we know what we are doing tonight and I will leave it to Members to decide.

It is only fair to say that I can understand why Members might want to oppose this money resolution. It is not necessarily because they are against this Bill, but it does stop the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill having much chance of making progress. That is because on certain Fridays private Members’ Bills have priority if they have come out of Committee, and if we pass the money resolution on my Bill tonight I will probably take 26 October while another Bill that has already gone through will take the November slot; there are no more dates available for private Members’ Bills. I can therefore understand why Members might want to vote against this money resolution tonight, and if they did, I would respect that.

Philip Davies: Is my hon. Friend saying that if we vote for this money resolution this evening, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill of an Opposition Member would not be able to proceed?

Mr Bone: That is exactly what I am saying, because it would come on as a second Bill and therefore, as it is quite a complex Bill, would not get through. I think that some people who may have been involved in rearranging when money resolutions come through—this new idea...
of having a choice in relation to money resolutions—were aware of that fact, but I am not sure that everyone in this House was. I considered standing up and recommending that Members should not support this money resolution. However, if I did that, I would be playing into the Government’s hands, because that would stop a private Member’s Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend seems to be saying—in his typically generous way—that, for the greater good, he would be prepared to make a short-term sacrifice in respect of his own Bill. From the debate that took place earlier today, we know that one way of avoiding the problem that he encounters by having to have a money resolution debated and voted on in the House tonight would be to have a Bill without a money resolution. When he drafted his Bill, did he consider whether it would be possible to draft it in such a way that it would not require any more public money?

Mr Bone: Absolutely. There was much discussion with the Clerks of the House on that point. As my hon. Friend knows, that money has already been expended on the system that we have. My Bill is actually not going to cost the public purse any more money than at present. I argued strongly that my Bill should not have a money resolution, but the Clerks persuaded me that it was the proper thing to do. I think they felt that, on balance, it was safer to do it like this.

I did not think I would be speaking about a money resolution for my Bill. I did not think that anyone would spend any time on this matter. What normally happens—[Interruption.] No, I think we need to scrutinise this properly—

Mr Bone: I do apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think we have 45 minutes, whatever happens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is someone else who wishes to speak as well.

Mr Bone: Well, what I am trying to say is that, yes, there is £700,000 of expenditure but we are already paying £700,000 so I am not actually asking for any more money.

I also have a gripe about the time it has taken to get this money resolution here. I am not going to thank the Government for doing this, because I think that that is wrong. This should happen automatically. It is weeks and weeks since the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill had its Second Reading, and that was on exactly the same day that my Bill had its Second Reading. Mine was afterwards. I think there is something a little bit shifty here. I know that other Members want to speak, so let me just say that I want a money resolution and I want my Bill to move forward, but I will quite understand if the House divides tonight as a matter of principle.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), with whom I am pleased to serve on the Procedure Committee. I will not take up too much of the House’s time tonight, as I have a further lengthy speech to write for a Public Bill Committee on Wednesday morning, but I was rather shocked when I saw this money resolution on the Order Paper, not least because the House spent time debating a similar matter at length this afternoon, as we set out, on a cross-party basis, the need for a money resolution for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, which was passed unanimously by the House of Commons.

I presume that most Conservative Members have other engagements and cannot be here now, but they spent a huge amount of time this afternoon talking about the importance of money resolutions when committing public money and expenditure. This debate started at 9.44 pm and I think that the hon. Member for Wellingborough has been the only Conservative Member who has stood up to speak on this money resolution, which commits to spending £700,000 of public money. Conservative Members tell us on a regular basis that it is important to have lots of scrutiny when the Government are committing to using taxpayers’ money. Tonight, however, we have heard from the hon. Member for Wellingborough, whose Bill got its Second Reading on the nod, without debate, whereas hon. Members including me came here on a Friday from our constituencies to debate the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. We spent some four hours doing that, and the Bill was passed. It is the ninth Bill of the Session, whereas this Bill from the hon. Member for Wellingborough is No. 94, so we face the rather bizarre spectacle tonight of a Bill that was ninety-fourth jumping over the Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and, indeed, the laudable Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) that relates to child refugees. Once again, we see this Government playing party politics with private Members’ legislation.

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 9(3)). Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)).

That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Mel Stride relating to the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill. — (Amanda Milling.)

Question put and agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Main Question again proposed.
authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under the Act by the Secretary of State.”

It would therefore not be a lot of work for the Government to bring forward a money resolution for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, too. Given that it has been easy tonight, I look forward the money resolution being passed for the Bill of the hon. Member for Wellingborough.

10.1 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing us to debate this motion up to the maximum of 45 minutes. I was disappointed when it was introduced, however, because there was not much detail. We have heard about the approximate sum of £700,000 a year, but paragraph 47 of the Bill’s explanatory notes states:

“The Bill may result in some implementation costs for the bodies and individuals required to have regard to the Data Guardian’s published guidance, in that they will need to review and assess the relevance of the guidance.”

When the Minister comes to respond to this short debate, I hope that she will explain how many of those bodies and individuals are actually funded out of the public purse, and therefore to what extent additional costs will be incurred for the Exchequer in addition to the approximate £700,000 per annum.

I do not know whether the Opposition will call a Division, which they can do following the decision that deferred Divisions shall not apply to this motion this evening, but if they are really keen to move forward with the Bill that they were complaining about this afternoon, which has not yet received a money resolution, they should be using every available procedural device available to them to promote that cause. One is sometimes left with the feeling that there is a bit of gesturing here and that people do not have their heart in it, so I want to see the Opposition’s heart reflected in votes in this House, rather than in just mere words. Having said that, some important points have been made, and I hope that the Minister will respond to them.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 and 7 together.

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

BANKS AND BANKING

That the draft Cash Ratio Deposits (Value Bands and Ratios) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

That the draft Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Somerset West and Taunton (Modification of Boundary Change Enactments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 23 May (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Dorset (Structural Changes) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved. —(Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 23 May (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

Movement made and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Amanda Milling.]

10.4 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I am grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate on a very specific issue that was originally raised with me by my constituent Liz Barron, who felt sufficiently strongly and sufficiently affected that she brought supporters from Walsall and Northampton to my Twickenham constituency. I then discovered that the health issue that concerns her affects some 50,000, and possibly 70,000, people across the country—an average of around 100 people per parliamentary constituency.

Those people suffer from a condition called hypothyroidism—an underactive thyroid—which leads to a variety of conditions, including chronic fatigue. There is a link to cardiac symptoms and diabetes, and in some cases to mental illness. For many of these people, the condition leads to the absence of a full life, and in some cases it leads to serious disability, leaving those affected on benefits and unable to live life to the full.

Eighty-five per cent. of sufferers, at the very least, are women. Hypothyroidism is very gender-specific. Underlying the issue is a policy failure by Government. I do not mean this particular Government—this is a long-standing problem going back at least 10 years under successive Governments. The problem is a paradoxical one that is rather different from what we normally see in health debates. Typically the argument in health debates is that something should be done but there is not enough money, whereas in this particular case far too much money has been spent on over-expensive drugs, leading to a correction in the form of severe rationing, which is now causing a great deal of hardship.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have sought the right hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene. Does he agree that lab tests are just one part of the diagnostic puzzle and that other steps have been taken to address the fact that between 40% and 50% of patients are either over-treated or under-treated, which massively affects their quality of life?

Sir Vince Cable: There is a lack of precision in this area, and there are questions both on the number of people affected and on the dosages required. I fully take the hon. Gentleman’s point.

We are predominantly dealing with the questions of cost and of physical availability, but let me develop the hon. Gentleman’s point.

The roots of this problem lie in the charging and costings for this drug. There is a monopoly supplier, Concordia, a company that was originally called Goldshield. The word “gold” was probably so obviously embarrassing, given the way it treated this as a goldmine, that it changed the name to Mercury Pharma, and it has subsequently been changed to Concordia. Some 10 years ago, this company originally produced a packet of these drugs for about £4.50, but the cost then increased to £258 for the same product, which is an escalation of about 6,000%. The NHS was originally spending some £600,000 a year on this drug, but I established through parliamentary questions that in the past three years it has spent successively £22 million, £33 million and £30 million. There has been an enormous increase in cost and an enormous burden to the health service as a result of the extraordinary pricing that this company has adopted. The consequence is that a large number of clinical commissioning groups have stopped supplying the drug and a large number of people no longer have access to it.

The Government, to their credit, have responded in the past year or so with two specific interventions, the first of which was referring the matter to the Competition and Markets Authority so that it could examine the abuse of pricing. The CMA has provisionally reported that the drug company has been seriously abusing the market and charging excessively. In addition, the Government have engaged in a consultation exercise on limiting the availability of the drug. There was a strong negative reaction and some 30,000 people petitioned the Government on those potential restrictions, but they have proceeded with guidance, at least in England, and the drug has been removed in many situations. The guidance is somewhat ambiguous but, in essence, it says that the drug should be made available only through secondary care—through hospitals. A user has to obtain a consultation with an endocrinologist in order to have the drug prescribed, and often this is difficult to secure. What are the consequences of that? In some 23 to 25 CCG areas in England the drug is no longer available on prescription, and 90% of CCGs have said that they wish to stop supplying it, so we have a postcode lottery.

In addition, a lot of users have realised that they can get round these restrictions by going on the internet or travelling to Europe, because in many European countries the drug is available at cost. Remarkably, the NHS is paying some £9 per tablet, whereas in Germany it is available for 25p. People who have become aware of that can order it on the internet or go to Italy, Germany or Greece, where the drug is freely available. We are dealing with a combination of a postcode lottery,
I shall round off what I want to say by posing questions on a series of issues to the Minister, the first of which relates to the history. We have had 10 years of a scandal that may well have cost the taxpayer some £200 million in overcharging, so I want to ask him whether he has any plans to retrieve that money. I established through parliamentary questions that the Government have been active in the High Court in cases of this kind and have recovered money for the taxpayer in previous cases of seriously abusive charging by companies. Do the Government have any plans to do the same in this case?

Why did it never occur to anybody in the NHS over the past 10 years to bring in these drugs from overseas? They are produced in Europe at standard quality, so there is no problem. Why is that not NHS policy? Perhaps I can recall a former Member of the House who was recently remembered because of his infamous “rivers of blood” speech: Mr Enoch Powell, who was once a highly respected Secretary of State for Health. One thing that he did in his period in office was to help the NHS to overcome issues of scarcity and cost by bringing in imported drugs in situations of this kind. There is a long precedent and I cannot understand why that option was not used on this occasion.

My second concern relates to current supply. Why are the Government not using the powers recently acquired through Parliament—in the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017—under which they can force companies to cut their costs? That appears not to have happened in this case, and I am intrigued to know why. Two other companies have been licensed to break the monopoly; are they now producing the drugs, and at European-level costs? Are those drugs being made available to the NHS so that the problem can be resolved?

Finally, on the availability of the drugs to patients, will the Government introduce revised guidance to help a much larger number of patients to obtain prescriptions through their GP, as they did before, rather than having to go to a hospital? It is often not possible to get a consultation and, even if there is one, a prescription is difficult to obtain. Will the Government therefore issue revised guidance to help the large number of people who currently do not have access to the drug?

I conclude by quoting Sir Anthony Toft, a former physician to Her Majesty the Queen who was for many years president of the British Thyroid Association. He summarises the case from the point of view of an experienced professional:

“Experience of managing more patients with thyroid disease than most over a period of some 40 years is being trumped by inflexible guidelines; truly a remarkable state of affairs. Others hide behind guidelines to avoid the cost of prescribing liothyronine, which in the UK is exorbitantly priced by the sole supplier…when well-travelled patients can obtain supplies for a few euros in Italy and Greece and beyond.”

He strikes me as an authoritative and reliable source of advice. I do not know whether the Minister is aware, but 25 May—at the end of this week—is World Thyroid Day. He will make a lot of people very happy if they are able to celebrate that day with an advance in Government policy.

10.18 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):** I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for giving us the opportunity to debate this issue. It is unusual for a party leader to lead an Adjournment debate; indeed, this is certainly a first for me. I just note that point. I pay tribute to him and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who as always is in his place and intervened in the debate. They spoke passionately on behalf of their constituents affected by this condition.

Hypothyroidism—hypo—is different from hyper, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly said—is a debilitating condition, caused by a deficiency of thyroid hormone that affects at least two in every 100 people. It is therefore not rare, and it can lead to depression, severe tiredness and weight gain, with all the associated health implications that we know about. The symptoms can affect every area of someone’s life, affecting their ability to work, to play a role in society and to lead any sort of full social and personal life.

It is important for people to have the drug that is most effective in treating their condition. Levothyroxine is beneficial for the majority of patients with the condition but does not treat the condition in all patients. For some, the alternative drug at the centre of the right hon. Gentleman’s opening remarks—liothyronine—better alleviates symptoms.

Let me say up front that, if people have a clinical need for a medicine, it is right that they get the most appropriate medicine for their condition. It is certainly not the Government’s intention to deny someone the correct treatment. Indeed, the basic principles of our national health service are based on the provision of the right care and treatment, free at the point of delivery, paid for by general taxation. That is correct and how it will remain.

Under their terms of service, GPs are allowed to prescribe any product, including any unlicensed product, that they consider to be a medicine necessary for the treatment of their patients under the NHS, subject to three provisos, the first of which is that the product is effective and safe medicines for patients. As has been clear that that decision was also based on insufficient evidence of the clinical effectiveness of liothyronine, either alone or in combination with levothyroxine.
For unbranded generics, the Government encourage price. Liothyronine is an unbranded generic medicine. Concerning liothyronine: the significant increase in its when determining their local prescribing policies. I cannot commissioning services, to take account of the guidance commissioning groups, which have responsibility for

am sure the local clinical commissioning groups will

initiate prescribing of the drug. It will also consider

consultants—primary as well as secondary care—should

consider whether GPs as well as hospital

hospitals and build on the recent NHS England guidance.

Close working with consultants in south-west London

are reviewing local arrangements. The review will include

close working with consultants in south-west London

hospitals and build on the recent NHS England guidance.

It will consider whether GPs as well as hospital

consultants—primary as well as secondary care—should

initiate prescribing of the drug. It will also consider

which categories of patients should be prescribed it. I

am sure the local clinical commissioning groups will

ensure that the right hon. Gentleman is fully apprised

of the outcome. I will ask them to ensure that he is fully

apprised every step of the way.

Let me now turn to the other issue raised this evening

calling liothyronine: the significant increase in its

price. Liothyronine is an unbranded generic medicine. For unbranded generics, the Government encourage competition between suppliers to keep prices down.

However, as we know, Concordia—the manufacturer—is currently the subject of an investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority over how much it was charging the Government and taxpayers. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the CMA has provisionally found that Concordia abused its dominant position, overcharging the NHS millions of pounds for its tablets.

As the right hon. Gentleman rightly put on the record, the CMA’s findings are provisional at this stage. There has been no definitive decision that there has been a breach of competition law, and the CMA will carefully consider any representations from the companies concerned before deciding whether the law has in fact been broken. Where companies have breached competition law, the Department of Health and Social Care will seek damages and invest that money back into the NHS. That was one of the right hon. Gentleman’s questions, and the answer is an unequivocal yes. This is why we refer such issues to the CMA.

I am pleased to note that there are now multiple marketing authorisations for this drug. Increased competition usually leads to a more resilient supply chain and lower prices—one of the right hon. Gentleman’s other concerns. However, we will watch this carefully and will consider referring the matter to the CMA again if competition does not bring the price down.

It is not often that we hear a Liberal in this House quote the qualities of Enoch Powell—he is not often talked about in new Richmond House—but I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point. I will look into the issue of overseas imports and write back him on it. He also mentioned the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017, which does not come into force until this summer. Officials who report to me are very much ready to go when that legislation comes into force. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for speaking on behalf of his constituents and many others. This subject has not had a hearing in this House during my time here.

The total medicines spend in England for the years 2016–17 was £15.4 billion. That is the second biggest area of NHS spending after pay. Access to treatment is, and always will be, a priority for this Government. I hope that some of the answers that I provided tonight have helped the right hon. Gentleman in his investigations; I will write to him with more.

Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.
Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will not raise taxes on small businesses, and will he share with the House what help the Government will give to entrepreneurs who are setting up for the first time, with particular regard to the business rate?

Mr Hammond: We have already introduced business rate concessions to reduce the burden of rates on small businesses, including by bringing forward by two years the switch in indexation from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index. We are ensuring that Britain is the world’s leading place to start and grow a business, including through reducing corporation tax rates. There are almost 7,000 small businesses in Southend-on-Sea alone, and this Government back them every step of the way. I can tell my hon. Friend who will raise taxes on small businesses, and has said so publicly: he is sitting opposite me.
constrain the actions of big business. Will my right hon. Friend advise us what steps he is taking to make sure that he controls regulation and reduces tax burdens affecting microbusinesses?

Mr Hammond: We have taken steps that I have already outlined this morning to reduce the burden of taxation on businesses large and small, although of course small businesses are most beneficially affected by the £10 billion programme of reducing business rates costs and through the reduction in corporation tax levels. But we are always looking for further ways to support the smallest businesses and to encourage them to become larger businesses.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I associate myself with the Chancellor’s remarks about the Manchester bombing.

For the Chancellor to make up his own small business tax policies on the hoof is one thing; making them up for the Labour party is a fantasy. The Government have ruled out a customs union with the European Union worth £16 trillion for an alternative customs union with British overseas territories worth only £22 billion. Is the Chancellor happy with that decision? Can he give us any clue about how such a decision will support businesses and entrepreneurs?

Mr Hammond: I do not know whether that was an announcement of a change in Labour party policy. My understanding is that the Labour party’s position is to increase corporate tax rates for small businesses. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell us whether he has changed his position.

On the question of our future customs arrangements with the European Union, the hon. Gentleman will know that I have consistently sought arrangements that will protect our existing trade with the European Union, allowing British businesses to continue to trade freely with the minimal possible friction at the border with the European Union. We do not believe it is necessary to be in a customs union to achieve that.

Peter Dowd: For the Chancellor’s information, he can easily find our policies on www.labour.org.

When the Chancellor met David Cameron last October to give a thumbs-up emoji to Mr Cameron’s UK-China investment fund, presumably to help businesses and entrepreneurs, was he aware that the fund is to be domiciled in the Republic of Ireland? If so, did he think to ask the former Prime Minister whether that was for the purposes of tax avoidance?

Mr Hammond: I have already answered the hon. Gentleman’s questions about my meeting with Mr Cameron last October. In a meeting that ranged across a number of issues, Mr Cameron was good enough to inform me of his intention to take up this role with a fund promoting investment both in China and the UK. The Government support all initiatives that improve trade and investment between the UK and China.

Cost of Living

2. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What progress the Government have made on supporting families with the cost of living.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): People’s disposable income is now 4.6% higher in real terms than in 2010. That is because we have turned around the economy and held taxes down.

Trudy Harrison: According to recent figures from the Office for National Statistics, real household disposable income is £1,600 higher than in 2008, while the proportion of lower paid workers has fallen to its lowest level for 35 years due to the national living wage. Does my right hon. Friend think that those statistics would be as positive if we had taken the advice of the Labour party?

Elizabeth Truss: As my hon. Friend knows, the advice of the Labour party is that we need to “overthrow capitalism”. If we were to do that, there would be fewer businesses, fewer jobs, higher taxes and higher mortgage rates—and we would all be queuing for food, as people are in Venezuela.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Families with three children are at a greater risk of poverty than other families, and next year the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will take £1.2 billion away from them. Does she agree that this is the least family-friendly Government in history?

Elizabeth Truss: What we have done for families is make sure that more parents and families are in work than ever before, enabling them to look after and support their children. We are also investing a record amount in childcare—£6 billion a year—to help more parents into work.

19. [905470] Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Increases in the personal allowance and the national living wage, and the freeze to fuel duty, have helped my constituents with the cost of living. However, things are still tough and too many are just about managing. What further plans does my right hon. Friend have to continue to support my hardworking constituents?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we need to keep taxes down, but we also need to recognise the role that free enterprise and free markets play in encouraging competition, allowing new products to come to the market and keeping prices low. The reason why we have low food prices and cheap air fares is because we have successfully kept those markets open. The Labour party advocates abandoning that.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Tory austerity will result in annual social security cuts of £4 billion in Scotland by 2020. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that 1 million more children will be pushed into poverty across the UK. With planned devolution covering only 15% of social security spending, the blame lies firmly at the Chancellor’s door. Does the Minister think that is acceptable?

Elizabeth Truss: What I find incredible is that the Scottish National party, which has been in power in Scotland for many years, presiding over declining education standards and now raising taxes in Scotland, has the audacity not to take responsibility for its own policies and actions.
Kirsty Blackman: The Chief Secretary did not answer my question. Once a fortnight someone comes into my office with so little income that we have to refer them to a food bank. When will the Chancellor realise how much harm he is causing? When will he reverse the cuts and when will he end the hunger?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that we have seen more people in work in Scotland, as we have across the country, and that is delivering more real income. We have held taxes down across the country, to the tune of £1,000 per basic rate taxpayer, which means that people have more disposable income to spend.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Well, that was fascinating. The Chief Secretary knows full well that 67% of children in poverty live in working households. The Child Poverty Action Group expects cuts within universal credit to push up to 1 million children into poverty by 2020. When all the Government’s policy changes are included, lone parents have lost an average of £5,250 a year since 2010. Families with three or more children have lost £5,600 a year. Families with a disabled parent and a disabled child have £6,500 less every single year. Is she complacent or just callous?

Elizabeth Truss: Surprise, surprise: we have not heard Labour acknowledge the excellent news from the Resolution Foundation that we now have the lowest share of low-paid employees for 35 years—before the Labour Government were in power. Under Labour, we saw rising unemployment and more people left on the scrapheap. We saw a welfare system that did not support people into work.

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to make faster progress. If people could keep their questions brief, and if answers could focus, as constitutionally they must, on the policies of the Government, that would be the proper procedure in the House. The right hon. Lady is very experienced and I know she knows that extremely well.

NHS and Adult Social Care: Multi-year Funding Plan

Elizabeth Truss: We are developing policies on artificial intelligence and I know she knows that extremely well.

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to make faster progress. If people could keep their questions brief, and if answers could focus, as constitutionally they must, on the policies of the Government, that would be the proper procedure in the House. The right hon. Lady is very experienced and I know she knows that extremely well.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If he will bring forward proposals for a multi-year funding plan for the NHS and adult social care.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We will come forward with a new long-term plan for the NHS and provide a new multi-year funding settlement in support of that plan. What is also important is that we are developing policies on artificial intelligence and digital services to make sure that our NHS delivers better outcomes for patients.

Wera Hobhouse: To raise the amount we need for long-term sustainable services for my constituents and people across the country, will the Chief Secretary consider introducing a ring-fenced health and social care tax that would bring together spending on both services into a collective budget?

Elizabeth Truss: As the hon. Lady knows, the problem with such hypothecated taxes is that if the revenues from them go down, the consequence is a reduction in support for our NHS or our social care services. That is why we believe in funding those services out of general taxation. We put an extra £6.3 billion into the health service at the Budget. We are looking at the longer-term settlement, but it is important to note that this is about not just the money we spend, but how we spend it.

PFI Contracts

4. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department’s procedure for authorising and monitoring private finance initiative contracts.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The vast majority of PFI projects—86%—were signed off under the last Labour Government. Since 2010, we have reformed the approach so that PF2—private finance 2—contracts, in the selective circumstances in which they are used, now deliver better value for money for the taxpayer, so far delivering over £2 billion of savings.

Liz Twist: Recent research from the University of Greenwich suggests that bringing existing PFI contracts back in house could pay for itself within two years. The National Audit Office has noted that Government Departments reported the “operational inflexibility” of PFI, so can the Chancellor explain why his Department is still pushing the increasingly discredited and scandal-ridden PFI model under the disguise of PF2?

Robert Jenrick: Under the last Labour Government, the average number of PFI contracts signed per year was 55. In the last two years, the Treasury has signed off none. We will use this approach selectively when it delivers a genuine transfer of risk and provides value for money for the taxpayer, not as the last Labour Government did.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): As the Minister said, PFI was hugely popular under the last Labour Government. Will he confirm whether PFI stands for “private finance initiative” or “pay for indefinitely”?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend highlights the cost legacy of the PFI projects signed off under the last Labour Government. Hon. Members can be assured that we will use this approach wisely and selectively, in particular for the most complex infrastructure projects requiring a transfer of risk and the expertise of the private sector.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): On PFI hospitals, the National Audit Office report recently found “no evidence of operational efficiency”, and that in the NHS, “the cost of services, like cleaning…hospitals is higher under PFI contracts.” Will the Chancellor explain why his Government persist with imposing higher costs than necessary on local health budgets instead of ensuring value for money for the taxpayer?

Robert Jenrick: I think that the hon. Lady is having amnesia. These contracts—86% of the contracts and 91% by value—were signed under the last Labour Government. In respect of some of the items that she
mentioned, such as cleaning and security services, we have reformed PFI contracts under PF2 so that those items are not included in the standard contract.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Would my hon. Friend be interested to learn that when I was a lowly Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury in 1996 and 1997, John Major was constantly trying to make us finalise PFI contracts, but we in the Treasury refused because they were bad deals? As soon as Labour got in, they went straight ahead and entered into those bad deals.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The initial intention of PFI was to transfer risk, when appropriate, to the private sector, and to drive up innovation and quality in a very small number of selective cases. That was perverted under the last Labour Government by Gordon Brown.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): We have learned from the experience of PFI; this Government—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Anneliese Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This Government have not. In the light of last week's report on Carillion, we want to know whether the Minister can indicate which PFI contracts are being delivered by contractors that are deemed to be actually or potentially high risk. Following last week's reports that failed bidders for PFI contracts will be compensated, can he rule out bailing out firms that fail even to win contracts? We need answers on these questions now, not a history lesson.

Robert Jenrick: As I have indicated, this Government's approach to PFI is entirely different from that of the last Labour Government. The hon. Lady says that she has learnt the lessons. Well, it is a pity for the taxpayer, and for our children and grandchildren, that they were learnt so late.

Lifetime ISAs

5. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): How many people have paid a 25% withdrawal charge to use their lifetime ISA savings since that scheme was established. [905473]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In the first financial year, 2017-18, there was no unauthorised withdrawal charge in place. The data for 2018-19 is obviously not yet known, but HMRC will publish it when it is available.

Justin Madders: Will the Minister look at the effect of the withdrawal charge more closely? A first-time buyer has told me that he has found a home that suits his needs, but because his lifetime ISA is less than a year old, he will not only lose his Government bonus but have to pay a £375 penalty charge back to the Government out of his own money. Why are aspiring homeowners being penalised in this way?

John Glen: I am of course happy to look at that case. Following my appearance at the Treasury Select Committee, I asked my officials to look at the guidance on the website, as I am anxious not to put misleading advice on there. The LISA is available for long-term savings. That was the scheme's objective when it was set up.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I am pleased the Minister just mentioned his appearance before the Select Committee, where we explored the issue of the 25% charge and the fact that a further 6% of capital can also be lost. Will he update us? He has talked to officials about looking at the website. Will he ensure that the Treasury website is fully compliant with Financial Conduct Authority rules applicable to firms in the private sector?

John Glen: I am taking this up further, but I am concerned not to put a misleading flat-rate percentage on there, given that most savers who make an unauthorised withdrawal will pay a different amount according to their circumstances.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We have junior ISAs, cash ISAs, stocks and shares ISAs and lifetime ISAs. Will the Minister consider simplifying the entire ISA system to help young people in particular with long-term, cost-effective saving?

John Glen: The Government have developed a range of savings products and incentives, or encouraged providers to do so, to reflect the range of needs. We have also raised the ISA allowance to £20,000 and introduced the personal savings allowance, meaning that 95% of people do not pay any tax on their savings income. It is important that we have that range of options for all age groups.

Productivity

6. Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase productivity throughout the UK. [905474]

7. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to increase regional productivity. [905475]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Budget showed our determination to improve productivity, increasing the national productivity investment fund by £8 billion to £31 billion. With substantial investment in the regions of the UK, such as the £1.7 billion transforming cities fund, we want to help all parts of the country achieve their potential.

Andrew Bowie: I am sure the House will be united in rejoicing that the UK’s productivity last year grew by 0.7% and in the last quarter increased at its quickest pace in six years. Does my hon. Friend agree that raising our productivity is the only way to deliver higher-paid and better jobs for the future?

Robert Jenrick: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Raising productivity is the only sustainable way to grow the economy, boost wages and improve living standards, which is why we have given it such a clear and determined focus. With respect to Aberdeenshire, the North sea oil and gas industry is one of those sectors that have seen
the greatest productivity increases in recent years. We will continue to support that with a highly competitive tax rate.

Mike Amesbury: Given that average UK productivity is 30% below German levels, does the Minister agree it is now time to rebalance our economy and support further devolution for areas such as Cheshire and Warrington?

Robert Jenrick: It was of course this Government who one year ago created the Mayors across the UK, including in Greater Manchester, and several of them, including Andy Street, have had a great impact on their local economies. I have had conversations with the leader of the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership and the Minister responsible at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to take such matters forward.

23. [905429]Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I challenge the Government to maintain a strong emphasis on sound management of the public finances so we can invest in skills and apprenticeships to boost productivity and living standards?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is only with sound management of the public finances that we can continue to invest in the skills required to grow productivity, and that is exactly what we are doing with increasing investment in apprenticeships, through the apprenticeship levy, and with the T-levels, which will be largest change to our secondary education system since the introduction of A-levels and which we will be seeing in the coming years.

15. [905483]Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The unique cross-border region of north Wales and Cheshire is one of the most dynamic economies in the United Kingdom. Will the Treasury—which has promised a north Wales growth deal in, I think, at least three Budgets, but has yet to deliver a penny—please stop marking our homework, and give us the freedom to invest in the economy that we believe in?

Robert Jenrick: We have had numerous conversations with local partners in north Wales, and with the Welsh Government. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take the message to the Welsh Government, but they also need to engage with the UK Government to make sure that important deal, which, as he says, will link the economy of north Wales with the north-west and the northern powerhouse to drive productivity.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that cutting corporation tax to 19% has encouraged business investment, boosting productivity as well as encouraging the creation of 3 million new jobs?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we reduce the tax to 17%, we will see those productivity gains increase—and, contrary to what the Opposition have claimed, revenues have increased.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Eurostat figures show regional inequality in the United Kingdom, measured by output per hour, to be the worst in Europe, and the Government have failed to close the gap since 2010. When will the Chancellor commit himself to making the investment that is needed to end regional imbalances that have seen the north of England set to receive just one fifth of the transport investment per capita in London?

Robert Jenrick: The Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which has conducted the most rigorous analysis of Government spending on infrastructure, has made clear that the north of England will receive more funds from the present Government than any other region in the United Kingdom, including London and the south-east.

New Technologies

8. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support firms harnessing new technologies.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are committed to helping firms to harness the benefits of new technologies, and we are taking action to do so. For example, we have set the annual investment allowance at £200,000 a year, its highest-ever permanent level; we have announced a 10-year action plan to unlock more than £20 billion to finance growth in innovative firms; and we have delivered the biggest increase in research and development investment in 40 years.

Mr Hammond: Yes. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his commitment in this regard, especially in his role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the fourth industrial revolution. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that our tax system remains competitive, to maximise the support that we give to our business entrepreneurs?

Mr Hammond: Given that Northern Ireland is the cyber-security centre of the UK, what steps is the Chancellor taking to provide tax relief to encourage global businesses to consider using Belfast and other equipped cities as their bases?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Government seek to make all parts of the UK attractive to foreign direct investment, and Northern Ireland has done extremely well from that.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Government please explain what is being done to help firms in places such as west Oxfordshire to harness 5G and broadband,
making them more competitive, making them raise more money, and creating the capital that will enable us to fund the public services that the Labour party wants to overthrow?

**Mr Hammond:** This is partly about public investment and partly about private investment to encourage the roll-out of full-fibre broadband technologies and give companies access to the funds that they need to make investments and take advantage of the public infrastructure. We will make further announcements about our forward broadband strategy during the summer.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Scottish Government’s Budget included a 70% increase in investment in business R&D. To prevent that investment from being undermined by the Government’s approach to Brexit, will the Chancellor commit himself to maintaining the EU levels of R and D funding beyond the current cycle?

**Mr Hammond:** Once we have left the European Union the money that was reaching the UK from EU sources will be allocated to the UK shared prosperity fund, and over the course of this year we will consult on both the distribution and the application of those funds and the size that that fund should be.

**First-time Home Buyers**

9. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps he is taking to support first-time home-buyers throughout the UK. [905477]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): In the last Budget we abolished stamp duty for first-time buyers for the first £300,000 of a property’s value up to £500,000 in total. That has meant that 95% of first-time buyers have paid less stamp duty and a full 80% of first-time buyers have paid no stamp duty at all.

Stephen Metcalfe: Last November the Chancellor announced an ambitious package to tackle the broken housing market. How many first-time buyers have benefited from that package, particularly in Essex, and where can people find further information about this so we can make hopefully impressive numbers even greater?

Mel Stride: Some 69,000 individuals have already benefited from this vital tax relief and over 1 million will do so over the coming five years. We do not have disaggregated data specifically for Essex, but I can tell my hon. Friend that within the south-east 12,900 individuals have benefited from first-time buyer tax relief.

17. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): My constituency tops the leader board for house building, building at the moment over three a day. Can the Minister give an assessment of how much my first-time buyers are saving because of the Government’s policies?

Mel Stride: As I outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) who asked the preceding question, in the south-east 12,900 first-time buyers have benefited from this relief, of whom 9,000 purchased a property of a value of between £300,000 and £500,000 in total.

Tax Credits Overpayments

10. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of tax credits overpayments. [905478]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has taken a variety of steps to reduce overpayments of tax credits including real-time income data in-year, guidance that is very clear on these matters, and of course providing appropriate contact routes with HMRC so that those who have changed circumstances can indicate that to our tax authorities.

Chris Elmore: Overpayment of tax credits can have disastrous impacts on families; a constituent of mine has been left with a bill of £8,000 as a result of purely administrative errors admitted by HMRC. Such errors can create real financial hardship and in the past have even pushed some families into poverty. Will the Minister start instructing Treasury and HMRC officials to do more to tackle this problem?

Mel Stride: HMRC is doing a great deal, as I have already outlined to the hon. Gentleman, in terms of making sure that the correct information is provided. Overpayments do not solely emanate from HMRC; there is of course customer error and there can be negligence or a failure to report a change of circumstances. But I can assure the hon. Gentleman that HMRC is always sympathetic and careful in its approach to anybody in the kind of situation he described.

Economic Growth

12. **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth. [905480]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The best way to drive economic growth is to raise our productivity growth rate. That is why since 2010 the Government have overseen over half a trillion pounds in capital investment including in the national productivity investment fund, have increased investment in skills and have reduced taxes for business, and I tell my hon. Friend that the way not to support economic growth is through more borrowing, more debt and higher debt service costs.

Andrew Percy: After we voted to leave the EU, a vote endorsed by huge numbers across the north of England, we were told by some that mismanagement of the economy would occur under this Government. The reality in the north, despite those who talk the economy down, is that we have record employment and some of our areas have the fastest growing economies in the country, so may I urge the Chancellor to continue investing in the north and to ignore those, on the Opposition Benches especially, who repeatedly talk down the north of England?

Mr Hammond: Since 2010 the shadow Chancellor has predicted that the UK would go into recession on no fewer than eight separate occasions—that is eight out of zero. But the UK economy is growing steadily and is now 10.7% bigger than its pre-crisis level, and the
Office for Budget Responsibility expects it to continue to grow in each year of its forecast to 2022. While we know that the shadow Chancellor does not think that a growing economy matters, let me tell him why I do: a growing economy means more jobs, more prosperity and more security for working people.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What consideration has been given to the contribution that varying certain business taxes, such as **VAT**, according to the nation or region of the UK could make to encouraging economic growth?

**Mr Hammond:** The Government’s view is that a **unified rate of VAT** across the United Kingdom is an important part of our single market of the United Kingdom, which is an essential economic good for the whole of this country.

18. [905486] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Economic growth in Moray will get a huge boost when the **Moray growth deal** is agreed. It has the support of businesses and communities throughout my area, and I back it 100%. Will the Chancellor meet me to discuss the Moray growth deal and the huge benefits that it will bring to my constituency?

**Mr Hammond:** We absolutely look forward to being able to make progress on the Moray growth deal, and I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I know that the Exchequer Secretary, who is dealing with this matter, would also be pleased to meet him.

**Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Government acknowledge that they want to spread wealth and economic growth across the United Kingdom through their industrial strategy. Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer therefore agree with the **Welsh Affairs Committee**, chaired by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), that the money from the cancelled rail electrification between Cardiff and Swansea should be spent in Wales, so that we can have that shared prosperity?

**Mr Hammond:** We firmly believe that the service that will be provided on the route from London to Swansea will deliver exactly what passengers have bargained to get, without the need for the disruption and cost of overhead electrification. We will look at the funding needs of all parts of the United Kingdom appropriately, to support economic growth and to reduce regional disparities.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) has question 21, which is not altogether dissimilar from the one with which we are dealing, but which will probably not be reached. If he wants to come in now, he can. If he does not, he need not do so. But he does, so he will.

21. [905489] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. With regard to important infrastructure projects such as the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury, will the Chancellor give me an assurance that when the land frees up housing capacity when the road is built, that will be taken into consideration when the schemes are apportioned funding?

**Mr Speaker:** Especially for the purposes of generating economic growth.

**Mr Hammond:** Precisely, Mr Speaker. It is the economic growth generation potential of housing development that we will take into account when evaluating transport proposals. In relation to the specific project to which my hon. Friend refers, the Exchequer Secretary advises me that the Department for Transport is eagerly awaiting a business plan for the project from the relevant local authority.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree that a devolution settlement for all Yorkshire with an elected Mayor, as supported by all Conservative councils in the county, could improve economic growth in the region?

**Mr Hammond:** The Government will look carefully at proposals from Yorkshire leaders for a devolution settlement, provided that it does not undermine the existing South Yorkshire-Sheffield city region devolution settlement that has already been established, with a Mayor already elected.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port operator Associated British Ports, the Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce and many local businesses are giving serious consideration to free port status for the Humber ports in the post-Brexit world. Will the Chancellor or his Ministers agree to meet representatives of the business community in the area and to give serious consideration to this proposal when the idea has been further developed?

**Mr Hammond:** As my hon. Friend will know, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has a great interest in that proposal. Without even needing to consult her, I can say without hesitation that she will be delighted to meet him and his colleagues.

**Wage Growth: Young People**

13. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of wage growth for young people over the last 15 years.

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury** (Elizabeth Truss): From 2002 until the crisis, young people saw their real wages grow more slowly than the UK average. In fact, their wages fell more during the recession. Since 2014, young people’s wages have been rising faster than the UK average.

**Nic Dakin:** Young people are struggling to get a good start in the job market. They are earning less, working longer hours and commuting further than their parents’ generation. What are the Government going to do to transform their outcomes?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The most important thing is that those young people are in jobs, and under Labour we saw unemployment rise to 20%. Youth unemployment has reduced by 40% since 2010. I recognise that we need
to see those young people get better skills. That is why we are investing in IT training, that is why we are developing the maths premium so that more students study science, technology, engineering and maths, and that is why we have developed the apprenticeship levy to get more people into apprenticeships.

Money Laundering and Criminal Finance

14. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent estimate the Government have made of the cost to the economy of money laundering and criminal finance in the UK.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The social and economic costs of organised crime, of which money laundering is a key facilitator, total tens of billions of pounds a year. The Government are committed to tackling illicit finance in the UK and have implemented recent measures including the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and the updated money laundering regulations, both of which were brought into law in the past year.

David Hanson: The cross-party Foreign Affairs Committee said only yesterday that the Government should show stronger political leadership in tackling the importing of dirty money into the United Kingdom. Is it not time that the Government supported the Labour Front Bench’s proposals for an overseas register of interests?

John Glen: I acknowledge the report of the Select Committee. This Government stand by the rule of law. We do not do random confiscations but, alongside the work being undertaken, work is under way across Whitehall to examine what further steps are necessary. I am eager that we go as far as we can, and we must do so in ways that are consistent with our values.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I associate myself with the Chancellor’s eloquent words on the Manchester tragedy. I also commend the emergency services that operated on that day.

“The Government cannot afford to turn a blind eye as kleptocrats and human rights abusers use the City of London to launder their ill-gotten funds”.

Not my words but the words of yesterday’s Foreign Affairs Committee report. For eight years this Government have turned a blind eye to the flow of dirty money through the City. Not only have they delayed until 2021 the introduction of a full public register of overseas companies that own UK property but they have refused to introduce the tougher scrutiny and regulation of City flotations that we have demanded, and they have failed to broaden the definition of “politically exposed persons” to include more individuals linked to crime or criminal regimes.

Will the Government do as the Foreign Affairs Committee has demanded and start taking money laundering and tax avoidance seriously by bringing forward the date for the register of overseas companies that own property in the UK?

John Glen: We will continue to take these matters very seriously. We will freeze Russian state assets where we have evidence that they will be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals and residents. As the Prime Minister made very clear in her statement to the House, the National Crime Agency will bring all UK capabilities to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. As somebody who has experienced that directly in my constituency in recent months, I stand by the Prime Minister’s statement. There is no place for these people and their money in our country.

John McDonnell: That is just not good enough. We were promised a register in 2015, and we are still having to wait another three years. The Government are letting the crooks, the tax avoiders and the money launderers off the hook again. They have failed to introduce and enforce stricter due diligence for companies as registered companies, they have failed to take on the service providers that set up these laundering schemes, and they have refused to legislate to create a new offence of failing to prevent money laundering. Those are all amendments that the Opposition tabled to the recent Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. The people of this country are entitled to ask why this Government are soft on tax evaders and money launderers.

There is another issue that has to be addressed today, as highlighted by the allegations against Lycamobile. Will the Government bring forward legislation requiring any political party found to have accepted donations from money launderers and tax evaders to forfeit or return that money?

John Glen: Obviously, it is impossible for a Minister to comment on live cases, but we will continue to use powers to disrupt and pursue money launderers and terrorists. We will use the anti-corruption strategy, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime is committed to using the National Economic Crime Centre to pursue those who need pursuing, but we will do so within the rule of law, consistent with the values of this country.

Tax Evasion

16. Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps he has taken to give Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs the appropriate powers and resources to tackle tax evasion.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have brought in more than 100 measures to clamp down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance since 2010, and the associated powers that HMRC has had in that respect. We have protected and brought in £175 billion across that period, which is substantially more than we invest in our national health service every year.

Laura Smith: Almost 15,000 HMRC and Valuation Office Agency jobs have been lost since 2010, and that is alongside tax office closures up and down the country. With potential changes to our customs border on the horizon, does the Chancellor not agree that now would be the time to invest in HMRC, and put a stop to all planned cuts and closures?

Mel Stride: I am pleased to be able to inform the hon. Lady that we have been investing heavily in HMRC to clamp down on the issues she has raised—we are talking about some £2 billion since 2010. We have 23,000 staff
in HMRC engaged in that purpose and we consequently have about the lowest tax gap in the entire world, at 6%, which is far lower than it was in any year under the previous Labour Government.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [905495] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): 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, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in the autumn Budget and the spring statement. The Government’s balanced approach to the public finances enables us to give households, businesses and our public services targeted support in the near term, and to invest in the future of this country, while also being fair to the next generation by at last beginning to reduce a national debt that is far too large.

Tom Brake: On prosperity, Mark Carney has just said that household incomes are now about £900 lower than was forecast in May 2016, before the referendum. How much lower still does the Chancellor estimate household incomes will be when the UK leaves the customs union and the single market? When will he publish his analysis?

Mr Hammond: On the publication of Government analysis, I have made it clear on several occasions that once Parliament is being asked to vote on a proposal—on a package—it will be appropriate for the Government to publish the analysis that they have, to make sure that that debate is as informed as possible. The future trajectory of household incomes will depend, in part, on the quality of the deal we negotiate as we exit the EU, and we are focused on getting the very best deal for British households, businesses and our public services targeted support in the near term, and to invest in the future of this country, while also being fair to the next generation by at last beginning to reduce a national debt that is far too large.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady focuses rightly on output per hour. The problem is a productivity gap between the regions of the UK and the most prosperous areas of London. We have to close that productivity gap. That is in the interest of not only those individual regions, but our overall national economy. We will do so by investing in public infrastructure and in skills, and by ensuring that the conditions are right for business investment, both domestic and foreign.

T3. [905497] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I have a constituent who, despite having ample equity in her home and never having been in arrears with her payments, is unable to extend her mortgage beyond the age of 75 because of Government rules. That means that she will have to sell the house that she loves. Will my hon. Friend look urgently at whether those rules are absolutely necessary?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Lenders are not restricted from extending mortgages beyond the age of 75, as long as the consumer can demonstrate affordability. Several lenders are currently looking into this issue. There is considerable merit in interest-only retirement mortgages.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What action are the Government taking to tackle payroll and umbrella companies, some of which—not all—are used to perpetuate bogus self-employment and undermine terms and conditions?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): We are looking very closely at this policy area, not least in respect of the Matthew Taylor review of the different ways in which individuals choose to work. The Government’s overriding objective is to make sure that the way an individual works is reflected in the way they are taxed, and that they are taxed properly.

T4. [905498] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Some of my constituents have reported ongoing confusion about child benefit. Some who admit that they have claimed child benefit inadvertently have not been told of the money that they owe to HMRC until interest has accumulated for as long as five years. What more can HMRC do to communicate errors more quickly?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I can reassure him that HMRC has written to a total of 800,000 people to inform them of the issue he has raised, which is also set out and made clear on the very first page of the child benefit application form. I can also reassure him that we will review this policy area in the current period to see how we can make changes going forward.

T6. [905500] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Wick in my constituency has now closed, and a sad sight that is. Last week, we heard that the Homebase branch is also to close. The Chancellor may say that we
have to accept change and live with it, but these are hammer blows for a community such as Wick, and I begin to wonder when we will see tumbleweed blowing down the street. Does the Chancellor agree that we should carry out some kind of assessment of the impact of such closures on the local economies of places like Wick and Caithness, before it is too late?

**John Glen:** It is a matter for banks to make commercial decisions on the basis of their assessments, and there are rules on how they inform the affected constituents. I am, though, very concerned about the situation in rural and sparsely populated areas. I shall visit Scotland over the summer recess to address some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

**Mr Speaker:** Colleagues can help each other by being very brief, which I am sure they will be.

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): With child poverty set to increase by another 1.5 million by 2022, according to the Economic Council for Equality, what will the Treasury be doing to help the very poorest households?

**Elizabeth Truss:** What we have seen in the past few years, since 2015, is a 7% rise in the real wages of people on the lowest incomes, and a reduction in income inequality.

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend talks about complexity. The Office for Tax Simplification is looking into the way in which inheritance tax and the regime operate. Changing the way that tax reliefs operate in the way that he describes would add very significant cost. However, we do, of course, keep all taxes under review.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): The TUC estimates that the number of working households in poverty has risen by 1 million since 2010. Inaction on low-paid, insecure work and punitive welfare reform measures have led to record numbers of people accessing food banks. A responsible Government would measure food insecurity to create policies that end hunger. My Food Insecurity Bill does that. Why will the Government not back it?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We are the Government who have introduced the national living wage. We have reduced tax bills for those on the lowest incomes, and we are keeping our food market competitive and have some of the lowest food prices in Europe.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The UK productivity and prosperity funds are meant to benefit all local authorities across the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to talk about how Scottish local authorities can apply directly to those funds?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** Yes.
Mr Philip Hammond: The Government are committed to exploring all technologies that will keep data safe and create opportunities for innovation. Blockchain is one such technology, but the Government will also be examining other even more innovative distributive ledger technologies.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to learning more about blockchain. I am uninitiated on the matter, as the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) can tell, but I feel sure that he will put me in the picture erelong.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Governor of the Bank of England has stated that economic uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote will knock 5% off wage growth and is costing the UK economy £10 billion a year. Does the Chancellor agree with the Governor?

Mr Hammond: We have not yet concluded our negotiations with the European Union, so it is impossible to make any assessment of the impact of our departure until we know what the future relationship with the EU will be. This Government’s agenda is to get the best possible deal for Britain that protects jobs, prosperity and businesses, so that we can protect our existing trade with the EU as well as build new trade opportunities beyond Europe.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) need not worry; I am perfectly clear that he wishes to give us his thoughts. I am saving him up. It would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Today’s figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that we are at the lowest level of public borrowing since 2006. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out what that will mean for future investment in public services, as opposed to maxing out paying off the nation’s credit card?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we have successfully turned the economy around. We have brought the deficit down, and next year, for the first time in many years, we will see debt fall as a proportion of GDP—[Interruption.] Some Members are laughing, but the same people are proposing that we increase our debt by half a trillion pounds and push our country into penury.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What will ministers do to support the “Great Western Cities” initiative, which promotes collaboration between Bristol, Newport and Cardiff and has enormous potential for the wider region?

Robert Jenrick: We are already engaging with that important initiative. We continue to support the Mayor of the West of England in Bristol, and we are investing over £600 million through the Swansea and Cardiff city deals.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Manufacturing accounts for 24% of the west midlands economy but, as others pointed out earlier, there are skills shortages.
Will the Chancellor therefore support any bid from the Mayor of the West Midlands for a devolution deal to take over responsibility for skills from the Department for Education?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am tempted to wonder whether my hon. Friend might have discussed that question with the Mayor of the West Midlands before asking it. It would be remiss of me to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that I would accept any bid, but I am certainly willing to consider any proposals from the Mayor of the West Midlands, or from any other elected mayor, to address the skills challenge that we face across the country.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Several of my constituents who are highly skilled migrants made entirely legitimate and timely changes to their tax returns and are now facing removal by the Home Office under immigration rule 322(5). Will a Treasury Minister confirm that people should make entirely legitimate changes to their tax returns? Will they also have a conversation with their Home Office colleagues to prevent these highly skilled contributors from being removed from the UK?

Mel Stride: The answer to the hon. Lady’s question is that people should clearly continue to make appropriate changes to their tax returns. I reassure her and the House that Treasury Ministers and HMRC officials are working closely across Government—particularly with the Home Office—on the issues that she raised in order to ensure that we get these matters right.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Government have decided not to proceed with the legislation that they committed to bring forward to protect consumers from the rip-off practice of logbook loans, despite the Bill being prepared and ready to go through the accelerated procedure. Will the Minister explain why he is prepared to allow innocent buyers to continue to be exploited through this outdated, misused legislation?

John Glen: The FCA is looking at a range of options, but I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss her concerns on this matter as soon as possible.
Transport Emissions: Urban Areas

12.40 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps his Department will be taking to improve transport emissions in our urban areas.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question.

Air pollution is the greatest environmental threat to human health in this country and the fourth biggest public health killer after cancer, obesity and heart disease. Today marks the publication of the latest stage in this Government’s determined efforts to reduce and reverse the impact of air pollution on our health and on our natural environment. Our clean air strategy consultation, published today, outlines steps that we can all take to reduce the emission of harmful gases and particulate matter from all the sources that contribute to polluted air.

It is important to recognise, as I know my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) does, that air pollution is generated by a wide variety of sources—from the fuel used for domestic heating to the application of fertilisers on agricultural land, and from the use of chemicals in industry to sea, rail, air and road transport. The strategy published today outlines specific steps that we can take to reduce the use of the most polluting fuels, to manage better the use of manures and slurries on agricultural land, and to ensure that non-road mobile machinery is effectively policed, among other measures.

My hon. Friend asks specifically about urban transport pollution. Last year, the Government published their UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations. The plan allocated over £3 billion to help to reduce harmful NOx emissions, including £475 million to local authorities to enable them to develop their own air quality plans. Since then we have been working with local authorities to help them to deliver specific solutions. We have also issued ministerial directions to 61 local authorities to ensure that they live up to their shared responsibilities.

Our plan committed us to phasing out the sale of conventional diesel and petrol cars by 2040 and taking them off the road altogether by 2050. This is more ambitious than any European Union requirement and puts Britain in the lead among major developed economies. Alongside that commitment we are dedicating £1.5 billion to the development of zero and ultra-low emission vehicles, including support for new charging points across the country.

We were of course helped in the preparation of our clean air strategy by the excellent report produced earlier this year by the Chairs of the Select Committee on Health, the Select Committee on Transport and the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In their excellent report on air quality, the joint Select Committees recommended introducing a new clean air Act. We will indeed be introducing primary legislation to clean up our air. They suggested that we initiate a new health campaign. As the Secretary of State for Health has emphasised, we will be introducing a personal messaging system to ensure that those most at risk receive the information that they need about pollution risks.

It was also recommended that we place health and environment, rather than simply technical compliance, at the centre of our strategy. We do that with ambitious new targets that match World Health Organisation metrics on improving air quality. Of course, we were also asked to reduce emissions from tyres and braking—the so-called Oslo effect—and today we have announced action to work with manufacturers to do just that.

Emissions have fallen consistently since 2010, and my predecessors in this role are to be commended for the action that they have taken, but today’s strategy marks the most ambitious steps yet to accelerate our progress towards cleaner air. I commend the strategy to the House.

Neil Parish: I thank the Secretary of State very much for publishing the clean air strategy today. I know that he feels very passionately about this and works very strongly to get our air cleaner in this country. I also welcome the proposals for improving air quality. That demonstrates progress. However, I am concerned that the strategy is not as wide-ranging as it could be. I welcome the fact that we seem to be cleaning up our wood-burning stoves. We also need to deal with agricultural pollution but, in particular, we need to deal with the hotspots in our inner cities.

The strategy says that, to reduce particulate emissions from tyre and brake wear, the Government will work with international partners to develop new international regulations for particulate emissions from tyres and brakes through the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. I very much welcome that, but is it adequate? To cut the levels of particulate matter from vehicles, the Government should reduce the need for private vehicles in congested urban areas by improving public transport and by making sure that public transport is much cleaner. We have done a lot in London but we need to do much across the rest of our cities in this great country.

It is not clear that the Government have taken on board our report’s key finding that Departments are not necessarily working together effectively. This is not a criticism of the Secretary of State; it is very much to say that we need to work more with Transport to deliver many of the solutions.

Will the Secretary of State support our calls for conventional petrol and diesel engine cars to be phased out by 2040? Will he offer more support and resources to local councils to improve their air quality so that this can be tackled at a local level as well as a national level? Can we be sure that all the monitoring systems through DEFRA and through local authorities actually work?

I welcome the fact that there will be new powers for the Transport Secretary to compel manufacturers to recall vehicles for any failures in their emissions control systems and to make tampering illegal. I still continue to ask why Volkswagen has got away with what it did and why we did not do enough to make sure that it was brought to book. That is not you, Secretary of State—that is the Transport Secretary. However, can the Secretary of State offer more support for cleaner fuels that consumers can use in vehicles, especially bioethanol—E10—in petrol?
Mr Speaker: Whew! The hon. Gentleman can now breathe.

Michael Gove: As you have indicated, Mr Speaker, I think we are all admiring of the Select Committee Chair for managing to pack into his allotted time so much that was useful. I will do my very best to reply appropriately.

My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to the way in which tyres and brakes generate particulate matter that finds its way into the air and contributes to air pollution. We will be working with manufacturers, exactly as he says, in order to deal with this method of pollution. He is also right that particulate matter is a particular problem with regard to public health. One of the biggest generators of particulate matter is domestic wood burning and coal burning. The clean air strategy goes further than ever before in making sure that we can deal with both those means of generating particulate matter.

My hon. Friend asks that we improve public transport. Specifically with regard to NOx emissions, the diesel vehicles on which so many rely for public transport—buses and so on—do need to be modernised. We work with local authorities to ensure that there is appropriate retrofitting of these vehicles so that the diesel emissions that contribute to poor air quality can be effectively dealt with. We are spending £475 million with local authorities to ensure that they can have bespoke solutions. That can involve the retrofitting of public transport. It can also involve engineering solutions to bring down the concentration of harmful emissions in particular areas.

My hon. Friend makes a point about the 2040 target. I completely agree that it is important to hit that target. He also draws attention to the fact that some motor manufacturers, in effect, attempted to get around regulations in order to produce vehicles for sale that did not meet the requirements for air quality that we would all want to see. We can all reflect on the way in which the regulation, which was of course fixed at EU level, did not work effectively. There has been reference, and I know there will be subsequent reference, to the court cases that have found a number of EU countries, including Britain, to be in breach of EU law on this matter. The truth is that one of the reasons Britain and other countries are in breach of EU law is that there are vehicles on our streets that had technical compliance with EU rules but, in terms of real-world emissions, were not fit for our use.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): What we needed from the Government today was a comprehensive clean air strategy to show that they are really serious about tackling this public health emergency, but what we have instead is yet another consultation, which has a focus on emissions from agriculture and wood burning and is weak on cutting roadside pollution from diesel vehicles. It is worth remembering that, since the general election, there have been 25 DEFRA consultations and not one piece of primary legislation delivered.

We know that air pollution is responsible for at least 40,000 premature deaths every year. We know that it is particularly harmful to our children and our vulnerable elderly people. Effective national action must be taken to address the emissions from road transport that are contributing to illegal and harmful levels of pollution. The UK is currently routinely responsible for exceeding the legal levels of pollution. Today’s strategy states that the Government aim to halve the number of people living in unsafe levels of pollution by 2025, but that is simply not good enough. If today’s announcement is the extent of their ambition, it poses a serious question about whether this Conservative Government can really be trusted with our environment and with dealing with illegal air pollution after the UK leaves the EU.

The strategy still does not legally provide for a network of mandatory clean air zones, which DEFRA’s own analysis shows is the quickest and most cost-effective way to bring NOx levels down to legal levels. Yet again, we see more shunting of new responsibilities on to our cash-strapped local authorities, which have been cut to the bone by the Government’s unrelenting austerity agenda. All the new promises we have heard today will mean very little if local councils do not have the money or the resources to implement them.

The Government say time and again that they are committed to this being the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it in, but I see no evidence of actual action being taken to deliver that. Anything being mooted by the Government on tackling air pollution will be effective only if there is a serious and independent environmental regulator after Brexit to hold the Government to account, but the Government’s recently announced environment watchdog has been roundly condemned as entirely toothless.

Labour has been calling for primary legislation on air quality since the last election. This Government only ever take action on illegal air pollution when they have been held over a barrel in the courts. I remind the House that there have been three legal challenges and a referral to the European Court of Justice. When will the Government treat this issue with the seriousness that it deserves? The time for half-measures and public consultation has to end. We need real action now to tackle this public health emergency.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Lady for her points. She asks for a comprehensive strategy. That is what we have produced today. She specifically refers to our target to ensure that half of the population live in areas that meet World Health Organisation standards for air quality by 2025. What she omitted to tell the House is that this Government are putting forward a more ambitious aspiration for the cleanliness of our air than any other Government in a developed nation. It seems that, in her desire to be grudging, she failed to share with the House the detail of our ambition.

The hon. Lady asked about clean air zones. Clean air zones can be implemented by local authorities if they believe that that is the right solution. We on the Government Benches believe in the “local” in local government. It is right for local authorities to make an appropriate decision, depending on the circumstances in that area. A one-size-fits-all approach imposed from the centre may be appropriate in the Marxist-Leninist world of the Corbynistas, but we believe that it is appropriate to
work with local authorities and metro Mayors. When necessary, we will apply ministerial directions, but it is appropriate to have the right approach for each individual area.

The hon. Lady asked about primary legislation. Let me remind her that a Labour Government were in place for 13 years, and how many pieces of primary legislation did they bring in on air quality? How many? It was a Conservative Government who brought in the Clean Air Act 1956 and a Conservative Government who brought in clean air legislation when John Major was Prime Minister, but when Labour was in power, we did not have clean air Acts—we had dirty diesel subsidies.

It was the Labour Government who introduced a deliberate ramping up of the number of diesel cars on our streets. We had a confession recently from none other than the hon. Member for Brent North, a man to whom I always richly enjoy the Secretary of State’s performances, almost as richly as he does himself. I hope, however, he will not take it amiss if I gently point out that to refer to the hon. Member for Brent North as “manifestly are.”

Mr Speaker: I always richly enjoy the Secretary of State’s performances, almost as richly as he does himself. I hope, however, he will not take it amiss if I gently point out that to refer to the hon. Member for Brent North as “manifestly are.”

Sir Desmond Swayne (Towyn) (Con): The clean air strategy rightly sets out the compelling case for action to reduce public exposure to air pollution in order to save lives and improve the quality of life for many. We also know that there is a compelling case to get Britain moving and get us out of our cars, and that cycling and walking, even where there is a lot of traffic, exposes people to less air pollution than driving. Does the Secretary of State share my disappointment that there is only a single paragraph in the strategy on active travel? I urge him to go further by strengthening measures to get people out of their cars and, where possible, on to their bikes and walking for their benefit.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The clean air strategy rightly sets out the compelling case for action to reduce public exposure to air pollution in order to save lives and improve the quality of life for many. We also know that there is a compelling case to get Britain moving and get us out of our cars, and that cycling and walking, even where there is a lot of traffic, exposes people to less air pollution than driving. Does the Secretary of State share my disappointment that there is only a single paragraph in the strategy on active travel? I urge him to go further by strengthening measures to get people out of their cars and, where possible, on to their bikes and walking for their benefit.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. Today’s strategy deals with a number of sources of air pollution, and I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport for showing leadership on precisely the area that she draws attention to. We have spent £1.2 billion on a cycling and walking investment strategy. When my colleague the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was Mayor of London, he introduced a cycle lane network across the capital, which has contributed hugely to an increase in the number of people cycling across the capital. I absolutely believe that we need to have a switch away from an over-reliance on traditional internal combustion engines, towards new modes of transport, and part of that is making sure that we can cycle and walk wherever possible.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): In Scotland we have achieved progressively clean air over recent years through increasingly strict control of industrial emissions, tighter fuel and emissions standards for road vehicles and control of smoke from domestic premises. However, after going to court numerous times, the UK Government are not taking serious action. They are just dragging their feet by announcing yet another consultation. As has just been said, the Secretary of State has issued more than 25 consultations since the 2017 general election, but none has yet produced new laws.

The Government’s own research shows that clean air zones are the most effective solution to air pollution, so why are they ignoring their own advice? Surely they should follow the Scottish National party Government, who are funding low emission zones to take the most polluting vehicles out of the most polluted areas of Scotland. The Health Secretary has said that “Air pollution is contributing to a national health crisis.” Why is the Environment Secretary ignoring his own Cabinet colleagues and not taking serious action now?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He makes the point about the number of consultations we have brought forward. Call me old-fashioned, but I think it is appropriate to consult before one legislates. I think it is absolutely right to make sure that we take account of the views of the citizens of this country and interested parties before moving to legislate. However, I note that in his demand for us to legislate was implicit Scottish National party support for the laws that we will bring forward. I will bank that kind offer of support from the SNP for the legislation that we will feel necessary to bring forward in due course.

The hon. Gentleman says that the Scottish Government have shown leadership on this issue. Indeed, I am happy to acknowledge that there are members of the Scottish Government, whether it is Roseanna Cunningham or others, who take an approach to the environment that dovetails with our own, and I enjoy working with them. The hard work behind the scenes that both Governments exhibit to improve our environment is sometimes not reflected in the exchanges we have on the Floor of the House, so I want to take this opportunity to thank the Scottish Government for the work that they do behind the scenes to advance our shared environment. It is vital, as we leave the European Union, that there is effective working across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom to achieve the goals that we all share.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that there is action he could take now that would not cost the Government money and would not require him to legislate further? Regulation 98 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 states that it is already an offence to leave an engine idling when stuck in traffic or at traffic lights. Is he aware of Westminster City Council’s “Don’t Be Idle” campaign? Why do we not put some
beef behind that campaign, spread it across the country and do something now that would really help, would not cost money and would make a big difference?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The phenomenon of idling engines—often, ironically, outside the very schools whose children we most want to protect from deteriorating air quality—does require action to be taken. I commend my hon. Friend for pointing out the leadership shown by Westminster, among many other councils, and I believe we need a wider application of the already existing powers that local authorities have to deal with this.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Our joint Select Committees report called for ambitious, co-ordinated cross-departmental action, yet there is virtually nothing in the Secretary of State’s new strategy to tackle the impact of road traffic. As the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has said, modal shift gets two paragraphs and active travel just three sentences. He has clearly rejected a ban on diesel and petrol cars before 2040. Can he point to a single measure or funding pot that he is announcing today that will better align urban planning, public transport and fiscal incentives, as our Committees recommended?

Michael Gove: It is important to realise that there was widespread recognition in the report produced by the hon. Lady and other Select Committee Chairs that road transport was simply one of the sources of air pollution. In this strategy, we are complementing what was already announced last year in our roadside NO\textsubscript{x} emissions strategy, with action on ports, air travel and trains, which is a signal of the determined efforts we are taking across the Government to deal with all the sources of air pollution.

The hon. Lady says that we should move faster than to get rid of internal combustion engines by 2040, but I have to say to her that no other major developed economy is taking that step. We need to take a balanced approach towards setting a firm deadline for moving away from conventional petrol and diesel engines, while also providing industry with the time to adjust.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Precisely what are my right hon. Friend’s plans to interfere with my fireplaces and my bonfire?

Michael Gove: I know that my right hon. Friend is one of the most responsible dwellers in the New Forest. He would never burn wet wood or coal with a high level of bitumen; only the driest and most parched twigs will find their way on to his fire and he will use only the appropriate and less smoky coal. I also know that he lives in one of the most beautiful parts of rural Hampshire, and as a result any emissions he generates are unlikely to form a particularly toxic cloud.

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of those attending to our proceedings, the right hon. Gentleman says that the Secretary of State is very kind, but quite right, so there we are. We all feel a bit better informed.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Over the past 30 years, the cost of motoring has fallen by 20%, while the cost of bus travel has risen by 64%. Will the Secretary of State do what he can to reverse those figures? Will he look in particular at the situation in Brighton and Hove? He has written to me about my concern that data on NO\textsubscript{2} exceedances in the city are not being taken properly into account by the Government. Does he acknowledge that we have such exceedances in our city, and if so, will he look again at our grounds for appealing the decision not to award us money from the clean bus technology fund?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I will look at that decision. I recognise that it is important to have accurate measuring of exceedances, but as the hon. Lady will acknowledge, one of the reasons why we have them is that the current Euro 6 diesel cars have been found to emit six times the lab test limit on average, and the new regulations that have come into effect do not accurately ensure that we can bring down exceedances to the level that we both want to see.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I appreciate that my right hon. Friend is a friend, rightly, of the bees and of the fish, but he also needs to be a friend of hard-pressed motorists. The fact is that, as he acknowledged, diesel motorists were told by the previous Government to buy such cars, and his plans will give a green light to many local authorities up and down the country to whack taxes on to diesel car owners. Will my right hon. Friend look at this again? It has happened in London, and motorists are taxed far too heavily, so will he vary these plans?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend has been a consistent champion of small businesses and of those who rely on diesel vehicles to provide the services on which we all, more broadly, rely. As the nature of the debate in the House indicates, a balance needs to be struck. That balance is between recognising that there is an appropriate place in the next couple of decades for diesel as part of the transport mix—where either the private sector or local authorities can find support for a scrappage scheme, we will of course endorse and do what we can to facilitate that—and, as well as making sure that small business can thrive, ensuring that our children, critically, are protected from the greatest concentrations of pollution that we find in some urban areas.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that local authorities have a big role to play in this, but they could do an awful lot more if they had the resources. Central Government have an even bigger role to play. In Tinsley in my constituency, NO\textsubscript{2} levels are regularly above safe limits because it is next to the M1 motorway, which is a central Government responsibility. What are the Government going to do about that, apart from adding an extra lane to the motorway? In Sheffield city centre, the pollution hotspot is around Sheffield station because
of diesel trains, yet this Government have just cancelled the electrification of the midland main line. When are we going to get some joined-up government on this matter?

Michael Gove: I am a great admirer of the hon. Gentleman for all the work he has done both to ensure that the case for appropriate support for local government is made and to ensure, when it comes to planning, that we all take a thoughtful approach that takes the environment into account. However, there is one more thing he could do, which is to have a word with his Labour colleagues on Sheffield City Council and ask them to stop the tree felling campaign in which they are engaged. If we want to deal effectively with air pollution, one of the things we can do is to continue to ensure that trees—they not only act as a source of beauty and natural wonder but contribute to the fight against air pollution—are allowed to survive, rather than being chopped down by a council that is, I am afraid, in thrall to its own officers.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): A properly targeted diesel scrappage scheme would enable us to get rid of the most polluting cars on our streets, and if it was properly targeted it could be done without hammering those people on the lowest incomes. Will my right hon. Friend commit to pressing the Treasury to agree to such a scheme, because ultimately it will have to do so?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The success of any scrappage scheme depends on effective targeting. What we cannot do—it would be irresponsible—would be to use public money to subsidise people who are already making a choice to get rid of a particular vehicle. The deadweight cost associated with that would not be money appropriately spent. He makes the very good point that if we can effectively target such vehicles and find the individuals whom we can incentivise to move towards a green and more sustainable method of transport, we should of course support such measures. I am entirely open-minded about any proposals that might come forward, whether from metro Mayors, local authorities or others.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State noted the very striking finding in our joint Committees report that the fumes and pollution inside a vehicle are 10 times worse than those outside a vehicle? As part of the public information campaign that he has just announced, will he ensure that it is directed at parents who drive their children to school, thinking they are protecting them when they are actually doing them much more harm than if they walked or cycled, as well as exposing other people’s children and families to more pollution and congestion?

Michael Gove: Absolutely spot on. I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. All of us need to know more about the sources of air pollution, and he is absolutely right. I did not appreciate that until the Select Committees brought it to my attention, and I am grateful to him for bringing it to the attention of a wider audience today.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): There are three hotspots in my own constituency all of which are in towns. What are we going to do to increase electric charging facilities in those places to overcome this problem?

Michael Gove: We have devoted £1.5 billion overall to supporting the growth of zero and ultra-low emissions vehicles, including a wider network of charge points, but I think there is more that we can do. One of the things I will be exploring with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Housing, Communities and Local Government is how we can do everything possible—both in planning and in the legislation that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is bringing forward—to build on the leadership that my hon. Friend has shown.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Everyone has the right to clean air, including people in villages such as North Hinksey and market towns such as Abingdon in my constituency, yet those places have hotspots, and those sorts of conurbations are not mentioned at all in the clean air strategy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that his ambitions extend to smaller conurbations, not just cities?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a good point. There are concentrations of poor air quality not just in our major cities but in other areas. There can be a combination of factors, including roadside emissions and emissions from domestic heating. Critically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, acknowledged, sometimes emissions also come from agriculture. The strategy commits us to providing support for all those sectors, to move towards a cleaner future.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): In my constituency, the badly thought through planning policy of the failing Labour council is failing properly to take into account the critical issue of air quality. How will today’s announcement improve my constituents’ lives, given that at the moment they are at the mercy of a failing Labour local authority?

Michael Gove: The powers envisaged in the consultation will allow local authorities to act on everything, from unwise choices made about domestic heat generation to making sure that some of the diesel machinery involved in construction and for other purposes is appropriately licensed and controlled. I note that, following recent local election results, it seems that the leadership shown by my hon. Friend has been recognised by voters in his constituency, who have moved away from their previous allegiance.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State outline progress on E10 regulations, on proper investment in hydrogen vehicles and on what is being done to tackle secondary generators and transport refrigeration units?

Michael Gove: On secondary generators and other generators of emissions, we are giving local authorities and others powers to deal with the consequences of poor air quality as a result of their deployment.

More broadly, on hydrogen and other vehicles, the Department for Transport is neutral about future technologies but supportive of the investment required to ensure that a suitable range of technologies is available.
One of the key features of the legislation being brought forward by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, which originated under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), is to facilitate precisely the type of innovation that the hon. Gentleman alludes to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman in question is in our midst, and that fact will not have gone unnoticed.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that new primary legislation announced today will give authorities such as Cornwall Council the power they need to protect communities such as Tideford and Gunnislake in my constituency from air pollution?

Michael Gove: Absolutely; I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. We want to work in partnership, and local authorities such as Cornwall Council can make sure that the communities in her constituency—in particular the children who attend primary schools in those communities—can be protected from the impact of air pollution. I am grateful to her for championing much of the work in this consultation throughout her time in this House.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has repeatedly told the House that the UK leads the way in phasing out combustion engines by 2040, but he must keep up to date with current events in the German Bundesrat, which has already passed legislation for them to be phased out in Germany by 2030. We also believe that in China combustion engines will be phased out by 2030. That makes our policy a laughing stock in the world.

Michael Gove: There are some countries, including some outside the European Union such as Norway, that have a more ambitious target than our own. However, I do not think that the legislation has yet been given effect in Germany.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend may seek to control what goes into them, but proper responsibility—a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, I met Simon Thomas and some of his colleagues from the Welsh Assembly a couple of weeks ago. I was hugely impressed by the work that they are doing, and I would like to work closely with the Assembly and the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Government’s move towards phasing out petrol and diesel cars, but the key point will be the charging infrastructure, particularly for when people are away from home—when they are visiting Torbay this bank holiday, for example. Will the Secretary outline what plans the Government have to develop the necessary infrastructure?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are investing £1.5 billion, but it is also important for us to reflect on where people are likely to find themselves at particular times of the year—now and in years to come. One of the things that many of us will be doing this coming bank holiday weekend will be visiting beautiful English seaside resorts such as Torbay. It is important that, as they move towards cleaner and greener forms of transport, people have the opportunity to enjoy the natural beauty of the southern riviera without polluting the air at the same time.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On the subject of natural beauty, Hull was one of 49 UK towns and cities that failed World Health Organisation standards for air pollution.

I want to return to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). What discussions has the Secretary of State actually had with the Transport Secretary about the scrapping of rail electrification schemes and his championing of bimodal trains which, as I understand it, will still pollute the air?

Michael Gove: We have had extensive discussions with the Secretary of State for Transport, who has been leading efforts to ensure not only that we can scrap diesel trains altogether at an appropriate point, but that we can ensure that there are appropriate alternatives to those that exist at the moment.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The use of dirty coal to generate electricity in our country plummeted by 25% last year, and such generation now stands at less than 7% of the overall energy mix. Will my right hon. Friend recommit the Government to the ambitious target of getting rid of coal completely from the energy mix by 2024 and maintaining the UK’s global leadership in this important field?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point and reminds us of the steps that we have already taken to ensure that we move towards cleaner methods of electricity generation. In that respect, I commend to the House the recent work of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who has been outstanding in ensuring that we can make the transition to which my hon. Friend alludes.
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are in the dock at the European Court of Justice for the premature deaths of 40,000 people a year. As we approach Brexit, is it not time that we had a clean air Act with the focus and priority to deliver the standards and enforcement institutions that we enjoy in Europe? We should at least match the 2030 targets for the Netherlands, Ireland and Germany so that we do not end up being the dirty, coughing man of Europe.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. He has been in the lead among Members in pressing for primary legislation, and we acknowledge the need for such legislation in the strategy. I know the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make—it was also made by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis)—but it is important to remind the House that the vote in the Bundesrat was non-binding. What we have in this country are binding commitments that we are determined to meet, and that is a significant contrast.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Yesterday I met representatives of Honda and BMW, both of which are determined to make a difference in this important area. Will the Secretary of State urge his colleagues to provide more clarity on the use of hybrid engines and technology as a way to help to reduce emissions year on year?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The existing motor companies will play a critical role in ensuring that we can move towards a more sustainable and cleaner method of providing personal transport. He is absolutely right that hybrids will have a role to play. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will be saying more about that in due course, but I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and other Members who represent manufacturing and industrial sectors for the constructive way in which they have helped to bring people together.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure that the Environment Secretary gets very frustrated with the Treasury dragging its feet on some of the initiatives he wants to push forward. It was recently reported that the £400 million plan for electric car charging infrastructure is being held up by the Treasury because it has not even recruited somebody to be in charge of the private sector investment element—it says it will recruit this summer—so will he please put a rocket under the Treasury and tell it that while people want to buy electric cars, they will not do so unless the infrastructure is in place?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for trying to present the issue in the way she did. The truth is that I cannot think of anyone in this House, apart from possibly my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, who is cleaner—keener, rather—on investment. [Laughter.] He is very clean. Cleanliness is next to godliness. I do not think there is anyone in this House who is keener on moving towards ultra low emission vehicles than the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As Transport Secretary and in his current role, he has led efforts across the Government to make sure we are moving in the right direction. I do not think it is at all fair to criticise him or the Treasury in that regard.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the owner of two very efficient renewable fuel-burning wood stoves. On traffic emissions, it was recently discovered that the monitoring equipment in Shoreham high street had been broken for several years, which might explain the fact that Shoreham’s air quality is always deemed to be good. Volunteers have now had to carry out those tests. If we are to be serious about the quality of the air, may we put a duty on local authorities to properly maintain accurate and reliable equipment?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will investigate what we can do.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that rather than pursuing HS2, a greater priority would be the introduction of regional public transport schemes to electrify our rail lines, and to encourage the introduction of hydrogen and electric buses in our towns and cities?

Michael Gove: I do not think it should be a case of either/or.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): The development of electric vehicle battery technology will be crucial to encouraging a supply side revolution in the uptake of electric vehicles, which would help to reduce emissions in urban areas. What progress has the Secretary of State made, jointly with the Department for Transport, in this area?

Michael Gove: We have been working with not just the Department for Transport, but the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to ensure that we can make Britain the most attractive home for new technologies. It is striking that great British inventors such as Sir James Dyson have dedicated themselves to ensuring that Britain can compete with competitors such as Elon Musk’s Tesla to provide the right technology for clean, green, effective and sustainable transport in the future.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The clean air strategy says that during the transition to zero emission vehicles “we will ensure the cleanest conventional vehicles are driven on our roads.”

The Secretary of State will know that most people buy second-hand cars, not new ones. Under changes introduced by this Government, vehicle excise duty rates for used cars registered after March 2017 make no distinction whatever between those that produce lower levels of carbon dioxide and pollutants that are harmful to air quality, and those that produce higher emissions. How is that compatible with a promise to ensure that the cleanest conventional vehicles are driven on our roads?

Michael Gove: It is the case that the increase in vehicle excise duty on new cars is helping to contribute to ensuring that local authorities receive the money they require to have appropriate clean air strategies. I think
that any keen student of the second-hand car market would recognise that the value and resale value of diesels has fallen, reflecting the fact that people know that they need to move away from that polluting form of transport.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): With a characteristic mix of insight and eloquence, the Secretary of State has once again made the case for extending the electric charging infrastructure, thereby addressing one of the reasons why people do not buy electric cars. He will know that when we debated these matters in the House—he paid tribute to my pioneering of that legislation—one of the reasons for local authorities' frankly inconsistent application regarding on-street parking was that the guidance was not strong enough. Will he now ensure that all local authorities make provision for electric charging infrastructure on streets?

If I might just add, Mr Speaker, I initiated a competition as Minister for the design of such infrastructure. Will the Secretary of State reinvigorate that competition so that the charging infrastructure is one day as iconic as the pillar box or a Gilbert Scott telephone box?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes two very important points. On the first point, we absolutely need to make sure that the infrastructure is there, and his second point is also important. One of the reasons why we cherish the environment is natural beauty. When we think about the steps we take to safeguard and enhance natural beauty, we should think about man's contribution to making sure that the aesthetics around us reflect the best of us. The best of us is, of course, exemplified by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): My constituents and Londoners more generally want more ambitious measures implemented, and sooner, than are outlined in the Government's strategy. They breathe in toxic fumes on a daily basis. Why has London been exempted from the clean air fund?

Michael Gove: We have specific arrangements with the Mayor of London to ensure we can help him to meet his ambitions. I saw the Mayor last night. I do not expect him to endorse everything in this package, but I find his constructive approach to working with central Government to improve air quality heartening. We will continue to work with him. A little while back the Mayor himself said that while resolving road emissions was critical to improving air quality, there are many other things that the Government are required to do. It was partly a result of what the Mayor said that we brought forward the strategy today.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): There are 40,000 premature death deaths nationally, with 10,000 in London, and the schools in my constituency fare among the worst. What impact assessment has the Secretary of State done to consider how many deaths would be prevented under the new strategy compared with if the Government committed to a clean air Act and phasing out diesel engine use by 2030?

Michael Gove: One thing we have done is to work with the academic community. Indeed, I met some of its members yesterday at Imperial College, one of our best universities, to look at the impact of the steps we are already taking to improve public health and to save money for the Exchequer. By definition, that work is publicly available to all. I take on board the hon. Lady's point. We are bringing forward primary legislation. We can use the model that has been constructed to see how different impacts could be generated by different policies, and I look forward to sharing those results with her.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Emissions from road traffic cause the majority of air pollution in my constituency. Given that the M4 and traffic related to Heathrow are outside the purview of the London Mayor and the London Borough of Hounslow, how exactly will the Government ensure that post-Brexit regulatory regimes will have the same powers as their current European equivalents?

Michael Gove: On the first point, I want to make sure that, as we envisage the expansion of aviation capacity across the south-east, we do everything possible to make sure that all contributors to air quality in the relevant areas are taken properly into account as part of a balanced approach towards policy. On the second point, we are consulting on what shape a new environmental regulator should take.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Hope Street in my constituency has long been acknowledged as one of the most polluted streets in Scotland, so I am sure that the Secretary of State will have been as glad as I was to see that Councillor Anna Richardson is bringing forward a low emission zone in Glasgow as one of the first acts of the SNP city government. One of the inhibitors to the success of low emission zones is of course haulage and bus transport. Will he tell us a bit more about what conversations he has had with those industries about progressing to more environmentally friendly vehicles?

Michael Gove: We have been keen to make sure, certainly when it applies to buses and public transport, that we make money available to local authorities for appropriate retrofitting. Hauliers recognise that there will need to be a shift. One of the things we need to do—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is doing this—is to make sure that we can move to a more efficient method of haulage in the future.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I was pleased that the Secretary of State raised electric vehicles in his opening remarks, as I have been pursuing this issue since I came to this place. I have created a nine-point plan, which I raised with the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and more recently with the roads Minister in a debate on electric vehicles in Westminster Hall. The ideas include matching Joint Air Quality Unit funding with Office for Low Emission Vehicles funding and getting three-phase electric points. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss all nine points of my plan?

Michael Gove: It will be a pleasure.

Mr Betts: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: Order. A point of order would ordinarily come later. Does it appertain to these exchanges?

Mr Betts: Yes.

Mr Speaker: And is it uncontroversial and not a continuation of debate, but an honest pursuit of truth by the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee?

Mr Betts: It is an honest pursuit of truth, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very good. I will give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt.

Mr Betts: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would not want an inaccurate statement to go uncorrected. He said that Sheffield City Council was felling trees and that that was adding to the pollution problems in the city. The truth is that while there has been some contention about the removal and replacement of some trees on some streets, overall there will be more trees in Sheffield at the end of the programme than at the beginning, and the city will have low-energy LED street lights throughout, which I hope the Secretary of State will welcome.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information. We have learnt a bit more about the Sheffield tree situation, which is potentially reassuring. If the Secretary of State wishes to leap to his feet to respond, he is welcome to do so.

Michael Gove indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman signals that he is content, such is the—

Mr Betts: He agrees—thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman agrees, but he gives no evidence of disagreement. The emollient tone of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has served his purpose for now—[Interruption.] Order. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) chatters from a sedentary position that this is an explosive issue. I do not know whether it is—[Interruption.] Locally; well, that may well be so. Very good, honour is served.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his update, and I have a few questions for him. Will the Government make it clear today that they will condemn the new charges brought against my constituent and call for her immediate release? Ministers have said that they will not provide a running commentary on the case, but when we met the Foreign Secretary in November, he promised that he would leave no stone unturned. I press the Minister to update the house on how his strategy is being conducted in practice.

Will the Minister update the House on whether the historic debt owed by Britain to Iran has been paid, and when is the next court date scheduled? Nazanin spoke to our ambassador to Iran after meeting the judge, and she requested that he sign a formal letter of protest to the Iranian Government. Will the Minister confirm that this constitutes an overdue acceptance from the Iranian judiciary that Nazanin is indeed British? Will he say whether he anticipates that this will lead to further consular protections being granted? Will he today confirm that the ambassador will send the note of protest that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has requested? Will the Minister press the Iranian authorities to allow Nazanin temporary release to spend Gabriella’s—her daughter who went with her to Iran—fourth birthday with her?

I finish by saying that I bring these questions to the House in good faith. All we want in West Hampstead is for Nazanin to return home. All our constituents, including her husband, Richard, who is in the Public Gallery today, believe that Nazanin is innocent. She is British,
and she deserves to know what her Government are doing to secure her release and to reunite her with her families back home.

**Alistair Burt:** I refer to remarks I made earlier about how we intend to conduct the case and the answers that I can give to the hon. Lady's questions. We remain of the assessment that a private, rather than public, approach is most likely to result in progress in Nazanin's case and ultimately, her release, which is all any of us want.

I can answer one or two questions. On diplomatic protection, the FCO is in discussion with Mr Ratcliffe and his legal representatives on the merits of a claim for diplomatic protection. It would be remiss of me to comment any further until these discussions have concluded. I am not making any comments about the charges or anything similar.

As I have said, our ambassador spoke to Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe on Sunday. He assured her that we continue to prioritise the case and do everything we can to bring about her release, including requesting consular access, requesting access to medical reports and requesting a temporary furlough so that she can indeed celebrate Gabriella's birthday with her family.

On the International Military Services issue, we do not share the view that the IMS debt or any other bilateral issue is the reason for Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's detention. The UK has always been clear, both publicly and in private discussions with Iran, that the two issues are entirely separate, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has publicly stated on several occasions that there is no link. We will meet our legal obligations in relation to the debt, and funding to settle the debt was transferred to the High Court several years ago.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that Foreign Office advice relies on the fact that this experience is a powerful corrective to any notion of dual nationals that they might return to Iran?

**Alistair Burt:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions, but I am unable and unwilling to answer many of them—in the circumstances I outlined earlier, it would not be appropriate—and I know he would not press me to deal with the detail of the negotiations and their handling between us and the Iranian Government in such a sensitive case. I can well understand the reasons for the questions, which were all perfectly fair, as were those of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), but their position is different from mine in terms of dealing with the answers.

Like everyone, I share the sense of regret that we still have to discuss this in the way we do—even though we are limited in how we can talk about it—but I can only repeat the assurances I gave a moment ago: at the highest levels here in the UK, with the Prime Minister's call to President Rouhani and the Foreign Secretary's intervention, and through our ambassador's interventions, we continue to call for access and the temporary furlough. We are doing all we can in our belief that this is the right way to handle this delicate situation. I do not think it would be appropriate or helpful, however, to deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's questions.

There is no indication yet of any change in the attitude of the Iranian authorities towards Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's status, and we are having to work with what we have, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that no conversation goes by at any senior level in which these issues are not raised. Our consular team handle this very carefully, and representations will continue to be made, but as I indicated, to deal with every single part of this would not be the appropriate way to help Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her families.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): The shocking news reported last night that a judge in Iran has told the jailed British-Iranian teacher, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, that he expects her to be convicted on a new charge of "spreading propaganda against the regime" is truly appalling. As Amnesty International has stated, “this is yet another body blow for Nazanin”,

"(Tulip Siddiq)"
who, we must remember, has denied all the charges brought against her. Can the Minister confirm that the future of Nazanin is not enmeshed in the long-standing British debt of more than £300 million and that this has been agreed by both Governments? Does he also agree that now is the time to issue a demarche, as Nazanin discussed with the UK ambassador, given the treatment she has so far received and does he further agree that she has already been subjected to a blatantly unfair trial and sentence? Finally, will he now agree to significantly escalate the UK Government’s response to Nazanin’s plight by asking for the Prime Minister’s personal intervention so that this further injustice can be brought to an end swiftly? This has been going on for far too long.

**Alistair Burt:** Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s last remark about the time. First, as I indicated earlier, there is no link between the debt owed by the UK and the dual national cases. Secondly, it is not appropriate at this stage to deal with the detail of any particular type of contact between the embassy and the Iranian Government. On escalating the matter still further, the Prime Minister has already raised the matter, which is being handled at the highest level by the British Government.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As a result of Nazanin’s treatment in prison, Redress has written to many of us asking for the intervention of the UN special rapporteur on torture. What action will the UK Government take to protect Nazanin from any further torture and ill treatment and to ensure she receives an independent medical examination and any necessary treatment in compliance with international law? Does the Minister agree with Redress that the UN special rapporteur should intervene?

**Alistair Burt:** No.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer to the urgent question. Does he not agree that the time has come to use all our diplomatic influence, and can he confirm what action we can take with our allies collectively to bring about an end to the brutal emotional and physical persecution—it is nothing short of that—of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe?

**Alistair Burt:** As always, the hon. Gentleman speaks from the heart, and his point certainly needs to be considered in this case. The humanitarian circumstances have been made clear to the Iranian authorities. This is a woman separated from her child some time ago. As the House knows, I have met the daughter and family in Tehran, and I am well aware of the circumstances. We make the case on the humanitarian basis as much as we can to indicate the pathway forward, and the UK will continue to do so in a manner that the House would expect and understand.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): When we had a debate on this matter in Westminster Hall last July, I was not the only MP who said that many of their constituents were really exercised by the plight of this lady. I still get emails from constituents about it. Am I really in a position to assure them that the British Government are doing everything they can?

**Alistair Burt:** The short answer, as I said earlier to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), is yes. It is difficult to explain to constituents who would like to believe that the answer to everything happening abroad lies here, but it does not. We will do everything we can, and are doing so, not only in this case but in the cases of other dual nationals. We will not know how successful that is until the happy day when she and others are released.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her tenacity on behalf of her constituent. Last November, I asked the Foreign Secretary whether he was willing to hold discussions with the Iranian authorities about their targeting of the BBC Persian service—not only journalists in the UK but their families in Iran. There are real fears for their safety. Can the Minister update the House?

**Alistair Burt:** Yes, I can assure the hon. Lady, whose own tenacity in other respects also deserves commendation, that the issues affecting the BBC Persian service have been raised directly both by the Foreign Secretary and me. We are conscious of the pressures under which they work and the diligence with which they go about their duties, and I can assure her that those matters are indeed raised.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Last year, I met Redress, which has been mentioned already, to discuss not just this case but that of Andy Tsege. It published a report in January saying that more than 100 British citizens a year were reporting being mistreated in jails abroad and not being provided with the humanitarian or consular assistance that the British Government should be giving them. It also says that there is inconsistency in the support provided, particularly for dual nationals. What can the Minister do to assure us that any British national, whether a dual national or not, will receive the same consular support if they find themselves in that position?

**Alistair Burt:** They are certainly offered all the same support, but the blunt fact is that not all states treat dual nationals the same: some recognise dual nationality and allow access to the UK authorities, others do not accept it and treat the dual national solely as a national of their own state. In those circumstances, they do not believe they are required to give access. I can assure the hon. Lady, however, that in each and every case the UK Government make exactly the same representations seeking access, because we believe that dual nationality means what it says: dual nationality, not sole nationality.1

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Taking on board the lessons of the mistakes made in this case, will the Government review how they deal with such situations in the future to ensure that no other British citizen has to go through the misery that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her family are experiencing at the moment?

**Alistair Burt:** I wish I could give the hon. Lady the assurance she seeks, but the decisions of foreign courts and states and their impact on UK nationals are not always within the power of the UK to resolve at the speed or in the way we would wish. I can assure her that, 1.[Official Report, 4 June 2018, Vol. 642, c. 1MC.]
as any contact between colleagues and our consular officials should make clear, although every case is individual, note is taken of how cases are handled in particular states so that if there are lessons to learn, they are learned. As I have said, we are sometimes dealing with situations that are not entirely within the United Kingdom’s control, and each case may need to be handled with a different degree of dexterity. People are released from foreign detention every day, unknown to the House, unknown to the press, known only to their families and sometimes to us, so not everything is done publicly; but everything that the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and our consular service try to do is for the best in terms of their welfare.

Point of Order

1.50 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday a written ministerial statement entitled “Road Haulage Update” was published by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), setting out plans for a solution to the problems of Operation Stack, and explaining how the Government intend to avoid queues 20 miles long should customs checks be introduced post-Brexit.

This is an issue of strategic national importance, which, if mishandled, will devastate not only Kent but the national economy. The Secretary of State did not make an oral statement yesterday, and has failed to give the House an opportunity to scrutinise the announcement. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how the Secretary of State might be encouraged to come and make a formal statement to the House?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise this matter. The short answer to him, and for the benefit of the House, is that the decision on whether to make a written or an oral ministerial statement is a matter for the Minister; it cannot be decided by the Chair.

I recognise the importance of the issue to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and it is evidence to me—and doubtless to others—that he is, to put it mildly, perturbed, or even irritated, by the absence of an oral statement. He asked what recourse he has in the circumstances. The answer is that the hon. Gentleman is a most dexterous individual in respect of the use of the Order Paper and the facilities of the Table Office, and he is not unaware of mechanisms by which he can secure further answers. If he thinks that the matter remains of urgent importance, he can seek to secure the presence of the Minister to respond to him.

I think we will leave it there for now, but meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman has ventilated his dissatisfaction.
Social Justice Commission

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

1.52 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to the Social Mobility Commission.

Social justice is the defining issue for our country, and I was delighted that the Prime Minister’s key message in her “burning injustice” speech in July 2016 was that the Government would fight injustice in our society. The Social Mobility Commission, then led by Alan Milburn, was to play a crucial role in that mission: its purpose was to shine a light on progress towards tackling injustice. In December last year, however, Alan Milburn resigned, alongside his fellow commissioners. He explained his reasons in his letter of resignation, stating specifically that roles on the commission had been vacant for nearly two years, and expressing his belief that the Government were—in his words—“unable to devote the necessary energy and focus to the social mobility agenda”.

Social justice is one of our themes on the Education Committee. We want everyone in our society to be able to reach and climb the ladder of opportunity, and the resignation of the commissioners was naturally a source of serious concern. We held a public evidence session with Alan Milburn, Baroness Shephard and David Johnston, and published a report with our conclusions.

We concluded that there should be a body inside Government to co-ordinate and drive forward initiatives to ensure social justice across the country, and to ensure coherence and cohesion across Departments. We also said that a few relatively minor legislative changes would result in a more effective commission, and it is those changes that the Bill seeks to implement.

By the time the commissioners walked out in December, there were only four of them left. The commission had started with 20, but there had been no renewals since March 2015. An appointment process at the beginning of 2016 was described as “farcical”. The commission was left to dwindle, which seems totally at odds with the Prime Minister’s commitment to social justice. Baroness Shephard was the deputy chair of the commission. She said that

“the writing was very firmly on the wall anyway. It had to be because we could not get answers. There were delays. Not delays, but blank walls as far as appointing new commissioners was concerned, and I thought there was no point...there was no point at all.”

The Bill would create a minimum membership of the commission, of seven members in addition to the Chair. I see no reason why the Government should aim for the number of commissioners to be fewer than 10, although I recognise that there may be occasions on which the membership may, for one reason or another, fall below that number. However, introducing a minimum membership in law will mitigate the risk that such attrition and neglect will happen again.

The commission has conducted in-depth research, and has a focus on data and analysis. It is therefore in an ideal position to analyse Government policy objectively for its effect on social mobility. The Government already recognise the value of independent advisory bodies, objectively assessing financial implications of policy: the Office for Budget Responsibility is one example.

Why should that not apply to social justice as well? The Bill seeks to give the commission specific powers to publish social justice impact assessments of both policy and legislative proposals. Those assessments should be used to help Governments to improve policy, not just as a means by which negative effects are flagged.

The legislation that set up the commission provides that it must, on request, give advice to a Minister of the Crown on how to improve social mobility in England. However, Alan Milburn told us that the Government “lacked the head space and the band width to match the rhetoric of healing social division with the reality”.

He noted that

“there is only so long you can go on pushing water uphill”.

We are not confident that Ministers regularly and usefully request advice from the commission. The Bill would give it power to give advice proactively to Ministers on how to improve social justice in England, as well as its duty to give advice on request.

Our final suggested legislative change is to the name of the commission. I do not like the phrase “social mobility”. It reminds me of a Vodafone advertisement. While it can convey the idea of people moving up the ladder of opportunity, the phrase “social justice” goes much further. It describes helping the most disadvantaged to reach that ladder of opportunity, and supporting them should they fall. Changing the name of the commission would make abundantly clear what it is seeking to improve. It is the Rosneal principle: it does what it says on the tin—not just improving the chances of some people, but offering all people equal access to opportunities. As its name has already changed twice since 2010, a further small change would be consistent with its changing role.

I am delighted that our report was agreed unanimously and that the draft Bill has the full support of the Education Committee. I pay tribute to all my colleagues on the Committee for their hard work and support, and for their commitment to social justice. We may be members of different parties, but we are united in addressing social justice in education. I thank the officers of the Committee as well.

We are convinced that the relatively modest changes proposed in the Bill, in addition to a body inside Government to implement recommendations and co-ordinate across Departments, will result in a more effective social justice commission. We want to see the commission empowered to monitor and report effectively on progress towards achieving social justice in England. We want the Government to hear the commission loud and clear when it suggests remedies, and when it advocates on behalf of those in our society who need a voice the most. An effective social justice commission working in tandem with an implementation body at the heart of Government could really begin to heal some of the great social divides in our country. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Robert Halfon, Lucy Allan, Marion Fellows, James Frith, Emma Hardy, Trudy Harrison, Ian Mearns, Thelma Walker, Lucy Powell and Mr William Wragg present the Bill.
Robert Halfon accordingly presented the Bill. Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June and to be printed (Bill 213).

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the main business of the day, I remind the House that we will interrupt the debate at 2.30 pm, or possibly a few seconds before, to hold a one-minute silence to remember the terror attack in Manchester on 22 May 2017.

Serious Violence Strategy

2.1 pm The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Serious Violence Strategy.

A year ago today, 22 innocent people, including many children, lost their lives in an appalling and cowardly attack on the Manchester Arena. Today, we remember their lives and share a thought for all the families who were affected on that tragic day.

We are reminded today of the devastating consequences that hatred and violence can have for ordinary lives. This Government’s absolute priority is the safety and security of their citizens. No one should feel unsafe on our streets and in our communities. That is why I am here today to talk about another issue affecting the lives of ordinary citizens and to lay out the Government’s strategy for tackling violent crime.

This Government are determined to end the deadly cycle of violence we see on our streets today. We are clear that these crimes are unacceptable, that there is no place in society for these horrendous crimes and that anyone committing these acts of violence must feel the full force of the law.

The recent increase in serious violence is of deep concern to us all in both Houses, and I assure Members that the Government take this very seriously. That is why on 9 April we published our “Serious violence strategy”, which sets out the action we are taking to address serious violence and in particular the recent increase in knife crime, gun crime and homicide.

The Government have also made a commitment to bring forward legislation in the coming weeks. Our strategy represents a step change in the way we think about and respond to serious violence, establishing a new balance between prevention and the rigorous law enforcement activity that is already happening up and down the country.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister will know that recorded incidents of violent crime have risen from 700,000 in 2009 to over 1.3 million in 2018. Does he think in any way, shape or form that the 20,000-plus reduction in the number of police officers in that time has any connection to that rise in crime?

Mr Wallace: I hear the right hon. Gentleman’s observation. What I do know is that, during the last spike in knife crime, in 2009-10, there were more knife crime offences than there are now and police numbers were at much higher levels, so it is not entirely connected, as he will know. If it were, his logic would have said that there would have been fewer knife crime incidents, when the police numbers were much higher, than there are today. Perhaps he can answer this question: in 2009-10, why was there a spike in knife crime given that there were such high police numbers then?

David Hanson: The figures are clear: there were 700,000 violent incidents in 2009 and 1.3 million now. I was the Minister dealing with knife crime then and there was a spike. We put investment into early prevention, after-school activities, higher policing visibility at the school gates, visibility at night and alternative activities for people in...
the streets and we reduced knife crime incidents; they were recorded at hospitals and at accident and emergency. In his violent crime strategy, the Minister is now reinventing those measures, having cut them in 2010.

Mr Wallace: I note the right hon. Gentleman’s examples, but none of them—hospitals, local schools, local government—was about police numbers; they were about similar things to the things we are talking about today in the strategy and the broader response by society to tackling why violence is being embedded in communities. So it is not purely about the police numbers debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I reject utterly that connection. We would have to swamp the streets with policemen; there would have to be policemen available at every violent incident for it to make that form of difference. We would be back to Cromwells saying, “If I arm one in 10 will that be enough?” Of much more significance in terms of the propensity to violence is the lack of attention to the question of young people—particularly very young people—and parenting. That is where the Government’s efforts must be directed.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s point. It is certainly the case with any type of crime, whether violent crime, serious crime, organised crime or terrorism, that it has to be dealt with not purely by arresting our way out of the problem.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Wallace: I am going to press on.

We can debate police numbers all we like in the House, but the simple fact of the matter is that, unless we get involved in prevention and share the burden more broadly in society—[Interruption.] As important, because it often slips the mind of the Opposition, is the fact that if we do not live within our means we will not be able to sustain the spending on our communities and public sector. I regularly have to remind the Opposition that in 2010 the deficit in this country was £150 billion. We were spending more than we got in tax receipts. Unless we start to live within our means we cannot sustain the investment in our communities. We can live with the Opposition’s fantasy politics of nationalising everything on a Monday, funding everything on a Tuesday and borrowing all year round, but we will pay for that in the end. That is why we have set about balancing the economy and taking a strong and stable determination to make sure we took apart the money that enabled them to operate. That crime group is no longer active, and that community has taken back control and managed to deliver a successful response.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The Minister knows that there are difficulties in London at the moment. He is also aware that Cressida Dick has requested additional resources to deal with them. I came here today in the hope that we would have a fair and balanced debate about what we need on our streets, rather than this Punch and Judy nonsense. What he has suggested is that it is okay for nine children to have died in my local authority area because we do not have the money for the police force. May I ask him to be a bit more sensitive in the way he is dealing with this debate?

Mr Wallace: Is the hon. Lady suggesting that I said it was okay for nine people in her constituency to die? That is the worst example of Punch and Judy politics I have heard in this House for a very long time. It is fine for her to ask about resources, and it is fine for her to say that she does not think the response is correct, but she seems to suggest that a Government Minister is saying it is okay for nine people to die. Is that the measure of the debate we are going to have today from the Opposition? She insults the police, the local authority and her own constituents. The reality is that people are dying on the streets long before the Tory Government or the Labour Government were here. I remember patrolling the streets where people had died, and people were not going round half the time saying that it was purely the Government’s fault. There are lots of factors involved.

One of the factors behind the rise in violent crime is the use of smartphones and encryption, where we have seen a big shift. Those networks empower people to trade drugs and to communicate in a safe space. They allow connections between groups in a way that never happened before and that makes those groups much less vulnerable to the work of the law enforcement agencies.
Mr Wallace: I totally agree that we have to educate children about the dangers that they are exposed to.

I go back to the point about modern communications and smartphones. In the past there was often a gulf between streetwise communities where young people grew up exposed to crime and were sometimes exploited by it, and other areas where people would say, “I never see gun crime in my village”. In the past, there was no connection between the two, but now it is all joined up. Now, young people can be exploited wherever they are, and whatever their background, by being able to access drugs using their smartphones. That is why we are seeing this problem seeping in, and that is why the first place to go is the schools—as low as the primary schools—to teach children about how vulnerable they can be online and how vulnerable they can be to being approached.

Another part of my portfolio involves child sexual exploitation. People are being exploited, manipulated and organised through those telephones. That is a real challenge, and I am not going to pretend that we have a solution.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I take the Minister’s point about this impacting on young people of all backgrounds, but there is no doubt that there is a clear link between what is going on and deprivation, inequality and poverty. Does he agree that if this issue were affecting a different group—a privileged, more wealthy group of young people—it would be headline news every day of the week? Surely this is why we must think about how we approach our young people, and why we must adopt what many are describing as a public health approach to this issue. We are not looking after the mental health and wellbeing of too many of our young people living in deprived communities, including some of the wards in my constituency.

Mr Wallace: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, who I know is on the violent crime taskforce. I often find that the crimes in my communities do not get reported. As a north-west MP, I sometimes feel that when crimes happen in London they get a higher profile than they would in Lancashire. We have a duty to point out to all our young people where they are vulnerable. I agree that some communities do not get the attention they deserve. Certainly, some of the crime we have seen in London has too quickly been put down to gang crime, rather than to serious organised crime. It is often serious organised crime groups that are exploiting these young people, but because this crime is put down to gang crime, there is a tendency to say, “Well, we have dealt with gangs like that for many years.” Those young people are just as vulnerable and exploited as any other type of child.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I really want us to get back to a serious tone. I am grateful to the Minister for specifically mentioning the cocaine market. Will he say something about our Border Force? Will he also say something about resources for the National Crime Agency? He will understand that the average black teenager in Tottenham barely knows where Colombia is and certainly does not have the means to organise trans-shipment routes. Will he also say something about eastern European gangs?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman makes a clear point. In the past, there were plenty of middlemen between the local gangs and the big organised criminals running out of Colombia or the Balkans. That has now reduced. Through safe and secure encryption, young people have the ability to order drugs and gangs have the ability to have delivered to their door large packets of drugs from Albanian or Serbian drug gangs, or indeed from local drug gangs: United Kingdom citizens—it is not the copyright of the western Balkans. That has put real power into the system.

At the same time, the United Kingdom is fast becoming the biggest consumer of cocaine in Europe. There is high demand from the consumer, and cocaine is no longer the preserve of the yuppie or the rich. We are seeing cocaine in my villages, in rural communities and in communities in London that would not previously have used it. It is a high-margin, high-supply drug at the moment, and that is fuelling the increase in violence.

With those Albanians or those serious organised criminals comes the enforcement of the county lines. They do not just put a 15-year-old into a house or “cuckoo” the house; they provide a weapon to enforce the drug line. Sometimes, if the 15-year-old is not a willing participant, the gangs will ruthlessly enforce that county line with violence. They will kill those people and they will kill the local drug dealers if they get in their way.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and I, through the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, recently met some girls who had been involved in county lines. They had become involved because of boyfriends, because of money and because it was a solution to the problems they faced in their lives. They said that nobody had ever told them not to do it. No one at school or earlier on in their lives had explained that these things might be offered to them and that there were choices to be made. There was no one in their school telling them about that. Does the Minister agree that schools have a duty to keep our children safe, and that they need more resources to ensure that children know what good choices to make?

In the old days, if anyone wanted to import huge amounts of cocaine to this country, somebody had to go to Colombia and meet people there. They had to physically go there and order the drugs. Then they had to take the cash and launder it. In the space of about eight years, these changes have meant that no one has to do that anymore. People can sit at home and order and deal drugs, and they can launder the money almost instantaneously through Bitcoin and elsewhere. That is a real challenge for the police, and it will not be fixed purely by putting more patrols into communities. It is also about changing how policing is done and investing in upstream National Crime Agency issues—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is right to say that there are issues of resource, and that is why we have increased some of the resource. I am informed that £49 million more is going into the Met, and the violent crime strategy comes with some new money.
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Five young men have been stabbed in my constituency in the past month alone. The community is traumatised, and people are worried that things are going to get worse, as they always do, as the long summer nights roll in. I know that lots of London Members here will be wondering what can be done in the immediate term, in addition to the strategy, in terms of extra funding for prevention and diversionary programmes to ensure that we do not have a summer of escalating violence in our capital.

Mr Wallace: I understand the fear about the challenges on summer nights. If five people had been killed in my communities, I would feel as horrified as the hon. Gentleman.

First, we are building on the things that have been happening for years. We are getting everyone around the table—the Mayor of London is on the serious violence taskforce—because it is about engaging everyone. I am not deaf to the resource issue, and I do not pretend that the police have not been under stress. We can disagree about why they have not had more money. We also have to recognise that policing has to change as crime changes. We have seen them do some good stuff. We have sometimes seen money spent in the wrong place. We have to work on making sure money is spent in the right places.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): So-called drill music often glamorises violence, stabbings and even murder. When allied with social media, drill music can amplify tensions between gangs and groups. How can we call the social media platforms to account and encourage them to wake up to their responsibilities?

Mr Wallace: I welcome the statement over the weekend from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on consulting on measures to remove both illegal and legal harms from the internet, and on the exposure of people, certainly young people, to those harms on the internet. I would welcome any suggestions from either side of the House, and the Home Office, alongside DCMS, will tackle those harms.

I met Google this morning to discuss how it can do more to take down violence-inspiring videos. The level of violence to which my young children are exposed quite early in the day on television, let alone the internet, will come back to haunt us.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In his answer to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the Minister said that he was not blind to the idea of resources, particularly in relation to London and the real crisis that is happening in our city. Will he give us a little more hope because, like the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich and many London Members here, I worry about the trend continuing into the summer months?

Mr Wallace: In the Home Office we are always open to listening to more demands. After Manchester last year I, as Security Minister, received a demand from Mark Rowley and the head of MI5, and we worked hard at the Treasury to get £50 million of extra money to respond to the operational pressures.

It is not just London. Merseyside MPs saw a spate of murders and gun crime at the start of last year. There is a real pressure that we have to try to address. Of course the Home Office will work with colleagues to see where we can get more out of the resources we have.

We have found more resources. We have put £49 million into the strategy, and we have put more money into some of the broader responses, including local government and community responses. We will work with the Mayor of London, with whom we will discuss what his priorities may or may not be, on which we may or may not agree.

I wish I had more money. We did not come into Government to cut things. There is sometimes a suggestion that we had a choice and we chose not to spend money. We will try to do our best to meet the resources, but burden share is important, and it is the same in other growing areas of crime. We cannot arrest our way out of some of these things. We have to burden share, and we are doing a whole range of things. A new contest will be launched in the next few weeks and, in order to meet the growing scale of the threat, we have to burden share with both the private sector and the public sector on keeping us safe on the ground. That is the scale we face not just here but internationally.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I will give way, and then I will have to make some progress.

John Cryer: The Minister is right to say it is not just about the police, because it is also about the other agencies. The problem is that every agency across the board has faced cuts, certainly in London. My east London constituency covers two boroughs. Waltham Forest has faced cuts of around £100 million, and Redbridge has faced similar cuts. The boroughs cannot mount early intervention and provide greater resources through schools and social services while, at the same time, carrying the burden of £100 million in cuts over seven or eight years.

Mr Wallace: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As I have said throughout, where we can find more resource to meet this pressure, we will. We might disagree on the wider economy issue but, nevertheless, we are trying to balance the books. Without doubt, it is important that we have this framework in place, with £49 million of early investment, as well as other sums, to make sure that we start the process of gelling together all the people who can help to deliver on some of these issues.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: No, I really have to press on. I have given way quite a lot. I am about to read my speech backwards, and Members will not want to hear it twice.

As I have said, it is vital that we steer young people away from crime in the first place. We have to support positive alternatives and timely interventions to provide them with the skills and resilience to lead productive lives free from violence. In the strategy we propose a range of universal targeted interventions, including the
[Mr Wallace]

ey early intervention youth fund, which will be launched this summer and to which police and crime commissioners can apply to support early intervention and prevention activity with young people. We will also provide support to Redthread to expand the pilot and its youth violence intervention programme outside London and to develop its services in London hospitals.

We have reviewed the evidence, and the strategy sets out the trends and drivers of serious violence. The analysis makes it clear that the rise in serious violence is due to a range of factors, but the changes in the drug market are a key driver of recent increases in knife crime, gun crime and homicides, which marks the second element of the strategy.

Crack cocaine markets have strong links to serious violence, and evidence suggests that crack use is rising in England and Wales due to a mix of supply and demand factors. County lines drug dealing is also associated with violence and exploitation, and its spread is also a key factor.

In addition, it is thought that drugs market violence may be facilitated and spread by the social media I talked about earlier. The strategy sets out a range of activity we will undertake to tackle serious violence, including more than 60 specific commitments on action. We are providing £40 million over two years to support the initiatives in the serious violence strategy, including £11 million for the early intervention youth fund and £3.6 million for a new national county lines co-ordination centre that will sit in the National Crime Agency.

We are particularly concerned about county lines because of the violence they are now developing. The links behind the county lines are complicated, and the threat crosses police and local authority boundaries, which is why the national county lines co-ordination centre will be key not only in sharing intelligence but in co-ordinating responses and in making sure that victims are supported or diverted away from the county lines.

We will also work with the Department for Education on the support and advice offered to children who are educated in alternative provision, including those who have been excluded, to reduce their risk of being drawn into crime or on to the pathways into crime. In addition, we will work with the Department for Education and Ofsted to explore what more can be done to support schools in England in responding to potential crime.

However, taking effective action means that the issue needs to be understood and owned locally as much as nationally. Communities and relevant partners must also see tackling serious violence as their problem, which is the third pillar of our approach. We are supporting communities to build local resilience and awareness by continuing to match fund local area reviews, which identify the resilience and capability of local areas to respond to gang-related threats, including county lines. That follows on from our support to help partners.

Police and crime commissioners have a vital role in working with community safety partnerships, or the local equivalent, in providing local leadership to bring communities together. That is why the Government are also committing £1 million to our community fund for each of the next two years. The fund, which was launched last week, provides support for local initiatives that work with young people to tackle knife crime. Those initiatives include early intervention and education, as well as mentoring and outreach work. In March we launched a major new media advertising campaign, #knifefree, aimed at young people and young adults to raise awareness of the risks of carrying knives. That was chiefly delivered through social media targeted at young people and it has had a positive response from our partners. We must pursue, disrupt and prosecute those who commit violent crimes, and a robust response from law enforcement therefore remains critical. As I have said, we will bring forward legislation to strengthen our response to violent crime. That includes the introduction of new measures such as—

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues, we will now hold a one-minute silence to remember all those affected by the terror attack in Manchester a year ago today.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

Mr Wallace: A year ago, I was in Manchester, from very early in the morning of the attack, and I wish to take this opportunity to place on the record my appreciation of Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Manchester, of the leader of the council and of chief constable Ian Hopkins for the fantastic and amazing work they have done over the past 12 months in helping to heal Manchester and bring that community together. Having visited the investigation on many occasions, I cannot say just how much regard I have for the police and intelligence services, who are still pursuing leads and still working to keep people safe. I believe we have the best police and intelligence services in the world, which is why Manchester is back on its feet, alongside a great community who are determined to make sure that the spirit of Manchester lives on. Although I am not there with them today, many of us are there in spirit and we stand ready to continue to help that great city.

We must pursue, disrupt and prosecute those who commit violent crimes, and a robust response from law enforcement therefore remains critical. As I have said, we will introduce legislation to strengthen our response to violent crime. That will include the introduction of new measures such as restrictions on buying and carrying knives and corrosive substances; and banning certain firearms. An offensive weapons Bill will be introduced into the Commons or the Lords in the next few weeks. We will also continue to support and facilitate police action such as Operation Sceptre—weeks of action designed to tackle knife crime—and action to prevent violent gang material on social media. The serious violence taskforce has been established to drive the implementation of the strategy and support the delivery of key objectives. The taskforce brings together Ministers, Members of Parliament, the Mayor of London, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the director general of the National Crime Agency, other senior police leaders, and public sector and voluntary sector chief executives.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Minister mentioned social media. The Met police have reported more than 400 incitement to violence videos on YouTube alone that are still online today. Do the Government support police authorities across the
country having the power to compel YouTube and other social media outlets to remove content that is violent or incites people to violence?

Mr Wallace: I absolutely support our forcing these outlets to take this material down where we can. I met Google and YouTube this morning to discuss exactly that subject. The challenge around the world on videos and YouTube stuff is not on cases where a clear crime is involved, such as bomb-making manuals or child abuse; it is where companies—often based abroad—decide that our version of incitement or extremism is not their version of it. That is where we have to look at all alternatives. That is what the announcement at the weekend on the consultation by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was about. We have to have a proper collective discussion and ask, “Where do we start and stop? How do we draw a line about what is freedom of speech, what is incitement and what is violent extremism?” That is not as straightforward as people say. However, 98% of violent extremism on those internet platforms is being taken down within 24 hours and some of it is being taken down within two hours. We are pushing for this to happen even quicker, through using artificial intelligence and machine learning to recognise those issues. We want these companies to put more of their resources into that, to make sure these things are taken down. I also want them to report this content when they take it down so that our police and agencies can do something about it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister makes the point that it is difficult to tell, but we do not have a problem deciding whether something is incitement to violence offline. I fail to see why we cannot apply that logic to online content and why he cannot work with the internet providers and the platforms to administer online what we have offline.

Mr Wallace: When we see these things and we report them, these providers take them down. We are asking them to spot them in advance before they are uploaded. That is what we want. On the plus side, when, through the Met police’s internet referral unit, we report these things, the providers do take them down. The simple scale of the internet means that we want them to do this before or during the uploading. They have made some progress on this matter, although we still think they can do more. I am acutely aware that they have made more effort only when we have talked about regulation, tax and harder things; it is not as though they jumped through the front door offering. However, I think they have had a realisation, through seeing the patience that is being tested internationally.

I was at the G7 recently with people from France and Germany, and they were all saying to the lead four companies, “We have sort of had enough.” Those companies are now starting to move and move rapidly. We have supported the Global Internet Forum, set up and chaired at the moment by both Governments and the big four. We have to make sure that they do more about the small providers, because as they are taking more stuff down, small providers and platforms, based in jurisdictions we cannot get at, are popping up and handling most of that content. We have to do more on that. We have to put more pressure on the United States about some of the far right websites. As the Select Committee on Home Affairs rightly pointed out, we will proscribe National Action yet it will still be running a website—or it has in the past—in the US. However, we are working hard with the Americans and they have said they will do more, as will the internet companies. They are now moving, although they could have moved a bit faster—that is how I would probably say it.

Gareth Thomas: Nigh on three weeks ago, two teenagers in my constituency were shot at and seriously injured. I do not doubt the commitment of Cressida Dick and the Metropolitan police to finding the perpetrators of that shocking incident, but my constituents and I worry about the decline in the visibility of the police presence on our streets in Harrow. I therefore take this opportunity to underline to the Minister the profound concern, particularly from London MPs, across party, as well as from others, about the lack of sufficient resources for the Metropolitan police. I urge him to do whatever he can to lobby the Chancellor for further funding for the Met.

Mr Wallace: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s point on the funding. I also say that it is important to work with Cressida Dick and to ask about policing priorities and how she chooses to deploy her force. All police forces do things differently. Members may recall significant gun violence in Nottingham a few years ago, when the city went through a patch that included the murder of a jeweller’s wife. Interestingly, Nottingham got a bad reputation in the early-90s or mid-90s, but that was driven by two people and when they were taken out it had a profound effect on that community. There are definitely operational decisions here as to how police forces spend their resources, but I also hear the point about resources.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Wallace: I really have to move on. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will respond to the debate and can certainly answer more questions on those points.

I believe that the approach set out in the strategy—a multi-strand approach with a greater emphasis on early intervention—will address the increase in serious violence and help young people to develop the skills and resilience to live happy and productive lives away from violence, and it will also ensure that people feel safe in their communities and homes.

2.40 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We Opposition Members also want to honour the anniversary of the Manchester atrocity. We share the Minister’s appreciation for the leadership of Mayor Andy Burnham, and for the work of the police, security services, fire services, NHS and other public sector actors. Above all, we want to honour the people of Manchester, who did not allow the bombing to tear them apart and who showed outstanding love, solidarity and strength.

I am pleased that the House has this opportunity to debate the important serious violence strategy. Serious violence is an issue that concerns people all over the country. Here in London alone, bloodstained month has succeeded bloodstained month since the new year.
Just in the past few days we saw in Islington the 67th homicide victim in London this year, who was also the 42nd victim of a fatal stabbing. But it is not just a big-city issue. The county lines phenomenon has brought violent gang-related crime into the heart of the countryside and county towns.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for what she is saying in her speech. She talks about serious violence not being just a London issue; it might not be very well known but throughout Norfolk and Norwich we have seen the biggest surge in violent crime in the entire country in the past couple of years. There has been a fifteenfold increase in knife crime and a 70% increase in gun crime. In the midst of this perfect storm and this rising tide of despair and woe is increasing youth homelessness, more children in care, more children permanently excluded from school and community policing completely and utterly cut—Norfolk was the first county police force in the country to do that. Some £30 million has been cut from the police budget in Norfolk—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If you want to speak, I can put you on the list. Short interventions, please; it will help the House.

Ms Abbott: Serious violence is not just a big-city phenomenon. Earlier, after some of my hon. Friends’ interventions, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) said that this was artificial politics. Let me say to the House that nothing could be more real than mothers crying over their dead sons, and nothing could be more real than keeping our constituents safe. This is not a parliamentary game; this is about our constituents’ lives.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just about the £253 million that is going to be cut from the Metropolitan police in the next 18 months? The cuts to youth services since 2010 have also fuelled this despair and worry.

Ms Abbott: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and shall return to those issues later in my speech.

We welcome the broad themes in the serious violence strategy—tackling county lines; early intervention and prevention; supporting communities and local partnership; and law enforcement and the criminal justice response—but I hope the Minister will agree that it is reasonable to talk about resources when we discuss those themes. For some time, Ministers claimed that they were protecting the police budget and that crime was going down. I am glad to hear them now admit that there is a major problem with serious violence, the crime about which people are most frightened and concerned.

In the latest 12 months, police recorded gun crime is up 11% and knife crime is up 22%. There are widespread reports of serious violent crime, including knife crime, throughout the country. Reported deaths have risen sharply from the beginning of this year. Ministers have said that the Home Office serious violence strategy is designed to address all that. In her foreword to the report, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), said that £40 million of public funds have been committed to the strategy and that it is a “significant programme of work involving a range of Government Departments and partners, in the public, voluntary and private sectors.”

Are Ministers really telling us that the resources that they are promising are adequate? To be clear, in the past 12 months the police recorded almost 40,000 knife crime offences and well over 6,000 firearms offences; the funding allocated to discourage, prevent, divert and detect serious weapons-related violent crimes is therefore just a few hundred pounds for each offence.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about resources, and it is clear that there are not enough. As she rightly says, it is about not just big cities but towns, too, and it is also about having the resources to detect and prevent crime and to get the intelligence. That is one of the biggest problems. It is about not only having police officers on the streets but being able to prevent crime in the first place.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is right. We talk about the lack of resources because the role of the police is not just to detect crime and prosecute; the role of the police is to be in communities and to know what is going on, and to be trusted stakeholders with whom community groups, parents, schools and others can work. If we do not have the police officers on the ground, that affects our ability to respond to serious violence, in more than one way. It is unclear from the Government’s published strategy whether there is any new money at all or if it has just been stripped from the existing police budget, which has already been cut in real terms since 2010.

When we look at stakeholders’ response to the strategy, we see their scepticism about the level of resources. The chair of the Local Government Association’s Safer and Stronger Communities Board said:

“Only with the right funding and powers can councils continue to make a difference to people’s lives by supporting families and young people and help tackle serious violent crime”.

The Association of Directors of Children’s Services said:

“The strategy emphasises the importance of local communities and partnerships yet provides little for local authorities to develop local responses”.

If Ministers are to be taken seriously on this issue, they have to listen to what stakeholders say about resources.

Chuka Umunna: I completely agree with the shadow Home Secretary on this resourcing issue. First, does she agree that no one on the Opposition Benches is saying that resources alone or more police numbers alone are going to solve this? The point is, though, that the current state of affairs makes it so much harder to address this problem. Secondly, on prevention, does she agree that it is high time that this country elevated the status of our youth workers? Too often, youth work is treated as a useful add-on or a voluntary activity, but we need to treat youth work in the same way as we treat teaching. Youth workers sometimes spend more time with our young people than teachers in our society.
Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend. Nobody on the Opposition Benches is saying that having more police officers would solve the issue of serious violence on its own, but the Government cannot expect the community to believe that they are taking the issue seriously unless they provide the right level of police officers. The Government have long been in denial about the effect of their own cuts to the police. They have cut 21,000 police officers since 2010, and more than a quarter of police community support officers have been axed. They have not protected police budgets, which have fallen in real terms. According to the National Audit Office, which I hope Ministers will regard as a reliable source, central Government funding to police forces reduced by 25% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16.

The Government talk about making more money available, but much of what they are talking about is the capacity of police and crime commissioners to raise the precept. Why should keeping people safe come out of the pockets of the community? When will the Government acknowledge that people expect national funding to meet national need?

While the Government have been in denial about the fact that they have not protected police funding, chief constables are clear that those cuts have consequences, especially for the police’s ability to tackle serious violent crime and other important areas of crime. The most senior police officer in the country, Cressida Dick at the Metropolitan police, has said this about the effects of cuts:

“There’s a whole load of things, but of course I would be naive to say that the reduction in police finances over the last few years, not just in London but beyond, hasn’t had an impact.”

It is time that Ministers started listening to chief constables and listening to stakeholders such as Cressida Dick.

Cressida Dick accepts that many reasons contribute to the rise in serious violent crime, but she also accepts that police cuts are one of them. Even the Home Office itself, in a leaked memorandum, accepted that resources are part of the problem. The Home Office document, “Serious violence; latest evidence on the drivers” said:

“So resources dedicated to serious violence have come under pressure and charge rates have dropped. This may have encouraged offenders.”

It is unlikely to be “the factor that triggered the shift in serious violence, but may be an underlying driver that has allowed the rise to continue.”

Neil Coyle: On the issue of the lack of charging and prosecuting, what message does my right hon. Friend think that the Government are sending to Mariama Kamara whose 16-year-old son was murdered in September 2015 in Walworth, or to the mother of Rhyheim Barton who was shot and killed in my constituency on 5 May? Those mothers see the plateauing of prosecutions and know that there are people out there who are literally getting away with violent crime and murder.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. If the level of charging has plateaued and people are literally getting away with murder, communities must think that, for all their protestations, Ministers do not really care. [ Interruption. ] Well, Ministers may try to reject that analysis, but the thoughts of the people in our communities must turn to that.

We want a serious violence strategy, not just increased levels of stop and search. Evidence-based stop-and-search has a role, but any serious strategy to tackle violent crime will involve a number of Departments and local stakeholders, as the Minister has said. We need to learn from what works. The Home Office’s own research into stop-and-search shows that there is “no statistically significant crime-reducing effect from the large increase in weapons searches during the course of Operation Blunt 2. This suggests that the greater use of weapons searches was not effective at the borough level for reducing crime.”

Research from the College of Policing came to exactly the same conclusion. When the New York Mayor, Bill de Blasio, completely ended stop-and-frisk, he found that it coincided with a decline in crime. The Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, had this to say:

“I strongly believe that stop and search should be used proportionately, without prejudice, and with the support of local communities”.

I agree with her comments then, even if her views and those of other Conservative Members differ now. Indiscriminate or mass stop-and-search has no discernible impact on reducing crime. Only targeted, intelligence-led stop-and-search has shown to be effective.

Ministers will be aware of the advances in tackling knife crime and other violent crime in Scotland. In 2017, there were no deaths from knife crime in Scotland, even though Glasgow was once thought to be the knife crime capital of this country. The approach taken there, which itself developed from lessons learned in the United States and elsewhere, was to treat knife crime as a public health issue. That means tackling the gangs and the gang culture, including diverting people from crime and helping young people get out of gangs. It includes work in communities and in schools, and ending the widespread use of school exclusion, rather than class exclusion.

Catherine West: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although we have good and outstanding schools in many local authority areas, including in my own, sadly, the numbers of exclusions are going up, which seems to correlate with the rise in youth crime? That seems to hold up the evidence on the public health approach, as keeping young people in schools, or in some sort of care, seems to be an effective anti-crime approach.

Ms Abbott: We must reflect on the rising level of school exclusions and acknowledge that pupil referral units sometimes look and feel like academies for crime, even though the people who run them work very hard and do their very best.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As someone who was a councillor in Glasgow when the initiative was introduced, I can say that it made an absolutely huge difference. I do not know whether she heard of the cull-ins that we had in the medics against violence programme when gang members were brought into the courts and shown testimonies by parents and by medics. Did she see that and does she think that an initiative, whereby people could see the direct result of gang violence to families and communities, would make a difference in London?

Ms Abbott: I have heard of that initiative, and it is certainly worth trying. Dealing with violent crime is not just a question of policing and arresting. The initiatives
used in Glasgow are well worth looking at. Anybody who thinks that we can simply arrest or stop-and-search our way out of this crisis is deluding themselves.

A senior commander at the Met told me recently that an entire gang operating in one part of London was put away for lengthy sentences for drug crime. The result was not that the level of drug crime and the level of violence dropped, but that violent crime in the area actually surged, as competing gangs moved into the vacant territory. We need an integrated, joined-up approach. Seizures, arrests and sentencing will all play a part, but we also need the right level of resources, and those can only ever be a part of a much broader strategy involving schools, hospitals, local communities, social workers, resources for youth centres and recreation and much more. Of course, all those things have been cut as a result of this Government’s austerity, and we are now living with the consequences. We cannot keep people, and our young people, safe on the cheap.

I try to visit the families of every young person who is stabbed or a victim of homicide in my constituency. I remember visiting a family recently. They were broken, and the mother could not stop crying. In my closing remarks, I want to say to the House as a whole that we need to remember that, whatever the circumstances, violent crime is a tragedy for the protagonist, a tragedy for the family, and traumatising for entire communities. That is why the Opposition believe that the Government must give the issue their continued attention and the right level of resources. In response to my hon. friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the Minister said that if five people in his constituency died, he, too, would be very upset. Communities want Ministers to behave as though five people in their constituencies had died. Our constituents want the Government to pay more than lip service to the issue and to learn from strategies that have succeeded, whether in America or in Glasgow.

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Lady can question our policies or our funding, but to question our motives or suggest that we do not care is just insulting. Glasgow has done a fantastic job in reducing knife crime to zero—[Interruption.] Police Scotland has done that; it is a devolved matter. According to Police Scotland, the number of police in Glasgow in 2015 was 5,544. In 2017, when knife crime had been reduced to zero, the number was 5,530. Therefore, on the numbers, police in Glasgow managed a reduction, but they used broader shoulders to solve the crimes and the problem, and they should be rewarded for that. If there is an example to show that it is not all about police numbers, that is it.

Ms Abbott: I said earlier that I am not arguing that this is all about police numbers, and I touched on some of the other issues, such as education, youth services and community services, that are also part of the answer.

I have always believed that part of my role in this Parliament is to be a voice for the people who would not otherwise have one. In my community and in others that I have visited, there is serious concern about how much the Government are prepared to do about this issue. We want Ministers to act as though they believe that every young person’s life has a value. We want Ministers not just to talk the talk, but to put resources, police officers and support into strategies that can relieve our communities of the burden of constant reports of death and killing.

3.2 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It might be useful for me to begin with the genesis of the debate. I draw attention to it not merely to emphasise my role, but to illustrate that the request for this debate sprang not from one part of the House, but from across the House. When I raised the matter at business questions on 19 April, I was quickly followed by several colleagues, including the hon. Members for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and others, who were determined to ensure that we had time and space to debate the issue. We did so exactly in the spirit that was mentioned earlier: not out of a desire to make party political points, but a proper and responsible desire to talk about both the causes of and potential responses to the problem.

I was encouraged, perhaps even inspired, to begin that process—although I share the credit entirely and equally with all my colleagues—by a wireless programme that I heard on Radio 4, on which the mothers of victims of knife crime were interviewed. It was extremely poignant, as one might imagine, and we have all seen or heard similar interviews, I am sure. Those mothers not only described the tragedy of their loss—of course they were going to speak about that, which would have been sad enough—but, chillingly, claimed that people in positions of power did not know enough and, more than that, did not really care. Without bitterness—just as a bold fact—one of the ladies said, “Well of course they do not care, because it is not their children at risk.” When I heard that as I drove to come here, I thought to myself, “I know many people in this House—some better than others, but I know people across the House extremely well—and there is not a single Member of this House who does not care.” We needed this debate and the chance to speak out not just because the matter deserves airing, but because we need to broadcast from this Chamber not only that we care, but that we are prepared to do something about the things about which we care. That was the genesis of this debate.

I had no idea—

Chuka Umunna rose—

Mr Hayes: I will give way to somebody whom I know well and like a lot, but only after I have finished this point.

I had no idea that the hon. Member for Gedling in Nottinghamshire, where I spent the first part of my adult life, or the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford in south-east London, where I spent my childhood, were going to follow me at business questions. It was not staged, but it might as well have been, because it was highly effective. The Government responded to our call, and I am grateful to Ministers and, as I said last week, to the Leader of the House for doing so.

Chuka Umunna: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am glad that he recalls the audio that he heard on the radio. Just to contextualise
the comment made by the shadow Home Secretary about the sense that people in this House do not care. I have certainly heard, in my constituency, what the right hon. Gentleman heard on the radio, and we must face up to that. Too often, we focus attention on the matter when we see the numbers jump, as they have recently, and the perception is that we forget about it afterwards.

As someone who served in government for some time, the right hon. Gentleman may have noted something that I find disappointing. It is good to see the two Home Office Ministers here, but Ministers from all the other Departments affected should be here, because the only way that we are really going to grip the issue and show that we really care and will do something about it is if there is join up. Where is the Minister for Skills? Where is somebody from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government? That is vital.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right. As has already become clear from what has been said so far this afternoon, the issue touches so many aspects of life that it is bound also to touch many aspects of Government. We have heard about youth services, education, employment and everything that is associated with what sustainable communities are and how they are built. That affects the work of all kinds of Departments, and the work of all kinds of Departments affects those communities. He is right that we require a lateral approach.

The hon. Gentleman will also know, as I do having served in many Departments, that one of the weakest parts of our system of government is its ability to combine the efforts of Departments effectively. It does happen. Sometimes, an initiative, campaign or effort can span Departments, but the nature of how Governments are constructed, with ministerial responsibilities essentially following a vertical pattern, means that it is hard to get Departments to be as effective as they need to be in combining. That is not an excuse, and certainly not a justification, but it is perhaps a reason for why successive Governments have not done as well as they might have done in bringing people together. Perhaps today marks an opportunity to do so. [Interruption.] I see the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on the edge of his seat—I first met him when he was a Home Office Minister, and he was a very good one indeed.

David Hanson: I was just moving slightly following what the right hon. Gentleman said, but when Labour was in government and I was the Home Office Minister responsible for policing and security and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and Baroness Hughes of Stretford, the former Member for Stretford and Urmston, were Education Ministers, I assure him that we met every week for a year as part of a knife crime action plan to try to bring the figure down when the spike mentioned by the Minister occurred. That co-operation between Departments drove a reduction in knife crime.

Mr Hayes: Yes, I did not want to suggest—and I did not, actually—that it does not happen at all. What I said was that we did not do as well as we might. That is not to say that efforts are not made. I was involved in all kinds of cross-departmental work in various Government Departments, including when I did the same job as the Security Minister, who opened this debate. However, we do need to work more at having that kind of cross-fertilisation, application and collaboration. If the right hon. Gentleman can point to a precedent that could be followed, so be it. Governments do not have the same predecessors, regardless of party. All Governments do some things well and some things badly. All Governments have their moments in the sun and their periods in the darkness, do they not? All Governments have their brightly shining stars, although far be it from me to claim such a mantle. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is smiling because, of course, we worked together so effectively in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and he knows well the approach that I took there.

This is a real opportunity. It may be an opportunity to stimulate just the kind of work I just mentioned. It is an opportunity for the Government to sit back and consider what they are getting right and what they are not, and what more can be done. It is also an opportunity for us to critique the effectiveness of the current policy, and to articulate some new ideas and thoughts about what we could achieve as time goes on.

This debate is a salient one. The hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford and for Leyton and Wanstead, myself and my hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and others called for this debate because, although violent crime, knife crime and gun crime are not new, there is a qualitative and quantitative difference now. There has been a step change in volume and a change in the character of the events that lead to the appalling crimes with the consequences that have already been described by others Members.

I want to speak today not really on my own behalf. By definition, I always speak on behalf of my constituents, but I also want to speak for all those who have been affected and are being damaged by these tragic events not just in London—as the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State said—although urban places have of course suffered most, but in places across the country. We have heard already that nearly 40 people have died this year as a result of knife crime and that more than 65 people have lost their lives in London since the beginning of the year due to violent crime. Yesterday, of course, saw a murder on a high street in broad daylight.

It needs to be said that this crime disproportionately affects particular communities. Despite making up less than 2%—about 1.4%—of the whole population, young black men represent a third of the victims of these crimes. We must do something about the disproportionate effect of violence in those communities. We owe all our people a duty; and when we look after all our communities, this House can feel truly proud. But by the same token, if we are not taking action and if any group of the population feels neglected, as the mothers of those victims clearly did, it is a cause not merely of disappointment, but of shame. I do not want to be shamed by a failure to act and I know that Ministers do not either, so let us be clear: we all want to make a difference. We are here because we care about this issue. I know both Ministers on the Front Bench, and I know that they care about getting this right as much as anyone in this Chamber.

Let us now talk about cause and effect, because so far in this debate there has been some meandering between the two. I want to be clear that we cannot just deal with the effects; we have to deal with the causes and we have
to be honest about them. Yes, gang violence is a part of it. Yes, gang culture is a part of it. Yes, it is fed in part by social media. It is certainly affected by the character of the communities in which these people live. When people’s lives are stripped of purpose, they lose pride. When people lose a sense of place, pride and purpose, hopelessness prevails, and hopelessness leads to all kinds of malign and malevolent outcomes, including violence. If people have nothing to belong to, when there is nothing that give their lives shape and meaning apart from the membership of a gang, they are very likely to join one.

Chuka Umunna: I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point about gangs, but does he agree that we must actually be very careful about the way in which we use the term “gang”? It is unhelpful to put people, particularly young people, into that bracket because they are not gangsters. In some senses, using the term reinforces the notion that they are. There is also the problem that, if we put the issue into that bracket, we condition agencies and public sector bodies to think, “Oh well, that’s how those young people act.” There is then almost an expectation that that is how it is, and that we should just put people in that box. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my hesitation about that, not least because—due to social media, as was mentioned earlier—people are no longer acting in big groups, and the situation is much more localised and parochial than it was before?

Mr Hayes: It would be myopic—even misguided—to isolate the reality of violent crime, particularly knife and gun crime, from social and civil decline. We have to look at the character of community and the nature of civil society in order to get to the root of why this is happening at the scale and in the way in which it is. If this is the qualitative and quantitative change that I have described, we have to be straightforward, but also thoughtful, about the cause, and I think that part of that cause is the decline of traditional structures.

I spoke at the beginning of this debate about growing up on a council estate in south-east London. I had an idyllic childhood in a stable, loving family in a strong, responsible community in a place that I was proud to call home. Now, I do not for a moment claim that my family or the others that we lived among were wealthy. We certainly were not wealthy. By that stage, of course, people had a reasonable standard of living. We had enough food to eat, a well-furnished home, a seaside holiday for a fortnight a year—usually in Kent—as well as a polished second-hand car outside the door and a clipped privet hedge. This was not like the background that my father endured of abject poverty before the war; my childhood was not wealthy, but neither was it uncomfortable.

The key thing about that time was that the values that prevailed in that community were the kind of values that encouraged a sense of responsibility and purpose, which delivered the pride that I mentioned earlier. When people are purposeful and proud, they are much less likely to behave in a way that is socially unacceptable and they are certainly less likely to get involved in crime and violence. That is not to say that there was not crime then—of course, there has always been crime—but the character of those communities has absolutely changed from the time when I was growing up. I am sure that that is about family breakdown and the values that prevailed then that are no longer routine. It is also about all the civilities and courtesies that have informed daily life. I do think that some of that civil and social decline—that communal deterioration—is associated with the way in which individuals behave, and the way in which that behaviour sometimes spills over into crime and violence.

I agree with the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) that of course it is not all about gangs. The point I was making was that, in the absence of a positive social structure, alternative social structures will sometimes fill the void, and they are not all desirable. Some are fundamentally undesirable—indeed, they are malevolent in both intent and character. In essence, that is a very longhand way of saying that I broadly agree with him.

What are some of these social changes? I have spoken of some of them by way of illustration from my own life. We know from endless research that young people who grow up in broken or disjointed families are much more likely to be involved in antisocial behaviour, crime and drugs. We know that, when some of the other ties of community break down, both individual wellbeing and the common good are detrimentally affected. I spoke of having a loving family. There is no better element of civil society than strong, supportive families.

Our popular culture, however, celebrates success over respect, ego over reflection, opinion over knowledge, and desire and feeling over virtually everything else. Social media’s role in this is that it may have provided a platform to celebrate some of the things that I have described. Social media perpetuates a very egotistical perspective on the world as it celebrates all kinds of characteristics that are not necessarily those which build strong civil society. Knife crime is a devastating consequence of social and cultural malaise. Crime feeds on excess, irresponsibility and selfishness. From the desolation that flows from the kind of doctrine that places individual interest above communal obligations, and individual will above all else, first lawlessness and ultimately violence springs.

It may be convenient for the wealthy white City worker to believe that recreational drugs are his own private business. He may well assume that, as the godfather of liberalism, John Stuart Mill, would put it, his actions are doing no harm. Yet the boom in the middle-class market for cocaine is the root cause of the recent gang wars over county lines that have resulted in so many young lives being lost. Selfish individualism may indeed benefit those who spend their days safely ensconced in guarded office blocks, in the back seat of an Uber, or in gated communities exclusively for the wealthy, but for others it has resulted in desolation and life stripped of meaning and purpose. We cannot hope to find a successful cure for the wave of violence unless we accept the proper diagnosis.

It is not good enough for Governments to say that they can do nothing about drugs and the drug culture. We need a serious clampdown on middle-class drug use and an examination of how that drug use relates to the kind of violence that we are debating, because the lines of supply and demand are closely associated with gangs, with crime, with violence and with murder. I do not say this because they are my Government, or even my...
Ministers, if I might put it that way; I would say it about any responsible Government. The reasons for society’s failure to do that thus far are ironically, perhaps even fundamentally, what I have said as the reasons for the growth in the problems we face.

It is a disastrous consequence of the liberal consensus that stop-and-search was seen as part of the problem. I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) about this. [Interruption.] No, no. Although we are, I hope, having a good-humoured and positive debate, as it should be—there are contributions from all parts of the Chamber that I will hear and certainly value, and I know that that will also add value to the considerations of Government—I do think that there is also a proper place for disagreement. I am going to talk a bit more about this, but I want to start by being very clear: freedom from being searched is really not more important than freedom from knife crime. Where is the freedom in living in fear of gangs, as so many young people in London do? Where is the freedom for young children drawn into a life of violence and crime as the runners for county line drug networks, or increasingly as drug peddlers in small towns and rural communities, as the right hon. Lady described?

The spike in knife crime must be a spur to action, not just for us to toughen our approach, which is urgent and necessary, but also for deeper measures to restore purpose and pride for people in places that are stripped of both. But first, we must restore the safety and security of our communities. That must mean extensive use of stop-and-search. Moreover, the police must be a visible part of those communities. People would be much less antagonistic towards the police—and towards stop-and-search, by the way—if they did not feel that these are the only times that they ever see them. When policemen were a regular feature of local life—when they were seen in circumstances that were not adversarial and were just there as part of the community—they enjoyed a different relationship with those communities. If policemen are seen to be there only when there is trouble, they will be defined by trouble, and that will change the relationship between the law-abiding public and the police.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): On the police’s relationship with the public, about a fortnight ago, on a Saturday morning, hundreds of members of the public turned out in the Willenhall area of Coventry because they were concerned about a lack of police numbers at the same time as an increase in crimes such as burglaries and assaults. That gives an idea of the level numbers at the same time as an increase in crimes because they were concerned about a lack of police. Therefore, I do not think it is entirely about numbers. I am not saying that this is unrelated to them, but I think the Minister was right when he pointed out—as, to be fair, did the shadow Home Secretary—that it is not wholly about numbers. It may be about resources, but it is not wholly and probably not even mainly about them.

Sir Edward Davey: I suggest the right hon. Gentleman reads the serious violence strategy, which says on page 24: “Some have questioned whether the reduction in the use of stop and search is driving the increase. The data do not support such a conclusion.”

Mr Hayes: I am coming to that now. Although stop-and-search has become more targeted, with 17% of police stops leading to an arrest in 2017 compared with 9% in 2010, we cannot ignore the fact that, in 2010, there were 13,833 weapons-related arrests, compared with 7,794 in 2017. Fewer people are being found with weapons, and fewer people are being arrested for having or carrying weapons with intent. It is all very well speaking about a more targeted approach, but in terms of the numbers—

Sir Edward Davey: indicated dissent.

Mr Hayes: I have already said that this debate stretches well beyond party politics. I know that it is always difficult for Liberal Democrats to step outside party politics, but I implore the right hon. Gentleman to raise his game and do so. I do not mean to be unkind; I am simply trying to be helpful.

The important thing is that fewer people are being arrested, and fewer people are therefore being convicted. Because of that, inevitably, more people feel they can get away with carrying a knife or a gun.

Sarah Jones: Ten years ago, only one in 10 stop-and-searches resulted in finding anything, and now it is something like one in three. The way that the police stop and search now is much more effective because it is much more targeted and intelligence-based. Surely that is the right approach, rather than a blanket approach of saying, “We’re going to stop and search anybody who looks a bit dodgy,” which is what was potentially happening in the past. It is much better for it to be completely targeted and based on intelligence, to ensure that those we stop are much more likely to have weapons or drugs.

Mr Hayes: There is of course a series of bases on which people are stopped and searched. The police are missioned to behave proportionately and, as the hon. Lady will know, there is a protocol associated with stop-and-search. Policemen must make it clear who they are and what they are doing and justify why they are doing it. She is right, of course, that it should not be used permissively. I am simply pointing out the fact that more people are carrying knives and guns and fewer are
being arrested for doing so. I know that that will be of concern to the Government, and they will want to respond accordingly.

I also want to say a word about sentencing before I conclude. At the moment, as Members will know, there is a maximum four-year sentence for carrying a knife. In practice, as the Ministry of Justice reported recently, the average amount of time that people serve is just over six months. People are serving just over six months for being convicted of carrying a knife, and that is just not long enough. In Scotland, those convicted spend on average a year behind bars, and there is a lower rate of knife crime in Scotland than in England and Wales. Immediate action needs to be taken to address the issue of inadequate sentences.

**Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a vast number of reasons beyond sentence length for the reduction in knife crime in Scotland? It would be wholly false to give the impression that the reduction in knife crime in Scotland is down to sentencing, because there is a lot more to it, as the shadow Home Secretary said.

**Mr Hayes:** I have already pointed out that the reasons and causes of knife crime and all violent crimes are complex. It seems to me that, if the Scots believe that people should spend longer in prison once they have been convicted of carrying a knife, there may be some lesson to be learned from that. The lesson we might learn is that, if someone thinks there will be a longer sentence if they are convicted for carrying a knife with intent, they might be less likely to do so.

We need to tackle the alienation that has developed between those who grow up and live in the inner city and the highly privileged who often make the policies that affect them. The liberal consensus that has prevailed and that has failed to recognise the decline in the quality of life for many of the people who are most affected by these problems and who live on the frontline of violence is in part responsible for the failure of Governments to take the necessary action. There is a simple correlation, which is a meaningful one, between opportunity and purpose. Many of the communities worst affected by both the threat and the reality of this kind of violence are disadvantaged—the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington made that point. One of their key disadvantages is the lack of opportunity to gain and keep a job or to acquire the skills necessary to do so.

We have a big opportunity to improve the opportunities people enjoy to acquire a skill and then to get a job in which to use that skill. The first Crossrail project allowed us to do that with the development of the Tunnelling and Underground Construction Academy in east London. If we look at the kind of people who trained and did apprenticeships there, we will see that they were not drawn from the predictable, normal group. There were far more women apprentices and far more people drawn from the communities where the academy is based. As Crossrail 2 develops, it is vital that we reach out still further and give more of the people who might be drawn into lives that lead to crime, violence and drugs the opportunity to gain a skill and a job.

This comes back to the point made earlier about cross-governmental work. We need the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Home Office to work together to develop policies that provide the kind of opportunity that feeds hope. We must make sure that Crossrail 2 emulates and improves on what Crossrail 1 achieved for skills and training.

In conclusion, I repeat that I know the whole House cares about social and civil decline and about the quality of life available to the people most likely to be affected by violence, particularly knife crime and gun crime. I know that the Minister who will wind up the debate will want to respond to the heartfelt concerns expressed by Members on both sides of the House, and I know that she does not have a closed mind about what the Government can do or about whether they can do more. I am delighted that the Government have agreed to hold this debate and that, as it has continued, the spirit has been one of collaboration and co-operation. However, this will require a really thorough and robust look at both the causes of crime and its effects and what we do about them. It is no longer enough for us to continue with business as usual. I think the Government and the Minister know that. We must relentlessly address the systemic causes of these problems and be robust in our response with respect to deterrence and punishment. To paraphrase a Labour politician who was once in fashion, we need to be tough on the reasons for violence and tough on its effect.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Although it may appear that we have a lot of time for this debate, many colleagues want to contribute to it, and I urge Members to be considerate of others so that we can get everybody in. With that in mind, if people speak for about 10 minutes, that will be fine, but do be considerate of others, because we cannot have speeches that are longer than those of the Front Benchers.

3.38 pm

**Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** Before I turn to the subject of this debate, I want to pay tribute to those who are currently in Manchester commemorating the events that happened a year ago today, and I am very proud to say that Scotland’s First Minister is attending those commemorations. On behalf of Scottish National party Members, I offer our condolences to the families of the bereaved and to send our best wishes to the survivors. I pay tribute to the police, the security services, the emergency services, the NHS and other first responders last year, and most of all, I pay tribute to the city of Manchester and its Mayor for their strength and fortitude in the face of such adversity.

There can be no doubt that serious violence is a scourge on societies and communities across the United Kingdom. We have heard already today about the 22% rise in knife crime in England and Wales—the biggest year-on-year rise ever to be recorded. I understand. We have heard that more than 60 people have been murdered in this great city of London alone this year and that almost 40,000 offences involving knives or sharp weapons have been recorded by police in England and Wales—the highest level in seven years, I believe.
It is clear that current UK Government strategies are not working, and that cannot be swept under the carpet. Nor can the fact that cuts in police numbers and budgets do have an impact on the rise of serious crime. That is not my view—or my view alone: it is the view of the most senior police officer in England and Wales, the Met Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick. She has said in terms that cuts to police budgets play a part in these matters. It is a fact that while, between March 2007 and September 2017, police numbers in England and Wales decreased by 14%, in Scotland, by contrast, police numbers have been maintained since the SNP came to power at almost 1,000 more than under the previous Labour-Lib Dem coalition in Scotland.

I want to be positive today and look at the good news story in Scotland. These matters are devolved and police numbers are not the only area in which the Scottish Government have a positive story to tell; I was grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for alluding to that in her speech.

The infliction of death or assault by knife leaves a scar not only on the victim but on families, friends, neighbours and the wider community. We saw that in Scotland all too recently when, at an Aberdeen school in October 2015, a young man called Bailey Gwynne was stabbed to death. That caused a real national sense of shock and profound loss across Scotland. Despite that recent tragedy in Scotland, knife crime there has plummeted over the past decade. Given the recent spate of stabbings in London, it is understandable that police, politicians and healthcare professionals in England and Wales are now looking to Scotland for a clue as to how to solve the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said earlier, a decade ago, Scotland—Glasgow, in particular—had a serious problem with knife crime. In 2004-05, there were 40 murders in Glasgow, which represented more than a third of the total homicide rate across Scotland. The figure earned for Glasgow the inglorious title of “the murder capital of western Europe.”

At that time, I was serving as Crown Counsel, prosecuting in the high courts across Scotland. I came face to face with the results of knife crime on a daily basis. So I was particularly pleased when the then Strathclyde police—now part of the Scotland-wide police force—launched a new strategy in response to Glasgow’s epidemic of knife crime. It was a holistic approach that saw the formation of the violence reduction unit, which sought to treat violent crime as a public health and social problem. By treating violence as if it were a disease, the violence reduction unit sought to diagnose the problem, analyse the cause, examine what worked and for whom, and develop solutions that could be scaled up to help others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central has already spoken about how, as a councillor in Glasgow, she was taken to the sheriff court there to witness gang members listening to evidence given by the mums and girlfriends of young men who had been killed as a result of knife violence. That had a profound effect on the gang members.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. and learned Lady for giving way on this point, which is a critical issue for my city to this day. The success of the violence reduction unit is a great legacy for the Scottish Government, under both Labour and SNP administration.

Critical to gang-related violence in Glasgow is the under-reporting of it in the city. One of the most effective measures that the violence reduction unit introduced was the surveillance of A&E departments, which cast significant light on the true scale of the issue in Glasgow and then enabled the deployment of effective strategies to deal with it. Perhaps that is something that the rest of the UK could learn from the city of Glasgow’s experience.

Joanna Cherry: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to that, because the violence reduction unit works with the health service, schools and social workers to observe what is going on and to create lasting attitudinal change in society rather than just a quick fix.

Some mention has been made today of heavy sentences. Heavy sentences do not work. That is not my view but the result of research. That is why in Scotland we have looked at a more holistic approach, which has worked. Again, that is not my view but the view of the professionals who have examined the evidence. The violence reduction unit started out in Glasgow, but it is now a national unit across Scotland that receives long-term stable funding from the Scottish Government. It has been a huge success.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have listened very carefully to this debate and it has informed me a lot. Does the hon. and learned Lady think that adverts showing how awful the result of carrying a knife might be and suggesting that no one should carry a knife would help?

Joanna Cherry: Displaying to those who carry a knife the evidence of the awful results of carrying a knife has worked in Scotland. As I said a moment ago, gang members were brought in to a court setting and they heard evidence from the mothers and girlfriends of young men who had been killed by knives. That kind of education really helps. When I worked as a prosecutor, I became aware that a lot of young men—it is mainly young men—simply have no idea of the potential consequences of wielding a knife. They think they can stab somebody and inflict a minor injury as a warning. So often, however, a stabbing leads to death. It is very important to get that message across. The violence reduction unit has worked in Scotland because it is not just a police initiative but has worked with the health service, schools and social workers to bring in young men who are tempted to carry a knife and to educate them out of the desire to do so.

The approach of the violence reduction unit fits very well with what is called a whole-system approach to crime, which was introduced by Scotland’s first SNP Government back in 2008, after their election in 2007. The whole system approach is designed significantly to change justice policy and focus on prevention rather than punishment. It is also focused on inclusion, making people feel invested and included in the society around them so they will not have the same desire to lash out at it.

The whole-system approach marks a shift away from previous policies that were very much designed to criminalise, label and stigmatise young people. Rather than do that, in Scotland we sought to provide early and effective interventions that kept young people out of formalised justice settings. That does not mean jettisoning a proper approach to criminal justice. If the crimes are...
committed and they are serious enough, they must be dealt with appropriately, but the whole-system approach focuses on collaboration with schools, social work, the police, the prosecution service and the third sector to stop the offending behaviour from happening at all and to reduce the rates of offending behaviour.

In addition to the violence reduction unit and the whole-system approach, the Scottish Government set up the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice at Strathclyde University. It is dedicated to supporting improvements in youth justice, and works to provide knowledge exchange, practice development for professionals working with young people, and research on youth justice issues. These approaches together have led to a vastly improved situation in Scotland. It is simply not true to say that heavy sentences in Scotland have led to that improved situation. What led to the improved situation in Scotland was the violence reduction unit and the whole-system approach. I recommend those to the House as worthy of study given the current crisis, particularly in London.

The facts speak for themselves. Crime in Scotland is now at its lowest level in 43 years. The crime of handling an offensive weapon decreased by 64% between 2007 and 2017—that is a huge achievement. The number of under-18s in custody has reduced by 77% and there has been an 82% reduction in children referred to a children’s hearing on offence grounds. The children’s hearings system in Scotland is unique; it seeks to cater for children and young people away from the court system.

Mr John Hayes: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I will make some progress, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind. We are not complacent in Scotland. The problem has not gone away, so tackling violent crime must remain a key priority. That is why my colleagues in Edinburgh, in the Scottish Government, have invested over £14 million in violence reduction programmes for young people since the SNP came to power in 2007.

I pay tribute to one of the programmes that they have invested in—the No knives, better lives youth engagement programme. It has received more than £3.4 million in funding since 2009 and 24 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities are now involved. This national initiative works with local organisations to provide information and support. I was asked earlier about advertisements highlighting the dangers of carrying a knife. The No knives, better lives strategy goes much further: it aims to raise awareness of the consequences of carrying a knife and provides information and educational materials for use in schools and by other professionals, as well as health advertising campaigns and information on local activities and opportunities for young people to try to get them away from a culture of gangs and casual violence and into participating in and putting something back into their community. Research suggests that this educational work has been particularly effective in making a difference.

Mr John Hayes: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I am very conscious of your strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am going to wind up now, and I will not take any more interventions.

This is one area where Scotland and the Scottish Government really do have a good news story to tell. Until about 10 years ago, Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, were notorious for violent crime. That is now a historical reputation—not a current reputation—not as a result of some heavy-handed law-and-order approach but because a whole-system approach was used. We need to remember that the young men who carry knives need our help. Some of them are only children. Of course, if they go on to commit a serious crime, they must be dealt with appropriately, but prevention is far, far better than cure.

I am very pleased that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has recognised this and has visited Glasgow and the violence reduction unit to see what lessons can be learned for London and beyond. I was also absolutely delighted that the Solicitor General recently accepted my invitation to come to Scotland to hear more about the whole-system approach from the perspective of the prosecution service, and to discuss moving away from prosecution and towards our early and effective intervention model. I and my Scottish Government colleagues are very much looking forward to welcoming the Solicitor General to Scotland, and I am sure that the Ministers here today would be very welcome to accompany him.

3.53 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). I listened intently to her discussing the challenges that they have had in Scotland and the progress that has been made. As she rightly identified, that does not mean that the problem has been completely resolved. There is clearly always more to do.

I welcome the serious violence strategy, which Ministers have put forward in response to a problem that has been bubbling under the surface in this country for some decades and is again manifesting itself with tragic consequences. Tragically, there have been 40 deaths here in London in just the last few months.

Ministers are right to identify four themes in the strategy, but I want to dwell on the misuse of drugs and the illegal drug industry, which has become embedded over the decades, not just in London and the big cities, but in towns across the country. I represent Nuneaton. It is just about the largest town in Warwickshire and is extremely well connected in the middle of the country, just up the road from Coventry and Leicester and not too far from Birmingham. It is on the edge of Warwickshire, where it meets Leicestershire, but is also close to the west midlands in terms of policing.

There is a significant issue with cross-border crime that will not have passed the Minister by. It is not uncommon in my constituency for a tenant, particularly in social accommodation, to be befriended by an individual who then suddenly moves into the property—it is known as “cuckooing”—and very soon there is a satellite drug-dealing den in that property. They then befriend others in the community with inducements—cash and other things—who end up hooked on drugs and beholden to their suppliers. This is a critical issue to some other crimes that my constituents are concerned about.

My constituency has recently seen a spike in burglaries because of the illegal drugs industry and the use of illicit drugs. That extends to further organised crime.
and the taking of car keys in burglaries—the aggravated burglary where people are challenged in their own homes for their car keys—and all because some of my constituents over the last few years, although not wealthy, have started to do reasonably well. They have worked hard and now have nice cars and nice things, and they feel threatened by people who live in a house and end up working for highly organised criminal gangs who want to take that new Jaguar or Range Rover and ship it abroad for a fraction of its value—still a significant amount of money.

Tied into this is the challenge presented by the tragic loss of life. I mentioned the 40 people killed in London recently. A few months ago we had an altercation in my constituency between two groups where a man lost his life. He had several children, who had now been left bereft as a consequence. Other people who have nothing to do with these challenges can also get mixed up in tragic situations. I will cite the case of a 20-year-old man in my constituency, Morgan Hehir. In 2015, he was out on a night out with friends. They were walking between one pub and another and decided to take a shortcut across a park. They were followed by three men who, regrettably, set upon Morgan and his friends. Morgan was tragically stabbed with a steak knife, and died at the scene. It is very regrettable that some of these people know no boundaries. In this instance, the men even went to the extent of stealing Morgan's phone and his wallet while he lay on the ground, either dying or having already died. That just goes to show the lengths to which some of these people will go, and how low some of them will stoop. As Members can imagine, Morgan's parents have been devastated, his friends have been devastated, and the community has been left devastated.

The issues we have talked about involving county lines feed into other massive social challenges that we face in our communities. For some months I have been working on a steering group with an organisation called P3, which was commissioned by Warwickshire County Council to support rough sleepers as an outreach organisation. It has become increasingly obvious to the steering group that the majority of the small but significant group of rough sleepers in my constituency are in that position because they have lost tenancies, generally in the social sector.

A frequent scenario is that people move in with someone who has a social tenancy—not always of that person's own volition, because vulnerable people often feel threatened and do not feel able to throw out others who come to stay with them—and those people, often in a flat, end up making life hell for the other tenants in the block. At that point, the tenants who are having to live with the antisocial behaviour are likely to contact the local authority or housing association, and the holder of the tenancy often loses it as a result. It is apparent to me that many people have held two or three tenancies from a local authority or other social housing provider and have lost them because of the actions of others, which is clearly leading to a wider social problem.

So far we have all talked about things that are depressing, but I now want to talk about something that I find quite uplifting within the difficult situation that we face. One of the biggest problems is putting across to young people, in an educational way, that dabbling in drugs, getting hooked on drugs and hooking up with people who are involved with drugs is bad news, and they should avoid it at all costs. I have recently been heartened by the work of an organisation in Warwickshire called Street Aware, which was started by Councillor Richard Smith, and whose programme director is a lady called Donna Williamson. The organisation works with and trains young people in the issues surrounding drugs and the problems caused by them.

Those young people—they are unpaid, but they want to make a difference in their communities, and I pay tribute to them—then go out to schools and speak to school assemblies. They are doing something that I fear not one of us going and speaking to young people in a school where we are seen as just people in authority: what do we know? They speak to their peers on the same level, and make very clear to them the difficulties that they will get themselves into if they become involved in drugs. I commend Street Aware, Councillor Richard Smith, Donna Williamson, and those young people who are doing such a good job for our communities. I was recently delighted to attend a National Crimebeat Awards ceremony at which Street Aware scooped second prize for its work for local communities in Warwickshire.

We need more education: we need more education about drugs, and we need to support organisations such as Street Aware. We also need to be doing the same in respect of knives. As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West said, one of the key planks of the success we have seen, particularly in Glasgow, has been making people aware of the problems that will be caused if they carry knives and use them. Quite often these young people will not want to use a knife, but if they are being threatened and told by somebody who they are running drugs for that they must carry a knife, they will feel compelled to do so, and if they get into a situation where they are challenged and they panic, they might well use that knife without thinking, only to realise afterwards that the consequences for the person they have attacked and for themselves are massive. Using a knife is likely to blight their life as well as that of the person it has been used against.

We must also do more to help young people to engage with society. There are people who engage very well, such as those who play football, go to athletics clubs or attend the Scouts, but there are others who do not get involved in any community activity at all, and we need to look more carefully at how we can get them engaged.

I also welcome the measures in the strategy to do with the police. I welcome the extra support my police in Warwickshire have received recently, and I am glad to say that my police and crime commissioner, Philip Seccombe, is employing an additional 50 police officers in Warwickshire. That might seem a small number to Members who represent city communities, but Warwickshire Police is the second smallest police force in the country and 50 officers represent an extremely important resource. We should also look not just at how many police officers we have got, but how we use them. That is important because many of the offences we are talking about are cross-border crimes; they do not recognise administrative barriers. We must ensure, therefore, that our police forces—whether West Midlands, Warwickshire, West Mercia or Leicestershire—are all working together, sharing intelligence and working with the local authorities in their areas, and that in turn the local authorities and other services are passing intelligence between each other.
Sarah Jones: I serve on the Select Committee on Home Affairs and we went to see the National Crime Agency to talk about county lines. The NCA made the point that these crimes are not just cross-border within this country, but are cross-border across Europe and the world. One of the worries about Brexit that the NCA expressed was that at the moment we can arrest people, follow people and collaborate with other countries, and if we do not get that sorted when we leave the EU, we will be in big trouble.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady is right from the point of view that the world has in recent decades become a very small place, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) eloquently pointed out—as did my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime—there are places from which people can send things through the post right to somebody else’s door; they no longer need a long distribution chain with items changing hands. The Prime Minister has been clear about this country and its exit from the EU and about wanting to maintain that information-sharing, working with other countries in the EU and beyond. Although we are leaving the EU, we are still very much part of Europe and we want to continue to work with our European partners to ensure that we support and assist each other in reducing the amount of crime.

Mr John Hayes: In the absence of the Security Minister, and speaking as the ex-Security Minister, I can tell my hon. Friend that that co-operation is very much part and parcel of how this Government and all Governments operate. Much of it is international, and it is not limited by the European Union. The Five Eyes community is an example of such co-operation. The chances of that co-operation stopping are very slim indeed, because of the mutual interests that lie at its heart.

Mr Jones: I understand what my right hon. Friend says. He has considerable knowledge in this area of policy, and he is absolutely right to say that the will is there to ensure that, on leaving the EU, this country will continue to be a partner of other countries within the EU in tackling the challenges that we all want to deal with.

I welcome the early intervention youth fund that the Government have announced. Our police and crime commissioners, being embedded in their communities across the country, are ideally placed to use that funding to work with local authorities and other partners, whether in the not-for-profit sector or the private sector, to deliver programmes to engage young people and pull them away from gang culture and from communities where they might be vulnerable. I certainly welcome that.

I also welcome the strategy that has been put forward today. This debate has given me the opportunity to put on record a number of my concerns about keeping my constituents safe, and I hope that, through today’s debate, through the work that the Government will do on the strategy, and through the additional measures that the Home Office is taking, particularly in its work with the Treasury, we will be able to tackle some of the underlying issues that have been bubbling under the surface. As I have said, we really must get under the surface to tackle them.

4.11 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to begin by thanking the Minister for finally providing the time to debate this extremely important issue. It might interest the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) to know that I have been requesting this debate since 22 March, and I am grateful to everyone in the Chamber who also requested such a debate on 19 April. The Government’s strategy was published on 9 April and finally, on 22 May, we have a chance to debate it. Since I first called for this debate, we have lost 20 people to violent murders in London alone.

Before I begin, I want to urge the Minister to listen and genuinely take on board the comments that have been made by Members across the House today. This is not an issue that we can afford to play politics with. We know that the rise in youth violence has not just happened overnight, and we must realise that developing the right solutions will not happen overnight either. We will not fix violence with a few years’ worth of funding in a single parliamentary term. This will require cross-party working on a generational scale. We need a long-term strategy that Government after Government—I hope one of them will be a Labour Government—will continue to implement, no matter who is in power. We owe this to every person who has lost their life to violence, to every family that has lost a loved one and to every community still traumatised by violence.

Many Members will know that I am keen for us genuinely to address this issue, and that that has been driven by what I see locally. Since I was first elected, we have lost seven young lives: Shaquan Fearon, 17; Naseem Galleze, 17; Kabbah Kamara, 23; Jamar Walker, 15; Myron Yard, 17; Rukeyve Tadafe, 21; and Leonadro Osemke, 16. In one school year, Lewisham Deptford has lost seven young people to violent deaths. Many teenagers in my constituency know someone who has been stabbed or murdered, and this breaks my heart. Those young people were part of our local community. They had families and friends, and those people are now grieving and hurting. Nobody quite understands why those lives were taken so needlessly and so senselessly. If this happened in a football stadium or in a workplace, we would rightly be crying out for a public inquiry.

In London we have had more than 60 murders since the start of this year, so we all know the Government need to act. We all need to act, and we need to do something different. We need to get in there and understand the root causes. What early interventions can we make to ensure that no young person carries a knife, and certainly never uses one? Prevention and early intervention are what it must be about. No young person is born carrying a knife. Something happens that leads them to feel they need to carry one, be it fears about their safety or a desire to fit in. Thankfully, we all now recognise that prevention and early intervention are better than cure.

I compliment the Government on this strategy, which rightly states that the only way truly to tackle violence is with early intervention and prevention. The strategy talks about using teachable moments to engage with young people, but I do not believe that teachable moment is when a kid turns up at A&E having been stabbed—that is not good enough. Why only then do they have a youth worker to work with them? I want us to be far more ambitious.
We need to start far, far earlier, working with families from birth by providing support such as Sure Start, which works with a child and their family from a pre-school age. Let us have that as the teachable moment, or does it not provide a good enough photo opportunity? The media and the Government, when talking about this issue, always seem to glamourise it: the media, with photos of gangsters or knives, make areas out to be the hood; and the Government with photo ops in A&E or with ex-gangsters.

Our young people are cool. They are cool because they are our future lawyers, bankers, nurses, doctors, social workers, footballers, music artists and, indeed, politicians. They can go on and achieve anything, and we have to ensure that we provide them with the opportunities so they can do anything.

To be brutal, the Government have provided an excellent analysis of the problem but, quite frankly, this is not a decent enough strategy. It is tinkering at the edges. At £40 million, the strategy just is not enough, especially when we consider that, at the same time, £387 million has been cut from our youth services.

The cross-party Youth Violence Commission, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), the hon. Members for Brenttree (James Cleverly) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the right hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) and for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I have been working with our academic partner, Warwick University, has been studying the underlying causes of youth violence for nearly two years.

In February 2018 we conducted a national survey of more than 2,200 young people looking at their experiences of violence. More than 70% of young people tell us they are exposed to serious violence in real life at least once a month, and younger respondents aged eight to 19 experience the most serious violence. More than 16% of young people say they do not feel safe in their own home. Thirty-eight per cent. of young people know at least one person who sells drugs and, shockingly, almost 10% know more than 10 people who do. Forty per cent. of young people agree it is easy to buy illegal drugs where they live. And 33% of young people know at least one person who carries a weapon, and 7% know more than 10 people who do.

Put simply, this shows us that our young people are experiencing adverse childhood experiences far too often. We must do more to address that. I am pleased that the Government’s strategy references ACEs and the need to have a trauma-informed approach to policing, the youth justice system and looked-after children.

I am also pleased that police forces in Wales will be piloting a public health approach. We already know from the work of the violence reduction unit in Scotland that closer integration of services and communities can produce extremely positive results, but with just £7 million allocated to this public health approach, following £58.8 million of cuts to Welsh policing, surely the funding does not even fill the gap. We have seen 59% cuts to the Youth Justice Board, but those have been countered by a 23% increase in what we have to spend on our looked-after children. We therefore have to question whether we are paying for failure, because we have not invested in youth services, children’s services and schools.

We do know that we can get dramatic results by investing in and taking a public health approach to addressing serious violence; listening to communities, not dictating to them; and seeing the evidence of how such an approach works from Scotland, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned, from Chicago and elsewhere. With Birmingham, Reading and many London boroughs looking to replicate this, surely it is time we seek to do this on a wider scale, empower our communities to do this and look for a public health approach.

We have been listening to people and trying to find solutions that work. As part of the work of the commission, we held a series of evidence sessions where we listened to experts, practitioners and, most importantly, young people on a range of issues, including youth services, trauma and mental health, education and housing. I have visited numerous youth organisations and projects across the country. Our last session took place yesterday, and it covered policing and the criminal justice system. We had an interesting discussion on drugs. Some believed that if we legalised drugs, that would be enough to stop the drugs market. Others rightly identified the disparity between the treatment of, say, a young white kid caught with drugs at university and a young black kid caught with drugs on a street corner. The law is not implemented indiscriminately: black people are twice as likely as white people to be charged with possession of drugs, despite lower rates of drug use.

One thing we agreed on was the importance of educating people on the societal impact of recreational drug use. Many people today are conscious of where they get their clothes, coffee and meat from, but have a blind spot when it comes to the illegal drug market. Many of the people who are so careful to buy only Fairtrade coffee and wear ethically sourced clothes are the same people who do cocaine at the weekends, with no consideration of the wider impact of this habit. Perhaps if there were educational programmes on the real harm caused by the drug market, more people would treat cocaine with the same disdain they do to clothes made in sweatshops or eggs from caged hens.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is making an excellent argument, which associates that middle class so-called “recreational drug use” with the normalisation of drugs and the supply lines that do so much damage. One person’s recreation is another person’s misery.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, and I think this is probably one area where we would have a cross-party consensus.

Some other clear themes emerged from the commission’s evidence sessions and the visits that I undertook. The Government’s serious violence strategy has much that aligns with our work, particularly a focus on early intervention, which is crucial. Many young people who are affected by serious crime, either as a victim or a perpetrator, have themselves been subjected to adverse childhood experiences. As a result, they grow up with unaddressed trauma and mental health issues, which can make them extremely vulnerable to negative influences, so support mechanisms are crucial. Young people need to have consistent and safe spaces where they can go for advice and support. Those could be counsellors in school, mentors or role models, community spaces,
or grassroots charities and organisations. Right now, too many young people do not have access to any of those. We must do more to provide the training and funding for these types of activities. Prevention is always better than cure, and in this case prevention will undoubtedly save lives.

One thing we have definitely learnt from our work is that there are no quick fixes. The path to change will require long-term investment and an integrated approach, with public services, the police, communities and individuals all working closely together. The commission's work has produced a lot of questions that we must address and that are beyond the current scope of the serious violence strategy, because the net has not yet been cast this wide. We must ask ourselves whether our school system is fit for purpose. Police officers in Lewisham have told me that the most dangerous time of day for stabbings among young people is after school and before parents come home from work. Should we therefore consider changing the hour that school finishes at to, say, 5 pm or 6 pm?

We must look at whether young children have enough positive male role models in their lives. Should we look into recruiting 50% male primary school teachers? Should we teach sex and relationship education at an earlier age? Perhaps we should teach primary school children what positive and negative relationships look like. Should our teachers be trained to teach in a trauma-informed way? Should we have dedicated police officers in all our schools, including primary schools, to build up trust with our young people so that they know police officers are safe people to speak to? Should we aim to have a policy of zero exclusions in schools?

Should we revisit the school syllabus, so that we can actually give young people the life skills for future employment—for example, by teaching them about budgeting, getting a mortgage or investing? Should we also teach social media classes that not only prepare young people for employment but ensure that they are safe online? Should we change our history syllabus to ensure it is much more culturally diverse and representative of our communities? Are we providing the right level of mental health support for young people in school?

There are also questions about youth service provision. How do we ensure that there is less needless competition between charities, and instead foster more collaboration? How and again, grassroots charities see the usual suspects—the large charities that are able to afford bidding teams and that know how the system works—get funding for programmes. How do we provide long-term, sustainable funding for programmes that prove that they get results, run by smaller organisations right in the heart of our communities? As politicians, we have a responsibility to our young people and future generations to answer all those questions.

There is so much more that I could say and want to say, but I want to ensure that everybody gets to speak in the debate. Hopefully, Members can see that the youth violence commission's work has been comprehensive and rigorous. Our initial findings will be published before the summer recess. I am grateful that the Prime Minister has agreed to meet me to discuss our work. As chair of the youth violence commission, I am aware of how many previous reports and strategies successive Governments have published that have been related to youth violence in one way or another. Many of the recommendations from those reports have never been implemented or, when they were implemented, the net has not been evaluated. I hope the Government's serious violence strategy does not follow the same path, because young people continue to die on our streets. We owe it to them and to future generations to make sure that we fix this.

4.27 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). As I listened to his oration, I was struck by the comparison between his constituency—which, incidentally, I have never visited—and my own, and by how many shared experiences we have. It is of course also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). Although I do not agree with everything that she says, she speaks with such passion and is clearly so very dedicated to this most important of issues.

I think I speak for every single Member of this House in saying that there is no question but that we want to tackle and have a passion for tackling the scourge that is knife crime and youth violence. I wish to touch on a couple of specific points in respect of the serious violence strategy. Several Members have already made the case so passionately and compellingly for why it is so important to get this right: because of the impact of knife crime, violent crime and murder on not just families but whole communities. I particularly remember the cases in recent years of two young people, Nahid Almanea and James Attfield, who were stabbed to death in my constituency. They were horrific murders that really shook and affected the entire community.

I am going to focus on young people and children. Why? Because, in too many cases, children and young people are not just the victims of knife crime and youth violence but, tragically, the perpetrators, too. This problem is not unique to London and our major cities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton said. If we went back 10, 15 or 20 years, we could have probably said that. Would we have seen and heard Members of Parliament for Nuneaton and Colchester making a contribution such as this to these debates? Probably not because instances of this nature were a rarity; they were not commonplace. However, one phenomenon that we have seen, particularly in the past three to five years, is the growth of county lines. It is really concerning how this issue is stretching out further and further from our major cities. First, it was just south Essex, then it moved back up to mid-Essex, and now it is prevalent in north Essex and beyond; I reference, of course, Colchester, my own constituency.

Up until there were incidents in my own constituency, I had no dealings with or knowledge of county lines. When we see some of the activity that takes place, of course, it all revolves around drugs. Colchester is just one example; there are towns up and down the country that are being affected by county line operations. When we talk about the individuals who operate these county lines, they are not, in effect, the drug dealers; they are the kingpins—they are the people who never touch drugs. It is the people further down the line who are actually peddling the drugs and bringing to our towns, up and down our country, not just their drugs, but their violence and the intimidation that comes with it.
In one particularly striking incident in the town that I represent, there were six knife attacks in one evening. It was not particularly late—I think that it was about 6 pm in the evening in Colchester. Interestingly, all six were committed by, and perpetrated against, individuals who were not from my town; they were all from London and they were rival drug gangs. They came to Colchester, bringing with them that violence and intimidation to sell drugs on what they saw as a fertile patch—a market that was not, and is not, saturated in the way that London and so many other places are.

The other concerning development, which is also related to county line activity, is cuckooing. This was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton. Again, it was not something that I had come across until a constituent raised it with me on a Friday in my constituency office. Without being over-disparaging, I could see that he was clearly a drug user himself. He said that his flat had been taken over by individuals from London whom he had willingly let in. They were threatening him with a firearm, had huge quantities of class A drugs and were using his property as a base from which to deal and to peddle their drugs over the course of a week, and sometimes two. Sadly, we are seeing that pattern of behaviour repeated.

More worrying than that is whom these vicious drug gangs are preying on in terms of their targeting for the cuckooing activity. It tends to be prostitutes, people with mental health issues, those who are in social housing and particularly isolated and existing drug addicts. They know that these individuals are vulnerable and can be targeted.

That is worrying enough in itself, and an issue that we should tackle, but the greatest concern is the use of children in county line operations and cuckooing—whether it is blackmail or bribing them with money. They may initially be bought a pair of trainers, at which point they are committed by, and perpetrated against, individuals who are not from my town; they were all from London and they were rival drug gangs. They came to Colchester, bringing with them that violence and intimidation to sell drugs on what they saw as a fertile patch—a market that was not, and is not, saturated in the way that London and so many other places are.

We must intervene. What should we do when we get the opportunity? I am not pretending that this is easy, but why are we still treating young people—in many cases, they are children—as criminals? Yes, they have gone out to deal drugs, but what message does it send out when we criminalise a child who has been groomed, threatened, abused and blackmailed with threats against their mother, for example? We need to send out a clear message that children in such situations are not criminals, but victims. Until we treat them as such, things are not going to change.

Of course, that has to be within reason and we need caveats. If a young person or a child has committed a serious offence, particularly one against another person, such as a knife attack, it is right that the police and the criminal justice system take appropriate action. However, it is not hard to identify where these children and young people are clearly victims. It is important that we treat them as such, if no other reason—although there are many—than that the cost of getting things wrong is so great. Not only would the young person or child be set on the wrong path for the rest of their life, but we are labelling them as a criminal. What are their future life chances if they get a criminal conviction at a young age for trafficking or selling drugs? What message does that send out?

We know that drug gangs are increasingly using children as young as eight, nine or 10, as I said, because the gangs know that they are less likely to be stopped and searched and that they tend to be more vulnerable and easier prey for grooming. We know that such things are increasing, and we know that we must break the cycle and intervene. The question is how we intervene.

I welcome the £11 million for an early intervention youth fund, the £3.6 million for a national county lines co-ordination centre, and the cross-party taskforce, which is a good thing, but I encourage close working between police forces up and down the country and the Metropolitan police to break the county lines, which are effectively phone lines up and down the country that are bought and sold like franchises. I also encourage the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is hugely passionate about this issue, to work with the Ministry of Justice so that we ensure that we treat the young people and children whom we identify as victims as victims, not criminals.

Moving quickly on to sentencing, I am sure that none of us wants to throw vast swathes of young people and teenagers into prison for possession of a knife or an offensive weapon. We all know that it is far better to rehabilitate them in our communities, but that has to be meaningful if it is to work. I would like any under-18s who are convicted or cautioned for a first-time knife-related offence to be sent on a mandatory weapons awareness course as part of any caution or sentence.

I am not making a direct comparison, but we already do this when people are caught speeding at a low level. Instead of paying a fine, people can go on a day’s course. I have not done it yet—I wonder how many Members across the House can say that—but those who I know have been on the course have told me that it is quite hard-hitting. Attendees are shown, very graphically, why it is important not to speed. This includes seeing the impact of drivers doing over 30 mph in areas with a
30 mph speed limit if they were to hit a pedestrian, including a child. The point is that the course is a graphic reminder of why we should not speed. Why should we not send under-18s who are convicted—or indeed just cautioned—of knife possession on a mandatory course, so that they have to see at first hand the impact that their actions could have?

**Lyn Brown:** I get where the hon. Gentleman is coming from—it is wholesome. My young people tell me that they carry a knife because they cannot be found lacking. We do not keep them safe, and they therefore feel that they have to keep themselves safe. Although I can see where he is coming from, I am not sure that we are really getting to the root cause or understanding of the problems that we are facing in the inner city.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I entirely understand where she is coming from, but I respectfully disagree. I will come to exactly why I disagree in just one minute. I first want to touch briefly on weapons awareness.

The hon. Lady is right when she says that young people carry a knife because they believe that it keeps them safer and they have to carry a knife because everyone else is carrying one. Yet we know that that is a hugely ignorant position because every single statistic out there tells us that people are more likely to be the victim of the knife crime attack if they are carrying a knife themselves. We have to get that message across to young people through numerous mediums—not just in schools and not just to people who are caught carrying a knife. We have to show them what it looks like to be stabbed with a knife and what it would look like to see their mother crying over their body. People need those hard-hitting lessons. As much as I agree with the hon. Gentleman, I do not feel that is actually where we are now, because of what the hon. Gentleman is talking about: county lines and how this new way of distributing weapons awareness is really getting to the root cause or understanding of the problem entirely.

**Lyn Brown:** That is where I was a few years ago, but time has moved on. My little sister is a solicitor. She used to take people into schools to talk about the unlucky stab—that is, when people did not mean to kill somebody, but they cut an artery and so on. These people would talk to kids about the impact of the unlucky stab on their lives and the lives of others. But I am not sure that that is actually where we are now, because of what the hon. Gentleman is talking about: county lines and organised crime, which have changed the whole gang situation entirely.

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady again makes a very valid point. I do not disagree with her. She is almost certainly right when we are talking about mid-teens, late-teens and people in their early 20s, but we need to reset the dial and start this education in primary and secondary schools now. I am not suggesting that this is a panacea. I am not even suggesting that it is a quick or easy fix, but it has to be part of a solution and a package of measures that will help to eradicate knife crime in the medium to long term.

There is an organisation in my constituency called KnifeCrimes.Org, which is run by a lady called Ann Oakes-Odger. In the neighbouring constituency, a lady called Caroline Shearer runs another organisation called Only Cowards Carry. These inspirational women each lost a child to a knife crime attack—hugely tragic—but they have harnessed that energy and set up charities that are doing such great good around weapons awareness, particularly in schools. I look to the Minister because these organisations need funding in order to survive. In some cases, that comes via the police and crime commissioners, but I want to see more central funding made available for these organisations, which do such good work at a grassroots level.

I have been one of the courses. I sat in a school and watched one of the presentations, it was really hard-hitting. Everyone leaves thinking, “Wow.” We were shown on a huge projector what numerous knife wounds look like. We learnt about the impact on families. If I had watched one of those presentations as a seven, eight, nine or 10-year-old, or even in the early stages of secondary school, I would have found it quite compelling.

Too many young people are carrying knives, and we need to understand why that is by getting in early. That is why primary schools are so important. We need to show these young people, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), that a knife does not keep them safe; statistically, it makes them far more likely to be the victims of a knife crime attack. We must hammer that message home—not just in schools as part of weapons awareness education, but as part of social media activity and in TV ads like those being run in Scotland. There has to be an overall package of measures to show them how it feels to have a life shattered by a member of their family losing their life through a traumatic weapons attack.

May I gently push the Minister on a couple of things? We need weapons awareness classes in school. We must support the organisations up and down this country that are providing that and support the creation of new ones. I would like to see mandatory weapons awareness sessions as a condition of a conviction for someone caught carrying a knife. It is not acceptable just to give them a caution, a slap on the wrist, and an “Off you go”. We have to do more by sending them on a mandatory course. Yes, there is a cost to that, but I think it would pay dividends in terms of the number of people for whom we could break the cycle. I also encourage the Minister to push for closer working between local police forces and the Metropolitan police to tackle the growing issue of county lines, which we desperately need to resolve.

Finally, probably the most important message that I can impart to the Minister is this: please, please can we treat the children and young people who are caught up and groomed, victimised and intimidated into county lines activity and drug dealing as victims, not as criminals?

4.46 pm

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). The House is indebted to him for a speech that showed great understanding of the problem of county lines and how this new way of distributing drugs is harming individuals, families and communities; and also for the fact that he had some very constructive proposals to put to the Minister. I support him in that. I dare say that he might not like this comment, but it almost sounded like a Liberal speech. He was right to
focus on county lines. I think that the strategy is very good on that problem. His point about co-ordination between different police forces is really important.

I will be very interested to see whether the Minister has any comments to make about the drug dealing telecommunications restriction orders that are now being rolled out. In his opening remarks, the Security Minister talked about some initial signs of real success in that they are seriously disrupting county lines. We must hope that they will continue to do so. I hope that Ministers will be able to report to the House about the success of those orders as we go forward in tackling county lines.

I wanted to start my remarks by remembering the victims of the terrorism in Manchester last year, as spokespeople for the other parties have done. I very much agree that those victims should be in our thoughts today, not least as we discuss this particularly important issue. We saw the tragedy of the families who were bereaved—the mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. That must be in our thoughts. The fact that the people of Manchester responded so powerfully together in their unity is something that we should celebrate.

I also want to talk about real people in the rest of my speech. In my constituency we have had people suffering from the effects of knife crime. I have been particularly engaged with a family who lost a son in June last year. Derick Mulondo was in his 30s. He was stabbed by a former partner. He was one of those people who everyone loved. He was a community activist. Young people would see him as a leader. He would go and organise football matches at the local park. After he was taken from us, the young people would go to his mother's door and say, "Now Derick's gone, who do we look to?", so we doubly suffered as a result of that awful murder.

His mother, Sophie Kafeero, is one of the most courageous people I have ever met. She is still suffering, and she goes to her son's grave very regularly to talk to him. She, in her grief, has had support from Derick's friends to set up a campaign called "Drop a Knife, Save a Life". That campaign is in its infancy, and I hope that in due course it will make an application to the Government's community fund, because it could do a lot of good work with other organisations such as Oxygen in my constituency, which is also tackling the problems of knife crime.

We must learn from these victims and listen to them—listen to their pain and their strength, and listen to what they are saying about what needs to be done. The Government have done some good things to support community initiatives, but I urge them to go further, because I am afraid there are too many mothers like Sophie.

The strategy has many positive aspects. I will come to some criticisms in a minute, but the positive aspects are worth focusing on. Some of the analysis in it, written by good Home Office officials and with lots of evidence, is definitely worth reading and debating, because we need our policies to be evidence-based. I wish more of the Government's policies were evidence-based. Let us hope that this one will be.

The fact that the strategy puts prevention high up the agenda was welcomed across the House and the country. There are some issues with putting money behind that, but ensuring that prevention is a priority is important. A few Members have touched on the international aspects we are facing, which we need to say more about, and I will come on to that.

Some of the Government's initiatives deal with new aspects of the debate, including not just county lines but social media and its link to drug distribution, and the glamorisation of drugs; young people are told about the money they can make, but they are not told that they could lose their lives. Social media is having such a big impact. I think the Government are taking that seriously. I may question their judgment and their decisions at times, but I do not question their motives on this at all.

As other Members have said, two big things are missing from the strategy. The first—I am sorry to say this to the Minister, but I have to—is the lack of acknowledgment of the impact of police cuts. If we look at the evidence printed in The Guardian, which was not published and which the former Home Secretary said she had not read, it is absolutely clear that the cuts were likely to have been a contributory factor to the rise in violent crime.

The other key problem, linked to that, is resources. This puts a challenge to the Government. They talk about the need for prevention, but a lot of the activities in local government, the health service, schools and the police that were focused on preventing crime in the first place have been cut, and the Government's welcome extra funding mentioned in the strategy does not come close to replacing the money that has been lost.

Let me return to some of the policies, which are important. The strategy refers to the "large potential benefit to preventative intervention". It talks eloquently about the need for both universal preventive interventions and targeted interventions, and that is worth focusing on. The strategy talks about looking at young people and families where there is a combination of high-risk factors, and where it is very beneficial for the local authority, Government and police to come together to intervene really early. We hear about early intervention on so many subjects, but here it is about saving lives. The Government should talk more about that and then put the money behind it. Other Members have touched on the importance of helping children who have had chaotic lives, whose health and education have been affected and who are so vulnerable to the drug gangs that prey on them. Unless we intervene to help them, we are setting the whole of society up for failure.

Lyn Brown: I have been working with mums whose children are or have been involved in county lines, and one of the messages they are very keen to get across is that this could happen to anybody, whoever they are. A police officer who spoke to me the other week told me about how the child of one of their colleagues had got involved. I want us to be very aware of the fact that this could genuinely happen to anybody, and we should not stereotype any group of people we think may be involved.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. She has actually anticipated what I was going to say next. One of the other groups who are very vulnerable and are preyed on are those with mental health issues. As she said, this could happen to anybody or any family. That comes back to the crisis in child and
adolescent mental health services. As I am sure is the case in colleagues’ constituencies, CAMHS are absolutely on their knees. If we are talking about prevention, we really must tackle that as quickly as possible.

I want to talk about the positive international aspects of the serious violence strategy. Some of the statistics, particularly those on pages 19 and 20, show that Britain may not be alone in experiencing such a rise in violent crime. I know that the Government are planning an international symposium in the autumn, and that is very important. It may well be that issues such as austerity—the cuts in state spending not just in the UK but in other developed countries—have had an impact. Let us be frank about that. Linked to this are the growth in social media, strengthening organised crime, bumper coca crops in Colombia and the reduction in prices. All these international elements wash up on our shores and affect our communities as well as other countries.

We need to work with other countries; in doing so, let us learn from them—their successes should be shared with the House—and remember the importance of international co-operation. I forget which colleague said that Brexit may undermine such co-operation. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) brushed that aside, but he is totally wrong. I had the privilege of going to Eurojust and Europol in The Hague 10 years ago to see how with them, and tools such as the European arrest warrant and joint initiatives, we could be far more effective in catching criminals and bringing them to justice. Let us remember that the sort of criminals Eurojust and Europol go after, using the European arrest warrant, are the organised criminals who span boundaries. I know that colleagues who think Brexit is a terribly good idea will say, “Don’t worry. It’s in everyone’s interest to work together”. Yes, it is, but we will not be in the room or making the rules for Eurojust and Europol’s use of the European arrest warrant. These are relatively young tools that will be more and more developed in the future, but we will not be in the room.

Anyone who goes to see how Eurojust operates will find that there is just one representative from each member state, and when there is an investigation—such investigations often involve drugs—a representative just calls those of the other member states through which the investigative forces will have to travel to arrange the right warrant and so on. Such co-operation can happen at lightning speed so that we can catch the criminals who try to escape justice by playing people off against each other and going across jurisdictional boundaries. By not being in the room, we will undermine our ability to take on such organised criminals, so although the Government are right to talk about international co-operation, they are not really in a very good place.

My final point about international co-operation concerns the Border Force. We often think about the Border Force in terms of stopping illegal immigration, but it is actually critical in stopping drug trafficking. The Border Force has been devastated, particularly when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary, which is not a good policy if we are trying to tackle serious violent crime, county lines and the Mr Bigs behind such vulnerable people. We should be most worried about the Mr Bigs, but dealing with them requires an international response.

Before I finish, let me talk a little more about some of the problems in the strategy. I have talked about resources, but I want to come back to that issue. The strategy itself says:

“The recent downward trend in arrests and charges for some crimes lessens the certainty of punishment.”

In other words, because there are fewer police officers, fewer people are being arrested and charged. [Interruption] I accept that the strategy does not say that, Minister, but I quoted it directly initially. The downward trend in arrests and charges has come only because there are fewer police officers. I say to the Minister that we need more detectives, as serious crime is rising and we need to go after the perpetrators. Not only that, but if we cannot arrest the perpetrators in the first place because there are fewer officers, that will reduce the deterrence against crime because people will think that they will not be caught. That is a real issue.

I lament the fact that the Government have not reacted quickly enough to the uptick in serious crime over the past two years. We have learned how to use police officers more efficiently, particularly with the new technique of hotspott ing. The evidence shows that that can be very effective against drug dealers and all sorts of criminals. We know more about getting the best value for money out of the police, and reducing their numbers at this time just does not make sense. The shadow Home Secretary quoted Cressida Dick, and Ministers should be learning from her.

Finally, I know that the strategy includes an inter-ministerial group but, as other colleagues have mentioned, if we are going to take the approach that the Government rightly set out in the strategy, we have to see more cross-departmental work. This will come from the top only if Cabinet Ministers are sitting around the table regularly chasing the issue and making sure that their departmental officials see this as a top priority. I am afraid that I will not be convinced that the Government are treating this as a top priority in the cross-Government way they should until we start hearing the Secretaries of State for Education, for Health and for Housing, Communities and Local Government talking about it. When they talk about it, we will take the Government seriously because they will really have got the message.

Let me end by reminding the Minister—I am sure that she knows this, but I will remind her anyway—about why we need to take the issue seriously. Families out there are grieving and they want to know that we are responding as a Parliament and Government to the crisis; and it is a crisis. People have been taken aback by the rapid rise in violent crime, whether that involves knives, guns or acid. There is a sense that things are slipping out of control.

The serious violence strategy and the Mayor’s measures could not come early enough, but we have to redouble our efforts. When Ministers are sitting around the table with the Chancellor making representations, they really have to see that this must now be the top priority. They will have the support of the whole House if they do that. They will certainly have the support of the British people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are not doing very well on the target of 10 minutes per speech, which Members were asked to aim at some
time ago. Speeches have ranged in length: 15 minutes, 16 minutes, 18 minutes, 19 minutes and 17 minutes—quite a lot more than 10.

**Lyn Brown:** Indeed it is!

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am glad that the hon. Lady approves of my arithmetic. I am sure that we can manage this debate without the need for a formal time limit, which limits how the debate works. Will colleagues please try a little harder to stick to around 10 minutes? Then everyone will get in and it will be fair and equal.

**James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I now feel under a significant degree of pressure. I will crack on.

I welcome the strategy. Right from the start, and peppered throughout, the strategy makes the point that the issue cannot be resolved by just arresting people. That is absolutely key. Police intervention must form an important part of the solution, but it is not the only solution. I will come on to my thoughts about police intervention, and, in particular, I will address the points about police resourcing that were raised by the shadow Home Secretary.

In the years immediately preceding my election to the London Assembly, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) being voted in as the Mayor of London, the murder rate in London reached unacceptable levels. Without a shadow of doubt, the previous Mayor of London, Ken Livingston, had not taken the issue as seriously as he should have done. Indeed, he accused the reporting of murders in London of being a media construct, with the particularly vile and inappropriate line “If it bleeds, it leads”, implying that the murders were being reported only because they were sensationalist stories.

In 2008, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and I were elected to London government, getting a grip on the unacceptable level of violent crime in London was a priority. It was done in two parts. First, Operation Blunt 2 was immediately initiated. The shadow Home Secretary, I think quite fairly, ran through some of the questions marks over Operation Blunt 2. It is always very difficult to measure the exact implication of a policing strategy. She asked what message or signal it sends when politicians do or do not take action. Under Ken Livingston, the message sent was that City Hall did not take this as seriously as it should have done. We were very clear that the message we wanted to send was that this was absolutely a priority for the incoming Conservative administration in City Hall.

Operation Blunt 2 was a very high profile, visual, police-led operation which made it completely clear that knives were unacceptable and that people carrying knives would be arrested and charged. I do not row back from the importance of such visual policing operations, but we were also very well aware that a policing response on its own could not and should not be the only response to knife crime. That is why, in addition and in parallel to Operation Blunt 2, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and I worked together to produce the Time for Action youth violence strategy, which addressed a series of potential intervention points in the lives of young people, up to and including rehabilitation of offenders.

There was a programme in Feltham young offenders institution to get young men who had been incarcerated after involvement in knife crime on to rehabilitation programmes, with a gateway to employment with a number of employers directly from the gates of that YOI. While they were on a ROTL—a release on temporary licence—they would be able to start working for their future employers before they had completed their sentence, so they had the incentive to stay on the straight and narrow when they came out of prison. We also considered looked-after children who, unfortunately, still disproportionately find themselves involved in criminality. The sad truth to this day is that looked-after children are still more likely to go to prison than to university. That is an unacceptable truth, but we worked to address that.

We looked at community programmes and diversionary programmes in communities. As the Mayor’s youth ambassador, I visited numerous programmes that were doing fantastic work around London. We also looked at such things as the uniformed youth organisations, including the Scouts, the cadets, the Boys’ Brigade and Girl Guides. Why? Because in many parts of London, they became the quasi-parents of children who often led very dysfunctional lives. I had the pleasure of meeting the air cadets squadron not far from this place. They have an amazing mix of young people, from some of the most wealthy and privileged families in the country to children of refugee and impoverished people. They rub shoulders, mix together and work in that military structure, which we know so often develops the kind of life skills that help to keep people out of trouble. Why did we do these things? We did them because we knew that we had to work upstream and had to do them to prevent young people from getting into trouble.

The shadow Home Secretary, who is not in her usual place, although she is in the Chamber, made the point about police resourcing. It is worth remembering that we halved the number of young people who were murdered on the streets of London between 2008 and 2016 against the backdrop not just of tightening budgets, but of having to deliver the policing operation for the Olympic and Paralympic games, which imposed a huge operational burden on the police. Yes, police officers, police numbers and police funding matter, but—

**Mr Lammy:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Cleverly:** I will.

**Mr Lammy:** I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I want to put on record that the 2011 riots happened during that period. Against the backdrop of the riots, many of those young people were put in prison and that reduced the numbers, because the whole subject was about gang violence—he forgets all the media coverage at that time.

**James Cleverly:** I am sorry, but the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. The idea that somehow the police response to the 2011 riots swept potential murderers from the streets and locked them up is just statistically wrong. [Interruption.] No, the big drop in teenage murders in London happened in the operational year—
Mr Lammy: In 2012.

James Cleverly: No. There was a massively significant drop in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 elections—in the 2008-09 year followed by the 2009-10, preceding the drop in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 elections—in exactly the same as the one that works here. That is why I welcome this strategy so much. I am very pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), is responsible for driving this through. We have spoken about it previously, and I do not think I am giving away any trade secrets if I say that I know her personal passion for getting this resolved.

As I come to my conclusion, I want to say—this has been mentioned by others—that we have to educate our young people, and I have discussed plans for doing that. However, we also have to educate the people who think that drug use—that occasional line of coke at some middle-class party—is a victimless crime. It is not. There is an absolute causal relationship between that so-called victimless crime at some party or some club and the kid that lies bleeding out in the stairwell of a block of flats in south London. Until we look people in the eye and remind them of that fact, this problem, as much as we try to mitigate it, will not go away. That might be a difficult conversation to have. To have celebrities bragging on social media about their drug use is unacceptable and it needs to be called out.

My final point is not explicit in the serious violence strategy, but it is implicit in what it says about some of the preventive measures that the Government are pursuing. It is that we need to find a way—I do not pretend that it is easy or that a solution would be perfect—of capturing the downstream savings of preventive activity, so that they can be recycled to fund those preventive activities. For example, typically, the layer of government that takes responsibility for diverting young people away from crime tends to be local government, which often funds community projects and so on. If it is successful, the bit of government that reaps the savings—through not incarcerating young people—is the Ministry of Justice, but there is no practical way of recognising the downstream saving, harnessing it and reinvesting it in the diversionary activities often discharged by charities and local government in the first place. If we could do that, I have little doubt that it would only take a small percentage of the downstream saving to put these projects on a much more stable financial footing.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister works incredibly hard—she is famous for it—and I hate loading up her shoulders with extra work, which she will tell me off for later in the Tea Room, but if anyone can come up with a plan, she can. I am more than happy to help. This is my offer and my ask. If we can find that alchemy, that way of capturing the savings and reinvesting them in front-end projects, we could really make a difference. I have little doubt about the Government’s commitment. It saddens me that some Members—unintentionally, I assume—question the Government’s commitment to protecting the lives of young people, and I urge the Opposition spokesperson, when he sums up, to be cautious about accusing anyone in the House of being uncaring on this issue.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The rise in violent crime in recent months should concern us all. Lives have been needlessly lost and the public are rightly concerned. The position we find ourselves in has many factors at play, and I agree with the serious crime strategy’s assessment that tackling serious crime is not a law enforcement issue alone, but I am firmly of the view that the cuts to our police forces up and down the country are key to the recent rise in violent crime.

The Government must surely recognise the severity of the situation when an apolitical figure such as the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police suggests that Government cuts have played a significant part in increasing levels of violent crime. For far too long, the Government’s stock response has been to accuse the Labour party of playing politics. When I raised this issue at Prime Minister’s questions last month, the Prime Minister attempted to dismiss my concerns as hyperbole and even suggested that the shadow police Minister was alone in seeing a correlation between the rise in serious crime and cuts to police numbers.

Cressida Dick’s recent comments have vindicated the sterling work of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and showed that these are indeed genuine, well-founded concerns. If the country’s most senior police officer is suggesting that we are in the midst of a funding crisis for our police forces, it is high time the Government took note and reversed the chronic underfunding that has gone on for far too long.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a link between police cuts and violent crime? I represent a seat in south Yorkshire that has seen a 57% increase in violent crime in the last year—one of the highest in the country.

Ellie Reeves: I agree with my hon. Friend. That there is a link between the rise in violent crime and police cuts, and our concerns cannot be dismissed as playing party political games. As a London MP, I am acutely aware of the damage that sustained central Government cuts have had on our police force. The Met has had to make savings of more than £600 million, and more savings are required. Around my constituency, both safer neighbourhood front desks, in Catford and Penge, have closed, and across the capital officer numbers are dangerously close to falling below 30,000.

Some may argue that the Met gets funding from the Mayor of London. They would be correct, but even after the council tax precept increase, which has already been raised to the highest level by the Mayor, the Met will still need to make additional savings of £325 million by 2021. More importantly, the Met relies on central Government for over 70% of its funding, and this shortfall has been caused by successive Conservative Administrations. The reality is that there is nobody for them to pass the buck to when it comes to the issue of police funding.

Yet while we have seen funding continually fall over the past few years, there has been an irrefutable rise in serious crime. In London, knife offences now total over...
12,000 each year, which is a 17% increase since 2013, and firearms offences are up 34% to over 2,000 a year. When I spoke about serious crime in London during Prime Minister’s Question Time, the number of murders in the capital this year stood at 57. Now, five weeks on, the number is approaching 70, and 41 of those murders have been stabbings. Since my election last year, I have met a number of constituents who have been directly affected—most tragically, the families of two young men who were stabbed to death.

Only cross-party efforts can help us to fully rectify the horrendous rise in violent crime. Political decisions can change the situation for the better. The Mayor of London has done his part, allocating an extra £110 million to the Metropolitan police through a rise in the precept, but we have a Conservative Government who are still blind to the fact that chronic underfunding of police forces has its consequences. The serious and organised crime strategy choreographed by the former Home Secretary—the present Prime Minister—raised some important points, but they are meaningless if our police forces are unable to carry out their day-to-day duties because of reductions in central funding. It is another case of the Government’s giving with one hand and taking with the other.

The strategy raised several points about youth involvement that are entirely valid, and the aim of spending £40 million on early intervention and prevention is welcome, but it is set against a backdrop of sustained long-term cuts in youth services and schools since 2010. The cuts in services that may have previously helped young people at risk of being involved in serious crime are symptomatic of the “cuts and austerity” culture that the Government have normalised, with utter disregard for the results of their actions. Moreover, the Government can come up with as many strategies for combating serious crime as they like, but unless our police forces are given appropriate levels of funding and resources, they are wasted exercises filled with hollow words.

The Government can do something, and they should do something. They should do something today. The Conservative party has previously positioned itself as a party of law and order. That rhetoric has long ago worn thin, and it is patently obvious to many in the House and beyond that increasing police funding from central Government is crucially important if we are to deal effectively with serious crime in the long run. More funding would see more officers and better resources. Do it today: do it now.

5.22 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). She made some very good points, and made them passionately—and I know that she is passionate about the security of the community she serves.

For the past year, my community in West Ham has been haunted by violence. Since the start of 2017, nine young people have been killed in my constituency alone, and today I want to remember them. They are Titu Miah, Pietro Sanna, aged 23, Ahmed Deen-Jah, aged 21, Benjamín Piekny, aged 21, Taofeek Lamidi, aged 20, Abdul Mayanja, aged 19, Sami Sidhom, aged 18, Lord Promise Nkenda, aged 17, and Corey “CJ” Davis, aged just 14, and shot in a playground.

That is not the final roll-call. There have been so many more children and young people with life-changing injuries caused by the dreadful, almost unrestrained violence over the past 18 months—saved just by luck, or by our amazing national health service, want to think about all of them today.

Our latest young man to die needlessly and tragically was Sami Sidhom. He was stabbed last month on the street outside his home when returning from a West Ham game. He was a bright, well-loved, quiet young man, studying at Queen Mary’s College in London. He was doing really well, and was not involved in any crime or any gang. His neighbours rushed out of their house to help him. They were talking to him and comforting him when he died from his wounds. I have seen the pain, the anger and the fear of the community in which he lived. His father’s heart broke in my arms.

The whole community are traumatised. Their only outlet so far is talking to each other, because there is absolutely no support for them. There is no aftercare. The young man who told me about how the blood was running through his fingers, how he did not know what to do and he could not save Sami’s life: there is nothing available to him today. There is no one I could pass him to, who could take some of that trauma away. So people in the community are gathering together for comfort and looking for things to do, but I think we can do better than that, which is why I agree with many who have spoken today that this is a joined-up cross-Government strategy: we need somebody from the health service to help us out, give us some money and make sure proper counselling is available for those who are traumatised.

We in this place need to face up to some truths, too. All of us of all parties have allowed these circumstances to be created. Those who are dying are so young, and so are many of those who have blood on their hands, but they did not create these circumstances for themselves; effectively, all of us—I am gesturing a huge circle now—helped to create them. We as adults, we as people in authority, we as policy-makers, we as budget-holders, we who did not see what was happening, have allowed our streets to become what they are.

Let us face some facts. Too many of our children now live in fear, convinced that the authorities cannot, or will not, protect them from harm. Too many of our children have no trust whatsoever in the systems we have created so they simply do not engage. Too many of our children believe their potential will not be recognised or nurtured by our society. Quite simply, they have so little hope that they see no future for themselves. That is why they take such massive risks.

These facts make our children far more vulnerable to exploitation by criminals, including those who run county lines. These people have created a cruelly efficient business model to distribute and sell drugs, using our children as expendable cheap labour to enable large profits. It is a cycle of exploitation and grooming that has become an industry. Often the children targeted are bright and charismatic with such promise, and that is why the gang leaders want them so much—because they make such great sales people. We need to find a way to empower our young people so they know how to recognise the power and the tactics of the groomers who are using them to sell the drugs. They need to know how to say no; they need to be given the skills and tools to resist the manipulation of the groomers.
[Lyn Brown]

As has been said in the debate, for many of our people who end up selling drugs, or even killing or dying because of a drug gang, the downward spiral starts with something simple like being befriended by a cool older boy—a new best friend who gives them chicken and chips or new trainers. They take the older boy’s gifts and respect, but it does not take long before those gifts become debts and that respect becomes domination. By the time realisation dawns, it is too late. We must find a way of giving our young people the resilience to resist grooming, and that requires peers, teachers, youth workers and role models making them aware of where accepting that gift of chicken and chips may lead. That will take resources; it will require improving training for teachers and social workers so that safeguarding becomes as much about looking for signs of gang grooming as about spotting child sexual exploitation.

In truth, we do not have a handle on the scale of the exploitation and grooming that drug dealers are engaging in. Even if children and social services are aware of the scale of the problems and the tactics deployed by those running the county lines—and some of them, woefully, are not—they are already massively overstretched. We need to expand their role and give them the training, and that, again, is going to require some resources.

Some young people know or suspect who is responsible for some of the terrible crimes I am talking about, and they might well hold evidence or be able to provide eyewitness accounts that would be helpful to us in a court of law. The information is out there that would help us to catch the people responsible, but the young people who have that information live in a really uncertain, dangerous and deeply scary world. They do not trust; we have done nothing to earn any trust.

I say to the Minister that we need to find a safe space where young people can report this information, and I do not think that that safe space is Crimestoppers, however much my local police encourage people to use it. Young people simply do not believe that it will be confidential. They assume that, if they ring, their call can and will be traced and that a police officer will come knocking on their door. They know that if that happens, they and their families will be punished for snitching by the gang members and drug dealers. They do not trust us to keep them safe, and who can blame them? Third-party reporting, run by a trusted organisation, would be a really good step. It would help us to gather information and address some of the unsolved murders in our communities.

We also need to have a genuine, believable and appropriate offer for those young people who do the bravest of things—namely, give evidence in court against gang members and really serious nasty criminals. They need to know that we will look after them and their families and keep them safe afterwards. They need to know that we will help them to make a new life. We do not do that at present. I know a young man whose life was completely destroyed because he did the right thing. He gave evidence, and then he ran. He was terrified, and he ended up in a community that was completely different from home. He was lost and frightened, and then he was attacked one night. He fought back, but he did so disproportionately, according to the court. So despite the fact that it was he who was attacked and the initial victim, he is now serving time in jail, and I understand that he could well be deported to a country that he has never known after he has served his sentence. We should have done better by him. We owed him that much. His story is known in my community, so why should other young people put themselves at risk in order to give us the information that we need? Why should they help, when that would only make their lives and their families’ lives much worse?

Most of the people in this place have grown up knowing that they have choices and that many opportunities will be open to them. Tragically, most childhoods in my community are just not like that. Sixty-five per cent. of the children in Newham grow up in poverty, knowing that their parents are always thinking about how to pay the rent and the bills and how to put food on the table. Children live with that stress. They watch their parents struggle day in and day out, and they see their future as being the same. It chips away at their dreams, because they know that their parents are working every hour and trying so hard but that it is not bringing them prosperity or security. Our children need some hope for the future.

In West Ham, we have had the worst of it. My community is, as I say, traumatised. We need to work together to make real changes so that we can keep our children safer than we have managed to do thus far. But we also need the resources that we currently lack if we are to destroy the criminal base that is blighting our communities and provide the hope and opportunity that our children deserve. I will work with absolutely anybody in order to get that.

5.33 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I have sat here throughout the afternoon listening to many people, and I look forward to the contributions that are to come. We have heard descriptions of what has happened in our country, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) just now. We have heard about children and young people being murdered on the streets. We have heard of county lines and of the horror they bring. We have heard of the desperation in communities about what can be done about that.

As someone said at the beginning of the debate, why are we debating this only now, perhaps months after we should have been debating it? Why has not the House—all of us, including me—been roaring about this for months? My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has been speaking up about the black community and about some of these issues for years, but why have we, as a collective, not been roaring about it? A massive 67 people have been murdered in London this year. That is an unbelievable figure. Imagine if the figure were aggregated and spread across the country—astonishing.

Serious violence is rising everywhere. It is not just about policing, but policing is part of it; it is about all of these things. Of course everyone cares, but this is a national emergency. This is a crisis for our country. If this were happening in any other context, there would be emergency statements by the Prime Minister and
calls from both sides of the House to do something about it. The county lines are a relatively new phenomenon, and who knows how many children they affect? Children in our country, some as young as 10 or 11, are being exploited by criminal gangs to move drugs. I do not know what law it will take or what should be done, but I do know that that is totally and utterly unacceptable to every single Member of this House of Commons.

I know the Minister wants to do all she can, and I know the Government want to do all they can, but I honestly believe that we all have to wake up. We all have to say this really cannot continue. After this debate, people out there expect to be able to see something being done. Early intervention, schooling and parenting matter, and all of that is right, but what are we going to do now?

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) talked about the long summer evenings. A young person was stabbed to death in Islington at 6.30 pm last night. It was not down some murky alleyway at 1 o’clock in the morning; it was on the streets of Islington in front of people going about their everyday business. This cannot be acceptable, and it cannot be right.

I passionately argue for us not only to debate the issue and not only to show to the people out there who might be watching that we care—I think everybody does care—but to show that we get it and that we understand it. We must tell the mothers, the families and the communities across this country who are crying that we will stand with them and do something about it.

I was a Home Office Minister when we were faced with some of these problems before and it is a sterile argument. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington has argued about police numbers. She has not said that that is the only solution—nobody on either side of the House has said it is the only solution. Of course it is also about youth services. The best people to get involved are the reformed gang members. Get the people in who understand what is going on. Get them in to talk about it—once they have been subject to the law, I hasten to add.

I want to make two more points. This is from the Government’s own evidence. We can see this in the documentation that the Government have published in their serious violence strategy. It totally vindicates what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington has said: targeted stop-and-search is absolutely a part of what we should do, but there is no evidence, even from the Government in their serious violence strategy, that blanket stop-and-search makes any difference. It is in the document the Government have published. What is crucial, it says—I know this as a teacher who dealt with fairly minor instances—is that there is certainty of a consequence. The strategy states:

“We also know that the certainty of punishment is likely to have a greater impact than its severity.”

That is the Government’s own evidence. People have to know that they cannot just act with impunity—

**Lyn Brown:** Because they are going to get caught.

**Vernon Coaker:** Exactly. They have to know they will get caught and be held responsible for what they have done, be it carrying a knife, smashing a window, swearing at somebody or acting in a racist way. If they do not know they will get caught, it is like a kid at school, or your own son or daughter: they will mess you about, but in a much more serious way. So we need certainty of punishment. The Minister has to get hold of the Ministry of Justice, or whoever is responsible, and say, “Get it sorted out. We are the Government.” We are the Parliament. If we cannot sort it out, who is going to sort it out?

We have heard the argument about police numbers. Of course police numbers are not the only reason for this situation, but policing makes a big difference and police numbers make a big difference. It is obvious. Do not accept what my colleagues have been saying: the Government’s own serious violence strategy says exactly that. It says the fall in police numbers is partly a driver—not the only driver, as I totally accept—for the rise in serious violence.

I will finish with this in order to keep to the 10-minute limit. I wish to make one plea to the Minister. This is what I want to happen in the short term. The longer term will sort itself out, but the communities I represent in Nottinghamshire—in Nottingham and around there—and those represented by other Members need something to hold on to now. So I say to the Minister: go to the Treasury and demand, to deal with a national emergency, a pot of money that will allow hotspots to be identified across the county, where police resources can be targeted. That is what works, according to what the Government themselves say: putting money into hotspot areas, so that the police can increase their resources, target those resources and work with youth services and with the community, brings down crime. Crucially, again according to the Government’s own evidence, not only does it bring down crime—it does not result in a displacement of crime from one area to another. Would that not be a price worth paying, Minister? Would that bill not be worth the Government’s picking up? We are talking about a bill of tens of millions of pounds to give to the hotspot areas in London and around the rest of the country where we know the majority of these offences occur. What a statement it would be to those communities to say to them, “We are going to provide some additional resources for the police you need, and to support the youth services in the community alongside them, in order to target what we now accept is a national emergency and a national crisis.”
frankly, the response that I would have as a father would be tougher than that of the police or the law. Of course these issues come back to parenting and to neighbourhoods, but it is also the case—we get used to it in this Chamber—that some Members have been to the best public schools, and that experience is not only about education, because one way in which those schools achieve all that they achieve is the fact that there is the most fantastic extra-curricular work at the end of the school day. If someone is lucky enough to go to one of our public schools, for that 30 grand a year, the rugby, cricket, football, drama and swimming are tremendous. It has always surprised me that some of those very same Members—not all, but some of them—do not realise that a black child in my constituency deserves exactly the same after school. If the Government cut local authorities in the way that we have seen, so that there cannot be the sport or youth services, how do we support a parent to raise her child?

It is just like a doctor facing a patient and assessing whether the illness in front of him has got worse. Is it about the same, or is it getting better? When we look at youth violence, which has now been with us for well over two decades—certainly for the two decades that I have been a Member of Parliament—we have to ask ourselves whether it is the same, about stable or getting worse. The answer is that it is getting worse. Why is it getting worse and what will the strategy do to deal with the problem?

The central issue, about which we hear so little and which the strategy does not really deal with in depth—we did not hear enough on it from the Minister when he was at the Dispatch Box, either—is the work of the Home Office and the National Crime Agency on serious organised crime and serious gangsters. According to the EU’s drugs agency, this country is the drugs capital of Europe. The UN has said that the global drugs market is thriving and London is the capital of the cocaine market in Europe. Some 30 tonnes of cocaine come into our country every year. Our illegal drugs market is worth at least £5.3 billion. The National Crime Agency says that drugs trafficking costs our country £11 billion per year.

The Home Office’s own data shows that at least 1 million people in this country have taken cocaine in the past year, so there is a seriously lucrative market. If there is a lucrative market worth billions every year, that is worth fighting, so why are we not hearing more about cutting off these gangs at source and stopping the flow of drugs and firearms into our country? Why has the Border Force been cut by 25%? How is the Border Force to deal with the drugs coming into our country if there are not the personnel to do it? I have been to the National Crime Agency and had briefings from senior officers. They are being asked to do more with less. They are being asked to deal with cyber-crime; they are being asked to deal with terrorism; and they are being asked to deal with child sexual exploitation and many other issues. They are not being told that drugs are a priority. We have not had any statements from this Home Office on drugs policy. Many people think that the war on drugs has failed, but we have had nothing to replace it, and because we have had nothing to replace it, there is a growing market. FOOT soldiers in my constituency and others are being recruited to feed the demand that exists across our country.

In the serious violence strategy, there are no new announcements on organised crime. In the summary on the Government’s website, there is no mention of organised crime. In the four themes of the serious violence strategy, there is no mention of organised crime. When we read the strategy, we find out that, apparently, there is “ongoing” work to tackle serious and organised crime, thanks to the 2017 drugs strategy that has promised to “restrict supply” by criminal gangs, “disrupt domestic drugs markets”, “respond effectively to the threat posed by organised crime groups” and make our borders “more resilient”. Well, it is not working.

The strategy is linked to ongoing work on serious and organised crime, but there is not just a link; the two issues are the same. Serious organised crime drives violence, so we cannot have a serious violence strategy without a strategy to deal with serious organised crime. It could get worse. The National Crime Agency has been clear that eastern European organised groups are bringing guns into this country. It is worried that they are actually beginning to supply some people with grenades—grenades! You heard it here first in Parliament. When will we get serious about this? When will a grenade go off to protect a county line?

The Government’s own strategy tells us that the share of homicides that are explicitly linked to drugs stands at 57%; yet, again, there is nothing new here on organised crime. I have been passed a document by the Metropolitan police showing that half of the homicides that we saw in the capital last year were linked directly to gang activities and turf wars, but we are hearing very little about breaking that cycle—that cycle of protect and serve to sell drugs—and the myriad organisations that sit well above the youth crime on the ground.

Let me put this bluntly. Very, very sadly, because of poverty and a lot of the issues in many of our constituencies, recruiting young people is much easier than it should be. We have to cut off the demand for the drugs that they are selling and the violence that it is driving in communities such as mine.

This document is not a strategy; it is a wish list full of jargon. It is not sufficient—not even close. Let us look at the key actions and commitments. They include to undertake “nationwide awareness-raising communication activity” and provide £175,000 to deliver support to children at risk in schools and pupil referral units. The Home Office is apparently to provide £1 million to help communities tackle knife crime and provide £500,000 for a new round of heroin and crack action areas. Am I really supposed to believe that if 50 or 60 white middle-class young people were killed in Surrey or Kent in space of five months, we would just have an “awareness-raising communication activity”?

If innocent children were being gunned down on the streets of Richmond or Guildford, would we have a £175,000 fund to deliver support to at-risk children? A person cannot buy a house in London for £175,000, and that is what we are spending on at-risk children. Really? It is not good enough. Of course Ministers have been quick to celebrate the £11 million early intervention youth fund, but what will that fund deliver when in my
bureau alone—the London borough of Haringey—the local authority has had to cut £160 million since 2010, when funding has fallen by almost 50%, and when there has been a 45% cut in staff? Unison has calculated that youth services have been cut by almost half. Will that £11 million meet the gap? Really? The Mayor is putting in a fund of £40 million, but that will not meet the gap and, going back to what I said originally, it gets us nowhere near the extra-curricular activities that some young people in our country who go to certain schools get, when the poorest young people who need as much, if not more, are getting less.

It takes a village to raise a child. No parents or single mother can do it on their own. My wife and I certainly do not do it on our own, but we have the resources to pay for help and to bus our kids all over London to activities. Why should people on the poorest housing estates in London not have the same thing? The response is not good enough when all that the Government and the Met Commissioner want to talk about is stop-and-search or YouTube. Those two things are important, but they are not the only issues.

James Cleverly rose—

Mr Lammy: Given the time, I will not give way.

When asked why crime had risen, the Met Commissioner said, “We think that stop-and-search has had some bearing on this.” Let us not have another argument about the merits of stop-and-search when we reached cross-party consensus on it under the current Prime Minister. We should of course bring in intelligence-led stop-and-search where there has been a spike in crime, but that will not deal with huge amounts of cocaine or stop the death of Tanesha, who was shot in the chest. This is not about stop-and-search. Yes, we must challenge YouTube, and we have to get the drill music videos down, but if the unemployment rate in a constituency such as mine is between 40% and 50% for some young black men—they have no work—it is unsurprising that they rely on putting drill music videos online to get a little money. Why are we surprised? We should get the videos down, but they are almost a distraction, because the real issue is organised crime. I want to hear about “McMafia”, eastern European gangs, Albania and transhipment routes. I want to know why we are cutting the Border Force by 25%.

It is not just gang members getting caught up in all this. There are two other types of young people I care a lot about, because I was them once. A second group of young people are picking up knives on our estates. Why? They are picking them up because they are shit-scared. I was once one of those young people, and I am so lucky that I had things to distract me, but they are scared. We in this House have failed and the Met has failed as a police force if those young people are scared on their estates. That is why they are picking up knives. It is not because they are gang members. They are hiding knives in bushes on the way to school and then finding them on Saturdays and Sundays because they are scared. We will have failed and the Minister will have failed if we do not make them feel safe.

The third kind of young person are those who are dyslexic or have ADHD. They are not going to get access to medication, and there will be no access to CAMHS in the constituencies that we are talking about—it is not going to happen for months—so those young people are seduced into following the crowd. They get seduced by the videos, end up in a group, get arrested on joint enterprise and then go to prison. What are we going to do about that growing number?

Those two groups need a proper strategy—a much better strategy than this. I look forward to working with the Government on their serious violence strategy, because if we do not solve this problem, the figure will be over 100 by the autumn. You heard it here first. Over 100 young people—more than New York—will have died in this country. Do black lives matter or not? That is the question for the Minister.

Last weekend, a 16-year-old boy from my constituency, Ozell Pemberton, bled to death on the streets of Sutton Coldfield after he was stabbed. His mother is absolutely distraught. He is the latest casualty of the rise in violent crime, which has doubled since 2013, with knife crime up by 36%.

In my constituency and in many parts of Birmingham, fear stalks the streets. It has been said many times in this debate that this not just about police numbers—I will come to that later—but I say in all earnestness to the Minister that she cannot cut 21,000 police officers nationwide, including 2,100 in the west midlands, and expect there to be no consequences. Cressida Dick was absolutely right when she made the link between reduced police numbers and rising crime. To be absolutely frank, the Government are in denial. There is a simple, blunt reality: more people will die who might otherwise have lived if we do not reverse this deeply damaging policy of the biggest cuts to any police service in western Europe.

What is happening on our streets is truly frightening, affecting young people but not only young people. We recently had a public meeting in my constituency, following a litany of stabbings and shootings in the preceding three months: two men stabbed in Tyburn Road; guns going off in Gravelly Lane; a robbery in the Greggs store on Kingsbury road involving a two-foot-long machete; shootings in Dovedale Road; two men stabbed on Edgware Road; and a gang of 30 men with machetes attacking a local shop on Witton Lodge Road. Only last month, three sixth-formers from St Edmund Campion School were standing at the bus stop outside their school, when they were attacked by two men with machetes. One boy had his arm chopped from his shoulder down to his wrist.

It is not just about the young people who are directly affected. Fear is being generated by growing gang crime and gangs on the streets. A 60-year-old woman in Slade Road said, “I’ve lived here for 55 years, but I’m now afraid to leave my home.” A woman who has lived on the Perry Common estate for 48 years said, “I don’t go out after dark.” Young men are saying to me, “We are afraid to go outside of our estates.” One young man is even afraid to go to school unless he is escorted, because of the risk of becoming a victim of gang crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and other speakers have catalogued why this is happening. It is despairs; there is often no
It is also the pernicious influence of the internet providers, for those struggling with forms of mental ill health. It is family breakdown and, sometimes, housing problems. It is also the pernicious influence of the internet providers, which in my view are literally getting away with murder. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham was absolutely right about access to CAMHS mental ill health; my right hon. Friend the Member for Erdington (Jack Dromey), who speaks with great knowledge on this subject, I have been pleased to work with him in the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime.

Let me give an example of what is happening in the west midlands. The police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, has established a commission on gangs and violence, injecting £2 million into a very welcome initiative that includes: a team of expert negotiators set up to diffuse violence between gangs and to help individuals escape gangs; a mentoring scheme to help young people at risk of offending; a package of support measures to rehabilitate ex-offenders; and a set of programmes designed to provide alternatives activities for young people at risk of school exclusion and offending. That is all deeply welcome. We need an integrated, public health approach, as several hon. Members in today's debate have mentioned. But, crucially, such an approach will be limited in its impact without the necessary resources. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) were absolutely right that it is crucial to provide adequate resources at the next stages.

Police numbers matter, particularly in the role of neighbourhood policing—the building of relationships with communities. I can give an example of that from my own constituency. Sergeant Simon Hensley set up a canoeing club on Brookvale Park lake, and 200 young people joined it. He helped some of them by way of signposting the various forms of assistance they needed in their lives. When there was an outbreak of burglaries in Stockland Green, young people with whom relationships had been formed came forward and said, “Simon, we think we know who the burglars are.” Some might say, “What are the police doing setting up a canoeing club?”, but it was an excellent way of reaching out to and involving local young people. Sadly, though, such initiatives are becoming ever more difficult because neighbourhood policing has been hollowed out as the numbers of police officers have fallen.

On resources, the Government talk in their strategy about the role of council youth services, family support, mental health services, and schools. In Birmingham, the problem with that is that the council's budget has been cut in half. We have seen the biggest cuts in local government history—£700 million. Youth services have been decimated, family support has been cut back and mental health facilities likewise, and schools are struggling with their budgets. All those things are absolutely vital to underpin a policing response, and the social fabric of the city is increasingly under strain. All the services that are vital in terms of effective early intervention are under pressure.

Of course there are some welcome steps identified in the strategy, but I ask the Minister to listen to the wise words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, who said that they are wholly inadequate to rise to the challenge of what is confronting us now in this country, and the wise words of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, who said that this is a national emergency. These are young people—the best of our country who are being cut down in their prime. It is fundamentally wrong, and the Government have to rise to that challenge.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who speaks with great knowledge on this subject. I have been pleased to work with him in the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime.

I speak as the chair of the all-party group but also as the Member of Parliament for Croydon Central, where we have had a significant issue with knife crime, as have many other places across London and across the country. I want to respond, although he is not in his seat, to the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), who questioned the conversation we were having in this debate about whether we care or not. I do not think it is an issue of whether we care but of whether we care enough. I do not doubt the Government’s compassion on this issue, but I do doubt the choices they have made about what we care about more. It is the Government’s role to prioritise, and this issue is not prioritised enough.

Most of the debate so far has been very good, and we have recognised most of the issues at play. We know that this is partly about policing and partly about prevention. Those issues have been rehearsed and I do not need to go over them again. I just want to make one small point to add to the overall picture: it is not just the individuals involved who are suffering deeply as a result of this violence, but the families and communities. I have in my constituency the family of a boy who was murdered. The boy’s brother, following the murder of his brother, got into trouble at school. There started to be issues, and the school was looking at whether it should perhaps expel him. He then got access to some mental health treatment. It transpired that this boy had very severe post-traumatic stress disorder and needed counselling. We then had to go on the CAMHS waiting list for the treatment that he needed. It took months for him to get that treatment, and who knows what damage will have been done in the interim? It is not just about the individuals, but their families, communities and schools that are also suffering.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on her repeated requests for a debate on this subject, not least in asking the Leader of the House every Thursday morning for many, many weeks. She has done well to get a debate. As many others have said, it is a great shame that it has been so long in coming. We should have had a proper debate, with the Home Secretary, as soon as the strategy was published, and that has not happened.

Before the publication of the strategy, I, along with 12 other chairs of cross-party groups from both sides of the House, wrote to the then Home Secretary to call for a clear and ambitious target to halve the number of deaths from youth violence over the next 10 years. We were disappointed that the Government chose to ignore that call and not to set themselves any kind of goal, but given the resources they have put in place, that is not
surprising, because the resources are simply not enough to achieve a target. The Government talk of a different approach, focusing on early intervention, but those are frankly just words; we need more action.

I want to make one main point that will hopefully add to the debate. I think we all agree that this is a very serious issue that we need to do something about. Everybody is talking about how the public health response can help. I want to mention my friend and former boss, Tessa Jowell, whom we lost recently to brain cancer. I want to pay tribute to her trailblazing work in this area, as the first Minister for Public Health. Almost 20 years before public health became part of our discourse around this agenda, Tessa was putting in place a strategy that was called by one commentator “the success story of our time”, and there are strong lessons to learn from it.

The teenage pregnancy strategy is an example of the sort of long-term, integrated public health approach that we so desperately need now to tackle knife crime and violent crime. It was an evidence-based programme. It had a 10-year goal, it had funding and it had leadership. The strategy did not simply attempt to crack down on teenage pregnancy but sought to understand and prevent its underlying causes. There were tough national targets, but there were local strategies. There was a central team in Government—that was key—who co-ordinated the response across Government. The Prime Minister took a keen interest in the strategy and was regularly given reports on progress, and it was taken seriously. It was not just about telling girls not to have sex; it was about the underlying issues of aspiration, jobs, training and support.

That strategy succeeded. It halved teenage pregnancy rates and is now used as a blueprint by the World Health Organisation. Speaking in this place 20 years ago, Tessa Jowell criticised “the rather pathetic hand wringing about moral decay that characterised so much of the debate about teenage pregnancy in the past.”—[Official Report, 23 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 1127.]

Sadly, the debate about knife crime remains full of hand wringing about moral decay, with not enough focus on the social conditions that underpin it. Of course offenders must be caught and punished, and the police without any doubt need more resources to do their job, but every single police officer will tell you that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

We know what a lot of the answers are. We just need to have the will. At the moment, the Government are not showing that they have the will. I think everybody on both sides of the House would work with them, if only they would publish a proper strategy, with proper resources, focused on prevention.

6.12 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Twenty-two years ago, I was up in the Gallery watching proceedings on the Family Law Act 1996. It was the first time I had ever been in this place, and I watched Members on both sides of the House debate fiercely, furiously and passionately, just as we have this afternoon. I also watched Members find common ground where they could. I watched a Government who moved when they realised that the arguments had been well put by Opposition Members, and I watched an Act come into being that helped save thousands, if not millions, of lives through reforming the law on domestic violence.

Although domestic violence is not the subject of the serious violence strategy, I want to mention it. The strategy quite rightly says that it does not address topics where other strategies are already in existence, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reminds us every International Women’s Day, two women a week are still being killed by a violent partner, and there are lessons to learn for this strategy from the way we tackle domestic violence.

I am not going to repeat what others have said. I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for working so hard on securing this important debate and for what she is doing on the Youth Violence Commission, which could be transformational and could well reflect what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said about a long-term strategy that looks at underlying causes and does not just go for quick fixes.

While we are talking about long-term strategies and not just going for quick fixes, one of my main asks of Ministers—both of them are now in their places—is that we look at the benefits that could accrue from implementing, early and well, compulsory personal, social and health and economic education, with sex and relationships education, for all children, whatever their background and wherever they are at school. This is not me as a Labour MP asking for more money, although I have that on my list as well, but me asking for something that could have a transformational effect.

We have learned from work on perpetrator programmes in the domestic violence sector. I know that the Minister is very interested in this, because she and I have conversed about it many times, and I value her support. We have learned from work on domestic violence perpetrator programmes what can be done if we invest long term in helping to change people’s underlying belief systems. She will have heard me say this before, but I will say it again. In my time, I worked with many very violent men before I entered this place, and if only there had been some form of early intervention for them 20 or 30 years previously, perhaps they would never have been forced to end up in prison and subsequently in a room with 16 other men while I and my co-facilitator told them what they needed to do differently. I really wish that we did not need domestic violence perpetrator programmes after people have already committed violence, but if we have investment in high-quality PSHE at an early stage, we can do so much to tackle the things so many hon. Members have mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said that young people think someone is their friend when they offer them chicken and chips. I have to say that a high-quality sex and relationships education and PSHE curriculum can help young people differentiate between someone who is a friend and someone who is trying to buy their favour.

The question of gender has not been mentioned, but I want to raise it. It is often controversial, but it is deeply relevant. Member after Member has mentioned people who have been killed, but behind those stories lie the people who have killed, and they are often—they are usually—male. Let us be honest about this: if we look at the statistics for murder and serious violence, it is often, although not always, men who commit those crimes. It is not just an accident that they are men; they are doing it in a culture of patriarchy and with attitudes...
towards gender roles that support them in thinking that they can get away with something, or that they are entitled to or should do something because they are a man. This is something else that could be challenged for the benefit of all men, as well as for women. It is for the benefit of all men to know that being violent does not define them as a man, and that trying to control someone else or to use a knife or a gun does not make them a better man. Again, I ask the Minister, in her summing up, to give us an update about where we are with PSHE, because we could explore that and make it available to all young people as part of the long-term strategy mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central.

My friends in the Avon and Somerset police force are doing amazing work, but I have to bring in the question of police cuts before I finish. Since 2010—not just since 2015, but since 2010—the Avon and Somerset area has had £65 million of police cuts, and we have lost 655 officers. They were good, specialist officers, and we have lost specialist services that knew how to tackle specific issues. We have lost them, and some of them will never come back. When I went on a ride-along recently with PC Ben Spence and Sergeant Richard Jones—thank you to them both—they showed me the impact of the cuts by introducing me to people who are being cuckooed. They are very vulnerable people, some of whom have criminal records but some of whom do not, and both categories deserve our help. The impact of cuckooing is that other people are being hurt and other people’s lives are being made a misery.

I wish to leave the Minister with a final picture. This affects ordinary people in my constituency, and I am sure in hers as well. I know her constituency well, having visited it many times. I do not think there are the tower blocks in Louth and Horncastle that we have in Bristol West—she will correct me if I am wrong—but there will be similar issues and commonalities. The people who live in the tower blocks right outside my office tell me of the misery of knowing that someone in their block is being cuckooed: being terrified at someone ringing on the doorbell late at night, being old and feeling frightened of the drug dealer at their door, seeing someone inject heroin into their groin on the stairwell, or not being able to send their children out to play in the park right outside. It is so heartbreaking.

I am sure that the Minister would not want that for anybody’s constituents. I believe that she is honourable, and she, like me, will want all those young people to have a better life. I offer her this opportunity: I will work with her and contribute my experience of domestic violence work and work with violent men. I will help anybody interested in learning from that experience. But I ask the Minister to commit tonight to making sure that PSHE comes forward at the earliest opportunity. Also, will she please at least talk to her Treasury colleagues about funding for our specialist police officers?

6.19 pm

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), I want to participate in this debate principally to talk about some of the shockingly violent crimes that Great Grimsby and North East Lincolnshire have experienced in recent months, and to explore a bit more broadly the situation there to try to get to the bottom of what seems to be a spike. In Humberside, violent and sexual crime has increased by 20%. Arguments have been made that police numbers are not the only story, but there is an issue about referrals as well: while sexual crime seems to be going up, referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service across the country are going down.

I want to focus on violence and drugs. I have previously mentioned in the House the gang of hooligans who went marauding through my lovely seaside town, frightening the life out of many of my constituents. A poor man was killed by a single punch. Another man, Anthony Richardson, who was homeless, was killed in a daylight attack. Bins have been set on fire against vulnerable people’s homes, resulting in their deaths. This week, a knife was pulled on a child at a BMX track by another child. These incidents may not be as regular or serious as those that some Members have discussed this afternoon, but they are serious and they have a lasting impact on my community. The incidents are separated by time, and I certainly do not want to paint my town as being riddled with violent crime. But this is certainly becoming an issue. In a small town and small borough such as North East Lincolnshire, the impact on the impression people have of the area can be lasting. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) talked about fear and the perception of crime, and that issue is incredibly important to many of my constituents.

In March this year, 626 violent crimes were recorded in my area. The figure has never been that high; I have looked at the figures back to 2011. The statistic does not distinguish between domestic violence and other violent crime, but I do not think that matters a great deal. I feel that the violent crime is linked to drugs. The Government’s strategy refers to crack cocaine as an issue, but the biggest issue on the streets of North East Lincolnshire seems to be Spice. Its effects are so varied and users do not really know where they are or what they are doing. The local outreach service Harbour Place notes that it is the most destructive drug it has seen on the streets of Great Grimsby.

It is interesting that the drug crime does not seem to have risen as the violent crime has. Is there an issue with drugs not being tackled early enough, so that serious violence increases? If more action were taken to deal with the drugs element, perhaps violent crime would not be happening as it is.

I do not know whether these are reported issues of drug use, incidents or charges, and perhaps some of the detail is hidden, but I am left concerned that violent drug criminals are not being apprehended despite the determination of Humberside police through Operation Impact, which has tried to deal with the issue. Grimsby is known to be at the receiving end of county lines action taking place at the moment. That police involvement seems to have been solely around engaging in that county lines operation to try to stem the flow of drugs. Colleagues this afternoon have mentioned trying to stop the big dealers from spreading drugs around the country by orchestrating efforts towards smaller local areas. My constituents say to me that it is all well and good looking at the big picture and stopping the big fish in their tracks, but the impact that has at the local level means that the police do not have the resources to
interfere on drug taking at the local street level. That has an impact on neighbourhoods. A comment was made about people injecting heroin in a stairwell. They are lucky in Bristol West to have the privacy of a stairwell. I have witnessed it happening openly in the middle of the street in my constituency and it puts people in fear. It makes them feel like the police are not intervening to stop that action from taking place. It makes them feel that there is nobody who has the power or the responsibility to stop it happening right in front of our noses. If I am seeing it and my constituents are seeing it, they wonder why nobody in authority is seeing it and stepping in to stop it from happening.

This issue does not just affect the difficult estates and other areas with greater social deprivation. Recently, I received reports of drugs being dealt from nice middle-class homes in quiet areas where the police usually have little cause to go. The criminals consider those areas to be police blind spots. As I said, the attention given to tackling the source of the drugs has had a real impact on the local community. People feel very frightened in their neighbourhoods.

In Humberside, there are 800 fewer police and police staff than in 2010. There has been excellent work by Labour’s police and crime commissioner, who recognises these issues. The chief constable has also heard my concerns about the need for a dual strategy, tackling the issue at the level of criminal gangs and dealing with the impact on people’s streets and homes. The Humberside PCC Keith Hunter recognises those issues and rather than sitting on millions of pounds in reserves, as his predecessor did, he has decided to plough them back into shoring up staffing numbers, including the recent recruitment of 200 new officers. I applaud him for that, but we have to remember that reserves can only be spent once. We need to ensure sustainability in that programme. I ask the Minister to take the opportunity to have a look at that sustainability.

I should take a moment to thank Humberside police for a genuine determination in wanting to tackle the root cause of extreme violence linked to drugs. They have, at every request I have put to them to help be a part of community solutions, given up their resources to help. Their help is not always just dealing with crime directly. Recently, a police community support officer in the Freshney ward found an elderly gentleman who had been hit by his own garage door and left unconscious on the floor. I do not know how long he had been there, but the fact that we have PCSOs who are grounded in the community and walking the beat meant that they were able to see that man and help to get him to hospital. That shows the importance of neighbourhood policing more broadly. Boots on the ground give local communities the confidence that their police are aware of the issues, however innocent and minor or serious they might be.

The police have to tackle crime gangs who are ever more inventive at operating through young people, and not just the young people I expected. In a meeting with the police last week, I was talking about vulnerable children being exploited. I was thinking about disadvantaged, marginalised and look-after children, but I was told that the young people now being targeted by gangs are those who are well dressed and look respectable. They are completely unassuming and the police would never think to stop them or suspect that they were involved in criminal activity. The police need the opportunity to provide resource into the intelligence-led work that other colleagues have talked about.

I finish on the point that activity with young people, and access to youth clubs and to youth activity, are so important. In North East Lincolnshire, all but one youth club has shut in the last eight years, and that youth club, the Shalom centre, which is run by Canon John Ellis, has been under threat of closure. It has had to turn to crowdfunding to try to source an essential £40,000 to stay open. The centre is in one of the most deprived wards. It has managed to raise £15,000 so far, which is absolutely fantastic, and I congratulate and commend him on his efforts. Another community group, Grimsby Boxing Academy, led by Andy Cox, is reopening the Trin youth club in Cleethorpes, thanks to North East Lincolnshire Council allowing it to take that property on for a peppercorn rent. I also mention the CatZero and CPO—Creating Positive Opportunity—Full Families programme, which I know the Minister is aware of, and which works to stay in touch with families who need assistance, help and support more broadly.

The picture clearly differs across the country, but all those communities are experiencing difficulties, fear, hurt and concern. The Minister has to be absolutely sure that her strategy is the right one for tackling that whole variety of different issues.

6.31 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I begin my remarks by marking the first anniversary of the terrible events in Manchester on 22 May 2017. We remember all those who lost their lives and those who were injured. We think of their friends and families and pay tribute to the emergency services and first responders for the work that they did that night. I also pay tribute to the great city of Manchester for the way in which it came together in the aftermath of that awful tragedy.

We are here today to debate the serious violence strategy. There is agreement across the House on its broad themes—tackling county lines, early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and effective law enforcement and criminal justice response. The 14 speeches from Back Benchers covered a range of issues. I draw attention, in particular, to the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has called tirelessly for this debate and spoke movingly about the young lives lost in her constituency and the importance of engaging with young people. After all, they are our country’s future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) was absolutely right to draw attention to the comments of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who said clearly that it would be “naïve” to say that the reductions in police finances, whether in London or beyond, have not had an impact. I say to Ministers that her words really should be heeded in terms of how they take matters forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke very movingly about those lost in her constituency and paid tribute, entirely appropriately, to the work by our national health service, whenever there are violent crimes, in seeking to save and treat people. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) spoke with great passion about the need for action. In a sense, he summed up that urgency in seven words—“what
are we going to do now?” My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) also spoke with great passion. Like him, I have visited the National Crime Agency, and he is entirely right to draw attention not only to the key issue of tackling serious and organised crime in drugs and firearms, but to the cuts to Border Force.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was entirely right to say that 21,000 police officers cannot be cut with no consequences. The Government should not be in denial about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) spoke very movingly and appropriately about the work of the late Baroness Jewell in public health. She is absolutely right that we should bring that into the debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work as the chair of all-party group on knife crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was entirely right to bring domestic violence into this debate—a key issue on which she spoke with great authority—and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke well about the shocking rise in violent crime in her area. She also raised the key issue of why there had been a reduction in the number of referrals for sexual offences from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service. That is something that needs to be considered across Government.

The issue of resources has been raised across the Chamber. Let me say at the outset: I am not saying that adequate resourcing is sufficient on its own to tackle these multifaceted issues, but it is necessary if we are to take all the action needed. It cannot be said that police numbers are irrelevant. If there is any doubt about that, I should remind the House of the leaked Home Office document that appeared last month, which my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary spoke of. Let us be clear—this is what the Home Office is saying to Ministers:

“Since 2012-13, weighted crime demand on the police has risen, largely due to growth in recorded sex offences. At the same time officers’ numbers have fallen by 5% since 2014. So resources dedicated to serious violence have come under pressure and charge rates have dropped. This may have encouraged offenders.”

Home Office Ministers should be heeding the advice they are being given.

We have spoken a great deal in the House today about the 21,000 fewer police officers, but we must not forget either that more than 18,000 police support staff have been cut, in addition to more than 6,000 police community support officers. The statistics really are damning. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who served with such great distinction in the Home Office, highlighted the figures on violent offending for the year ending December 2017. As he pointed out, there were just under 1.35 million violent offending for the year ending December 2017. As he pointed out, there were just under 1.35 million violent offences that year compared with 700,000 in 2009—a near doubling. The Government’s own serious violence strategy also contains some very sobering but pretty clear statistics: the homicide rate rose from 553 in 2011-12 to 628 in 2016-17; knife crime offences were up, from just over 28,000 in 2011-12 to more than 32,000 in 2016-17; firearms offences increased over the same period from just over 6,000 to 6,375 and increased by 2016-17; firearms offences increased over the same period from just over 6,000 to 6,375 and increased by 2016-17. These figures only reinforce my hon. Friends’ points about the urgent need to tackle this and save lives.

I go back to what the Prime Minister said when she became Home Secretary in 2010:

“Nobody should accept a situation where at least 26,000 people fall victim to crime every day.”

I have looked at the crime survey for England and Wales. In the year ending September 2017, there were more than 10.5 million recorded criminal incidents, which works out at over 29,000 per day—3,000 more per day than in 2010. If the Prime Minister tells us that that was unacceptable in 2010, why on earth should we accept it in 2018?

Those statistics really should make the Government think, but this is about far more than mere statistics. Every statistic I have quoted is about young lives being spoilt or endangered, young lives crying out for intervention.

I say to Ministers, “Do not dismiss the impact of police numbers.” The Metropolitan Police Commissioner makes the link with finances; the leaked Home Office document makes the link; common sense makes the link. Let me say to all Conservative Members who have spoken today that nowhere in the serious violence strategy document is there any sustained analysis of the link between police numbers and levels of crime, and indeed violent crime; it is simply not there. If there were such confidence, the analysis could have been put in that document and placed before the House, but it is not there because we all know that there is a link.

I say to the Government, “Listen to what has been said in the debate today, and act, so that we can save more young lives.”

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Let me begin by saying that Manchester is a city that is very close to my heart. I grew up in Lancashire, and it was the big city that we used to visit on a Saturday to do our shopping, to go to the cinema and go to concerts. I know that, across the House, we share the sorrow of the people of Manchester. We are in awe of their strength, and we give thanks for the extraordinary bravery of the emergency services and all the members of the public who ran towards danger on that terrible night to help others. Manchester is a magnificent city with great people, and their response on that night is a mark of how great its community is.

Let me now turn to the very serious debate that we have had today. I am pleased that it was called for by Members across the House, and, as a Minister, I am pleased that the Government provided time for it, because the topic is so serious. We have heard from colleagues on both sides of the House about the way in which it has affected their constituents personally. I will begin my response by identifying a couple of points on which I hope we can all agree.

One point on which I hope we can all agree is that we all want this to stop. Another is that we owe it to our constituents, to the victims of serious violence and to the families who are grieving, to put aside party politics and work together to stop it. That point was made forcefully and powerfully by the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for West Ham (Lyn Brown), and also by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). His speech showed that—contrary to suggestions made by one or two Members—even colleagues with constituents in rural counties a million miles from the urban hotspots can feel powerfully about this issue, and care about it.
I am very pleased that the Mayor of London and Members on both sides of the House—including the right hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Lammy)—as well as police and crime commissioners, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the director general of the National Crime Agency, people who head charities, local government representatives and Ministers across the Government are joining those in the serious violence taskforce to implement the more than 60 commitments in the serious violence strategy. At the first meeting of the taskforce last month, the firm intention of everyone was to act. It is not a talking shop but a place for action, and it is gratifying that—I sense—such an approach has the support of the House today.

The most important part of my role as the Minister responsible for crime, safeguarding and vulnerability is meeting and listening to the victims of crime and grieving families. I am constantly amazed at the strength and dignity of people who are in the most trying of circumstances. It does not matter whether the incident happened a few months ago or years ago; the impact on those families is still painful to behold. I know that Members in all parts of the House have seen it for themselves in their constituencies.

It is a privilege to sit and listen to the families’ stories, to hear about their loved ones and to reflect on their views as to what more can, and must, be done. Indeed, some are somehow able to find the wherewithal to use their experiences to help others. I am thinking in particular of Ben Kinsella’s family. The pain the parents have felt over the years since Ben’s death is palpable, yet the family have put that emotional energy into setting up the Ben Kinsella Trust centre in Finsbury, which I cannot recommend highly enough to Members to visit. It is particularly effective at addressing themes that have been raised today, such as reaching out to young people from primary school age through to late teens in an age-appropriate manner. I will not give away the impact of a visit, but the most powerful part is where the horrendous impact of such murders on family members and the friends of those lost is made very clear. That is a theme that has been raised by colleagues across the House today; the effect of these murders is not restricted to the family unit but is also felt by friends and communities.

I thank every Member who has spoken today, particularly those who spoke so movingly of the experience in their constituencies. I am bound to mention the contribution made by the hon. Member for West Ham, whose constituency, sadly, features too often in our conversations in this regard. When talking about one victim, she used a phrase that struck me: “His father’s heart broke in my arms.” That sums up the feeling hon. Members have brought into the Chamber this afternoon and points to the much wider impact this has had nationally.

It is vital that we listen to the young people themselves. I agree completely with colleagues across the House who have said that, and it is why I and other Ministers visit charities across the country to listen to young people and the people who work with them; I am sure not every teenager wishes to spend their afternoon off school receiving a visit from a Home Office Minister, but I believe that young people and their youth workers do appreciate the chance to talk to us.

I visited Safer London in east London and I was so inspired by a video it showed me of one of the young people it had worked with, Reuben, that I invited him, other former gang members and members of the charity into the House of Commons. I hope colleagues will recall that I invited everyone across the House to come a couple of months ago to the event we held on the Terrace. It is important that young people are not only listened to but feel they are being listened to. It is important to hear from young people such as Reuben, who might live just a few miles down the river; I asked him if he or his friends had ever been to this part of town or to the House of Commons, knowing what the answer was likely to be, and he said that it felt like a different country and it was inconceivable that they would make that journey. This is the first of what I hope will be regular events where colleagues across the House can listen to young people here, to understand for ourselves what we should be doing and what more they expect of us.

This reaching out and listening is exactly what Home Office officials did when commissioned by the then Home Secretary a year ago to draw together a strategy to deal with serious violence, because they could see the way the statistics were going. Home Office officials have reached out to the police, local authorities, charities, youth workers, teachers and healthcare providers to ask for their ideas and thoughts on what can be done to stem this flow of violence.

The serious violence strategy that has been published, which hon. Members have been kind enough to review and give their thoughts on today, has four pillars. We are looking not just at law enforcement, important though that is, but at the causes of serious violence and what can be done to tackle it. That is why we are committing £40 million to be invested to support initiatives to tackle serious violence. This will focus on early intervention and prevention and on the root causes of the violence. It will look to help young people before they go down the wrong path, encouraging them to make positive choices and to live productive lives away from violence. It will tackle head on some of the theories about why these crimes occur, and explore the reasons behind the violence, including the links to drugs and gangs.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for giving way, because I forgot to mention something in my speech. Two years ago, I asked a question about Grimsby being included in a list of local authority areas that would benefit from the strategy discussed in the “Ending gang violence and exploitation” paper. Can she tell us what has happened to that paper and that strategy?

Victoria Atkins: I can certainly help the hon. Lady with the “Ending gang violence and exploitation” strategy. It is one of the strategies on which the serious violence strategy has been built. I do not pretend that we are inventing the wheel for the first time here; we are building on work that has been done over the years, and “Ending gang violence and exploitation” is one of those strands of work. We have an inter-ministerial group, and I am delighted to see my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General, sitting here next to me tonight, because he is one of the Ministers in that group, which I chair. It brings all the relevant Ministers into the room and challenges them to deliver for their Departments in terms of tackling these types of crime. We are now refocusing the group to deal with serious violence, because county lines and other factors have developed. I am hoping that I might get a little assistance specifically
about Grimsby, but if I do not, I will write to the hon. Lady about that. I am afraid that I cannot flick through my file and find the answer in time now.

I am delighted—“delighted” is the wrong word; I am pleased—that Members across the House have understood the terrible impact that county lines is having on criminal statistics and on people living day to day in our constituencies. I hope that those who attended the debate on county lines in Westminster Hall several months ago will forgive me for repeating this powerful line from a police officer who has done a lot of work on county lines gangs. She said:

“They are stealing our children.”

That sums it up for me.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham, who I look forward to working with on the serious violence strategy, spoke powerfully about the role of serious organised crime, and I agree with him. I used to prosecute serious organised crime, and I am very alert to it. We would say that county lines is serious organised crime. That is our mindset. It is at the heart of the serious violence document. He made a point about wider serious organised crime groups, and various nationalities have been mentioned today. The National Crime Agency leads on those crime groups and on county lines investigations, because county lines is a national crime. We will also be producing the serious organised crime strategy in due course, in which—believe you me—this will be looked at. Please do not think for a moment that we have ignored serious organised crime; we have not. We have put it at the heart of the strategy, because we consider it to be part of it.

Jack Dromey: There is common ground in the House that this is not just an issue of police numbers, but does the Minister agree with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that there is a link between the numbers of police officers on the street. In addition, does the Minister agree with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, that this is not just an issue of police numbers, but does the Minister agree with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that there is a link between the numbers of police officers on the street? In addition, does the Minister agree with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, that this is not just an issue of police numbers, but does the Minister agree with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that there is a link between the numbers of police officers on the street?

Victoria Atkins: I am constantly asked that question, as the hon. Gentleman will imagine, and I challenge my officials to tell me the answer, because I want to get to the truth and I want to ensure that we are tackling this as effectively as possible.

During the previous spikes in knife crime in the late 2000s and mid-1990s, there were many, many more officers on the street. In addition, there does not appear to be a relationship between the numbers of police officers and the national rise in serious violence. I absolutely understand why hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised this issue.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a compelling point about the collaboration taking place across Government, and her own work on this is well understood and widely admired. Will she also look at the allocation of police resources and what I described earlier as the police culture? We need policemen who are involved in their communities and who are familiar to and respected by those communities. Such work will build the strength and social solidarity that is essential to tackling the problem.

Victoria Atkins: I am very conscious of the time. Many colleagues have raised the point about youth services. We understand that, which is why the Government, in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund, have invested £80 million—£40 million in the #iwillFund and £40 million in the youth investment fund. We are also supporting the National Citizen Service and the troubled families programme, and we are setting up the early intervention youth fund. We have the trusted relationships fund and the anti-knife crime community fund. Colleagues on both sides of the House have said that we need funding for small charities, not for the big ones. The anti-knife crime community fund is doing exactly that, and bids are about to open, so please get charities to apply.

I shall turn to the subject of drugs, although I am conscious of the time. Many colleagues have talked about the journey of cocaine and heroin into this country is plagued with exploitation, violence and death. When someone buys a wrap of cocaine, they have no idea how many children and young people have been involved. We as a House need to unite around precisely that so that when the Government introduce legislation such as the offensive weapons Bill, we will give it full support.
Business without Debate

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

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

**CONSUMER PROTECTION**

That the draft Breaching of Limits on Ticket Sales Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 26 April, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.) Question agreed to.

**Fuel Laundering**

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7 pm

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): I want to draw the House's attention to a serious problem on a serious scale. It is a problem run by organised crime gangs across our country, yet it appears to many that the Government are lackadaisical or so distracted by other matters that they are not that concerned by it. I want to address the issue of Government concern—they ought to be concerned—as this crime is costing the Treasury hundreds of millions of pounds, so much so that, by a modest calculation, every 10 years the sums the Government could recover would make the Conservative and Democratic Unionist party confidence and supply agreement moneys cost neutral. The Government should consider that when dealing with this issue.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): I wish to raise an area of major concern, which is the position of road hauliers, particularly those in Northern Ireland, who are missing out because they are having to compete against those who are dealing in smuggled fuel and are, thus, unable to compete on a level playing field. Most of the moneys being derived from this are going into the pockets of paramilitaries.

**Ian Paisley**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The Government's very conservative estimate of what this crime amounts to is largely down to the lack of resources being directed at tackling it, as measured by the small amount of arrests and convictions, and to the fact that the current Government strategy of markers has failed because the markers do not work as well as the Government pretend. As it is Northern Ireland's problem, it is often regarded as a problem that is out of sight and out of mind. However, the facts available to me indicate that it is fast becoming a UK mainland problem.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that a zero-tolerance approach must be taken to fuel laundering, not simply because of the cost to the Exchequer of some €100 million per annum in Northern Ireland, but because those carrying out these crimes are very often inextricably linked with paramilitarism? We must cut off the money-making arm of paramilitary groups throughout Northern Ireland. Do away with the money and we stop the paramilitary groups being active.

**Ian Paisley**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We hear much debate about Brexit and the hard border, and how it must be frictionless and customs must be harmonised. Every gangster who is engaged in this operation in Northern Ireland and this level of crime, many of whom are senior Sinn Féin supporters and other senior paramilitaries, believes in a hard border on this one, because they love the fact that there is a customs differential and they want to ensure their ability to transfer vast amounts of laundered fuel in a frictionless manner.

Let us examine the scale of the crime. In March, Baroness Neville-Rolfe stated in an answer to questions in the other place that the estimated level of illicit fuel
[Ian Paisley]

sales amounts to “£50 million” in lost revenue for the last year for which figures were available. I believe that is a glossed over view and that, even though it is a staggering amount, it conceals a far greater level of fraud. However, if that was the height of it, that is half a billion in resources lost to the Government over the term of a normal Parliament. The most recent official report of the Organised Crime Task Force—I must declare an interest, as I served as a member of it before I joined this House—details that the tax gap between Government known legitimate sales of oils and fuels, and illicit fuel trading is about £100 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) identified. That has reduced from about £160 million nine years ago, but it is still a staggering amount.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the substantial amounts of money that the Treasury is losing, an issue that is sometimes not highlighted is the danger of the damage done to vehicles? Some of these illicit fuels are poisoned and treated very badly so that these people can maximise profits.

Ian Paisley: If we start to go down that line, the costs are in many ways incalculable. We need to bear that in mind.

The Organised Crime Task Force recounts a case study of an organised crime gang that evaded duty of more than £3 million. It had laundering plants in 13 locations, at one of which the police seized approaching £300,000 in cash. They also seized 72,000 litres of illicit fuel that was being sold to unsuspecting motorists, like my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said. Nine people were convicted, and two custodial sentences were handed down amounting to—listen to this—just 16 months in prison. Seriously? A multimillion-pound crime gang and they get 16 months in prison. What sort of disincentive to criminality is that?

The Government will no doubt point to their new fuel marker, which they introduced in conjunction with the revenue and customs people in the Republic. They claim that it is particularly special and “significantly more resistant to laundering” than old markers. Given that old markers could be laundered through a sieve, that is not actually a good recommendation. They also boast that there has been a “reduction in laundering plants discovered”. That boast is hollow, as it means that the authorities cannot find the laundering plants.

I will tell the House why that is so. Previously, removal of the marker left an environmentally hazardous sludge that ultimately gave away the launderers’ locations and caused a multimillion-pound hazard that the local authorities had to pay hundreds of thousands pounds to clear up. The new so-called more effective marker can be removed via the process of distillation, leaving no environmental waste at all—it simply evaporates—hence the carefully crafted words of the report. If the laundering plants do not leave any trace, they will be much harder to find, so fewer plants will be discovered. On the fact that the new marker can be distilled off the fuel, I leave this thought with the House: many people in Northern Ireland know a lot about distillation. They have been distilling a produce in Northern Ireland for very many years, so it is now so much easier to commit this crime than it was previously.

Let me turn to the substance of my argument; I hope that the Minister will respond to these points. This is not a uniquely Irish problem. Because a blind eye has been turned to stamping it out, organised crime gangs are exporting this crime across the Irish sea. A case study produced by the Government’s Organised Crime Task Force recounts how the “fuels may move across the EU borders without supervision”,

If ever we were going to get a warning that we need more friction on our border in respect of this issue, this must be it.

In 2016, there were 80 movements of ISO tanks—tank containers built to the standard of the International Organisation for Standardisation—containing 26,000 litres each. The Government estimate that millions of litres of this oil were smuggled before it was identified. The crime amounted to millions of pounds in lost revenue for Her Majesty’s Exchequer—and this is just one operator. Such crimes have a devastating impact on our haulage industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said earlier.

At the weekend, three Secretaries of State visited Northern Ireland and heard at first hand from the haulage industry. The industry took the opportunity to spell out the following, saying that organised crime gangs “are now exporting laundered diesel to GB on an industrial scale using bulk containers contained inside curtain slide trailers. This is of huge concern to Roll on Roll off operators on the Irish sea as it is hazardous cargo, is not manifested or transported safely”. A potential disaster looms that would make the Zeepbrugge disaster look insignificant. This operation is being used to supply illicit vehicle operations across England. The Government promise that legitimate trade must not be interfered with or delayed, as a result of Brexit, between our islands and on our island. I agree wholeheartedly with that position, but to have confidence, illicit trade must be stamped out. The Government must not sacrifice their principles on ensuring that we have open trade. They must not allow criminals to get away with it. We must deal with the criminal elements, because they are rubbing their hands in glee, looking at the opportunities that Brexit will open up for them.

There are 5,730 licensed commercial vehicle operators and 22,000 licensed goods vehicles in Northern Ireland. Some 27% of Northern Ireland licences are international hire and reward work compared with an average of 10% here on GB mainland. Therefore, this is big business in Northern Ireland. Some 27,000 people are currently employed in the transport and storage industries in Northern Ireland, and fuel represents about 32% of the operating costs of those industries. It is obvious from those figures that illicit traders can destroy a legitimate business by focusing on the sale of illicit fuel, and put a legitimate operator out of work overnight.

Our duty on fuel is, of course, the highest in Europe and it is unlikely to fall, so the pressure on legitimate trade and the opportunity for the criminal grows. Last June, I met people from the Petrol Retailers Association. They are appalled at how easy laundering has become. They have identified a number of sites across Northern Ireland that are openly run by criminals, and yet nothing
has been done about it. I was going to use privilege this evening to read out the names of 12 illicit trade operators across the United Kingdom that have been given to me by the Petrol Retailers Association. I would get a very easy headline, but I will not do that, because I am not here to embarrass the Government. I am not here to try to pull that one on them, but I do make a plea to the Minister that if we know who these people are, and if their names are easily circulated between the police, the association and the operators, surely something must now be done to stamp them out. I hope that the Minister will push that matter back to the authorities and tell them that we want these criminals dealt with, and that we want to see examples set.

I have three pleases to make to the Minister this evening, and I hope that he can respond to them. The first is in the words of the Petrol Retailers Association. Let me quote again from the letter:

“...I firmly support you and your colleagues in demanding from Government a fresh look at the real impact of this HMRC marker initiative and a renewed commitment to tackle the heinous problem of illicit fuel which has spread to the mainland.”

Secondly, I want the Government to review the sentencing policy and practice of those caught engaging in this heinous crime. Finally, as Brexit approaches, let us use this as an opportunity to make the United Kingdom have the gold standard fuel marker and to put in place a proper and effective British marker that works and stops this illicit trade. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond positively to these matters and offer me the opportunity to meet senior officials to address them.

7.13 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for raising an important issue, which I know that he, his constituents, and the effective quartet of Members from Northern Ireland who are here this evening—[Interruption.] I forgive, I do apologise. Who could forget? I know that this is an issue that many people feel strongly about. I know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be delighted to hear that the Democratic Unionist party now wants to be cost neutral, and I will make sure that that is taken into consideration in future conversations.

Fuel duty makes an important contribution to the public finances. In 2016-17, it generated £28 billion, or nearly 5% of total tax revenue. It is the fifth largest source of tax revenue to the Exchequer, behind only income tax, national insurance contributions, VAT and corporation tax, so, as my hon. Friend rightly suggested, this matters. Fuel fraud is not a victimless crime. It deprives the Exchequer of funds that pay for public services. I appreciate that my hon. Friend has concerns about paramilitary activity. That is a concern across the United Kingdom and, quite obviously, a particular concern in Northern Ireland.

For all those reasons and those set out by my hon. Friend, the Government are and must be committed to tackling the issue and to giving it the due consideration that it deserves. HMRC’s strategy to tackle fuel duty fraud has seen the UK’s tax gap for fuels in general fall from £1.5 billion in 2002 to less than £100 million in 2015-16, but £100 million remains a significant sum of money, as we have heard. In Northern Ireland, where the issue is a particular problem, the illicit market share has, according to HMRC, fallen from 26% to 8% over the same period. None the less, there is no room for complacency. Indeed, there has been a modest increase in laundering plant detections over the past year, which should give us all cause for concern. The new fuel marker that was brought in together with the Republic of Ireland in April 2015 to tackle the problem of fuel laundering is part of the significant investment made by HMRC to ensure that all businesses and individuals contribute to the tax revenues that are required to fund our public services. I appreciate that my hon. Friend has in the past raised objections to Accutrace, but I will return to those shortly.

As outlined in HMRC’s evaluation of Accutrace, the new marker has led to a reduction in the number and size of fuel laundering plans discovered by HMRC, although there has been a modest uptick over the past year. That apparent success reflects our commitment to tackle fuel fraud, as evidenced by the reinvestment of over £1 billion in HMRC’s fight against evasion and fraud over the spending review period. To continue that work, the Government announced the expansion of road fuel testing unit capacity in Northern Ireland in particular, but also in mainland Great Britain, in addition to the extra resource for fuel fraud work within HMRC’s criminal investigation directorate that was announced in the autumn statement 2013. That should complement HMRC’s fleet of road fuel testing vehicles, all of which are equipped with gas analysers that all officers have been fully trained to use. In 2016-17 alone, HMRC took 45,000 samples in the UK, so the problem is being addressed seriously at quite a scale across the UK.

Multi-agency, cross-border co-operation is clearly essential, and HMRC chairs a quarterly multi-agency cross-border fuel fraud group to share intelligence and information on operational activity, as well as co-ordinating joint operations. I have reiterated the importance of that with the Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime in advance of this debate. HMRC’s testing capability can now identify markers down to parts per million, including the new Accutrace marker that has been introduced on both sides of the border. HMRC investigates all attempts to remove Accutrace. To date, HMRC advises that there is nothing to suggest that rebated fuel can successfully be laundered to remove the marker in a way that is not detectable to HMRC. Although all markers have theoretical vulnerabilities and there is no perfect marker on the market, this new marker cannot be removed profitably at any scale. It remains HMRC’s view that the marker has been, and continues to be, effective in driving down fuel fraud. Clearly, I am interested in hearing further evidence from my hon. Friend if he wishes to engage with this. Where HMRC has detected laundering plants, these have not been capable of successfully laundering the new marker.
My hon. Friend raised the question of custodial sentences. Custodial sentences for fuel laundering were handed down in 2016 following a successful HMRC investigation into a £2.6 million fuel laundering scheme. However, the scarcity of custodial sentences for what is clearly a serious crime is noticeable and disappointing. My hon. Friend was right to raise that matter today. Right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland know that justice and policing are devolved matters, but I will give further consideration to this issue and I am happy to engage with them on how we might move forward. I am informed that sentences for this crime in Northern Ireland are, taken together, more lenient than those in England and Wales. We should all give that further consideration.

My hon. Friend mentioned points raised by the Road Haulage Association. I am happy to meet him to discuss these issues at a later date. We have increased our capacity in road fuel testing units, and have provided extra resource for fuel fraud investigations across the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland. I would be happy to supply further information from HMRC regarding the quantity and where the units are being deployed. I have asked HMRC officials to supply us with better data on the numbers and on the locations at which roadside testing is happening in Northern Ireland. Tests are completed throughout the supply chain. The number of tests at suppliers’ premises in Northern Ireland has increased over the course of the last two financial years.

Ian Paisley: I really appreciate the level of engagement that the Minister is offering—both with himself and officials. Will he arrange for the Chancellor also to be engaged in the discussions, so that we can ensure that he appreciates how seriously we want this matter to be addressed?

Robert Jenrick: I raised this matter with the Chancellor in advance of this debate, and he would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues if they wish to join. I suggest that I arrange a meeting with him and others who wish to participate as soon as possible so that we can take this matter forward. In advance of that meeting I will review some of the other issues that he has raised and the points made by the Road Haulage Association so that we can have the most productive conversation possible. The Chancellor is very aware of the importance of this issue in Northern Ireland and of the assiduous way in which my hon. Friend has pursued it over many years—going back at least five years—by raising it with the Government and in Parliament, so we would be happy to take this matter forward.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. We have had a productive debate. I listened closely to the comments that he made and hope that I have been able to answer some of them. The Government are committed to tackling avoidance, evasion and fraud throughout the tax system. For all the reasons that we have heard this evening, this is an important issue that deserves our attention and deserves to be elevated in the level of importance to which HMRC and law enforcement authorities in the whole United Kingdom, but particularly in Northern Ireland, attach to it. I will do everything that I can from my position in the Treasury to ensure that that happens. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and his colleagues to take this matter forward.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.
**Oral Answers to Questions**

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Secretary of State was asked—

**Co-operatives**

1. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to increase its support for the development of co-operatives throughout the world.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The Department for International Development has supported co-operatives across many sectors and is increasing support to small-scale farmers to help them to commercialise. For example, the ELAN programme is working with women’s co-ops in the Democratic Republic of Congo to improve quality, improve marketing and establish systems for full traceability of product.

Alex Norris: The co-operative model of ownership has distinct advantages for sustainable international development. Regrettably, in 2011 the Government cut the £5 million fund for co-operative development. Will the Secretary of State commit to investigating the desirability of reinvesting that fund, and match the ambition of Opposition Members by ensuring that new co-operatives go further than they have before in protecting and upholding women’s rights?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that co-operatives can be a hugely powerful and empowering model for delivering economic development. I do not think we should have just a small £5 million fund. We should be leveraging all the investment we have from DFID into those organisations. Through a new initiative, “GREAT for Partnership”, we hope to build connections with organisations that can do just that.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned in passing the role of women in developing countries, particularly in the agricultural context. Does she agree that microfinance is an incredibly important way of developing women in such areas? What more will the Department do to enhance, prolong and enlarge the use of microfinance in agriculture in developing countries?

Penny Mordaunt: DFID has a proud tradition as a leader in initiatives that empower women, including economically. Microfinance is critical to that. In most countries where we have a presence, we are running such a programme specifically for women.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): ActionAid has calculated that women in developing countries could be almost £7 trillion better off if their pay and access to paid work were equal to that of men. Will the Secretary of State make a commitment that, when establishing such agreements around the world, the UK will demonstrate its commitment to women’s rights and gender equality by ensuring that new co-operatives go further than they have before in protecting and upholding women’s rights?

Penny Mordaunt: I will commit to do just that. We have a big opportunity with the forthcoming G7 Development Ministers’ meeting next week in Canada. Canada has done a huge amount on this agenda, and the issues of which the hon. Gentleman speaks will feature heavily in our discussions.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that women’s co-operatives have an important role to play in tackling poverty? I encourage her Department to do much more in this area.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his election to the Select Committee and wish him well in that role. He is absolutely right that unless we enable women to reach their full potential, nations never will.

**Safeguarding**

2. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve safeguarding in the international development sector.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We have introduced new safeguarding standards for all DFID programmes. I have requested and received assurances from our partners on their safeguarding policies and procedures. Internationally, we are leading the charge to raise standards.

Luke Hall: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Will she update the House on her Department’s plans for the international safeguarding conference that is being held later this year?

Penny Mordaunt: The conference will be held on 18 October in London and will involve survivors of abuse, aid beneficiaries, multilateral organisations and others. Much work is being done globally to develop vetting procedures and new human resources practices and to harmonise standards and policies across the board. At the conference, we will secure sector-wide action to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation.
Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State’s international leadership on this issue. What conversations has she had with United Nations institutions, where there are serious concerns about potential sexual exploitation both by peacekeepers and by civilian staff?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have had extensive discussions with all UN agencies and partners, as well as core UN bodies. They are making progress. The safeguarding conference will be fundamental in consolidating that progress, but we are also talking with our counterparts in the Ministry of Defence to look at what we can do to help to build capacity in peacekeeping troops before they deploy.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The International Development Committee is looking at this very issue. How can my right hon. Friend be absolutely certain that charities are telling her the truth about what has happened within their organisations, and does she believe that an international register of people working in those bodies would be a good idea?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely. As well as the assurances we have sought and our oversight of projects and programmes we are contributing to on the ground, there will be other tell-tale signs. For example, if organisations are not reporting incidents or allegations, that is a red light to me that there is something wrong within those organisations. We are still monitoring this situation. We are leading an international donor group that is looking at setting up the precise procedures to which my hon. Friend refers.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Before agreeing with Oxfam and Save the Children that they would withdraw from Government funding, did the Department carry out an assessment on the impact that that would have? Will the Secretary of State tell the House exactly how many jobs will be affected and how many vulnerable people will lose access to life-saving aid?

Penny Mordaunt: My sole concern in making these decisions is the impact on the beneficiaries. Unlike other nations, I will not take decisions that impact negatively on beneficiaries. We are very conscious that both the organisations to which the hon. Lady refers may have difficulty in maintaining employment contracts—I suspect most of those people will transfer to other organisations—but how they maintain their staffing budgets is not the basis on which I am going to take decisions.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, but we still do not know what assessments were carried out and whether they will be made public. What steps is she taking to guarantee that the agencies and contractors now bidding for Government funding will have safeguarding protections against sexual exploitation that are robustly stronger, not weaker, than those of Oxfam and Save the Children?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to share with the hon. Lady any information about any of the projects. For example, I looked at everywhere we are working with Oxfam, not just directly but with other partners who work with Oxfam. I will not allow any beneficiary to suffer and that will be key in my decision making.

We have to strengthen the system across the board. We are taking the lead and other donors are following our lead. I hope that by the end of the year we will have vetting procedures, benchmarking and the harmonisation of policies to deter predatory individuals from the aid sector.

Rohingya Refugees

3. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to support vulnerable children in Rohingya refugee camps during the monsoon season.

9. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to protect Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh from the effects of the monsoon season.

13. Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to protect Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh from the effects of the monsoon season.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Up to 200,000 Rohingya are living in areas at risk of flooding and collapse during the rainy season. We are working with the Bangladesh Government and humanitarian partners on preparedness, including improved shelters, water and sanitation, vaccination campaigns and pre-positioning of emergency supplies.

Carol Monaghan: Last August, Myanmar soldiers systematically brutalised and raped young Rohingya women. Nine months on, and in the middle of the monsoon season, many of those young girls are now giving birth to babies conceived as a result of rape. As these girls are often shunned by their communities, what support is the UK Government providing to these vulnerable girls and their babies?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. Some 16,000 women may be caught up in this. We have deployed a specialist maternity worker to be there. In addition, we are working with our partners to support Rohingya women who were raped and are pregnant. The deployment includes training of medical specialists, psycho-social support, clinical management of rape and emergency obstetric care. This is all being provided despite the difficulty of the monsoons and other circumstances.

Afzal Khan: Given the greatly increased risk of waterborne diseases facing the Rohingya during the monsoon season, what steps is the Department taking to make sure that as many people as possible are vaccinated?

Alistair Burt: There are two issues here: first, work needs to continue to ensure that latrines and waters are as safe as possible, and secondly, an extensive vaccination campaign is already being undertaken. The United Kingdom is a major contributor to the vaccination programme.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When the International Development Committee visited the refugee camps, we were told that non-governmental organisations had identified land that could be made available to them for the safety of the
Rohingya refugees. What representations have the Government made to the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that that land is released and that refugees are not put on an unsuitable island?

Alistair Burt: Regular representations are made about this. The hon. Gentleman is right: a certain amount can be done at Cox’s Bazar to strengthen fortifications in relation to the forthcoming cyclones, but the land itself is difficult. Some have already been moved out, but we do make representations as well about the unsuitable nature of the island that is sometimes proposed.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Now that the UK is providing 10.5% of the total budget set out in the humanitarian joint response plan, will my right hon. Friend advise and update the House on what he is doing to get other countries to step up to do their bit?

Alistair Burt: First, may I congratulate my old friend on his recent award, which will please all of us, for his long service and devotion to this House and its duties? We are very proud of our record in relation to being a major donor. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a further £70 million on 7 May to help with the current crisis, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett) is right: we need to make sure that we continue to ask other donors to step up, and it is a regular part of our briefings and contact with other donor nations.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): We witnessed the precarious conditions in which many of the refugees are living in Cox’s Bazar; it was quite appalling. If the monsoon is devastating for the region, will my right hon. Friend redouble his efforts to ensure that land is made available, as well as emergency housing? Pushing them on to an island is totally unacceptable.

Alistair Burt: To answer my hon. Friend, our sense is that as far as possible, preparations are being made both by the Bangladesh Government and the international community to meet the anticipated and expected conditions. Bangladesh has an excellent record on dealing with emergency crises caused by weather. No one can say, if something exceptional happens, what the response will be, but all preparations have been made. However, he is right: the nature of the land is extremely difficult and we must continue to try to urge that as many people as possible are moved to the safest possible areas.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) was right to raise the issues of pregnant women, new mothers and small babies, who are particularly vulnerable to issues of hygiene and sanitation, so will the Minister assure me that those will be key priorities for aid spending in this area?

Alistair Burt: I can reassure my hon. Friend that as much as possible is being done in relation to this. UK-supported cholera, measles and diphtheria vaccination campaigns will help to provide protection against some of the most common diseases in the camps, and this is very much on people’s minds at such a vulnerable time.
Mr Speaker: Absolutely splendid! I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for announcing that, as I am sure will be both Rwanda and Arsenal.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the Burnley-based charity Furniture for Education Worldwide, which will next week send its 100th container of furniture and equipment to aid developing schools overseas?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that. I will indeed endorse that fantastic organisation. It is a testament to the fact that we have small companies and charities in our constituencies that can make a big difference to many people across the world.

Global Disability Summit

5. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What steps is her Department plans to take at the forthcoming global disability summit to promote disability inclusion in international development. [905508]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): The UK’s global disability summit in July will increase action and investment, share best practice and deliver lasting change. It will tackle the stigma faced by people with disabilities and provide educational, learning and economic opportunities and the means to access them through more available assistive devices.

Edward Argar: I welcome that answer. I recently met Sightsavers, a fantastic charity doing great work tackling sight loss and the stigma faced by disabled people around the world, particularly in the developing world. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that at this important summit she will join with it in pressing for concrete goals for Governments to tackle the stigma faced by disabled people around the world?

Penny Mordaunt: That is absolutely the aim of the summit. It has already galvanised people into action, including multilateral organisations around the world, which will be embedding disability in their programming.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Given the new statistics showing that the number of disabled people able to access legal aid here in the UK has fallen by 99% since 2011, what steps will the Secretary of State take with Cabinet colleagues to get the UK’s own house in order before we host a global summit?

Penny Mordaunt: When I speak to my opposite numbers in other nations, they tell me that one barrier to their making further progress is that they are starting from a low base. It is important that the summit is not just about the UK showcasing what it does; we can learn from other organisations, which is why we are co-hosting it with Kenya. My new role as Minister for Women and Equalities affords me the chance to make a difference in both the UK and the developing world.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Humanitarian Assistance

6. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What funding her Department has allocated to humanitarian assistance programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [905509]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK is one of the leading humanitarian donors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We have acted quickly to support the country and the World Health Organisation in tackling the Ebola outbreak; the Secretary of State today announced an extra £5 million to support the WHO response plan.

Mr Cunningham: What are the Government doing to prevent the outbreak from spreading to places such as Kinshasa?

Harriett Baldwin: The plan announced by the World Health Organisation involves making sure that we use a new, experimental vaccine that the UK has helped to develop. It is being applied to anyone who has come into contact with Ebola. Yesterday, vaccinations began to be offered to health workers and to anyone who has had contact with a contact.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I commend the Department’s response to the outbreak, but what assurance can the Minister give that the capacity and leadership at the WHO are stronger than they were in 2014, when it made so many mistakes in responding to an earlier outbreak?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to Jane Ellison, who is now very much involved in that. As my right hon. Friend will know, there has been an extensive programme of work to learn lessons from the outbreak in Sierra Leone, and, indeed, this is the ninth outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On every occasion lessons are learnt, and we are helping the WHO and the Government to deliver on them.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of the DRC Government’s decision to boycott the April humanitarian pledging conference in Geneva and to deny the scale of the displacement crisis in the country, what representations has the Secretary of State made, now that Ebola poses a very real additional threat, to ensure that the same does not happen again and that the DRC Government accept urgent assistance to prevent an international health emergency?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the wider humanitarian crisis in the DRC. I was there myself last month to see the fantastic work that UK aid workers are doing on the ground and the extensive way in which we are helping. We are proud to have announced £100 million of support for this year, and we are the second largest donor.

Topical Questions

T1. [905519] Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): UK aid is currently dealing with 10 large-scale humanitarian emergencies and giving humanitarian assistance to 30 countries around the world. It is, for instance, protecting the Rohingya at Cox’s Bazar during the monsoon and cyclone season, providing food and healthcare for those affected by the conflict in Yemen, providing medical training and aid.
for families in Syria, and tackling Ebola in the DRC, for which I have announced £5 million of UK aid spending. We are also making preparations to provide support, if needed, for the Caribbean during the hurricane season. I am sure that the whole House will join me in commending the work of British scientists, British aid workers and our armed forces, and UK aid, in saving lives.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend will be aware of yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate about the persecution of Christians. Will she update the House on the Government’s efforts to promote freedom of religion and belief worldwide?

Penny Mordaunt: The most stable societies are those that uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief. Through UK Aid Connect, DFID will fund a consortium of organisations to address the key challenges in building freedom of religion and belief. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is also very focused on that agenda.

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the sense of anticipation of the session that is to follow, but may I gently remind the House that we are discussing the plight of some of the most destitute people on the face of the planet. I think that a respectful atmosphere would be appreciated.

T2. [095520] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There are few more desperate places in the world today than Yemen. As the Secretary of State will know, all the signs are that the Saudi-led coalition is gearing up for an attack on the port of Hodeidah. Will she explain to her colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office just how serious that would be for the humanitarian situation in Yemen, so that they may in turn explain to Saudi Arabia that if the attack happens, it will mean the end of UK arms sales to the Saudis?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID are acutely aware of the degree of concern about the situation in Yemen, and we are in regular contact with all parties there. The only answer is for the work of the United Nations envoy, Martin Griffiths, to be successful through negotiations, but we have already made clear that we do not see a military solution to the conflict.

T4. [095522] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend doing to bring about greater transparency in the international aid system to ensure that there is probity and that other countries pay their fair share to international development?

Penny Mordaunt: DFID scores very highly on the international aid transparency initiative, and we are working with other nations and multilaterals to help them to reach the same standards. We are also leading the charge on combating illicit money flows and capital flight, which is necessary if we are to help developing nations.

T3. [095521][R] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the tragic events of last week necessitate urgent action to tackle the plight of the Palestinian people, including the disarmament of Hamas, the return of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority, international donors meeting their reconstruction pledges fully, and Israel assisting in Gaza’s economic revitalisation?

Alistair Burt: One of the main areas of focus at last week’s United Nations Security Council meeting was to accept special envoy Nikolay Mladenov’s persuasion that Gaza does indeed need more direct assistance and support to ease the circumstances there. Israel will be involved, as will other international donors, working in a very complex situation. The relief of humanitarian issues in Gaza is essential.

T6. [095524] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the food security situation in east Africa and let us know what help the Government are able to provide?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work as chair of the all-party group on Ethiopia and Djibouti and I assure him that the UK has provided assistance to more than 13.6 million people in east Africa and allocated £279 million in humanitarian aid to those countries this year.

T5. [095523] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Not backing the vote for investigation into the Gaza killings is another example of the UK Government not standing up to Israel. Will the Minister’s Department show some backbone and demand compensation for aid-funded structures that have been demolished?

Alistair Burt: The UK is well aware of the circumstances surrounding the issues in Gaza and calls for a transparent and independent inquiry; but we are providing humanitarian aid through UNRWA to the Palestinian people and looking at further possibilities of providing direct aid to the medical situation in Gaza.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The horn of Africa has been hit by a devastating tropical cyclone and Somaliland has been particularly hard-hit, with devastation to lives and livelihoods. Somaliland is already a progressive democratic country in an otherwise very troubled part of the world and, as a former British protectorate, it has strong ties to the UK, but because we do not formally recognise Somaliland, any aid we provide must pass through Somalia, which is much less stable. Will my hon. Friend reconsider that policy and consider working directly through Somaliland?

Harriett Baldwin: I invite my hon. Friend to the meeting of the all-party group on Somaliland later today.

T7. [095525] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Recent local elections in Tunisia showed an encouraging increase in the involvement of young people in the democratic process. What further assistance can the Government give to good governance there?

Alistair Burt: The excellent work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and those who have taken part through the British Council in encouraging the development of democracy are playing an important part in Tunisia, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely
right to draw attention to a good move forward for
Tunisia, which we hope foreshadows other things
to come in the region.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My right hon. Friend
may be aware of the Dalitso project in my
constituency. It involves more than 500 volunteers in Scotland and
Malawi, and they have collectively generated funding
for over 300 orphans in Malawi and employ 30 people.
What is the Department doing to support such small
charities that contribute so much to our overseas aid?

Penny Mordaunt: I was recently in Scotland to dish
out some UK Aid cheques to many of the wonderful
organisations that have raised money and are doing
fantastic work to benefit people around the world.

T8. [905526] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment
has the Secretary of State made of the effect of Oxfam
and Save the Children withdrawing from her Department’s
funding rounds on the beneficiaries of those charities?

Penny Mordaunt: That is the only criterion that I look
at when making those decisions: no beneficiaries will be
harmed in any way as a result of the decisions we take
about withdrawing funding or preventing people from
bidding for funding.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905527] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If she
will list her official engagements for Wednesday 23 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This week
has seen the start of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. This
was an unimaginable tragedy and justice must be done
for the victims, survivors, bereaved and the wider
community. It is right that we learn everything we can
about what happened and take the necessary steps to
make sure nothing like it ever happens again.

Yesterday also allowed the nation to come together,
one year on, to remember all the victims of the Manchester
terrorist attack. That night saw the worst of humanity,
but it also saw the best. The kindness, compassion and
fortitude we witnessed that night triumphed, and the
great spirit of Manchester continues to inspire us.

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.

Kerry McCarthy: I echo the condolences expressed
by the Prime Minister to the victims, friends and families
of both Grenfell and the Manchester bombing.

On a happier note, I send congratulations from the
Opposition side of the House to the royal couple. Even
the fully paid-up cynics among us found it quite charming,
and I am very much one of them.

A not so welcome American import is the fact that
Britain now has a higher proportion of children classed
as obese at the age of 11 than America. Yesterday’s
Public Health England report shows the dismal failure
of the first-year target on cutting sugar, at only 2%,
compared with the 11% drop in sugar following the tax

on sugary drinks. Will the Prime Minister admit that
the voluntary approach is simply not working, and will
not work, and that what we want to see in chapter 2 of
the childhood obesity plan are mandatory targets and a
ban on junk food discounts?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Lady’s good
wishes for the royal couple. We expressed our good
wishes in the House last week, and indeed it was a
perfect day and a perfect wedding. Windsor did the
couple proud.

We know that childhood obesity is one of the greatest
health challenges we face, and we are determined to
tackle it. That is why nowhere in the world is setting
more stringent sugar reduction targets than the Government
have set. We are, as the hon. Lady says, taxing sugary
drinks, and we are doing more. It is not just about sugar
in food and drink; it is about helping children to exercise
more. It is also about the funding we are putting into
research on junk food advertising, and it is about cutting
sugar and calories in food. We have made good progress
on the sugar reduction target. Sugar in drinks has been
reduced by 11% and the average calories have been
reduced by 6% in response to the soft drinks industry
levy. More needs to be done, which is why an updated
plan is currently being worked up, and we will be in a
position to say more on that shortly.

Q2. [905528] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire)
(Con): I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s
earlier comments.

This week we have seen the start of the Grenfell
inquiry, and last week Dame Judith Hackitt reported
that our building regulations are not fit for purpose, yet
she did not specifically recommend a ban on inflammable
cladding. Can the Prime Minister confirm that, nevertheless,
it is her clear intention to ban inflammable cladding
and to ensure that another tragedy like Grenfell never
happens again?

The Prime Minister: The deeply moving testimonies
we have already heard and will continue to hear this
week from survivors and the bereaved leave absolutely
no room for doubt. We must learn everything we can
about what happened, and we must take the strongest
possible action to stop such an unimaginable tragedy
from ever happening again.

As my hon. Friend says, Dame Judith Hackitt’s
recommendations do not include banning inflammable
cladding. We are minded to go further by banning
combustible materials in cladding on high-rise buildings.
We are meeting our legal duty to consult on these
proposals, and we will not delay any necessary action.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Indeed it is
almost a year since the Grenfell tragedy, and sadly
justice has not yet been done. Many of those families
have still not been rehoused and many are still living in
tower blocks. People across the country are worried
about the safety of cladding. More needs to be done
more quickly.

I agree with what the Prime Minister says about the
anniversary of the Manchester bomb. We were there at
the service yesterday, and I pay tribute to the people of
Manchester for the fantastic event they held last night.
in Albert Square, which brought all communities across Manchester together. That is the answer to terrorism, that is the answer to threats: bring people together.

In 2010, £4 billion of NHS services were outsourced to private companies. How much is it today?

The Prime Minister: First, I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments. Terrorists attacked in Manchester, and we sadly saw a number of other terrorist attacks in this country last year. They were trying to divide us, and I think the response of all communities, whether here in London or in Manchester, has shown that we will not be divided by the terrorists. We will not let the terrorists win. We will defeat them.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the outsourcing of services within the NHS. Of course, what we do know is that spend on the independent sector nearly doubled in the last four years of a Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about the amount spent now. NHS budgets have increased by just 1% per year under this Government, but it is jackpot time for the privateers, whose share is up by 100% to over £9 billion per year. We have also learned that Surrey NHS has just paid Virgin Care £1.5 million, not for any service that it has delivered, but because its bid was not chosen—£1.5 million wasted on Virgin Care that should have been spent on healthcare. Is the Prime Minister concerned that the National Audit Office said this week that NHS England's handling of private contractors had put "patients at risk of serious harm"?

The Prime Minister: The NAO report said that "no actual harm has been identified." It is also the case that, in relation to the contracts that the NAO was talking about, the savings that have been made have all been reinvested into frontline NHS patient care and have helped to fund the equivalent of an extra 30,000 operations. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the percentage of money that has been spent on the private sector, and I must say that the proportion of spend in the NHS in England that was outsourced to the private sector last year did not go up at all. There was somewhere where it went up by 0.8%. Ah yes—Wales.

Jeremy Corbyn: The NAO criticised NHS England's Capita contract, saying that it had put "patients at risk of serious harm". Thousands of women were dropped from the national cervical cancer screening programmes. Another element of the contract handed over to Capita was for GP services, which resulted in two thirds of GP practices receiving incorrect medical records, and 500,000 new patient letters were left unsent. Is that not the inevitable consequence of this Government tearing up the founding principles of the NHS and putting private profit before public service?

The Prime Minister: At every general election since the NHS was formed, the Labour party has scented danger about the Conservative approach to the NHS. At every general election, Labour has made claims about privatisation and about funding cuts. What has every elected Conservative Government done? We have protected the NHS; we have improved NHS services; we have put more funding into the NHS; and we have ensured that we remain true to the founding principle of the NHS: that it is free at the point of delivery.

Jeremy Corbyn: From the party that opposed the NHS in the first place, that is a bit rich. [Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise on both sides of the House. I have plenty of time, and I am sure that the principals have as well. We will get through the questions, but preferably in an atmosphere of calm.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Royal College of General Practitioners says:

"The long list of failures made by Capita have been incredibly frustrating for GPs and our teams, and we are still dealing with the fallout".

Public servants are bearing the brunt of private failure. GPs are leaving the profession in despair—4,000 have retired early in the past five years, which is one in 10. In 2015, the Health Secretary said that he would hire another 5,000 GPs. How many more GPs are there than there were in 2015?

The Prime Minister: We now have more than 14,900 more doctors in our NHS than we had in 2010. We are indeed committed to delivering 5,000 more GPs. We have increased the number training to be GPs. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the private sector being used in the national health service, but he might ask the shadow Health Secretary for his view. The shadow Health Secretary has said, "We are still going to buy from the private sector where we haven't got capacity in the NHS." The right hon. Gentleman's shadow Health Secretary is committed to it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The shadow Health Secretary has a very good understanding of the needs of patients and will always put them first. He will not be the one putting the private sector first.

The reality is that there are 1,000 fewer GPs and the number is falling. It is no wonder that more and more people are writing to me every week saying how difficult it is to get a GP appointment. GPs are the bedrock of the NHS. We need more of them.

I had a letter this week from Anne, who is retired. Until recently, she cared for her mother at home. She wrote:

"The NHS pay a private nursing home for mum's care...day after day we experience a catalogue of disasters. I can't leave my mum knowing that her needs aren't catered for; so I spend hours at the nursing home".

What action are the Government taking to deal with the substandard care that providers give in the private care sector, which is so upsetting for so many people?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman and to Anne that I fully understand that people want to have the confidence and reassurance of knowing that the care their loved ones receive is of a good quality. That is why this Government have put in place the various steps to ensure that we are looking into the quality of care provided in those sectors.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the shadow Health Secretary recognising the needs of patients. I think
he was saying that he recognises the needs of patients, which is why the private sector will be used in some cases. The former Health Secretary, now the Mayor of Manchester, said that “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.”

Jeremy Corbyn: The shadow Health Secretary is dedicated to the NHS, not to handing it over to private contractors. That is the difference. The Care Quality Commission said last year that “there is too much poor care”.

A fifth of care providers require improvement. Year after year, private sector care providers are letting down our elderly.

This year is the 70th birthday of the national health service—I pay tribute to all its staff over all of those 70 years—but the NHS reaches that milestone with the worst A&E waits on record, the worst delays for cancer referrals on record, falling numbers of GPs, falling numbers of nurses and the longest funding squeeze in its history, while this Government open the door to even more profiteering. Why does the Prime Minister not act now to end the siphoning off of billions of pounds from patient care and give the NHS the funding it needs?

The Prime Minister: We do indeed pay tribute to all those who have worked in the NHS over its 70 years and those who work there today. We want to see a bright future for the NHS, which is why we will be coming forward with a long-term plan for it. What we see today is a national health service not only with more funding going into it, but, crucially, with more people being treated and more operations being undertaken. There are people alive today who have suffered from cancer and would not have been alive just eight years ago, because our cancer outcomes have improved. That is the reality of our national health service. What we also see is that this Government can put money into the NHS only because we have a balanced approach to our economy. What did we learn this week that the Labour party and the shadow Chancellor want to do? They want to “overthrow capitalism”. What would that mean? It would mean families paying higher taxes—[Interjection.] It is supported by parts of the Labour party; now we know where the Labour party really stands on this issue. I say to the shadow Chancellor and others: what would this mean? It would mean families paying higher taxes; more debt for our children in future; fewer people in jobs; and less money for our schools and hospitals. A Labour party that would bankrupt our economy would do lasting damage to our national health service.

Q5. [905531] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Government have stated their ambition for the UK to have 10% of the worldwide space industry by 2030. Central to achieving that is establishing our own launch capabilities within the UK, through UK spaceports. Cornwall is keen and ready to play a significant part in that, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to the establishment of UK spaceports? Will she ensure that the right people get together to deliver this in Cornwall as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has put in a good bid and is a good champion for Cornwall on this issue. He is absolutely right to say that our industrial strategy identifies the role of new markets, such as space launch, in driving growth across the UK. That is why we are delivering a programme to ensure that companies can offer small satellite launch and sub-orbital space flight from UK spaceports. On the specific issue relating to Newquay and Cornwall, strong enthusiasm for this new opportunity is being shown by Newquay airport and other locations around the UK, which is why in March the Government brought forward the Space Industry Act 2018 to support them and we have made £50 million available to enable small satellite launch and sub-orbital flight from UK spaceports. The space agency is considering funding to help kick-start promising projects and will be making announcements shortly.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on both Manchester and Grenfell?

The Windrush scandal has taught us that the UK Government’s “hostile environment” policy has targeted those who legally live here; young people who have grown up in the UK and know of nothing else face losing their lawful settled status because they simply cannot afford the paperwork. Home Office fees have increased by 148% since 2014. These children have the right to be here; the UK is their home. I am giving the Prime Minister the opportunity today: will she scrap these fees for young people, as she has done for the Windrush generation?

The Prime Minister: A minor who has indefinite leave to remain will have access to benefits and entitlements that put them on an equal footing with their British citizen peers, so a grant of British citizenship is not therefore required. Of course specific exemptions from application fees are provided to several groups with limited means, such as stateless people, victims of modern slavery or domestic abuse, asylum applicants and children who are looked after by a local authority. And the Children Act 1989 imposes a general duty on local authorities to promote the upbringing of children in need by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children’s needs, regardless of their status.

Ian Blackford: That simply is not good enough. We are talking about up to 120,000 young people in this country. We are talking about young people who live here, who have to wait 10 years and pay up to £10,000 to achieve permanent right to remain. It is shocking. The Government are guilty of creating a generation of undocumented citizens without the rights that many of us take for granted. Will the Prime Minister change her policies that target young people, and will she meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) to resolve this issue?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Gentleman cites a figure that I certainly do not recognise as the cost that he suggests applies for an application for citizenship here in the United Kingdom. I repeat the point that I have made: a minor who has indefinite leave to remain will have access to the benefits and entitlements that put
them on an equal footing to their British citizen peers. A grant of British citizenship is not required in order for someone to access those rights and benefits.

Q7. [905533] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Through regular exercise, daily-mile initiatives help to make sure that children in schools are physically active, have better mental health and are best placed to learn and achieve. I know that my right hon. Friend recognises the value of these initiatives. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing this website to my attention. I am really pleased to see that.

The Prime Minister: [Interruption.] The daily mile is an excellent programme. It is simple and inclusive, and as my hon. Friend says, it can successfully engage in physical activity children who would otherwise not undertake that physical activity. This gives me the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on running the London marathon for two of his local charities: Corby Nightlight and Crazy Hats Breast Cancer Appeal. Well done to my hon. Friend for doing that. I certainly agree that we want more schools to adopt the active approach and the daily mile.

Q3. [905529] Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): As the nation’s attention was rightly focused on the royal wedding, the Prime Minister was busy stuffing the House of Lords with 13 new Members. After all these defeats, apparently—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman’s question must be heard. [Interruption.] It is his question. He has a right to ask his question and he will ask his question. The question will be heard and the answer will be heard. That is the way it has always been and that is the way it will continue.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker—and I will be heard.

After all these defeats, apparently we need the right type of crony. There are now more than 800 cronies, donors and aristocrats in that circus down the corridor, embarrassing this nation and mocking any notion of democracy. How many more is the Prime Minister going to appoint? When will enough be enough?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the total size of the House of Lords has fallen since I took office in July 2016. From the sound of what he says, I think the hon. Gentleman is making a bid for himself to be put in the House of Lords. He needs to speak to his leader.

Q8. [905534] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, at the end of last year my constituent Natalie Lewis-Hoyle, the daughter of Councillor Miriam Lewis and our right hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Sir Lindsay Hoyle), took her own life, having been in a coercive relationship and suffering mental abuse through what is known as gaslighting. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to raise awareness of this particular kind of abuse? Will she support Miriam Lewis in establishing the “Chat with Nat” website in memory of Natalie, to help and advise those affected by this behaviour?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing this website to my attention. I am happy to offer my full support to the project, which I am sure will provide much-needed help and advice to those who are in the most difficult and painful of circumstances.

We have, of course, changed the law to introduce a new domestic abuse offence of coercion and control in intimate and familial relationships. Since the introduction of that offence, there have been almost 300 successful prosecutions. That shows what a problem this issue is out there. We are always looking for what more can be done, and in our consultation on transforming the law on domestic abuse and violence, we are currently looking for ideas on how the offence can be further strengthened, to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Q4. [905530] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): In North Tyneside and across the UK, homebuyers are being sold new houses that have serious defects by developers such as Bellway and Persimmon with no means of sufficient redress. Following the recent Government consultation, will the Prime Minister put her weight behind establishing a new homes ombudsman to give those consumers the proper redress that they urgently need?

The Prime Minister: Of course, as we are building more homes—and we need to build more homes for people—we want to ensure that those homes are fit for purpose. There are standards that house builders have to abide by, and also a number of ways in which it is possible to raise these issues, including where there are defects in the homes that are being built.

Q12. [905538] Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Bowel cancer claims the lives of more than 44 people every day and has a devastating impact on families up and down the country, but it can be beaten if it is caught at an earlier stage through better diagnosis. Can the Prime Minister assure me that the Government will listen to proposals to lower the screening age from 60 to 50?

The Prime Minister: We now have the highest cancer survival rates ever, as I mentioned earlier. The latest figures show that an estimated 7,000 or more people are surviving cancer after successful NHS cancer treatment compared with three years ago, but there is still more to be done. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that early diagnosis is an important element of that. We are looking at how the development of smart technologies, which allow us to analyse great quantities of data quickly and with a higher degree of accuracy than we have through the intervention of human beings, can be used to ensure that we get that earlier diagnosis. By 2033, we want to see at least 50,000 more people each year being diagnosed at an early stage of prostate, ovarian, lung or bowel cancer.

Q6. [905532] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite a groundswell of opposition from public, staff and clinicians, this Government are actively supporting
the removal of vital services from South Tyneside Hospital. Will the Prime Minister tell the 149,000 people who rely on our hospital why?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, it is for the local NHS to make decisions about the future of local health services; these matters are not determined in Whitehall. I understand that the Sunderland and the South Tyneside hospital trusts have formed an alliance to improve the sustainability, quality and performance of hospital services. Local commissioners did consult the public and they agreed a number of service changes in February, which will improve services for patients.

Q13. [905539] Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In the 1940s, access by British epidemiologists to patient data established the causal relationship between smoking and lung cancer. How will the big data and artificial intelligence, which the Prime Minister spoke about on Monday, help us transform healthcare outcomes today, and what barriers to data sharing exist in the way of that?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says, on Monday, I did announce that we will use data, artificial intelligence and innovation to transform the prevention, early diagnosis and treatment of chronic diseases by 2030. I have just referenced, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), the fact that we want to see at least 50,000 more people each year being diagnosed at an early stage of prostate, ovarian, lung or bowel cancer. That will mean that, every year, around 22,000 fewer people will die within five years of their diagnosis compared with today. We are also committed to the highest possible standards in using data, which is why we brought forward the Data Protection Bill and have announced our intention to create a new centre for data ethics and innovation. Big data gives us a huge opportunity to improve services to patients in the NHS, but, of course, we must use that data very carefully, and patients need to have the confidence that it is being used carefully, and that is what we will do.

Q9. [905535] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for agreeing to meet Sheffield young carers this afternoon? They are very much looking forward to sharing their views with her, and I am sure that she will enjoy the meeting.

May I raise another issue? Last week, the Education Secretary told the House that he understood the cost pressures facing schools and that he would work with them to bear down on those costs. On Friday, I met a group of Sheffield primary and secondary headteachers who said that their schools were at a tipping point. They said that if the Government wanted to help them bear down on costs, they could start by fully funding the teachers’ pay increase and the increase in national insurance and pension contributions. Will the Prime Minister do that?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman, with the young carers, and I am sure that that will be a really interesting meeting. I am pleased that we will have the opportunity to hear directly from them.

On school funding, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the new national funding formula is providing for a cash increase for every school in every region, as well as protected funding for those with additional needs, but it is important that the Department for Education is helping to bear down on costs that schools are experiencing. That is exactly what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is doing—ensuring that the Department is giving support to schools where it is needed.

Q15. [905541] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The UK motor industry has undergone a resurgence. It employs 900,000 people, generates one tenth of all manufacturing output, and exports 80% of the vehicles it produces. As we leave the EU, will the Prime Minister ensure that the sector continues to have access to the workers it needs, to bring in components without delays, and to sell into its biggest export market tariff-free?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend draws attention to a very important sector in our economy. The motor industry does play a very significant role in our economy.

Our exit from the EU provides us with an opportunity to forge a new role for ourselves, to become that great global trading nation and to have those other trade deals around the world, but we also need to ensure that we provide as much certainty as we can at an early stage. That is why we are working with businesses and other stakeholders, including the motor industry, and looking for as free and frictionless trade as possible between the UK and the EU—because we want to see that trade flowing freely and those integrated supply chains being able to work as well as possible. That is what we are working for in our future partnership.

Q10. [905536] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Today in my constituency of Leigh, NHS workers are on strike—I am sure that the Prime Minister would like to wish them well. The strike is due to the move of more than 800 staff into a wholly owned subsidiary—a direct result of NHS underfunding. In the wake of Carillion, why is the Prime Minister allowing back-door privatisation, which has little or no public support, instead of keeping the NHS where it should be: safely in public hands?

The Prime Minister: I think that I answered comments about the national health service in response to the Leader of the Opposition, but I will just reiterate: this Government are committed. We are putting extra funding into our national health service; we are committed to a long-term plan for our national health service that will give it certainty and sustainability over a longer period of time than through the annual budget-making process; and we are committed to a national health service that remains free at the point of delivery.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Prime Minister knows that stem cell transplants are the only lifeline for leukaemia patients. Tragically, children such as five-year-old Kaiya and 11-year-old Rajie, whose families are in Parliament today for a donor awareness event, have only a 21% chance of finding a donor match because there are simply not enough donors registered from an Asian background. Childhood leukaemia affects children of every ethnic group. Will the Prime Minister commit to leading a nationwide donor registration drive to help to save the lives of hundreds of children suffering from leukaemia, like Kaiya and Rajie?
The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue and for highlighting it with the experience of children like Kaiya and Rajie. I know that she is doing a lot of work to raise awareness of the lack of donors from BAME backgrounds, particularly with her event today in Parliament. We support efforts to raise awareness of the need to recruit more stem cell donors from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. More than £20 million has been provided to NHS Blood and Transplant and Anthony Nolan for stem cell donations since 2015, and that includes very specific stipulations about the numbers of newly registered donors with units stored in the UK cord blood bank who must be from BAME backgrounds, and specific funding to support the recruitment of donors from BAME backgrounds. Of course more needs to be done. I am happy to voice my support for my right hon. Friend’s event, which I think is continuing to raise awareness of this important issue.

Q11. [905537] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure that the Prime Minister, like millions of other people, was glued to her TV set on Saturday watching an event of national importance—sadly, there was not a fairy-tale ending as Chelsea won the FA cup. That could be the last FA cup final played at Wembley before it is sold to an overseas owner. When the premier league is spending hundreds of millions of pounds every year on wages and transfers, does she agree that there is more than enough money in the game for there to be no need to sell off this iconic national asset?

The Prime Minister: That is a decision for the owners of Wembley. It is a private matter; it is not a matter for the Government.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Just over five years ago, the Francis report was published, at the instigation of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), and since then there have been major improvements in patient safety throughout the NHS. Just in relation to County Hospital in Stafford, will my right hon. Friend congratulate the staff there, who have seen a great improvement over the years, with the result that in A&E we are now seeing more patients a day over 14 hours—I wish it was 24 hours—than we did previously over 24 hours and the 95%-plus target being met on a weekly basis?

The Prime Minister: The Francis report was very important. It highlighted an area of deep concern about what had been happening at the local hospital. I welcome what my hon. Friend says about County Hospital and the work that is being done there. Excellent work is being done to provide safety to patients, to provide more treatments for patients and to provide those services to his constituents and others.

Q14. [905540] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Prime Minister has two groups of Ministers considering different scenarios for a frictionless border with Ireland. We know that the backstop alignment can only be ended if another solution is found. Is not the truth that she does not have a clue how it might work?

The Prime Minister: No.
It is important, as the hon. Lady says, that mental health has risen up the scale of people’s concerns. I would like to think that that is partly because we have ensured that there is greater awareness of the issue of mental health. Everybody in the House has a job to ensure that we remove the stigma attached to mental health so that people feel able to come forward when they have mental health problems.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share the surprise that I felt, as a former Marks & Spencer employee, at the news that the Scottish National party Administration have bullied Marks & Spencer over the use of the word “British” and the Union flag on British produce? Will she stand with me against that petty bullying and support companies that are proud of Scottish and British produce?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We should all be proud of Scottish and British produce and of produce from any part of our United Kingdom. It is frankly appalling that the Scottish Government did not want to see the Union flag and the word “British” on produce. It is not only appalling; it fails to reflect the vote that took place in Scotland, which showed that people in Scotland want to stay part of the United Kingdom.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust is struggling to recruit doctors because of immigration rules. One example is an experienced paediatric doctor who has applied for a visa every month for six months, but has now given up because he has been rejected six times. What can the Prime Minister say to my constituents to reassure them that Home Office delays will not impact on the safety and health of their loved ones at this time of greatest need?

The Prime Minister: We keep the issue of tier 2 visas in relation to the health service under review. We have already taken steps. We took steps a while back to ensure that the numbers could be adjusted to reflect the need for nurses, and we continue to look at the situation in relation to doctors.
Points of Order

12.48 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are a redoubtable champion of Members seeking to hold the Government to account. One of the things we sometimes resort to in doing that is the submission of freedom of information requests. On 20 July last year, I submitted a freedom of information request to the Department for International Trade, to which I have not yet had a response, nor indeed any acknowledgment, despite chasing it up in March and April. I submitted a separate FOI request on 14 March this year, which did receive a response, advising me that the Department would be unable to respond within 20 days but that a response would be forthcoming by 14 April at the latest. I have still had no such response, despite it now being May.

On 26 April this year, the Cabinet Office and the Office for National Statistics released the annual FOI statistics by Department. The Department for International Trade was the worst of all Departments, with 27% of requests either not being answered within the time limits or not answered at all. That failure prevents parliamentarians from properly scrutinising the Government’s trade policy at a time of intense public debate on these matters—something we have a duty to Parliament to do. I make no judgment of whether it is by intention or incompetence on the part of Ministers, but I seek your advice as to how we may redress the situation.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hope he will not take it amiss if I begin my response to him by saying that, although it is an attempted point of order, in a very real sense it appeared to me to resemble an intellectual dissertation, which of itself is no surprise to those of us familiar with the cerebral quality of the hon. Gentleman. I think it is important to distinguish between parliamentary proceedings on the one hand, in respect of which I may have some modest powers and capacity to assist Members, and freedom of information requests on the other, in relation to which I am literally powerless, as those are not matters for me. However, theHon. Gentleman has raised a concern, and it may well be shared by others. It is on the record, and I hope, consistent both with the letter of obligation to those who submit such requests and with its spirit, that full account will be taken of the situation the hon. Gentleman has painstakingly highlighted. If I may, I suggest we leave it there for today.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following last Wednesday’s difficult day, will you clarify a point of Chamber etiquette? Is it now acceptable in the Chamber to call a colleague a liar?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I would say to him very respectfully and courteously by way of reply that I made a statement on those matters in the Chamber. I think what I said at the time was very clear to people, and I do not feel the need to add to that statement. My position has been very explicit. I thank the hon. Gentleman for inviting me to dilate on the matter, but I do not intend to do so, and we shall leave it there. I am deeply obliged to him.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that, if action were taken every time a Member of this House felt moved to say under his breath something rather abusive about another Member, the Chamber would be deserted for considerable lengths of time? Do you not agree that it is better to leave this to the body that is now investigating it and hope that some common sense will be applied to this rather overheated subject?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for what he has said, and Members will make their own assessment of it. I simply appreciate the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman says what he says on the strength, next month, of 48 years’ uninterrupted service in this House.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am saving the hon. Gentleman up, as I often say. I do not want to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings. I call Mr Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Two hundred days have passed since my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal was held in India without charge, with accusations of torture and with trial by media. I am grateful to Ministers who have engaged with me so far in holding the Indian authorities to account. Nevertheless, I have now written to the Prime Minister twice, without formal response other than a holding response from their office. Will you assure me that all Ministers of State take their responsibilities seriously in responding fully to a constituency Member of the House of Commons on a critical matter involving a constituent—a UK citizen, and a true son of the Rock of Dumbarton—who has made accusations of torture against a close ally?

Mr Speaker: I hope that these matters are always treated with the utmost seriousness and that responses to parliamentary colleagues are both timely and substantive. I say to the hon. Gentleman, without fear of contradiction, that that notion of a timely and substantive response should apply both in relation to parliamentary answers to parliamentary questions and in relation to correspondence. I was not familiar with all the details of this matter, although the hon. Gentleman has apprised me of some of them, but it is of course important that these matters are addressed fully.

A moment ago, we heard from the Father of the House—perhaps I may respond on this point because it is quite an important one for all of us. A former Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman, when he did not receive substantive replies to questions or letters, was
given to tabling a written question on the matter, inquiring when he would receive a substantive reply. If I remember correctly, Sir Gerald was inclined to say that that was an extremely effective technique. I volunteer that advice gratis to the hon. Gentleman.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Gentleman, but I call Mr Simon Hoare.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you are probably aware, there have been problems with the wi-fi connection in the House for remote devices during the past few days, and the authorities have been reasonably good about keeping Members up to speed. May I invite you to provide the House from the Chair—today is a sitting day, but we are coming up to the recess—with both an update on progress and confirmation that those of us on recess next week will be able to access the intranet, our emails and parliamentary sites in the usual way, notwithstanding the problems?

Mr Speaker: I believe the Parliamentary Digital Service is attempting to keep Members updated on this matter. It would perhaps be rash of me to proffer any—[Interruption.] Well, it would certainly be rash of me to proffer any technical advice, as I have no expertise in that matter, as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) can perfectly well testify. It is probably unreasonable to think that I can offer any sort of oral statement on the matter tomorrow, which is the last day that we will sit before the Whitsun recess, but I think the Parliamentary Digital Service will seek to keep Members updated. On the back of what the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has said, if there is a further way in which the House Service can help him and other right hon. and hon. Members, we shall do so.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: However, this particular subject will not have been exhausted until we have heard the views on it of the right hon. Lady.

Anna Soubry: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry not to have given you notice of this, but it flows so naturally from what was said by my right hon. Friend; sorry, by my hon. Friend.

Simon Hoare: Right hon. Friend is fine. [Interruption.] It is a serious problem, and I simply do not know how we can resolve it. Can you help, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I rather fear that I am not able to help. I do not want to make too many declarations on the Floor of the House. Suffice it to say that I am not myself technologically sophisticated. I think I owe it to the right hon. Lady to disclose that candidly to her. I am not saying that I have not the slightest idea what she is talking about, but I am not closely familiar with the detail, and when it comes to this filter or that filter, it all seems very confusing to a simple chap like me.

I would say to the right hon. Lady that these are serious matters. PICT of course ceased to exist about three years ago, but the Parliamentary Digital Service—I think that is what she means—does try to assist. I think there are ways of dealing with this outside the Chamber, but knowing the right hon. Lady. Lady as I do, I feel sure that if she is not satisfied on this matter ere long, we will all be hearing more about it and I will doubtless be hearing more about it. [Interruption.] Indeed, the right hon. Lady will probably send me an email. It is always my pleasure to hear from her both in the Chamber and outside it, but in all seriousness, people are aware of this and I will try to ensure, as of now, that there is some progress and that Members are satisfied, because they should not be obstructed in the discharge of their parliamentary duties. I thank her for raising what she has raised.

It is a case of patience rewarded for the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. That was excellent pronunciation, as ever. In the north-west of Scotland, fishing boats have been sold, processing jobs lost and exports lost because the Home Office will not provide visas for such work in Scotland or Northern Ireland. All of that is happening to keep the Home Office happy, essentially. We need seasonal workers from non-EEA countries urgently, otherwise we will only have European Union fishing boats around our waters. How can I best get this matter on the record and raise awareness of it? I seek your advice and guidance.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, he has achieved his objective with immediate effect. His words will have been heard on the Treasury Bench and will be recorded in the Official Report by the dedicated and expert staff of the House. He can therefore go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, which might otherwise have been lacking. If he feels that he has not exhausted his energy on this fishing matter, he can of course seek a debate in the Chamber or in Westminster Hall. Who knows? The hon. Gentleman might be successful.
BILLS PRESENTED

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (NURSERY GROUNDS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Lidington, Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Michael Gove, Mel Stride and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision for buildings used as nursery grounds to be exempt from non-domestic rates in England and Wales.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 214) with explanatory notes (Bill 214-EN).

IVORY

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Boris Johnson, Secretary Penny Mordaunt, Secretary Matt Hancock, Andrew Leadsom and Dr Thérèse Coffey, presented a Bill to prohibit dealing in ivory, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 215) with explanatory notes (Bill 215-EN).

Terminal Illness (Provision of Palliative Care and Support for Carers)

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

1.1 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of comprehensive palliative care to those with terminal illnesses, including adults over the age of 60; to require certain public bodies to co-operate with hospices in the provision of palliative care; to make provision for support for those caring for individuals with a terminal illness; and for connected purposes.

I was moved to choose the subject of palliative care for my ten-minute rule Bill following a visit to my local health and wellbeing day centre run by North London Hospice, where I heard an inspirational speech by Joy Watkins who is a patient and user of the amazing facilities there. Joy said:

“So what do I get from coming here to the Hospice? My GP and hospital doctors are excellent but they don’t have the extra time to give. What I get here is the space, time and flexibility to talk through things with experts who know about living and living with a good quality of life; help in dealing with the impact of a life threatening or terminal illness; and also the chance to meet others like me and have honest supportive conversations and encourage each other.”

Joy and some of the other patients, carers and staff are in the Gallery today. I welcome Joy and everyone.

As the population grows older and lives longer, many will develop health conditions that could become a terminal illness. Macmillan Cancer Support has estimated that by 2040, older people will account for 77% of people with a cancer diagnosis. The number of people dying of cancer is increasing and is expected to continue doing so. There is a real prospect of unprecedented pressures on the already overstretched NHS.

Palliative care needs to go hand in hand with hospital treatment and should be available for all people with advanced and progressive illnesses and life-shortening conditions. Unfortunately, the provision of palliative care is patchy at best. Even those with a terminal illness are not being identified as in need of referral for palliative care. In some regions, one in four people dying of cancer has never been referred for palliative care and has not been on a care register. For people with motor neurone disease, early access to palliative care is essential, as one third of people with motor neurone disease die within a year of diagnosis. Sufferers should be able to plan ahead for their end-of-life care and ensure that their wishes are known.

Research has shown that early referral for palliative care can improve the quality of life and lengthen it. Early referral also results in fewer admissions to hospital and helps carers by alleviating the stress and pressures they face.

It cannot be right that palliative care funding is dependent on local clinical commissioning groups, whose contributions to local hospices’ costs range as widely as 1% to 50% from region to region. The average contribution of CCGs to the costs of children’s hospices is 10%, compared with 30% for adult hospices. This week is Children’s Hospice Week, and the Rainbow Trust Children’s Charity has identified that hospices save the NHS money...
Terminal Illness (Provision of Palliative Care and Support for Carers)

23 MAY 2018

Bambos Charalambous

by freeing up hospital beds, reducing the number of missed appointments and, in the case of children with terminal illnesses, helping parents stay together by allowing them to manage their feelings better in a supportive environment. I am still staggered by the thought that many hospices survive thanks only to their own fundraising activities or the generosity of donors.

We need to have properly funded nationwide palliative care provision that is integrated with local authorities, community care providers and local NHS providers, so that there is a comprehensive and coherent way of addressing end-of-life care. This Bill will seek to provide that.

There is still a big taboo about talking about end-of-life care and there is limited understanding among the public about what palliative care is and when it is appropriate. This is a challenge for all of us, but doctors and healthcare professionals could also benefit from training and a greater understanding of the work that hospices do and what is available from palliative care. Better communication is needed and more sensitivity and empathy are required from health professionals when discussing an end-of-life diagnosis and options such as palliative care.

One cannot underestimate the value of district nurses in providing care for the terminally ill. They build a trusting and supportive relationship with patients and their families and friends, making the patient’s last few months as comfortable and pain free as possible. Many more district nurses are needed to provide that support.

Palliative care is only part of the picture and we cannot forget the role that carers provide in supporting their loved ones at the end of their lives. We have only one chance to give decent care to each person who is diagnosed as terminally ill. No matter what age someone is when diagnosed, there is likely to be a relative or friend who goes above and beyond to unconditionally care for and support them in the last stages of their life. Hospices like North London Hospice’s health and wellbeing centre in my constituency of Enfield Southgate can play a role in identifying carers who have not realised that they have suddenly become a carer and are entitled to an assessment. Someone focusing on a person who is at the end of their life can find it tough to identify their own needs and to fully appreciate the role they have taken on.

The health and wellbeing centre works for outpatients and carers, recognising the holistic and inclusive approach that is needed. Carers face many physical and emotional challenges as they provide the essential support that their loved ones need—things like dressing them, taking them to the toilet or physically helping them move about, all while trying to preserve their loved one’s dignity. Even where there is palliative care provision, there is virtually none that is out of hours, so carers rarely get breaks at night time or at weekends. Many carers get no support or respite at all and are often stressed to breaking point as they adjust to a time when the sole focus in their life is the care of their loved one.

At a time when there is chronic underfunding in social care, there is a serious lack of high-quality community care and support for carers. Carers UK estimates that as many as one in eight people are providing unpaid care and support to a family member or friend. That unpaid care is worth £132 billion each year, which is equivalent to the entire NHS budget for one year. Under section 10 of the Care Act 2014, councils in England must carry out an assessment of a carer of an adult if they may need support. However, Carers UK research shows that 25% of people who provide palliative or end-of-life care are waiting over six months for an assessment. Even when assessments have been carried out, many carers get no extra support, leading to carers suffering ill health, financial pressures, stressed relationships and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Carers need breaks, an allowance in line with jobseeker’s allowance, a right to paid leave and support from a more carer-friendly NHS, for which Hospice UK has been campaigning for some time.

It is for those reasons that I am seeking a clearer recognition from the Government of the existing contribution of carers and an understanding that without this support, the situation would become unsustainable. In tandem with that is the need for a new right to paid care leave for carers who are in work and an increase in carer’s allowance for those not in work.

Marie Curie Cancer Care has estimated that in the next 25 years an extra 100,000 people will die each year. The need to do something about this problem could not be starker. The Bill seeks to ensure that there is equal access to community palliative care services for anyone who is terminally ill; better co-operation between hospices, agencies and NHS services to join up the currently fragmented provision; and better funding for district and community nursing.

Each person who becomes terminally ill has only one chance to live well until they die, and it is unacceptable that their only chance of living well is dependent on the prioritisation of funding for their hospice from their local CCG. In all probability, when the Bill receives its Second Reading, Joy will no longer be with us, but, in her words, “the hospice can help us live with a better quality of life. It is about living not just about dying, until we are ready and then it will be a safe place to die.”

We owe it to Joy and all current and future sufferers of terminal illnesses to make sure that we improve the provision of palliative care and make the system better and fairer.

I should mention that my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), my hon. Friends the Members for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), and the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) also support the Bill. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Bambos Charalambous, Jo Platt, Emma Hardy, Tonia Antoniazzi, James Frith, Eleanor Smith, Laura Smith, Layla Moran, Dr Philippa Whitford, Dr Lisa Cameron, Jim Shannon and Will Quince present the Bill.

Bambos Charalambous accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 216).
Opposition Day

[12TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Transport Secretary: East Coast Franchise

1.11 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House censures the Secretary of State for Transport, the Rt hon Member for Epsom and Ewell, for his handling of the East Coast franchise and his proposal to re-privatise the route rather than operate it as a public sector operation; and calls on the Government to reduce his ministerial salary by £2,400 per year.

Labour has brought forward today’s motion because of the lack of candour and lack of debate around the future of the east coast franchise, both inside this House and outside. Not for the first time, the Secretary of State for Transport has fallen desperately short in matters of clarity and courtesy in his ministerial conduct. I believe that manners maketh the man and manners also maketh the Minister.

I would like to take this opportunity to advise the House that a week ago today I was denied the usual courtesy of being furnished with a copy of the Minister’s statement at least 45 minutes before the statement was made. I was allowed sight of the statement at 12.15 pm in an ante room on the upper ministerial corridor. I was not permitted to retain a copy and simply had to grab the few minutes afforded to me to make brief handwritten notes. With Prime Minister’s questions scheduled to finish at 12.45 pm and there being no other business before the House, that gave me the briefest sight of the document that I was to respond to.

To add insult to injury, I was not even provided with a hard copy of the statement as it was being delivered at the Dispatch Box. I noted that you, Mr Speaker, did have the benefit of a hard copy of the statement as he delivered it, but sadly I did not have that luxury.

Mr Speaker: I say in the most gentle spirit—we do not want to go over all of it in detail—that the copy for me was of limited use. It was very interesting to read, but of limited use. It would have been of greater use to the hon. Gentleman.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful, Mr Speaker.

It seems that certain newspapers had sight of the statement approximately an hour before its delivery. That courtesy ought to have been afforded to Her Majesty’s Opposition. To add further injury to further insult, the Secretary of State told this House, in the course of responding to questions on the statement, that the Opposition had been provided with a copy of the statement. Being given brief sight of the statement, by any reasonable interpretation, is a far cry from being provided with a copy. I trust the House will accept that this is not the way to go about business. Even at this stage, I live in hope that the Secretary of State will accept that his behaviour was not what is expected of a Minister of the Crown.

In my remarks today, I intend to examine how rail operations in the United Kingdom got into such an inexplicable and unsustainable place and consider whether the Government’s policy solutions are the right ones. Before I do so, however, I would like to deal with a preliminary issue. Each time we debate the railway, the Secretary of State argues that the private sector funds investment in the railway that we would not have under public ownership. That is simply untrue and misunderstands where investment comes from. It is the taxpayer and the fare payer, not private companies, who fund investment in the railway. Every bit of new truck, every new station or new train is paid for by the public. The private sector only finances investment and it does so at a profit, such as rolling stock companies who finance the purchase of new trains and take home eye-watering profits.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can the hon. Gentleman explain to me the difference between paying for something and financing it?

Andy McDonald: Absolutely. The private sector can organise financing, but the funding has to come from somewhere. It always comes from the same source: it is provided by taxpayers and by fare-paying passengers. It is paid for, so it is wrong for the Secretary of State to repeatedly credit companies with the investment made by taxpayers and passengers who are paying sky-high fares. Public ownership does not mean less investment. Under Labour, it will mean greater investment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am not sure whether this is bad timing, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that today in Wales the Labour Government have awarded the Welsh franchise to a multinational French-Spanish company, KeolisAmey, in a £5 billion 15-year deal, despite a manifesto promise to award it on a not-for-profit basis. Why are his Labour colleagues in Wales directly contradicting what he is proposing today?

Andy McDonald: That is entirely a matter for the Welsh Government.

The east coast saga is littered with incompetence and delusion, alongside a frankly cavalier regard for the public and passenger interest by a succession of Transport Ministers.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This is now the sixth change of management for the east coast main line in 11 years. That cannot be good for any organisation. Does my hon. Friend know what is happening to the planned investment programme of new trains being built by Hitachi in the north-east?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is entirely right. There are people now working on the east coast main line who are expecting their sixth change of uniform in 10 years. It is absolutely ludicrous. There has been an appalling record over the past several years.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend says something that sums it up. This has been about changing uniforms and livery on trains, while the promised improvements to service, the new routes and the benefits to passengers have never ever materialised.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is ludicrous that the reported cost of changing the livery yet again on this network is an estimated £13 million.
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is being very kind in giving way. Does he recognise that since 2015, when the franchise was put back into private hands, there have been an extra 1.74 million seats and an extra 40 services each week from London to Edinburgh? Is it therefore not the case that we have seen not only a 20% increase in money coming in, but an increase in service?

Andy McDonald: If we speak to people who take that train journey regularly, I think they will have their own observations about the quality of service. However, if the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will deal with his remarks as I develop my speech.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andy McDonald: I really want to make some progress—I have taken a lot of interventions thus far.

I am concerned that the Government’s unimaginative and ill-thought-out response to the current crisis threatens the taxpayer interest yet further. Following the west coast franchise debacle in 2012, there were numerous reviews and process changes to rail franchising. We were told that nothing like that could ever happen again. In an act of ideological spite, the east coast franchise was forced back out into the private sector by a coalition Government desperate to tie the hands of a franchise was accepted in 2014. Why, then, did the Department accept the bid? What due diligence of the bid took place? Two of the Department’s franchise bid advisers told the Transport Committee on Monday that the Virgin-Stagecoach bid got through the DFT’s financial robustness test and financial risk assessment test. If that is the case, the financial robustness test and the financial risk assessment test are wholly ineffective and inadequate. Those same witnesses—the Department’s own advisers—suggested that the east coast franchise was doomed from day one. That is hardly a ringing endorsement from those in the know. In all those circumstances, what faith can we have in the Department’s processes?

This week it emerged that the Secretary of State allowed HS2 to appoint Ernst and Young to investigate Carillion, notwithstanding that EY was advising HS2. Clearly that is a direct, obvious and major conflict of interest. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Work and Pensions Committees asked if appropriate diligence took place. It seems that the Secretary of State’s failure to conduct proper due diligence is not isolated. EY, it should be recalled, is one of the Department’s technical advisers on the east coast operator of last resort.

Stagecoach knew that it would not meet its revenue targets weeks after taking over the east coast franchise in March 2015. The company was in constant dialogue with the Department about it. The Secretary of State has been in post since July 2016 and must have known about this for that period of time. Why did he do nothing? Has not this Transport Secretary been asleep at the wheel?

We learned this morning that the Government knew that Carillion was at risk for more than a year before the company went bust. As with the east coast franchise, the Government sat on their hands and did nothing. What about the Department’s managing director for passenger rail services, Peter Wilkinson, who was brought in at such great expense in 2012 to “get rail franchising back on track”? I am not a personnel expert, but I would say that Mr Wilkinson must be in breach of his contract.

Let us get into some of the details. On 14 Feb 2018, DFT OLR Ltd—presumably OLR stood for “operator of last resort”—was renamed London North Eastern Railway Ltd. It is a company limited by shares to a nominal value of just £1. The company has six directors, four of whom are listed with the occupation “civil servant”. They include the DFT’s head of passenger service, Peter Wilkinson; the DFT’s lead in franchise change, Richard Cantwell; and the DFT’s head of franchise policy and design, Simon Smith—the other civil servant does not show up on the DFT’s organogram.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) is entirely correct about that, and she is right about the response from the people who work on the railway. The investment in their training and performance reflected that and the benefits of the quality of the railway are because of the hard work and dedication of the people who work within it.

The Secretary of State said more than once that Carillion was at risk for more than a year before the company went bust. As with the east coast franchise, the Government sat on their hands and did nothing. What about the Department’s managing director for passenger rail services, Peter Wilkinson, who was brought in at such great expense in 2012 to “get rail franchising back on track”? I am not a personnel expert, but I would say that Mr Wilkinson must be in breach of his contract.

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Not only was LNER established in February, but the domain name was registered on 29 March. Why has it taken the Secretary of State three months to inform the House of a decision that he took all those months ago? Last year, it emerged that the Government decided to cancel rail electrification projects in March but they did not announce the decisions until after the general election in July. The collapse of the east coast franchise should set alarm bells ringing at the Department for Transport.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Virgin-Stagecoach has let down passengers, as well as the taxpayer. Does my hon. Friend agree that Virgin-Stagecoach should not be allowed to bid for any other train routes? If it
were, that would make a mockery of the whole system of privatisation and outsourcing, with absolutely no responsibility or accountability?

**Andy McDonald:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point: we seem to be in the business of rewarding failure. The smash on the wrist for Virgin-Stagecoach was to give it an extension on the west coast line. How on earth does that relate to a franchise that has failed?

As I said, the collapse of the east coast franchise should set alarm bells ringing at the DFT. The Secretary of State acknowledges that his Department accepted a bid that was too high, yet at the time of the bid, Virgin Trains East Coast was told by the DFT that it was the highest-quality bid that it had ever received. If the highest-quality bid ever received could go so badly wrong so quickly, what does that mean for other franchises?

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Andy McDonald:** I will.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Before the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) intervenes, the shadow Transport Secretary has been most generous in giving way, and that is perfectly proper, but I just emphasise that 15 Back Benchers want to speak. Therefore, it might be an idea to think in terms of finishing the speeches from Front Benchers by 10 past or quarter past 2 at the latest. If it is possible to do so earlier, so much the better. I call Mr Gareth Thomas.

**Gareth Thomas:** I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for accepting this intervention before you got up to make your own. Is my hon. Friend aware of the Centre for Policy Studies—not a natural ally for him, perhaps—and its recent report in which it alluded to fundamental problems with rail competition and the declining market interest in bidding for rail franchises? Would he therefore take this opportunity to commend the Secretary of State the recent Co-operative party report setting out a new approach to public ownership of the railways?

**Andy McDonald:** I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and to my hon. Friend. Friend makes a very good point. With your guidance in mind, Mr Speaker, I put the House on notice that I do not intend to take any further interventions—I shall crack on.

The franchising model is based on ever-growing passenger numbers. Indeed, other franchise agreements have been agreed with similarly optimistic assumptions about growing passenger numbers and fares revenue. Even in times of growing usage, franchises have proven to be unsustainable, yet we are now seeing a period of falling passenger numbers. In the last two quarters, rail passenger usage fell by 0.4% and 0.9%, driven by respective 8.1% and 9.4% falls in season-ticket journeys. That is a result of above-inflation fare rises; people who have seen fares rise at three times the rate of wages since 2010 are opting for cheaper modes of transport. Passengers are being priced off the railway. This declining usage threatens the integrity and financial sustainability of the railway and the franchising system itself, as other operators find themselves in similar trouble to Virgin-Stagecoach on the east coast.

What, then, is the Secretary of State’s solution? Will he abandon above-inflation fare rises, as Labour has pledged to do, so that passengers can afford to travel by rail and patronage can be boosted? If not, how does he plan to handle problems with franchises down the line? Will he do as he has done with the east coast and allow companies to walk away from their contracts, thereby forfeiting billions of pounds in premium payments owed to the Treasury, before handing services over to other companies that will agree to pay less back to the taxpayer?

The new west coast partnership franchise has a £20 million parent company guarantee. This contrasts with the £200 million guaranteed by Stagecoach on the east coast. Less risk for the private sector means more risk for the public purse. Both options would allow private operators to renege on their contracts, at a cost of billions of pounds, and makes a mockery of rail franchising by telling private operators that the state will intervene if they are in trouble, removing risk and incentivising reckless bids. It would be a case of profits being privatised and losses socialised.

The Public Accounts Committee and the Transport Committee have published reports that are scathing of both the Secretary of State’s handling of franchises and the franchising system more generally, which is clearly failing on its own terms. The Secretary of State is attempting to prop up the franchising model for ideological reasons. Since 2010, there have been more direct awards—companies being gifted services without having to bid—than successful franchising competitions, meaning that the system resembles state-sponsored monopolies rather than a market where franchisees make bids they are expected to honour.

I have yet to hear the Secretary of State articulate a solution to these fundamental flaws in rail franchising. So far, he has only proposed to tinker around the edges. The strategic vision for rail announced last November will be a future case study for media students on Government presentational double-speak. Amid reversing the Beeching cuts and announcing the invitation to tender for the next south-eastern franchise, there were two sentences on how the east coast franchise had failed. The strategic vision embodies his approach to his ministerial brief and to announcements in this House: smoke, mirrors, ambiguities, jargon, technicalities, empty aspirations and discourtesy.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend offer any insight into the Secretary of State’s long-term vision for rail franchising? Did he hear the evidence to the Transport Committee on Monday on the proposed east coast partnership, when Iryna Terlecky, a rail professional with decades of experience, told us that she had “no idea how it might work”? She added: “If I was doing this kind of partnership, I would not do it on the east coast” because it was “completely counter-intuitive”.

Can he understand why the Secretary of State is going down this path?
Andy McDonald: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. I value the work she does so astutely as Chair of the Transport Committee. It is remarkable that those experts and advisers are making such comments. I will come on to deal with the choice of the east coast for a potential partnership option in my concluding remarks.

Simon Hoare: A moment or so ago, the hon. Gentleman mentioned ideology. I am a Welshman and I thought I understood the Welsh Labour party. What is the difference between the ideologies of Welsh Labour and London Labour on these vital transport issues? Clearly there is a difference, as alluded to by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards).

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman will recognise of course that the Government forced through the franchise option, so they had no choice in Wales.

Like his time at the Ministry of Justice, the Secretary of State must hope to be moved on before his wrecking-ball approach to decisions reveals its true horrors. He seems incapable of being direct with Members and the public alike. Given his track record, is it any wonder that no one takes the east coast partnership idea seriously? Where on earth did he come up with it? In the back of a taxi on the way to Parliament to deliver his statement?

As my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee has remarked, the east coast is the last line on the rail network on which a partnership between a train and track operator has been launched. More than 20 passenger, freight and open access operators use the east coast main line. The east coast franchise runs less than 10% of services. Why would anyone put this operator in charge? There is no basis for the Secretary of State’s assurances that the governance of the partnership would be independent.

The Secretary of State knows that Network Rail’s London and north-eastern route covers the east midlands. Putting that route into an east coast partnership will force Network Rail to prioritise the east coast over the east midlands and further damage a region that is losing rail electrification and services because of timetable changes. Will his east coast partnership not undermine the national rail infrastructure manager, Network Rail? His new market-led proposals for rail enhancements also undermine Network Rail’s role and increase the Department’s micro-management of rail. Is there not simply too much political interference in rail?

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy McDonald: I will give way briefly, but it will be my last intervention.

Mr Campbell: Like many north-east MPs, I travel on the east coast line every week, and I am always being asked this question by passengers and staff: why on earth did the coalition Government get rid of a perfectly good company that put £1 billion over four years into the Treasury and give the franchise to Virgin-Stagecoach?

Andy McDonald: I think the explanation is quite simple: it was done out of ideological obsession and to put the franchise outwith the reach of anybody else.

By contrast, the next Labour Government will allow rail professionals to get on with their jobs free from political interference. [Interruption.] They do not seem to understand the difference.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con) rose—

Andy McDonald: No, I am not taking any more interventions. Sit!

Last week, the Secretary of State failed to address my concerns about four other highly vulnerable rail franchises being provided with revenue support by the Department. Is it his intention to take these contracts within the operator of last resort function should they fail?

Kwasi Kwarteng: How does the hon. Gentleman square his statement that there is too much political interference in the rail network with his party’s stated desire to nationalise the entire network? It does not make any sense.

Andy McDonald: Had the hon. Gentleman been here for the entirety of the debate, he might have heard me to refer to that: I know he has just walked in. The object of the exercise is to put rail professionals in charge of the railway system.

Is it not the reality that the franchise system is totally broken? It is finished; it’s a dead parrot; it is no more. The one thing the Secretary of State is right about is that track and train should be unified, but that should not be done simply to further his ideological obsession with parceling up public services for profiteers. I am glad, therefore, that this service has been taken out of the franchising system and placed under public control, although the fact that it is a consortium of private companies brought about during the partial privatisation of the operator of last resort prevents it from being properly described as full public ownership.

A minimum estimate is that £725 million flows out of the railway every year into the pockets of shareholders. In addition, £200 million each year is wasted through a disjointed system. Breaking the railway up into pieces was necessary to sell it off, but it has created an inefficient railway. A few years ago, the McNulty report found our railways to be 40% less efficient than European comparators.

I do not agree with the Members who favour a “halfway house” option—having a degree of public ownership, but retaining the broader franchising model, along with a public sector operator or two—as that would mean failing to realise the full benefits of public ownership. What is needed is a fully integrated railway that is fully in public ownership. A unified railway in public ownership, serving the interests of British citizens, their communities, their jobs and their businesses is what Labour will deliver, and the sooner we can have a general election to bring it about, the better. I commend the motion to the House.

1.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): What a lot of incoherence from the Labour party and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)! Who does the hon. Gentleman think runs the railway today except rail professionals? It is a nonsense.
What we also have seen today is a classic example of the definition of the word “hypocrisy”. This morning, the Welsh Labour Government announced their plans for what will be a public-private partnership to develop a new metro service on the Welsh valley lines. This afternoon, the Labour party at Westminster is trying to censure me for announcing a public-private partnership to improve services on the east coast main line. That says a great deal about what the Labour party has become.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way in a moment; let me make a bit of progress first.

I am not going to go through, line by line, the process that I have been undertaking in the past few months to reach what I believe is the right position for taxpayers, passengers and employees, but I have been struck by how little Labour Members understand about the way in which such a process must be managed, and how little they appear to understand the financial structure of franchising, rail laws, or the fact that the Government have to operate within the legalities of contracts and other laws.

I believe that, when confronting a failing franchise, the Government have three duties. The first is to ensure that any transition to a new arrangement is smooth and trouble-free for passengers. That was why we engaged an operator of last resort team in the autumn, meaning that, if necessary, they would have plenty of time to plan a smooth takeover. The team registered the name and prepared the website so that they would be ready if this situation arose. That is good practice.

The second of the duties is to ensure that the failing company fulfils its contract with the Government. If I had moved to make this decision months ago, the operator of last resort would not have not been ready and, moreover, I would have left taxpayers short-changed—they would have been given back less money than they should have been. When this contract ends, the taxpayer will have recovered all the money that it is possible to recover under the terms of the contract. That is a key duty of the Government in such a situation.

The Government’s third duty is to act according to due process, to be seen to assess all options properly, and to ensure that they have proper legal protection against any challenge to the decisions that I make. In the last few months, the Department has ensured that all those duties have been fulfilled, and I am grateful to all the members of the team who helped me to make that happen.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned the Welsh railways, but the motion is not about the Welsh railways; it is about the east coast main line, which has gone bust three times in less than 10 years. The Government are still obsessed with financing the private sector through taxpayers and railway users, whose fares have gone up by more than 32%.

Chris Grayling: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what the motion is about: Labour Members saying one thing in one place and doing something else in another. Why should we take them seriously when they do that?

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Is there not a much bigger problem with the Labour party’s policy of nationalisation? Labour Members are trying to keep us in the single market, but the state aid rules within the single market mean that we cannot nationalise.

Chris Grayling: That is absolutely true. The irony is—I shall say more about this later—that it is the rail unions that have been campaigning against the same European laws that the Labour party wants to keep. This is another example of Labour’s nonsensical position.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend amplify something that he hinted at earlier? Will he confirm that he sees the Government as an interim operator of last resort and that this is not a permanent renationalisation?

Chris Grayling: I do not intend that the arrangement will be permanent. What I am saying—I have said this all along—is that when we move ahead with the full future shape of the LNER, we will not do everything in exactly the same way. What has been done on this railway in the past has not worked, and I do not intend to do it again. We will do things differently. We will consider giving the staff a stake in the business, and we will look at a different kind of investment from the private sector. However, as I shall make clear, I believe—the Welsh Government clearly believe—that a partnership between the public sector and the private sector is beneficial to the country, and not something to be cast aside as an evil and sinister attempt to do down passengers.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: I will give way once more, and then I will make some progress.

Ian Mearns: I am very interested by the comments that are coming from behind the Secretary of State. It is clear that he is in favour of state ownership of UK railways; the only problem is that it is German, Italian and French state ownership.

Chris Grayling: It appears that the Welsh Government—the Welsh Labour Government—take the same view, because they have just awarded the contract for the Wales & Borders franchise to a French state business in partnership with a Spanish-owned private business. Again, the Labour party says one thing in one place and does something else in another.

What we have heard from Labour in the last few months has been a litany of misinformation, misunderstanding and inaccuracy. Let us take the bail-out point. Labour Members claim that there has been a £2 billion bail-out. That is just plain nonsense. It is wholly inaccurate to claim that there has been a bail-out now, when the railway will continue to make a healthy profit for the taxpayer. It would equally be inaccurate to claim that Labour had bailed out National Express when it did not push through nearly £1.5 billion of future premium payments after 2009. The railway carried on making a profit then, and it will carry on making a profit now.
Andy McDonald: Had the franchise run its full term, would the Secretary of State have expected Virgin Trains East Coast to pay the full £3.3 billion in premiums?

Chris Grayling: Any franchise that runs its full term is expected to pay the full premiums, but when National Express went under and there was a further £1.5 billion of premiums to pay, that money continued to be paid by the new operator, in the same way that the premiums that we are expecting will continue to be paid by the operator in this instance. This is my point: the hon. Gentleman does not understand how the finances of the railways work, and that is why the Labour party is so unfit to be in opposition, let alone to govern.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) rose—

Lilian Greenwood rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and later to the Chairman of the Transport Committee.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful to the Secretary of State. I hope that he will clear up that point about the last Labour Government and National Express. As a member of the Transport Committee, I heard a former Transport Secretary, Lord Adonis, explain that sanctions had been applied and that that particular operator was not permitted to bid for other franchises, which was a significant sanction.

Chris Grayling: If I am not mistaken, Lord Adonis actually accepted before the Select Committee that that did not happen. He thought that standing up in Parliament and saying that there would be a ban meant that there actually was one. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my Department looked very carefully at this and no evidence of any ban has been found. Moreover, a report from the National Audit Office stated that it had found no such evidence.

Huw Merriman: I was at the same Select Committee sitting. Of course, in the year following those events, the Labour party left office. What did happen at the time was that the then Secretary of State said that National Express would be stripped of other franchises, but of course that did not occur—I dare say that that could not happen legally—and the two franchises remained the same.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right. It is all very well Labour Members posturing, but we do have to operate within the law of the land, which is a fact that they sometimes miss.

Lilian Greenwood rose—

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) rose—

Chris Grayling: I will take two more brief interventions, but then I must make some progress.

Lilian Greenwood: I want to deal with the loss of premium payments. According to the Secretary of State’s own “Short-term Intercity East Coast train operator 2018 options report”, “the business revenues are estimated to reach around £2bn over the period of interim operation and the forecast income or premium for taxpayers is estimated at around a quarter of a billion pounds.”

That is about £420 million less than had been anticipated under the VTEC contract. Who will fund that black hole in the Government’s finances? Will it be taxpayers or will it be passengers? Will the Secretary of State have to cut other departmental budget lines, or has the Chancellor agreed to bail him out?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for confirming that the talk of a £2 billion bail-out that we keep hearing from Labour is absolute nonsense. The reality is that we will drive this business as hard as we can to keep the revenues as high as we can. But if this railway were going to deliver as much money as was forecast, none of this would have happened in the first place.

Julian Knight: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; he is being most generous. He is forensically taking apart the Opposition’s case. Was he struck, as I was, by the fact that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) did not even mention the cost of renationalisation? Across the board, the renationalisation of the utilities and the railways would cost more than £170 billion, and that is money that we simply cannot afford to spend.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Opposition never cost in their renationalisation plans the value of the trains that are currently privately owned, for example. That amount would be billions and billions of pounds, unless they are planning to nationalise the railways but have no trains to run on them, which is also a possibility.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I am going to make some progress. I will want to talk about a couple of other issues, for the benefit of the House, but first I want to be clear about what the debate is all about.

The Labour party, in its guise here today, unreservedly hates the private sector. Other parts of the party do not, however. Even Lord Adonis, who has been attacking me for months, said yesterday that he thought that the franchising system was working well. I do not necessarily agree with him on that. I think that some serious changes are going to be needed, as I have said in the House before, but the solution is not to go back to where the French are today. President Macron is trying to move things away from the model that the Labour party is advocating, which would be disastrous for this country. Labour’s vision for the future of transport in our country is precisely the opposite of President Macron’s. When a country has a system that is struggling, losing money and closing routes, Labour’s vision is not the way for the future.
vision for a socialist Britain? This is a man who does not even believe in private property. That would be disastrous for this country, and we must stand up very firmly against an ideology that would damage this country.—[Interruption] Opposition Members talk about where investment comes from, but they do not understand that if the railway is in the public sector, that means it has to compete for precious capital day in, day out, and year in, year out, with other parts of the public sector—the health service and the education system. The reason why right now we have knocked old trains in the north of England—the Pacer trains that were no more than bus bodies bolted on to train wheels in the days of British Rail—is that British Rail, in the public sector, did not get the capital to invest properly, and that would happen all over again.

I am going to keep my remarks brief, because many Members want to speak. However, I do want to say a quick word about this week’s timetable issues on the railways, since the shadow Secretary of State raised them and they are of great concern to Members.

What we have seen in the last few days has not been good enough. No one should underestimate the logistical challenge of introducing a timetable change. The changes have been made for a very good reason: they mean a big expansion of services across the country. A timetable change of such a scale involves reorganising staff rosters, training staff for new routes, and reorganising how we deploy our trains. It needed months of preparation, and I am afraid that a number of things went wrong, but most particularly the fact that for the second time in six months, Network Rail was far too late in finalising planned timetable changes and left the rest of the industry struggling to catch up. I am not happy with that at all and I have told the leadership of Network Rail that it cannot happen again. But it is perhaps an uncomfortable truth for Labour Members, who keep talking about current problems as an excuse for not electrifying the railways. That does not rule in a way that is deeply regrettable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Grayling: I will give way, but then I shall wind up my remarks so that others have a chance to speak.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I have been experiencing some of these teething problems due to the new timetable in Stevenage. There continue to be issues, but we are looking forward to more seats, more services and more destinations. I was on a train today from Stevenage. I had to get off at King’s Cross, but it went through to Gatwick and then on to Brighton, so we are excited about the prospects.

We are very proud to have the east coast main line stopping at Stevenage. We would like more services, but we cannot forget the passengers. They do not care whether ownership is private, mutual or public—they just want things to work. I am grateful that the Secretary of State has stepped in to try to make that happen.

Chris Grayling: That is the most important thing. It is why we are pushing forward with the integration of track and train to make the railway more reliable, and it is why we have a strategy to bring in digital technology to improve the performance of the railway. It is also why, for the first time in a long time, we are investing in significant extra capacity across the rail network.

We sat in opposition looking at things that needed to be done but just did not get done, but now we are in government, they are happening. Last week the fantastic new London Bridge station opened. In the summer, I will be in the midlands to open the new Kenilworth station. In July, I will be opening the expanded Liverpool Lime Street station. These are big and positive steps forward for the railway.

In total, over the next five years, we will be investing £20 billion on renewing the current infrastructure and another £9 billion on further enhancements, including the flagship trans-Pennine rail network. We are building HS2; we will shortly be opening Crossrail; we are just opening the Thameslink tunnels through central London; and we have done the Ordsall chord in Manchester. [Interruption.] The £2.9 billion trans-Pennine rail upgrade will begin in the spring of next year and make a massive difference to passengers.

The thing that passengers will probably notice the most, however—this is being funded by the private rather than the public sector—is all the new trains that are arriving. Every single train in the north of England is being rebuilt, starting from later this year, with all the Pacer trains going to the scrapyard, and every train
[Chris Grayling]

East Anglia. The new trains asked for by Opposition Members are arriving on the east coast main line later this year, and new trains are coming to the south-west, the midlands and the south. There will be new trains across the whole country because this Government are investing in our rail network. This Government want to give a better deal to passengers, and this Government are going to do what works. All we hear from Labour Members is ideology from a party that cannot quite work out what it is actually talking about, and I think we have one big job for this country: make sure they never get anywhere near government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, let me say to the House that it will be obvious that a great many Members wish to speak. We have limited time, as there is another debate after this one, and I therefore want to warn colleagues that I will be imposing a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. That, of course, does not apply to Mr Alan Brown.

1.58 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Transport Secretary. He made a speech that will certainly appeal to his Back Benchers, but I would not say it was a forensic demolition of the argument for public ownership of the east coast main line. When the Transport Secretary throws out phrases like “Labour just hate the private sector” and “they would turn our economy into a Venezuelan economy”, that seems like smoke and mirrors to me, rather than forensic analysis.

This censure motion relates directly to the handling of the east coast main line franchise. I am happy to support it on that basis, but there has been a further catalogue of errors on the Transport Secretary’s watch. I want to touch on some of that as well, as it builds up to where we are today.

It is clear from the opening speeches that there are opposing views across the Chamber on the merits of privatisation and franchising, but one thing that I am confident about is that, as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) touched on, the Transport Secretary wrongly connects cause and effect when it comes to privatisation of the railways. He argued that British Rail was struggling—it did have some poor rolling stock and it was outdated—but that is only half the picture because the Government would not allow British Rail to borrow to invest in the railways. The Transport Secretary says British Rail did not have access to capital, but that was because the Government would not allow it to access capital.

There was another restriction on the railways at the time. Substantial investment was needed following the 1988 Clapham rail crash, and further rolling stock upgrades and the channel tunnel were bleeding money elsewhere that British Rail was not allowed to access.

Once John Major’s Government sold off British Rail, they allowed private borrowing, so it is correct that additional money was levered in, but that money was levered in on the basis that it could be recovered only through fares or through Government subsidy. If the Transport Secretary cannot acknowledge that money can be borrowed only because it is underpinned by the taxpayer, either it shows a real lack of understanding of where the money comes from, or it shows his ideological blind spot.

That attitude permeates all the way through the failed east coast franchise. The Transport Secretary has previously more or less shrugged his shoulders in the Chamber and said, “Well, you know what? Stuff happens. Some franchises fail, and that is the way the private world operates. Some fail and we move on, but do you know what? Others will come along and they will be successful, so why worry?”

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the flaws in the east coast franchise, and one of the reasons it failed, is that it was so badly set up in the first place, with the backloading of payments? Does he agree that perhaps we should take this opportunity, as we go into a different arrangement, to look at how we set up franchises to make sure we do not doom them to failure?

Alan Brown: I agree with the hon. Lady. I will address a couple of those points because I agree wholeheartedly with what she says about the tender process and the backloading.

The reality is that private investors and companies either make money out of a franchise or they seem to be allowed to walk away. The Transport Secretary stated at the Dispatch Box that what is now happening is not a bail-out of VTEC. But if VTEC owes £2 billion in track premiums and is allowed to walk away without paying anything, that must by definition be a £2 billion bail-out. That is so simple and it cannot be argued against.

Huw Merriman: Surely the definition of a bail-out is when the Government actually have to pay money to the company, which of course they are not doing. If anything, the criticism of the Government is that they have ripped off the private sector and got more money from it than it could deliver.

Alan Brown: Yes, there we see the ideological blind spot yet again. If somebody owes me £2 billion, I would be writing off £2 billion of debt if I said, “Forget about it. It’s okay.” Let us say it is technically not a bail-out, but the Government are writing off £2 billion of debt that that company owes the taxpayer. The company is walking away and getting rid of a £2 billion liability, and I do not understand why Conservative Members are trying to argue different.

The Transport Secretary has previously justified the predicament by saying the franchisee got its sums wrong. That should not be an excuse, but, as I have repeatedly said, and the shadow Minister also touched on this, it means the Department for Transport also got its sums wrong when it thought the tender was suitable for award. It is not just the franchisee that got its sums wrong; the Department for Transport got its sums wrong, too.
The Government failed in their due diligence. What about the supposed parent company guarantees? Those guarantees clearly have not been worth much to the taxpayer. What do we not know about the runner-up bids? The narrative that there will be further issues down the line. For such a partnership to address. It is absolutely guaranteed on the line, there will clearly be further complications. The repeated Back-Bench Tory support for open access interact with other services outwith the franchise. Given the Transport Secretary had a duty to ensure that lessons were learned and properly applied in awarding the east coast franchise, and it is clear that not enough analysis was undertaken.

When the story broke, although VTEC got the sums wrong. Richard Branson blamed some of the reduced numbers on Network Rail. Given the Transport Secretary also has responsibility for Network Rail, what is the truth in that statement? If it is true that Network Rail was the problem, VTEC should be compensated because that is the way the franchise model works. If it is not true, why has the Transport Secretary not come out to prevent a blame game between the track owner and the franchise holder is a combined partnership model. To prove the rail franchising model is broken?

Despite all that, the Transport Secretary’s new wheeze to prevent a blame game between the track owner and the franchise holder is a combined partnership model. That might improve things, but at this stage we do not know what the set-up will look like or how it will interact with other services outwith the franchise. Given the repeated Back-Bench Tory support for open access on the line, there will clearly be further complications for such a partnership to address. It is absolutely guaranteed that there will be further issues down the line.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): The Public Accounts Committee found last month that the passenger growth forecast by Virgin and Stagecoach was wildly wrong. In the light of what the hon. Gentleman is saying, does that prove the rail franchising model is broken?

Alan Brown: It certainly proves the current model is broken. If a franchisee gets its figures wildly wrong, it goes back to the due diligence by the Department for Transport, which clearly accepted the wildly wrong and inflated figures. Action is needed to remedy that.

Even if we accept the Government’s partnership model, the Transport Secretary has made it clear he believes that the private sector always operates better than the public sector. Surely then, at the very least, he should allow the public sector to bid for franchises: if he is that confident the private sector will win, he does not have to worry about the public sector bidding. Let the public sector bid and let us see which is the most competitive.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is it not the case that what we are seeing here is not a free market situation at all? In a free market situation, a failing franchisee would lose money, too. The current situation is tantamount to going into a casino, putting on a bet, losing and being given back the stake. Surely risk should be shared with the private sector in future arrangements so it takes a hit, as well as the taxpayer.

Alan Brown: I completely agree. Rail franchise holders have been able to walk away. As has been said, the profits are privatised and the losses are underpinned by the taxpayer. That is not a proper free market model because there is absolutely no punitive action against franchise holders when they fail.

Huw Merriman: If that were the case, why did the share prices of the companies involved collapse?

Alan Brown: Funnily enough, Stagecoach’s share price increased when the Transport Secretary gave a statement from the Dispatch Box in February. Share prices go up and down, which is to do with the overall performance of these companies, and they are very big companies. The whole point of these big companies bidding and providing parent company guarantees is that it is supposed to offset the risk, rather than leaving the risk to the taxpayer.

On the question of state-owned companies or public sector organisations running franchises, the Transport Secretary’s logic completely falls apart when we consider that four foreign state-owned rail companies already operate franchises in the UK. Those companies are making a profit here for reinvestment in their domestic set-up, which is proof that state-run railways can work efficiently.

The previous east coast main line services are further proof that public ownership can work. When the previous franchise failed and was taken into public sector operation, it returned £1 billion in track fees to the Treasury and turned an operating profit of £42 million. So, as has been asked before, why move away from that successful model to one where VTEC can come in with inflated sums and then get to walk away? It is clearly not right.

The southern rail franchise shambles also happened on the Transport Secretary’s watch. The main conclusion of the NAO’s report is that it could not be demonstrated that the franchise has delivered value for money. At the time, the operator blamed Network Rail and the unions, and the Government blamed the unions, completely ignoring the Transport Secretary’s role in refusing to engage with them. The fact is that 60% of the cancellations were due to Govia Thameslink Railway and only 40% were due to the franchise holder. The main conclusion of the NAO’s report is that it could not be demonstrated that the franchise has delivered value for money. At the time, the operator blamed Network Rail and the unions, and the Government blamed the unions, completely ignoring the Transport Secretary’s role in refusing to engage with them. The fact is that 60% of the cancellations were due to Govia Thameslink Railway and only 40% were caused by Network Rail. The UK Government set up the model supposedly to deal with the complex infrastructure upgrades, but the Government took all the revenue risks, so the strikes actually cost the taxpayer, because the loss of revenue is underwritten. The Government also awarded the franchise based on an even higher roll-out of driver-only operation, which is what caused some of the disputes.

Ian Mearns: This is not just a problem with southern. Southern is a failing franchise, but northern seems to be on the verge of failing, too, with complaints from passengers across the north of England about services regularly not being provided.
Alan Brown: I agree, and I think that the Government are now looking at northern because it is yet another failing franchise—another sign that the current system is just not fit for purpose.

I go back to the problems with the southern franchise. The NAO report makes it clear that the Department for Transport’s responsibility was large, especially for access to the network and timetabling pressures. Such errors led to an additional £60 million being allocated from the Treasury, following a loss in revenue and other costs. Again, all that happened on this Transport Secretary’s watch.

Chris Grayling: I do not want to deflect attention in any way, but may I remind the hon. Gentleman that that franchise was not set up while I was Secretary of State?

Alan Brown: I am happy to accept that, but all the current problems are happening under the Secretary of State’s watch. He has refused to get involved in trying to resolve the disputes to move things forward. I accept the fact about when it was set up, but he could have been stronger in his leadership and his interventions instead of letting things rumble on.

Another issue that I have with the Secretary of State’s overall competence is his dogmatic refusal to devolve Network Rail to Scotland. The organisation is clearly too big, and it has a bad reputation for delays and overspend, so why would he not want to take the opportunity to devolve it, allowing the Scottish Government to take full responsibility? It has been estimated that a unified management structure could save up to £100 million a year, and that alone should appeal to a Tory Secretary of State, so I just do not understand his dogmatic refusal to engage.

Then there is his lack of engagement with the Scottish Government about the funding for control period 6 in Scotland. The allocation is way less than his regulator recommended for track maintenance and growth in Scotland’s railways. Why is he being so obstinate in refusing to meet the Scottish Government or to consider what might be a fair funding settlement? We also had the recent railcard fiasco. The autumn Budget included the announcement of a discounted railcard for 26 to 30-year-olds, except the Treasury did not put any money into the scheme. In answer to a written question, I was told that the rail industry would pay for it itself, but that was done without discussions with the industry so, lo and behold, the scheme is in chaos. Who would have thought it? Again, that happened under this Secretary of State’s watch.

The Transport Secretary’s slash-and-burn attitude to rail electrification projects and the short-sighted selection of hybrid engines will lead to continued diesel pollution. He has also so far refused to fund or consider meaningful upgrades to the west coast main line north of Crewe. The way that high-speed rail will be implemented means that journeys between Scotland and Crewe will take longer than six minutes. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I note that he chastised Government Members for saying that the explanation was simple, but it appears that he does not understand the difference between revenue projections and debt, which is fundamental here. At its heart, the motion seems to be about the east coast main line, how it was franchised, how it is now operating, the solution and also the future of the railways. The divide between the two sides of the House is clear: the Opposition believe that everything should be nationalised, and the Government believe that a public-private partnership will work for the benefit of passengers.

I listened to the opening remarks of the shadow Secretary of State, and I understand his frustration, but surely he appreciates a Secretary of State who comes to the House to announce changes, rather than one who, as happened in the case of National Express, made an announcement on the radio at 7.30 am. When this Government had less talent available to them and I was a Minister, I met a number of people from the rail industry and I can say that to think that the railways are not run by professionals is an insult to the many who work on them. They will have been disappointed to hear the shadow Secretary of State say that today.

This is about rail franchising, the principles on which it is based, and then whether the Secretary of State has followed those principles. After the problems with the franchising of the west coast main line, the Brown review set out the principles for franchising and re-franchising. The principles contain clear guidance on the capital that must be put up by franchisees, on the risks and on the Secretary of State’s duties—duties that this Transport Secretary has surely followed. It is his job to ensure that passenger services are not disrupted and that there is a smooth transition if a franchise is failing. By getting the operator of last resort involved last autumn, services were preserved, and the reality on the east coast main line is that more trains are being run, more money will be generated for the taxpayer and more people are being employed. In addition, the most recent passenger satisfaction survey shows that 92% are satisfied with the privatised railway.

Lilian Greenwood rose—

Stephen Hammond: I will happily give way to the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Lilian Greenwood: I want to pick up on the hon. Gentleman’s point about the Brown review. One of its recommendations was that franchisees should be responsible only for the risks that they can manage, but that was not implemented. Does he agree that the failure to do so was one reason why this franchise has gone wrong?
Stephen Hammond: If the hon. Lady reads on, she will see that that recommendation states that franchisees “should not be expected to take external macroeconomic” risks. Surely this franchise has underestimated the risk to itself by overestimating revenues. Now, whether the Department for Transport took the appropriate advice is for the Transport Committee to dwell on, but the Brown principles are quite clear.

The next duty on the Secretary of State is to ensure that taxpayers are protected, and this private failure has not resulted in public sector liability or taxpayer cost. The Secretary of State is right in what he says about that.

Finally, there are processes that must be followed. Like it or not, whether someone is a Minister or a Member of Parliament, there are many times when frustration with some public or private service can boil over, but due legal process must be followed. Looking at what this Secretary of State has done, I do not think that anyone can argue that he has not followed the process. He came to this House in February, and before he set in place the operator of last resort. He has ensured continuity of service and that there will be no loss to the taxpayer. He has taken the appropriate legal advice. Against that test, the motion must fail.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) rose—

Stephen Hammond: On that point, I will give way to my right hon. Friend, a former Minister of State.

Mr Hayes: I was able to work with the Secretary of State, as the House knows, and I can say with absolute surety that he is a diligent Minister who does indeed know the detail and follows procedure in precisely the way my hon. Friend describes. I do not think it is reasonable to blame the Secretary of State for intervening when we all know that he would have got the blame had he not intervened. He has taken the right steps in the public interest and should not be blamed for doing so.

Stephen Hammond: The former Minister of State is a friend of mine from when we were both in the Department for Transport. I wholeheartedly concur, as ever.

The second part of the motion is about the future, which is where the biggest divide is. I enjoy a good reminiscence as much as the next person. I remember my fifth birthday treat—my parents took me on the railways, because I always wanted to do it.

Alec Shelbrooke: Was steam still around?

Stephen Hammond: Yes, steam was still around.

For most of the first part of my professional life, I used British Rail to commute. The idea that it was a paragon of virtue and good service is just nonsense. My memory, which I do not think has deserted me, is of old and failing rolling stock, poor maintenance, timetables that were never operated and a lack of investment. That is not the reality now. Since privatisation, the Government have invested billions in railway infrastructure. Over the next five years, they will ensure that there is another £20 billion—actually, there will be much more than that—coming directly from the private sector investing in new rolling stock, which will be the biggest benefit for the public.

Grahame Morris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hammond: I am mindful of the six-minute limit. I have taken two interventions, so I will not take one from the hon. Gentleman.

That private investment, which Labour so heavily opposes, is the very investment that will greatly benefit the people who travel on the trains, about whom all hon. Members should be most concerned. Under Labour proposals, that investment would disappear.

I applaud my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has come to the House with a future rail strategy. It is a great start, but he knows I would like him to go further in a few key areas. I went to speak to the managing director of South Western, which runs the trains around my area. The reality is that Network Rail is causing the bulk of the delays. I am delighted to see public-private partnerships, but I urge my right hon. Friend to go further with his plans to devolve sections of Network Rail, which would provide local accountability and responsiveness to local passenger need. Let us not worry ourselves about nationalisation; let us make sure we get this right. It is ironic that the part of the railway that is most criticised is the nationalised part.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made the point about timetable delays and one or two other issues. The projects division inside Network Rail is responsible for many good works, but it is also responsible for a number of delays. I urge him to get the private sector more closely involved in the design and concentration of projects.

Finally, I am pleased to say that this motion fails at the most basic level. It is wrong to censure the Secretary of State, who has followed the right processes. The last thing this country needs is to go back to the 1970s. It needs to look forward to the 2020s, and nationalisation can never be the answer.

2.23 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am pleased to be allowed to speak in this very important debate. I start by thanking the staff on east coast rail who, during the eight years I have been in the House, have been unfailingly helpful on my twice-weekly journeys to and from Newcastle. They have been unfailingly cheerful and unfailingly efficient despite the turmoil that successive Conservative-led Governments have put them through.

Speaking of the workers, I would not normally support singling out one worker—in this case, the Secretary of State for Transport—for criticism and in effect a fine for a collective failure of this Government, but if anyone is responsible for that failure, it has to be him. What is more, it is not only a failure of competence; more importantly, it is a failure driven by ideology—the Secretary of State’s extreme free market ideology. If he wants to play ideology at dinner parties around the country, that is his decision, but here he is playing ideology with the east coast main line, a critical piece of national railway infrastructure serving more than 20 million passengers per year and contributing more than £300 billion annually to the UK economy. Also, independent research shows that investment in it could generate more than £5 billion in additional GDP for our country and our region. The Secretary of State’s ideology is destroying jobs in my constituency, for which he must be held accountable.
Conservatives are ideologically constipated on free markets and infrastructure. Did it justify the huge costs involved in economic development? Transport for the North estimates £27 billion invested in our transport infrastructure. Did it justify the huge costs involved in designing multiple tenders and the exposure to legal challenges? Did it justify the uncertainty that has been so bad for staff and passengers? Absolutely not. The Conservatives are ideologically constipated on free markets to the extent that they cannot see the reality of our rail network and its needs.

Ian Mearns: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for taking this difficult decision to bring the east coast main line back into public control while we find a long-term, sustainable solution for the train line that takes me and my constituents up and down the length of our great nation, week in, week out. As he knows well, I am the MP for the northernmost English constituency, which lies some 350 miles north of us here, and so I am well aware of the crucial importance of good transport infrastructure to ensure business investment can flow into my constituency. That will help to grow strong, long-term successful businesses, which create great jobs for my constituents.

Chi Onwurah: It is an honour to follow my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who always speaks wisely on all things engineering and technical. I long to be as knowledgeable as she is.

I wish to thank the Secretary of State for taking this difficult decision to bring the east coast main line back into public control while we find a long-term, sustainable solution for the train line that takes me and my constituents up and down the length of our great nation, week in, week out. As he knows well, I am the MP for the northernmost English constituency, which lies some 350 miles north of us here, and so I am well aware of the crucial importance of good transport infrastructure to ensure business investment can flow into my constituency. That will help to grow strong, long-term successful businesses, which create great jobs for my constituents. This is one of the most vital investments the Government can make.

I have talked endlessly, and partially successfully, about why dualling the A1 from Morpeth to the Scottish border—[Laughter.] I heard that! I have talked about why that is so vital for economic growth and inward investment. Indeed, the Department for Transport based its financing decisions on that economic development model, which was so important to justifying why a rural county needed to address 40 years of lack of road investment. The Secretary of State has listened patiently to me over many years and has supported driving forward that investment. Obviously, we wait with bated breath for the sight of diggers, as they get closer in the months ahead. The Department can be assured that my constituents and I will not rest until the whole road is invested in, because that is a crucial way of linking up north Northumberland to Edinburgh, Newcastle and the rest of the UK.

It is not only road investment that is vital; the east coast main line, linking Edinburgh to London, is an efficient and speedy service, and it has two key stopping points at Berwick-upon-Tweed and at Alnmouth, which is Alnwick’s railway station. With recent and continuing improvements in parking provision at both those stations, we have seen substantial increases in usage by my constituents, who travel north and south for business, study and pleasure. It is a crucial rail transport link for my constituents, of all ages, so it is of the utmost importance to me that this train line is run sustainably and that the long-term security of the east coast line’s investment in rolling stock and the management of fares to ensure a competitive and effective train line is assured.

With the Ministers here, it would be remiss of me if I did not highlight the continuing campaign by my constituents to reopen the Belford station, which sits between Berwick-upon-Tweed and Alnwick, to create more opportunities for investment in that 1,000 square
miles of rural constituency. Good rail links bring investment and economic growth, and we must continue to be able to invest in the line.

I remember our nationalised railway systems of old; one of my granny’s Sunday afternoon’s involved seeing whether we could get a train that went somewhere and could get us home in time for tea—it did not always work. The Labour party’s vision for train provision, which does not put the customer at the centre—

**Mr Kevan Jones:** I am sure the hon. Lady remembers British Rail, because we are still travelling on some of the 125 rolling stock first introduced by British Rail.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** It is not so much the rolling stock that I remember as not necessarily getting back for tea because the train just did not go—that used to cause my grandmother and I some disconcertion. The railway timetables were more an idea than a reality a lot of the time. That is a childhood memory, and the Labour party’s vision for train provision, which does not put the customer at the heart of all policy, will not work. The customer pays the fares and must be at the centre of those decisions. So I believe the Secretary of State has taken the right, difficult decision to use his operator of last resort powers to get the London North Eastern Railway—that lovely brand, which I believe is on a last resort powers to get the London North Eastern Railway—that lovely brand, which I believe is on a

2.35 pm

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Thank you for calling me in this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. Like my party’s Front Benchers and others, I really am very happy to see this Government, with no hint of irony, realising the virtue of a rail franchise being taken into public hands, operated in the interests of the many, not the few. Let me be absolutely clear: the failure of Virgin East Coast, and this Secretary of State’s handling of it, shows this out-of-touch Government at their self-serving worst, looking after their rich pals in big business while people across the country are left to pick up the pieces. In January, we were offered the ridiculous suggestion from Virgin that the Government’s bail-out of the east coast franchise was somehow the pragmatic solution. Why is it that this Government can always somehow find the money to bail out their friends in the big corporations but refuse to help increasingly frustrated railway passengers, such as the ones who contact my office every day? What is pragmatic about that?

I have long been a supporter—since before I came to this House—of putting our country’s railways back into public hands. Real pragmatism would involve just that: giving power and control to passengers—giving the public ownership of our railways, because the utter failure of the franchise system is there for all to see. I worry about the precedent that the Secretary of State has set with the east coast line to companies such as Virgin, sending out a message loud and clear, “Under this Government, no matter how badly your business is doing, don’t you worry, we’ll be there to make sure the taxpayer looks after you.”

The public are paying these big companies more and more of their hard-earned money in exchange for a shoddy and shoddy service. Even just last week, I and other regular users of Virgin East Coast received a rather odd email. It was Virgin congratulating itself on the service being “in a really good position thanks to the positive transformation we’ve started”.

Perhaps I missed that. I am sure regular East Coast users, both in this House and outside, will have been happy to see that Virgin was signing off with a good crack at a joke—that is all it could have been.

Our railways are in a significantly worse state than they were in 2010, and it is not just Opposition Members saying it; the public also know that things are now so bad that something has to give. Some 76% of the public and 90% of Virgin East Coast staff agree. What this Government just do not get is that their party’s privatisation of the railways 25 years ago has been such a deep, unmitigated disaster that the public are now willing to try something different. They are, frankly, sick of seeing a Secretary of State who comes to this House time and again to tell me and colleagues that our constituent’s experiences of travelling by train—trains overpriced and late, people packed in like sardines—are not accurate and do not reflect the real picture.

Every week that this Secretary of State remains in his position—I note he is no longer in his place; perhaps he has something better to do—is yet another week in which mistrust of his Department grows deeper and deeper. Grand promises to improve the daily commute for people in my constituency are being made in one breath, only for the Secretary of State to turn his back on passengers in another.

“It is a bit of a cheek for a Member...to lecture and question us about rail investment when the Government have made so many promises that they have failed to deliver.”—*Official Report*, 5 December 2006; Vol. 454, c. 221.

I hope Conservative Members agree, because those are not my words; they are the words of this Secretary of State when he was the Conservative shadow transport spokesman, more than a decade ago. We do not even have to go back 12 years with this flip-flop Transport Secretary. In 2016, he said that nationalisation is “an expensive, reckless idea”, and in 2017 he called it Venezuelan. This January, he said, “We must never forget how badly nationalisation failed key public services.” Now, four months later, he talks of his excitement at bringing back one of Britain’s most “iconic” state-run brands. Well, the chickens really have come home to roost, have they not? If he cares to return to the Chamber, will the Secretary of State tell the House why he suddenly changes his mind on nationalisation and his seemingly long-held principles against it when nationalisation becomes a means of bailing out Richard Branson?

In Yorkshire, what have we had from this Secretary of State? My Labour colleagues and I have come to the House time and again to demand a fairer deal and highlight the concerns of our constituents, only for Transport Ministers to turn their backs callously on northern commuters. We have had the downgrade of Crossrail for the north. Yorkshire has been hit with the biggest fare increase anywhere in the country. We have seen the Secretary of State ducking and diving meetings with me and colleagues when we simply wanted to discuss our constituency concerns. If we continue to say that we will cut the Secretary of State’s pay if he continues with some of these incompetencies, I am worried that he will end up on less than the minimum wage.
Northern passengers have been told that twice as much is spent on them as is spent in the south, although through a rather imaginative calculation, that ignores London. Just this week, we have seen new timetables cause complete meltdown throughout the region, with barely an eyebrow raised in Westminster. And now this: an accidental renationalisation. On behalf of my constituents, who have quite frankly had it with the state of public transport across Yorkshire, I say this: surely the buck has to stop somewhere. Does he realise that he is undermining the entire argument, because he is saying that when there is competition, franchising fails? Surely the east coast line is that there is competition so should be bailed out. Does he realise that he is undermining the entire argument, because he is saying that when there is competition, franchising fails?

2.41 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. As a member of the Transport Committee, I hope to inject a rational perspective into proceedings. As has been mentioned, the Committee is currently scrutini sing this issue. I should add the caveat that our proceedings are still under way and we might receive further evidence later.

The first point I wish to make is that this is not a failing railway in the sense that most passengers would understand it. It operates efficiently; there are high levels of passenger satisfaction; there is growing usage of it; and, yes, there is investment in it. Under Virgin, many of the trains have been refurbished and, although I appreciate that this is not a direct part of the franchise, King’s Cross station has been transformed in recent years, so the passenger experience is being enhanced.

The issue at the heart of this debate is that something went wrong with the revenue projections for the line. That is what we need to scrutinise. It is important to understand the nature of the east coast main line franchise. It has a much larger discretionary element than most other rail franchises, by which I mean that the passengers who use it have many more options for making their journeys. Those options are both on the railways, with other train operating companies running services on large parts of the line—at the southern end of the line, Hull Trains and Grand Central offer alternatives to the Virgin Trains, and further north there is TransPennine Express and ScotRail, meaning that there is a discretionary element to which service passengers use—and, because of the long-distance nature of the network, passengers can choose non-rail alternatives, including flying between Edinburgh and Glasgow or driving between some of the key towns and cities. That makes it much more difficult for anyone in the public or private sector accurately to forecast revenues over a lengthy period. I have had conversations with other train operating companies this week, and they said, “We don’t bid for these long-distance franchises because of that element of uncertainty.”

Chi Onwurah: The hon. Gentleman is saying that the issue with the east coast line is that there is competition and that Virgin could not handle that competition so should be bailed out. Does he realise that he is undermining the entire argument, because he is saying that when there is competition, franchising fails?

Iain Stewart: Absolutely not. I will come to that point and refer to the evidence that the Select Committee heard on Monday from Iryna Terelecky, who has many decades of experience in the rail industry.

The shortfall in projected revenue would have happened irrespective of who owned and ran the railway. The difference is that under a nationalised system, the public purse would have taken an immediate hit from the loss of revenue, whereas under the system we have, the parent company and the bond that it put up has taken the brunt of it.

Helen Goodman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Iain Stewart: No; forgive me, but I have three minutes left and the hon. Lady’s previous intervention was not really up to scratch.

There are of course lessons to be learned about how we base our revenue projections over a long period. There need to be more cautious forecasts of rail revenues over the long term. Indeed, I think that that has already happened in respect of some of the franchises that have subsequently been let. We need to revisit some of the Brown recommendations on the balance of risk that an operator takes against extraneous factors that are not to do with the direct operation of the railway. In the end, though, the franchise system does work; it does deliver enhanced performance. I, too, remember what British Rail was like when I was a child, and it was not a glorious existence.

Let me conclude on what I hope is a more consensual point. I am a sentimental old railway buff and I cheer the reintroduction of the LNER brand. LNER was one of the big four private companies that transformed this country’s rail system in the first half of the previous century. May I make one little plea? LNER had iconic...
deliveries, from the apple green of the Flying Scotsman to what is called the garter blue of the Mallard and the Gresley class, and the teal colour of the carriages. Please can we have that back and rekindle the romance of the railways of those years? I am absolutely certain that that would help to keep numbers high and ensure that this important railway line has a bright future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

2.49 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and other expert members of the Transport Committee who have spoken in this debate. I am only sorry that the Secretary of State has left the Chamber—left the dock, effectively—because I was rather hoping that we might discuss what we will do with the £2,400. I was going to suggest that we should perhaps buy him a bus pass, because I am very keen on moving from rail to bus. I was actually going to say something nice about him as well—only one nice thing, I hasten to add—because I was going to thank him for raising the vexed issue of the timetable changes. Many Members will have heard their constituents’ concerns about the way in which the process has been handled. Of course, this is a major set of changes—we understand that—and such change is not easy to implement.

I was on the “Mann in the Morning” programme on wonderful Radio Cambridgeshire this morning, listening to people who have had bad experiences on the rail line from Cambridge. Those experiences were immediately blamed by the Secretary of State on Network Rail. We are now in the process of no longer transferring risk within the system, but transferring blame. It is not all about Network Rail; the train operating companies must bear some responsibility. If we get a chance to sort out who is responsible for delays and that hundreds of millions of pounds are lost on this process. Frankly, do we really need all of that? What are the train operating companies actually delivering, apart from the delightful colour changes that have been suggested? If we ask passengers what they want, they say an integrated system. They are talking not about transferring risk or arguing about blame, but about getting the system to work. Let me conclude with a few words about the so-called future partnership model.

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is, as ever, making a valuable contribution. One of the most interesting things that has come out of this debate, thanks to him and to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), is the business of how we integrate transport policy. We have heard that a competitive element is associated with road and rail and that all kinds of other factors affect projections and estimates. Perhaps the Minister will take that away from the debate. There has always been a call for an integrated transport strategy, and every Government have wrestled with it. Perhaps this event will stimulate and catalyse just that sort of approach.

Daniel Zeichner: Once again, the right hon. Gentleman, an experienced former Minister, speaks very wisely. In the end, this is a slightly false debate. Of course there will always be a role for the private sector in transport; the question is whether we have to build in competitive mechanisms in this kind of way. We could probably repeat the same discussion with regard to buses and other parts of the transport system. We need investment—of course we do. It is a straw-person argument to point to British Rail 30 years ago. Of course we knew that there was underinvestment in British Rail 30 years ago. The question is what the system will look like in the 21st century and how we will unlock the resources that we need.

Let me turn now to the partnership model, which, I am afraid to say, the Secretary of State has hidden behind. The Transport Committee heard pretty clear evidence on Monday evening from experts in the field that that approach does not look like the best one to try out. Apparently, some 20 passenger, freight and open access operators use the line. Once again, this is a recipe for argument and dispute about who gets priority and
how the whole thing will work. It seems to me that this was more an excuse for the Secretary of State to hide behind to spare his blushes, because he could not bear to admit the fact that the line was coming back into public ownership.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to disagree with Lord Adonis, who spoke very engagingly to the Transport Committee on Monday in defence of the franchising system. At the end of his evidence, he gave a warning to me and people in Cambridge who use the line into King’s Cross, explaining how difficult it could become because of the various competing priorities within this partnership. I had to tell him that that was already happening. A year or so ago, I had the pleasure of having a cab ride to King’s Cross—one of the best parts of being a Member of Parliament is that I get to ride in the front of the train. It was an extraordinary experience and very different from the mixed experiences as a passenger. I well remember the train halting from Cambridge as it joined the east coast main line, and the drivers pointed out that there are regular disagreements and disputes about priority at that point. These are very real issues.

Let me return to the people who really matter. I am not convinced that the passengers who were fuming on the station platform in Cambridge this morning are that bothered about the intricacies of franchising approaches and who is to blame. They want a railway that works and a railway that is affordable, and that should be the aim of everyone in this House.

2.57 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The problem this afternoon is that we are just going to fall into the ideological arguments about nationalisation and privatisation, rather than getting down to some of the key causes of why we are in this position today. Quite frankly, the nationalisation argument has been blown out of the water with the single market argument, and quite often nationalisation itself is not the cause of some of the problems. A year or so ago, I had the pleasure of having a cab ride to King’s Cross—one of the best parts of being a Member of Parliament is that I get to ride in the front of the train. It was an extraordinary experience and very different from the mixed experiences as a passenger. I well remember the train halting from Cambridge as it joined the east coast main line, and the drivers pointed out that there are regular disagreements and disputes about priority at that point. These are very real issues.

Let me return to the people who really matter. I am not convinced that the passengers who were fuming on the station platform in Cambridge this morning are that bothered about the intricacies of franchising approaches and who is to blame. They want a railway that works and a railway that is affordable, and that should be the aim of everyone in this House.

I am pleased to be following the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) because he raised the issue of timetabling, which has affected all of us. I have certainly seen the comments from my constituents who use the trains and heard about the struggles that they have had. What is at the heart of the timetabling issue? Well, train companies normally plan their timetable six to nine months ahead, but the delays of Network Rail meant that they had two to four months. It is therefore not exactly surprising that they ended up in a situation in which the timetabling is not exactly working as smoothly and efficiently as we would hope.

Network Rail had a large part to play in where we are today. We have made comparisons with the west coast main line, and talked about Virgin keeping the contract and Stagecoach making the profits and so on, but Network Rail simply has not delivered on the basis that was laid down in the bids that were put forward. Companies made promises about power upgrades in their bids, but they have not occurred. They also promised to eliminate bottlenecks, and that has not occurred.

Several hon. Members rose—

Alec Shelbrooke: Just give me two seconds. When we look at the money that was earned, some £1 billion was returned in three years compared with £1 billion in five years under nationalisation.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the problems caused by Network Rail. Will he remind the House who was in charge of Network Rail for the Government?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has made that point. Indeed, that is the problem with a nationalised company. Many people have said, “Oh, it’s the Secretary of State’s responsibility in a nationalised company,” but that is not how it works—it is not how it has ever worked. On the one hand, people are saying that the Secretary of State should take complete control of the railways, and on the other that he should get out. People who are running a nationalised operation do not share the sense of urgency of those in the private sector. There are litigations of delayed or missing projects under Network Rail.

Ian Mearns: The hon. Gentleman should just remember that Railtrack was privatised. It failed, and the Government had to take it back in-house to save the railway network.

Alec Shelbrooke: Railtrack failed due to the vandalism of John Prescott when he was Transport Secretary. He took advantage of the opportunity when British Rail’s failure to keep its system upgraded and safe culminated just three years into privatisation under Railtrack. The track that broke, which caused Railtrack to fail and to be transformed into Network Rail, did not degrade in the three years of privatisation. It broke as a result of a catalogue of rail mismanagement that led up to that point. It is one of the biggest disgraces—

Mike Amesbury (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman should just remember that Railtrack was privatised. It failed, and the Government had to take it back in-house to save the railway network.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am sorry, but I have taken two interventions and I will not have any more.

It was a disgrace to use that failure as an opportunity to act according to political ideology. I am very clear on that point. One of the fundamental problems with the railway is that we have got to a point where we are looking back through rose-tinted glasses. I recommend to everyone—perhaps some people have seen it—a programme on Channel Five at the moment called “InterCity 125: The Train That Saved Britain’s Railway”. It is fantastic. I really enjoyed the first episode. What was the first part of that episode? The state of the railways in this country when they were under British Rail, and the lack of investment by Governments of all colours during that time.

We talk about the east coast main line. We are going back to a period when, given the resources that were available at the time, with the overhead powering, the gantries were as far apart as they could possibly be, so of course high winds displaced the wires. These were all failures of trying to deal with a nationalised company that has to compete for its money with the health service, benefits and pensions, education and all the other things the Government have to spend money on. They were also due to the fact that whatever those failures were, staff would still come to work the next day.
day and get paid, because they did not have the responsibilities that they would have had in the private sector.

I am being very critical of Network Rail, and one reason why is that I have had it up to here—up to the top of my head, for the benefit of _Hansard_—with Network Rail. For several years, this Government—under the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne—delivered a grant to Network Rail to put in place a bridge at Dartford station in my constituency under the Access for All scheme. I have constantly been in meetings about that with Network Rail, and I have heard excuse after excuse for why it is not happening. Fundamentally, whatever the reasons, it is getting to a stage where it could not manage its way out of a paper bag. I have had enough—my constituents have had enough—of Network Rail staff’s failure to take responsibility and attempts to pass the buck. There is only one reason why we have problems with electrification: the poor management and poor running of Network Rail. I have kept quiet about my criticisms of Network Rail to this point, but not today, because another failure has led to the contents of a rail franchise bid not being delivered.

Like many Members, I have used the east coast main line regularly, and none of us can deny that the carriages have been upgraded. They were refurbished. The experience in those carriages is more pleasant than it was in the recent past, and that shows that there has been investment.

Every single time we talk about an upgrade, Network Rail puts it back. Now we are looking at December 2018 before the latest set of figures come through. It beggars belief that when we see the failure of such a major company at the heart of our railways, which is charged with delivering the infrastructure for the rail operating companies to work on, nothing ever happens.

The motion states that the Secretary of State’s pay should be cut. In my view, we might instead start thinking about censuring the people who are putting together project plans but not delivering them.

3.4 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I always travel by train when I can, and with respect to colleagues from the north-east of England, I am going to lay claim in this debate to be Virgin Trains East Coast’s best customer. I have made 32 return journeys from Edinburgh to London in the past 12 months. That is the equivalent of circumnavigating the globe in a Virgin train and it gives me quite an insight into the service.

I pay tribute to the staff of that service who have served me over these years—the people who drive the trains, who check the tickets, who serve the drinks, who provide the information—and also the many hundreds of staff who work in the depots, cleaning and engineering these magnificent machines. I think it is a shame, the way in which they have been treated, and that they are constantly being told that their boss and their uniform is changing, rather than being valued for the service that they provide.

We have heard a lot about ideology in this debate. The Government seem convinced that their opponents are motivated only by ideological dogma. Anyone reviewing the text of this debate surely can only conclude that the reverse is the truth—that in fact, it is the Government who are so blinkered by ideological dogma in favour of privatisation that they refuse even to consider the possibility of a contemporary public sector alternative. That seems to me very regrettable, because there are many positive reasons why the public sector alternative should be considered. I just want to name two.

The first reason is that it would allow integration of the management of the service and remove the ridiculous separation between the train and the track that is responsible for many of the problems that we are facing in the operation. What better way to ensure that the track serves the demands of the train service than to place it under the management of the same people who manage the train service? The idea of separating a vehicle from what it is travelling on might make sense with a road network, where there are lots of different avenues to travel, but the train only has one track on which to get from A to B, and the management of those things ought to be integrated. That could happen, in a public sector organisation.

**Alan Brown:** Clearly, I agree with the points that my hon. Friend is making. Does this not further reinforce the argument that, in Scotland, Network Rail should be devolved to Scotland, to allow the Scottish Government to have that integration he is talking about?

**Tommy Sheppard:** Indeed, and I will come to that later.

The second big positive of having a public sector operator is that it will allow for much greater investment—we would not have to have investment that was contingent on franchise payments and on levels of use; we could just take a serious decision, as a grown-up country, and say, “We need to rapidly and significantly invest more in our rail network if we are to bring it up to scratch and achieve the type of global service that our competitors can achieve.”

I represent Edinburgh East, including the world-famous Waverley station. I admit there have been some improvements over the past few years—we have seen the market share of the rail journey from Edinburgh to London rise to a peak of 37%—but that still leaves nearly two thirds of the people who make the journey from Edinburgh to London taking the plane. Surely that is a ridiculous situation, and we must take urgent action.

The industry will tell us that, when we get the journey time down to four hours, that is a tipping point and that will take market share to around 40% but, to get the train as the majority means of transport between Scotland and London, we will have to reduce the journey time to three hours, and that can only happen with massive investment in a high-speed network and it can only happen with a new fleet of trains. So I want the Minister to confirm that these changes that are taking place will not in any way affect the delivery in December of the roll-out of the new Azuma fleet on the east coast line and that he will engage seriously and purposefully with the Scottish Government in discussing the investment required for HST in the future.

The Scottish Government, because of devolution, have some responsibility for the rail network in Scotland, yet as with so many other things it is working in a straitjacket that is set by this place. We have repeatedly said, over a long period, that the franchise for rail services in Scotland should be run by a public sector
operator. We tried, in a debate on the last Scotland Bill, to get the whole regime transferred to Holyrood, but could not find support from any other parties in this Chamber. There is now a golden opportunity, however, for the Department for Transport to take seriously the Scottish Government’s request. Now we have the ability to put a public sector operator into the tender process, there is an opportunity in Scotland—if they will not do it here—to use this to experiment to see how a contemporary public sector operation takes place. The Thatcher Government began the attacks on British Rail when, as a service, it was still reeling from the attacks of Beeching and the massive line closures. We do not know what a public sector operator would be like now if privatisation had not happened. Maybe—just maybe—we might have had trains as good as people have in France and Germany.

This is a motion of censure, and I find it surprising that the Secretary of State has absented himself from the debate. This is not a normal motion on a matter of policy; it is a motion that questions the capability and commitment of an individual. At the very least, he ought to have the decency and respect to be in attendance in this Chamber to hear the case against him.

3.10 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this very important debate. We have had a to-ing and fro-ing about the merits of nationalisation, the merits of privatisation and all the rest of it, but what has struck me about the debate is the hypocrisy, I think, that I have heard from many Opposition Members. It is a strong word, used by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in his opening remarks—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let me just say that “hypocrisy” is not a word that we would use against fellow Members, as we are all honourable Members. I am sure you would like to withdraw it.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I will withdraw it, although if you were to look at the record, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would see that the word had been used earlier in the debate, so I was just repeating it, but we will leave it there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If I might help, I was not here earlier, and I can only make a judgment on what happens when I am in the Chair. I am sure you would respect that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Thank you very much, Sir, for your very mild and modest rebuke.

I find it extraordinary to hear speaker after speaker look to the network in France, in Germany and in other countries and say that things are operating well there, when clearly, if one understands anything about the UK competition policy or the single market, the whole drift of EU regulation in the rail network has been away from the nationalisation that has been lauded by Opposition Members.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that President Macron, a centre-left politician, has recognised that the French railway system is completely unsustainable, and that has led all the workers out on strike.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that goes to the slight craziness of a lot of our debate. It is clear to me that the partnership with the private sector has put far more investment—billions and billions of pounds of investment—into the network than would have been the case if it had remained under public ownership. We all know the budgetary pressures. We all know the budgetary situation in 2010, when we had a deficit of £160 billion. It does not take a particularly sophisticated mathematician to work out that, if we had had the rail network in public ownership, as well as public ownership of vast swathes of industry, the budgetary position would have been a lot worse than even in 2010.

Mike Amesbury: Surely the way forward in this debate is what works. In the past 14 days alone, Northern Rail has cancelled 1,159 trains—full cancellations. It is complete chaos in my constituency. That demonstrates that the current franchise system is not working. We need public ownership and public control.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Everyone in this Chamber realises that the franchise system is not perfect, and I freely admit that. However, compared with what was operating before under the nationalised system, we have seen massive improvement in terms of investment and a doubling of passenger journeys since 1995. Under the old system, one of the principal jobs of the Government was, in effect, to manage this huge industry. Half the Secretary of State’s time was spent talking to the unions about the wage bill. There were civil servants running the network who were not rail professionals. The shadow Secretary of State said that we need to get more professionals running the system. His proposed solution to that was to nationalise the entire network. That is essentially giving control to the man or woman in Whitehall, who, despite their qualifications and skills, are simply not rail professionals; everyone can see that. It is extraordinary to say that we need more rail professionals to handle the network and operate the system, and then to say that the Government should nationalise the whole thing. There is an inherent contradiction in that.

When I entered this House, I was very lucky to serve on the Transport Committee for three years. We covered a great deal of ground in that time. We went to the EU—to Brussels—a number of times. It is really disappointing, frankly, to see that the debate has regressed since I served on that Committee, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman). All parties in this House were broadly in agreement with the franchise system. The debate was about how we were to manage that system and how the franchises should operate. People have mentioned the Brown recommendations, the majority of which, as I remember, were supported by the Committee. We were moving forward. There was political consensus in this House and across the country.

Now, we are faced with a radical Marxist, or whatever you want to call it, party—[ Interruption. ] I am sure you would not call it that, Mr Deputy Speaker. We can call it lots of things. We are confronted with a party that is
openly suggesting that nationalisation is the answer. 

[Interruption.] The shadow Secretary of State says, “The public are agreeing with us.” The polls on aviation showed that only 18% of the public believed in privatisation at the time, but we privatised it anyway and it was incredibly effective. The reality of British Rail and a nationalised network is not the fantasy described by Opposition Members.

I want to make some specific remarks about the east coast rail franchise. It is absolutely the case that this has been a very difficult franchise. It has had recurring difficulties in terms of revenue projections, as my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) said. Those projections would have been difficult under any administrator—any form of ownership. There are serious questions to be asked about the nature of the shareholders’ guarantees and the nature of the public sector liability. However, to suggest that the answer is to nationalise the entire network, which I believe was in Labour’s manifesto, is really, I am afraid, a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Unfortunately I am going to have to drop the limit to four minutes to get all Members in.

3.18 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the firmest ideological principles held by Conservative Members, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Spelthorne ( Kwasi Kwarteng), is their insistence on the superiority of the private over the public with regard to the ownership of capital. The continued failure of the rail franchising framework to harness the power of the private sector ought to give them pause for thought on this matter. Much has been said about the £1 billion surplus that was poured back into the Treasury when the east coast main line was run in the public interest prior to Virgin-Stagecoach, but less has been said about how East Coast achieved what private companies could not.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that improved transport links are vital to the success of the so-called northern powerhouse? As such, does he agree that this east coast fiasco means that we can now show that only a publicly owned company model can deliver that agenda?

Alex Sobel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I often stand at King’s Cross waiting for my train home and see the words “Train cancelled” above me. I look wistfully at platform nine and three quarters, hoping that I may be able to go through the wall and travel home on the Hogwarts Express. Although the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, was a very inept Minister, he at least managed to run the Hogwarts Express successfully—unlike the Secretary of State. I completely agree with my hon. Friend’s point.

I would like to turn to the remarkable East Coast Rewards loyalty scheme that was made available to customers from 2011 until it was scrapped by Virgin Trains East Coast. I extend my thanks to the individuals behind the “Save East Coast Rewards” campaign, who kindly provided my office with a collection of documents obtained through freedom of information requests, including financial reports and business plans produced while East Coast was under public control. The documents disclose the business thinking behind the creation of East Coast’s generous loyalty scheme. They show a sharp focus on understanding and exploiting the unique market characteristics of the east coast main line, to compete with fierce competition from road and air.

The scheme had the following benefits. Frequent business travellers who spent £1,800 over three months would receive six first-class return tickets, lounge access for them and a guest, 20% off advance fares from the East Coast website and a quarter of a bottle of wine, which I am sure Conservative Members would enjoy. That was a bold and competitive offer, and it brought business back from air travel and road on to the railways.

For less frequent business and leisure travellers, a spend of just £255 through the East Coast website entitled them to a free standard-class ticket anywhere on the network, so we could enjoy Yorkshire, the north-east or Scotland completely free.

After Virgin took over the franchise, it decided to roll out the Nectar point scheme. Subsequently, an £1,800 spend over three months would award business travellers £18-worth of Nectar points, instead of six first-class tickets. A £255 spend would get someone £2.50-worth of Nectar points, instead of one standard ticket under the public East Coast. It appears that Virgin Trains simply pushed the Nectar reward scheme on to East Coast, without paying any attention to what was already on offer, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the loyalty market, what East Coast had to offer and competition from air travel.

Financial reports from East Coast show that, in 2013-14, East Coast Rewards had more than 380,000 members, who accounted for 50% of expenditure. In subsequent reports, the reward scheme is shown to be ever growing, with more than 600,000 members, before being folded when Virgin-Stagecoach came in. The reward scheme was increasingly central to the surplus that East Coast provided back to the Treasury.

The remarkable thing is that a not-for-dividend subsidiary rail operator appears to have understood far better than Virgin-Stagecoach how to run a viable rewards scheme that succeeded in exploiting the market characteristics of the east coast main line—and its status as an artery route and its discretionary travel base of leisure travellers, with competition from road and business air travel—to successfully run a rail franchise. Virgin’s inability or unwillingness to recognise the viability and popularity of the reward scheme it inherited from East Coast seems at odds with the belief that private interests are best placed to organise business profitably.

East Coast was an example of a rail operator that was not responsible to shareholders or profits and was not contorted into complementing the brand identity of Virgin. We had a well-run and well-liked organisation that understood its market position and its strengths and weaknesses and improved the service while pouring money back into the public purse. We need to return to that situation, not as a last resort but as a default position, using the best ownership model for rail travellers, whether as directly operated rail or a co-operative, which would have strong employee and consumer interest. We on the east coast deserve the best railway, which we have not had under Virgin-Stagecoach but did have under the public East Coast.
3.23 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If Members on both sides of the House can agree on only one thing in this debate, it has to be the importance of the railways to our national transport infrastructure, important though they are for business and social purposes and of course for their distinct and clear environmental benefits, as we try to get people on the trains and off the roads. I pray in aid HS2 and Crossrail, which underscore the importance that the Government place on investment in our rail network.

This has in some respects been a slightly confusing debate, but not, I suggest, on the Government Benches. To paraphrase the arguments that have been made on the Government Benches, of course franchising is not prayed in aid as a perfect, foolproof exercise, but it delivers better results than we had under nationalisation, and the Government have behaved in a pragmatic way in facing the problems of the east coast franchise. The Labour party seems to be trying to have its cake and eat it in saying that the Government are solely ideologically driven, have blinkers on and see the private sector as the sole answer, and yet chastising them for finding a temporary, pragmatic, workable solution not designed on the testbed of any form of political ideology but merely trying to provide a seamless service for people who rely on that rail route for either social or commercial purposes. I see no evidence there of any Conservative ideology, but more likely pragmatism.

There was certainly confusion from the shadow Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) who regionalised the philosophical basis of the Labour family, be it Welsh or English. As we have heard, Carwyn Jones, the First Minister in the Labour Government in Cardiff, has taken an entirely different approach to the railways from that which the hon. Member for Middlesbrough seemed to suggest.

Clearly this is a bit of a death knell for that debate. We all remember the phase in British politics when we thought the railway sector was different from any other. We all remember the phase in British politics when the hon. Member for Middlesbrough seemed to suggest. There was certainly confusion from the shadow Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) who regionalised the philosophical basis of the Labour family, be it Welsh or English. As we have heard, Carwyn Jones, the First Minister in the Labour Government in Cardiff, has taken an entirely different approach to the railways from that which the hon. Member for Middlesbrough seemed to suggest.

I remind the House that, when in public ownership, the east coast main line returned over £1 billion to the Treasury to be used either to upgrade the rail service or for vital public services. In 2015, we were told that re-privatising the east coast main line represented “best value” for commuters and taxpayers, and I do not believe the Secretary of State has adequately explained how that can be reconciled with the decision to bail out Virgin-Stagecoach to the tune of £2 billion.

Why do the Government not hold such companies to their contractual commitments? The noble Lord Adonis, with whom I do not always see eye to eye, gave some interesting evidence to the Transport Committee. He questioned why it is acceptable for corporate entities to walk away from their commitment to us—the taxpayers—to my constituents and to the Government. We really should take a harder line with the private train operating companies. We should block companies that have corporate structures and base themselves in tax havens from bidding for public contracts. A decision to overbid on such a contract is simply corporate irresponsibility, and the taxpayer is being fleeced time and again.

3.27 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate. I would like to recognise the expertise of many members of the Transport Committee, on which I have the honour of serving.

Listening to the debate, I cannot help feeling a sense of déjà vu. The shortcomings of privatisation and the franchising process are demonstrated by the private operators running the east coast main line. I was slightly amused when the former Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), who is very affable, talked about the golden age of privatisation and how wonderful the new rolling stock was. I just checked the age of some of the rolling stock on the east coast main line. The InterCity 125 diesel-powered high-speed trains were introduced in 1976; the 225s, which were the mainstay, were introduced in 1989; and the Pacer trains on the Northern Rail franchise were introduced in 1984, so let us have a sense of realism.

This is the third occasion in a decade that the Government have had to accept back the keys to a failed east coast franchise. A failure once we can excuse and twice is unfortunate, but the third time is a cause for censure and for reflection. It demonstrates that the Government’s desire to privatise the east coast main line is nothing more than adherence to blind political ideology.

It is ironic that the Transport Secretary, as a leading Brexiteer and staunch privateer, now allows our railways to be run by any state-owned company except one owned by the British state. The right hon. Gentleman might like to dust off an old phrase to use in this context: “Take back control”. He would be in good company, as numerous surveys show that 70% of the public support calls for the railways to be publicly owned—run in the public interest, not as a cash cow for private operators.

I am very interested in why this franchise has been brought in-house yet again, and the Transport Committee is keen to get under the skin of whether there is a particular issue with this franchise that causes it to be more problematic than others. We were very fortunate to have two respected industry professionals come and speak to the Committee, Iryna Terlecky and Nicola Wood, who both act independently to verify whether a franchise should be passed. Quite simply, their point about why this franchise failed is that the bidders overbid. Why do the Government not hold such companies to their contractual commitments? The noble Lord Adonis, with whom I do not always see eye to eye, gave some interesting evidence to the Transport Committee. He questioned why it is acceptable for corporate entities to walk away from their commitment to us—the taxpayers—to my constituents and to the Government. We really should take a harder line with the private train operating companies. We should block companies that have corporate structures and base themselves in tax havens from bidding for public contracts. A decision to overbid on such a contract is simply corporate irresponsibility, and the taxpayer is being fleeced time and again.

3.31 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my Transport Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who always speaks well on this subject.

I am very interested in why this franchise has been brought in-house yet again, and the Transport Committee is keen to get under the skin of whether there is a particular issue with this franchise that causes it to be more problematic than others. We were very fortunate to have two respected industry professionals come and speak to the Committee, Iryna Terlecky and Nicola Wood, who both act independently to verify whether a franchise should be passed. Quite simply, their point about why this franchise failed is that the bidders overbid. Why did they overbid? Because they took the view that the Government place on investment in our rail network, and if a private company has the jewel in the crown, that sets it up well for the remainder of its franchises.
The House may welcome my taking a step back. The Government can of course be looked at—they should, rightly, be looked at—for allowing this to happen on their watch, but it would be slightly negligent of a Government not to try to take the maximum amount of money they could for the taxpayer. That money ultimately allows the Government to continue with the financing of the entire rail network, and in that regard I think that such strong criticism is based on ideology in relation to who should run the railways. In my view, although I will always regard the private sector as the better operator, where the private sector cannot operate, the state will of course step back in, as has indeed been the case.

Network Rail has taken a bit of battering in this debate. It was quite clear to us from the evidence—indeed, VTEC has acknowledged this—that, in terms of the works Network Rail has delivered, it is not responsible for the issues on this line. It may be that Network Rail became a problem, but it delivered during control period 5. We should acknowledge that, rather than use it as a scapegoat, as it often is. [Interruption.] Quite frankly, I am not particularly bothered what Richard Branson has to say. That actually tends to be the case, but I think he looks more to Brexit and other reasons to explain why this has failed, when we have in fact seen more of an inflow of people staying in this country, rather than leaving.

This point has already been raised, but I want to mention the noble Lord Adonis. I was particularly impressed by the evidence he gave to the Select Committee, and he was very balanced. He made the point that, in his view, all the franchise systems work well, but this line is an exception and has been one previously, and there is no reason to change a model that he still believes works well. He is worth listening to, but I take issue with his claim that, on his watch, a bidder such as Virgin-Stagecoach would not have been allowed to bid again and would have lost its other franchises. Of course, when National Express suffered the same fate, the legal advice was that the cross-default mechanism did not allow it to be stripped of the other two franchises, and it was not. Richard Branson is not Lord Adonis to say that a future Labour Government would have stopped such bids coming through, but he knows full well that between 2009 and 2010 there was no option to do so, and we will never know whether that would have been the case.

In the 30 seconds I have left, I want to talk up our rail network. In my view it works well. Within the EU, we have the largest investment in the railways; the utilisation of our railways is 60% greater than the EU average; and the European Commission has found that there are £11 billion of efficiency savings for the other 27 members to deliver, but zero for the UK. We have the second safest railway and the second highest passenger satisfaction ratings. That is hardly surprising, given that we have doubled the number of passengers since privatisation. I want to talk up rail because it still has more to offer us in private hands.

3.35 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate about franchising and the operation of our railways.

The Government have undertaken the biggest programme of railway modernisation since the birth of the industrial revolution. Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS2 and the northern hub are among the most ambitious initiatives to fuel the engine of the north and fulfil our aim to create a fully integrated transport network right across the north of England. Greater Manchester is a major beneficiary of the historic transport development, and I hope that the powers that are being given to Transport for Greater Manchester will allow those of us in the north to emulate the successful independence of Transport for London.

As this is a censure debate, I want to put on the record my view that a large part of the success of our rail in the north has been down to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I know from working with him over the past few years that he is as committed as I am to ensuring that we improve our rail services and revitalise the whole northern economy.

I emphasise from the outset the importance of the train lines that serve my constituents. Stockport is an important regional hub, with 3.8 million journeys a year made from Stockport station. Rail travel plays a critical role in connecting district centres such as Heald Green, Gatley, Cheadle Hulme, Hazel Grove and Bramhall in my constituency with Manchester and towns across the borough.

However, the new revised timetable from the rail operator, Northern, offers a diminished service for my constituents in Heald Green, Gatley, Davenport and Woodsmoor—stations that account for 2.3 million journeys a year. Of most concern for passengers using Woodsmoor and Davenport stations will be the uneven service pattern, particularly the gap in the morning peak between 7.38 and 8.23. Having no service for almost an hour at peak time is clearly unacceptable. The situation is made worse by cancellations and only this morning, a Gatley commuter told me that both the 7.05 and the 7.47 were cancelled, describing it as simply a disaster for the residents of Gatley. My constituents will be appalled by the actions of unions, which promise strikes and working to rule to exacerbate the problems further.

It is not just passengers travelling to work who are affected by the timetable changes, but students going to school, who have been left high and dry. Parents and headteachers have expressed their concern to me that children as young as 11 may have to make a choice between travelling on a later train and therefore arriving at school late, and catching a train earlier in the morning and facing the prospect of waiting on a busy main road at the school gates until they open.

Northern was awarded the franchise under its parent company, Arriva Rail North, which inherited the rolling stock units from the old Northern Rail in 2016. The franchise agreement stipulated that the outdated Pacers trains, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned, would be phased out by 2019 and that improvements would be made, with more than 2,000 extra services a week along the network. However, we have not reached that situation yet. It is clear that Network Rail failed to complete the Bolton works on time and was late in setting timetable information for Northern.

We need a more integrated rail system across our northern cities and for local connectivity to run side by side with it. There has been a lack of accountability. The Mayor of Greater Manchester mentioned accountability...
as being important a year ago. I urge him not to make political capital out of this issue, but to work with the Government, the Secretary of State and Transport for the North, to attend meetings and to ensure that we in the north are properly represented by him.

3.39 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Let us get things straight. Who runs the Department for Transport? Who makes the decision about who runs our railways? Is it the private operators? Is the Secretary of State completely in control of them? Is it the official? Has the Secretary of State completely abdicated his responsibilities and placed them in the hands of civil servants? Perhaps it is the Secretary of State. Of course the buck stops with the Secretary of State. He has the final say. It is his stroke of the pen that decides what happens. The fact is that the Secretary of State has more centralised control than we have witnessed for many, many years. He interferes with work programmes according to his political preferences and he certainly has the final say on all that happens in his Department.

It was, therefore, the Secretary of State who set out the franchising process for the east coast main line. It was the Secretary of State who had responsibility for the content of the franchise. It was the Secretary of State who had the ultimate responsibility to review the east coast main line bids. It was the Secretary of State who would have carried out the due diligence on the bids. It was the Secretary of State who would have determined whether a bid could be delivered. It was the Secretary of State who would have awarded the franchise. It was, of course, the Secretary of State who had the responsibility for managing the franchise ever since.

There is no point passing the buck to some rail operator. There is no point blaming officials. The Secretary of State is 100% responsible for every failed franchise. The Secretary of State therefore bears responsibility for the £2 billion black hole in his accounts created through the termination of the contract with Stagecoach-Virgin. It is now this Secretary of State who is responsible for nationalising the east coast main line. The hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) mentioned Access for All funding; it is the Secretary of State who has cut £50 million out of the Access for All funding.

Labour is delighted that our desire to nationalise the railway is making so much sense to the Secretary of State. Before we come back into power, he has taken our policy to put rail back under public control, such was its success when Labour did that in 2009 on the east coast, putting £1 billion back into the hands of the Treasury. Unfortunately, the east coast main line will still not be under public ownership: private companies Ernst and Young, Arup and SNC-Lavalin will be taking over its operation.

I have to say to the Secretary of State that passengers up and down the east coast are saying no more privatisation, and no more privatisation or privatisation dressed up as some obscure partnership. No. They are saying: keep it in public hands. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, 70% of the public are demanding that rail be put under public ownership. Labour, to start the ball rolling, has already said that it would demand the Secretary of State for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) highlighted how it was not just his but his constituents’ desire to see rail taken back in the interests of the public.

**Alec Shelbrooke**: Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Rachael Maskell**: I will make some progress now and see how the time goes.

I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions in holding the Secretary of State to account: my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), for North Durham (Mr Jones), for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) and for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) used her business experience and expertise to analyse the reality of the Secretary of State’s failed franchising model and found him wanting. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) provided a reality check to the Government’s approach, saying that it was more likely to be found on platform nine and three quarters. He was absolutely spot on when he highlighted the loss of the east coast reward scheme.

**Alec Shelbrooke**: Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Rachael Maskell**: As I say, I am going to see how time progresses.

I question why the Secretary of State has waited so long. Having registered the LNER name back in March this year, it is clear that nearly two months have passed with him withholding information from the public about the level of failure and his intention to nationalise the line. Perhaps he could not say, “Nationalisation”.

I do not want Stagecoach or Virgin to feel that they are off the hook either. While fully exploiting the Tory privatisation of the Railways Act 1993, let us be clear that the track record of companies such as Virgin is to drive profit out of the public purse—out of the pockets of taxpayers. Virgin has been particularly astute in the way that it has used litigation to sue the state over contract failure. It is the financial model of Virgin to do so, no matter the line of business, and look at how it has used that to win the lucrative contract on the west coast.

Can the Secretary of State guarantee that there are no mechanisms that Virgin or Stagecoach can use to take out litigation against him or his Department in the light of this abject failure, and can he further guarantee that he will disqualify them from applying for any future transport contracts? Further, can the Secretary of State report to the House how much this abject failure on the east coast main line has cost the taxpayer? Just three years after the east coast line was ripped out and no one had the final say, the Secretary of State’s Department, and therefore the Secretary of State, is now responsible for managing the franchise ever since. It was the Secretary of State who set out the franchising process for the east coast main line. It was the Secretary of State who had responsibility for the content of the franchise. It was the Secretary of State who had the ultimate responsibility to review the east coast main line bids. It was the Secretary of State who would have carried out the due diligence on the bids. It was the Secretary of State who would have determined whether a bid could be delivered. It was the Secretary of State who would have awarded the franchise. It was, of course, the Secretary of State who had the responsibility for managing the franchise ever since.

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of State, failed in the process of drawing up the franchise—failed to discuss the infrastructure upgrade, scheduling and deliverability with Network Rail when its budgets were evidently under strain. So we had one part of his Department cutting back while the other part of the Department was signing agreements to the contrary, agreeing things that would never be delivered. How did the Government let this happen? I have heard that from both Network Rail and the rail operator, so I know it to be true.

We know that there are around another four franchises that are on the brink of collapse. Will the Secretary of State therefore come to this House and make a statement on each of these contracts and bring these immediately back under public control? He has a responsibility to militate against the future failure of our vital public services, so will he take action now to avoid failure and to ensure that our rail is safely and smoothly transferred into his operator of last resort?

**Alec Shelbrooke:** I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Will she now clarify from the Dispatch Box that in order to nationalise the railways, it is Labour’s specific policy not to be a member of the single market?

**Rachael Maskell:** I can make it absolutely clear to the hon. Gentleman that the French railway system and the German railway system have trains in national ownership, not only in their country, but in our country, too.

Right across the country, it is crystal clear that this Government’s transport policies daily fail the public. They charge more and more for the public to use the trains while signing dodgy deals to enable private companies and even foreign Governments to suck money out of our railways; and they waste money on livery and uniforms, as we have heard in today’s debate. I must put on record that it is the staff who are at the heart of the constant change, and we thank them for their endurance through this process.

Labour would put that money back into our trains, back into upgrades, back into building our public services and therefore back into our economy. Today’s debate has clearly demonstrated that the Secretary of State has completely failed this nation and has completely failed our railways. It is time for a new Secretary of State, and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) is ready to take our rail back and get our nation back on track. Labour will rescue and generate our rail service once again.

3.49 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** As we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members, the railways always stimulate passionate debate, even if some of the arguments made by Labour Members do not seem to have moved on much since the 1970s.

Leaving aside Labour’s unwarranted, ad hominem, vindictive attacks on the Secretary of State, which only serve to underline how thin its substantive arguments are, it would have us believe that our future lies in returning to the bad old days of British Rail. However, scores of Conservative Members have used this debate to restate the merits of what has been achieved since privatisation, and they are entirely right to recall its considerable successes.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) made clear, privatisation has transformed the railway. Passenger numbers have doubled, with 1.72 billion journeys in 2016-17. Passenger satisfaction has increased—ours has the second-highest satisfaction levels of any railway in Europe—and we have unprecedented levels of safety, meaning that the British railway is one of the safest in Europe. The public and private sector, working together, have responded to demand by delivering more services to more stations across a busier network. Some 71 more stations are open today than in 1994-95, and more than 7.3 million passengers services were planned on the Great Britain rail network in 2016-17, which represents an increase of 29% from 1997-98.

**Paula Sherriff:** The Minister seems to be referring to some utopian paradise with his talk of all the great things about the current rail system. Has he looked at Twitter this week and seen the complaints of many thousands of people, including many of my constituents, who are experiencing a living hell just commuting to work and college?

**Joseph Johnson:** We are of course dealing with the challenges of managing a busy, successful and growing network. The hon. Lady will acknowledge that we have just introduced one of the biggest—if not the biggest—timetable changes in the history of the railways to reflect the surge in demand for rail services. We recognise that there are problems, of course, and we are focusing on them so that we minimise disruption, but we should acknowledge that we are dealing with the challenges of success, rather than failure.

Let us not forget about freight either—it is one of the great success stories of privatisation. The private rail freight operators that took over from British Rail in the 1990s brought a new spirit of commercial enterprise and customer focus, and an innovative approach, to operations. That transformed a sector that had been in steady decline into one that, over 20 years, has doubled its share of the land-based freight market.

Privatisation has driven innovation, new private investment and customer service excellence, drawing in more than £4 billion of private investment in our railways since 2010 to deliver faster, more convenient and more comfortable journeys. Thanks to private investment, 7,000 new carriages are to be introduced on the rail network between now and 2021.

**Lilian Greenwood:** By talking about freight, the Minister is avoiding the main subject of the debate. He will know, however, that the rail freight sector is in some difficulty following the loss of important business.

Virgin Trains has identified one reason for its underperformance as people switching from rail to road due to rising rail fares and falling petrol prices. Given the Government’s supposed commitment to tackling air quality and climate change and to a modal shift from road to rail, why did he not anticipate that and do something about it?

**Joseph Johnson:** The hon. Lady mentions climate change, which is of course relevant to freight, as one reason for the freight sector’s difficulties in recent years has been the withdrawal of coal from use in power...
stations and the declining coal tonnage in freight. And, of course, the Government are committed to our climate change targets, and we are on track with our various carbon budgets.

I will turn now to the main subject of the debate: last week’s decision on the east coast. Our decision ensures that the taxpayer will recover all the money possible under the terms of the contract, and Virgin and Stagecoach have lost nearly £200 million in the process.

Throughout all this we need to remember that, fundamentally, the Intercity East Coast rail operation, as a train service business, continues to be a successful enterprise that returns good value to taxpayers now and will do so in the future. VTEC could not meet the agreed costs of its contract with the Department but, as an operating business, Intercity East Coast services are in good shape, and commercial revenues more than cover the direct costs of the train business. In fact, VTEC paid back more money to the taxpayer than when the line was in public sector ownership.

Alex Sobel: Does the Minister see in any merit at all in the public sector running of the east coast line between 2009 and 2015?

Joseph Johnson: We are putting together the new east coast partnership, which will constitute a new approach to how we run the railways. It will bring together the best of the public sector and the best of the private sector, ending the blame game that has seen train companies blame the track operator and vice versa.

Let us not forget that, as a passenger service, this was a well-run railway. The dedication of the staff responsible for the delivery of railway services has maintained high levels of passenger satisfaction—more than nine out of 10 passengers are happy with their journeys.

Opposition Members have suggested that we have nationalised the railway. That is, of course, not the case; rather, this is a temporary return to public control. Indeed, that was envisaged in the original design of privatisation in the early 1990s. The use of the operator of last resort—our public sector operator—is an integral part of the franchising system, not an alternative to it. It is used on a routine basis when we negotiate with private companies to provide a genuine alternative in negotiations, ensuring that we secure real benefits for passengers and taxpayers, and keep people moving. They are given a better deal because they know that the Government have this option in their back pocket.

As was emphasised in the 2013 Brown review, passengers remain protected through the Department’s ability to handle default with an operator of last resort on hand to take over. In this situation, the OLR will do what it is supposed to do: work with the Department on the next competition for a commercial train operator. It will help us to shape the new partnership railway on the east coast, preparing the ground for the line to be transformed into a public-private partnership that will deliver the best of both worlds.

Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) commented on the French nationalised railways. Does my hon. Friend agree that they are in terrible straits and that the President has recognised that the present system cannot continue because it is haemorrhaging billions of euros every year?

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. Advocates of the full renationalisation of our railways should heed what President Macron is saying about the sustainability of the French model. It is a warning indeed.

The east coast provides an opportunity for the first of a new generation of long-term regional partnerships, bringing together the operation of track and train under a single leader and a unified brand and delivering more effectively for rail users.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Joseph Johnson: Not at the moment.

That brand is the London and North Eastern Railway, LNER. This will evolve into a partnership between the public sector and a private partner, procured through a competitive process.

Of course, we are always seeking to improve the way in which we deliver. We continually refine the franchise model and monitor the performance of all franchises closely. We know that passengers have had enough of the blame game between train operators and Network Rail. We have also improved bid assessments since 2014 by introducing a new process to ensure that bids are more financially robust, such as when there is a lower level of growth in passenger numbers than was anticipated. We have developed new approaches to sharing risk with train operators, which means that they do not take on risks that they are not able to control, including impacts due to wider economic changes. Let me be clear: this means that the Government will continue to run a system that requires train operators to face financial penalties if they do not meet their commitments and ensures that we get the best deal for passengers and taxpayers.

Some Members have raised concerns about other franchises. I can reassure the House that the Department closely monitors the performance of our franchises, assessing a range of measures such as levels of bonding and parent company support, as well as assessing liquidity ratios to establish their health.

Colleagues have commented that this week has seen the launch of the biggest change to rail timetables in a generation. This timetable change will deliver improved passenger services across the country, including the delivery of substantial passenger benefits from the Thameslink programme and the great north rail project. By 2020 there will be over 2,000 extra services a week, with room for 40,000 extra passengers. There will be faster and more comfortable journeys, and new and direct services across the north and beyond.

This vindictive motion diminishes those Opposition Members who support it. I reinforce the Secretary of State’s message that we put passengers at the heart of the railway by making the best use of expertise from the public and private sectors, just as the Labour Government in Wales have done this morning.
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackford, rh Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Douglas  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Clwyd, rh Ann  
Coca, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Davey, rh Sir Edward  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
Day, Martyn  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debonoaire, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr T anmanjeet Singh  
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
Dodds, Anneliese  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Elman, Mrs Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frith, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Grady, Patrick  
Grant, Peter  
Gray, Neil  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Kate  
Healey, rh John  
Hendry, Drew  
Hepburn, rh Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hillier, Meg  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hollem, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Graham P.  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keely, Deborah  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Killen, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lamb, rh Norman  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, rh Ms Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Marsden, Gordon  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
Mc Nally, John  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Moran, Layla  
Morden, Jessica  
Morris, Graeme  
Murray, Ian  
Norris, Alex  
O’Mara, Jared  
Onasanya, Fiona  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Teresa  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Piddock, Laura  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emmal  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Adams, Nigel  
Afolami, Bim  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Ruane, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Starmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Swinson, Jo  
Tami, Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turley, Anna  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherin  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Williamson, Chris  
Wishart, Pete  
Woodcock, John  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel  

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Nic Dakin and  
Nick Smith  

NOES  
Andrew, Stuart  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  

Transport Secretary: East Coast  
Franchise  
23 MAY 2018  
Transport Secretary: East Coast  
Franchise
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. At 10 minutes past 3 this afternoon, just after the Secretary of State for Transport left the Chamber, he issued a press release on plans to tackle poor performance at Northern Rail. I wonder whether the Secretary of State, who is almost back in his place, has indicated any intention to make a statement to the House allowing right hon. and hon. Members to question the Government on those plans, which are of huge significance to many of our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have certainly not been given any notification that the Secretary of State wants to come back at this moment, but there is a good chance tomorrow morning at business questions, when I have no doubt you will be able to raise this again.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have to advise the House in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967 that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Data Protection Act 2018
- Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018
- Smart Meters Act 2018

I should also like to announce to the House the deferred Divisions result in respect of the Question relating to the Somerset West and Taunton (Modification of Boundary Change Enactments) Regulations 2018. The Ayes were 298 and the Noes were 17. Of the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 270 and the Noes were 14, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the Question relating to the Somerset West and Taunton (Local Government Changes) Order 2018, the Ayes were 298 and the Noes were 17. Of the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 270 and the Noes were 14, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the Question relating to the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole (Structural Changes) Order 2018, the Ayes were 293 and the Noes were 19. Of the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 265 and the Noes were 16, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the Question relating to the draft Dorset (Structural Changes) (Modification of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) Regulations 2018, the Ayes were 294 and the Noes were 19. Of the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 266 and the Noes were 16, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the Question relating to the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 293 and the Noes were 19. Of the English Members voting on that Question, the Ayes were 265 and the Noes were 16, so the Question was agreed to.

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NHS Outsourcing and Privatisation

4.17 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be provided to the Health and Social Care Committee: written submissions received by Ministers since 8 June 2017 on proposals for reform of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, on the creation of accountable care organisations in the NHS, and on the effect of outsourcing and privatisation in the NHS including the creation of wholly-owned subsidiary companies; and minutes of all discussions on those subjects between Ministers, civil servants and special advisers at the Department of Health and Social Care, HM Treasury and the Prime Minister’s Office.

In six weeks’ time, we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the national health service, a great civilising moment for the nation, which the Secretary of State’s predecessor, Nye Bevan, described in the House on Second Reading of the National Health Service Bill. He said of the creation of the NHS that “it will lift the shadow from millions of homes. It will keep very many people alive who might otherwise be dead. It will relieve suffering. It will produce higher standards for the medical profession. It will be a great contribution towards the wellbeing of the common people of Great Britain.”—[Official Report, 30 April 1946; Vol. 422, c. 63.]

They are certainly stirring and inspirational words, but as we approach the celebrations and the 70th anniversary of the NHS, we see a service in crisis, underfunded and understaffed, and patient care is suffering.

After eight years of the biggest financial squeeze in its history, and at a time when England’s population has increased by 4 million, when the falling real value of tariff payments for hospital care means that trusts now lose 5% of costs for every treatment, and when the Government have refused time and again to give the NHS the funding required, we see patients suffering every day in our constituencies. That is why we have just suffered the worst winter in the history of the NHS, when our hospitals were overcrowded and our A&E departments were logjammed. The number of hospitals operating at the highest emergency alert level—the OPEL 4 level—was nearly double what it was the year before, which itself was branded a humanitarian crisis.

In the first week of January 2018, there was a point when 133 out of 137 hospital trusts in England had an unsafe number of patients on their wards. Sixty-eight senior accident and emergency doctors wrote in January to the Prime Minister raising “the very serious concerns we have for the safety of our patients.”

In response, we had a blanket cancellation of elective operations and cancellations of more than 1,000 emergency operations, causing misery for patients and financial difficulties for trusts already in deficit.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend should also be aware that many walk-in centres have closed. In my constituency, the superb Alexandra Avenue centre has had a 20,000 cap imposed on the number of patients it can see. This service is run by popular GPs, but it faces the risk of being outsourced to a Virgin healthcare or someone else. It originally served 40,000 patients, and many of my constituents are genuinely worried for its future.
Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend makes the point well. I believe about 50 walk-in centres have closed and there are another 50 whose future has been reviewed.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Lincoln’s walk-in centre was closed. A consultation was undertaken by the clinical commissioning group and 94% of those who responded did not want the centre to close. So what did the CCG do? It closed it.

Jonathan Ashworth: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. I know that she, as the relatively new Member for Lincoln, will be campaigning for the future of health provision in her constituency.

The response of the Prime Minister to those cancelled operations this winter was to shrug her shoulders and say, “Nothing is perfect,” but by the end of the winter reporting 185,000 patients, often elderly, vulnerable and in distress, had been left waiting in the back of an ambulance or treated in a corridor for more than 40 minutes. We do not have a crisis in our NHS just in winter; we have a crisis all year round. Since 2010, we have seen a reduction of about 16,000 beds, including more than 5,000 acute beds and nearly 6,000 mental health beds—that is almost 20% of them. Among equivalent wealthy countries, only Canada and Poland have fewer doctors per head, and only two countries have fewer beds per head.

A report today in The Guardian details how old and out of date the equipment is in hospitals because infrastructure budgets have been raided. According to the OECD, we are bottom of the league for the provision of CT and MRI scanners. Meanwhile, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) has pointed out, eight years of multi-billion cuts to social care provision have decimated the sector and have denied 400,000 people, often the elderly and the vulnerable, the support they would otherwise get.

Years of pay freeze, and failure to invest in and plan properly for the workforce, have meant vacancies for 100,000 staff, including vacancies for 40,000 nurses, 3,500 midwives and 11,000 doctors. In the past two years, we have lost more than 1,000 GPs. In our communities, we have seen district nurses cut by 45%. We have lost more than 2,000 health visitors in two years. We have lost nearly 700 school nurses. There are 5,862 fewer psychiatric nurses and 4,803 fewer community health nurses than in 2010, and the Prime Minister’s hostile environment has meant the Home Office has turned down visas for at least 400 staff.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In the St Helens and Knowsley Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, the spending on agency nurses has quadrupled since 2011. Is it not a fact that under this Tory Government we have a retention, recruitment and resources crisis in our NHS?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has, with great eloquence, explained why failing to plan properly on the workforce is such a false economy. It means that trusts are spending more and more on locums and expensive agencies.

I trust that no Conservative Member will try to pretend in this debate that it is possible to reduce beds, reduce staff, cut social care and fail to invest while patient numbers are increasing without the quality of care suffering. If any Conservative Member does try to tell us the opposite, they should look at the latest performance standards. The lack of hospital capacity and staffing means that the waiting list has risen to more than 4 million. Simon Stevens, of NHS England, has warned that “on the current funding outlook, the NHS waiting list will grow to five million people by 2021. That’s an extra million people on the waiting list. One in 10 of us waiting for an operation—the highest number ever.”

The blanket cancellation of elective operations has seen waiting lists rise by nearly 5% compared with last year, and we have waiting times up and performance against targets down. In overcrowded A&Es, in the past year, 2.5 million have waited more than four hours. Just 76.4% of patients needing urgent care were treated within four hours at hospital A&E units in England in March—that is the lowest proportion since records began in 2010.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Of course, A&E waiting times would not be as long if the Government were investing properly in primary care. In my borough, we have the ludicrous situation of private companies advertising in London underground stations, saying: “Fed up waiting? Our private GPs can see you now...ONLY £80”.

Does my hon. Friend agree that people should not be forced to pay £80 to see a GP, and they should not be waiting unnecessarily long in A&E because of the Government’s failure properly to fund and deliver the workforce that primary care needs?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. The problem is that, when the Government allow our national health service to deteriorate by such a scale and push it into this level of crisis, they are essentially forcing people, often reluctant refugees from a public NHS, into self-pay options. That is what happened last time the Conservatives were in government and it is happening again.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): rise—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the former Health Minister.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that five GP surgeries in Broxtowe have been rated outstanding and that we yet again have a 2% increase in CCG spending? Why is he always talking down the NHS?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am delighted that GPs in Broxtowe have been rated outstanding, but patients in Broxtowe will be concerned that bed occupancy rates at Nottingham University Hospitals Trust are at 94.9%. That is what people in Broxtowe and across the east midlands are concerned about.

Anna Soubry: Would the hon. Gentleman like to speak to Nottingham City Council, which is run by Labour? It has repeatedly refused to unblock beds at NUH, unlike Conservative-run Nottinghamshire County Council, which always ensures that it has social care available so that there is no bed-blocking in Nottinghamshire. The problem is Labour in the city—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.
Jonathan Ashworth: I know that Councillor Jon Collins of Nottingham City Council is a talented man, but he does not run Nottingham University Hospitals Trust. The people running the health trusts are the chief executives, who have to rely on the budget settlements that the right hon. Lady and her party have been denying—

Anna Soubry rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: No, I am not giving way again. The right hon. Lady has had two chances; she can contribute to the debate later.

We have overcrowded A&Es and—perhaps the right hon. Lady can listen to this—patients are not even able to get a bed, often lying confused on trolleys in corridors.

In the last year of the previous Labour Government, 60,000 people were designated as trolley waits—

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could the record please record that indeed the leader of Nottingham City Council does not run NUHT, but he is responsible for social care in the city? That was the point I was making.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that is clarification.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that. I invite her to make another point of order, because Nottinghamshire County Council is closing five care homes.

Anna Soubry: I am happy to take that up. My understanding is that Nottinghamshire County Council is looking responsibly at the provision of—[Interruption.] Well, the hon. Gentleman invites me to give him information; I am trying to assist him. In my constituency, the county council is making sure that the money that it spends on social care goes to the very many care homes in my constituency that are rated as good or outstanding—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. May I just help a little? We have 25 speakers to come in after the Front Benchers, so I appeal to the Front Benchers to leave time for Back Benchers to contribute.

Jonathan Ashworth: I shall take your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to indulge the right hon. Lady, but I have to point out to her that Councillor Cutts of Nottinghamshire County Council is cutting care homes across Nottinghamshire. The record will show that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: Given that Mr Deputy Speaker has just castigated me, let me make a little progress. Hopefully, I will be able to take more interventions towards the end of my remarks.

Underfunding and lack of capacity have driven more and more—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: Mr Deputy Speaker has asked me to make a bit of progress, so let me do so.

Underfunding and lack of capacity have driven more and more NHS purchasing from the private sector. We have seen beds lost in NHS hospitals, which are then increasingly forced to use the private sector. Spending on elective treatments outsourced to the private sector rose from £241 million in 2015-16 to £381 million in 2016-17. In many instances—from mental health provision and detox services for those suffering from substance misuse, to routine elective operations—we often see a poor quality of service in the private sector. The House does not have to take my word for it; the Secretary of State himself intervened recently to demand that the private sector gets its house in order. These risks have been known for years, since the Paterson scandal, and I note that the Government are not proposing to legislate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will make a bit of progress because Mr Deputy Speaker has asked me to do so.

I say to the Secretary of State that, if he is prepared to legislate, we will support him because we know that, when things go wrong in the private sector—often these hospitals have no intensive care units—it is the NHS that has to step in and act as a safety net, with patients often being transferred from a private hospital to an NHS hospital. That risk has been estimated to cost the NHS £60 million.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me make a bit of progress and then I will try to let others in.

If the Secretary of State brings forward legislation, we will work constructively with him.

The latest and perhaps most pernicious consequence of underfunding is the move to so-called wholly owned subsidiaries. Many are saying that this is a VAT scam. Hospital trusts feel that, because of underfunding, they have no option but to transfer staff to these so-called subsidiaries, set up at arm’s length but still owned by the trust. We have trusts paying management consultants a total of £3 million, according to freedom of information requests, for advice on setting up these new arrangements. That is money that should be going on patient care. It will mean a two-tier workforce as new joiners no longer need to be on “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions. That looks to many like forcing staff to pay for the Government-imposed financial crisis in the NHS.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is under a lot of pressure, rightly, in this debate. When he selected the motion for the Opposition debate today, was he aware, given the liturgy of supposed privatisation that he has alleged has taken place under this Government, that the proportion of spend on the independent sector under the Conservative Government in the last year was zero and that the proportion of spend on the independent sector in Wales, run by the Labour Administration, went up?

Jonathan Ashworth: I am grateful to the former Minister of State. We do miss him during our exchanges at the Dispatch Box. The figures that he has quoted are different from those provided by the Library. The Library says that the percentage of the total budget spent on private providers has gone up to 1% in Wales, but it has gone up by 2% in England in the past year. The Department of Health and Social Care may have different figures, but those are the figures from the Library.
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend send his support to the staff from Wigan hospitals who are today striking in protest at the creation of Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Solutions? Does he agree that that is just privatisation by the backdoor?

Jonathan Ashworth: I do agree. May I reassure my hon. Friend that those Unite and Unison members who are taking industrial action at Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh have our support? We stand with them in solidarity. I congratulate her and my hon. Friend the Members for Leigh (Jo Platt) and for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on the campaign that they have been running. These jobs should not be outsourced to wholly owned subsidiaries; they should be in-house.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I know him to be a good man. May I put this to him? None of these figures or statistics means anything to people wanting treatment on the NHS. May I assure him that my constituents, like his, are not over-concerned where their treatment comes from? What they are concerned about is that they should be competently, effectively and caringly treated under the national health service.

Jonathan Ashworth: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, of whom I am tremendously fond, as he knows, that I agree broadly with the point that he is making. If my memory serves me correctly, he sits for a Sussex constituency and, of course, in Sussex, we had the shambles of a patient transport contract that went to a firm, Coperforma, which did not even own any ambulances and which was leaving patients stranded on their doorstep waiting for transport to dialysis appointments and to chemotherapy appointments. It often could not then pick up the patients from the hospital and take them home. That leaves patients stranded on their doorstep waiting for transport to dialysis appointments and to chemotherapy appointments. It often could not then pick up the patients from the hospital and take them home. That contract had to come back in-house. It is these types of privatisation that we believe are doing great damage to the health service.

Mr Jim Cunningham rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has been very patient, so I will give way to him.

Mr Cunningham: My hon. Friend has been generous in giving way. Does he agree that private companies are also increasing car parking charges, which is a tax on patients, and that, more importantly, because of the lack of social workers we have bed-blocking in the national health service, too?

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) seems so desperately keen that I will take his intervention and then I will hear from Ashfield and make some progress.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am really grateful to the shadow Minister. Under the last Labour Government, before Worthing became the outstanding hospital it is now, there was a long list of patients requiring hip and knee replacements. To speed up the list, the hospital contracted with a local private hospital. Those patients were treated much more speedily, at least to the same quality, and actually at a lower cost per patient than if it had been done in-house—and, of course, the patients did not have to pay a penny themselves. Is that the sort of privatisation the hon. Gentleman so opposes?

Jonathan Ashworth: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that no, it is not. I agree with the Secretary of State that the “use of the independent sector to bring waiting times down and raise standards is not privatisation.” They were the words of the Secretary of State when he spoke at his own party conference the other year. The Labour Government did spot-purchase from the private sector to bring down the huge waiting lists that we inherited in 1997; but our concern is about contracts for delivery of healthcare services being handed out to private sector providers who not only provide poor quality to patients but give the taxpayer a poor deal. It is a different situation.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Thirty-five pounds a week to watch the basic TV channels from a hospital bed; 60p a minute for a relative to call a patient on a hospital phone; a minimum of £1.80 for the car park for a short visit: these charges are happening at my hospital and at hospitals across the land. They are a tax on sickness and a particular tax on long-term sickness. They have to stop.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has hit upon a brilliant new campaign, which I am sure she will be running. The charges for watching television in wards are absolutely extortionate. It is a scandal; it is a tax on sickness; but it happens because the hospitals, and the health service in general, are so desperately underfunded.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will take an intervention from Chesterfield and then I will make some progress.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Chesterfield Royal Hospital is consulting on setting up a subsidiary company. Does it not seem madness that, to save £3 million that the hospital is paying the Government, it is creating this new organisation, which is being funded by the Government anyway? It is the emperor’s new clothes. The money is going round in circles without doing any good.

Jonathan Ashworth: In addition, hospitals have wasted millions in consultancy fees in setting up these organisations. They create a two-tier workforce because new joiners will not necessarily be on “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions, and they could at some point be completely sold off to the private sector. It is a back-door privatisation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: If Members will forgive me, I will make a little bit of progress, and then hopefully we will get a chance for more to come in later.

Labour has been calling for a long-term economic plan for the NHS. We are led to believe that the Secretary of State agrees with us, because according to The Guardian, in an article headed “Hammond and Hunt in battle over NHS funding boost”, the Secretary of State and Chancellor are reported to be “at loggerheads”, with the Secretary of State calling for £5.3 billion extra, but the Chancellor only wanting to offer £3.25 billion. Of course, neither is quite as generous as the extra
£45 billion for the NHS and social care across the Parliament that Labour was offering, but we will watch carefully.

Our plans would have been funded from increasing taxation on the top 5% of the wealthiest in society. Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us how he proposes to fund his extra £5 billion. Will it be an increase in national insurance for pensioners, as has been floated? Or will other departments be cut? Will the defence budget be cut to fund the extra £5 billion increase in the NHS? Will it be a move towards co-payment the defence budget be cut to fund the extra £5 billion. Will it be an increase in national insurance for pensioners, as has been floated? Or will it be another conjuring trick from the Secretary of State, whereby he claims to be increasing the funds going into the health service, only for us to subsequently find out that public health budgets, training budgets and infrastructure budgets have been cut and the settlement is not quite as generous as we have been led to believe? According to tomorrow’s Spectator, there will be a Tory splurge on the NHS, so he should honour the House today with his confidence and tell us where he thinks this splurge will come from—tax rises, cuts elsewhere, or charges and co-payments.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman: it was a Labour Government with Gordon Brown who increased taxation to pay for the NHS and helped us treble funding in cash terms, and it will be the next Labour Government who will increase taxation for the very wealthiest in society to fund a long-term, sustainable plan for the NHS. When we face the demographic challenges of an ageing population, with people living longer, the disease burden shifting and people living with co-morbidities, and when we are on the cusp of great advances and innovations from artificial intelligence and genomics, is it not clear that the current fragmented structures of the NHS are wasting energy, wasting time and wasting resources?

We are now led to believe that, according to the BBC, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, despite both having sat in a Cabinet that agreed the Health and Social Care Act 2012, have realised that the structures produced by that Act have been a dismal failure. I do not like to say, “We told you so,” but we did actually tell you so. The Act has created a fragmented mess, with healthcare leaders trying to work around it. I say to the Secretary of State that it does not need amending—it simply needs consigning to the dustbin of history to be included in the next edition of “The Blunders of Our Governments”.

We will test any new legislation that the Secretary of State brings forward to see if it moves towards greater collaboration—away from a purchaser-provider split model in favour of partnership and planning. Any new legislation should bring an end to the creeping, toxic privatisation of the NHS and instead restore and reinstate a public universal national health service. The Health and Social Care Act has contributed to the reality today where, according to the Department of Health’s own figures, £9 billion is spent on private providers—a doubling in cash terms since 2010. Indeed, we have seen about £25 billion of contracts awarded through the market since the Act came into force.

Of course, there has always been a role for the private sector in providing services, as I said to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who is no longer in his place, as indeed there has always been a role for the voluntary and co-operative sector. But the combination of years of underfunding alongside the constant tendering of contracts via the any qualified provider arrangements has led to creeping privatisation. Before Government Members tell us that this is just 8% of the total budget—in fact, the Secretary of State told the House in January that it is “not huge”—let me point out that the problem is that that 8% is located almost exclusively in areas like elective care, community services and patient transport, meaning that the private sector is disproportionately influential in those areas. Moreover, the way in which the funding mechanism works restricts NHS income from those areas and leaves NHS providers picking up the more complex, costly cases—emergencies and the chronic sick. In other words, outsourcing and privatisation is increasingly a false economy where supposed savings are easily outweighed by the costs.

But more importantly than that, privatisation has first and foremost a detrimental impact on patient care.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the hon. Lady because she is a nurse.

Maria Caulfield: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the any qualified provider system was brought in under the previous Labour Government in 2009?

Jonathan Ashworth: I remind the hon. Lady, whom I greatly respect in this House because of her work in the NHS, that we moved away from that system to a preferred provider mechanism because we knew that the any qualified provider mechanism did not work and was not in the interests of patient care or the interests of the taxpayer.

Let me give some examples. On support services, GPs have warned repeatedly of the dangers of NHS England outsourcing primary care services to Capita, in a contract designed to save £40 million. Those fears proved well founded, as the National Audit Office found that there was a real risk of “serious patient harm” stemming from Capita’s handing of the contract, with major problems around the secure transfer of patient notes, with notes going missing or delivered to the wrong surgery. Capita’s work in providing back-office services such as payment administration, cervical screening tests, medical records and supplies orders had fallen “well below an acceptable standard.”

On patient transport contracts, I mentioned to the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) what happened with Coperforma. This was a contract worth £63.5 million.

Maria Caulfield rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: And the CCGs are still paying out to Coperforma—is that not correct?

Maria Caulfield: With regard to Sussex—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) would agree with me—the last time Labour was in government it proposed to close the Princess Royal Hospital in Haywards Heath.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am sure that the hon. Lady accepts that it is a scandal that the CCGs—her local health economy—are still paying out to Coperforma. She should be getting up and complaining about that.
Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend, who is extremely experienced, shows with great eloquence the dangers of this relentless outsourcing of services. It damages patient care and is not in the interests of the taxpayer.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am a fan of PFI in general.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2003, Vol. 397, c. 181.]

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend, who is extremely experienced, shows with great eloquence the dangers of this relentless outsourcing of services. It damages patient care and is not in the interests of the taxpayer.

Jonathan Ashworth: I greatly respect the hon. Lady. I greatly enjoyed her Red Box blog on mental health provision last week. I know she thinks carefully about these matters, but this is not about ideology. It is about what works. Let us take the example of the East Kent contract for integrated NHS 111 and GP out-of-hours services, which began in January 2017. After only seven months of Primecare running it, the service was placed in special measures after it was rated inadequate. That is why we carried on with the John Major PFI scheme, which was the creation of that Government.

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. I wish the Labour candidate in Lewisham East well and will be campaigning with them. We will be sending a firm message to the Tories that privatisation of the NHS will end. The NHS is not for sale.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. I wish the Labour candidate in Lewisham East well and will be campaigning with them. We will be sending a firm message to the Tories that privatisation of the NHS will end. The NHS is not for sale.

Jonathan Ashworth: I will make no lessons from the Tories when it comes to PFI.

We have not only seen facilities management contracts having to be brought back in-house in Leicestershire and Nottingham; we have also seen them deliver a poor quality of service across Lewisham and Greenwich. Those contracts at Lewisham Hospital should come back in-house. I know that the Labour candidate in Lewisham East will be campaigning to bring them back in-house, and I hope the Tory candidate will do the same.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my hon. Friend from Lewisham, and then I will make progress.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank my hon. Friend. He is right: the candidate in Lewisham East will absolutely be campaigning on that, because it is out of order and outrageous that many of the people working under that contract are not receiving pay for one week because Interserve is not paying them.

Jonathan Ashworth: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: Absolutely. I wish the Labour candidate in Lewisham East well and will be campaigning with them. We will be sending a firm message to the Tories that privatisation of the NHS will end. The NHS is not for sale.

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend, who is an authority on these matters and campaigned on them for many years before entering this place, speaks well and she is absolutely right.
I will take an intervention from the hon. Lady from Wales, but then I will not take any more because I fear I am really testing your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is not about my patience, but about Back Benchers.

Liz Saville Roberts: I have only one question: will the hon. Gentleman explain why the Welsh Labour Government have outsourced dialysis services at Wrexham?

Jonathan Ashworth: We have always said that there is a small role for the private sector. This is what I said earlier—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I want to hear Members on both sides, and I certainly want to hear the answer, but I cannot do so if everybody is shouting.

Jonathan Ashworth: We have always said that, and I do not know why Government Members are so surprised about it. Indeed, the Prime Minister, thinking she had a humdinger, quoted me at Prime Minister’s questions, but I was decidedly nonplussed by her response to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

Perhaps the biggest area in which private contracts have gone out is in community services, where the private sector has taken over 39% of contracts compared with the 21% in the NHS. NHS Providers said last week:

“The fragmentation of the community sector is...due to the private provider share of the community...service market being much larger than in other sectors”.

It also said:

“it is almost always a legal requirement for commissioners to go out to tender competitively for community services. Tendering for contracts is therefore much more competitive in the community sector than in the acute sector, and contracts are sometimes won on cost savings, rather than improvements in the quality of care.”

We have seen this time and again. For example, Serco was awarded a £140 million contract in Suffolk, but could not meet key response times, such as the four-hour response time for nurses and therapists to reach patients at home 95% of the time. Before Serco took over the contract, the target was achieved 97% of the time.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I did say that I would not take any more interventions. I apologise to my hon. Friend; I know her intervention would have been excellent.

How about the seven-year contract worth £70 million per annum to Virgin Care that was awarded in November 2016 across Bath and Somerset, with services including health visitors, district nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and social workers? The first few months were beset with IT problems, and there were problems with payroll transfers and delays in paying staff. How about the dermatology contract in Wakefield, which again went to Virgin Care? The IT systems did not work, and it was not consultant-led. Satisfaction fell by so much that GPs refused to refer, and again the contract had to come back in-house.

In fact, Virgin Care is now picking up over £1 billion of NHS contracts, and when it does not win a contract and believes something is wrong with the tendering process, it becomes increasingly aggressive in the courts.

Most recently, and disgracefully, it sued the NHS in the Secretary of State’s own backyard and forced it to pay out £1.5 million. That money should be spent on patients in Surrey, not go into the coffers of Virgin Care.

The legal action by Virgin Care reveals a bigger truth. Not only does the Health and Social Care Act lead to many community health contracts going to the private sector, but the regulations underpinning the Act are dysfunctional, which results in millions being wasted on increasing numbers of failed privatisation projects. Perhaps the most prominent example is the 10-year contract worth £687 million for end-of-life and cancer care in Staffordshire that has had to be abandoned, costing CCGs over £840,000—money that should have been spent on patients.

That is why we are raising concerns about the proposed accountable care organisation model, which is currently subject to judicial review. We favour integration and accountability, and we agree that services should be planned around populations and, indeed, that funding should be allocated by means other than an internal market. We favour a strategic hand in the delivery of services and greater local collaboration, and our vision is one of planning and partnerships.

However, the existence of piecemeal contracts and the contracting out of services is a major barrier preventing the real integration of health and social care. The enforcement of competition obstructs collaboration and the proper, efficient organisation of services. A model in which billions of pounds of NHS and local authority funds can be bundled up and go through a commercial contract for 10 years is not accountable and neither, depending on the level of funding, will it deliver the level of care we expect, while it could also go to the private sector. What sense does it make to offer binding long-term contracts for delivering a vast range of services over 10 years? Surely the lesson of PFI is not to guess the future, not to write healthcare contracts for services 10 years hence and not to get locked into a deal when so much will change in the delivery of healthcare over the next 10 years.

This is a tired, outdated, failing approach. Quite simply, privatisation has failed. Almost every day in the NHS, we hear of a further investigation, a further failure, a contract handed back or a problem uncovered—from scandalous failures in patient transport, to poor standards in private hospitals, to millions wasted on huge tendering exercises that go nowhere, to Circle failing to manage Hinchingbrooke, to Capita failing to manage vital patient records, to Interserve failing to clean hospitals and deliver meals, to Virgin Care suing the NHS for £1.5 million.

I challenge the Tories to point in this debate to a significant success in outsourcing to offset that total mess. No Tory can tell us that the competition and markets in the Health and Social Care Act have led to shorter waiting times, innovations in care or better services. The reality is that the NHS and the provision of healthcare are too important to be left to the chasing of market forces. The principles on which our NHS was founded seven decades ago are being betrayed by this Government, and the staff and patients of the NHS are being betrayed with it. There are longer waiting times, intolerable pressures on staff, daily stories of human heartbreak and operations cancelled.
On the 70th anniversary of the NHS, the staff can hold their heads up high, but the Government should bow their heads in shame. In this anniversary year, it will fall again to this party—the party that founded the NHS and that believes in the NHS—to rebuild and restore a public universal national health service.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Hopefully we will get some Back Benchers in, but I warn them that they will get no more than four minutes each. That may have to come down and some Members may not get in.

4.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I welcome the opportunity of this debate to dispel some particularly pernicious myths.

May I say how much I enjoyed the shadow Health Secretary’s speech? If they had listened to his denunciation of privatisation and outsourcing, I think my children would have said that Alice in Wonderland has nothing on the Labour party when it comes to taking totally contradictory positions on an identical issue. My favourite thing was the stirring way in which he said, “What concerns me most is contracts handed out that are poor value for taxpayers,” after his Government left £80 billion-worth of PFI contracts for the NHS to pick up the pieces. That costs the NHS £2 billion every year—money that cannot be used for good patient care. He had lots of other gems and we will return to them during the course of this speech.

I want to start with the motion. I am afraid that it is a transparent attempt to set hares running about NHS privatisation that is not happening. He used the phrase “creeping toxic privatisation”, but the truth is that we know it is not happening and the Opposition know it is not happening. With all the pressures facing the NHS today, to scare staff and the public with fake news is breathtakingly irresponsible.

In the motion, the Opposition use the Humble Address mechanism to ask for the release of documents, knowing full well that it will fuel wild conspiracy theories if we refuse to release those documents, as we must for reasons that are nothing to do with the NHS, but to do with good governance. However, there is a flaw in their Machiavellian logic. When I asked officials for advice on what submissions we as Ministers hold on privatisation—this great swathe of secret plans that the Opposition constantly allege—this is the written advice that I got back: “Officials have, since the Humble Address was received, sought to find submissions about the privatisation of clinical or patient services within the period specified, but to this point none have been identified. Her Majesty’s Government has no plans to privatise the NHS.” That was the official advice, but don’t take it from me. The respected King’s Fund said in 2015 that “claims of widespread privatisation are exaggerated.”

Another way in which the Labour party loves to try to scare the public is to deliberately muddle up privatisation and outsourcing, which of course are quite separate. I think the shadow Health Secretary knows that, going by some of his comments. What are the facts on outsourcing? The Prime Minister did indeed wax lyrical about the possibility of 40% of acute operations in the private sector being done under the NHS banner—not this Prime Minister, but Tony Blair in 2006. Had we followed Tony Blair’s advice, we would be spending nearly £2 billion more on outsourcing than we currently spend. The Secretary of State from that period also said quite openly, “We intend to use the private sector when it can bring expertise or resources to help improve services.” That is not me, but Alan Milburn in 2002.

And boy, did team Labour set about that outsourcing with enthusiasm: not just increasing the PFIs we have talked about and not just giving the first contract for an NHS acute hospital to the private sector in 2009—that was Andy Burnham—but increasing the amount spent on outsourcing by 50% in the last four years of that Government. [Interruption.] Fifty per cent. These are the facts. I know the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) wants to do the fake news and the scare stories, but let us just listen to the facts. Let us talk about what has been happening under this Government. In my first year as Health Secretary, the proportion going to the independent sector went up by 0.6%. In the second year it was 1.2%, in the third year it was 0.4% and last year it was 0%.

I need to correct the record. During Prime Minister’s questions, I hurriedly passed the Prime Minister a note about the increase in Wales in the use of the independent sector. She said at the Dispatch Box that in Wales it had gone up last year by 0.8%. I need to correct that, because in fact it went up by 1.2%—50% more than I thought. Wales, where Labour is in government, is racing ahead. In fact, in pounds spent, the use of the independent sector last year in Wales went up by a third. What that shows is not just that these allegations are nonsense, but that Labour knows they are nonsense. If there was any truth to them they would not be increasing outsourcing in Wales by one third at the same time as branding it as verging on the criminal in England. With the huge pressures facing the NHS and immense efforts by frontline staff to cope with flu, winter and an ageing population, can the Labour party really be trusted with the NHS when it spends its time putting out fake news?

Unlike Labour, we do not believe that the NHS should close its ears to innovation in other sectors or other countries. We want the NHS to be the best in the world and there are things to learn from others that will help patients and help the NHS. Sometimes those innovations will even come—dare I say it—from America. But to copy global best practice from one small part of what is happening in America does not mean that we want to copy its system itself, which I think, and I think most people in this House think, is an affront to that great country, with poor outcomes, lack of coverage and high cost.

To stop ideology trumping the needs of patients, the Conservative-led Government in 2012 legislated to stop politicians choosing whether to boost the private or the public sector, formally and legally giving that decision to clinicians who run clinical commissioning groups. I will tell the House why we did that. What would happen if we followed what the shadow Chancellor advocated last year, when he said “we will reverse Tory privatisation by renationalising the NHS” is that 120,000 people would have to wait longer for operations on their hips, knees and for other elective procedures.
surgery. The price of Labour ideology, putting ideology before patients, would be nearly 200 people waiting longer in every constituency in this House.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): The Secretary of State touches on a point that is very pertinent in my constituency. I met a former police officer who had an NHS operation on his hip. The operation went wrong, so the local NHS trust paid privately for the officer to have the operation done correctly. Does that not show that at times it can be a very good thing to involve the private sector? The key is that the NHS is free at the point of need.

**Mr Hunt:** That is exactly the point. Sometimes the quality is high in the private sector and sometimes it is low. When it is low, we will clamp down hard just as we do with the NHS.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the Secretary of State’s comments on ideology and the Health and Social Care Act 2012. He will remember that I, in a CCG, was implementing the 2012 Act. Is he saying that he is proud of the Act and that it has worked out as intended?

**Mr Hunt:** I will give way, with great pleasure.

**Jonathan Ashworth:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Mr Hunt:** I will give way, with great pleasure.

**Jonathan Ashworth:** I really do think the Secretary of State has some brass neck. The Tory party voted against the creation of the NHS 20-odd times. That is the reality of what happened in 1948, including on Third Reading in this House. It is a Labour creation.

**Mr Hunt:** As Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai said about the French revolution, it is too early to tell.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) alluded to, there is one ideology that we will not compromise on: our belief that the NHS should be free at the point of use and available to all. And why will we not compromise on this? It is because, contrary to Labour’s creation myth about the NHS, it was a Conservative Health Minister, Sir Henry Willink, who first proposed it in 1944. Here are his words from 1944 announcing the setting up of the NHS:

“Whatever your income, if you want to use the service…there’ll be no charge for treatment. The National Health Service will include” —

[Interruption.] I know this is difficult for Labour Members, but let me tell them what the Conservatives said when we were setting up the NHS:

“The National Health Service will include family doctors” and will “cover any medicines you may need, specialist advice, and of course hospital treatment whatever the illness”.

Nye Bevan deserves great credit for delivering that Conservative dream, but let us be clear today that no party has a monopoly on compassion, and no party has a monopoly on our NHS. There are some other myths —

**Jonathan Ashworth:** The hon. Gentleman’s party voting against the Care Act 2014. That does not mean that they disagreed with the principles behind it.

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The circumstances around the recent collapse of Carillion have left Liverpool with an unfinished hospital. Negotiations with a potential new contractor are under way but may require ministerial involvement because of the involvement of other Departments. Will the Secretary of State give me an absolute assurance that he will do whatever he can within his power to ensure that that new hospital is completed as soon as possible?

**Mr Hunt:** I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. Lady that assurance. I am most grateful to her for raising that issue and reassure her that my hon. Friend the Minister of State responsible for hospitals was at the hospital on Friday, going into detail about how we make sure that there are no delays on that issue.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) rose —

**Mr Hunt:** I will give way one last time and then I will make some progress.

**Jamie Stone:** I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. On the issue of freedom of access and equality of access, would he at least concede that where there are issues of distance, rurality and remoteness of location, that is a challenge — although health is devolved to the Scottish Parliament—which means that it is not quite as free for some of my constituents as it is for people who live in Glasgow, Edinburgh or London?

**Mr Hunt:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, which would be echoed by many Government Members who represent rural constituencies. There is a balance to be struck between the benefits of specialist surgery, where greater volumes of a particular procedure are done, leading to better outcomes for patients, and the trade-off that we make with travel times. I know that that is something that the local NHS, in all parts of the UK, thinks through very carefully.

There is another myth we always get from the Labour party that I think it is very important to dispel: the narrative about the NHS being in total decline. Let us be clear about the pressures facing the NHS. We had to deal with the financial crisis of 2008, which left this country’s coffers empty. We have had to deal with the fact that over the last seven years, we have had half a million more over-75s. We had to deal with a crisis of care at Mid Staffs, which turned out to be a problem affecting many other parts of the NHS.

Yes, it is true that we are missing some important targets at the moment, but let us not forget the extraordinary things that have been achieved despite that pressure, such as for cancer. We inherited some of the lowest cancer survival rates in western Europe. In 2010, only 10% of patients got intensity-modulated radiotherapy; that figure is now 44%. We have two new proton beam therapy machines—at the Christie and University College London Hospitals—and there are 7,000 people alive today who would not be had we stayed with the cancer survival rates of 2010. Every day, 168 more people start cancer treatment than did in 2010. This is a huge step forward.
On mental health, previously we had no national talking therapy service for people with anxiety and depression; today, 1,500 more people are starting or benefitting from talking therapy services every single day, and we have huge plans to extend mental health provision to 1 million more people.

Karen Lee: Does the Secretary of State think it acceptable that ambulances were waiting outside Lincoln A&E for up to seven hours over the winter? Is that a mark of progress?

Mr Hunt: No, I do not think it acceptable at all, but I would ask the hon. Lady to bear it in mind that we have 2,000 more paramedics than we did in 2010 and that we have invested in a huge amount of capital equipment for the ambulance services. Of course we need to do more, but, when she talks about A&E, she should recognise the achievements of many hospitals, including her own. Every day across the NHS—even over this difficult winter—2,500 more people are seen within four hours than were in 2010.

Labour seems to think that quality problems in the NHS started in 2010. I should point out that because of what we have done to deal with the problems of Mid Staffs, which happened on Labour’s watch, including through the new Care Quality Commission regime, 2.1 million more patients every year benefit from good or outstanding hospitals than did five years ago. A couple of weeks ago for the first time the majority of hospitals in the NHS were good or outstanding, which is a huge step forward and a huge tribute to NHS staff. That might be just one reason the Commonwealth Fund last year said that the NHS was the best healthcare system in the world. When Labour was in office, it was not even the best in Europe.

There is another reason to oppose the motion. It has nothing to do with health policy, but is a much bigger point of principle. After more than five years in this role, the one thing I have learned is that good policy can be made only through frank and open discussion between Ministers and officials. It will not surprise the House to know that Ministers are human, we make multiple mistakes—not me of course—and it is critical that the Secretary of State in charge of the largest health system in the world can get honest, high-quality advice, but the Secretary of State in charge of the largest health system in the world. When Labour was in office, it was not even the best in Europe.

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This is not a party political point. Many Labour Members have benefitted from such advice, and all of us would want Ministers of any party in power to benefit from such advice, regardless of whether we support the Government, yet the motion asks us to release not just that written advice from officials, which would have an enormous chilling effect, but notes of confidential discussions between Ministers and officials. In short, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) said only last week, it would undermine the safe space within which Ministers and civil servants consider all the options and weigh up the best approach. Officials must be able to give advice to Ministers in confidence. The candour of all involved would be seriously affected if there were any fear of those discussions being disclosed.

No Government of any party have ever operated in an environment where advice is sought one week and made public the next. Let us look back to what Andy Burnham said in 2007 when he as a Minister was asked to release information. His words were:

“Putting the risk register in the public domain would be likely to reduce the detail and utility of its contents. This would inhibit the free and frank exchange of views about significant risks and their management, and inhibit the provision of advice to Ministers.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 1191.]

Far from increasing the accountability of the Executive to the legislature, releasing such information would risk weakening it, as more and more discussions would end up taking place informally with no minutes taken at all.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be completely inconsistent with the Freedom of Information Act—passed, by the way, by a Labour Government—which deliberately carved out an exemption for precisely these sorts of communications? It would be very odd—in fact, completely counterproductive—to turn that on its head.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks extremely wisely. He is right: it would fundamentally weaken the ability of the Executive—which the Freedom of Information Act tried to protect—to make considered, thoughtful and wise decisions. Ultimately, that would put at risk the credibility of our democracy itself.

I think it fair to say that, despite my many faults as Health Secretary, I have pursued transparency in the NHS with greater vigour than has been the case previously. I passionately believe that in this House we must be accountable for the outcomes of all the decisions that we make, but all of us are mortal—all of us make mistakes—so if accountability is the watchword after a decision is made, thoughtfulness must be the watchword before it is made. Any measures that affect the honesty and frankness of the advice that Ministers receive would fundamentally reduce that thoughtfulness and reduce the effectiveness of our Government for the people whom they serve.

For those reasons—as well as because of all the ridiculous myths about the millions and privatisation—I have absolutely no hesitation in asking my right hon. and hon. Friends to vigorously and thoroughly oppose the motion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a vast number of Members want to speak in the debate. I will impose a four-minute limit after we have heard from the spokesman for the Scottish National party.

5.16 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I will be as brief as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker, to accommodate Members with clear constituency interests who I know will want to contribute to the debate. It was interesting to watch the Secretary of State being the pantomime villain of the day and trolling us about the Conservatives’ record on the national health service.

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I want to make some observations about privatisation and outsourcing in particular. I think that I should start off with the World Health Organisation’s definition of privatisation:

“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 in the public sector”.

Patients who attend health service centres throughout these islands will receive amazing care, but that is predominantly due to the dedication of the people who work in the NHS, some of whom—as we need to recognise—are working under much greater pressures than others.

Some have argued that outsourcing such services as cleaning or car parking is a good thing, but there is evidence that the outsourcing of cleaning, and poor-quality cleaning, led to the rise of hospital-acquired infections. The Conservatives created the internal market in 1990, and that led to an “us and them” mentality in many local areas because it introduced competition between hospitals. In 2010, they promised “no top-down reorganisation”, but then introduced the Health and Social Care Act 2012, section 75 of which pushed commissioning groups into putting contracts out to tender.

We have seen the rise of the independent treatment sector, which won approximately 34% of contracts in 2015-16. That figure rose to 43% in 2016-17, and it now stands at approximately 60%. It cannot be denied that private companies are more involved in healthcare in England.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Stephens**: I am sorry, but I will not take any interventions because many Members with constituency interests wish to speak.

We often hear about the costs of service redesign. The new organisations, the external consultants and the change managers are all described as one-offs. However, the experience of NHS workers over the past 30 years is that the process has led to a huge amount of waste.

**John Lamont**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Stephens**: I did say that I would not take interventions.

**John Lamont**: This is a debate.

**Chris Stephens**: The hon. Gentleman is right: many Members representing English constituencies want to talk about their constituents’ experience, and I think it only fair to allow them to do so—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman can try all he likes, but I will not be shouted down by anyone in this Chamber.

What about running costs due to market forces themselves? What about the contracting design, the tendering, the bid teams, the corporate lawyers, the billing and the profits? The Government appear to have moved from an internal market to the external market that is now in England. [Interruption.] Members keep trying to shout me down, but I will continue talking. It is disrespectful to shout Members down in this Chamber. I will continue my speech, but I want to accommodate other Members. I do not think that they should be subject to a four-minute time limit, and I want to give them time to talk about their constituents.

A petition that received 237,095 signatures was debated in Parliament in April. The signatories are very concerned about outsourcing in the NHS, and they have every right to be concerned about the approach of this Administration. Others have warned of the threat of English health privatisation as it applies to devolved services. The trade union Unison has warned:

“The Tories might not run NHS Scotland, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t attacking it. We must fight to save it.”

It also says:

“Devolution means they can’t run down and privatise our NHS directly, the way they are doing in England”, but what the Tories can do is starve it of resources. The NHS is under threat from privatisation and cuts. The Tories’ health Act pushed the profit motive to the heart of the English national health service.

I hope that the Minister will address a number of things mentioned by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) when he responds to the debate because I find what has been happening astonishing. I opposed outsourcing and privatisation before I was in this place, as a trade union activist for 20 years. The issue of West Sussex has been mentioned, but we have heard no response. We have also heard about Carillion—I was on the joint inquiry into Carillion—and the effects of what happened on Liverpool. We heard about the collapse of the £800 million contract in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough for older people’s services.

Those issues are all serious, and people across the UK who are watching our proceedings will be concerned about the outsourcing and privatisation of the NHS in England—[Interruption] I will not be shouted down. The Scottish Tories think that they can shout people down, but that will not happen with me. I am reaching the conclusion of my remarks, so the hon. Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) will have to be patient until another day.

Those who are watching these proceedings will be very concerned about the outsourcing and privatisation of the national health services in England. People want to see a publicly owned national health service across these islands.

5.22 pm

**David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) were simply trying to find out why the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) did not want to talk about the £700 million-odd a year that the SNP Government in Scotland are spending on outsourcing, but we will leave that for another day.

I was delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned Henry Willink, the former Member of Parliament for Croydon North and war hero, who was one of many people who helped to form the national health service, along with the great Liberal Beveridge, of course. It is disappointing that Labour have tried to make the NHS something that they alone feel they have the right to talk about. It is not their NHS; it is our
national health service. It does not belong to any one political party; it belongs to all of us. There was opposition from a number of Conservatives to the Bill that set up the NHS, but some Labour peers, such as Lord Latham, and Herbert Morrison were concerned about that Bill, although of course all that is written out of history.

We know that whenever the Labour party is in trouble, it starts to generate scurrilous stories about privatisation. We have been thinking about the celebrations for the anniversary of the national health service, but I was rather sad last year about another NHS anniversary: 30 years since Labour started making up mythological stories about the Conservative party wanting to privatisate the NHS. It was 30 years since 1987, when Labour said that they would end “privatisation in the NHS”. They did the same thing at the ’92 election, saying:

“Labour will stop the privatisation of the NHS.”

And so it went on at one election after another: Labour trying to conjure up the idea that the Conservatives wanted to privatisate the NHS. Despite that, we won numerous elections after 1987—we have been winning them since 2010—and we have absolutely no intention of privatising the national health service and never will.

It was interesting that Labour’s 2005 and 2010 manifestos said that a Labour Government would start using the private sector. The 2005 manifesto talked about using the “independent and voluntary sector”, and that approach continued in the 2010 manifesto.

As a result, between the financial years 2006-07 and 2013-14, we saw a gentle increase in the amount spent on the private sector within the national health service to deliver operations free at the point of use to those who need them by occasionally using private contractors, as the SNP is doing in Scotland. The figure went up from 2.8% to something like 6.1%. To put those figures in perspective, Cuba—a country I love, but not one known for its wild capitalist economy—has about 18% of its production in the private sector. Figures from an obscure website, thediplomat.com, suggest that 7.5% of North Korea’s economy is in the private sector. In other words, North Korea makes greater use of the private sector than the NHS—a figure of 6.1% does not represent privatisation.

From my experience, I can truthfully say that I have a complaint about the NHS in England, and so do my constituents: we cannot access it, because we are forced to use the national health service in Wales. The result of this is that we have longer waits for our ambulances. I recently dealt with a case of a lady who had to wait two hours for an ambulance after a suspected heart attack. We have longer waits for accident and emergency. We do not have access to cancer drugs such as Avastin in the way patients do in England. And, of course, we wait much, much longer for hospital treatment and operations. The target in Wales is 26 weeks, as opposed to 18 weeks, but that target is all too often missed.

I wish that I had more time to talk about Labour’s failings in the national health service. I have suggested a few things in my time, but neither I nor any Conservative MP will ever privatisate the NHS. It is about time the Labour party stopped telling those fibs.
My union, Unison, represents nearly half a million healthcare staff employed in the NHS. That is one in every 60 or so working adults in one sector in the UK represented by one union standing up with one voice against injustice.

In Canterbury, rooms at the once thriving city hospital can now be found stacked with old equipment, and staff tell me that whole wings of old, neglected hospitals, such as the Buckland in Dover, lie abandoned, underused and under-occupied while waiting rooms in our not-so-local accident and emergency departments remain rammed. In Canterbury, services that were removed “temporarily” in 2017 look likely never to return to those old buildings. Proposals are afoot for a new hospital, but it simply will not be built if the central Government funding is not there to fill it. I am the only Labour MP in Kent and, as such, I am proud to make a loud noise about and stand up against the Conservative cuts that have caused vital hospital services to disappear in my county in recent years.

Things need to change drastically, and the new university medical school in Canterbury will be part of that much-needed change. If someone in my constituency is sick, we currently have to travel a long way to Ashford or Margate to get the emergency care they need.

Combine an underfunded NHS with a South East Coast Ambulance Service in special measures, and we have the ingredients for chaos. Chaos and a lot of political knockabout, which does absolutely nothing to advance the cause or to pursue better patient care. I am frustrated that the word “privatisation” is so readily bandied around for cynical ends to scare the public and to try to give a misleading picture of what is happening for dogmatic reasons.

Nobody is seeking to privatisate the NHS, but it was Labour that introduced competition into the NHS. What does that mean? It means that there is often greater capacity to treat people more quickly based on demand. What could possibly be wrong with buying in 100 hip operations, for example, if people get treated more quickly, if they are getting the best possible care and if they are fit and well sooner? Who could possibly argue with that? Not a single constituent of mine would argue that there is anything wrong with that. Surely they matter most in all this.

Labour Members hark on about money and not about outcomes—we do not hear anything about outcomes; we hear just about money, often in crude terms. A more effective debate today would have been about moving the agenda forward. We could have talked about things such as prevention. I am all for discussing prevention—at Prime Minister’s questions today, I talked about prevention through the daily mile, which would be a welcome step. In a time of increasing demand, prevention means that people do not get into desperate situations. It is often more effective for the taxpayer. Prevention means that people will be fitter and healthier for longer, which we should focus on.

The Government have consistently increased health spending year on year since 2010. I would be happy for a Labour Member to intervene and answer this question. Why have they not supported this Government’s increases in health spending? Could they say which services would have less money if we had taken their advice, given that we would be starting from a lower base? Back in 2010, the former shadow Health Secretary, who is now metro Mayor of Manchester, said:

“I am putting the ball right back in Osborne’s…court. It is irresponsible to increase NHS spending in real terms within the overall financial envelope that he, as chancellor, is setting.”

On the prevalence of private providers in the health service, currently less than 8% of the NHS budget is spent via private providers. The rate at which that has increased since 2010 has been slower than the rate under the Labour party, under whose Administration the NHS spent around 5% on private providers. The motion is a bit churlish. It does not focus on what we should focus on, which is patients, better care and moving the agenda towards the direction of prevention.

It frustrates me enormously that we use terms such as privatisation so readily, while knowing full well that they give a misleading picture to the public. We hear a lot of complaining from Labour Members, but, as with police and local government funding, and stamp duty
for first-time buyers, when the Government find solutions, Labour Members vote against them. People will make their own minds up.

5.37 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On 6 March, I had the good fortune to secure a debate in Westminster Hall on wholly owned subsidiaries in the NHS and was shocked to find how many hon. Members—were not just Labour Members—had experience of local NHS trusts setting them up. The NHS trust that covers my constituency, the Gateshead NHS Foundation Trust, has set up a wholly owned subsidiary company. It is also advising other trusts on how to do the same.

The Gateshead NHS Foundation Trust is a very good trust, but I am concerned that it has transferred staff who provide the maintenance, cleanliness and operation of the hospital to a wholly owned subsidiary company. There are two ways in which trusts can save money by setting up a subco: through savings on VAT thanks to a loophole—the Treasury appears to be willing to look the other way—and through future savings in staffing as new staff are employed outside “Agenda for Change” pay, terms and conditions. Importantly, there are also savings on pensions because those staff are denied access to the NHS pension scheme.

The savings are coming off the backs of staff, many of whom—porters, cleaners and catering staff—are already on the lowest scales. “Agenda for Change” was introduced to provide a fair and equality-proofed pay system for all NHS staff. It is bad enough that staff working for contractors in the NHS, such as those formerly employed by Carillion and now employed by companies such as Serco, which took over some of Carillion’s contracts, are not on that pay system, but the fact that NHS trusts voluntarily and even eagerly take measures to get around the system is simply outrageous.

Let us be clear: we know the problem is underfunding of our essential NHS services. This Government have failed to provide adequate funding right across the NHS and some trusts have taken the decision to set up these subsos in an effort to make that money go further. We understand that on the Labour Benches. But it is beyond the pale to ask lower-paid staff to make the savings from their own pay packets. All of us, on both sides of the House, say how much we value the NHS workforce, but that means not only nurses and doctors, but the staff who make the hospital work. They are an essential part of the NHS team, and the Government must ensure that they are treated fairly, now and in the future.

There is another concern about these subsos. There is a real concern that they are being set up ripe and ready for privatisation: a neatly packaged organisation, vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. This is not the NHS we want. We want an NHS that recognises the value all of its staff, from cleaners and porters to allied health professionals such as occupational therapists and radiographers, from maintenance staff to nurses and, yes, doctors. We need an NHS that does that so that we can provide the best possible care for patients. We need to maintain these services in the public sector, and I know that there is huge support from my constituents for ensuring that our NHS services are directly provided by NHS staff.

Earlier today we heard that staff at Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust are taking industrial action against a proposal to transfer them to a subco. More than that, they are striking against the privatisation of NHS services. I wish them, and staff in other trusts standing up for our NHS, every success.

5.41 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The allegation of privatisation of the NHS is wholly misconceived. It is a reheated and debunked myth that irresponsible elements have been trotting out for decades, and repeating it does not make it any more true. NHS outsourcing to private providers is being weaponised in a way that involves dressing it up as a threat to the NHS’s guiding principle that treatment should be provided free at the point of use and regardless of ability to pay. That is what people understand when the expression “privatisation” is used, but the reality is that nothing could be further from the truth.

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. It is the principle that says that 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. There is no appetite in this country for the Americanisation of British healthcare. Even if there were, I could never support it, my colleagues could never support it and the Government could never support it. That is why it is so important that we make that position crystal clear.

On the issue of outsourcing, we must not rewrite history. As moderate members of the Opposition concede, 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. The same goes for dentists and pharmacists. Equally, the NHS has long-established partnerships for the delivery of clinical services such as radiology and pathology, and for 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 from frontline patient care in order to research and reinvent something that was already widely available.

That is why certain members of the Labour party have slammed this kind of argument as scaremongering. Lord Darzi, a former Health Minister, has been highly critical. In 2017, the shadow Secretary of State said on the “Today” programme that there may well be examples “where in order to increase capacity you need to use the private sector”, so this argument is completely misconceived. In 2009, Andy Burnham admitted that the private sector could benefit the NHS. As Labour’s Health Secretary, he said: “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.”—[Official Report, 15 May 2007; Vol. 460, c. 230WH.]

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is making the point extremely well that there is complete inconsistency in
Labour’s argument on this point. Which of the various parts of NHS services that are provided by independent sector providers is Labour against?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I shall give three brief examples from my own constituency. First, Cobalt is a Cheltenham-based medical charity that is leading the way in diagnostic imaging. It provides funding for research, assists with training for healthcare professionals and provided the UK’s first high-field open MRI scanner. Is the Labour party now suggesting that that should be ditched—that we should axe that fantastic facility in my constituency?

Secondly, the Sue Ryder hospice at Leckhampton Court is part-funded by the NHS and part-funded by charitable donations; again, is that for the axe under Labour? Thirdly, what about Macmillan and its nurses? It is a fantastic organisation, yet we have the extraordinary situation in which the Labour party says, “Macmillan is all right, but another provider is not.” What is the logic of the Labour position? What about Mencap? The list goes on and on.

Let me deal briefly with the second part of Labour’s motion, whereby it wants to ensure that all communications between Ministers and their officials are revealed. The reason why that is so bogus was explained clearly by the former senior Labour Secretary of State Jack Straw in a statement that was quoted with approval in the Chilcot committee’s report. He said that meetings in Cabinet “must be fearless. Ministers must have the confidence to challenge each other in private. They must ensure that decisions have been properly thought through, sounding out all possibilities before committing themselves to a course of action…They must not be deflected from expressing dissent”.

What about advice given by officials in the form of memorandums and so on? What would Labour Members say to those officials about a motion that might result in the making public of the advice of professional civil servants—people who, of course, can never answer back themselves—that they thought was given to Ministers in confidence? As I have already indicated, it would also be completely inconsistent with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which was introduced by a Labour Government. On both bases, the motion is misconceived, and I shall have no hesitation in voting against it.

5.46 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I work as a GP.

There may be people listening to this debate who work for private or voluntary sector organisations, providing services to patients or to the NHS. Most of them do a fantastic job. They are not employed by the NHS, but they do help our NHS, and I thank them for the work that they do.

When local people and local commissioners agree that it is in the best interests of local patients to use non-NHS services to deliver NHS care, that should sometimes be enabled. In the fields of medical technology and devices, pharmaceuticals, information management and many others, good private sector companies are working to support the NHS. But private sector involvement can also lead to a race to the bottom. When subsidiary companies reduce terms and conditions for workers, that is bad for us all; when privatised community services ignore the hardest-to-reach patients, that can widen health inequalities; and when private sector treatment centres cherry-pick the least-risky patients, do not contribute to training, and then expect the NHS to pick up the pieces when complications arise, the NHS loses.

All that is without mentioning the private Primary Care Support England contract, run by Capita. It is total disaster. The main function of support services is to enable clinicians to get on with the job of looking after patients, but GP registrars are not being paid on time, GPs are not added to performers lists, and one practice manager told me that it took four months and 16 emails to transfer a GP from being salaried to being a partner. This work needs to be taken back by the NHS; Capita has failed.

What vision do I think we should have for our NHS? I endorse the Government’s goal of integrated health and care services built around patients’ needs. That is the only way to meet the health challenges of this century. The Health and Social Care Committee, on which I serve, has looked in detail at moves towards the integration of care through sustainability and transformation plans, accountable care organisations and integrated care systems. We have seen real potential to improve the quality of care for patients, to make the strategic shift away from reactive care to proactive care and to transfer more NHS resources into keeping people well rather than just fixing them when they get sick. The need to bring together primary care, community care and social care has widespread support in the NHS, but we should do that within a health and care service, run by the NHS, owned by the NHS, and led by the NHS.

There are understandable concerns about the integration agenda being used to encourage more private sector involvement. The Government and NHS England say that that is not their intention, but speculation could easily be dispelled by legislating to make accountable care organisations—if they happen—NHS bodies. I am talking about NHS-owned and NHS-led organisations running health, and even care services, for whole populations. What a great legacy that would be, with procurement not being forced on commissioners, with the private sector being used only when it enhances the ability of the NHS to help patients and with no cherry-picking and no dilution of hard-won employment rights for any staff providing services to and for the NHS.

The Government should bring forward legislation to repeal section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012; accountable care organisations should be cemented in primary legislation that makes them NHS bodies; and the Primary Care Support England contract should be brought back into the NHS.

5.51 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr. Williams) who made a laudable and moderate speech. I dare to suggest that when people have serious first-line experience of our health service, as many in my own family do, they are less hyperbolic than those we heard from the shadow Front Bench. We should be clear that hyperbole harms our health service.

I do not for a moment think that we should pretend that there is no politics in the health service, but we should be clear that there are many things that unite us on this. I say that in large part because the situation in
my own constituency of Boston and Skegness, where we have a serious and ongoing problem recruiting paediatric consultants and paediatric staff, has led to a number of public meetings, which have been both fascinating and somewhat disconcerting. I say that largely because the rhetoric of privatisation, of outsourcing, is something that I have confronted at first hand.

People genuinely believe that there is a long-term suggestion that an American model is coming to the UK. The effect of that is not simply to scare people, but when the vulnerable older person in Skegness, who often does not have access to a car and often does not have the deep-seated knowledge that the hon. Member for Stockton South has of the NHS, thinks, “You know, I shouldn’t go to my GP. The NHS is under huge strain. I shouldn’t cause a fuss. I shouldn’t make that appointment.” Later down the line, when he or she finds themselves in a less healthy position, it is the fault of those of us who have used the NHS has a hyperbolic football. All of us in this place should be responsible when we talk about the health service. As we always say, and as those on the Front Bench have said, it is about patients, not politics.

I have been in those public meetings saying to my constituents that I believe that the trust in my own constituency is passionately committed to providing healthcare services for desperately ill children as close to home as possible. When I say that that trust is struggling to recruit, it is because it is struggling to recruit; it is because it is being honest. It is not because of some conspiracy theory at the top of the previous Government or of this Government, but because there are deep-seated problems that this Government are tackling with, for instance, the expansion of medical schools and the expansion of nurse training places. We should not, I gently suggest, be ideological about this stuff, and we should be responsible.

The shadow Secretary of State said that this is not about ideology, but about what works. The hon. Member for Stockton South also said that where private sector involvement enhances what can be provided by the public sector, we should be brave about saying that what makes patients healthier is in the taxpayers’ interests, it is in their interests and it is in our interests. So, while it is sometimes hard, in this adversarial Chamber, to calm down and look at the interests of our constituents, and although parliamentary theatre may be fascinating for Prime Minister’s questions and may be fascinating to us, I would like to hear an acknowledgment that the present Government are investing more than ever in the health service, are seeking to tackle the challenges of an ageing population and are seeking fundamentally to put patients first.

5.55 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to be called to speak in this important debate.

In my constituency, local NHS services have been an issue of concern for some time. It seems that services are forever under threat and that our local trusts are always struggling. Dewsbury Hospital, which is in my constituency and serves my constituents, has seen a number of its functions move to Pinderfields Hospital. Its A&E has been downgraded, so that seriously ill patients are more likely to be taken elsewhere, and in recent weeks the Secretary of State for Health stepped in to prevent any potential closure of the A&E at Huddersfield Royal Infirmary. That was a welcome step, but our NHS services should not be in a position where such drastic changes to provision are suggested.

I, like so many colleagues in the House, am in awe of our hard-working NHS staff, and I know that, in the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, they continue to go above and beyond in ever more testing conditions. I pay tribute to them, and also say to Ministers that in my constituency we want our NHS staff to remain NHS.

Just last week, the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust announced plans to move staff into a wholly owned subsidiary company—something that, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and others, is part of a national roll-out. That subsidiary will run a considerable range of local NHS services and will be responsible for an enormous number of local staff. The announcement came with very little warning and no public engagement about the plans.

Once again, I reiterate that I appreciate and understand the pressures that are being put on NHS trusts by the Government, and Mid Yorkshire is no different; but for me, the decision to move to a wholly owned subsidiary company simply is not the right one. Opposition has already been growing. The trade union Unison has called the trust’s plans an “insult” to workers, and will be balloting its members next month over potential strike action—something that will leave my constituents concerned, but also frustrated, as this problem is avoidable. They will understand that to take people off NHS contracts, and thereby put them at the risk of a future where the terms and conditions of their employment are inferior to those of their colleagues, can only worsen the situation.

The good news is—I hope it is good news—that the decisions on whether the trust can go ahead with its proposals are not a done deal. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care still has to approve the plans. I say to him and his colleagues that these staff, including cleaners, IT specialists, maintenance workers, help keep our hospitals safe and functioning. They have stuck by the NHS in extremely testing circumstances, throughout years of pay stagnation. I, staff and the unions know that it is not the right decision to go down this path—a path that could lead to a two-tier workforce, where two colleagues working side by side, doing the same hours, the same job, could end up taking home a different wage.

Let us do the right thing by NHS staff and local people, and consign this wholly owned subsidiary to the bin where it belongs.

5.58 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and so many other colleagues who have made excellent speeches from both sides of the House.

I should recognise at the start of my comments that this Government have, over the past eight years, been increasing spending on the NHS and have ambitions, and a determination, to continue spending on our national health service. But for me, the Government are introducing a new substantial multi-year funding plan, which will provide more certainty for the future and better enable the NHS to plan and invest.
Locally, only last year we saw the building of a new £40 million mental health hospital—Atherleigh Park. That demonstrates this Government’s commitment to supporting people with mental health concerns. I was really pleased to see that local investment recently. In Horwich, we have plans for investment in GP services, with a new centre costing £6.8 million. It is going to be delivered in the near future, and it will provide a far better service and far better accessibility for people living in Horwich. That commitment to spending—to the NHS—is there.

As the Secretary of State highlighted, during the second world war the Conservative party, along with other parties in Parliament, was committed to delivering a national health service to ensure that we got that improvement in people’s health right across the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that since the second world war the Conservatives have run the NHS more than Labour. That rather undermines these arguments about privatisation, because why has it not yet been privatised if we have run it more than Labour? As my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) said, the rate of increase in privatisation was actually far higher under the previous Labour Government. Labour ought to reflect on its own record in government of the increasing rate of privatisation through PFI deals.

Ultimately, this is about what works: that is what patients want to see. I am concerned about the scaremongering being pursued by Labour Members. Most MPs, when they hear the talk about privatisation, would recognise that care will still be free at the point of use, with a different mechanism to deliver the same high standard of care through the NHS or a private provider. What many people at home would hear, though, is that they will have to pay for that care—that they will need to have their credit card with them and if anything happens they will have to pay extra money, in addition to paying their taxes and everything else. During last year’s general election, I had conversations with constituents who had been terrified by people on the doorstep telling them that they would have to get their credit card to pay for their healthcare. This scaremongering has to come to an end.

6.2 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I rise to speak as a former public health consultant and the chair of a primary care trust.

I want to start by recalling a conversation I had with Brenda Rustidge, a constituent of mine. She was born in the 1930s, and she described to me what it was like living in a pre-NHS world. Her father, who had just been demobbed after the war, was unemployed. She had a number of brothers and sisters, and they used to have to hide under the window when the doctor’s secretary called round on a Friday night to collect the money. She described the real fear and shame that she felt as a result. Of course, all that changed nearly 70 years ago when the NHS was created. Brenda and her family have thrived because of that.

This debate is not about scaremongering. It is about raising awareness of the real concerns not just of political parties but of clinicians, academics and experts across the country and across the world about what privatisation means. Okay, it is on a small scale, but in terms of spending it has increased from about 2.8% in 2006 to over 7.5%—over 10% if we include not just private providers but all non-NHS providers.

I want to reflect on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams): we have within the NHS a system that provides universal, comprehensive and free healthcare. That is something we should be very, very proud of. We are seeing that being eroded. For example, private providers of knee and hip replacements exclude certain people. They do not want the complex cases because they are too time-consuming and costly. I take issue with the point that the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) made, because it does entirely matter who provides the care that we get. There is a slow and steady erosion of the NHS as the sole provider.

In 2014, I conducted an inquiry into the international evidence on the effect of privatisation, marketisation and competition across different health systems. We commissioned a review of reviews, which is the strongest type of evidence, on the impact on health services, particularly looking at equity and quality. It was submitted to peer reviews and accepted in peer-reviewed journals subsequently, and it showed clearly and conclusively that health equity worsens in terms of not only access to healthcare but health outcomes.

It also revealed that there is no compelling evidence that competition, privatisation or marketisation improves healthcare quality. In fact, there is some evidence that it actually impedes quality, increasing hospitalisation rates and mortality rates. Of course, that was the key argument and the sole reason that the Government put forward for the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

The report found a whole host of other issues. I am sure that Members will go to my website to read about that. The transactional cost was one example—

Mr Speaker: Order.

6.6 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I want to start by recognising the achievements of the Tony Blair Government in taking the ideology out of private-public, which was good, and fast-tracking a number of patients who had been waiting too long for knee or hip replacements by allowing those operations to take place using the private sector. My own family were able to benefit from that. That was a good example of looking at what was best for the patient. It was still free at the point of delivery and ultimately within the health system.

I find it deeply depressing to hear those on the Labour Front Bench this afternoon talking in a manner that completely unwinds that, putting the NHS as a political football first and what is best for patients second. The shadow Health Secretary was so excited about the concept that I thought he was going to spontaneously combust. It is a stain on the Labour party that it would go back in time in that manner.

Far from the exaggerations that we heard, the reality is that the proportion of private spend has gone up from 5% when Labour left office—not, as the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, 2.5%—to 8%. Since the NHS has been
It is because both I and my party hold the NHS so dear that Labour Members are concerned by the parlous state in which it finds itself. Pushed to the brink by the biggest financial squeeze in NHS history and reeling from the worst winter crisis on record, the NHS is at breaking point. People are waiting far too long for operations, and performance targets are so far from being met that they are now about as realistic as the Government’s infamous immigration targets.

Official data show that patient waiting times, bed shortages and ambulance queues have hit record levels. The chair of the British Medical Association succinctly summed up the situation when he said: “the ‘winter crisis’ has truly been replaced by a year-round crisis. Doctors and patients have just endured one of the worst winters on record...We cannot accept that this is the new normal for the NHS.”

Let us be clear that this is not an unavoidable situation or the result of some unforeseen circumstances; the situation has come to pass as a direct result of this Government’s policies. By stark contrast to the policies of the Conservative party, in our 2017 manifesto Labour promised immediate investment in our NHS and, just as importantly, explained how we could pay for it.

The issue of privatisation within the NHS is both an important and an emotive one. I believe in a publicly owned NHS, free at the point of delivery, but the creeping privatisation of services poses a very real threat to that most essential of principles. The figures are irrefutable. Since 2010, NHS expenditure on private health providers has doubled from £241 million in 2015-16 to £381 million in 2016-17, while the percentage of funding allocated to private sector providers has grown from 4.4% in 2009-10 to 7.7% in 2016-17. Spending on elective treatments outsourced to the private sector rose significantly from £241 million in 2015-16 to £381 million in 2016-17.

Since the Government’s disastrous Health and Social Care Act, one third of contracts have been awarded to private providers, some of which have resulted in failure and the waste of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money. We have seen the grotesque spectacle of Virgin Care successfully suing our NHS for £1.5 million after losing out on an £82 million contract for children’s health services in Surrey. This has to stop. Labour is committed to reversing privatisation, repealing the Health and Social Care Act and reinstating the powers of the Secretary of State for Health to have overall responsibility for the NHS.

The creation of wholly owned subsidiary companies represents another concern. These new arm’s length private companies can pollute NHS trusts because they can reduce their VAT payments and cut the pay and pensions for any new staff. They result in millions of pounds being wasted on consultancy fees, with the Clatterbridge Cancer Centre in Birkenhead alone spending more than £660,000. That money could have paid for new staff to work in such hospitals.

I am fortunate to have the amazing Queen Elizabeth Hospital in my constituency. Among many other things, it cares for our brave men and women who are injured while serving their country in our armed forces. I want that hospital to continue to flourish and serve the people of Edgbaston and further afield, but I consider privatisation to be a threat to that happening.

As well as more money, we need reform. Reform only works when more money is put into the system. As well as seeing an extra 1p on income tax, I would like to see another penny effectively suspended. We can then go back to the public and ask whether they think it is acceptable that people abuse the A&E system and the people within it, and whether people should be charged if they turn up wrecked and take advantage. Is it acceptable that people mess around their GP surgeries, wasting time and money for GPs? If that does not work, perhaps we should put a second penny on income tax, because we need to take tough decisions to make this work.

Another point I want to make comes back to political footballs. Reference has been made to Sussex patient transport, and I chaired the group on that. It was a good example of a cross-party group that with other MPs—including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) from the Opposition—worked with the CCG to try to find a solution. The reality was that the contract was not stripped out of the public sector.

CCG to try to find a solution. The reality was that (Peter Kyle) from the Opposition—worked with the MPs—including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle)—on that. We have the pharmaceutical industry. The public and private have always worked together to make sure the best care and free at the point of delivery—and that is what goes on at the moment.

We are seeing record levels of funding within the NHS, as we did under the Blair Government; I hope Members see that I am being fair and trying to make a cross-party point. I would like to see more funding in the NHS. While I do not like to see taxes go up—I would be the last person on the Government Benches to argue for that—I think the point has come when we need to look at our income tax rates and face facts. People are living longer, and they need better care. We need more money in our social care system as well.

As well as more money, we need reform. Reform only works when more money is put into the system. As well as seeing an extra 1p on income tax, I would like to see another penny effectively suspended. We can then go back to the public and ask whether they think it is acceptable that people abuse the A&E system and the people within it, and whether people should be charged if they turn up wrecked and take advantage. Is it acceptable that people mess around their GP surgeries, wasting time and money for GPs? If that does not work, perhaps we should put a second penny on income tax, because we need to take tough decisions to make this work.
6.14 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I, too, want to use this opportunity to debunk the myth that the Conservative party wants to, or ever has wanted to, privatisate the NHS. That is an image that the Labour party wants to portray, but the facts tell a different story. In the 70 years of the NHS, 43 of those years have been under a Conservative Government, so if privatising the NHS were the sole aim of the Conservative party, it would have been done by now. The NHS remains based on the three founding principles of meeting the needs of everyone, being free at the point of use, and being based on clinical need, not ability to pay. However, facts do not often matter to the Labour party.

I was at a meeting at the weekend of more than 200 GPs who were desperate for the politics to be taken out of the NHS. They welcome the Government’s talk of a long-term settlement and of taking the NHS out of the political cycle. That puts fear into the heart of Labour because it would mean that the NHS would come first, not the motives of the Labour party.

If Labour Members were honest with themselves, they would recall the history of the last Labour Government, who did more for privatisation in the NHS than anyone before or since. In 1999, within two years of coming to power, the Labour Government set up market structures in the NHS to create choice and competition, with hospitals starting to charge by price per episode to compete with the private sector. That is Labour’s record on privatisation in the NHS. In 2003, they set up foundation trusts so that hospitals could be free from the constraints of the NHS and run like a business. That is Labour’s record of privatisation in the NHS. Also in 2003, they introduced independent sector treatment centres—private companies set up to provide wholly NHS elective procedures. That is Labour’s record of privatisation in the NHS.

Some 84% of PFI projects were started under Labour. Although they built £11.8 billion-worth of hospitals, the cost to the NHS is £79 billion over 31 years. In 2009, the Labour Government introduced “any qualified provider”, which we have heard about this afternoon, allowing the private sector to undertake NHS work. That is Labour’s true record of privatising the NHS. The King’s Fund analysis on the Labour Government found that by the time they left office, the NHS in England was operating more like a market, with half of elective patients being offered a choice of the private sector. The culture of the NHS had changed from one of collaboration to one of competition.

I am not against the involvement of the private sector in the NHS. As a research nurse, I worked with many multinational pharma companies setting up joint research studies that gave NHS patients access to drugs long before they were available on the NHS and access to equipment that was paid for by pharma companies and left in perpetuity to the NHS.

Labour Members lecture us on privatisation in the NHS, but the last time they were in government, they wanted to close the Princess Royal in Haywards Heath to patients in my constituency. When we were missing Government targets and breast cancer patients were not getting their treatment under the last Labour Government, did they listen to the breast surgeons in my unit who said, “Give us an extra theatre and we can deliver it.”? No, they spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on performance management consultants, time and motion studies, brainstorming sessions and patient pathway mapping. At the end of that six-month process, they told us that the solution was to have more theatre sessions, which the surgeons had told them in the first place.

This is not just my experience; the British public know that the NHS is safe in Conservative hands. That is why, for 43 of the last 70 years, they have put the Conservative party in charge of the NHS, and long may that continue.

6.18 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): After eight years of the Government’s austerity agenda, the NHS is on its knees. People in Lincoln commonly wait hours for an ambulance, including those having a heart attack. If a Health Minister happens to be in Lincoln any time soon, they might want to ask about that, because call-to-balloon times for PCI have increased. I am not scaremongering—that is the truth. I am sorry, but I will not pretend that—pardon the pun—everything is rosy.

Although the austerity experiment has been discredited by various economists, we have not seen a halt or a reversal of the underfunding and privatisation of our NHS. With the NHS approaching its 70th birthday, the Government are not providing it with the funding and resourcing it desperately needs. Despite the Government telling us that they are putting record amounts of money into the NHS, compared with countries such as Germany and France, we spend a considerably smaller percentage of our GDP on healthcare.

The latest King’s Fund research confirmed the bleak picture of the policies of the past eight years. The NHS has among the lowest levels of doctors, nurses and beds in the western world. This is not scaremongering; it is the reality of the past eight years’ effect on the health service. I am sorry if people do not like hearing it, but it is the truth. The question should not be why the NHS is so under-funded and under-resourced, but rather how the NHS copes under immense pressure when it is so under-resourced. Remember, this is at a time when the Government are prioritising tax cuts for the wealthy and for large corporations.

Deregulation under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is a stain on this country’s long respect and support for our NHS. There is no role for the private sector if the NHS is fully resourced. Outsourcing has led to nearly two thirds of clinical contracts being won by non-NHS providers. The NHS should not be a cash cow available to the highest bidder. The financial pressures on the NHS have forced some firms to leave the market, while others search for short-term cheap fixes to deliver contracts, which ultimately impacts on patient care.

It is clear that the Government have a not very well hidden agenda: slash, trash and privatise. Underfunding, with little sign of change over the past eight years, only raises the question: do the Government actually want a nationally run service that provides free healthcare to all, free at the point of service? My constituents, after the closure of our walk-in centre—against the wishes of 94% of people who said they wanted it to stay open—are not convinced. The sustainability and transformation partnerships, wholly owned subsidiaries and accountable care organisations are all a ploy for their ideological goal: the backdoor privatisation of our service.
I have seen that at first hand from the hospital floor as a nurse. Instead of just words of praise for those working in the health service—praising nurses sounds really cheap, you know, as if Conservative Members can take some sort of credit for it; it is their hard work, not yours—why not provide them with the resources to do their job properly? Rewards come with actions, not just words.

6.21 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is quite interesting to be following the speech we just heard. I will not dwell too much on it, but the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) mentioned accountable care organisations. Supposedly, they will have “multiple benefits” and “contrary to what some of the demonstrators suggest will make it easier for the NHS not to go down the private contracting route”.

Those are not my words, but the words of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), a former Labour Health Minister.

I always welcome the chance to discuss the NHS on the Floor of the House and to consider some of the challenges in my constituency, in particular for social care, given that 9% of the entire population of one of my wards is aged over 85. That brings not only challenges around social care, but questions of how those with chronic conditions are cared for by the NHS.

I had hoped this afternoon’s debate would be constructive. To be fair, the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), who is not in the Chamber, gave quite a constructive and thoughtful speech based on his own experience and his time serving on the Health and Social Care Committee. The debate, however, started off with what can best be described as a 40-minute partisan rant. It did include one positive and constructive offer of working with the Government on potential legislation but, other than that, it was quite bizarre to hear the Opposition spokesman running down every private contract given, except for those given by Labour Administrations. We heard an intervention by the leader of Plaid Cymru in Westminster about outsourcing in Wales, which is apparently okay because it is not wholesale, but just bringing in the private sector when it is the right thing to do. The Labour Front-Bench speech was a bizarre spectacle, although not surprising from a Member of the party responsible for 118 out of the 125 NHS PFI contracts.

People think PFI contracts are just about building hospitals, but they are not. I was deputy leader of Coventry City Council when University Hospital opened. The private sector did not just build the hospital; virtually all the facilities and services were privatised as a part of the PFI contract, which raised interesting issues with regard to amending it. Again, the idea that this was some sort of spot purchasing is absolute nonsense. This was a 25-year contract that even included guarantees about income from the car park, which ratcheted up the prices.

It is disappointing that the debate has not been more positive, with a consideration of some issues around health and social care. The other bizarre thing is that I have not yet heard one Labour Member talk about the motion or tell us why giving these papers to the Health and Social Care Committee would make much difference. What do they think the Committee would do with them? The terms of the Humble Address have not been talked about at all. It would be interesting to hear—I will be happy to take an intervention from a shadow Front Bench—what discussions, if any, there were with the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), before the Labour party tabled the motion. It strikes me as bizarre that we have a motion stating that the papers are really crucial and should be given to the Committee, yet no one has talked once about why doing so would be sensible.

I will conclude by talking about the positives in my community. The recent announcement of investment in urgent care services in Torbay has been very welcome, and it will certainly make a difference to patients. This will be the first new A&E department for Torbay since the 1970s. It was also really satisfying this week to see the local trust rated as good in its latest CQC assessment. That is a real tribute to all those who work in the NHS locally, and it deserves to be recognised here in this House.

6.25 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The biggest issue facing the NHS is the money and the workforce, and going into that mix, we have these wholly owned companies. They are a wheeze to gain income, but the consequences are deeply troubling. They drive further fragmentation of the NHS and, when collaboration should be growing, we instead see each trust going its own way.

If these changes for wholly owned companies were driven by service improvement and the appetite of staff for change, the managers and boards of the trusts would be doing their jobs, which is to identify the need for improvement in these services and to speak to their staff about how to achieve it. However, in almost every case, the changes have been progressed in secret, with little or no staff engagement or consultation and with no documents being made public. It is very hard to get the documents from these trusts. Worse still, we are now in an uncontrolled hiving off of NHS assets to these new companies, with no discernible safeguards to prevent the assets, or indeed the whole company, from being sold off to anyone else. They are one step away from being taken outside the NHS to any other provider.

In response to some of my written questions, I have discerned a bit of change in the Government on the NHS. I asked how many trusts have had to change the terms of their authorisation, which was a requirement in the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003, to protect the transferred assets. On 11 May, the Government said:

“There is no requirement to change the terms of authorisation when setting up a wholly owned subsidiary and therefore, the Department does not hold the information requested. If trusts hold community interest assets then these are considered public assets and cannot be sold unless subject to a Departmental/Secretary of State approval, however this is only a limited number of assets. For other assets trusts should consider whether transactions are ‘reportable’ under the transactions guidance and therefore would be subject to a review if above the thresholds outlined.”

NHS Improvement has committed to:

The proposed creation of subsidiary companies becoming a reportable transaction to NHS Improvement under the Transactions Guidance, irrespective of size; and”

NHS Improvement will be looking at “subsequent changes”.

Karen Lee
While a tick-box exercise and oversight by NHS Improvement is welcome, that is closing the door after the horse has bolted. In answer to another question about continued onward sale, I was told that there would be restrictions where disposal would affect commissioner-requested services. The 2003 Act does not say that. Section 16 talks about NHS foundation trusts not disposing of protected property “without the approval of the regulator” and says that protected property is the “property of the trust designated as protected in its authorisation.”

I think there has been a change in that period and I would like to understand why. If the Minister cannot answer that today, I am happy to write to him.

We have essentially no assurance as to how the transfer of these wholly owned companies to any private bidder, one step on, can be stopped. How would local people ever know? How would the staff now? We cannot get any information from most of these trusts. They are not answering FOI requests and that is why this is essentially of such continued concern.

The first step to remedying this shambles would be to close the VAT loophole, which I do not have time to talk about today. Meanwhile, NHS Improvement should not be encouraging the recreation of a two-tier workforce, especially at a time of such overwhelming concern about the availability of a skilled workforce. This is ever more important with Brexit looming. NHSI is a Government body funded by the taxpayer and accountable through the Secretary of State to Parliament. That it is not say that. Section 16 talks about NHS foundation trusts not disposing of protected property “without the approval of the regulator” and says that protected property is the “property of the trust designated as protected in its authorisation.”

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6.29 pm 

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): A constituent wrote to me last year to say that, against the backdrop of negativity around healthcare in this country, he personally had had a really good experience of treatment on the NHS at his nearest hospital. It happened to be KIMS Hospital, an independent sector provider, but it had given him what he really wanted: timely, high-quality and caring treatment free at the point he needed it.

The shadow Secretary of State recognised earlier that there was a place for private providers in the NHS. As in the example I have just given, that place might be enabling somebody to get timely treatment at a time of huge pressure on NHS resources, but, from what we have seen, it seems Labour considers the place for private treatment to be whenever Labour is in power. As we heard, in the years running up to 2010, when Labour was in power, there was an increase in the use of private sector providers in the NHS, as I saw when I worked with the NHS, and there was an increase in their use last year in Wales, where Labour is in power.

I do not want to make an ideological argument—I do not particularly want to talk about who provides the care, because what matters to me and my constituents is that they get good care when they need it—but, as Labour is picking this fight, it is only fair to put some truths on the table, and as far as I can see, the place for private providers, from Labour’s point of view, is whenever it is in government.

What matters to me is great care, and I have observed some ways of getting it. In some parts of healthcare, one way is by offering choice. Giving mothers-to-be the choice of where to have their baby makes maternity teams say, “Hold on. We want to be the best place in the area to have a baby.” Choice works, so long as it is accompanied by transparency, and the Government have done much to improve transparency in healthcare, meaning that people can know where to get good treatment and where there are problems, which has driven up quality.

Innovation and new technology can also transform healthcare. Whether the introduction of keyhole surgery, which has hugely shortened stays in hospital, or the exciting things happening with genomics and personalised medicine, innovation is making a huge difference, and it should not matter where that innovation comes from. If it comes from the private sector, we should welcome it. The workforce also matter. We have skilled, capable and committed people providing great care day after day, but I would argue the Government need to place an even greater emphasis on the workforce to make sure that those who work in the NHS or train to be doctors, nurses or other healthcare professionals are valued and nurtured and have rewarding careers that make the most of their talents.

I will conclude with some facts, given the many myths peddled this afternoon: it is clear the NHS is not being privatised—there has been a zero increase in the last year in the use of the independent sector; the NHS is getting more money—£8 billion more this Parliament; and the NHS is treating thousands more people. Times are difficult, but the NHS is rising to the challenge. We should get away from these ideological arguments and put our energies into making sure we have the best possible NHS.

6.33 pm 

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). She spoke with characteristic gusto, even if—I am sorry to say it—I did not agree with a single word she said.

I want to underline how privatisation is sapping resources from our NHS, in Oxford East and elsewhere in the country, at the very time it needs them more than ever, because of demographic change and the knock-on impact of cuts elsewhere in our public services. Oxford has particular problems with staff recruitment and retention because of the very high cost of living and the historically high number of EU staff in our local NHS, who are under threat from the Government’s shambolic approach to Brexit. Too few staff for high demand has led to clear reductions—that is right: reductions—in patient care in my local area.

Between January and March this year, 273 non-urgent surgical operations were postponed in my city. Rather than the response being additional resources for the local trust that was working so hard in trying to provide a decent service, in the topsy-turvy world of this Government, my trust lost £1 million because of what happened during that period. Meanwhile, Virgin Care has taken £1.5 million away from our NHS through court action against it. That is an absolute disgrace.
The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who, sadly, is no longer in the Chamber, wilfully misconstrued the impact of privatisation. The clue is in the word: it means privatising—making private—something that was public before. We are not talking about the great British biomedical industry, which has always been private. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), the shadow Health Secretary, came to my constituency to see an operation this very week. In fact, the innovation that is promoted by that industry would be aided by an end to inappropriate privatisation. If we stopped sucking out resources and putting them into the pockets of profiteers, they could be spent on the high-quality healthcare and technologies of the future that would actually benefit patients.

The delays in operations in Oxford have become substantially worse over time. Between the end of February 2017 and February 2018, the acute hospital trust had to postpone 952 non-urgent operations; 536 were postponed in the previous year. As the situation has worsened, it has become harder and harder to establish whose responsibility it is. It is no longer the Health Secretary’s responsibility, because, following the Lansley reforms, he has no overall responsibility for the NHS. Oxfordshire’s joint health overview and scrutiny committee, which is meant to oversee services, has just decided to hold many of its meetings in secret, so the public do not even know what is going on at that level.

There are constant arguments about who is responsible for the provision of various essential services. As we all know, breastfeeding support is incredibly important to both babies and mums, but my local clinical commissioning group and my local council cannot agree whose responsibility it is to pay for it, so it is not being delivered properly. That is happening throughout the country. Of course, those services used to be available in children’s centres, but we do not have them any more in Oxfordshire since they were got rid of.

The crisis in Oxford’s NHS has been intensified by all the cuts in social care. Even with all those pressures, however, local NHS staff are working incredibly hard. We are not scaremongering when those staff are coming to our surgeries in tears. When they are telling us how hard they work, we need to agree more with her astute analysis, which also—yet again—applied to what is happening in York.

I want to begin by thanking Pat Crowley, the chief executive of York Teaching Hospital NHS Trust, who has just announced his retirement. He has steered our hospital through unprecedented challenges. I have met the Minister to discuss so many of those challenges: the failed funding formula, the perverse financial incentives, the failed budget integration and the placing of the private profit motive at the heart of our NHS—but I am still waiting for his response to that meeting.

Let me turn to the issue of how money flows. We have talked about private finance in the NHS, but we should also bear in mind that money is not going into primary care and GP services. That is forcing people to use accident and emergency departments, which are the most expensive part of the NHS. Let us follow through the money that people are drawing down. People cannot get in through the front door of the NHS because people are not being cleared out of the back door as a result of the bed-blocking that has resulted from the Government’s cuts in local authority budgets. Those cuts have also caused public health services to be slashed so severely that a massive health crisis is being created. The shocking statistics relating to drug deaths in York are now the worst in the country. We desperately need more resources there. If we invest in people’s health, the health service will save money in the long term. Our teaching hospital is over £20 million in debt—it is the most expensive part of the NHS. Let us follow through the money that people are drawing down.

I want to take on the argument that the private sector is helping the NHS. The private sector is offloading the low-risk, high-volume work from the NHS—that which under the tariff produces money and profit for the private sector. Formerly that money was invested in the most expensive parts of the NHS to stop the deficits in the NHS; the money went to the ITU, the A&E and the renal units which have a high demand for expensive drugs. The private sector sucking out resources from the NHS in this way is causing the financial failure of the NHS today. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Minister to withdraw that failed model under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and to ensure that instead we see real investment in the NHS, which will make a vast improvement to the health service as we move to its 70th anniversary.

Mr Speaker: I am very sorry, but in order to accommodate the remaining speakers—I thought that there were four, but there seem to be five—I must impose a three-minute limit, as I advised the Whip. I want to get everyone in.

6.37 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). I could not agree more with her astute analysis, which also—yet again—applied to what is happening in York.

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23 MAY 2018

NHS Outsourcing and Privatisation

946

Several hon. Members rose—

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Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I remember when I first heard the term STP; I was portfolio holder for adult services at the time, and while I supported the need for a better integrated health and social care system, there were no details of what this might mean in the future. Within a few months, NHS bosses started talking about accountable care systems and accountable care organisations. Bedford, Luton and Milton Keynes would become a “first wave” accountable care system and this was good, they told us. The decision to become a “first wave ACS” had to be taken within 24 to 48 hours to secure additional funding, so there was no time for consultation with other councillors, let alone the public.

The same approach was taken with the STPs: no or little consultation with a take-it-or-leave-it funding deal, with no time given to us to analyse or debate the pros and cons. Recently we learned that the three CCGs in our STP area have agreed to merge their executive functions, which was “nothing to do with MPs and councillors,” they said, and nothing to do with the public. But they cannot tell us who will be accountable
under this new structure, and it is likely that it will not be the people making decisions about our health and social care system.

The term ACO emerged in the US in 2006. ACOs were designed to improve patient experience and control federal expenditure within the US healthcare system, which is dominated by private health and insurance companies. But so far the evidence of the effect of ACOs on quality is not convincing and in fact spending has increased.

There is an inherent risk that if we invite tenders from providers to run health and social care systems across the country, and we do so without proper consultation with patients and service users, we will end up with the sort of mess that we saw at Hinchingbrooke Hospital and hospitals suing the NHS, as Virgin Care did, but on a much larger scale.

The Government’s healthcare reforms of 2012 have created chaos in our health service. We now have a system that allows private providers to escape necessary scrutiny when they get things wrong and to walk away from unprofitable contracts without reproach. Billions of pounds have been wasted that could and should have been invested in frontline care.

6.43 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I will use this opportunity to focus on continuing the great work of my predecessor the right hon. Alan Johnson and his campaign to ensure that Hull has the much needed child and adolescent mental health unit in our constituency.

We all accept that mental health is a huge problem, and I was proud to play a part in the Education Committee’s joint report on failing a generation, which rightly criticised the Government’s Green Paper on this issue. But we have been waiting for this change for such a long time.

Alan became involved in the campaign for this unit after meeting a young mum and campaigner called Sally Burke. Her daughter, Maisie, had significant mental health problems, so significant that she was sent 140 miles away for treatment. My constituent was not able to see her daughter as much as she would have liked, which highlights the lack of provision in my constituency and the desperate need for it.

The people of Hull came together with the local newspaper, the Hull Daily Mail, and 3,500 people petitioned the Government to say that we desperately need this unit. Members could imagine our joy and celebration when, in September 2017, we were told that the money had been found and that we were going to get the unit we had been desperately waiting and the money is stuck in the Treasury, and he asked me to write to him. So I wrote to him about it, and then I had to wait for a really long time, until I tabled a written question asking when he would reply to my letter. He eventually replied with the confusing response that the trust needs to submit more information on the business case for the unit. That deeply concerns me because the unit was promised back in September 2017 and we are still waiting.

The people of Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle are not fools, and they will not accept any more delays. They have been campaigning for this unit for years, and I will not let down my predecessor, the wonderful Alan Johnson, by not making sure I deliver on his legacy and getting the CAMHS unit we desperately need. I call on the Minister to take immediate action: stop faffing about and give us the money for our CAMHS unit, which was promised months ago. I promise I will not stop going on about it until he does.

6.46 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): For now, NHS trusts remain the sole shareholder in their wholly owned subsidiary companies—yes, just for now—but those subsidiary companies will be easier to sell in future. The trusts have established those subsidiaries with long contracts under the misguided impression that such contracts protect the trust and the employees. What the trusts do not acknowledge is that the current Government, or a future Government, could order them to sell off a subsidiary company, contracts and all, and, if necessary, could change the law to make it happen.

We have already seen how these new subsidiary companies make their margins off the backs of now former NHS staff who face the prospect of less favourable contracts with no access to the NHS pension scheme, yet some trust executives claim they are transferring employees to protect them. That is absolute rubbish. We all know that when staff are transferred by TUPE, the receiving employer can have a reorganisation. It can create new roles and axe old ones, and it can require people to apply again for what looks like their old job with some subtle changes, with the terms and conditions varied, putting an end to the protections they once enjoyed. This creates the two-tier workforce many others have spoken about today. It means that some people are being treated better than others, with more rights, better pay and better working conditions.

I have even heard that some of these executives believe the changes could be in the best interest of the workforce. None of these executives faces the prospect of being reorganised out of their job or out of their final salary pension scheme with a 15% employer contribution. The executives will continue to get that pension, yet the people they have shifted into new organisations will get a 3% employer contribution to their pension.

In a few years’ time, it will be interesting to see just how many of the original staff are still in these organisations and how many of them are on the same terms and conditions enjoyed by NHS staff who are still employed directly.

I am proud that, just a week ago, one of the teams at the North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust in my Stockton North constituency was shortlisted for
the NHS 70th awards, but a few months ago even this trust succumbed to temptation and set up one of these wholly owned subsidiary companies, despite the accounts for an existing subsidiary company showing it needed a bail-out from the trust to survive.

Wholly owned subsidiary companies are not working. They are a mechanism to rid employees of their NHS pension and of collective bargaining. The companies are damaging to employees, and they are damaging to the service in the longer run. What they are really doing is severely damaging the morale of our staff.

Mr Speaker: For a maximum of two minutes, I call Hugh Gaffney.

6.49 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the NHS’s public service workers for all that they do for us. They have stood against cuts under Tory austerity and a decade of SNP cuts in Scotland. Scotland’s NHS workers are underpaid, undervalued and under-resourced while millions of pounds are spent on agency staff. As Richard Leonard, the Scottish Labour leader, said recently, private companies are “sucking money out of the NHS”, but Labour in Scotland is ready to stand up to Tory austerity and SNP cuts.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed.

6.50 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This has been an interesting, passionate debate with many knowledgeable contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) raised concerns about a new ALMO in her constituency and the impact on NHS staff working conditions, and I am sure that she will shine a light on that issue relentlessly. Like many Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) mentioned wholly owned subsidiaries, rightly highlighting the fact that the Treasury is turning a blind eye despite the fact that their creation represents a VAT loophole. That tells us everything we need to know about where the Government’s priorities lie. She mentioned NHS staff striking at the Wightlington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust because of their concerns about the impact that subsidiaries will have on their terms and conditions, and Labour Members send our solidarity and support. Government Members need to start listening to the staff.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) gave a typically cerebral contribution. He was right that elements of privatisation encourage cherry-picking and a race to the bottom, and I look forward to hearing more from him on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) gave her frontline view of the problems in her constituency, speaking with real passion, and it would be wrong to characterise that first-hand experience as scaremongering. My hon. Friends the Members for Barley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) mentioned wholly owned companies. Both talked about the secrecy surrounding the plans—and Labour Members sometimes wonder where conspiracy theories come from.

We also heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). In fact, we heard from more than 20 Back Benchers today, so I do not have time to refer to every contribution, but some Members seem to have been in denial about the basic facts. Performance targets are being missed month after month, with A&E targets not forecast to be met until next year at the earliest and the 18-week treatment target seemingly dropped altogether. We have among the lowest number per head of doctors, nurses and hospital beds in the western world. We have a recruitment and retention crisis, with more than 100,000 vacancies across the NHS.

The biggest fact of all is that the NHS faces the harshest and most sustained financial squeeze in its 70-year history. Despite the squeeze, the amount of money being directed to the private sector has more than doubled. That is the NHS under the Tories: patients worse off while private companies cash in. We have heard countless examples of what is happening on the ground today and clear evidence about the damage caused by the wasteful, top-down reorganisation of the NHS created by the Health and Social Care Act 2012—damage predicted by just about everyone other than Conservative Members.

Conservative Members have known for years that the 2012 Act is not working, and even the Secretary of State was uncharacteristically coy today when he was given the opportunity to give his own opinion on it. After six years of disaster, we finally hear reports that parts of the Act will be overturned, but there has been no detail of what is proposed. Why are the media being informed of these plans instead of this House? If there is nothing to worry about, why will the Government not come clean? If Ministers are still formulating their proposals, let me offer them some advice: if they propose anything less than a properly funded, comprehensive, reintegrated public NHS that is free at the point of use, we will not support it and the public will not support it, either. If they will not give the NHS the funding it needs and end the toxic privatisation of the health service, we will. I commend the motion to the House.

6.53 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): The Government oppose the motion. There is no complaint from the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), about papers sought and not provided. Indeed, there are no papers, according to the evidence that the Secretary of State read out at the start of the debate, which was provided to him by officials. There is no logic to the motion when, as several Members pointed out, there has been no increase in the share of NHS spending on the private sector over the past year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) in particular highlighted, the rate of increase has been slower under this Government than it was under previous Governments.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) pointed out, that is perhaps why so few Labour Members wanted to address the motion. As my hon.
Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, the motion contradicts both legislation passed by the Government in the form of the Freedom of Information Act, and numerous statements made by senior Labour politicians such as the former Foreign Secretary and Member for Blackburn in his evidence to the Chilcot inquiry.

Instead, there was a mix of confusion and division among Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who is not in her place and did not stay for the speech of the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karim Smyth), said that there is no logic to the use of the private sector, but in a well-informed and measured speech the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) said that sometimes it should be enabled. That point was conceded in the Chamber today by Labour Front Benchers, and in numerous media interviews, including on the “Victoria Derbyshire” show. They seem confused about whether they welcome the use of the private sector.

The confusion extended to the remarks of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). She said that Gateshead trust is very good, yet she seems to ignore the fact that the legislation on subsidiaries was passed under a Labour Government. The staff survey for that trust shows that the subsidiary has a satisfaction rate that is 15% higher than it was in the NHS as a whole. Because of her ideology, she seemed to suggest that her constituents working within that trust, which is 100% owned by the NHS, are wrong.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Debbie Abrahams) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) pointed out, there was a rewriting of history. The Labour Government before 2010 embraced the private sector. As illustrated in Wrexham, contracts in Wales are given to the private sector when Labour is in office. Labour Members say one thing in opposition and do something else in office. We have seen the contradiction today. Labour Members say that they dislike accountable care organisations and that they are a form of privatisation. It might surprise colleagues to learn that the Mayor of Greater Manchester, the former Labour Secretary of State for Health, is seeking to pilot an ACO because he recognises the benefits of integration.

The House heard misleading statements today. We were told by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) that there has been a slow and steady erosion of the NHS as a provider, even though the facts show a zero increase in the private sector share of NHS spending. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) highlighted the fact that private sector involvement was embraced, sought and progressed by the Blair Government.

That rewriting of history was further underlined by the Labour Members’ PFI amnesia. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, the NHS has £80 billion of PFI contracts and a £200 billion a year spend on PFI. Labour Members mentioned Carillion—12 of the 13 Carillion contracts for service management were entered into under the Labour Government.1

The reality is that this Government are investing more in our NHS and delivering more outcomes for patients. Some 2,500 more patients a day are seen within the four-hour A&E target. We are training more dentists. The hon. Members for Lincoln and for Canterbury


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.

Division No. 164] [6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cumnings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Debnahore, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
...
Tellers for the Ayes:

Nic Dakin and
Nick Smith

NOES

Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi

Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooksbank, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Sir Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, rh Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.

Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
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
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea

Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Ainsworth, Mr Andrew
Allan, Mark
Allen, Jane
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooksbank, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Sir Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, rh Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.

Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
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Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea

Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam

Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Ever since I was elected last June, the Alex hospital has been—and will continue to be—my top priority. My constituents deserve first-class healthcare, and I am determined to make sure that their hospital is there for them when they need it most.

The people of Redditch are well aware of this hospital's history, but I am focused on its future—a bright future, with new services being launched and much-needed investment going into our hospital. One service that demonstrates local health bosses' long-term commitment to the Alex is the urgent care centre. This vital service will work alongside A&E, will treat adults and children with minor and moderate illnesses and injuries and will give parents much-needed peace of mind that their children can be treated at their local hospital.

However, local health bosses promised this service to my constituents before I was elected last June, and it still has not been delivered. That is why I launched my urgent care centre parliamentary petition to demonstrate strong local support for this new service. I want the urgent care centre to be operational as soon as possible. With more than 1,000 constituents signing my petition, the people of Redditch clearly want this service open now without further delay. I am hugely grateful to every single person who has signed my petition and it is an absolute honour to submit it on their behalf today.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Redditch County, the petition states:

However, local health bosses promised this service to my constituents before I was elected last June, and it still has not been delivered. That is why I launched my urgent care centre parliamentary petition to demonstrate strong local support for this new service. I want the urgent care centre to be operational as soon as possible. With more than 1,000 constituents signing my petition, the people of Redditch clearly want this service open now without further delay. I am hugely grateful to every single person who has signed my petition and it is an absolute honour to submit it on their behalf today.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Redditch County,
there would be an urgent care service for under 16-year-old very sick children provided at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch; and further that would give parents peace of mind that their loved ones would be assessed, in a place familiar to them, especially for those who have difficulty travelling to Worcester.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press the local health authorities in Redditch and Worcester to publish their detailed plans for the implementation of the said urgent care centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Accrington Victoria Walk-in Centre

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7.16 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I should like to raise the not-so-small matter of the closure of Accrington Victoria walk-in centre, a valuable community health asset and a huge support to those in and around my constituency. The people of the area have, with great affinity, taken to their local healthcare services over many decades, and in years gone by, through paying a penny a week, they have funded the local hospital. Yet every decade unelected bodies, supported by the Government, seek to reduce healthcare provision in the area—with the exception of the last Labour Government, who invested in three new health centres, among other things, and rebuilt the local hospital at Blackburn.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of the future of Victoria hospital, Accrington.”

Those are not my words, but those of former Hyndburn MP the hon. Ken Hargreaves, who like his successor, Greg Pope MP—my predecessor—and me, have fought for better healthcare facilities in Hyndburn, particularly the retention of vital NHS services at Accrington Victoria, and in this case today, the GP walk-in centre at that hospital.

On 28 November 1989, under the previous Conservative Government, the honourable and much liked Mr Hargreaves spoke in this Chamber from the Government Benches, stating:

“Thousands of people have signed the petitions and written to their Members of Parliament and to the Secretary of State…we are fighting the same battle now that we fought 11 years”—[Official Report, 28 November 1989; Vol. 162, c. 685.]

“Is it equally clear that the people of Hyndburn wish to unite and fight.”

On the second of this month, I too presented a petition to this place, like my predecessor, with some 24,000 names on it. I can update the House: the petition now stands at 26,000 petitioners. The truth is, the public are not listened to by Governments and unelected bodies, and the people of Hyndburn are, as the former hon. Member Ken Hargreaves described, uniting and fighting once again.

This popular walk-in centre has already survived five attempts to close it. On 16 June, the health authorities—I do not exonerate the Government from this dreadful decision—are going to try to close the Accrington walk-in centre once again. We have a decision that makes little sense and a consultation that was a sham.

My own story sums up why this is the wrong decision. I contracted acute bronchitis—a serious enough illness. I was unaware of it other than feeling very ill. I struggled on until I eventually realised that it was a little more serious than a chesty cough and walked into my local GP surgery. The very helpful staff told me that there was a considerable wait to get a doctors’ appointment—a situation repeated nationally. The average wait to see a GP in the region is 13 days, I am told. If someone needs GP healthcare but cannot get an appointment, what do they do? My constituents widely share my frustration at the lack of GP access. Ringing up the GP first thing in the morning, the person is probably told that they are No. 8 in the queue, and they finally get through to a
receptionist only to be told that all the appointments for that day are gone, with the next available slot being at the end of the next week.

The receptionist at my GP surgery helpfully rang through to the new extended-hours GP service to get me an urgent appointment. She told me that unfortunately all the appointments had been filled that weekend. Coughing badly, I had two choices: A&E or the walk-in centre. I went to the walk-in centre, where, following a two-hour wait, my condition was diagnosed. Notes were then sent to my GP and added to my health records. Without the assistance of GPs at the walk-in centre, my health could have deteriorated. I certainly would not have waited 10 days for a GP appointment; I would have gone to A&E.

The value and scale of the service provided by the Accrington Victoria walk-in centre cannot be overestimated. It has received an incredible 42,000 patient visits in the past 12 months. They were people like me who could not get an urgent GP appointment. If it closes, many of those patients will simply go to A&E. This was clearly my next option had the walk-in centre not been open. In fact, figures from the Bury walk-in centre reveal that about 22% of patients will head to A&E—in our case, the A&E at Royal Blackburn Hospital, one of the busiest in the country. This will add considerably to the pressure on the A&E already. The A&E already has 9,000 extra patient visits at a time when it is overstretched, with ambulances parked outside waiting to refer patients for care. There are financial implications to this, too. An average patient visit to A&E costs about £124 compared with an average patient visit to the walk-in centre that costs about £60.

Mine is not the only story. In fact, the campaign has received hundreds of similar stories through its “SAVE Accrington Walk-in centre” Facebook page. Some of those real-life stories from the people who have benefited from the walk-in centre are incredible. They include people who had to be rushed immediately from the walk-in centre to the Royal Blackburn for life-saving interventions. I must thank the local people for backing this campaign in such huge numbers. I must also thank the three leading campaigners—Chris Reid, Shahed Mahmood and Kimberley Whitehead—for pursuing a more consultative and informative debate than that offered by the clinical commissioning group. I would also like to place on record my thanks to the two local papers: the Accrington Observer, which has been at the forefront of the campaign; and the Lancashire Telegraph. This walk-in centre service means an awful lot to local people. The campaign has included petitions, walks, polls and articles, and has gathered huge support. It has also included letters to GPs.

Since the phased closure started in April, it has been revealed that only 658 people responded to the East Lancashire clinical commissioning group’s consultation—1.6% of the 42,000 patients who have visited. Members should compare that with the 26,000 local residents who signed the petition against the closure.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I spoke to him beforehand about this. We cannot ignore his fantastic work on this issue, and I congratulate him on his 26,000-strong petition, which far outstrips the 658 responses that the consultation on this closure garnered. Does he agree that more weight should be given to those opposing the closure, who are 60 times greater in number than those who responded to the consultation, and that the Government should listen to those 26,000 people and not ignore them?

Graham P. Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable contribution. I have yet to meet anyone who filled in the CCG’s consultation, and I will return to the issue of guidelines on NHS consultations and listening to the people.

I want to reflect on the CCG’s consultation. I have grave doubts over its credibility and reliability. To my mind, consulting just 658 invisible people with dubious questions is not a consultation. The CCG asked the public whether they wanted extra GP hours. Just to compare, the walk-in centre provides 88 hours per week. The CCG says that the walk-in centre will be replaced by the new extended-hours GP service, which provides just 19 extra hours’ GP access. That is an 80% reduction in GP access.

In the CCG’s foggy consultation, it said that 61% of people were “in support of” its plans for more GP hours. Which resident is not going to say yes to more GP hours? That is not the same as 61% of people saying, “Yes, and also please close my walk-in centre.” This was a devious consultation. The results of it are grossly misleading, and it is important that the Minister takes that point on board.

In response, I ran my own Facebook poll, reaching out to the four corners of my constituency, and an amazing 6,200 people voted. Unlike the CCG’s consultation question, mine was simple: “Do you want the walk-in centre to remain open?” With an explanation about the 19 extended hours of GP access, of the 6,200 people who voted, 98% voted to keep the walk-in centre open. That poll reflects the true extent of public opinion in my constituency—98%.

The Minister must stop this closure and ask for a new consultation. She knows that consultation and the views of the public are key to the provision of NHS services. She will know that in national surveys, over 40% of the public say they want to be more involved in decisions about their care. I remind the Minister of the 26,000 people who have signed this local petition to keep the walk-in centre open.

The question is: how has this proposed closure put patients first? Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, CCGs and NHS England have a duty to promote the involvement of patients in their own health and care. The Minister knows that the guidance is statutory and that CCGs must regard to it. NHS England’s statutory guidance emphasises to CCGs in the NHS England document “Involving people in their own health and care” that patients must be central to decision making. Clearly they have not been in this case.

The Minister will also know that her Government’s health and social care NHS White Paper included a section entitled “Putting patients and the public first” and promised an NHS that is “genuinely centred on patients and carers” and “gives citizens a greater say in how the NHS is run”.

It embraces the principle of shared-decision making, under which patients make joint decisions about their care with their clinicians. That is clearly not the case...
with the Accrington Victoria walk-in centre. Notably, the statutory guidance is clear in its description of shared decision making, saying:

“shared decision making is a conversation, or series of conversations, that should include evidence-based information about all reasonable options”,

such as a loss of GP hours. The loss of hours and the walk-in centre were never mentioned.

As pertinent is the recent publication of long-awaited guidance by NHS England, which lays out the future of urgent care services and expectations for local NHS commissioners. The guidance, which the NHS has released early, contains a clear expectation and commitment to retain walk-in centres as part of local integrated health services. I note the reassurances given in it that walk-in centres will remain a vital component of health service provision. The new guidance commits to the establishment of GP-led urgent treatment centres, open at least 12 hours a day, with nurses and other clinicians also available, along with a range of simple diagnostic facilities—a walk-in centre by another name, offering the same services currently offered by Accrington Victoria walk-in centre.

In conclusion—I just want to make a final point, Mr Speaker—patients will be able to book appointments in the new urgent care units using the NHS 111 service, through their GP or, crucially, as at the walk-in centre, simply walk in. NHS England wants these new centres to be co-located where possible alongside other health services, such as Accrington Victoria Hospital. If the Minister wants to put patients first, have a meaningful consultation and roll out the urgent care units, she will see that this closure meets none of those or her Government’s ambitions. I hope the Minister has listened, and will not just defend the decision or simply defer it to the powers of East Lancashire CCG, but accept that this closure runs counter to the NHS England guidance.

Finally, I very gently remind the Minister that thousands of Conservative voters backed the hon. Ken Hargreaves’s campaign to save Accrington Victoria services and today thousands of Conservative voters are backing this campaign once again to save one of the most vital services at Accrington Victoria. I hope she recognises that, were he here today, this cross-party campaign would certainly have been led by my honourable predecessor, Ken Hargreaves. He would want the walk-in centre to stay open, and we would be united in that ambition. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

7.31 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) on securing the debate. He made a very powerful case on behalf of his constituents and very carefully set out the enormous strength of feeling in his constituency, as of course he should as the local Member of Parliament. I am grateful to him for articulating his case so powerfully.

Following a three-month public consultation, the East Lancashire clinical commissioning group made the decision to close Accrington walk-in centre from Sunday 17 June. Other services provided from the Accrington Victoria Community Hospital, such as the minor injuries unit, and X-ray and in-patient and out-patient services, are not affected by the changes and will of course remain available. I understand that there has in fact been a delay in the closure taking place, as the walk-in centre was due to close in the spring. However, following consultation, the CCG has decided to close Accrington walk-in centre on Sunday 17 June. This extension to the originally planned closure date was made to ensure that there is a smooth transition to the new models of care, once the walk-in centre closes.

East Lancashire CCG has implemented an extended access service in Hyndburn as a new model of service provision. This service is being provided under contract by a local GP provider organisation, the East Lancashire Union of GPs. The contract is for 12 months from 11 December 2017, and the extended access GP scheme in Hyndburn has been operating since December. It is important to note that while the extended access service in Hyndburn is a new model of service provision, it is not meant directly to replace the walk-in centre per se.

GP services are accessible to patients through their own GP practice from 8 am until 6.30 pm, Monday to Friday, as usual. Pre-bookable appointments will also be available in the new extended GP service after 6.30 pm on weekdays and at the weekend. These appointments will be booked through the patient’s own GP practice. This new model of extended GP access meets the principles that were tested and supported by local people through a formal consultation process. In addition, the NHS 111 service can signpost patients to the most appropriate services, including an appointment with an out-of-hours GP, if required. We understand and appreciate that this is a real change for patients who are used to being able to walk in and see a GP, rather than phoning up for an appointment.

Graham P. Jones: Does the Minister accept that the consultation had flaws, and will she look at that? Does she accept that replacing 88 hours in a walk-in centre with 18 and a half or 19 hours of extended GP opening hours is a reduction in GP access, which goes counter to what was said in the consultations run by me and the CCG?

Caroline Dinenage: I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says about the consultation and also the consultation that he ran on Facebook. I know how worrying it must be for local people when a service closes, but it is the responsibility of the local NHS to follow the Government’s guidelines. The Government’s four tests for any service change are that it should have support from GP commissioners, be based on clinical evidence, demonstrate public and patient engagement, and consider patient choice. The Lancashire overview and scrutiny committee alone has the power to refer the decision to the Secretary of State or the Independent Reconfiguration Panel, and it was minded not to. That is the unfortunate situation.

Alongside improving and extending GP access, East Lancashire CCG has invested significant sums in social prescribing and care navigation. Those additional services are helping to guide patients and co-ordinate their journey through the health and care system to get the right help and support quickly.

There are benefits from the Hyndburn extended access service, including the provision of seven-day access to GP care, the addition of a minimum of 49 additional
delivery hours per week, and 162 additional appointments per week. The facilities are linked to the out-of-hours service, with the ability to secure urgent GP appointments at weekends. I understand that that provision is for Hyndburn patients only until the walk-in centre closes in June, but it will then be expanded to cover patients from the wider east Lancashire area.

The extended access service run by the East Lancashire Union of GPs already has robust information-sharing arrangements in place with Hyndburn practices to ensure continuity of care for patients utilising an electronic record. That level of record sharing has not been available to patients attending the walk-in centre. The patient and public involvement network in Hyndburn has been fully consulted, and has assisted in the production of communication materials to ensure that local patients have been informed of the changes and have the information they need to direct them to the most appropriate service for their health needs.

The extended access service will have the ability to generate electronic referrals that core GP practices can review and progress. The service will collate monthly data, including patient profiles and the reasons why people access the service, to shape service redesign and help to build a clear picture of patient health needs locally. That service will be delivered from an existing modern LIFT—local improvement finance trust—building, which is on a local bus route and easily accessible to the public. Use of the service has been building progressively and is being closely monitored by the CCG.

I thank the hon. Gentleman again for bringing this debate to the House and for his ongoing support for his constituents in Hyndburn.

Question put and agreed to.

7.37 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

1. Local Government

That the draft Somerset West and Taunton (Modification of Boundary Change Enactments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 17.


Division No. 159]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriley, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argr, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
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
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverty, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey

Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Daniail, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dijangly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garriker, Mark
Gaulke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Gillan, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
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Grahame, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, rh Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
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Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene

Halfon, rh Robert
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Hoare, Simon
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Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
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
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw

Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poultier, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, 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
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scally, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
That the draft Somerset West and Taunton (Local Government Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 9 March, be approved.

Changes) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 967 968

That the draft Somerset West and Taunton (Local Government Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England) Question accordingly agreed to.

2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Somerset West and Taunton (Local Government Changes) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 17.


Division No. 160]

AYES

Adams, Nigel  
Afelami, Bim  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Benyon, rh Richard  
Berry, Jake  
Blackman, Bob  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Botelho, Sir Peter  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, Ben  

Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, rh Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  

NOES

Brake, rh Tom  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Chope, Sir Christopher  
Davies, Philip  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Hermon, Lady  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Jardine, Christine  

Lamb, rh Norman  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lucas, Caroline  
Moran, Layla  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  

Dunne, rh Philip  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Evennett, rh Sir David  
Fabricant, Michaela  
Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
Field, rh Mark  
Ford, Vicky  
Foster, Kevin  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
Frazier, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Frysh, Mr Marcus  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
Gibb, rh Nick  
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl  
Girvan, Paul  
Glen, John  
Goldsmith, Zac  
Goodwill, rh 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  
Halfon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matt  
Hands, rh Greg  

Collins, Damian  
Costa, Alberto  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Crouch, Tracey  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Mims  
Dates, rh Mr David  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djungloy, Mr Jonathan  
Docherty, Leo  
Dodds, rh Nigel  
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey  

M.  
Donelan, Michelle  
Dorries, Ms Nadine  
Double, Steve  
Dowden, Oliver  
Doyle-Price, Jackie  
Drax, Richard  
Duddridge, James  
Duguid, David  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Dunsmith, rh Mr lain  


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  
Hollihrike, Kevin  
Holloway, Adam  
Howell, John  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hughes, Eddie  
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
Jack, Mr Alister  
James, Margot  
Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
Jenkyns, Andrea  
Jennick, Robert  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Johnson, Gareth  
Johnson, Joseph  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, rh Mr David  
Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
Kawczynski, Daniel  
Keeegan, Gillian  
Kennedy, Seema  
Knight, rh Sir Greg  
Knight, Julian  
Kwarteng, Kwasi  
Lamont, John  
Lancaster, rh Mark  
Latham, Mrs Pauline  
Leadsom, rh Andrea  
Lee, Dr Philip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
Lewer, Andrew  
Lewis, rh Brandon  
Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
Lidington, rh Mr David  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Mr Jonathan  
Loughton, Tim  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Maclean, Rachel  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Alan  
Malhhouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
McVe, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalf, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  

The House divided: Ayes 293, Noes 19.
VOTES CAST BY MEMBERS FOR CONSTITUENCIES IN ENGLAND:
Ayes 265, Noes 16.

### Division No. 161

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AYES</th>
<th>NOES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
<td>Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afolami, Bin</td>
<td>Donelan, Michelle</td>
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<td>Andrews, Stuart</td>
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<td>Cash, Sir William</td>
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<td>Caulfield, Maria</td>
<td>Grayling, rh Chris</td>
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<td>Chihi, Rehman</td>
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<td>Greenering, rh Justine</td>
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<td>Davis, rh Mr David</td>
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<td>Dodds, rh Nigel</td>
<td>Herbert, rh Nick</td>
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### NOES

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<td>Lamb, rh Norman</td>
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<td>Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian</td>
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<td>Skinner, Mr Dennis</td>
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<td>Swinson, Jo</td>
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**Question accordingly agreed to.**

3. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

That the draft Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole (Structural Changes) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.
Question accordingly agreed to.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Dorset (Structural Changes) (Modification of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 March, be approved.

The House divided:

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afroli, Bim
Ariyef, Adam
Addous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert

**NOES**

Bone, Mr Peter
Braze, rh Tom
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Chope, Sir Christopher
Davies, Philip
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Heron, Lady
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollobone, rh Philip
Jardine, Christine

**Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:**

Ayes 294, Noes 19.

**Division No. 162**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afroli, Bim
Ariyef, Adam
Addous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert

**NOES**

Bone, Mr Peter
Braze, rh Tom
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Chope, Sir Christopher
Davies, Philip
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Heron, Lady
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollobone, rh Philip
Jardine, Christine

**Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:**

Ayes 294, Noes 19.

**Division No. 162**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afroli, Bim
Ariyef, Adam
Addous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
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Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
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Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert

**NOES**

Bone, Mr Peter
Braze, rh Tom
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Chope, Sir Christopher
Davies, Philip
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Heron, Lady
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollobone, rh Philip
Jardine, Christine

**Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:**

Ayes 294, Noes 19.
Defered Divisions

23 MAY 2018

Defered Divisions

Donelan, Michelle
Donnie, Ms Nadine
Douglas, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghan, rh Mr David
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
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
Har, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenks, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lammy, Vernon
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Lettwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Mr Jonathan
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morrison, rh David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Aklok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swamy, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
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Throup, Maggie
Tohurht, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wratt, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Bone, Mr Peter
Brake, rh Tom
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Chope, Sir Christopher
Davies, Philip
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Hermon, Lady
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Jardine, Christine

Question accordingly agreed to.
The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government’s rail sector report was published in December and included an analysis of the rail industry. We keep our analysis under constant review. Our future relationship with the EU will be a matter for the negotiations. Both the UK and the EU have greatly benefited from investment in each other’s rail markets. We want that to continue as the UK leaves the EU.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the rail industry.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on rail will be a matter for the negotiations. The Government’s rail sector report was published in December and included an analysis of the rail industry. The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government’s rail sector report was published in December and included an analysis of the rail industry. We keep our analysis under constant review. Our future relationship with the EU will be a matter for the negotiations. Both the UK and the EU have greatly benefited from investment in each other’s rail markets. We want that to continue as the UK leaves the EU.

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John McNally: The Secretary of State will be aware that passengers in Scotland have been protected from the impact of fare increases as a result of the Scottish Government’s cap of RPI minus 1%. Will he not take a leaf out of the Scottish Government’s book to ensure that passengers are not hit in their pockets as the result of his Government’s inability to provide even basic certainty over Brexit?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure quite what that has to do with our future relationship with the EU, but I want the rate of increase of rail fares to come down. The biggest barrier to that is the Labour party’s and the trade unions’ insistence that the RPI measure has to be at the heart of every pay increase in the rail industry. The industry collectively needs to move to RPI, but the training manuals for the unions that back the Labour party insist that it is unacceptable to negotiate on anything except an RPI increase.

Tommy Sheppard: The Government often cite EU regulations on state aid as a constraint on their agency. Can we therefore look forward, after Brexit, to innovative new approaches to the public ownership of the railways, or will the Secretary of State continue to sell rail services to the state-owned companies of other EU countries?

Chris Grayling: We have a diverse rail market, with investment from the UK and international investment. I hope very much that after Brexit we will not become a country that does not welcome international investment. We are an outward-facing global nation, and I hope that will continue.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): In the Secretary of State’s assessment of the rail industry post Brexit, did he include the vital nature of securing resilience in the coastal railway at Dawlish, given the link to Falmouth docks and the freight services that bring in exports?

Chris Grayling: I want to reiterate that this is an absolutely crucial project for our railways. Network Rail is currently doing preparatory work for the very necessary improvements at Dawlish. I have given an absolute commitment that those works will go ahead. I regard this project, to make sure a proper resilient railway for the future is delivered to the south-west, as the most important infrastructure project in the country. It is one thing having a railway that is not quite up to date; it is quite another having a railway that gets cut off. We will not let that happen.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The east coast main line will be very important following our departure from Europe. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that smaller operators, such as ScotRail, have a say in what happens to rail?

Chris Grayling: It is really important that we protect the interests of passenger and freight operators. I have been clear that the new board leading the integration and development of the London North Eastern Railway will have representatives whose job is to protect the interests of smaller operators.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): EU rules clearly did not prevent the Government from taking the east coast franchise off Stagecoach last week, which shows their power to remove a franchise from a failing operator is not hampered by them. Given that this week we managed to pass 300 cancellations on the Lakes line in Cumbria since the beginning of April, and the enormous and catastrophic impact that is having on commuters, tourists and GCSE students trying to get to their exams, will the Secretary of State listen to the exasperated travellers of Cumbria and intervene to strip Northern of both its Furness and Lakes franchises—and do it today?

Chris Grayling: Let us be clear: the situation with Northern has been unacceptable. As I said yesterday, I will this morning chair a conference call with the Northern leaders. This is the most devolved franchise. It is a partnership between Northern leaders and the Department for Transport, but it is not solely led by the Department. None the less, it is no less important to me that we get this situation resolved. I am very clear that this problem has arisen for two prime reasons: the problems with electrification Network Rail is carrying out on the line through Bolton and the failure of Network Rail to deliver a finalised timetable in time. When the hon. Gentleman talks about the need to strip the franchise and renationalise, he is shooting at the wrong target. This is a Network Rail failure and it must not happen again.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We know that since rail privatisation the Secretary of State thinks magic money appears from nowhere with no risk to the taxpayer, but that is not the case. When it comes
to infrastructure, the UK relied on £35 billion of loans from the European Investment Bank between 2011 and 2015. Where will that money come from for rail infrastructure post Brexit?

Chris Grayling: We are a substantial net contributor to the European Union, so the money given to the UK from different European funds actually originates in the UK. We will be able to spend our money in the way we see fit. We are of course spending record amounts of money on rail infrastructure to develop what needs to be a better, expanded and more resilient rail network.

**Digital Railway Strategy**

2. Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the digital railway strategy.

3. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the digital railway strategy.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Two weeks ago, Mark Carne, the chief executive of Network Rail, and I launched the company’s digital railway strategy in York, where we announced that the industry should make plans for all future renewals to be digital or digital-ready. I have already approved funding to develop digital schemes in Moorgate and the south-east, and in particular, I have set out plans for the new TransPennine route. The £2.9 billion modernisation, starting around this time next year, will be Britain’s first, principal inter-city digital railway, and very necessary it is.

Mr Seely: Later this month, the priced option for the Island line in my constituency will be presented. I will be writing next week in support of that priced option. Can the Minister assure me that the Government understands the importance of the Island line to the Island and the importance of investment in it—in track, railway and stations such as Ryde Pier Head, which is on the pier, and Ryde Esplanade, which is a key gateway? Is he aware of my strong support for a feasibility study into extending the Island line south and west?

Mr Speaker: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that one of his constituents, not very far from here, has been listening intently to his question.

Chris Grayling: I know indeed, Mr Speaker—indeed, he used to be a constituent of mine and is now benefiting from the wonderful environment that is the Isle of Wight. My hon. Friend has been an excellent champion for it since his election. I can assure him that the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), and I will be taking careful note of the plans as they come through, and we will work with him to try to find the best way to ensure that his constituents have the best service that it is possible to deliver to them in future.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat—where is the fella? He has obviously beetled out of the Chamber. It is a pity that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling is not here, but we will bear up stoically and try to manage without him.

18. [905565] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Following the collapse of the east coast main line franchise, will the Secretary of State make a firm commitment to Virgin’s previous pledge to deliver additional train services between Lincoln and London in 2019? They are essential for our local businesses.

Chris Grayling: Let me be very clear: it is my intention that the commitments to new services made in the Virgin Trains franchise are delivered. The hon. Lady will know, as I have told the House before, that there is an issue and has been for some while around the timing of some of those services because of problems with infrastructure improvements. I am putting Network Rail under as much pressure as possible to deliver those as quickly as possible. I give her and all Members who are waiting for these new services an assurance that I will make sure that they are delivered.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Can the Secretary of State tell me how the roll-out of the digital strategy, which is in itself a good thing, on my local lines is going to stop me receiving tweets like the one I received this morning? It said:

“Chaos for 4th day on SE lines—trains cancelled, late, diverted, not stopping, short formation & angry passengers”.

How is the strategy going to help that?

Chris Grayling: There are benefits of digital technology, but my hon. Friend will be aware that this is a difficult week on the railways, as I have explained. It has happened because of the late delivery of the timetable. This is the second time that it has happened in six months. I have already had discussions with Network Rail about this. It must not happen again. What the digital railway will do is create a railway that can run more trains more reliably. It gets rid of the risk of traditional signal failures, which are a big part of the frustrations that many commuters face, and I want to see, over the next few years, our stopping replacing old-fashioned traffic-light signals and using digital technology instead.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): A digital railway is vital for improving capacity in the far south-west but will not necessarily improve journey speeds. If our journey times are to be long, they at least need to be productive, so can I ask the Secretary of State to commit to working with colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to improve our mobile and wi-fi signals to remove all the notspots in the far south-west, especially on rail journeys to Plymouth?

Chris Grayling: Sometimes, we disagree across the Chamber, but on this one I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We are looking at the best options to do this. I think that we should be getting mobile operators to put up more masts down the route, and particularly as we move to a 5G network, I want to see that 5G network up and down the railway—and not just for passengers; it helps the digital railway as well. On this one, I am absolutely with him.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is it?
Mr Speaker: It all sounds very sophisticated, although it is a bit above my pay grade, I am bound to say.

Bus Services

5. Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support local bus services.

14. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the provision of bus services throughout the country.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The bus market outside London is deregulated, and decisions regarding service provision are primarily a commercial matter for bus operators. Decisions on subsidised bus services are a matter for individual English local authorities, in the light of their own spending priorities. The Government paid out some £250 million last year to support bus services in England through the bus subsidy operators grant. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced new powers for local authorities and operators to work together to improve local bus services and increase passenger numbers.

Dr Williams: Arriva has cut the bus service in Hartburn on which my constituents rely, replacing a doorstep service with what is now a 20-minute walk for older people. I have written to the Tees Valley combined authority about it, but what is the Government’s position on communities that are isolated by public transport cuts?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman has raised a valid point, but local authorities are responsible for providing local bus services, and we expect them to work with local operators. Members of Parliament and local communities to do that. Of the £250 million grant that I mentioned earlier, £40 million is paid directly to local authorities to improve bus services in their areas, including the service to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. I believe that the Department paid £88,000 last year to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, which I am sure he will welcome.

Jeff Smith: Over the past four years, Greater Manchester has lost 8 million miles of bus routes, largely owing to the chronic underfunding of local government. Councils are forced to freeze funds, while costs rocket. Does the Minister accept that unless local government funding is increased, mayors and transport authorities will not be able to use the new powers in the Bus Services Act to full effect?

Ms Ghani: That is an interesting question. The Government have provided plenty of support for bus services in Manchester—[Interruption.] I will continue, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Apologies for the noise.

Ms Ghani: Not at all.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It was the hooting of a bus horn.

Ms Ghani: It happened because I was about to mention two very important packages of funding.

The Department contributed just over £32 million towards the £43.2 million Manchester cross city bus package, which was completed in 2017. Now we need another little beat of the drum, because there is another huge sum coming up. The Greater Manchester combined authority received a guaranteed allocation of £243 million from the £1.7 billion transforming cities fund to improve public transport. If the hon. Gentleman is still not satisfied, I suggest that he talk to the Mayor.

Mr Speaker: I can only imagine that it was a noise of approval. Who knows? It may be a divisible proposition, but there we go.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One very important aspect of bus services is the role played by community services, particularly in rural areas. There is great concern about the consultation that the Department are currently undertaking. When can we expect some final announcements?

Ms Ghani: The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is overseeing the consultation, and he will make an announcement before the summer. The Department understands the importance of community transport services, which not only tackle isolation but enable people who would not otherwise have access to transport to keep appointments. I understand their importance particularly well, because I represent a rural constituency. The Department is very concerned about the issue, and we will do what we can to help.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): For the first time in decades, the people of Cornwall are enjoying brand-new buses on our roads. They offer facilities that people used to think were available only in big cities, such as contactless payment, on-board wi-fi and charging points, and they have been delivered thanks to a partnership between First Kernow, the operator, and Cornwall Council. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the new buses; would she like to come to Cornwall to see them; and does she agree that their delivery demonstrates what can be done, even in rural communities, when local authorities use the powers available to them and work with the private sector?

Ms Ghani: I welcome the invitation to Cornwall—my summer holiday seems to have been sorted out—and I welcome the new First Kernow buses. I also welcome the fact that the local authority in my hon. Friend’s constituency has worked with the private operator and with the Member of Parliament. That shows that if people and organisations work together, they can put bus services together, even in rural communities.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Since 2010, bus budgets have been slashed by a third and over 2,500 routes have been withdrawn entirely. The Government recognise that franchising boosts patronage and improves services,
which is why franchising was extended to the metro mayoralties. Why then in the midst of a bus crisis is the Minister refusing these same powers to councils across the rest of the country?

Ms Ghani: Packages for buses are at an all-time high, and I would ask why the mayors who already have the powers have not taken them up. The policy at the moment applies to London and the Mayors of Manchester and Liverpool, so I suggest the hon. Gentleman ask his own Labour Mayor of London why he has not taken these powers up.

Strategic Road Network

6. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve the strategic road network.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Projects up and down the country are being delivered through the Government’s £15 billion investment in our strategic roads, our motorways and main A roads. I salute my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who had a fanfare a few minutes ago, and I think the reason for that was that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State officially opened the £400 million A1 upgrade from Leeming to Barton last week, so there is now a continuous motorway link between Newcastle and London for the first time in this country’s history.

Mark Pawsey: The A5 through Warwickshire and Leicestershire is an important strategic route throughout the midlands and is a valuable relief road in the event of hold-ups on the M6, which can happen from time to time. It is however mostly single carriageway, and with significant amounts of development proposed along the route, will the Minister ensure that detailed work can start urgently to improve both safety and capacity?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, we discussed this in a Westminster Hall debate in February and I have seen him and colleagues recently. It is a very important matter; we are aware of the strategic importance of the A5. We already have work in prospect between Dodwells and the Longshoot junction and we will continue to look closely at the matter.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Substantial congestion exists on the M60, M62 and M56 around Greater Manchester, but Highways England’s investment plans start north-east of this area. Given the very significant economic regeneration plans for south-west Manchester including at the airport, the new HS2 station and New Carrington in my constituency, which the Minister has visited, does he agree that Highways England must now attend to the investment that that will require in the south-west quarter of this motorway network?

Jesse Norman: I take on board the hon. Lady’s point, but the point I would make in response is that, over the next three years, Highways England will be investing and, by the end of that period, at a rate roughly three times more than the rate the Government inherited in 2010. Therefore, unprecedented levels of investment are going in. The hon. Lady is welcome to write to me or meet me if she wants to discuss this issue further.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I welcome the improvements to the A1 to Newcastle, but there is great demand for improvements to the part of the A1 north of Newcastle to the border and my constituency. Can the Minister update the House on improvements to that part of the road to Berwick-upon-Tweed and the border with Scotland?

Jesse Norman: A series of potential schemes are in place and they are moving forward to different forms of announcement or development, but I would be happy to send my hon. Friend a more detailed update.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Can the Minister explain to me why Highways England refused to take any interest in the provision of an alternative for the Orwell bridge on the A14, which is a vital strategic link that is often closed?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman and I have met and we have met Highways England to discuss this, and I think it is overstating the matter to say there is no interest at all, but we continue to look at the issue.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Drivers who hog the middle lane of motorways has always been a problem, but as traffic volumes increase the impact will be even greater. This problem makes the roads dangerous for other drivers and slows down traffic. What can be done about this?

Jesse Norman: There is guidance on this already, as my hon. Friend will know. I am not sure whether it is reflected in the road safety statistics, but I am happy to look at that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Owing to the sheer scale of the damage the proposed A27 project will do to ancient woodland and the South Downs national park, let alone the eventual impact on air pollution caused by induced capacity, 10 of Britain’s leading environmental groups have written to the Secretary of State to highlight how his proposals contravene his own national policy statement for national networks. So has he changed his definition of “irreversible damage” or will he urgently review this scheme?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady will know, many of those ancient woodlands were planted only in the past couple of decades, so I am not sure that she has quite made her point.

GWR Franchise

7. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What plans he has for the operation of trains in the Thames valley after the end of the Great Western rail franchise.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The current Great Western franchise ends on 31 March 2020. In November 2017, the Department started its consultation on the future of services. Department for Transport officials are currently evaluating options for the specification of the franchise from April 2020, and throughout the 2020s, with the aim of issuing the specification later this year.
Dr Huq: It is a tale of two railways in Ealing and Acton. This week I have heard praise for not-for-profit TFL rail services, whose users rate its reliability, but also complaints about GWR services, which are based on profitability, that have been cancelled without recompense. Will the Minister at the first opportunity take the Thames Valley franchise back into public ownership and scrap the crackpot idea to split it further? That would do us all a favour—the Exchequer and not just shareholders—before he is forced to do so when it flops.

Joseph Johnson: I fear that the hon. Lady is under a misapprehension as to the nature of the TfL contractual arrangements on that line, but she will be pleased to know that we are transferring services to TfL, including those from Paddington to Hayes and Harlington, and Heathrow Connect.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announces the successor to the GWR franchise, will he ensure that the Cotswold line and the Kemble to Swindon line have an increased number of services and increased punctuality, so that the large amount of money that the taxpayer has put into Network Rail to redouble those services is properly utilised?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for services on the Cotswold line. We will certainly take into account his advocacy for it.

Disabled Rail Passengers

8. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve accessibility for disabled rail passengers.

905533

15. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve accessibility for disabled rail passengers.

905562

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government will publish an inclusive transport strategy later this year. I assure my hon. Friends that I and the Department believe that disabled people should have the same access to transport as anyone else and be able to travel easily, confidently and without extra cost. All train fleets operating passenger services will meet modern accessibility standards by 1 January 2020. Further funding for the Access for All stations programme will be made available for 2019 to 2024.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, there is a desperate need for a lift at both Stanmore and Canons Park stations. That is the responsibility of the Labour Mayor of London, who has failed to deliver. Also, Harrow and Wealdstone station is in my constituency, and the local authority’s civic centre is part of the “Heart of Harrow” regeneration scheme. The station does not have disabled access or step-free access, even though it has an overground, underground and Network Rail interchange. How can we get suitable access to that station?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Transport for London manages transport services in the capital and is responsible for implementing the Mayor of London’s transport strategy, so Stanmore and Canons Park underground stations are his responsibility. I hope he is following today’s proceedings and will deliver for disabled and able-bodied passengers in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Of course, Harrow and Wealdstone station falls under the Access for All stations programme, and bidding for funding will open shortly. I urge my hon. Friend to get in touch with his local authority, which can work with the transport operating companies and put together the best possible bid to secure funding.

Trudy Harrison: Now that the Minister has confirmed that the Government will continue the Access for All scheme, which has improved accessibility across many of this country’s railway stations, can she advise us on how can we get the Cumbrian coastal railways included in future funding bids?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency, so she will no doubt help the local authority and transport operating company to put together the best possible bid. The Access for All programme will provide step-free access to stations across the country, and I know how popular it is across the House. It will be open for bidding shortly. Stations will need to be nominated by the transport operating company, based on chosen criteria. Annual footfall and the local incidence of disability will be taken into account, as well as priorities such as industry and local factors such as proximity to hospitals and availability of third-party funding.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has already slashed £50 million from the Access for All fund, and now Govia Thameslink Railways’ new staff guidance says, “do not attempt to place persons of reduced mobility on a train if there is a possibility of delaying the service” and that they should “move from the train as quickly as possible” someone having a seizure. That is not only completely wrong medical advice, but directly discriminates against disabled people. Why has the Minister not intervened, and why has GTR been allowed to get away with this direct disability discrimination?

Ms Ghani: Since 2006, about 200 stations have been made step-free and 75% of rail journeys are now step-free through stations. Funding has been made available and will continue to be made available. One of the biggest issues we have in getting people who are disabled to use public transport is confidence, so we need to let them know that we have accessible stations. Now I will respond to the point about GTR. There was one line in the document—

Rachael Maskell: It is so discriminatory.

Ms Ghani: Will the hon. Lady give me a minute to respond? It was not the best use of language, and I can update the House and say that my officials have spoken to GTR and raised concerns about that line and the language used in the leaflet. The leaflet is good overall, but the hon. Lady is right to point out that one particular line was not appropriate, and it will be revised.
Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me; these are very informative answers, but we have a lot of questions to get through, so we need short answers and short questions.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Disabled passengers in the Lawrence Hill area of my constituency are not being served with step-free access, although they have been promised it for some years. They have to get a train upline and then another downline on the other side before they can get to Temple Meads to get a mainline train. Will the Minister meet me and Councillor Margaret Hickman to discuss this urgently?

Ms Ghaoui: Of course I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about accessibility in her constituency. As I mentioned earlier, Access for All funding is available for train stations; if she were alluding to a tube station, that would be another situation altogether. As she is talking about a train station, I am more than happy to meet her.

Transport Police Merger: Scotland

9. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What recent discussions he has held with the Scottish Government on the proposed merger of the British Transport police Scottish division with Police Scotland.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Officials have been working closely and effectively with the Scottish Government, the two police forces and the two police authorities, through a joint programme board established to oversee arrangements for delivering the transfer of the British Transport police’s functions in Scotland. We want to see a smooth transition to the new arrangements that ensure the safety and security of rail passengers and staff, and recognises and protects the UK’s interests.

Douglas Ross: Earlier this month, BTP Federation chair Nigel Goodband said:

“It is appalling that the Scottish Government constantly reminds us that one of its three aims in full integration is accountability to the people of Scotland. British Transport police officers and staff...are people of Scotland. They are proud Scots; they are proud to be in the British Transport Police and proud of living in Scotland.”

He continued:

“They have said to me that they feel abandoned...by their Government. That is pretty disgusting. It is alarming that they feel that way.”

Does the Minister agree that that quote proves that the SNP Scottish Government are letting down hard-working and dedicated BTP officers and staff in Scotland and that their interests and the interests of the public they proudly protect would be better served by maintaining the way that the BTP operates in Scotland, rather than breaking up a force that serves Scotland and the United Kingdom well?

Joseph Johnson: I certainly understand my hon. Friend’s concerns. It is in both Governments’ mutual interest to make the new arrangements work. The Government are very focused on protecting UK interests generally, including those of passengers, officers and staff, and that is why we are working closely with the Scottish Government, the police forces and the police authorities.

Heathrow: Third Runway

10. Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): What estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of the construction and operation of a third runway at Heathrow. [905555]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government have always been clear that any scheme for additional airport capacity should be financed by the private sector. The Airports Commission concluded that this was a viable way forward. As set out in the revised draft airports national policy statement, independent financial advisers have undertaken further work and agreed that expansion of Heathrow can be carried out without public finance.

Adam Afriyie: I thank the Secretary of State for the answer. The report by the Select Committee on Transport on the airports national policy statement said that the Lakeside Energy from Waste plant should be treated “with equivalent recognition as the Immigration Removal Centres and that the replacement of its facilities be accounted for in the DCO process.”

Will the Secretary of State confirm that his Department has assessed any infrastructure upgrade needed, such as that to roads and powerlines, to accommodate the relocation, and will those costs be met by the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: First, I extend my thanks to the Select Committee, which has produced a thoughtful report. We will be responding to the report in detail very shortly; indeed, my officials are speaking to the Chair of the Committee to make sure she is fully up to speed with how we are handling all this.

Of course it is essential that appropriate provision is made for the energy from waste plant, and I think that provision should be funded by the airport as part of its work. I do not see why the taxpayer should bear the cost. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) that the plant and other facilities, and the communities around the airport, are very much on my Department’s mind as we take these matters forward.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Transport Committee report on the national policy statement found that the Heathrow north-west runway proposal has little, if any, advantage over other schemes, or even over doing nothing at all, for passenger growth or for the number and frequency of long-haul routes, and that the proposal would actually cut international links for non-London regions and would have little economic benefit to the UK, so are the Government pushing ahead with this hugely expensive and environmentally damaging project?

Chris Grayling: When I am ready to update the House, I will of course come back to do so in person. The Committee recommended that the Government progress with their work, and it made a number of very helpful and constructive suggestions about elements to be included within that work. I remain absolutely of the view that airport expansion is necessary for the economy of this country. The important thing is that we deliver it in the best possible way for local communities.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): May I suggest to the Secretary of State that a much cheaper and more practicable alternative to the Heathrow third runway would be to use the considerable spare capacity and
long runway at Birmingham airport by electrifying and upgrading the Chiltern railway line and linking it to Crossrail? This would provide for a fast, direct, non-stop shuttle service between central London and Birmingham airport and would help to solve the south-east airport capacity problem. Will he give serious consideration to this proposal?

Chris Grayling: Of course the arrival of HS2, with projected future growth in passenger numbers at our airports, will provide an alternative and will provide for a bit of competition between airports, which is no bad thing. The hon. Gentleman is right about that, but I do not think it is either one or the other.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) has had to be away for a period. We have missed him, and I think I speak for colleagues in warmly welcoming him back to the Chamber.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): That is very kind, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much indeed.

Can the Secretary of State confirm whether he will be revising the airports national policy statement in the light of the 25 recommendations from the Transport Committee?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman and I sometimes spar vigorously across the Chamber, but I echo your words to him, Mr Speaker.

If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I do not think it is appropriate to talk about our response to the Select Committee report before our response is published, which will happen shortly. I simply give him the assurance that we are taking the recommendations very seriously. I certainly want to see many of the recommendations embedded in our planning as these matters go forward.

Fishing Vessel Safety

11. Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to respond to rail passenger concerns on the introduction of the new timetable for peak-time services in Hitchin and Harpenden.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Fishing safety remains a priority, and we are making improvements through education and legislation. New codes of practice set higher standards and will soon include stability requirements. Globally, the International Maritime Organisation’s work for the foreseeable future.

The International Maritime Organisation is critical to worldwide efforts to ensure safety at sea. The IMO is in fact the only UN agency to be based in the United Kingdom, so what assurances can the Minister give that Britain will continue to play an important role in the IMO in the years ahead?

Andrew Bowie: As everybody who has taken a vessel of any size to sea at any time will know, the International Maritime Organisation is critical to worldwide efforts to ensure safety at sea. The IMO is in fact the only UN agency to be based in the United Kingdom, so what assurances can the Minister give that Britain will continue to play an important role in the IMO in the years ahead?

Ms Ghani: I can give my hon. Friend the fullest assurance. Shipping is an international industry, and the UK strongly believes it should be regulated at an international level by the IMO. My officials and I recently played a leading role at the marine environment protection committee, where we secured the landmark agreement on phasing out greenhouse gas emissions. The UK takes great pride in being the host Government of the IMO, which is based just across the Thames, and we will continue to maintain our active role within the organisation’s work for the foreseeable future.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the biggest problems facing fishing vessel safety is boats going to sea undermanned because they cannot get enough crew. Will the Minister use her offices to make a proper assessment of that and pass on her findings to the Home Office to inform its consideration of the opportunities for getting more crew from non-European economic area countries?

Ms Ghani: Trying to encourage, recruit and retain people to work in the fishing, port and shipping sector is a priority for the Department. We know how difficult it is to attract people who are not already in contact with fishing, ports and ships. We are doing what we can to try to encourage people to think of shipping, fishing and working in ports as jobs going forward. We have set up a number of initiatives, especially this year, through the Year of Engineering, to try to get young people interested in being employed in fishing, ports and shipping, and we will share that information with any Department that wishes to see it.

Train Timetable: Hitchin and Harpenden

12. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to respond to rail passenger concerns on the introduction of the new timetable for peak-time services in Hitchin and Harpenden.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The new Thameslink timetable started on Sunday. It brings more frequent and better connected journeys for passengers across London and the south-east.

As part of this, rail passengers at Hitchin and Harpenden now have a more regular train service throughout the day than they did previously. The Government, along with the rail industry, are monitoring performance of the new timetable, as well as passenger feedback.

Bim Afolami: On Monday, the first day of the timetable for commuters, 24% of Hitchin’s services were cancelled and more than 50% were delayed. Please will the Minister reassure me and my constituents that the Department will do everything it can to force Govia Thameslink to improve its performance drastically or be stripped of its franchise?

Joseph Johnson: We are grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing all the issues facing his constituency to our attention, and we look forward to working closely with him in the coming weeks. This week’s timetable changes are the first phase of a totally recast timetable, which will deliver, in time, the full benefits of the £7 billion Thameslink programme.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The new timetable produces winners and losers across the country. Yesterday, the University of Nottingham told me that “connectivity to London and to the world is crucial to Nottingham attracting jobs, talent and visitors that will drive the future of our economy. We are concerned that the timetable changes will hinder these ambitions.”

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That is a clear indictment of the changes forced on East Midlands Trains’ services by this Department in order to accommodate the new Thameslink timetable. What have this Government got against the east Midlands that means that, yet again, we are getting a raw deal?

Joseph Johnson: The May 2018 timetable change will see about 90% of our services change. It is perhaps the single biggest timetable change in the country’s history and it will bring an extra 1,300 train services across our network. This is a very significant operational challenge. We recognise the disruption that is temporarily occurring in various places, and we are working carefully with train operators to reduce it as rapidly as possible.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me follow up on that question from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). Last month, the Secretary of State promised quicker and better train services to Sheffield. As a result of these Thameslink changes, East Midlands Trains says that priority is being given to these new trains on Thameslink services over trains to Sheffield. As a result, peak-time trains to Sheffield are now six to eight minutes slower than they were under the previous timetable—they are slower than they were 10 years ago. Have the Secretary of State’s promises of a month ago already been ditched?

Joseph Johnson: The midlands main line changes and efficiency improvements take place in a rolling way up to 2020, which is when the significant benefits to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency will start to flow through.

Road Repairs

13. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What funds he has recently made available for the repair of local roads.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Department for Transport is providing just over £6 billion to local highway authorities in England, outside London, for highways maintenance funding from 2015 up to 2021. Of course, my hon. Friend will be aware of the £296 million pothole action fund.

Robert Courts: I welcome the prospect of upgrades to main roads in west Oxfordshire, financed through the housing infrastructure fund and the growth deal, but what are Ministers doing to ensure that small rural roads in areas such as West Oxfordshire, which often bear the brunt of winter damage, are not neglected and are also maintained to a high standard?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point, especially in the light of the recent very bad bouts of weather we have had, which have particularly affected local roads. Until then, it was true that the A and B roads were improving over time but that that leaves out the C and U roads. A more strategic approach needs to be taken to that, and I am planning to do that in the months to come.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We have got a brand new road in my constituency and it is supposed to have a vital bus link on it between Hengrove and Long Ashton, but the West of England metro mayor refuses to use his devolved powers to help make it happen. What is the purpose of devolving powers to a metro mayor if he will not use them?

Jesse Norman: The purpose is to allow him to be held locally accountable by the people who elected him.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The proposal to put a weight limit on the North bridge in Oundle is causing great concern, not only to residents but to businesses and bus service users. I have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about the matter. Will he undertake to see what can be done to make sure that the repairs are carried out as soon as possible?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the North bridge in Oundle falls under the responsibility of Northamptonshire County Council as the highway authority. Since 2015-16, the Department has provided the council with £72 million of local highways maintenance finance, including £12 million this year. That can be used to help to strengthen bridges. It is entirely for the council to determine how that funding is deployed.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): North Lincolnshire’s roads and pavements are pitted with potholes. Given what the Minister has just said, should North Lincolnshire Council not be doing a better job of tackling this issue?

Jesse Norman: Of course, these are matters for local authorities in each case, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out. Our job is to take a more strategic view of the overall picture, which is what I have said we are planning to do.

Leaving the EU: Ports

16. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The UK ports sector is in an excellent position to facilitate growth in trade, both from the EU and from other countries, when we leave the EU. Indeed, many of the port operators have exciting plans to do so. Many UK ports have recently invested vigorously in capacity, to handle the largest container ships and to adapt to changing patterns of energy generation. We are seeing investment at crucial ports such as Dover, where the western docks are being developed to enable better use of capacity at the eastern docks to handle ferry traffic.

Anna Turley: Teesport in my constituency is going from strength to strength. It handles 5,000 vessels a year and more than 40 million tonnes of cargo. It is a gateway to the world, but especially to Europe, our largest trading partner. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that Brexit will not result in trading barriers and customs checks, or in lorries queuing down the A66?

Chris Grayling: The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that this country is committed to frictionless borders. Teesport is doing a great job; I saw some of the firms that operate at the port only recently. That is one reason
why I have announced the study into the potential reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line, because one thing we lack for ports such as Teesport and, indeed, Liverpool, is better freight connections across the Pennines. Every time I talk to the port operators, that is top of their list.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** One of the Brexit myths is taking control of borders, yet the Secretary of State continues to say that there will be no further checks on transport at ports. Is that just because he does not have a clue about how the Government can put in place a system that allows checks to be made but does not cause carnage on the roads round about the ports?

**Chris Grayling:** No, I am afraid it is because the hon. Gentleman does not understand how ports operate today. It is not necessary to stop every lorry at a border—indeed, every lorry is not stopped at the border—to have a free flow of trade. Countries inside the European Union and countries that have no connection with the European Union manage to operate a free flow through ports and across borders, and that is what we will do after we leave.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Clive Efford.

**Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential effect on passenger safety of the terms of the new south-eastern rail franchise which require some travellers to change trains at Lewisham station.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman looks a tad befuddled.

**Clive Efford:** I was expecting Questions 17 and 18, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** The answer—I always like to provide information to satisfy colleagues—is that Question 17 was withdrawn and the person who had Question 18 came in on an earlier question.

**Clive Efford:** Thank you for enlightening me, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to drop in on us; we are deeply obliged to him.

**South Eastern Rail Franchise**

19. **Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential effect on passenger safety of the terms of the new south-eastern rail franchise which require some travellers to change trains at Lewisham station.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** As I said, officials believe that we will see a decrease in the numbers of passengers interchanging at Lewisham station in the next franchise period. It is currently an accessible station, although I recognise that its existing design means that it can get crowded at peak times, as the hon. Gentleman said. In recognition of that, the invitation to tender incentivises bidders to consider investment to improve the flow of passengers at Lewisham. Bidders will be required to spend no less than £6.5 million on station improvements, and Lewisham is one candidate for that spend.

**Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** Rail accessibility is an important topic, so will the £430 million saved by not electrifying the Cardiff to Swansea line still be spent in Wales?

**Mr Speaker:** Very naughty indeed!

**Joseph Johnson:** At the time the announcement on electrification was made, we made it clear that we would be looking at a number of schemes to invest in infrastructure and enhancements in Cardiff and Swansea. Those discussions are currently under way.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [905567] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** Before I answer my hon. Friend’s question, it might be appropriate for the whole House to express our thanks to all of the transport workers who were involved in the planning and delivery of a smooth journey to and from Windsor last weekend for the royal wedding. It was a very smooth operation and it went gratifyingly well on what was a fantastic day for the country.

**Bob Blackman:** Drivers on the Jubilee and District lines are threatening all-out strikes on 6 and 14 June, bringing misery to literally millions of Londoners. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning this action, which will put the passengers and commuters of London in a desperate plight, and call on the Mayor of London to intervene to stop this strike?

**Chris Grayling:** In my view, there is never a justification for industrial action causing that degree of disruption to the lives of individual passengers and of other workers. It is not fair on them; it is the wrong thing to do. Disputes should be solved through means other than strike actions on our public transport system. However, I do remember being informed on regular occasions by the Mayor of London, when we had the troubles on Southern, that he would be much better at coping with these things because there would never be a strike on his watch. He has already broken that one, because he has had them already. It looks like he will have some more.
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): This week’s timetabling debacle is characteristic of all that is wrong with the railway. The Secretary of State told the press yesterday, and not this House, that Northern Rail issues were his top priority and that he would improve train driver rostering and driver recruitment to improve things, but he cannot simply tinker with rosters and pick new train drivers off a shelf. Does he not realise that it takes a year to train a driver and that roster changes have to be worked through, with the workforce, well ahead of their introduction?

Chris Grayling: First of all, the hon. Gentleman has not been following things too closely, because my recollection is that when I was in this House yesterday afternoon I expressly talked about the issues with the timetabling.

Secondly, Northern does not have a shortage in overall terms of drivers. The problem has been caused by the operational difficulties that resulted from, first, Network Rail’s failure to deliver the electrification to the schedule that was expected on the line to Bolton, and, secondly, from Network Rail’s failure to finalise timetables in time. That has been the prime reason for disruption, which was not helped, I might add, by an unnecessary work to rule by one of the unions.

What has happened has been unacceptable for passengers, but I also remind the hon. Gentleman that this is the most developed franchise in England. The management of the franchise is shared by my Department and northern leaders through Rail North, so it is not simply a question of my Department. I will be working now to see whether Rail North together has done enough of a job in monitoring these problems.

Mr Speaker: I do not wish to be unkind to the Secretary of State, and he has certainly given us full information, but let me say this. I gently chided the Minister next to him, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), for a mildly lengthy reply to one question, but he seems determined to outdo her. It is not a Secretary of State’ s top priority, but what about the Secretary of State’ s top priority, but what about the

Andy McDonald: Northern Rail issues may be the Secretary of State’s top priority, but what about the long-suffering passengers on Thameslink and Southern? This is the fault not of 400 hard-working timetablers, but of train companies that do not have enough drivers with the right knowledge in the right places at the right time. Is it not the case that these train companies have had years to prepare for this and that this Secretary of State simply trashes the hard-working men and women across the industry who strive to deliver rail improvements? He simply throws them under the bus.

Chris Grayling: If I am not mistaken, the hon. Gentleman has just trashed the hard-working men and women of the train companies, who are trying to do a decent job for passengers; he cannot have it both ways. I am afraid that this is a problem with Network Rail, and I have said that it cannot happen again. We have now had the late delivery of the timetable twice in six months. It is not what I would have expected to happen at this moment in time, with such a big, complex change. None the less, it is happening because we are running vastly more trains to more destinations. New trains have been running this week, and there are people getting on trains this week who have a seat for the first time in four years. That is a good thing.

T3. [905570] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): May I impress on Ministers the urgency of upgrades, including redoubling, to the Cotswold line? Will Ministers commit to working with me to ensure that West Oxfordshire sees those upgrades, which it so badly needs?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I am certainly aware of stakeholders’ desire for faster and more frequent services along the North Cotswold line between Worcester, Oxford and London. We will continue to provide advice to Lord Faulkner’s taskforce as it develops its proposals.

T2. [905569] Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The whole House welcomes the fact that the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill has received Royal Assent. Will the Minister confirm when this important legislation will come into force in Northern Ireland?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Gentleman is right to welcome this legislation. The misuse of lasers can have very serious consequences, and offenders should face tough penalties for endangering the lives of others. The new offences in relation to maritime and aviation will come into force on 10 July across the entire United Kingdom. As road and rail are devolved to Northern Ireland, these elements of the Act will require a legislative consent motion to be approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly when it returns.

T6. [905574] Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): With increasing house building near the strategic road networks on the edge of Northampton, what steps is the Department taking to finish the second phase of the north-west ring road?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): As part of the local growth deal, the Government have already provided nearly £8 million of funding for the construction of phase I of the Northampton north-west relief road. We work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that investment in this infrastructure and others helps to unlock new homes and create workable, sustainable communities.

T4. [905571] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister will have seen the major story in The Times yesterday, highlighting the problems of licensing and cross-border working in the taxi and private hire industry, and the concerns around public safety. Regrettably, my private Member’s Bill—the Licensing of Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill—was talked out a few weeks ago. Will the Minister now give the public an assurance that the Government will come forward urgently with legislation to address these concerns?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I also read the story, which was very alarming. He knows that licensing authorities are responsible for
ensuring that taxi drivers are fit and proper, renewing licences and doing criminal record checks. He will also be aware that there is a task and finish group looking at taxis. I am waiting for that group to present its report to me. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am looking at the issue very closely, as the safety of passengers is a big priority for me.

Chris Grayling: We are just finalising this. I do not know if we have made an announcement on when it is going to come out, but it will come out very shortly. The midland main line is going through the biggest modernisation programme since the 1870s. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) referred to the question of timetable changes. There have been a number of difficult timetable changes, both in the London area and further up the line. However, this is all paving the way. When this route is completed properly in 2020, when we will have new trains, the railway will be much better than it has been for a century.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What consideration has been given to breaking off the North Cotswold line into a stand-alone franchise once the GWR franchise comes to an end?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend has raised this with the Department and with me on a number of occasions, and we continue to look at it. It seems, though, that a stand-alone, North Cotswold-line-only franchise would potentially be too small to be sustainable in its own right, as it would be only a small fraction of the size of what is currently the smallest franchise in the network.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Following up on the earlier question about the consultation on community transport licensing. North Norfolk Community Transport has already lost contracts worth half its income during the consultation period because it cannot win any more business due to the fear that hangs over the sector. What steps will the Government take to guarantee the future of these vital community transport links?

Jesse Norman: We have published guidance making it perfectly clear that local authorities would be acting prematurely if they withdrew or curtailed funding through grants before further guidance, which, as my ministerial colleague has said, we expect to give before the summer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) to drop in on us. We have missed the hon. Gentleman, who was, I think, attending to important business elsewhere, but is now in the bosom of the Chamber. Let’s hear the fella.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence—you have been very kind indeed.

However, one thing that has been less kind to us, sadly, is the timetable changes on GTR and Southeastern. Many people in the constituency I have the privilege to represent, and indeed many in neighbouring areas, are commenting on the lack of capacity taking people into London in the morning and home at night to West Malling, Kings Hill and other places on the Maidstone East line. What will the Government be doing to increase capacity to get in and out of London for these valuable people?

Chris Grayling: I can assure my hon. Friend that there has not been a change to capacity on the Maidstone East line. Some trains on the new timetable are faster and some are slower, but in overall terms the services...
will continue to deliver for passengers. Right now, as I explained to the House a little while back, we clearly have initial problems with the new timetable. This is the biggest logistical change that the railways have made for a very long time. My Department is working very closely with all those involved to try to get this sorted out as quickly as possible. But this is all about delivering more services, longer trains and new destinations across the south-east, and once it is bedded in, I think that passengers in his constituency and elsewhere will see the benefits.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State update the House on his invitation for proposals on a southern rail link to Heathrow? This is of great interest to families and businesses in my constituency, with the potential for a direct rail link from Waterloo to Heathrow via Feltham.

Chris Grayling: That is very timely, because after this Question Time session I am going to meet a number of organisations that are interested in participating in this project. As the hon. Lady knows, we are going to deliver a massive improvement to service access around Heathrow. Western access will be delivered through the control period 6 process, and I aim for southern access to be a privately funded project. This has enormous potential to link not just Waterloo to Heathrow but to link parts of the south-west network through Heathrow on to Paddington.

Stephen Metcalf (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, 2018 is the Year of Engineering. As my local contribution to that, I am organising an engineering showcase in Basildon town centre on 14 July. Will he encourage other Members to consider doing a similar thing in their own constituency? May I also invite him to come and join us to celebrate all the fantastic engineering going on in Basildon?

Chris Grayling: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he is doing as our ambassador for the Year of Engineering. He is a tower of strength in making this a successful year. We have hundreds of firms involved around the country, and I encourage other Members to take advantage of what he is doing and to lay on an event for new students in their constituency this autumn, as I will. This is a great opportunity to unite the whole House in saying that engineering is a great profession and we need more young people to go into it.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Approximately two months ago, I asked the Secretary of State for a meeting with the Newton people who, because of HS2, are going to see more than 30 houses knocked down in their small village. Has the meeting been arranged yet?

Ms Ghani: I know that HS2 Ltd has put in place community managers who are meeting communities up and down the line. HS2 Ltd is also hosting regular meetings here in Parliament, at which Members can make representations on behalf of their constituents. We must not forget that HS2 will bring more than £92 billion of benefit across the whole country. HS2 Ltd is available here in Parliament and also in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, if he so wishes.

Mr Skinner: The Secretary of State agreed the meeting.

Mr Speaker: Well, the hon. Gentleman can always table a question asking when the meeting will be. That is a hint.

Mr Skinner: It was a fortnight ago when he agreed.

Mr Speaker: I note that, and I think that it will be on the record.

Chris Grayling: I do not think the hon. Gentleman’s office has been in touch.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the matter will be sorted out erealong; I very much hope it will.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Network Rail is responsible for Ayr railway station in my constituency, which has important links with Stranraer and Glasgow. The functionality and passenger safety at that station is under threat due to the derelict state of the nearby Station Hotel, which is privately owned. May I urge my right hon. Friend to encourage Network Rail to seriously engage with the owners of that hotel and the local council, to avoid a catastrophic event at Ayr railway station?

Chris Grayling: First, there is no question but that we are very happy to have a meeting between Ministers and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). If his office gets in touch, we will sort that.

On my hon. Friend’s question, I would like to find out a bit more detail, because clearly we would like to ensure that that problem does not exist. If he provides a bit more detail to myself or my hon. Friend the rail Minister, we will get on to the case.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The recent court case that found the collection of tolls at the Mersey crossing unlawful has afforded Ministers an opportunity to pause and review the operation of those tolls, which are hated across my region. Will they take that opportunity and review the tolls?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the road has been extraordinarily successful and is a great example of a piece of newly funded infrastructure. That issue is primarily for Halton Borough Council, but we are following the situation closely.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Residents in Uplawmoor are currently campaigning against proposed airspace changes at Glasgow airport. I very much welcome the Department’s decision to move that process on to the new Civil Aviation Authority guidelines, but does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that airports carry out meaningful consultation with affected communities and do not try to bamboozle and bludgeon them into submission with technical jargon that they cannot understand?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The management of airspace and flight paths is extraordinarily sensitive for local communities. Airports that engage well have a much easier time, and those that do not engage properly pay a price. I agree that community engagement is really important.
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): When the east coast railway franchise is once again open to bids, will the bidding process include a prosperity weighting clause, in keeping with proposals for some defence contracts?

Chris Grayling: When we form the London North Eastern Railway in its final form, as I have said, it will not be a conventional franchise bidding process. It will move to a completely new approach, as I set out in my statement earlier this month, and we will bring more details to the House about the shape of that in due course.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know the Secretary of State shares my excitement about the fact that in July we will see the first new Hitachi trains on a booked service west of Taunton. Will he update us about the wider progress being made with the new Great Western franchise, particularly about the idea that it may be split?

Chris Grayling: I have now got back the responses to the consultation, and I am carefully considering my response to them. I give my hon. Friend an assurance that I have a fairly clear message from the people who responded, and I will take that view very carefully into account in how I take this forward.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): When will the Government stand up for small towns in the shires of this country? While the cities get new trains and powers over bus services, the small towns in the heartlands, such as Lancashire, get nothing. This Government do not seem to care about small towns.

Chris Grayling: It is nice to finish with a degree of hokum from the Opposition. Lancashire has benefited, for example, from the Heysham relief road—connecting two smaller centres in a way that is absolutely vital if we are to unlock parts of the economy—and, starting later this year, all the small towns in Lancashire are getting new trains. Once we have bedded in the timetable and overcome these infuriating problems, the Northern Rail franchise will deliver more services in Lancashire—and, indeed, in Copeland, where my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who has now gone, had the pleasure last weekend of travelling on the west Cumbria line’s first Sunday service in decades.

Mr Speaker: That is very useful to know. Thank you.
Lesmahagow) (SNP) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the implications of the decision of Marks & Spencer to close 14 branches across the United Kingdom.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I welcome the chance to address the House on this matter. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her chairmanship of the all-party group on textile and fashion, and I commiserate with her on the fact that one of the stores that will be closing is in her constituency.

Who among us is not touched by the hand of M&S? I counted up this morning, and I am in fact wearing three items of M&S clothing—I will not declare what they are. Indeed, my breakfast this morning entirely comprised items bought at the Gatwick M&S after a late-night flight. By the way, I defy anyone in the House not to say that they have at least one item of clothing in their wardrobe from that fine retailer. This is, however, a worrying time.

As the hon. Lady said, Marks & Spencer made an announcement on Tuesday about 14 of its UK stores. This is part of a well-advertised plan to reshape its estates and, essentially, to reshape its stores to compete, given the very big challenges of many online retailers in the country. Five of the stores will close this year or early next year, and all colleagues at those locations will be offered redeployment to other stores. Nine other stores have been proposed for closure, and Marks & Spencer has entered a period of consultation on the redeployment of staff in those stores. All of us will of course recognise that this is a worrying time for the over 600 staff members currently going through that process. I know that there will be concern among Members on both sides of the House about this issue. The Government—the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus—will of course stand by, should support be required, to work with the company.

There have been a number of announcements in the retail sector recently—negative and also positive in terms of job creation. We should all recognise the incredible contribution of this sector to the UK economy—it was almost £95 billion in 2016—and this Government’s ongoing support for the sector. We have announced measures worth more than £2 billion over the next five years to cut business rates, with a positive change to the indexation of business rates.

Only this March, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), set up the Retail Sector Council, which is determined to drive up this sector’s productivity and ensure that it is fit to face future challenges. Sitting on the sector council are retailers—large and small; online and offline; in town and out of town—and the unions are of course very much a part of that process. The object of the council is for the Government and industry to work together to drive up productivity, and also to secure our fantastic retail sector’s future health and direction. We are working together on the requirements to make sure that productivity and economic growth in this sector can continue for many years to come.

Mr Speaker: I must just say—I probably do not have to, but I will do so anyway—that I share the Minister’s enthusiasm for Marks & Spencer, which is a most admirable institution. What she said about almost every Member having an item or more from Marks is incontrovertible.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for her response.

Over the past few years, there has been a cascade of commercial announcements from well-known companies saying that iconic retail high street stores need to close if they are to cut costs: British Home Stores, Mothercare, Toys R Us, the Royal Bank of Scotland and now Marks & Spencer. As chair of the all-party group on textile and fashion, I know that the market is changing, but retail companies need to strike a balance between remaining competitive and understanding the wider implications of closing landmark stores. Marks & Spencer’s proposed store closures—14 imminently, and more than 100 in the next few years—will not only result in thousands of potential job losses, but could devastate our local town centres. It is well known that when anchor stores close, the surrounding subsidiary stores feel the impact of reduced footfall, meaning that many close as well.

Are our high streets to become ghost towns? My constituency has already felt the effects of BHS closures, and we expect to lose 67 jobs if the Marks & Spencer closes. Has the Department made any assessment of the impact of the proposed closures on local economies in Scotland and across the UK? What is the impact on disabled people who find it difficult to travel to outskirt retail parks to shop? Since the report by Mary Portas on saving the high street that the Government commissioned in 2011, how many of its recommendations have been implemented? Finally, will the Minister agree to meet jointly with the all-party group, MPs affected and representatives from Marks & Spencer to facilitate further consultation on these proposals, and to consider desperately needed plans to save our high streets?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady raises some valid points—there is an M&S food shop in my Devizes constituency—and is right that attractive stores bring in footfall from which subsidiary stores benefit. Of course, the Government have taken forward many plans to support the high street, which is part of the reason for the rate changes. Local councils, which might be responsible for setting parking policy, rely on parking receipts to fund other transport services, but if those rates are remitted straight back to Westminster, their desire to create a more attractive parking and retail culture might be diminished, which is why it is important that our rate localisation policy proceeds. I hope that the Scottish National party will support it.

The hon. Lady asked whether an assessment had been made. There are ongoing assessments. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton, who sends his apologies for not being present, would be the person to take that meeting. I would not like to speak on behalf of his diary, but I shall make sure that the hon. Lady’s representations are put to him. He is working
tirelessly on this issue across Government even while our retail sector continues to thrive and grow. As she will know from her work on the all-party group, there have been several important announcements in the last few weeks: Amazon has announced the creation of 400 jobs; Lidl has announced the creation of 40 new stores; and ASOS, an amazing online store employing thousands of people in call centre and support capacities, has seen its sales grow by 30% this year—it is becoming a truly global brand.

There is definitely a rotation in the way in which we all shop. I am sure that we all now buy many more of our unmentionable items online—sometimes we even buy them in stores—but the hon. Lady makes some valid points. We should all think hard about what we can do as individuals, particularly to support our local authorities, which are often responsible for planning, decision making, rates setting and parking decisions, all of which can have a material impact on the high street experience.

I will take away the hon. Lady’s request and make sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) makes an important point. Companies such as Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and other major retailers, from farm shops to large online companies, and of course the vital Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which is providing so much support to workers in the industry—is to make sure that these conversations can be had on a cross-Government basis, and that policy making can be joined-up.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I must declare an interest: I am wearing a Marks & Spencer suit, although I do not want to give the House the impression that I am the fashion icon for Marks & Spencer.

Does the Minister agree that it is not all bad? Marks & Spencer has opened a massive store at Rushden Lakes in my constituency. It is hugely successful and employs lots of people. The store is a mixture of retail and leisure. It might just be that times are changing and Marks & Spencer is changing with them.

Mr Speaker: In relation to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s inquiry I say simply this: so am I, and neither do I.

Claire Perry: Perhaps there will be a competition at the end of these proceedings to judge who wears M&S best—I am declaring all responsibility for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) makes an important point. Companies such as Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and other major retailers have embraced this change and worked out how to be fit for the future. Sadly, in other companies—BHS, for example—the corporate management and the level of responsibility that were taken did not prepare the chain adequately for that change, meaning that many jobs were lost. Addressing that is partly the responsibility of the Retail Sector Council.

I appreciate that changes to jobs can be worrying for the more than 600 staff involved, but it is great that one of our iconic British retail chains is prepared to embrace the future, invest, and ensure that it can continue selling us the things that all of us—old and young—would like to buy. I will declare a final interest: I have about 12 Marks & Spencer jackets. They are the perfect combination of cheap and bright, meaning that I could catch your eye, Mr Speaker, when I was standing on the Back Benches.

Mr Speaker: Truly the Minister is a woman of the people.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My suit is from an independent retailer in my constituency, not from M&S.

The Press Association reported last month that 21,000 retail jobs were at risk in the first three months of the year, with administrations at Maplin and Toys R Us, and store closures at New Look, House of Fraser and Carpetright. We now learn that M&S is to close 14 branches this year, and 100 stores by 2022. As we express our fond memories of M&S, may we remember that 872 members of staff will lose their jobs? We need some sobriety in the proceedings here.

High street retailers struggle to compete against out-of-town and online shopping, given their lower cost base, and that is not helped by the long-term squeeze on incomes under this Government. The Government have their much-trumpeted industrial strategy, but where is the retail sector deal? How do they propose to help the affected communities and high streets? The Government must go much further on business rates because the changes simply have not cut through to make the difference needed by high street retailers. What conversations have the Minister and her colleagues had this year with trade unions that represent retail workers?

Unless the Government are prepared to step in to secure a level playing field between our high streets, and online and out-of-town retailers, more shops will close, more high streets will lose key big-name brands, more communities will lose out, and more workers will lose their jobs. The Marks & Spencer closures show that leaving market forces to their own devices is simply not working, and the Government must ensure that there is a fair market in retail for the good of businesses, workers, communities and our high streets.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I are in violent agreement. That is why the establishment of the Retail Sector Council, which absolutely involves store worker representatives, is vital. A series of financial measures has been taken forward. The Government have given almost £20 million to towns funding initiatives such as the Great British High Street. We have established the Future High Streets Forum, which is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), and that also involves retailers. More than £2 billion of measures were introduced in the autumn Budget to cut business rates, including the 100% small business rate relief that is so vital to independent retailers.

Bill Esterson: It is not working.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman says that, but he bought his suit from an independent retailer, which will no doubt have benefited from that—[Interruption.] He should have bought more suits there, Mr Speaker.

One point that has not been raised is that there is an unfairness in the current structure of online and offline retailing because of the way in which retailers pay VAT.
That is an issue for us all, and it is why online prices can be much lower. We are therefore bringing forward a review into the wider taxation of the digital economy to ensure that international corporation tax rules are fair, and that sellers that operate across online and offline marketplaces pay an appropriate amount of value added tax.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I assure my right hon. Friend that she is indeed a fashion icon in her M&S outfits.

This sad announcement by M&S, particularly for the people who work there, puts further pressure on our high streets, on top of the correct announcement on betting regulations and the trend towards online shopping. Will my right hon. Friend redouble her efforts, and that of her Department, to ensure the vitality and diversity of our high streets up and down the land?

Claire Perry: Most assuredly. Working with high streets in my constituency, as I am sure many right hon. and hon. Members do, I know there is a huge power in having a vibrant high street sector with lots of shops and big anchor tenants, and perhaps also, as a way of driving footfall, shops where people pick up their online packages. Our high streets are part of our incredibly vibrant history. Many of us represent small market towns where the high street is a hugely important part of the local economy. Let us not forget that they employ hundreds of thousands of people right across the country.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): All this is terrible news for our local retailers and for businesses on our local high streets. We have lost a staggering number of businesses over the past two or three years. It is terrible news for the employees and their families, and for our local economy. In my constituency, we will lose about 90 employees, which will have a devastating impact. Is it due to a combination of the Government’s austerity and the clicks versus bricks regarding VAT rates, which we have just spoken about? I know that the Government were planning a consultation on VAT. Will the Minister update us on where we are with that consultation? Is there any possibility, as I asked the Chancellor some time ago, of reducing VAT for our high streets to give local shops and high street retailers a fighting chance against online retailers?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman anticipates the review I hope we can all support. I will ensure that my hon. Friends in the Treasury bring it forward as soon as possible. I do have to push back slightly. The hon. Gentleman is right and wrong. He is right that we are buying less stuff. In fact, there is the phrase “peak stuff”, which suggests that the younger folks among us no longer go shopping for pleasure, but prefer to do other things with their time—mostly involving their phones, as best I can tell from my own kids. There is the view that the acquisition of products and services is on the decline globally. I believe the vacancy rate for shops in great cities such as New York is now in double digit figures, which is very surprising and reflects a global trend.

We should welcome the fact that in this country real wages are now going up and increasing ahead of inflation. People are getting more money in their pockets. The Government’s actions in cutting taxes by over £1,000 for over 3 million people and in continuing to invest in high streets, allowing both money and choice, has meant that spending has held up reasonably well—in particular, since the Brexit referendum, which was supposed to deliver the death knell to shopping in this country. That has not happened. We are seeing a change in the way people spend, but it is vital we recognise the importance of this sector as part of our industrial strategy going forward. Industrial strategy, by the way, does not just mean smokestack industries. It means retail industries and creative industries—[Interruption.]

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I speak as a former Marks & Spencer supplier and current Marks & Spencer customer. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) highlighted the importance of an anchor store to a town’s retail offer and the social importance of the high street. I entirely agreed with her question. Will my right hon. Friend remain vigilant on, or at least sensitive to, the impact of business rates for physical retailers as compared to internet retailers? Will she monitor that carefully, because we want to ensure a level playing field for the social benefit we have been talking about?

Claire Perry: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We have tolerated that difference for too long. It is right to have a fair allocation of VAT between both channels.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): It cannot be fair for our high street retailers to have to compete with online companies that offshore themselves for tax purposes and often use the most exploitative employment practices, such as minimum hours contracts. The Government have to act more urgently to deal with this problem. Does the Minister really think that if an employee loses their job at Marks & Spencer and goes to work for a company like Amazon, they will be given the same rate of pay?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman flags up the reason that the Government commissioned the Taylor review on the future of good work: clearly, the workplace is changing. The expectation, and it has been pleasing to hear Marks & Spencer talk about this, is that it will do everything it can to redeploys its workforce, particularly into stores nearby that might be transitioning to food. I have been very struck on my forays into M&S by its incredible investment in its workforce—its commitment to increasing diversity and to providing good jobs over the long term—and we must all work to make sure that those jobs continue.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I declare an interest as a former supplier to Marks & Spencer, and I am still involved in—but not paid by—the company that supplies Marks & Spencer. It is one of the most innovative retailers. It trains its staff, as other people have mentioned, and is a huge supporter of the British food industry. However, north-eastern Scotland has had to withstand 50% of the business rates increase, so I ask the Minister—
I ask her whether that increase in business rates can be justified and to be very conscious that business rates are damaging the high street, particularly as we are seeing in Scotland.

**Claire Perry**: Mr Speaker, you can tell by the vigorous debate on this point the importance of having local government and national Government.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. There are very uneasily exchanges between Scottish National party Members and Government Back Benchers. All should be united in wanting to listen to the reply from the Minister of State.

**Claire Perry**: This vigorous exchange points to the responsibility that we all bear—Westminster, national and local governments—for supporting our high streets and not using short-term measures, particularly tax-raising measures, that might further drive out the precious high street stores that we are all so interested in protecting.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister tell us whether the closures will affect any Marks & Spencer hospital branches? If she is meeting the company, will she raise the scandal of the higher prices in these shops than in high street shops? When I met the company over two years ago, it flatly refused to match the promise of WHSmith by ending premium prices in hospitals. I hope that the Minister agrees that this is absolutely exploitative and must stop.

**Claire Perry**: The hon. Lady raises a fantastic point. We were all so shocked to see that practice; it seemed to be a terrible example of predatory pricing. My understanding is that no hospital shops are closing, but I will certainly ensure that the issue is raised by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton. This practice must end.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Regrettably, Marks & Spencer chose to leave Rugby town centre a couple of years ago, but the good news is that it relocated to a much larger edge-of-town site at Elliot’s Field and is able to offer a much more extensive range. Does the Minister agree that this announcement means that it is important for retailers to work with developers and local authorities to continue to enhance and improve the retail experience?

**Claire Perry**: I absolutely do. The work that so many do on an unsung basis in our neighbourhood planning process should take into account these issues: how do we create vibrant centres where people want to live, work and travel to, and which mean we have a very vibrant high street sector? If you will indulge me for one minute, Mr Speaker, Marks & Spencer has been a leading company in its drive for zero-emissions activity. It was one of the first companies in the sector to set up such a plan. It has done amazing work with its supply chain and stores to reduce carbon emissions and sell sustainable products. I really do applaud it for that.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This is a very worrying time for Marks & Spencer’s employees. I was therefore very pleased to be able to support my excellent store in Sutton by buying this suit there a month or so ago. While I agree with the Minister that people’s purchasing habits are changing, does she agree that inevitably, the report from Mark Carney that household incomes are now £900 lower than had been predicted before the EU referendum will have had an impact on Marks & Spencer? Does she also agree that if “max fac” is introduced, a £32.50 charge for every shipment, given that Marks & Spencer operates in 23 out of 28 EU countries, will also have a significant impact on it and the retail business generally?

**Claire Perry**: I am not going to comment on hypotheticals, both pre and post Brexit, in terms of the impact on the economy. However, the right hon. Gentleman points out the absolute requirement both to satisfy the referendum result, in terms of leaving the European Union, and to ensure that we have as close and as frictionless a trading relationship as possible, so that we do not see food prices or the prices of goods and services going up for these very integrated operators in the UK.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for raising the issue of the closure of shops in the high streets in my constituency and the movement away from high streets towards out-of-town parks, and I think we should try to stop that.

Companies in my constituency are paying some of the highest business rates in Europe, and, obviously, Scotland’s business growth is below that of the rest of the United Kingdom. May I ask the Minister to work with me and with other colleagues—on a cross-party basis, if needs be—and with the devolved Administrations to increase business growth in Scotland, so that we can at least match the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Claire Perry**: Absolutely. My hon. Friend referred to disability access, and I think we still need to do more about that. We must bear in mind that it is not enough for companies simply to relocate out of town if people need cars or some other form of transport to get there.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): High streets throughout the country will be the poorer for this decision. Retail closures are coming thick and fast now. May I press the Minister on one point? When will we see a change in VAT rules that will help our local shops?

**Claire Perry**: As my hon. Friend—for he is a friend—knows, it is an unwise Minister who pre-empts a Treasury announcement, so I will not be tempted. But I think that we should focus on the fact that through such actions we can end up with a thriving great British company that is able to compete in the 21st century and to maintain its stores. We have seen too many great British names go under, partly because their managements did not make the right decisions and did not think enough about their staff in the long term.

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow...
(Dr Cameron) for securing the urgent question. The closure of the store in East Kilbride will also affect communities in my constituency such as Waterfoot and Eaglesham, where some of its staff live.

One of the problems with high street policy is that it involves a complicated mix of local government, devolved government and Westminster government, with often competing priorities. Will the industrial strategy present an opportunity for some combined thinking, so that we can develop good national policies that will ensure that our high streets can thrive?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has made clear exactly why the industrial strategy—which, as I have said, sounds a bit “smokestacky”—is actually focused on industries such as retail and hospitality, in which we know we must increase productivity and in which so many hundreds of thousands of staff, many of them women, are employed. That is why the sector council was set up. It has existed for only six weeks, but it has already had several very productive sessions. Ultimately, this is why the move to local industrial strategies, working with local enterprise partnerships and devolved Administrations—[Interruption. / Goodness me. Members are very shouty across the Chamber today. We have already had a discussion about politeness.

Mr Speaker: As I said a few moments ago, there is too much shouting between Conservative Back Benchers and members of the Scottish National party. The Minister must be heard. If Members want to squabble, they should not squabble when a Minister, a shadow Minister or anyone else is on his or her feet. Let us hear the answers.

Claire Perry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will endeavour to be brief.

It is vital for us to develop the national industrial strategy and to make it local, ensuring that mayors, devolved Administrations, local councils and local enterprise partnerships are involved in these decisions.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As we know, the retail sector predominantly employs women. What can the Government do to support them during this process and to ensure that they are not disproportionately affected by the closures?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is right—retail is very much a female employment sector, often because women are working part time—but he and I should celebrate the fact that there are more women in work than at any time since records began and that the gender pay gap is at its lowest-ever level.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made some very valid points, but let us be clear about one thing: M&S is changing its business model in response to changing customer needs, behaviour and desires, and it has survived since 1884 precisely because it continues to do that. Revenues are up—let us not paint a picture of gloom and doom—but profits are challenged, so what is happening is perfectly fair and reasonable. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that there is a level playing field between online and offline on the high street?

Claire Perry: Yes.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does the Minister—for whom I have the greatest respect—accept that small towns have been hardest hit by these previous closures and that central and local government policy is partly responsible? In Accrington, for example, hundreds of jobs have been lost, either as a result of council redundancies or because the Government have relocated public services to bigger towns or cities. Hundreds of well-paid workers have been taken out of town centres, and that has affected retailers such as Marks & Spencer.

Claire Perry: Our two constituencies share similar characteristics. There is a very complex mix. People’s working and commuting patterns are changing, and their mobility is different. The hon. Gentleman has his brand-new trains coming, which might encourage more people to out-commute from the market towns. There is a complex series of problems, and they cannot all be solved in Westminster; they need national Governments, local governments, local economic partnerships and industry working together, and the great thing about the industrial strategy is that it is the first time that I can remember that industry and the Government have sat down and defined what they need to do to drive up their productivity, to make sure there are good jobs in these sectors, both in central towns and smaller towns for the future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in the internet age, car parking charges in town centres make it more difficult for retailers both large and small and that local authorities might wish to reconsider them?

Claire Perry: As my hon. Friend knows, that is a difficult issue because local authorities rely on that revenue stream to fund other services, including buses in my constituency, and that is why the localisation of the rates, allowing local authorities to have more revenue from driving up activity in the high street and therefore rates revenue from the high streets, cannot come soon enough.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her response to the urgent question. What consideration has been given to possible management and staff takeovers such as by establishing co-operatives of individual shops marked for closure? What discussions has the Minister had with Marks & Sparks in relation to that, and what help can the Minister and the Government give to help that happen?

Claire Perry: There has been close contact with Marks & Spencer at Government level to understand what is happening. There is also now a period of serious consultation between the company, unions and staff affected in those stores to make sure there is the best possible outcome for all.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering’s Marks & Spencer shop is one of the 14 whose closure has been announced, and this is very bad news for local shoppers in Kettering who use the store and in particular for the 58 employees. The decision is even more bemusing given that Kettering sits in one of the fastest growing areas in the UK, with new houses going up all the time and the population increasing at a rapid rate. Will the Minister ensure that large retailers like Marks & Spencer are fully apprised of housing growth plans, because they might be making their decisions on incorrect information?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I will certainly make sure the Department ensures those pieces of information are shared, and of course a consultation is now under way—that was announced yesterday—with the stores affected and there might be new pieces of information that have not been thought about that should be used.

Business of the House

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 4 June will include:

**Monday 4 June**—Second Reading of the Ivory Bill.

**Tuesday 5 June**—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds) Bill, followed by general debate on NATO.

**Wednesday 6 June**—There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

**Thursday 7 June**—Debate on a motion on ending tuberculosis followed by general debate on early elections, human rights and the political situation in Turkey. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 8 June**—The House will not be sitting.

With regards to important Brexit legislation, I am confident I will be able to update the House on these Bills shortly, in the usual way. I will make sure the House can make swift progress in a matter of weeks, not months, in preparing for our new relationship with our friends and neighbours in the EU.

This week we have heard incredibly moving accounts given by courageous survivors and their families at the Grenfell inquiry. We are committed to getting to the bottom of this tragedy and achieving justice for the victims.

This week has also marked a year since the Manchester Arena terrorist attack. The attack on innocent and vulnerable people was appalling and we stand with them in our determination to never let terrorism succeed.

Finally, may I take this opportunity to wish everyone a restful Whitsun recess?

Valerie Vaz: May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business and for her statement? I say to her gently, however, that by making a statement she eats into the time for right hon. and hon. Members to ask questions, so perhaps she should provide statements at the end, when she is the last person to speak.

The forthcoming business is very light and no Lords amendments are expected for when the House next sits—[Interruption.] I will take longer if Government Members keep chuntering. Will the Leader of the House confirm what the Government Chief Whip said to the 1922 committee, namely that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will be back on 11 June? It seems that the respected journalist Faisal Islam is announcing House business: he has tweeted about the withdrawal Bill, the trade Bill and the customs Bill, and that there will be a debate on 11 June. Will the Leader of the House confirm whether he is the new virtual Leader of the House? Will the trade Bill and customs Bill, which should by now have passed Report stage and Third
Reading, be debated on 11 June? I am asking the Leader of the House rather than Faisal Islam. Will she confirm whether any of the Bills relating to Europe will be debated in this place—she obviously cannot talk about the other place—before the European Council meeting scheduled for 28 and 29 June?

It is unprecedented to treat Parliament in this way, with business being announced in the media, not in the House. Surely Democratic Unionist party Members do not want to prop up a Government who treat Parliament in such a way—short-termist, limping from one week to the next.

Brexit is so important. We need to take time to consider the proposals, in the best interests of the country. However, yesterday’s session of the Treasury Committee heard that the Government still have not worked out the customs arrangements. It is no wonder that the Tory party has to have a loyalty scheme to try to attract young people. This is about the interests of young people and the future of this country.

Where are the hon. Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Stone (Sir William Cash)?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I’m here!

Valerie Vaz: They have been calling for parliamentary sovereignty, but why have we not heard in this House when we will debate the Bills? [Interruption.] I will take longer.

What about a debate on the fact that the number of French, Belgian and Dutch companies registered 48%, 38% and 52% fewer businesses respectively in 2016-17 than in the previous year, and that there was a 90% collapse in foreign investment in the UK last year compared with 2016?

If the Government are too afraid to debate any Bill with the letters “EU” in it, how about heeding the words of the Prime Minister:

“to make Britain a country that works for everyone and not just the privileged few”;

or, to put it the other way—the way we put it—for the many, not the few? Perhaps, therefore, we could have a debate on the report by Professor Peter Dwyer of the University of York, who tracked claimants over five years and said:

“The outcomes from sanctions are almost universally negative.”

Or what about a debate on the social injustice of the growing number of homeless people being fined, given criminal convictions or even being imprisoned? A judge said:

“I will be sending a man to prison for asking for food when he was hungry.”

Or what about a debate on “Still Dying on the Inside”, a report by the charity Inquest? Most women who go to prison—84% of them—do so for non-violent offences, and two thirds of women in prison are mothers of dependent children. Where is the Government’s commitment to social justice?

And what about the head of Motability, whose salary is more than 10 times that of the Prime Minister? He can afford to buy a top of the range car, but I have had to write to him about constituents who have had their cars taken away, and some of them cannot even walk while waiting for their assessments. He has had support from the Government through tax breaks.

We have had the chaotic situation of the Government standing to support the Opposition in the application made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for an emergency Standing Order No. 24 debate on his constituency boundaries Bill, when all that was needed was a money resolution. The hon. Member for North East Somerset said that the quote I gave from “Erskine May” did not apply to private Members’ Bills, but I have taken advice and found that it applies both to Government Bills and to private Members’ Bills. Indeed, the Standing Orders that he himself mentioned apply to both.

I want to raise another House matter, raised last week by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), about the post office counter in Members’ Lobby. Will the Leader of the House use her best offices to talk to the Chair of the Administration Committee to ensure that Members are consulted about the closure of that counter, because they have not been. It is very useful to have it there, particularly if there are queues in Central Lobby.

Finally, will the Leader of the House confirm, following the wonderful wedding last week and the performance by the gospel choir, that the Prime Minister is now singing that Ben E. King classic, “Stand by Me”? I, too, wish everyone a happy Whitsun break.

Andrea Leadsom: “Dear Pot... Yours, Kettle” springs to mind. The hon. Lady asked me to be swifter in making the business statement and then said that she would waffle on for ever—and she did.

The hon. Lady asks about the business that was discussed, and I made it very clear that I aim to bring back the very important Brexit legislation within weeks. She will know that in this place discussions take place and the business is announced through very long-standing conventions through the usual channels, and that is indeed the case on this occasion. There has been no announcement to any committee through any private meeting. There has not been any announcement.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asks about the customs arrangements, and she will be aware that the discussions are ongoing. The Government have been very clear that we are seeking the best possible deal for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours as we leave the European Union. That we will continue to do. It means that we are constantly considering the best alternatives with the best information that is available at the time. We will continue to do that, because, rather than playing politics with it, trying to score points day in, day out and undermining the will of the people, the Government are determined to ensure that we get the best possible deal that we can.

The hon. Lady asks about the economy, and she suggests that it is struggling, so she might like to welcome the fact that employment is up to another record high, unemployment is down to a 40-year low, real wages are rising, and UK exports rose by nearly 10% in the last year to a new record high. She might like to welcome the fact that the highest growth in investment spending in the G7 last year came to the United Kingdom. She might like to welcome the fact that our day-to-day
spending is in surplus for the first time in 16 years, and certainly since her Government were in power in 2001 and 2002. She might also like to welcome the lowest net borrowing in over a decade. I am sure that she will not welcome any of those things, but what we on this side of the House focus on is giving more people the security of a job and a pay packet to give themselves and their families a better life.

Also, the hon. Lady talks about inequality and how unfair life is, and she might like to welcome the national living wage, introduced by this Government. Last month, we increased the national living wage by 4.4%—inflation busting and the equivalent of an annual pay rise of more than £2,000 for a full-time worker since its introduction. She might like to welcome the fact that basic rate taxpayers are £1,000 better off than in 2010 as a direct result of our changes to the personal tax-free allowance. She might also like to welcome the fact that the basic state pension is now more than £1,450 a year higher than it was in 2010. But as I say, I do not expect the hon. Lady to welcome the real improvements in people’s lives under a Conservative Government that balances the need to keep the economy in good shape with the ability to pay for public services.

The hon. Lady asks about the legislative programme. What I can say to her is that 31 Bills have been introduced so far, 17 of which have been sent for Royal Assent. Hundreds of statutory instruments have been passed by each House. Seven draft Bills have been published and there are six Brexit Bills before Parliament at this time. That is not by any means a small legislative programme. Perhaps the hon. Lady simply has not noticed.

As for the post office counter, as I said last week to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), I am delighted to take up the issue of its introduction. She might like to welcome the fact that we increased the national living wage by 4.4%—inflation busting and the equivalent of an annual pay rise of more than £2,000 for a full-time worker since its introduction. She might also like to welcome the fact that the basic state pension is now more than £1,450 a year higher than it was in 2010. But as I say, I do not expect the hon. Lady to welcome the real improvements in people’s lives under a Conservative Government that balances the need to keep the economy in good shape with the ability to pay for public services.

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As for the post office counter, as I said last week to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), I am delighted to take up the issue of its opening times. I have already asked the chief executive of the House authorities to respond to Members who want to raise the issue and to ensure that when services to Members are under question, consultation takes place with all Members. I hope that I have answered all the hon. Lady’s lengthy questions.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): May we have a debate on how the independent complaints procedure for this House is progressing?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that Members continue to work very hard cross-party on building an independent complaints procedure that will genuinely change the culture in this place for the better, making sure that everybody, right across the Palace of Westminster—whoever they are and whatever job they do—will be treated with the courtesy, dignity and respect which is their due.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the next sitting week. I very much endorse and support her comments on Manchester and Grenfell.

This has been the week in which clueless fantasy finally caught up with hard reality; as we have found that the Government’s “unicorn and rainbow” technological solution to the border in Ireland will cost £20 billion—£7 billion more than we paid into the EU in 2016—and the leave guru Dominic Cummings has said that the “wiring of power in Downing Street is systemically dysfunctional” and that there are no “real preparations” for leaving the EU. May we have a proper, realistic statement on where we are with Brexit, free of any of the delusional fantasy that are usually served up? Can we have a sense of how much this chaotic cluelessness will cost us?

There is nothing in the business statement about the return of the repeal Bill from the House of Lords. When should we expect to see the Bill? Can we have a categorical assurance that the Leader of the House will not simply lump all the Lords amendments together into one package to try to curtail debate and voting? These are important measures that we have to consider probably for the first time. Can we have a categorical assurance that this Government will not revert to type and try to close down debate, scrutiny and votes?

Yesterday was quite encouraging: we had two votes on Opposition motions. We are now seeing a little more Government engagement with Opposition day debates, which is all down to the threat of withdrawing ministerial salaries and releasing Cabinet papers, but can we not just go back to where we were, when the Opposition tabled motions for debate and then the House voted? Why do we have to go through all this rigmarole just to get this Government to vote?

Lastly, Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the staff of the House a very happy and relaxing Whitsun recess. We all look forward to coming back for a proper debate on the Lords amendments to the repeal Bill.

Andrea Leadsom: I always enjoy the hon. Gentleman’s passion for these matters, which is extremely welcome. I am sure he will have listened very carefully when I said that there will be bringing the withdrawal Bill back to this place within weeks, certainly soon after the short Whitsun recess, and of course we will debate the Bill at length, as we have done all the way through its passage. As a very honourable gentleman, I am sure he would recognise that this House and the other place have debated the Bill, and all Brexit and non-Brexit legislation, at enormous length.

The Government have clearly been listening—there has been a huge amount of change to those Bills—and we will continue to do so. The withdrawal Bill is now in a much better place than it was. We have listened very carefully to all views on both sides of the Chamber, and we will continue to do so. I urge the hon. Gentleman to accept the fact that this business must be carried out in a carefully considered way, but it will be brought back as soon as possible.

The hon. Gentleman asks for more votes, and I encourage all hon. Members to seek controversy wherever possible—that is what leads to votes. It is a great pleasure for the Government when the Opposition choose to support their legislation, as the Opposition have in many Second Reading debates—it supports the narrative that we are all working together to make this country a better place. Voting is not necessarily, of itself, a good thing. It is when there is controversy, when we disagree, that we need to vote. Voting is not the be-all and end-all in this place, and there is a lot to be said for making progress on important business such as the Tenant Fees Bill, the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, counter-terrorism legislation and so on, on which we can all agree. That is what people want to see this Parliament doing, and I am proud to say we often do that.
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the restoration of the much loved, at least by me, traditional Easter, Whitsun, Summer and Christmas Adjournment debates? If these debates were held in future in Government time, for a full day on the last day before we rise, it would give colleagues the certainty that they would have the opportunity to raise issues of local and national importance.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a much loved attendee of the pre-recess Adjournment debate. His interventions on topics such as phone scams, endometriosis and, of course, the city status of Southend are vital. We must always take every opportunity to welcome all of his interventions about Southend and its long-serving elected representatives, and I am sure the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee will give great consideration to my hon. Friend’s representations.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): With reference to the earlier exchanges on Marks & Spencer, and to assuage your undoubted curiosity, Mr Speaker: boxer shorts and socks.

You will have noted from the Order Paper that there are two Select Committee statements this afternoon, and this device is becoming increasingly popular. We have had five applications for Select Committee statements today, but we need to limit them because they do impinge on the debates on important issues to be aired in the afternoon. The Great Exhibition of the North, which Members know I witter on about a lot, will begin four weeks tomorrow, on 22 June. People travelling to Newcastle and Gateshead from other parts of the three northern regions will be depending on TransPennine Express, CrossCountry, trains on the east coast line and Northern to get them there. Let us hope that the Government, with those franchise holders, will make sure that those trains are running much more efficiently than they currently are, in order to get people to and from the Great Exhibition of the North in Newcastle and Gateshead. It is vital to the success of that venture that people can actually get between Newcastle and Gateshead from the three northern regions.

Andrea Leadsom: In response to the hon. Gentleman’s mention of Marks & Spencer and boxer shorts, I am tempted to say “knickers”, but I am not sure whether you would rule it out of order, Mr Speaker. So, moving swiftly on, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on finding the opportunity again to mention the Great Exhibition of the North and I wish him huge success with it. I absolutely share his desire to see many people attend it and make it a great success.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Mindful of today’s urgent question, Members from across the House will be alarmed at the prospect of a merger between giant supermarkets Sainsbury’s and Asda. Such a merger would disadvantage their suppliers—the farmers, growers and food firms in my constituency and elsewhere—and consumers, as choice would be reduced. T. S. Eliot said:

“Footfalls echo in the memory”.

The footfall in our towns and cities will be a distant memory if these corporate giants are allowed to dominate and snuff out the particularity and variety of independent traders, so will the Leader of the House ask my dear friend the Business Secretary to come here to tell us what he and the Competition and Markets Authority intend to do to stop this worst kind of virtual monopoly, crony capitalism? There can be a different kind of Britain, but only if the Government and this Parliament fight for it.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is raising a very important point. People have different views on the benefits or otherwise of a merger of this type, but I know we are all keen to see thriving high streets and decent choice, as well as value for money, when it comes to supermarkets. He will be aware that Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions will take place on 12 June, and I suggest that he takes this matter up directly with Ministers then.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I was delighted last year when the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs adopted my private Member’s Bill on animal cruelty and announced at his party conference that he would be increasing the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. The draft Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience) Bill was published in December and the consultation closed in January, but we have had absolutely nothing since. My constituents, who have witnessed some horrific incidents of animal cruelty, and many campaigners all around the country are desperate to know: where on earth is the Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I congratulate the hon. Lady on her work on this issue? It is vital that we do more to protect animals from cruelty. She will be aware that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made statements about his intention to introduce a Bill in due course. I cannot give her specific information on that, but the next DEFRA questions is on Thursday 7 June, when she might like to take up the matter with Ministers.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we have a debate on wasting police time? There has been a great deal of it about recently.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not sure of the specific context in which my right hon. Friend raises this point, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department certainly made a great point yesterday of appreciating the police for all the amazing work that they do. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude. It was good to see him setting a new tone with the police—one in which we are going to look to work very carefully with them on solving some of the big challenges that we face as a society.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): Recent estimates are that every year in the UK more than 15,000 babies are born damaged by alcohol consumed during pregnancy, condemning them to lifelong difficulties. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, for example, has been found to affect more than 50% of those in prison; that is just one tragic manifestation of its scourges. Will the Leader of the House press the case with her Government colleagues for comprehensive legislation to address this appalling blight on the lives of so many thousands of our citizens, both to prevent its occurrence and to provide proper care and support for FASD sufferers?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise what is a harrowing situation for so many babies and their parents. Foetal alcohol syndrome is appalling and absolutely shocking, and the fact that it affects so many babies is really terrible. In the first instance, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can share his views directly with Ministers.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Speeding cyclists on rural roads in the New Forest are putting residents and other pedestrians at risk, simply because they cannot be bothered to fit a bell on their bikes so that they can warn pedestrians of their approach. When I wrote to a Transport Minister about this issue 18 months ago, he replied:

"Through rule 66 of the Highway code we recommend that a bell is fitted to a bicycle and used as necessary. Under current regulations the cyclist is not compelled to keep the bell fitted after the bicycle has been purchased. We have no plans to make bells compulsory as this would be difficult to enforce."

May we have a statement from the Government about that rather insipid reply, so that my constituents, such as Margaret Verdon JP, can go about their business without fear of being mown down by silent road cyclists?

Andrea Leadsom: I might be tempted to say that this is a bit of a ding-dong, but the issue of cycling and its danger to pedestrians is very real. I have had an appalling case in which the child of constituents of mine was killed by a cyclist who had mounted the pavement. It is a very serious issue and I sincerely encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate; although there is an amusing element, the issue has had severe consequences in some cases.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): As the Leader of the House has advised us that Brexit Bills will come before the House in the coming weeks, I am of the view that that may mean in June, so will she please advise as to where we are on the introduction of proxy voting?

Andrea Leadsom: I believe the hon. Lady is referring to the proposal for proxy voting while on baby leave. I was pleased to see the Procedure Committee report on the sorts of considerations that it felt, having taken evidence, we would need to bear in mind were the House minded to introduce proxy voting. The shadow Leader of the House and I met just this week and discussed this issue. We agreed that we would both seek views, through the usual channels, on how best to proceed. I absolutely assure all right hon. and hon. Members that I mean to make swift progress on the matter.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My constituents and I value our accident and emergency at Cheltenham General Hospital and we want to see 24/7 services restored, but despite my having put in for Adjournment and Westminster Hall debates for many months to ventilate the issue of recruitment pressures, which is sometimes advanced, no debate has been provided. Does my right hon. Friend have any advice on how I might get this important issue before the House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been assiduous in raising this issue. He has, in fact, raised it with me on a number of occasions and, indeed, in the House. He will be aware that there have been a number of opportunities to debate health matters more generally, including in yesterday’s Opposition day debate, and there is always the possibility of the next Health questions. Nevertheless, he will need to look to you, Mr Speaker, for an Adjournment debate should he wish to put the issues for his constituents more directly to Ministers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen early-day motion 1267 in the name of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? It marks Dementia Awareness Week.

[That this House supports Dementia Awareness Week which runs from 21 to 28 May 2018; thanks all of the charities which work to support dementia patients and their families and who raise awareness; recognises the hard work and endeavours that they make to bring about a change to the quality of life with their families; and calls on the Government to assist and support research and development to find a cure for those with dementia.]

There is hardly a family in the country that is not touched by this terrible illness. Might we give consideration to having an annual debate on the subject?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. He may be aware that this week, in fact, Cabinet Members received training on dementia awareness and how to behave in a more helpful way to those with dementia. He is absolutely right that there are so many people suffering from this awful disease now. As the chief executive of the Alzheimer’s Society explained to us, what is very important is to help people to live well with dementia.

I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to seek dementia-awareness training so that we can all contribute. In response to his specific request for a debate, perhaps the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee might look favourable on something cross-party so that we can all share ideas on this subject.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House was a little bit grumpy this morning, which is very unusual for her. To suggest that I have not been banging on about parliamentary sovereignty is a little unfair. The excellent Leader of the House also bangs on for the House with the Government, and she does that very well. The Opposition have asked for time to debate the amendments to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I wholeheartedly support that. Shall we test the sincerity of the Opposition by removing the moment of interruption from the debate, so that we can talk all through the night if we want to?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful, of course, to my hon. Friend for his support for careful debate of all matters pertaining to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I assure him that we will indeed be giving plenty of time to this place to be able to debate the amendments when the Bill comes back to this House, which, as I have said, will be in the next few weeks.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House confirm whether there will be an opportunity—before the business announced by Faisal Islam on 11 June—for a debate on the increasing risk of no deal, the £900 drop in household incomes to which Mr Mark Carney referred, the difficulty in securing a trade deal with a protectionist United States and the importance of securing a final say on the deal?
Andrea Leadsom: I will not bother with most of the assertions of the right hon. Gentleman, which are simply wrong. The one assertion that I will bother with, because it is very important, is that Faisal Islam does not announce the business of this House. The business of the House has not been announced by anyone at all; it is announced by me on a Thursday.

I have given assurances to the House that I will announce the business and that the withdrawal Bill will come back to this place in the next few weeks. Hon. Members who actually care about the scheduling of complex and competing demands for time in this Chamber will realise that, actually, precise scheduling requires great care and attention and that urgent things do crop up from time to time. Nevertheless, I have given an undertaking: the EU (Withdrawal) Bill will be back in this place within weeks. Nobody has announced anything else to anybody else.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): There have been many comments about Brexit legislation coming back to this place. May I put in a plea from my constituents who have been asking me, “When are we getting on with this legislation?” They are saying that they want it to come before us as soon as possible. I am pleased that the speculation says that it will be next month, because, as 58% of local voters in my constituency voted for Brexit, they want me to get on with voting down those Lords amendments that came from the unelected place.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; he is right to mention many of our constituents’ desire to see us getting on with putting the EU withdrawal Bill into a position whereby we can leave the European Union with a good, strong, free and fair relationship with our EU friends and neighbours. That is exactly what the Government are focused on, and I absolutely assure him that we are getting on with it.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Can we have a debate about anything—does it not matter what—as long as we actually have a proper vote at the end of it that tests the Government’s position? The only votes that we are having at the moment are those proposed by the Opposition, and the Government are running scared of those as well. If the Government are too divided or too frit to push through a legislative programme, do they fancy getting off the pot and letting somebody else have a go?

Andrea Leadsom: What a completely extraordinary thing for the hon. Gentleman to say! We had two votes yesterday, and the Government won both. As I explained to the shadow Leader of the House, the Government have put forward a huge number of Bills; 17 have already gone for Royal Assent. If the Opposition choose not to vote on them—or, indeed, if we vote on them and the Government win—these are the normal processes of government. Things are proceeding apace. It is extraordinary for the hon. Gentleman to suggest otherwise.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Please can we have a debate on the positive impact of business on local communities? In addition to the economic benefits, there are social benefits, which I have seen locally that so many businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough are putting something back, including Harrogate Water’s work with the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. I have also seen it nationally, as charities such as Business in the Community work with so many companies. If we have a debate, we can discuss how businesses and communities are much stronger together.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that business can have a hugely positive impact on the local community. I am aware that Harrogate Water is doing exactly that with Keep Britain Tidy. I am particularly pleased to hear about the company’s work in cutting plastic waste, which my hon. Friend knows the Government are determined to tackle. The Government have been supporting the creation of community business through the £1.8 million Bright Ideas Fund, which aims to create a national network of 80 or more enterprising, community-led organisations.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The fourth report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, published at the end of April 2017, gave the Government until the end of last year to engage with Libya to negotiate compensation for UK victims of IRA bombs that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex to initiate a domestic solution. Can we have a statement from the Foreign Office outlining what progress has been made?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will obviously want to raise that matter at the next Foreign Office questions. If he would like me to pursue something that he had the expectation of having already received, he can write to me after business questions and I will take it up with the Foreign Office on his behalf.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Research recently carried out in Wales has found that the introduction of fines for parents who take their children out of school for a family holiday has had no impact whatever on the level of school truancy, yet this policy continues to damage the tourist industry, is unfair on those who work in tourism, and often damages the relationship between families and schools. Would the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the Secretary of State for Education reviewing this policy across England and considering whether it is time to drop this policy?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise this matter, which I know he cares deeply about. It is a priority to reduce overall school absence as part of the Government’s ambition to create a world-class education system. In 2013 the Government amended legislation so that a leave of absence could be authorised by maintained schools in exceptional circumstances. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate or perhaps a Westminster Hall debate to discuss this issue in more detail, because I am sure that many Members will want to discuss the research that he cited in his question.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): New research by the York Health Economics Consortium has found that scrapping prescription charges for people with Parkinson’s and inflammatory bowel disease will save the NHS more than £20 million a year. Can the Leader of the House please ask Health Ministers to meet representatives of the Prescription Charges Coalition to discuss this important information?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that there are a number of exemptions for prescription charges for different diseases. She may want to raise that at the next oral Health questions or to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can take it up directly with Ministers.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On the back of my weekly surgery last Friday, may we have a debate in Government time on the mindset that leads people to fly-tip and litter? I personally cannot get my head around it, and I think that Members in this House and beyond would appreciate an opportunity to debate it, not least because we waste over £1 billion a year on cleaning this up that could be better spent on our public services.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely amazing that people who fly-tip seem to care not at all for the impact of their behaviour. Right across the country, in all opinion polls on what people care about, littering and fly-tipping are right up there among the areas that bother them the most. I certainly share his concern about this, and I encourage him to raise it at DEFRA questions on 7 June to see what more can be done about it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have been contacted by many constituents who have experienced issues when applying for 30 hours’ free childcare, and have experienced problems with this myself. Further, nurseries in my constituency are facing closure due to inadequate funding of the scheme. When can we have a debate about this supposed flagship Government policy, which is clearly not fit for purpose?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely surprised that the hon. Lady raises this as a problem. She will be aware that we are spending about £6 billion every year on childcare support by 2020—a record amount of support—and investing £1 billion a year to deliver 30 hours of free childcare to needy children, with over 290,000 children benefiting from this at the moment. If she wants to raise this at Education questions, that would be very welcome, but no previous Government have done more than this one to help families deal with the cost of childcare.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby is delivering new houses, with work under way on 16 sites, including in Houlton, where 6,200 new homes will be provided. This is all adding to demand for local health services. While a number of new facilities, including orthopaedic services, have recently opened at our local Hospital of St Cross, the majority of patients have to make a journey to University Hospital Coventry. May we have a debate on how health services can be expanded and developed as a local population increases?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter that affects all of us where we have expanding populations in our areas. He will be aware that clinical commissioning groups are responsible for the planning and commissioning of healthcare services for their local area, including the commissioning of hospitals. Where the local population expands over the course of a year, that is factored into the allocation formula so that the funding is adjusted as a result. The clinical commissioning group should then be providing sufficient services to meet the needs of the local population. If he wants to discuss the specific needs in his area, he should seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Health Ministers.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have an important debate on regeneration plans for new towns? We could have something similar to a city deal specifically to address the needs of new towns. Since the closure of development corporations, focus on our new towns has diminished. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on new towns, I feel that regeneration funding is needed for my constituency but also for new towns right across the United Kingdom.

Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised this issue. Of course, we are all supportive across this place of the need for new housing for everybody to be able to have a home of their own. That does mean new building, and, in some cases, new towns. It is therefore absolutely right that we provide the right levels of infrastructure and development to meet the needs of those new communities. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the specifics of the new town proposed in her area.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The debacle over business rates and who has responsibility for them continues. I have been able to establish that both the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury have responsibility, yet neither seems to have responsibility for the review promised in the 2017 Budget. Can we have a debate about business rates and how they are seriously damaging our high streets at the moment?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sympathetic with the hon. Lady. We are all aware of cases in our constituencies of business rates proving extremely difficult for local high street shops, retailers, pubs and so on. It is very challenging. She will be aware that a significant number of measures have been put in place to try to relieve the burden of business rates, but I encourage her to seek a Backbench Business debate so that all Members can share their views and experiences.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Further to the earlier exchanges in Transport questions on disabled access to stations and safety at Lewisham station, I have been contacted by my constituent Caroline Walsh. She is a disabled person who uses a wheelchair, and she wants to invite the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to join her on the peak-time journey that she will have to undertake once the new franchise comes in and she is forced to change at Lewisham. Can we have a debate in Government time on disabled access to our railway services?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Gentleman took the opportunity to raise that at Transport questions, which preceded this. He raises a significant and important point. We are all used to feeling like sheep when we jump on a commuter train. That can be very difficult for
people who have disabilities, and where access is extremely
difficult, if not impossible, for them, that is unacceptable.
I encourage him to seek a debate, perhaps in Westminster
Hall, so that he can raise that issue directly with Ministers,
who I know are focused on alleviating the problem, and
share his views on what more can be done.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Will the
Leader of the House join me in congratulating the pupils at Chorlton High School in my constituency on
their Incorporated Society of Musicians Trust award for excellent GCSE results? I am regularly contacted by
parents who are worried about the narrowing of the school curriculum, and particularly the squeezing out
of creative subjects. Can we have a debate in Government
time on creativity in the school curriculum?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in
congratulating the school in his constituency. It is always
great to hear and so motivating for young people when a school receives an award for the excellence of its
results. We should all celebrate that. He is right to talk
about the need to promote creativity. The United Kingdom
produces extraordinarily creative industries, and it is
important that young people are encouraged to take
part and to create their own abilities in this area. He might like to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he
can raise directly with Ministers what more can be done.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Department for Work and Pensions recently announced
the closure of its offices in Merthyr Tydfil, which will have a massively serious impact on the town centre
economy. That is also happening in other areas of Wales and the UK. Can we have a debate on the Government policy of removing jobs where more jobs
are needed, not fewer, so that the Government can understand the implications of their actions for town centres such as the one in my constituency?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate
that many of the Government’s measures to consolidate the delivery of public services are to improve the service
by focusing on better advice for people who are claiming
benefits, looking for a job and so on. Much of that recasting of physical spaces is to improve the services.
Nevertheless, he is right to raise the issue of a potential reduction in jobs. I am aware that the Government seek
to redeploy people wherever possible right across the
public sector, but he might want to raise the particular case in his constituency at Business, Energy and Industrial
Strategy questions, which are soon after the recess.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Grace Warnock,
a young lady in my constituency, is the 897th recipient
of the Points of Light award from the Prime Minister.
Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Grace on her award and facilitate discussions about spreading Grace’s sign around the parliamentary estate and
Government buildings?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman
in congratulating Grace on her Points of Light award.
It is a fantastic achievement for her, her family and
people in her community. I agree with him on the importance of promoting that sign. If he writes to me, I
can suggest what more we might be able to do in this
place.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The East Durham
Trust in my constituency is supporting a homeless man
who is sleeping rough, forced to live off the land. He has
clear physical and mental health issues, and he is clearly
malnourished. The local authority cannot house him
because he has no benefits, but he cannot claim universal credit because he has no bank account and he cannot
get a bank account because he has no address. Will the
Leader of the House give us a debate on the housing
crisis and how we may tackle homelessness?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. As I have said before in this place, my husband is the vice-chairman of a
homeless centre in Northampton that is doing a huge amount to turn around the lives of people who have been or are now homeless. It is absolutely vital that we
focus on what more can be done. The hon. Gentleman
will be aware that the Government are committed to
halving homelessness by 2022 and to eliminating it
altogether by 2027. Millions of pounds are being invested
both in community projects and in other projects such as No Second Night Out to ensure that we do everything
we can to get people off the streets, but also, importantly,
to help people who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Last week, I met an
incredible group of local women who are supported by
Breast Cancer Care. They told me that receiving a
diagnosis of secondary breast cancer was devastating, but what added to their devastation, difficulty and
struggle was having to fill in a personal independence payment application for the Department for Work and
Pensions. May we have a statement from the Secretary
of State for Work and Pensions on the impact of filling
in unnecessary PIP applications for women with secondary
breast cancer?

Andrea Leadsom: I know many hon. Members will have constituents, and indeed family members, who are
in the same situation. I think we all know of women and
men who have suffered from breast cancer. He is right: a
diagnosis of secondary breast cancer is devastating for
anyone. We know that there were problems with the
original work capability assessments, which is why the
Government have scrapped unnecessary repeat assessments
for people with the most severe health conditions. If the
hon. Gentleman has a specific issue in relation to a
particular constituent, I urge him to write to Ministers
directly on that point.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The
EU-Japan economic partnership and strategic partnership
agreements are due to be agreed at the European Council
at the end of next month—at the end of June. May we
have an urgent debate about that on the Floor of the
House before the Council, given its huge significance
for the UK both while we remain a member of the
European Union and after Brexit, not least in relation
to data protection requirements?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. She will be aware that the Government intend to carry on all free trade agreements to which we have been a party as a member of the EU once we have left the EU. That is our very clear intention. She will also be aware that legislation is currently under way to give effect to those changes. Nevertheless, she raises a very important point, and I encourage her to seek at least an Adjournment debate, or perhaps a Westminster Hall debate, so that she can raise any particular questions she has directly with Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Stephen Benzie was in hospital for two and a half months, including periods of being in and out of a coma, and the DWP’s reaction to that was to stop paying his jobseeker’s allowance, rather than giving him a discretionary 13-week extension. He is now on universal credit, but the DWP is refusing to backdate the payments beyond a period of one month. May we have a statement so that the Government can outline whether they think this is a fair system, and can we get an apology for my constituent and a promise to review the backdated period so that he does not lose the money he is entitled to?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman’s constituent, and I hope that he is now well on the way to recovery. The hon. Gentleman often raises significant constituency issues, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am sure he will appreciate that the Government always need to balance value for the taxpayer with and what is fair to the taxpayer with what is fair for the recipient of benefits. He will be aware that when somebody is in hospital, their payments quite often cease for the period during which they are being looked after in hospital, but if he has concerns about this case, I urge him to take it up directly with Ministers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): With the closure of the Huddersfield employment and support allowance assessment centre, many vulnerable, sick and disabled people from my constituency are experiencing in Kirklees, home to over half a million people, will be left without its own assessment centre. We have been inundated with calls from people fearful of having to make this journey. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the Government’s treatment of some of Kirklees’ most vulnerable citizens?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady’s constituents experiencing in Kirklees, which she is absolutely right to raise, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can put their case directly to Ministers.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may be aware of recent reports by the GMB trade union and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions demonstrating a clear economic and national security basis for procuring the new Royal Fleet Auxiliary solid support ships within the UK. The determinate that there will be a 37% effective discount to the UK through supply chain and wage payments. Will she consider tabling a debate in Government time, with a substantive vote, on this matter, which is of critical national importance, to ensure that we get the best benefit for our national security and economic industrial base?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will be aware that the Government have a national shipbuilding strategy focused on giving our Royal Navy the ships it needs while increasing economic growth right across the country and investing in a better-skilled workforce. We are committed, however, to competition, as well as growing jobs right across the country and encouraging innovation. It is always a balance, and I would encourage him to raise his concerns at the next Defence questions.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says that the so-called “max fac” proposal pushed by a few extreme Brexiteers on the Tory Back Benches will cost our country £20 billion a year. This explosive assessment necessitates a Government statement and parliamentary scrutiny so that we get a Brexit that works for our country.

Andrea Leadsom: We are in a careful and thorough negotiation process that will ensure we get the best possible deal for the UK and our EU friends and neighbours. That means evaluating carefully the alternative options open to us for resolving issues around customs and many other areas. Those discussions and investigations are still under way, and the Government, as we have said right from the start, cannot give a blow-by-blow account of every assessment, which might be top level or very detailed, while we are undergoing these careful assessments. As soon as the Government have a clear position, the House will be made aware of it at the first opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In June 2016, the UN commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea found reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed by Eritrean officials against their own people since 1991. This came to the attention of the all-party group on Eritrea yesterday. These crimes include the imprisonment and torture of thousands of followers of various religions, including Christianity and Islam. The mandate of the special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea comes up for renewal at the UN Human Rights Council in June. It is vital that the UK does all it can to support the renewal of this mandate in order to ensure that the crimes of the Eritrean Government do not go unrecorded. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on this pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises appalling human rights abuses, and is absolutely right do so, and I hear his grave concerns on this subject. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his concerns directly with Ministers.
**Carillion**

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE  
Select Committee statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the first Select Committee statement. Meg Hillier will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and Meg Hillier will respond to those in turn. I call the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

12.9 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As Members will recall, the House agreed on 24 January that the Government’s risk assessments of its strategic suppliers should be released to the Public Accounts Committee. I commend my fellow Committee members for their hard work in looking closely at all those papers. Yesterday, we published in full the papers relating to Carillion, which of course subsequently collapsed. We strongly believe that taxpayers, and those who were served by the public services that Carillion was supplying, deserve to know what happened.

The Carillion papers identify clear and compelling problems with the business in the months leading to its collapse. The Carillion assessments—the documents the Government were using—show that although Carillion had been rated as “amber”, owing to its performance against contracts with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice, it was not until after Carillion issued a profit warning in July last year that the Government downgraded it to “red”. It therefore appears that the Government were not aware of Carillion’s financial distress until that point. In November last year, officials recommended a provisional “black” rating for Carillion—that information has come directly from the papers that we have published—but following representations from the company, the Cabinet Office did not confirm that designation. Carillion collapsed less than two months later.

The Committee has also considered papers relating to the other 27 strategic suppliers. A strategic supplier is a company that has business worth £100 million or more across central Government and their agencies. The risk assessments relating to other strategic suppliers raise concerns about their performance against contracts, and about the relationship between strategic suppliers and the Government. The Committee has currently chosen not to publish those papers, although I warn the Minister that we reserve the right to do so. We have been clear every step of the way, as we have looked at these papers, that our duty is to be responsible, not reckless. We are mindful of the impact of releasing information that could damage jobs and smaller supply chain businesses, and it is not our intention recklessly to pursue that. However, there might be information that we choose to put in the public domain at a later point.

The Government have become dependent on large contracts to deliver public projects and services, and great secrecy surrounds them. If a company providing a number of those contracts fails, that is bad news for service users and the taxpayer. The Government should act in the interests of the taxpayer and the public, but the system has become skewed so that too often the Government act to protect the contractor, rather than the service user. The system is broken. There are not enough suppliers bidding for contracts across whole swathes of government, and the system is skewed against smaller, specialist businesses that get work only as part of a longer supply chain. At each stage, margins are squeezed, and too often we see poor service, sharp practice and an unnecessary cost to taxpayers. There remains in government a shortage of the necessary skills to let and manage contracts. Quite simply, the Government are not a clever client, and taxpayers and small businesses are losing out as a result. The Public Accounts Committee has agreed that we will look closely at the nature of the relationship between the Government and their strategic suppliers, the Government’s approach to procurement and contractual management, and—of course—the impact on taxpayers and service users every step of the way.

Failure of essential services is not an option, but neither is the prospect of the Government bailing out private companies that fail. Some of the companies are running such large swathes of government that they have become too big to fail. Carillion continued to believe, as it set out in evidence to us in a joint hearing with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, that it would receive a Government loan to keep it going, right up to the moment of collapse in January.

The Public Accounts Committee has long raised concerns about the lack of transparency in large contracts funded by taxpayers to deliver public services. Our concern, especially given what we have seen in the papers, is that secrecy can lead to a cosy relationship in which the Government are more focused on the interests of the supplier, because of the potential impact of the collapse of that supplier. We can see those problems with other strategic suppliers in the papers we have received, and we will be calling them before the Committee, as well as those in government, to challenge them and to consider how this broken system can be fixed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and her chairmanship of the Committee—she is doing a superb job. I also congratulate her on the release of the papers today. Does she expect to publish a fuller report by the summer recess?

Meg Hillier: As a Committee, we always set deadlines for the Government when we make recommendations, so I commit to the hon. Gentleman that it is fully our intention to publish a wider report on strategic suppliers by the summer recess. We do not quite know how our inquiry will go, because clearly we are evidence-led, but that is our aim.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the Committee on another excellent report, and on the forensic and measured way in which she delivered her statement. I hope that the Government take fair notice, although I worry that that may be a forlorn hope.

The Government were given a recommendation by the commercial relationships board that Carillion should be designated “high risk”. The Government ignored
that, although the reason why remains unclear. Can my hon. Friend provide any further evidence of the reason for that rejection? The Government did not disclose that designation at the time of the Carillion scandal. Was that to protect their mates in Carillion rather than the taxpayer? The former chair of Carillion, Philip Green, was a Conservative supporter and Government adviser. Was the Government’s relationship with him more important than their responsibility to the taxpayer? We hope that the Government will now act on that responsibility and stop awarding contracts to big suppliers that continually fail to deliver.

The Government are too reliant on a small range of big private contractors. They have done little to widen that charmed circle, even though doing so would increase competition, support small and medium-sized enterprises, reduce costs and, critically, make us less reliant on suppliers in financial straits. Will my hon. Friend now widen her inquiry to look at others that may have been signed off by Ministers, contrary to recommendations of the commercial relationships board?

Meg Hillier: I would say to my hon. Friend that a piece of the jigsaw is missing. The papers released to the Public Accounts Committee only went so far, and the evidence we were given does not indicate when the Government made a decision about what to do with the recommendation in the risk assessment papers. I cannot provide any more evidence for why the Government chose not to implement the “black” rating at that stage, but I assure my hon. Friend that we are widening our inquiry and have access to the other papers. Sadly, and rather depressingly, the Committee has a large buck catalogue, and we have highlighted a number of issues to do with contract management in government. We will not leave a stone unturned in our inquiry, and as I said to the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), we hope to publish a report by the summer recess.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position, but for future reference, he is supposed to ask a shortish question. Brief questions are ideal, even from Front-Bench speakers.

Meg Hillier: My right hon. Friend, as ever, raises his point in a very effective way. This is one of our concerns about the size of these contracts. If the collapse of a large supplier means that a hospital in one of our constituencies is not completed, we see that the system is skewed to try to ensure that does not happen, but that means that the interests of the supplier can come first, in that they might end up being bailed out. Carillion was deluded in believing that it would be given a bail-out, and we want to examine why it kept believing, right up to the moment of collapse, that a loan would come.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend and the work of the Committee for the report. When I had the pleasure to serve on the Committee with her, we looked very seriously at apprenticeships. In my constituency, the City of Bristol College stepped in to pick up the apprenticeship programme to ensure that young people in particular were still able to remain in it. Will the Committee bring the two issues together and recognise the important work of other providers to pick up work from the collapse of Carillion?

Meg Hillier: I thank my hon. Friend. That would be outside the remit of our next inquiry, but she highlights an important point. The collapse of a large supplier has a wider impact than simply the contracts it runs, because suppliers are so embedded in the system. The way in which apprenticeships work means that, quite rightly, private businesses are providing apprenticeships, but there is a real risk of a ripple effect when a large supplier collapses. That goes back to the point about how large such suppliers are and how difficult it is for the Government to allow them to fail, which can then skew Government decision making.
Devolution and Democracy

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Select Committee statement

12.24 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to present to the House our third report of this Session, entitled “Devolution and democracy in Northern Ireland—dealing with the deficit”. As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Northern Ireland Executive collapsed in January 2017, since when there has been no effective ministerial decision-making process at Stormont.

I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland civil service, which has done a fantastic job of trying to hold things together during the impasse. As I will go on to describe in my short statement, it is not good enough to expect the Northern Ireland civil service to continue the work of trying to keep the ship on an even keel. The time has now come for further measures that will enable good governance in Northern Ireland. In the absence of that, I am sorry to say that it is the Committee’s view that people in Northern Ireland will notice a difference in their day-to-day lives. It is a demonstration of the importance of Ministers in our way of life and our democracy that such a deficit should have been caused by the collapse of the Executive, and it is very clear to everybody that the lack of ministerial decision making is impacting on people’s everyday lives.

We launched our inquiry on 24 November 2017. It was aimed not at being a post-mortem—that is for others to do in the fullness of time and there is no shortage of people wishing to do that—but at looking at where we are now and how we can deal with this impasse in the short term to try to deliver to Northern Ireland the governance it needs and to make the institutions more robust in the future. We have to accept that what we have at the moment is just not working for most people.

It is important to understand at the beginning that while we consulted widely—we are very grateful to everybody who contributed to our consultation—we were not able to take evidence from one of the large parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin. That is clearly an omission. It was not the Committee’s fault; it was an omission on the part of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin was asked repeatedly to contribute—it would have added to our report had it done so—but it chose not to. We tried to consult as widely as possible across the community in Northern Ireland, and I think the report has a balanced reflection of opinion in Northern Ireland, as well as a remarkable degree of consensus.

The Committee’s principal recommendation is that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should restart the active facilitation of talks between parties. There is currently a sense of drift in Northern Ireland. There is a frustration on the part of people resident in Northern Ireland that important decisions are just not being made. The solution is very clear: the restoration of the institutions at Stormont using the power-sharing arrangements laid out in the Good Friday agreement. However, we have to face the prospect that that is not going to happen in the immediate future. In those circumstances, it is just not acceptable for us to continue kicking the can down the road and not making crucial ministerial decisions.
In annex 1 of the report, the Committee lists a number of decisions that need to be made right now. It is a long list and it is growing every single day. It is very wide-ranging, touching on practically every facet of life in Northern Ireland, from plans for Kilkeel harbour to the York Street interchange and from the likely delay in implementing a reduction in tourism VAT in Northern Ireland to a failure to build new homes. All of them touch on day-to-day life. Unless we get decisions made by Ministers on these issues, people will start to notice a real difference in the way that they live their lives compared with life in the rest of the United Kingdom. We feel that that is unacceptable.

The High Court ruling of 14 May on the Mallusk incinerator decision was that it was not acceptable for civil servants to make a determination on this planning issue in County Antrim. I think this is the beginning of a process. If the High Court should say that it is not appropriate for civil servants to make such decisions, there is bound to be a catalogue of similar decisions stacking up that will be delayed because we cannot get a ministerial decision without a Minister in place to make such determinations.

The list grows day by day, but help is indeed available to Ministers. In such things as the Hart report, the Bengoa report and the draft programme for government, agreed by the last Executive, we have guidance for making those crucial decisions available to Ministers. If they stick to that script, they will not go too far wrong. However, we need to do more than that. The Committee also recommends taking legal and procedural advice on how to set up committees of Members of the Legislative Assembly to improve scrutiny during the current impasse. It is important that we do what we can, imperfect though it may be, to ensure that democratic voices are heard in Northern Ireland and impact on ministerial decision making.

I will briefly highlight two areas that are in urgent need of ministerial attention. We cannot constitute the Northern Ireland Policing Board because we do not have MLAs capable of populating that board. That is causing real problems. It means, for example, that senior appointments to the Police Service of Northern Ireland cannot be made. We recommend that Ministers take in hand the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 and implement the changes necessary to ensure that the board is able to conduct its statutory functions.

We would like Ministers, in the absence of an Executive, to take action on the Hart report and to introduce legislation, if necessary through this Parliament, to ensure that the victims that Hart identifies are given the redress that they have waited far too long for. We would also like Ministers to explore the role of local government. Councils—they were reduced to 11 in 2015, of course—told us that they are capable of doing more. In the absence of an Executive, that potential has to be explored. We would like Ministers to take note of the pilot that is under way by the Building Change Trust into civic assemblies. We have to ensure the long-term stability of the institutions and make them more robust. In our report, we touch on the controversial issue of the Good Friday agreement, which contains within it the prospect of a review at some point, and we make recommendations about that, accepting all the sensitivities that surround it.

Everything these days has a Brexit angle, and this one certainly does. We found that the voice of Northern Ireland was not being heard properly in Brussels, when we took evidence from Mr Michel Barnier, and that civil servants struggle to have their voices heard equally with Ministers from Scotland and Wales. That needs to be remedied.

We took evidence widely for the report, and I am grateful to all those who gave willingly of their time to make it the—I hope—thoughtful and constructive piece that it is. I look forward to the Minister’s response today and the Government’s response in due course. I promise him that we will be tracking progress on a regular basis and my Committee will publish regular updates on progress made against the recommendations that we make in this report, our third of the Session.

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend—of course I do—although we have to understand that David Sterling and his civil servants, who have done a remarkable job, should not be put in the invidious position of having to make decisions or feeling that they have to do so because there is no Minister, and then finding that the High Court judges that what they have done is ultra vires. That is unfair, which is one of the reasons why we have recommended that the Secretary of State comes forward before the summer with a framework, at least, within which she will start to make those crucial decisions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Shailesh Vara): I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend and his Committee colleagues for their report. The Government will respond in the usual way. I will make just one point: I hope that he agrees that it is appropriate that we give a huge thank you to David Sterling and his civil servants, who have done a remarkable job, should not be put in the invidious position of having to make decisions or feeling that they have to do so because there is no Minister, and then finding that the High Court judges that what they have done is ultra vires. That is unfair, which is one of the reasons why we have recommended that the Secretary of State comes forward before the summer with a framework, at least, within which she will start to make those crucial decisions. Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course I do—although we have to understand that David Sterling and his civil servants, who have done a remarkable job, should not be put in the inviduous position of having to make decisions or feeling that they have to do so because there is no Minister, and then finding that the High Court judges that what they have done is ultra vires. That is unfair, which is one of the reasons why we have recommended that the Secretary of State comes forward before the summer with a framework, at least, within which she will start to make those crucial decisions.
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I add to the record our commendation to the Committee Chairman for doing a splendid piece of work. He has brought together some very difficult issues into a single report that was unanimously agreed by the Committee. It was incredibly difficult work. The Committee endorses several political actions with regard to how committees should function in the current Assembly, even though it has broken down. It endorses the re-establishment of the Policing Board and states that we need ministerial decisions as quickly as possible. Those recommendations, carried unanimously by the Committee, should be implemented immediately. I hope that the Secretary of State and the Minister hear that loudly and allow for normal functions to continue.

I understand that the judgment by Justice Keegan, as mentioned on page 25 of our report, will be referred to the High Court on 25 June. Is the hon. Gentleman confident that we will get a quick, urgent decision from the bench, so that we will know whether direct rule will be implemented speedily or whether we will go back into the state of flux of negotiations?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The report is strengthened by the fact that it was unanimously passed by our Committee, despite the fact that it was wide-ranging and contained some extremely difficult material. That is a tribute to the Committee, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman.

I believe that the Keegan judgment is probably the start of a process and that there will be similar ones in the months ahead. I think that it should serve as a catalyst to Ministers to think about the framework to which I have referred and focus their attention on how they can start to make those crucial decisions to deal with annex 1 in the report, and the list is growing by the day. The hon. Gentleman has a particular interest in the judgment that has been made, but there will be more, I am sure, across Northern Ireland. Although I would not want to comment specifically on this one, I am confident that there will be several similar judgments ahead, and we need a strategy from the Government for dealing with them; it is clear that civil servants cannot make judgments of that sort because in our system those decisions are reserved to Ministers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his statement and commend his Committee for its report. For me, there are two stand-out recommendations in the report. The first is the need for the Policing Board to be reinstituted, and the second is for there to be a Brexit Minister for Northern Ireland, because the Province’s voice is not being heard. These two recommendations can be advanced by the Government relatively simply: in the first case, with a legislative change—a lot of Northern Ireland legislation goes through this House pretty quickly—and in the second, with a ministerial appointment. Should not the Government just get on with it?

Dr Murrison: I thank my hon. Friend for the interest that he has taken in this matter, and he is, of course, correct on both fronts. We believe that there is no reason for further delay on the recommendations that we have made. I hope very much that the Minister, when he comes to respond to this in the fullness of time, will accept all the recommendations that we have made, but particularly those that are absolutely crucial now. Northern Ireland’s voice is certainly not being heard in Brussels alongside those of Scotland and Wales, although this is a UK Government responsibility and not a devolved matter.

Policing in Northern Ireland is a crucial and desperately sensitive issue. It is unacceptable that we cannot, for example, appoint senior police officers because of the lack of a Police Board. That, in our opinion, is a matter that simply cannot be delayed any further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), on the leadership that he showed to all its members, enabling us to reach unanimous conclusions. There were times when we thought that that would not happen, but he managed to ensure that it happened in each case.

The backdrop was, of course, the stop-start, pause, start again extension of the talks process, to which pages 3 and 4 of the report refer. That, perhaps, indicates where we are at present. The Committee again took the opportunity to consider where we would go if the Northern Ireland Assembly did not function. The annex outlines—as did the hon. Gentleman at the end of his speech—the number of works still to be done and on hold.

Some of the Committee’s conclusions are very important. If the hybrid system for the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has operated in the past, does not work out, we shall look towards direct rule. What are the Chairman’s thoughts about how we can pull Sinn Fein out of its obstinate position? Sometimes, we need to move forward and park the issues on which we disagree.

I have another question, about Brexit. The Committee concluded that the Secretary of State and other Ministers should be more active. How does the hon. Gentleman think it can be ensured that Northern Ireland’s voice is clearly heard in the Brexit talks?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The Chairman of the Committee can pick any one of those three.

[Laughter.]

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made an extremely important contribution to the report.

Clearly, without the co-operation of Sinn Féin, the recommendations in the report about the committee structure at Stormont, for example, simply will not work. That is inherent in the power-sharing structure, which forms such a big part of the Good Friday agreement. I urge Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist party and all the other parties in Northern Ireland to set aside the issues on which they cannot agree and get on with the issues on which they can agree.

I think that people in Northern Ireland are increasingly frustrated by the silly nonsense and the politicking. Matters that are important to them on a daily basis, such as healthcare, education and infrastructure, are not being dealt with because obstinate politicians are standing on their dignity in respect of certain matters. Although the politicians may hold those matters dear, the rest of the population clearly feel that they are not of a nature that justifies putting on hold the good governance of Northern Ireland.
As for Brexit, the hon. Gentleman knows—because he was involved—that we made a number of recommendations in relation to the representation of Northern Ireland, and I hope that Ministers will take them to heart. We need to ensure that Northern Ireland’s voice is properly heard. Given that the border is front and centre of the success or otherwise of the Brexit process, it is ironic that Northern Ireland’s voice is not being heard in Brussels at this time.

Backbench Business

Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

12.43 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries around the world; further notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK, through the media, social media and otherwise; notes with concern the past activities of hate preacher, Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, who radicalised Tanveer Ahmed, who in turn murdered Mr Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016; calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadis; and further calls on the Government to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.

Let me begin by wishing all Muslims Ramadan Mubarak. Let me also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for today’s debate, and all the Members who are present to take part in it.

On the border of my constituency is one of the largest mosques in western Europe, which can accommodate 10,000 worshippers. It is little wonder, therefore, that my constituency and the wider south-west London region are home to a thriving Ahmadi community, who help to make up a global community numbering millions. Let me explain to those who are watching or listening to the debate, and who may be unclear about this, that an Ahmadi identifies as a Muslim, but does not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. That causes the Ahmadi Muslim community to be widely denounced as “non-Muslim”, and to be persecuted around the world—and, I am sad to say, often persecuted here in the United Kingdom.

To introduce the debate, I shall take Members on a global tour, from Africa to Asia and from Greater London to Glasgow. I shall then focus particularly on the persecution faced by the Ahmadi community in Pakistan, before turning to the shocking overspill of hate into the UK that the House has a duty and a responsibility to address.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As my hon. Friend will know, we also have an Ahmadi community in Manchester. Will she allow me to put on the record a tribute to their work in and for the community in general, and in particular to the offer of refuge and hospitality by their mosque after the Manchester Arena attack last year?

Siobhain McDonagh: Their desire to help the wider community and not only themselves marks Ahmadis in a particular way, in all our communities.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important and timely debate. I should be grateful if Crawley could be added to the tour on which we are to be taken. In 2014, the Noor mosque was opened in the Langley Green neighbourhood. As Members will know, “Noor” is Arabic for “light”, and the Ahmadis certainly bring light to the local
community with their charitable work and community cohesion. I am very grateful for their message of “Love for all, hatred for none”.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend has done well in securing the debate. The Ahmadi community in the Scunthorpe area is very small, but its members make a strong contribution to the area, and I want to record my thanks for all the work that they do. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) mentioned the message of “Love for all, hatred for none”. They live those words, and it is ironic that they suffer persecution in parts of the world as a result of that creed.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I give way to my hon. Friend.

Siobhain McDonagh: I give way to my hon. Friend. Seema Malhotra: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I pay tribute to the charitable endeavours of the Ahmadi community, particularly through Humanity First. They raised funds for Humanity First to support those affected by the Nepalese earthquake a few years ago, and this weekend the organisation will host a global telethon to raise funds for charity.

Siobhain McDonagh: Just before I continue my global tour, let me say that while all Members present recognise the efforts of the Ahmadi community in their constituencies, former Members also identify with their work. I am delighted that my friend and colleague Tony Colman, the former Member of Parliament for Putney, is present to listen to the debate.

I will begin our global tour in Algeria, where an estimated 2,000 Ahmadis live in fear. Just six months ago, in December 2017, 50 of them were tried on charges related to their religion, and were given sentences ranging from fines to five years in prison. A total of 280 Ahmadis across Algeria have been arrested on the grounds of their faith in the last two years alone.

We now head east to Egypt, which is home to approximately 50,000 Ahmadis. It was here, earlier this year, that the Interior Minister, Mr Magdy Mohamed Abdel Ghaffar, issued orders for the arrest of 25 innocent Ahmadi men and women. That, however, was just the latest in a long line of persecutions against the Ahmadi community in Egypt, a notable example being the arrest of the community’s publications secretary, Ahmad Alkhatteeb, and the confiscation of the publications in his property.

Such horrifying persecution can also be found further south, in Burundi. Earlier this year 13 young Ahmadis were arrested in the city of Bujumbura, where they were attending a religious education class. The secret service raided the mosque and arrested the children on charges of alleged terrorism, for in the eyes of the persecutors Ahmadi material is seen in such an extremist light.

Finally, we head to Asia, and specifically to Indonesia. For it is here that the Ahmadi community has existed since 1925, claiming a community of approximately half a million people. It is difficult, however, to know the community’s true scale given that revealing oneself as an Ahmadi here can be nothing less than a magnet for persecution.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a forceful argument. I also concur with other colleagues about the contribution of the Ahmadiyya community and wish to mention in that context mine in Slough.

On Indonesia, just five days ago, on 20 May, The Jakarta Post reported that an unidentified mob attacked and destroyed several homes belonging to Ahmadis and attempted to expel the Ahmadiyya community from Grepek Tanak Eat hamlet in Greneng village. Eye witnesses claim that at least one house was destroyed, in the presence of police officers. Does my hon. Friend agree that while the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community is well documented, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the persecution of the Ahmadis in countries such as Indonesia, as well as Bulgaria and Thailand?

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

In Indonesia, Ahmadiyya is not an authorised religion. So when an Ahmadi tries to secure identity documents requiring an authorised religion to be shown, they simply cannot get them. Furthermore, Ahmadi mosques have been burned down, Ahmadis have been denied their voting rights, and they have been driven out of their homes, as my hon. Friend said.

I am afraid to say that in Indonesia the persecution comes from the very top. In 2008 a joint ministerial decree introduced by the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Attorney General and the Minister of Home Affairs prohibited the promulgation of Ahmadiyya teachings. The Minister of Religious Affairs followed this up with calls for an outright ban against the Ahmadis in 2011. But perhaps the persecution is best illustrated by the calls from the governor of West Java, who claimed there would be no violence against the Ahmadiyya community if there were no Ahmadi teachings or practices. The “problem”, he suggests, “will disappear if the belief disappears.”

It is no wonder therefore that just last weekend 23 Ahmadis sought refuge at East Lombok police station, escaping after an angry mob destroyed their homes in an attempt to expel them from the area.

Away from Indonesia, there are currently 10,000 Ahmadi refugees stuck in limbo in countries including Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand, all having fled persecution in their home countries. Sri Lanka even tried to deport 88 Ahmadis back to Pakistan in 2014 despite claims that they could be at risk in their homeland, and so it is to Pakistan that I now turn.

For it is in Pakistan that the world’s largest Ahmadi community exists, with an estimated 4 million members, and it is there that the persecution Ahmadi face can perhaps be most prominently found. Only this morning, I awoke to terrifying reports of an attack by extremists on an Ahmadi house and mosque in Sialkot last night, with mob leaders calling for this to happen to all Ahmadi mosques. The situation could not be more precarious, for an Ahmadi in Pakistan faces widespread hatred from the moment they are born to the moment
they die. Perpetrators are given free rein to attack innocent Ahmadi Muslims in the knowledge that they will never face prosecution for their actions.

To understand why, we need to revert back 44 years to 1974, when Prime Minister Bhutto amended the Pakistan constitution to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim for the purposes of law. Ten years later, under General Zia, the Government of Pakistan made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, refer to their faith as Islam, call their place of worship a "mosque", make the call for prayers, say the Islamic greeting, or propagate their faith. The constitutional right to freedom of religion that is enshrined in Pakistan's constitution is therefore completely violated, with an Ahmadi liable to arrest, three years' imprisonment and an unlimited fine if they are considered to be behaving as a Muslim.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and moving speech about the pan-global issues faced by the Ahmadiyya community, yet the hate in Pakistan in particular is something many British citizens have faced. It is often why they became British citizens—none more so than my late fellow Glaswegian, Asad Shah, who was tragically murdered in March 2016. He had left Pakistan 20 years before, but sadly the hatred and prejudice followed him on to the streets of our own country. It is important to acknowledge that this is an issue in the midst of our own communities, and we must address it.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree. Even his holiness the head of the Ahmadiyya faith is now based in London precisely because of the persecution in Pakistan.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that as far as I am aware it is perfectly in order for me or her to say "Salaam aleikum" as a greeting, whereas in Pakistan it is not in order for an Ahmadi Muslim to do that?

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes, and that was brought out in the all-party group investigation meeting just on Monday. It had never occurred to me that it was specifically Ahmadi Muslims who could not do such things.

Mr Dhesi: The all-party group looked into the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community and we heard some very harrowing tales, as we did from the Christian community, about how they are being persecuted. We must all stand against discrimination in all its guises.

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extraordinary that the persecuted Christian community can do some of the things and act in ways that the Ahmadis themselves cannot, so there is a real conflict going on there.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech and I pay tribute to her leadership of the all-party group. Many Members present in the Chamber are members of the group and support its work. Does she agree that the persecution in other countries serves in one way to reflect the positive relationship in our country between Muslims from different countries and of different backgrounds, including the Pakistani community in my constituency, where the relationships between all the different Muslim communities are very strong?

Siobhain McDonagh: I wish all the communities did get on as well as perhaps they do in Hounslow, but there are many incidents of Ahmadis experiencing persecution in the UK from other Muslim groups.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I join other Members in paying tribute to the contribution the Ahmadiyya community makes in business and commerce and also very much in community affairs and public consciousness. But is it not also a problem that some of that hatred comes here from other countries? We have seen attacks on individuals—we have seen incidents in Glasgow and elsewhere, even if they do not lead to murder—as well as calls for boycotts on businesses owned by Ahmadis?

Does my hon. Friend agree that the authorities should be cracking down on this and making it clear that it is totally unacceptable in this country?

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree, and local authorities need to look to themselves as well, because Ahmadis are also excluded from most SACREs—standing advisory councils on religious education—in English councils, so some of these things are very close to our respective homes.

The statistics on persecution against Ahmadis in Pakistan show that 260 Ahmadis have been killed and 379 have been assaulted for their faith, while 27 Ahmadi mosques have been demolished and 22 have been set on fire or damaged. Some 39 Ahmadi bodies have been exhumed after burial and 66 Ahmadis have even been denied a burial in a common cemetery—and all in a country with a constitutional right to freedom of religion. Ahmadis in Pakistan live in constant fear that a baseless accusation will be made against them, with the consequences so often proving life threatening. This persecution is faced from cradle to grave, so I would like to describe the day-to-day reality for an Ahmadi living in Pakistan.

When a young Ahmadi in Pakistan attends school, they face immediate persecution. Take, for example, Farzana, a 15-year-old schoolgirl who gave Christian Solidarity Worldwide an honest and saddening insight. In her own words:

“A few of the children in my school knew that I am Ahmadi and what they did was to go and tell the other students, ‘She is Ahmadi, don’t play with her or eat with her, and stop treating her normally.’”

Her teachers encouraged this—this is what I find so hard to understand—and abused her, both physically and psychologically. Farzana says that they punished her, struck her with sticks and told her not to sit with the other kids because she is an Ahmadi and so is not allowed to do that. Farzana has now moved school as a result of her treatment. She has decided not to tell her new friends that she is an Ahmadi so that she is free from the persecution that she sees as inevitable.

Discrimination in education takes many forms, however, including nationalising all Ahmadi Muslim schools, expelled Ahmadis students based on their faith, and even the editing out of any Ahmadi Muslim's contribution to Pakistan's history. Take, for example, Professor Abdus Salam, a groundbreaking scientist famous for his work...
in the field of physics, for which he was awarded the first Nobel prize in Pakistan’s history. His faith has led to him being erased from the textbooks, which I remind the Chamber are rife with biases against religious minorities—and these are textbooks that we help to fund. There simply must be greater accountability by our Government and the Department for International Development to ensure that the vital educational projects that we fund continue, but without supporting intolerance, prejudice and hatred.

To return to Pakistan, an Ahmadi student may not even make it through education. In 2008, all Ahmadi students were expelled from a medical college in Faisalabad on the basis of their faith, while a local newspaper printed the headline, “We shall not allow admission in Rawalpindi Medical College of any student guilty of blasphemy”. For those young Ahmadis, their education and religion cannot co-exist side by side.

On leaving education, discrimination and persecution continue for Ahmadis in Pakistan when it comes to applying for a job. Even the rumour that someone may be an Ahmadi can destroy their opportunity of employment. For example, the civil and military services have placed restrictions on Ahmadis progressing to senior ranks.

Outside of work and education, the persecution for an Ahmadi in Pakistan is allowed to flourish in wider society. When an Ahmadi applies for a passport, they must state their religion by law. Anyone who self-identifies as a Muslim is required to take an oath declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslim. The reality, therefore, is that no Ahmadi can go to Mecca to perform the Hajj—one of the five sacred pillars of Islam. Nowhere else in the world are Muslims required to make such a declaration. How can a state be allowed to impose a religion on its citizens in that way?

For an Ahmadi in Pakistan, their persecution continues when they come to vote, which is particularly pertinent due to the upcoming elections in the country. An Ahmadi is prohibited by law to vote as a Muslim. They must either sign a declaration that they are not an Ahmadi or acquiesce to their status as non-Muslim, with a violation of that requirement punishable with imprisonment. That has effectively denied them the right to vote for nearly 40 years. What is more, the separate electoral list for Ahmadis is published and publicly available, enabling extremists to target, intimidate and harass the community. It is no wonder they face such persecution.

When legislators proposed reforms within the past year that could have changed the situation, outrage was sparked across Pakistan, prompting senior political and judicial figures to speak out, coupled with a mass violent rally. The reality, therefore, is that time is running out for an Ahmadi to be able to vote in Pakistan this summer.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Is not the key point that Pakistan uses the state, the constitution and the law to persecute the Ahmadis, which is unique? Of all the horrors we know in Pakistan, the Ahmadis Muslims are singled out by the state and the constitution, which is why we should speak out loudly today.

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Will the Minister take urgent steps to call on the Government of Pakistan to allow Ahmadis to vote in the upcoming elections without denouncing their faith?

After facing a life of hatred, the end of an Ahmadi’s life in Pakistan does not necessarily mean the end of persecution. There are countless examples of Ahmadis being denied the right to burial, with the protesting extremists claiming that they have no right to a burial in a Muslim graveyard. Gravestones have been desecrated and vandalised, and there have also been incidents of exhumation of deceased bodies. To return briefly to the case of Professor Abdus Salam, the Nobel prize-winning scientist, the word “Muslim” has been erased from his gravestone, under a court order.

Electoral disenfranchisement, discrimination in law and expulsion by society have left the Ahmadi community in Pakistan voiceless. So today we must be their voice, for even the constraints of life provide no constraints for the persecution that an Ahmadi in Pakistan may face.

Such persecution, however, is found not just in Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, Burundi and Indonesia—it can be found right here in the UK, right on our doorstep. Over recent weeks, the all-party parliamentary group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which I proudly chair, has been running a five-part inquiry into the persecution faced by the Ahmadi community. We have heard the testimony of dozens of Ahmadi men and women, describing the scale of hatred that they have faced. It is truly shocking.

The most stark and shocking example in the UK took place just two years ago in Glasgow, where Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah was brutally murdered.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the important speech she is making. Will she join me in paying tribute to Asad Shah, who was stabbed to death outside his shop in the Shawlands area of Glasgow in 2016? His death shows that we have much to do to raise awareness of and increase support for an important minority group. He was a brilliant man and loved by everyone in his community, recognising that the differences between people are vastly outweighed by our similarities. Asad left us a tremendous gift and we must continue to honour that gift by loving and taking care of each other. We can honour Asad by living in a world of equality as one race—the human race.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that opening speeches usually last 15 minutes? I am sure that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) will take that into account. I acknowledge that there have been lots of interventions. We do have some time, but I am sure she is nearing the end.

Siobhain McDonagh: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not usually my method to talk for too long, but given the amount of time we have to debate—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is the interventions that are doing it.
Siobhain McDonagh: It is, but may I thank everybody for their interventions? I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney). The 40-year-old was stabbed in his store, sparking an outpouring of grief from locals for a man they described as a true gentleman with a heart of gold.

During the police investigation, officers established that the incident was “religiously prejudiced”. The murder was celebrated by some on social media right here in the UK. The Khatt-e-Nubuwwat organisation even posted a congratulations message on its Facebook page. This violent organisation in Pakistan regularly calls for the elimination of Ahmadians, but it has branches in the UK—and is a registered charity, no less. Furthermore, there are reports that Abrar ul-Haq, an extremely vocal supporter of restrictions on Ahmadis in Pakistan, was allowed into the UK just days ago. Will the Minister establish precisely what measures are being taken to ensure that such hate preachers are not allowed entry to this country, so that Asad Shah remains the one and only Ahmadi to be murdered on our shores?

From anti-Ahmadi sermons preached in mosques, to posters calling for a boycott of Ahmadi business and customers, there is a constant undercurrent of hostility against the Ahmadi community. The action taken by Ofcom against a variety of television channels in the UK provides further examples of hate that, if unchecked, will start spreading to other faith groups as well.

One such example was in Waltham Forest in October, when Muslim members of the Waltham Forest communities forum actively stopped an Ahmadi Muslim from being re-elected, stating that he cannot be a representative of Islam. Meanwhile, a former national president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association describes how “some things have just become routine” on campuses across the country. Posters advertising events are torn down and there are examples of other Muslim societies, in an overt or covert way, trying to undermine their activities.

We return a final time to the case of Nobel prize winner Professor Abdus Salam. Earlier this month, Oxford University hosted the first UK screening of a film about him, but the university’s Pakistan society has been accused of discrimination due to its reluctance to get involved based on Professor Salam’s Ahmadi faith, forcing an apology after an extremely successful event. Such a scourge of extremism is a stain on the freedom of religion that we rightly and proudly celebrate in the UK.

I want to bring my speech to a close by going right back to the beginning and singing the praises of the Ahmadi community in my constituency. Above the front of the Baitul Futuh mosque in Morden hangs a welcome banner that reads, “Love for all, hatred for none.” The Ahmadi community in south-west London has raised thousands upon thousands of pounds for good causes and I am proud that they are a vital part of the fabric of Mitcham and Morden. As their MP, I have a duty to stand up against the persecution they face. As a Chamber, we have a duty to eradicate such persecution from this country. As a country, we have a duty to put pressure on Governments around the world that allow such persecution to flourish.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this hugely important debate. As she set out, she has a significant local Ahmadiyya community. I praise her speech, which was not only comprehensive but shocking in its detail of the persecution suffered by the Ahmadiyya community around the world.

The Ahmadiyya community plays a key role in my local community. Not only was its first mosque built in 1926 in Southfields—the first mosque built anywhere in London—but the area has been a home to the community ever since. The role that the community plays more broadly within the Putney, Roehampton and Southfields constituency that I have the privilege of representing adds hugely to our wider community. It was the Ahmadiyya community that got everybody together after the 7/7 bombings many years ago and made sure that we would not be divided by the hatred that led to those attacks. It is the Ahmadiyya community that has had a peace symposium every single year for 14 years, giving us an annual chance to come together and talk about all the issues that our communities face.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association does amazing work around the country raising money for charity. When we had the floods several years ago, its members ran towards them. They went to visit and help many of the communities affected, not only in nearby places such as Surrey, but further afield up in Cumbria. Of course, we have also heard of some of the transformational work that Humanity First does around the world. The funds that it uses are raised by the community and put to good use to help others who are far less fortunate.

Only last weekend we had the royal wedding, and one of the street parties that I had the chance to go to was in Arnal Crescent in West Hill. It was organised by local Ahmadiyya residents who saw it as a wonderful opportunity not only to celebrate the wedding, but to try to bring together for the first time people who live in that little bit of my constituency and might not have had the chance to meet one another.

The phrase that we have already heard—love for all, hatred for none—percolates through not only every single thing the community stands for, but how people conduct themselves. That is the case not only locally to me, but throughout this country and around the world. We have heard about the persecution that the community faces, and it is shocking that we have seen some of that right here in the UK. We heard about the terrible murder of the Glasgow shopkeeper Asad Shah—and for what? Apparently for simply wishing his local community a happy Easter, which apparently disregarded the Muslim faith. What an awful attitude to have to a pillar of the community who clearly played their role in bringing people together every day.

I draw the attention of the House to some of the invidious persecution that happens closer to home, including some of the literature that we know gets put out in places such as Tooting, and the fact that some shops are encouraged not to deal with the Ahmadi community, whether by selling goods to them or by employing them. That is totally unacceptable on our doorstep. Whenever I have needed to, I have always raised the issues with our local police, but we certainly should not tolerate persecution right in our backyard.
Mr Dhesi: The persecution of the Ahmadiyya or any community is abhorrent. If we are to be true to the principles of humanity, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with the community and stand up to discrimination in all its guises. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the appointment of a UK global ambassador for religious freedom would assist in highlighting and tackling the issues that we are discussing today, as well as helping to fight discrimination and promote equality?

Justine Greening: It might well help. It is also very helpful that one of our Foreign Office Ministers, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, is himself Ahmadi, so he is intimately familiar with some of the persecution faced by the community.

I draw the House’s attention to the excellent report “Ahmadis in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat”. It comprehensively sets out the persecution that happens around the world. I thought that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden did an excellent job of setting out just how many countries the persecution happens in. It is absolutely shocking. As she said, only last night a 500-strong mob attacked a mosque that has been there for 100 years in a part of Punjab in Pakistan.

I know that others want to speak, so I will finish my comments by saying that this is a country that has always stood up against persecution and for religious freedom. A debate in this Chamber is hugely important to set out our renewed determination to stand up against such persecution. The fact that this persecution is against a community that is the antithesis of the hatred shown by so many people who carry it out is the ultimate irony, and the approach of the community sets it apart in many positive ways. I am proud to have these people as part of my local community. They have been an intrinsic part of it for a century now, and they will always be hugely welcome. They add to it in a way that is impossible to convey through this short debate. I will play my role as a local MP in standing up against the persecution they face, both here in the UK and internationally.

1.18 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a huge pleasure to follow the right hon. Member. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), I apologise for not always notifying her when I go to the mosque in Southfields to meet his Holiness the spiritual leader of the Ahmadi Muslim community and others to talk to them about their issues, although I am sure that she does not really mind. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her leadership on the all-party parliamentary group, of which I am proud to serve as vice-chair. Our current inquiry is a very important piece of work, and I hope that the House will have a chance later this year to look at it. I pay tribute to her for securing this debate.

I do not want to repeat all the warm and correct words that have been spoken already about the role that the Ahmadi Muslim community plays in our country, except to say that one of the joys in my constituency has been getting to know Ahmadi Muslims, learning about the role they play in Britain and around the world, including of course in Pakistan, and seeing how hard they work. I am always astounded by their discipline and by the amount of time they give to charities, in particular, and to raising money. As others have said, the amount of money they raise and the things they do to help British communities in distress, such as during the floods, and through Humanity First, which does amazing work for some of the poorest in our world, is an example of people of faith living that faith through their actions.

The persecution that Ahmadi Muslims face, particularly in Pakistan, is quite abhorrent. The way in which the law in Pakistan—from the constitutional provisions to the penal code—allows state persecution is quite shocking and quite unique. By putting that into its laws, the state of Pakistan gives a green light to the people of Pakistan—many of whom I am sure, in many ways, are extremely religious and good people—to commit awful behaviour, which means that people who persecute, attack and even murder Ahmadi Muslims get away with it. They know that they will not be prosecuted or brought to justice, which means the rule of law does not exist for Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, which is atrocious. That is why this country needs to speak loudly and clearly to the Government of Pakistan about how this is absolutely unacceptable.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought the Foreign Office was quite big on this matter and was talking about it quite a lot to the Government of Pakistan. This debate will help, but the Government are already trying their best.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman is right. This debate is not an attack on the Minister, who has done a good job. The right hon. Member for Putney mentioned Lord Ahmad. As an Ahmadi Muslim, he is able to speak with authority and credibility, and I pay tribute to him.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field) rose—

Sir Edward Davey: Does the Minister wish to intervene?

Mark Field: I never miss a chance to say a quick word.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for protecting the interests of the Foreign Office. This is a very serious issue, and all hon. Members will appreciate that the correct and most effective way to represent the interests of a persecuted minority is often in private, rather than through megaphone diplomacy. I hope hon. Members will accept that, but I hope to address in my speech some of the valid points that have already been raised in this debate, particularly in relation to the constitution and the penal code, which are tightening the rights of minorities in Pakistan.

Sir Edward Davey: That was a very helpful intervention, because the Minister brings the real issue to bear: our questions on what the Government might do. I understand that such issues need to be dealt with in private, and I am sure that we can take his reassurance that that is happening. I hope that he will focus on the issues of the constitution, and particularly issues of voting and democracy, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned, because it is outrageous that Ahmadi Muslims are prevented from voting in the normal way.
Three Ahmadi Muslims were sentenced to death last year: Mr Mubasher Ahmad, Mr Ghulam Ahmed and Mr Ehsan Ahmed. They are on death row. I know that the Government are clear—not only in Pakistan but elsewhere—about our opposition to capital punishment, but this is even worse because, in a sense, those people are on death row because of their faith and beliefs, which is abhorrent. I hope the Minister can indicate that the rights of such people are being considered.

We need to try to understand, both by talking to the Muslim community here in the UK and by talking to the Pakistani Government, how we can reduce this aggressive extremism, one of the outlets of which we are seeing in Pakistan. We see extremism and its impact in Pakistan and elsewhere through, for example, the Pakistani Taliban. We need to work out how we can reduce that extremism. We have already learned from the inquiry that this persecution is permitted by the state, but it is ubiquitous in Pakistani society, which is what I find most frightening.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the most frightening thing to come out of our inquiry to date is the fact that younger people in Pakistan are more anti-Ahmadi than older people? In the west, we always expect the younger to be more liberal, but that is not currently the case in the Pakistan, and that is very frightening.

Sir Edward Davey: I absolutely agree, which is why I want to push the Minister a little further. Although I accept that sometimes we have to tread quietly on such issues, I am alarmed that the persecution of the Ahmads is accelerating. Given the murders, the assaults and, as we saw last night, the attacks on mosques, there is a concern that this is becoming endemic and deep-rooted, particularly due to the textbooks that children are reading.

I do not want to go too far along this road, but what is happening to the Ahmadi Muslims will ring awful bells for those of us who have had the privilege to visit Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust to learn about the eight steps to genocide. Although we should not throw the word “genocide” around too freely, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect needs to do a study. This may not be something that comes and goes; it might be something that has potentially disastrous outcomes.

There is cross-party understanding about this, and we need to think quite deeply. I am not suggesting that the Government should do this, but I urge them to consider making it clear—perhaps quietly—that we have teeth.

Pakistan enjoys, through the UK and the EU, GSP+ trade advantages—it is one of I think 10 countries that do. When I was a Trade Minister, I campaigned against Sri Lanka getting GSP+ status because countries with that status are supposed to uphold UN and International Labour Organisation agreements and conventions. I do not think that Sri Lanka is in any way doing that in a number of areas, and nor is Pakistan.

If we look at the UN international covenant on civil and political rights, the UN international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, the UN convention on the rights of the child or the ILO convention concerning discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, it is difficult to see that Pakistan is abiding by the international conventions it has signed up to with respect to Ahmadi Muslims. These things need to be pointed out because, if we are to have an impact on the behaviour of the Government of Pakistan, we have to show that we are watching and monitoring them, and that we do not accept their behaviour.

There are things that we can do in this country. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned some of the hatred shown to Ahmadi Muslims, and we need the police and local authorities to understand that, and to be strong in preventing and tackling it where it occurs. There are Ahmadi Muslims in refugee camps around the world who have fled from Pakistan, and we are not taking enough of them into this country. That is a Home Office issue, but I ask the Minister to confirm that he will ask the Home Office whether this country can take in more Ahmadi Muslims who are sitting forgotten in refugee camps. Let us not forget them.

If we are to take anything from this debate, let us make some small steps that are under our control and let us revisit our guidance on how Home Office officials are trained to consider asylum applications by Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. Let us make sure there is proper guidance so that people understand what Ahmadi Muslims have to put up with in Pakistan.

As we have heard, there is a united approach on both sides of the House. We want to come together and say to the Government of Pakistan that this is unacceptable. We want to say to Ahmadi Muslims here in the UK and around the world, and particularly in Pakistan, that we stand with them, and that we will campaign for their rights, including their right to religious freedom and basic human rights. We will not rest until that happens. 1.29 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who is almost an hon. Friend, as we share a border. She referred to the Baitul Futul mosque, which spans our two constituencies. It is where we meet, and as she rightly pointed out, it is the largest mosque in the UK and rumoured to be the second largest in Europe. Like my right hon. Friend and many others in this House, I have been pleased to visit it over many years and to visit the mosque in Putney.

When I was first selected as a candidate, some 18 years ago, the Ahmadiyya community was one of the first to come to see me and to say, “This is what we are doing in the community. How can we work together?” They take part in a number of community events—I wish to stress that at the beginning, before we get on to some of the details. A number of speakers have described this work: the community litter days; and the junior poppy collection day, supporting the people who stood up for freedom in this country and the world when it was required in those dark days some 70 years ago. They recognise the memory of that, and it is symbolic in today’s debate.

The Ahmadiyya community also afforded me the most amusing moment of my first year as a Member of Parliament. Every year, they hold a huge Jalsa Salana for the community all around the world. In those days, it was held in Alton, but it has now moved to a bigger
farm in north-west Hampshire. As we drove off, my wife said to me, “You are speaking at this event this afternoon. How many people will be there? Have you prepared something?” I said, “Darling, it is a religious ceremony. If we are lucky, there will be a couple of hundred people there.” Members can imagine my surprise when I stood up to address 30,000 people live and a couple of million more watching on the TV—as they reminded me there. That was a salutary lesson: always try to be prepared before standing up to make a speech, wherever you make it.

Let me get on to the serious points about today. I tried to make an initial serious point about how Ahmadis are integral to my community and to those of so many Members across the House. As we have seen, this community encompass and epitomise their slogan—“Love for all, hatred for none”—and they do so in practical ways. All of us in this House stand up for people’s ability to speak freely and to practise freedom of religion and of political expression. We seek to ensure that people are not allowed to prosecute hate in their speech or actions. In the tour around the world undertaken in the Ahmadiyya community, Member for Mitcham and Morden she not only rightly concentrated on Pakistan, but rightly pointed out, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton has just done, that we need to look at a number of issues. If we espouse these values in this House, we should espouse them in the actions taken in our country, too.

One or two people have talked about the worrying development of hate preachers coming to the UK and deliberately infusing hate against the Ahmadiyya community in some of the other mosques. I know from local experience that there was a widespread campaign to boycott Ahmadiyya businesses and shops, which was prosecuted by some of these hate preachers. The hon. Lady was right to mention the TV programme on Waltham Forest, and a Radio 4 documentary “Extremism: Hidden in Plain Sight” revealed recently that certain Urdu newspapers in the UK, which are particularly popular among elements of the Pakistani community, were running deliberate hate campaigns against the Ahmadiyya community. So although I understand this is a debate about persecution in the world, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we hope the Minister will say that he will speak to Home Office colleagues to make sure we are doing all we can to ensure that persecution does not happen in this country. If we do that, when we speak to the outside world, we will be able to do so with the surety that we are acting to drive out that extremism and hate in this country.

It would be unwise of me to do a tour of the world as the hon. Lady did, but I should say that this persecution is widespread. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney and others have made the point that it is the Pakistani state that puts this persecution into law. Other states, such as Egypt and Kazakhstan, allow persecution, but the Pakistan state, by putting this into law, has made this official persecution. In Pakistan, the Ahmadis are not allowed to call themselves Muslim, they cannot refer to their faith as Islam, they cannot call their place of worship a mosque and they cannot preach or propagate their faith. There is deliberate inequality of opportunity in education and in terms of practising whatever profession they may wish to do.

Although I absolutely respect the Minister’s correct position that much can be achieved in private and with methods that are sometimes not public, I believe that it is occasionally important also to use the megaphone, to use his analogy. He will recognise that this persecution is becoming more widespread and more frequent, and several Members have cited examples, but let me put on the record what Christian Solidarity Worldwide has said in the conclusion of its report on the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community. It said:

“The mood of aggression by certain Islamist groups towards the Ahmadiyya community shows no sign of improvement, even the Pakistani government has lacked the political will to make concession to their community.”

It continued:

“The exclusionary politics…has steadily grown since the creation of Pakistan”

and is playing “an important role” in other states in the world.

As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton said, this is an increasing problem, not a decreasing one. The Minister for the Middle East has made the point several times at the Dispatch Box about the number of times we are speaking to the Pakistani Government. Given the increasing nature of this problem and how it is now becoming, as others have said, more or less commonplace and accepted practice in certain countries, I hope that the Minister will say something about what influence the Foreign Office can exert, both publicly and privately.

1.37 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):

It is an honour to speak in this important debate. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing it and on the work she is doing through the all-party group. As she said, this debate is taking place during Ramadan, and I pay tribute to all the Muslim communities in my constituency and across the UK who are observing Ramadan. I pay tribute to their generosity, compassion and charity, as well as their contribution to our society and our economy.

Much has been said in this debate about the kinds of shocking discrimination that the Ahmadiyya community are experiencing across the world—not just in Pakistan but in many other countries. They face discrimination in schooling, in their ability to practise their faith and in their ability to participate in work, in livelihoods and in civic life. It is shocking to hear, read and comprehend this discrimination. The Ahmadiyya community are held in high regard in our country and across the world.

As other Members have said, their contribution to British national life is seen in their ongoing commitment to the values of loyalty, freedom and peace. It is devastating to be here debating the hatred that is being experienced by the Ahmadiyya community in so many countries, and in the UK from a minority who have imported that hate. It is essential that it is understood, challenged and stopped in its tracks in this country by the police, local authorities and all our interfaith communities and that the local police and Ahmadiyya community throughout the country keep a close relationship.
Last year, along with colleagues from this House and the other place, I attended the 51st annual convention, the Jalsa Salana, which an incredible number of people attended. I was also with colleagues and councillors from Hounslow and throughout the country. I pay tribute to the work in my constituency of Zaheer Khan and Councillor Hanif Khan, their father, Mr Abdul Latif Khan, and their late mother, who helped to build and support the growth of the Ahmadiyya community in Hounslow. The legacy of their work set the tone for how the Ahmadiyya community plays its part in mainstream community life, as seen in the more than 100 Ahmadiyya branches in communities throughout Britain.

I have had the privilege of attending Ahmadiyya community events in Parliament and the peace symposium, from which I have learned a great deal. Such events have brought together leaders from all walks of life to engage in a shared mission for peace, common values and prosperity. The motto “Love for all, hatred for none” is one that reaches out and touches the hearts of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many of us will have experienced that tone and message of humanity from the Ahmadiyya community. Ahmadis have been quick on the scene and quick to help in moments of need and suffering, such as the attack outside Parliament. Like other Muslim communities and interfaith communities, they brought people together. In the aftermath of that terrorist attack, I stood with them on Westminster bridge, where they brought together young and old, with a message of healing and solidarity.

I am proud of the work of two mosques in my constituency—Baitul Wahid in Hanworth and Baitun Noor in Hounslow West—which unceasingly reach out and bring people together to share in their faith and wisdom. Every year, the community raises hundreds of thousands of pounds for British charities, giving hope to many people who may never know where that support came from.

The Ahmadiyya community continues to suffer persecution around the world. It is important to send the message from the House today that we in Britain are on the side of the Ahmadis and seek their safety in every nation around the world. That requires joined-up action in our country. We have seen the seeds of hatred and discrimination. I do not believe that that is at all representative of the majority in the Muslim community, and it must be dealt with and rooted out. The message must be sent that we will not tolerate that hate being imported from other parts of the world. We must have a joined-up national strategy, involving the police, schools, local authorities, the Home Office and the Foreign Office, because it will take a joined-up strategy to tackle this issue at home as well as abroad.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Foreign Office has raised this issue with the UN? When we see such hatred, which goes against article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which requires states to guarantee the freedom of religion and belief, it is important that we have a way to stand together as nations to root out this hatred and to make sure that Ahmadis are free to practise their religion and their faith in every country around the world.

1.44 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Salam aleikum. Mr Deputy Speaker. That means “peace be upon you”. It is seemingly inoffensive and is a very traditional and heartfelt greeting in all parts of the Islamic world. I can say it here and the Ahmadiyya community can say it here in the UK. When I go to Bangladesh, I say “Salam aleikum” as a mark of respect to Bangladeshi friends and people I meet for the first time. I could do that in Pakistan, but unfortunately people in the Ahmadiyya community who live there cannot. As we have heard, they cannot have a call to prayer or self-identify as Muslims.

I have spoken a lot in this place about the Rohingya situation. Before that situation exploded last August and people were persecuted and pushed out into Bangladesh, as part of what people have described as ethnic conflict, the first identifiable thing that people raised about the taking away of the Rohingya people’s citizenship was their inability to vote. In Burma, I met the daughter of a former MP. Not only was he no longer an MP but he could no longer even vote in his own country. When that seemingly fundamental and simple right is taken away, there is a real risk of it leading into something so much worse.

We have already heard about the attack by a violent mob on the 100-year-old mosque in Sialkot in Punjab during the night. The house next door was damaged. Local administrators, police and journalists were all at the scene when it was going on, but they were powerless to do anything other than stand by as spectators while people ran around and continued unabashed with the destruction of the Ahmadiyya property. We have also heard about how the violence and lack of any sense that an Ahmadiyya Muslim could even be human, frankly, has come to this country, with the murder of Asad Shah. Someone actually drove from Bradford to confront a Glaswegian shopkeeper and stab him on the doorstep of his own shop—how can that possibly be humane in any sense?

I often mention my right hon. Friend Minister for the Middle East talking about the fact that when people are in effect considered sub-human, there are no depths to which their persecutors will not go to punish, hurt and damage them. I really hope that this is not the thin end of the wedge and that we do not see at some point in future an extension of this persecution—that it does not go so much further, like some of the violence we have seen elsewhere in the world.

The Ahmadi Muslims are fantastic advocates for what is going on around the world. They are a very tight and aware community. The all-party group is doing fantastic work, and I pay testament to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh): not only for her speech and for securing this debate, but for her work and leadership. I am absolutely delighted to serve alongside her on the all-party group, particularly in respect of the important work we are doing to take that testimony.

The most recent report of any great length of which I am aware was done by the International Human Rights Committee, which specialises in Ahmadiyya affairs. The foreword to the report talked about “the systemic nature of their persecution” and “Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy laws”. The report goes on to quote Prince Charles, who said: “The scale of religious persecution around the world is not widely appreciated. Nor is it limited to Christians in the troubled regions of the Middle East. A recent report suggests that attacks are increasing on Yazidis, Jews, Ahmadis, Baha’is and many other minority faiths.”
We must keep having these debates and we must keep these conversations going, because it is so important that we make people aware of what is happening to these people around the world, including in this country. The key findings of the International Human Rights Committee report include the fact that anti-terror laws are being used—or misused—in Pakistan against the Ahmadiyya and other religious minorities. We have heard that educational texts provoke intolerance and hatred, particularly the syllabus for religious education, and that nationalised schools and colleges of the Ahmadis have still not been returned to the Ahmadiyya community in accordance with the Pakistan Government’s policies.

Effectively, the constitutional amendment of 1974, designating Ahmadis as non-Muslims, laid the foundation for many, many years of hardship and persecution. Such behaviour is now entrenched in Pakistan, so, as the Minister has said, we must use not megaphone diplomacy, but every lever that we have to ensure that this important community around the world, but particularly in their homeland of Rawabi in Pakistan, can feel free to express themselves and worship in the form that they feel appropriate.

We have heard some of the fantastic and wonderful things that the people of the Ahmadiyya community do. I remember going up to Trafalgar Square, just after the Westminster attack: the first people that I saw were from the young Ahmadiyya community. They were holding a big banner saying, “Love for all, hatred for none.” They were there right at the forefront, showing solidarity with us after what they had seen.

I am looking up at the plaque of Jo Cox. When she was murdered, many of us felt at a very low point—I certainly felt at the lowest point in my three years of being in this place. I felt that we were given great succour by the people in the Ahmadiyya community. They came together to pay tribute—metaphorically to put their arm around us to say that these violent, extreme attacks have no place in this country, or anywhere in the world. That is really the basis of the annual peace symposium at the Baitul Futuh mosque. Those peace symposiums are replicated in smaller Ahmadiyya communities as well. The Sutton Ahmadiyya community holds a smaller symposium in my local area; I am always pleased to go and listen to what they say and to share messages of peace with my neighbours.

People from the Ahmadiyya community were among the first to volunteer at Grenfell. They are so aware of what is going on. Going back to the Rohingya situation, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden mentioned their wonderful work raising money for charity. I went to the telephone at the Baitul Futuh mosque where they raised £140,000 in just four hours for the Rohingya community in Burma. They are driven by such situations.

We have heard a lot today about “Love for all, hatred for none”. Anyone just dipping in and out of this debate on television or in the Official Report may think that people are just coming up with a strapline, but it is so much more than that—it really is. That strapline is part of the beating heart of every single member of the Ahmadiyya community. There are no extremists in the Ahmadiyya community; extremism is anathema to their very being. Interestingly, Lord Ahmad, whom we have heard about today, was one of the first Ministers looking after the counter-extremism policy. That was a perfect choice at the time.

In conclusion, we must make sure that Pakistan does everything that it can to tackle the religious zealots in its country, because we have seen in other countries such as Saudi Arabia how often the Government, the people and the religious leaders work at different speeds. We must make sure that we help them, effectively, to align. They will, of course, fundamentally disagree with the beliefs of the Ahmadiyya Muslims as they believe that Muhammad is the last prophet and the Ahmadis do not. There is no way in which we can reconcile that, but that does not mean that the Ahmadi Muslims should not be able to celebrate their religion and live in peace.

1.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). We do not see eye to eye on many issues, but in relation to this matter we certainly do. We are both advocates of campaigning against the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community, and, indeed, of religious communities more widely. May I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing this debate to the House, for the excellent work that she does on the inquiry that she is conducting, and for the support that she gives to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community?

Clearly, unfortunately, religious persecution is a worldwide phenomenon; it does not just affect the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. I am sure that many Members here will have been contacted by the Baha’i community, which faces very serious, systematic persecution in Iran—whether in relation to trying to run a business or trying to get education in that country. The fate of Pakistani Christians is also of concern. They suffer persecution not just in Pakistan, but, to some extent, here, with people trying to disrupt some of their services. We know that the Sunni and Shi’a communities in different parts of the middle east are persecuted by the other sect, and that the Yazidis in Iraq have suffered genocide at the hands of Daesh. The Jehovah’s Witnesses suffer persecution in Russia and, of course, Jews also face persecution in many parts of the world and, indeed, close to home here and in Europe.

Unfortunately, this issue does not just affect the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, but, obviously, I welcome the fact that the debate this afternoon is focused on them. A number of Members have referred to the motto, “Love for all, hatred for none”, which the Ahmadis live by. As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, it is not just a motto or a strapline, or something that they put on a leaflet or website, but something that they follow and observe in their daily lives. They are fully engaged in all aspects of UK life. A number of Members have referred to the different events that they hold, including the peace symposium. I have also attended the Jalsa Salana on a number of occasions. I was surprised not only at the scale of it in the United Kingdom, but at the reach that it has around parts of the world. We even have live coverage from Ghana. They hold a very successful annual fundraising march. I suspect that a number of Members have suggested to the community some charities that it should support, and it has done so very generously.
I am very proud that the Ahmadiyya community is able to practise its faith here without any risk or reservation, and we must ensure that that continues. A number of Members have rightly pointed out that, even in the United Kingdom with the murder of Asad Shah, there have been issues. A leaflet has been circulated by the organisation Khatam-e-Nabuwat, which, frankly, should never have been allowed off the printing press.

I hope that, when the Minister responds, he will be able to say a little about what discussions the Government have had with social media companies—there are issues with Facebook in particular to do with not taking down posts quickly enough. Certainly, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community has presented evidence that, on social media, there are significant issues. Have the Government had a dialogue with Facebook and other social media providers about how and how quickly they tackle these issues?

In the briefing that was supplied, there were some examples of where Ofcom has taken action. The most recent one, certainly on the list that we were provided with, goes back to 2013. I would like some assurances from the Minister that Ofcom is indeed properly resourced so that it can look at every single complaint that comes in. Given the number of channels available, I accept that it is difficult for Ofcom to monitor the range of output, but it is clearly something on which it has to keep a close watch. I hope that it is properly resourced to do so.

There is a worrying domestic picture of which the police, Ofcom, the Government and the social media providers should be aware, as should we as individual Members of Parliament. We should not become complacent about our democracy and the ability of people of different faiths to practise their religion here openly and freely.

I turn briefly to the international aspect of the issue, on which many hon. Members have focused, starting with Algeria. We were fortunate in getting a meeting with the Algerian ambassador some months ago. It was a very cordial and frank meeting; my only concern was that there did not seem to be any recognition that there was actually an issue. I am afraid that, to a great extent, that was the also the impression that we got when we met with the deputy high commissioner from Pakistan. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden may be able to confirm my impression that there did not seem to be an acceptance that there was, in fact, an issue for the community. After reading out some quite detailed evidence, we were asked to provide more evidence to demonstrate that there was a problem. Many Members have referred to the problem that exists in Pakistan, and there needs to be some recognition on the part of the Pakistan high commission here that there is one.

The third country that I should mention, as others have, is Indonesia. Christian Solidarity Worldwide provided us all with some excellent briefings ahead of today’s debate. It has suggested some recommendations for the UK Government. I am not sure whether the Minister received the CSW briefing, but I will refer to it for him if he did not. The organisation said that the Government should perhaps be a bit more circumspect when describing Indonesia as a role model of tolerance, because the evidence as far as the Ahmadi Muslim community is concerned, unfortunately, shows that that is not necessarily the case.

Indonesia has the same issue with blasphemy laws as Pakistan. This country should probably recognise that we only abolished our blasphemy laws 10 years ago ourselves—not exactly that long ago. However, we are now in a position whereby we can advocate that other countries should get rid of their blasphemy laws, and Indonesia falls into that category. It passed an anti-Ahmadi Muslim decree in 2008, which I hope that the Government will push to be repealed.

CSW has various concerns, including the need for Indonesia to extend human rights education, including the principle of freedom of religion, and the need to promote inter-faith dialogue and protect and promote the rule of law. It also requests that the Government of Indonesia invite the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit the country with unhindered access. Those are some specific recommendations for the Minister. If he has not received this briefing, I will give it to him at the end of the debate, so he will be able to refer to it as well as to what I said on the record.

CSW also flagged up a number of specific recommendations regarding Pakistan, including the repeal of blasphemy laws, and the repeal of section 298 of the Pakistan penal code, which is the provision meaning that Ahmadi Muslims cannot say that they are Muslims, either directly or indirectly. CSW calls for evidence that there are prosecutions taking place of those who attack Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and for curriculum reform. In fact, a number of hon. Members have mentioned textbooks that teach things that are a direct threat to the Ahmadi Muslim community.

I accept that the UK Government face a bit of a dilemma about whether to invest in education in Pakistan or not. On balance, I think that it is much better that we do it. It is better that the UK Government are making that contribution and providing education, rather than relying on religious institutions, which may promote an agenda that is not favourable towards the Ahmadi Muslim community. CSW recommends restoring the Ahmadi Muslim schools. The Ahmadi Muslim community complied with all the requirements for that as long as 12 years ago, but they are still waiting for that to happen. Safeguards are needed—the kind of safeguards that we advocate around the world for human rights defenders—to ensure that no seminary is spreading hate speech or hate material.

CSW also suggests that we encourage Pakistan to move towards a more democratic and pluralistic society. That is obviously quite a wide request for the UK Government, but the list I have mentioned does include some very specific ones. Given that the UK Government have a positive relationship with Pakistan, are a contributor through international development funds and have a security relationship with the country, we are in a position to exert some leverage.

This is a timely debate, in which all Members have reflected on the very significant contribution that the Ahmadi Muslim community make to the United Kingdom. We are all very proud of that, and both sides of the House should do everything we can to defend the rights of the community to practise their religion here and abroad.

2.5 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I apologise for having missed the opening speeches. I indicated to Mr Speaker that that would be necessary, but I am
nevertheless sorry not to have heard the opening remarks from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). I congratulate her on securing this vital debate. It is also an honour and a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who represents a wonderful seat. I wholeheartedly endorse all his comments.

I have been hugely fortunate during the time in which I have been an MP—and I have to admit, not much before I was elected in 2010—to see at first hand the incredible contribution made to this country by the Ahmadiyya community. We hear all the time, rightly, about the need for better and stronger integration of our diverse communities. That is at the very heart of the values that run right the way through the Ahmadiyya community. It angers me that the community has faced, and continues to face, so much persecution around the world.

The community’s motto, “Love for all, hatred for none”, which colleagues will remember was plastered across buses in 2011—paid for, in fact, by the Ahmadiyya community—shines out from absolutely everything that the Ahmadiyya community does. Colleagues will also remember, following the appalling attacks just across the road from here last year, the scenes of Muslim women from London’s Ahmadiyya community holding hands in solidarity and in condemnation of the violence.

I want briefly to highlight the 10-year partnership between the Royal British Legion and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association—an extraordinary organisation that has raised more than £200,000 for the poppy appeal. The same organisation runs blood drives, elderly home visits, feeding the homeless, charity events, all kinds of green initiatives, peace conferences, interfaith meetings and so much more. Last year, like other hon. Members, I had the tremendous honour of being invited to the Jalsa Salana—the annual convention of the Ahmadiyya community—which saw around 35,000 people from all over the world coming together to hear the Ahmadiyya message of unity, understanding and mutual respect. I left that event, as I know other hon. Members did, with a bounce in my step. I was inspired by the single-minded commitment of absolutely everyone there to peace, harmony and decency. I feel very lucky that we have such a thriving Ahmadiyya community right here in this great city.

Despite their amazing contribution, wherever they are in the world the Ahmadiyya community is one of the most persecuted groups of people on earth. As hon. Members will be aware, Pakistan—a country with which I have great and deep familial links, and for which I have a great love—is tragically at the heart of much of this persecution. Indeed, we heard only last night that a mob of 500 people is reported to have attacked a 100-year-old mosque in Punjab. We do not yet know the cost of that attack in terms of human suffering.

In that country, there exists deep structural and institutional prejudice against Ahmadis. By defining in law that Ahmadis are not Muslims, Pakistan has justified decades of religious persecution against them, and denied them anything resembling religious freedom. Those who have killed Ahmadis for their faith are often hailed as heroes. Ahmadi figures from Pakistani culture and history are simply deleted from the school curriculum. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned, the use of blasphemy laws against Ahmadis can see them imprisoned or even put to death simply for expressing their beliefs. If anyone is in any doubt, I recommend that they read a copy of a 2016-17 report by the Asian Human Rights Commission, titled “Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat.”

This is not just happening in Pakistan. In Algeria, Ahmadis have been detained and forced to worship in secret. In Indonesia—a country with a proud tradition of religious tolerance—Government Ministers have called for a ban on the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith altogether. Most depressingly, anti-Ahmadi persecution exists in the UK as well. Leaflets have been circulated outside mosques and in universities across the country calling even for the murder of Ahmadis. I saw similar in my own constituency a few years ago. Much of it is anonymous, but not always so.

Extremist clerics have called on fellow Muslims to sever all ties with the Ahmadi community. In 2010, the imam of Tooting Islamic Centre demanded a boycott of Ahmad-owned businesses. An organisation in Pakistan called Khattam-e-Nubwaat, which has already been mentioned, calls for the elimination of Ahmadis. It has offices here in the UK. That organisation congratulated all Muslims after the murder in 2016 of Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah, who was killed for being Ahmadi. Appallingly, that organisation has been an affiliate of the otherwise respected Muslim Council of Britain. The MCB has since set up a panel to look at the group, but why on earth do we need a panel when the group has quite openly and brazenly celebrated the murder of people whose version of Islam they do not like? Even calling a panel to examine such a phenomenon is an insult. To add to the insult, two of the members that have been put on to it have strong ties to the very group it is investigating. One of them gave a speech shortly before, saying:

“having any sort of ties with them”—

Ahmadi

“is far worse than being addicted to drugs and alcohol...I am humbly requesting you, do not meet them or your faith would suffer from an incurable cancer...Leave this place with the promise that not only will you sever all ties with the”

Ahmadi

“but also with anyone who sympathizes with them.”

Well, I guess that includes all of us in the Chamber today.

So this is not just an international problem, and we need to be much, much tougher on those propagating anti-Ahmadi hatred in the UK. When leaflets are distributed advocating violence or boycotts against the Ahmadis, we all need to speak out as one, more strongly, and law enforcement needs to clamp down on it and pursue those making these threats and incitements in a much more robust manner than we have seen in recent years—as well as, of course, condemning the actions of Governments overseas. The UK must use its considerable historical and cultural ties with Pakistan and other nations to call for an end to inhumane laws that criminalise innocent people simply for expressing their beliefs. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community has faced persecution and hate not with violence but with extraordinary dignity and compassion. They deserve every single bit of support that we can provide, here and abroad.
When such a poisonous thought exists in a society, no one is safe. Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. famously said—his words are important words that have been recorded in Hansard—

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

He also said:

"No one is free until we are all free."

We should take those words and think about how important they are. They encapsulate this debate and where we are on these matters. It is vital for people of all faiths and none to follow the example of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and to come together to stand up for the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

In that spirit, I will speak out about the persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan, and then about practical steps that Her Majesty’s Government can take. I am pleased, as always, to see the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), in his place.

As we have heard, Pakistan is the only country in the world that officially declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslims in law. The Ahmadiyya community is the most widely institutionally and constitutionally persecuted religious group in Pakistan, with Ahmadis facing persistent, systematic violence and structural discrimination that affects their economic, social and employment status, political life, and educational activities. It affects every facet of their lives. In 2017 alone, at least four Ahmadi Muslims were murdered for their beliefs, and since the mid-1980s, 260 other Ahmadis have met a similarly tragic fate. Whenever people go to Jalsa Salana, they will be taken down to one of the exhibitions there and see images of those who have lost their lives because of their faith. I am always very touched by that. It is a poignant occasion that brings home to me, as it would to all of us, just what it means to suffer and to give one’s life for one’s faith.

The Pakistani penal code is used to prevent Ahmadi Muslims from identifying as Muslims, using Islamic terminology and symbols, preaching, disseminating materials on their faith, or referring to their houses of worship as mosques. Any of the above is punishable by three years imprisonment and a fine. If the offence is regarded as blasphemy, then an Ahmadi could be sentenced to death. How tragic and how wrong that would be. Ahmadis are also technically prohibited from voting in law. The Ahmadiyya community is the most widely acknowledged human rights and persecution we agree on almost everything, to the last line and letter. I commend him for the hard work that he does in this House, as do others. I have spoken at Jalsa Salana events over the past two years. I am very fond of some of the very spicy food that they have there. It is nice to get away and enjoy those things. We cannot fail to be touched by the love and warmth that there is at those occasions. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said that he came away with a warmth and a goodness in his heart, and I think we would all do the same.

This week I was fortunate enough to participate in another excellent event—the Westminster Hall debate on the persecution of Christians. One thing that stands out to me from that debate, and this one, is that in many countries where Christians are persecuted, Ahmadis Muslims, and indeed many other religious and belief groups, are also persecuted. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, and also chair of the APPG on Pakistani minorities, I have come to understand that to protect freedom of religious belief for any one group means to protect it for all. When I speak, as I do, for the Christian community, I also speak for those of other faiths, and indeed for those of no faith. That is what we should all be doing, and I believe that it is what we all do.

When any one group is persecuted for their beliefs, it is a statement that human rights do not apply to everyone. When such a poisonous thought exists in a society, no
criminal justice system does not currently carry penalties for false accusations of blasphemy, encouraging allegations based on personal vendettas, enmities, or pure and simple hatred for religious or belief minorities.

Similarly, the current procedure, which we have heard examples of today, of allowing the local police to register blasphemy cases at the behest of any angry individual allows for false or frivolous cases built on the basis of personal animosity. Police stations are easily accessible, and police officers are often happy to register cases without proper investigation. Corruption is unfortunately rampant. If the law were updated to make it an offence to falsely accuse someone of blasphemy and the registration procedure were strengthened to require that any complaint of blasphemy must be submitted to a judicial officer, rather than a local police officer, that could significantly reduce the number of blasphemy charges laid at the feet of Ahmadi Muslims and other minority groups.

It is important to mention that the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims is not limited to Pakistan. Anti-Ahmadi hate has also surfaced in the United Kingdom, as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden said. The most extreme example of that was the brutal murder in Glasgow of Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah in 2016, who was killed for his faith. Members have referred to the fact that leaflets calling for members of the Ahmadi Muslim community to be killed have been distributed in universities, mosques and shopping centres in London. A recently broadcast documentary by BBC Radio 4, “Extremism: Hidden in Plain Sight”, revealed that Urdu newspapers in the UK such as Nawajjang and the Daily Ausaf, popular among some of the British Pakistani community, were running hate campaigns against the Ahmadi Muslim community. That speaks to the point I made earlier, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. That is what we need to keep at the forefront of our minds. Persecution of one group naturally spreads like a virus that can travel across the world, without regard for distance or borders, infecting every society it touches. It is therefore vital to tackle this persecution wherever we find it.

I know that I am pushing at an open door when I speak to the Minister—I say that genuinely and sincerely—so I want to suggest some steps that I believe will be helpful in addressing these issues. First, we must develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe restrictions on it. I thank the Minister and his Department for their proactive work on that, as I believe that several country desks in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have already produced such strategies. I ask that he continue to encourage other desks to do the same and that he request that the Department for International Development lends its expertise and input to the strategies, as it can support the FCO in many ways. For example, it can promote freedom of religion or belief through its training programmes and its work on developing education systems that do not discriminate against minority groups.

Secondly, we must develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities. That will help to ensure that the Government are better equipped to recognise and understand patterns of religious discrimination and to respond effectively, in order to reduce hostility and conflict between groups. That is also vital to ensuring that UK aid is effectively used to support marginalised communities.

Thirdly, we must increase Government expertise, either internally or via external experts, on violence and persecution with religious characteristics and how religion interacts with society and conflict. DFID has previously expanded its expertise in areas such as gender and preventing sexual violence in conflict, and it is vital that the same is done for religion and religious conflict if the Government aim to promote stability. Stability is a multidimensional phenomenon, but I say sincerely and gently that the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar shows us how unaddressed Government and social hostilities and persecution of religious groups can explode into violence and create humanitarian crises.

Fourthly, we must introduce mandatory training for FCO and DFID employees working in countries with severe levels of discrimination of religious or belief groups. That training should focus on the relevant religions, patterns of discrimination and conflict, and how religion and religious actors interact with the specific societal and conflict context. While FCO staff currently have access to training at the LSE Faith Centre, that training is not mandatory for staff who work in countries with severe freedom of religion or belief violations, and it does not necessarily address all the areas I have highlighted.

To sum up, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community continues to be persecuted for its beliefs. Wherever there is violence and discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims for their faith, we can be almost positive that we will find violence and persecution against many other religious or belief groups. What that teaches me and hopefully all of us is that to protect freedom of religion or belief for any one group means to protect freedom of religion or belief for all. It is therefore vital that people of all faiths and none follow the inspiring example of the Ahmadiyya community and come together to stand up for the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

I believe that there are many practical steps that Her Majesty’s Government and we in this House can take to increase our capacity to do that. The Government can develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe freedom of religion or belief restrictions; develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities; increase Government expertise on violence and persecution with religious characteristics; and introduce mandatory training for FCO and DFID employees working in countries with severe levels of discrimination of religious or belief groups. By taking those steps, the Government can dramatically improve their capacity to promote freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee the fundamental rights of Ahmadi Muslims and other groups across the world. I sincerely thank the Minister for his hard work in this area; we are deeply indebted to him. I encourage him to give serious consideration to my recommendations, and I look forward to hearing his remarks.

2.25 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Salaam aleikum, Madam Deputy Speaker. I join others in sending my best wishes to all those around the world observing
Ramadan. As someone who struggles to observe Lent each year, I think that people’s commitment to observing Ramadan, which involves even stricter discipline, is something we can all learn from.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting such a significant length of time for it. Everyone who has spoken has made heartfelt and personal contributions, and there is a clear consensus across the Chamber on the disgraceful nature of the persecution faced by the Ahmadiyya community. I hope that we will hear positive responses from the Minister.

I pay tribute to the various all-party groups that work on this issue, some of which are represented by Members here today, as well as the organisations that have provided us with background briefings, not least the Ahmadi community and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. I will say more about this later, but I want to say at the start that I join the tributes paid to Asad Shah. It is very fitting that that dreadful outrage is specifically referenced in the motion as it is one of the most terrible examples of persecution that we have seen.

The Scottish National party is, of course, utterly opposed to religious persecution. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, and it should be respected all around the world. We are deeply disappointed that the Pakistani Government continue to condone, and indeed oversee, some of these religiously motivated attacks, and we call on the Foreign Secretary to press the Pakistani Government to take action against such religious persecution. Reform of blasphemy laws, which has been touched on, is vital, as these laws are incompatible with the international covenant on civil and political rights to which Pakistan has committed. As we have heard, it is alarming that there appears to be increasing persecution of the Ahmadi community here in the United Kingdom, especially given the valuable contributions that the community makes to wider society and our constituencies. I want to reflect on those points in the short time available.

At the end of April, Pakistan’s Ahmadi community released a report detailing the growing hostilities that it faces, including indiscriminate arrests, impediments blocking people from voting in general elections, and the various other forms of discrimination that we have heard about. That is why it is vital that there is reform of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, and in other countries around the world that continue to keep such laws on the statute book.

In Pakistan, blasphemy against any recognised religion is illegal, with penalties ranging from a fine to death. Anyone can file a blasphemy case claiming that their religious feelings are injured for any reason. That is being applied to the Ahmadi community, whose faith is not recognised as a religion. Blasphemy laws are bad for freedom of speech, and blasphemy laws that actively ban another religion by name are really quite exceptional and matter to everyone in Pakistan. We have heard about the debate the impact of that—killings, attacks, and exclusion from schools and other aspects of civil society. Sadly, that has gone on for decades, dating back to at least the amendments to the constitution.

I was particularly taken aback by the fact that to be an impostor prophet and his followers to be non-Muslims. That is a quite astonishing thing for any holder of a religious belief to be asked. The theological and religious parallels are not identical, but it seems to me to be the equivalent of asking me to sign a document saying I do not recognise the authority of the Pope in the Catholic Church, which would just be astonishing.

This is very difficult to comprehend, although, as the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) said, it is not so long since the blasphemy laws were taken away here. There was a form of religious persecution or discrimination in this country for many years, but we have moved beyond that, and we have to continue to hope that we can encourage other countries to do the same. As Members have said, once we start to allow some form of state-sponsored discrimination against any minority, community or faith group, there is a very real risk that this is the thin end of the wedge, and that the experience of persecution begins to be felt by other minority groups or anyone who does not subscribe to the position put forward by the state.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, although some of the worst and most concentrated abuse of Ahmadi is taking place in Pakistan, there is growing persecution around the world. We have heard about particularly stark examples from Indonesia, but we know of others in Bangladesh, Belarus and various other parts of the world. We have seen the same kind of thing: people being targeted for their beliefs, as well as being attacked and murdered. None of that is acceptable, and it must be called out.

I understand that Ahmadis are officially banned from entering Saudi Arabia and performing the Hajj pilgrimage. Again, I encourage Members to consider what the equivalent would be for members of Christian denominations. If they were suddenly told that they could not visit Rome or the holy places in the middle east—Jerusalem, Bethlehem and so on—what kind of a message would that send? We have to think about how that reality is experienced by the people affected.

Sadly, we have seen such persecution on our own doorstep. Several Members from Scotland have spoken about the experience of Asad Shah, as have others who have contributed to the debate. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made the point—it is very true—that the root of the attack appears to have been the fact that Mr Shah was wishing his Christian customers, and his customers generally, a happy Easter. As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said, he was living out the phrase, “Love for all, hatred for none”, yet that was one of the motivating factors in his murder.

If anything positive is to be taken from that murder, it is the way in which the community has united in support of the Ahmadis in Glasgow against the kind of extremism displayed in that attack. There was an interfaith campaign, “United against Extremism”, with posters spreading a message of tolerance paid for by the various religious communities, and supported by politicians and civil society across the board. The First Minister was one of several politicians among hundreds of people who attended the vigil that was held.

At that vigil, Ahmed Owusu-Konadu, one of the leaders of the Ahmadi community in Glasgow—I know him very well, and I think everyone Glasgow MP has got to know him over the past few years since we were elected—
called on all Muslims to condemn the killing of Shah, saying that spreading a message of intolerance was unacceptable. He and others invited the First Minister to a peace symposium in their mosque, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). At that meeting in December 2016, the First Minister said:

“The Peace Symposium demonstrates the commitment of the Ahmadiyya Community to promoting the values of peace, tolerance and understanding and is an important opportunity for us to restate our shared values and our shared aims.”

Following the incident, the Scottish Government launched a review of the suite of laws covering hate crime offences in Scotland to ensure that they remain fit for purpose in the 21st century. In launching the review, the Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, Annabelle Ewing, said:

“Racism, intolerance and prejudice of all kinds are a constant threat to society, and while Scotland is an open and inclusive nation, we are not immune from that threat.”

That is absolutely correct; we must have a constant vigil.

We have heard from Members on both sides of the Chamber about other incidents of intolerance and bigotry towards the Ahmadi community throughout the United Kingdom. It was worrying to hear what the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said about the distribution at universities of leaflets calling for attacks on members of the Ahmadi community. We have also heard about the issues at Oxford University this month, and all that is a matter of great concern.

We are deeply disappointed that the Pakistani Government continue to condone and oversee the conduct of religiously motivated attacks. We call on the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Office Ministers to press the Pakistani Government to take action against religious persecution. It was in 2013 that the Foreign Office first listed Pakistan as a country of concern in relation to its human rights record, particularly due to its record on freedom of religion and belief. An update from the Minister on how the Foreign Office is acting and what representations it is continuing to make through diplomatic channels would be very welcome. What discussions are taking place at a global level through the United Nations and other forums on persecution in the middle east and other Muslim-majority countries?

It is important to hear a response from the Minister to various points made by hon. Members. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who is no longer in the Chamber, proposed a global ambassador for religious freedom, and I believe an equivalent has been appointed in the United States. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) raised the issue of support for refugees, which is absolutely vital. We must be welcoming, and we must be willing to offer refuge to people who are fleeing persecution and hostility. It would be helpful to hear about some of the recommendations made by Christian Solidarity Worldwide and others, including the action that could be taken in Indonesia and elsewhere that was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington. It would also be useful to know what steps the Government are taking to monitor and tackle the rising violence in the UK and to promote solidarity with the Ahmadi community, and what steps they are willing to take to work with the devolved Administrations in promoting such tolerance.

I want to reflect, as other Members have, on the contribution that the community makes to my own constituency. I have had the pleasure of interacting with Glasgow’s Ahmadi community since the 2015 election. We paid tribute to former Members earlier, and it is right to pay tribute to the former Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Margaret Ferrier. Even since the 2017 election, she has continued to be a champion for the Ahmadi community, standing in solidarity with people, supporting their campaigns and attending their events. She contributed greatly to the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community when she was in the House and, indeed, to similar debates in the Chamber.

Much as in the other communities that we have heard about, the community in Glasgow has responded incredibly. In spite of and in the face of violence and persecution, people respond, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, with peace, love and tolerance. They are actively involved in their community, which shows what a positive contribution can be made. They organise an annual fun run in Glasgow—the money often goes to the children’s hospital in Glasgow—as well as litter picks, and they make space in their mosque available for wider community events. They hold peace symposiums, many of which I have had the privilege of attending. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we are always guaranteed a memorable catering experience when we take part in them.

That experience stands in stark and welcome contrast to the violence and persecution that the community is experiencing, sadly, in the UK and around the world. As other Members have said, the phrase “Love for all, hatred for none” is not simply a slogan; it is a way of being, and a philosophy that permeates every aspect of the community’s life. It also reflects the golden rule in other religions, such as, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Governments who seek to persecute minorities ought to reflect on that, especially if they themselves are doing so in the name of a religion, because there is not a single global religion that, in its purest form, condones or accepts the violence and persecution we are seeing.

Tolerance is absolutely key, and we must speak out because, as other Members have said, if we allow blasphemy laws, persecution or intolerance towards one set of minorities, the risk is that other minorities and indeed larger groups may be affected as well, with the risk of increasing persecution of others and growing intolerance of all kinds. That is what we must unite against, and that is what has been shown by today’s debate.

2.39 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). We have heard some excellent speeches and interventions in this very important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), the chair of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, for speaking so eloquently on behalf of the community in her constituency, and for very skilfully taking us on a global tour and showing us the truly dreadful extent of the persecution suffered by Ahmadi Muslims worldwide.
My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) highlighted in an intervention the hospitality offered by the Ahmadi Muslim community in Manchester following last year’s attack. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), among many others, recorded the contribution the Ahmadi Muslims make to our national life and their constituencies. Like many who spoke, they quoted “Love for all, hatred for none”. That is something we will all take away with us this afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) talked about the charitable endeavours of the charity Humanity First and again the contribution the Ahmadis make to our national life. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) talked about the situation in Indonesia and quoted an incident of a mob attacking several homes and attempting to expel Ahmadis actually in the presence of police officers. The murder of the newsagent in Glasgow, Asad Shah, was highlighted by my hon. Friends. The Members for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who both paid tribute to Mr Asad Shah and said we needed to do much to deal with the prejudice here in this country.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) highlighted the restrictions on Ahmadis even on using traditional greetings. The right hon. Gentleman also highlighted the problems of online hatred being spread on sites such as Facebook. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) talked about the contribution of Ahmadis in business, commerce and community affairs and asked that the authorities crack down on the discrimination in this country. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) made the important point that Pakistan uses the state and the law to persecute Ahmadis and highlighted the case of the three Ahmadis Muslims still on death row. The Minister knows that I have written to him about this case.

The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) talked about the Ahmadi peace symposium held every year and the great work done by the Ahmadis in bringing communities together. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the chair of the all-party group on religion or belief, highlighted the important point that freedom of religious belief and thought must apply to those of all faiths and none.

The motion notes the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries. It also notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK and highlights the past activities of hate preacher Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, the Pakistani Muslim cleric who has been banned from preaching in Pakistan because his sermons are considered too incendiary. He is held responsible for radicalising Tanveer Ahmed, the murderer of Mr Asad Shah. As several Members have mentioned, Mr Shah was apparently targeted after messages he put out on social media, including an Easter greeting to Christians. That was highlighted by the right hon. Member for Putney and the hon. Member for Glasgow North. The right hon. Lady also brought attention to the excellent report from the International Human Rights Committee and the Asian Human Rights Committee entitled, “Ahmadis in Pakistan Face an Existential Threat”. I would recommend that excellent report to anybody here who has not read it.

The motion also calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadis and to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.

As we have heard, Ahmadis believe they are Muslims, yet in 1974 the National Assembly of Pakistan declared them to be non-Muslims. This was done by passing the second amendment to the constitution of Pakistan, which declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslim despite their own belief and thought. Pakistan’s blasphemy laws remain a key area of concern. These legal provisions, which criminalise insults against Islam, are often misused to settle personal scores, and Ahmadis continue to face blasphemy allegations.

Ahmadis cannot defend themselves against charges of blasphemy without committing blasphemy and placing themselves in acute legal, physical and social jeopardy. Ahmadis who voice opposition to legislation making their religion a crime are considered traitors. The International Court of Justice has found systemic and widespread fair trial violations related particularly to Ahmadis accused of blasphemy.

Under Pakistan’s election law, Ahmadis are effectively denied the right to vote and are disenfranchised unless they declare themselves as non-Muslims, which effectively would mean giving up their faith. The Electoral Commission of Pakistan has decided that Ahmadis can be permitted to vote only under a separate register and by self-identifying as a non-Muslim minority. This requirement to deny their faith to vote has caused their disenfranchisement from politics for more than 30 years, and worse still the separate Ahmadi electoral register is publicly available, making it much easier for extremists to target them.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom identifies Pakistan as a country of particular concern. Its 2017 annual report states:

“Ahmadis are subject to severe legal restrictions and suffer from officially sanctioned discrimination. The second amendment declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslims. Penal Code Section 298 makes it criminal for Ahmadis to refer to themselves as Muslims, preach, propagate or disseminate materials on their faith, or refer to their houses of worship as mosques. They are also prohibited from voting. Ahmadis frequently face societal discrimination, harassment and physical attacks, sometimes resulting in murder.”

I want to mention here the discrimination faced by Ahmadi women, who live in a patriarchal society. As well as facing similar harassment to Ahmadis men, they can become socially isolated and face overt discrimination during routine activities, such as shopping or going to the market. Some shops display signs and banners that say they do not deal with “Qadianis”, the pejorative term used to refer to Ahmadi Muslims. The term originates from Qadian, a small town in northern India, which was the birthplace of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement.

Many Ahmadis leave Pakistan to seek refuge elsewhere and a safe haven where they can freely practise their religion and live a normal and peaceful life. As we have
heard, many have fled to countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand where they may end up in refugee camps or prisons and be denied access to health, education and work. Discrimination against Ahmadies is not confined to Pakistan, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden took us on a comprehensive global tour.

Human Rights Watch reports that in Algeria, where the Ahmadi minority amounts to around 2,000 people, about 280 people faced criminal trials in 2016 for denigrating tenets of the Islamic faith or taking part in “unauthorised association”. Algeria’s religious affairs Minister, Mohamed Aïssa, has made disparaging remarks about Ahmadies, stating that they are not Muslims and suggesting that the community is part of a wider Israeli conspiracy to destabilise the country.

In Indonesia, Ahmadies were declared “deviant” by that country’s top Islamic body in 2008. Ahmadies have complained of intimidation since 2005 and say that their prayers and activities have been banned in many districts. In February 2011, 20 Ahmadies were attacked on the Java peninsula by about 1,500 radicals. Three members died and five were severely injured.

In Egypt, the Interior Minister has issued orders for the arrest of 25 innocent Ahmadi men and women. In Burundi, the secret service raided the Ahmadi mosque in Bujumbura, and arrested 13 children and youths who were attending a religious education class. Those children were arrested on alleged charges of terrorism.

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights enshrines the right to freedom of thought and religion. In their persecution of Ahmadi Muslims, countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Egypt, Burundi and others are denying their citizens that universal right. Pakistan’s founder, Ali Jinnah, expressed a clear commitment to defending religious freedom when he said:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed.”

It is time for Pakistan to return to that vision and for the UK and our international partners to work more effectively and consistently to secure the rights of the Ahmadi community across the world. Although I appreciate that the more sensitive details may not be made public, we can and must clearly condemn the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims.

Will the Minister call on the Government of Pakistan to pay particular attention to the findings of the International Court of Justice and ensure that Pakistan’s judicial processes deliver fair trials for Ahmadies and other persecuted groups? Will he call on the Government of Pakistan to order the immediate release of all Ahmadies on death row and those held in prison? Will he urge the Government of Pakistan to repeal its anti-Ahmadi and Blasphemy laws, which are the basis of the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims? Finally, will he call on all member states where Ahmadies are living in diaspora to ensure compliance with UN conventions and that the UNHCR completes its due process?

2.52 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this important debate. I pay a heartfelt tribute to her work as chair of the all-party group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and for all she has done to support the community in the UK and overseas. That gratitude extends to the contributions of other hon. Members, and I shall try to respond to the points raised. I notice that there is a bit of a south-London mafia in the House this afternoon, but I appreciate the good reason why that is the case. I have the misfortune of living just the other side of the river in my constituency, but in a previous life as shadow Minister for London before the 2005 election, I went out and saw the mosque, and was able to meet many leading members of the London Ahmadiyya community.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, only two days ago I addressed the House in another debate about the persecution of Christians. On that occasion, Members from across the House gave horrifying accounts of the suffering of Christians in the middle east and in north and west Africa. Today, we have heard similarly appalling descriptions of the discrimination suffered by Ahmadi Muslims.

This has been a very heartfelt but calm debate. I hope that the world outside, in particular the countries mentioned today that clearly discriminate against Ahmadyi populations, do not think that that calm does not underpin a certain amount of anger and our real sense of mission. The plight of the most peaceable of communities should be in all of our hearts. I hope we continue to work consistently and persistently on it.

Hon. Members have focused their concerns on events in Pakistan and Algeria in particular, but lest there is any complacency we must accept, as has been pointed out, that the UK is not immune from the scourge of religious intolerance. I take this opportunity on behalf of the Government to extend my personal condolences to the family of Asad Shah from Glasgow and to members of the Ahmadi Muslim community. When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, I know that she wrote to representatives of that community to express the Government’s condolences and solidarity. We took the opportunity to meet representatives of the community to hear at first hand about the issues they face in their day-to-day lives.

I understand what the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) says. There is a great worry that in the world at large minorities are becoming increasingly undermined. We need to recognise that and stand up to it. The Government will continue to challenge extremism in our own community. We all know that our country is built on the values of democracy, respect and tolerance, but we were rightly reminded by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that we had our own blasphemy laws on the statute book. They were perhaps never going to be pursued, but none the less the fact that they were on the statute book until barely a decade ago reflects the significant change in our own society in the decades and centuries gone by.

I know I speak for everyone in the House when I say that we do not believe it is acceptable for any organisation or individual in this country to promote hatred or to
condone violence, particularly on social media. I will come on to that in a moment or two. Where messages are posted in this country that incite hatred and murder, they should be reported to the police. Such activity is criminal and will not be tolerated.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton made a point about legislation. This is under active review. He will know and appreciate, as we all do, that the balance between freedom of speech and ensuring safety is very delicate. We need to recognise that many global internet service providers are precisely that: global organisations. The internet itself, in a very positive way, is a global resource. We therefore need to ensure that we are able to work with other countries to try to secure global protocols. That will be a major challenge in the decades to come.

As I said on Tuesday, all religious persecution, in whatever form it manifests itself, is abhorrent and deplorable. Governments, religious groups and right-minded people must condemn such incidents wherever they occur and do everything they can to bring them to an end. That is why we will continue to work tirelessly to promote and defend the rights of people of all faiths and none all around the world, so they can practise their faith or belief without fear or discrimination. I tried to explain our approach to defending freedom of religion or belief internationally in some detail on Tuesday, so I will not rehearse the same points today.

I would like to address specific issues raised in the motion, which, if I may say, was extremely comprehensive, about the prosecution of Ahmadi Muslims overseas and on UK policy on counter-extremism. I will be travelling to Indonesia in August and I am very happy to ensure that the very specific points raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden are brought up in the context of that visit. I have visited, and will visit in the future, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Thailand. Specific concerns raised here will be brought up. The hon. Lady raised an issue about the Department for International Development and textbooks. I do not believe it is correct to say that we fund biased textbooks, but I will look into that and, if she will forgive me, will write to her in due course.

The hon. Lady also talked about entry clearance and the processes that we focus on, and I know that a number of Members had concerns about that. Ministers of religion and religious workers can come to the UK through one of two routes: either tier 2 as a minister of religion, for longer-term postings, or tier 5 as a religious worker, for temporary positions of up to two years. Those routes cover coming to preach, to carry out pastoral duties, to work as a missionary or to be part of a religious order, and other religious duties. Both visa routes sit under the points-based system and require a certificate of sponsorship from a licensed sponsor.

It is important that we look at context in this debate. In October 2013, in a relatively recent change—as recent as four and a half years ago, although we have to keep the situation under constant review, given the matters raised in this debate—the Government introduced a genuineness test to better identify those who may be trying to abuse either of those routes. The test applies to applications under the points-based system and is part of a wider policy of assessing the credibility of visa applicants.

That is ultimately a Home Office—rather than a Foreign Office—matter, but we will try as far as possible to have as joined-up an approach as we can. However, I am concerned that the system is being played to in a certain extent, and that there are people who may be on dark lists in their home countries—as people who would incite religious hatred—but who are able to come to this country through the rules that we have in place and utilise being based in the UK to preach against Ahmadis in particular. We will do all that we can, and the fact that we have had this debate is useful. This is perhaps something that my Home Office colleagues need to work on more closely, but I give my pledge to the hon. Lady, and indeed, to all Members here, that between us and the Home Office, we will try to ensure that these abuses do not continue.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) spoke about a number of issues that I will come on to in my speech. She mentioned having a special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. I think this matter is almost literally sitting on the desk at No. 10 Downing Street at the moment. This is something on which we have work in progress, and I think we would want to formulate the best model for the task. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) referred. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) is a very close and long-standing friend, and I fear that it is in fact 19 years, rather than 18, since his selection as a candidate—I only know that because we are such good friends that we had a celebratory dinner with our wives, within a few days of that event. I will speak to the Home Office about issues related to domestic persecution—he is not here at the moment because he had another pressing meeting to go to, but I am sure that he will read Hansard avidly.

My hon. Friend touched on the issue of hate preachers, a subject that a number of others mentioned. The official line is that the Government take a robust stance against individuals whose presence in this country might not be conducive to the public good, but I recognise that there is now a much more deep-seated concern among the public that this test—rather a vague test as it is—is not necessarily capturing some people who really should not be in this country. I fear that part of the difficulty with such a test is that if there is a big hue and cry in the media, or on social media, we highlight particular individuals, and I suspect it is probably the case that the Ahmadi community, by its nature, is not organised on social media so is not able to start a big campaign to stop individuals coming into this country. We will need to look at cases on an individual basis—particularly those that are brought to our attention—but like many hon. Members, I am not convinced that we have got this absolutely right. We will need to tighten up and to try to have a more robust test to ensure that those who would do harm, who would wish to incite religious and other division, are not allowed into this country. Again, this is ultimately a Home Office-related matter and it would be wrong of me to be overly prescriptive at this stage.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton referred to GSP+. He will know that the EU issues reports on this matter. The most recent report was produced in January this year, and made a number of recommendations to Pakistan, among other countries. Along with our European Union partners, we will continue to press Pakistan in this regard.
The right hon. Gentleman made some thoughtful comments. I think he recognised that this was not necessarily the place for immediate action. One of the difficulties of putting countries on to a blacklist, or taking them off a blacklist, is that it becomes difficult to move away from inertia and to have a list of priorities. There can be dangers in going down that route. I think it is important for us to work with international partners, whether in the EU or, in the time to come, in the broader international community. However, the right hon. Gentleman has made a fair point, and I will take this opportunity to revisit precisely where we were with GSP+.

When he was a Minister, the right hon. Gentleman rightly spoke up at a time when the Sri Lankan Government were making international commitments, too many of which had not been fully and properly adhered to. He will recognise that there is also a need and desire at all times to bring countries within the international community so that we can try to work together. Trade and commerce constitute one aspect of that. It must not be an overriding aspect, but it has a part to play in bringing countries back into the international community. These are complex issues, and I shall be happy to take them up with the right hon. Gentleman directly. I should be interested to learn more about his own experience in this regard, especially given that—as he is well aware—Sri Lanka is another country for which I have responsibility in the Foreign Office.

We are aware of a number of reports of Ahmadi Muslims being arrested in Algeria. The Government in Algiers have said that the arrests relate to breaches of law applicable to all religions. However, it is also the case that, while the Algerian constitution provides for freedom of religion, it is not always compatible with domestic law. We will continue to raise our concerns with the Government of Algeria, and urge them to rectify the anomaly and to respect the right of freedom of religion or belief. Last October my colleague the human rights Minister, Lord Ahmad—himself an Ahmadi Muslim, and a man of deep faith—discussed the plight of the Ahmadiyya with the Algerian Minister for Religious Affairs, and our ambassador also raised the issue with him at the beginning of this year.

I should point out that we also have grave concerns about the treatment of the Christian Protestant community in Algeria. We know that, for example, a number of churches have been closed. We have raised that at various levels with the Algerian Government, and our embassy keeps in close contact with the Protestant Church there. Our ambassador met representatives of the Church as recently as last month.

Many Members rightly raised the issue of Pakistan. The debate is particularly timely, in that—as has already been pointed out—it has taken place the day after a brutal mob attack on an historic 100-year-old mosque in the Punjab. We strongly condemn the continuing attacks on a peaceful community. The mob attack serves as an unwelcome reminder of the seriousness of the issue, and I tweeted my condemnation of it earlier today.

Let me say a little about our relationship with Pakistan. We have a tremendous high commissioner there, Tom Drew. He and his team do a great deal of challenging work in relation to counter-terrorism and a huge number of consular issues. The Department for International Development has its biggest single programme there, and efforts are being made to work with British Pakistanis to develop trade connections for the future. It all involves a huge amount of work, but that is not in any way to downgrade the work that we do in standing up for the Ahmadi community. I will take the opportunity to ensure that we raise that issue more extensively. I have been to Pakistan once in my present post, and I shall be going again later in the year.

I feel, to an extent, that we are not doing enough, but I hope the House will recognise that we are not ignoring the plight of people who are deprived of freedom of religious belief. There is a huge agenda, not least given the importance of Pakistan as a neighbour of Afghanistan, its relationship with China, and the sense in which the United Kingdom is a trusted partner at a time of uncertainty in that part of the globe. I accept that we may need to do a little more, and that we may do more publicly. That was raised by a number of Members today. I did not wish to suggest that because we tend to deal with these issues privately and quietly—and we do, very persistently, with all of our counterparts—there is no opportunity to go a little more public on them, and I will do my level best to achieve that.

Jim Shannon: Sometimes in Pakistan and across the world we speak to people at high levels of Government responsibility, but the problem is getting that down to the lower levels from where it branches out. How do we do that, because if we get that done, we can address many of the issues?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right. We do get the highest levels of access to political leaders, and Pakistan is now in a pre-election period which is a time of particular vulnerability for many minorities, and we have touched on that. It is entirely unacceptable that the Ahmadi, for example, are electorally disenfranchised. However we also work at state level, and in my visits going out to Mardan, for instance—I will be heading out to Karachi and Lahore in due course—I try to speak to senior state officials. Pakistan is a large country with over 210 million citizens and many of the states are as populous as parts of the United Kingdom.

We have raised, and will continue to raise, with the Pakistan Ministry of Human Rights the issue of the protection of minority religious communities. I have also done so in writing to the Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif, and my ministerial colleague Lord Ahmad raised this issue as recently as February with the Pakistan Minister of Interior.

The Ahmadi community are prevented by the terms of the Pakistan constitution and penal code not just from practising their religion freely, but from being electorally franchised and indeed, dare I say it, from really being full members of the Pakistani community. That is unacceptable; we state that here and now and will continue to state it in our conversations with our Pakistani counterparts.

Followers of other religions, including Christians and Shi’a Muslims, also suffer persecution, and at the UN last November the UK pressed Pakistan to strengthen the protection of minorities. We also urged it to explain the steps being taken to tackle the abuse of blasphemy
and anti-terror laws, which leads to attacks against members of religious minorities. Algeria and Pakistan are not the only countries where this persecution takes place. In Bangladesh, regrettably, the authorities have often failed to protect minority religious groups. [Interruption.]

I am being told by the Whips that my time is almost upon me. I have tried to address many of the issues raised in the debate and, if I may, I will say a few brief words about some of the issues raised on our counter-extremism work. Ultimately, that is a Home Office responsibility, but it is also an important aspect that we deal with. The Government remain committed to tackling extremism in all its forms, violent and non-violent, Islamist and extreme far-right and extreme far-left. The threat from extremist influences continues to grow, and we are responding with a joined-up, cross-Government approach.

We have also established a new Commission for Countering Extremism, with Sara Khan as the first lead commissioner. She will provide support and advice to UK civil society, to help it identify and challenge all forms of extremism. While this currently has a domestic focus, it also recognises that extremism needs to be tackled at source, which on many occasions can be traced to what happens overseas. Incidents of religious persecution in Pakistan have a tangible impact on community relations in the UK, and we are working hard to reduce the risk of extremist influences being projected into our own communities.

There is so much more that I would like to say, but I recognise that we need to move on to other business. I have touched on social media and on what needs to happen and on entry clearance, but let me conclude by saying the following. The Foreign Office will continue to promote freedom of religion or belief right across the globe. We also intend to protect our communities here in the UK from the scourge of extremism by working with partners at home and abroad to counter extremist propaganda, by working with global internet service providers and other social media to close down the space from which some of this terrible divisive material can be disseminated, and by using every other means at our disposal to exclude from this country those who would do us harm.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all Members of the House for what has been a very worthwhile debate today.

3.14 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time to debate this issue. I also thank the eight Back-Bench MPs, mainly from south-west London—the best place in the world to live—who made speeches and everyone who made interventions. I appreciate that this is a difficult day as we go into recess, so I am grateful to the shadow Minister my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), the Minister, and the Scottish National party spokesperson the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for being here.

None of us should underestimate the power and importance to the Ahmadi community of a debate of this sort taking place in the British Parliament, on the Floor of this Chamber. It means that they are recognised and heard—and they desperately need to be heard.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes with concern the rising tide of persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Algeria and other countries around the world; further notes the effect that hate preachers have on radicalising people internationally and in the UK, through the media, social media and otherwise; notes with concern the past activities of hate preacher, Syed Muzaffar Shah Qadri, who radicalised Tanveer Ahmed, who in turn murdered Mr Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016; calls on the Government to make representations to the Governments of Pakistan and Algeria on the persecution of Ahmadis; and further calls on the Government to make more stringent the entry clearance procedures to the UK for hate preachers by ensuring that entry clearance hubs and the Home Office have adequate numbers of Urdu speakers to monitor visa applications and online radicalisation.
Northern Rail Timetable Changes

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Jo Churchill.)

3.15 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to have secured this debate, but that is in sharp contrast to the distinct lack of pleasure that hundreds of my constituents are experiencing as they try to travel to and from Manchester following this week’s introduction of Northern rail’s new, chaotic timetable. Northern rail’s revision to its timetable is negatively affecting services from Hazel Grove, Woodsmoor and Davenport train stations at the morning peak hour of travel, and there are also problems with the removal of the last evening service from Manchester to Romiley. I want to bring to the Minister’s attention the experiences of passengers as a result of the new timetable, and to show how unacceptable the situation is.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This debate is, of course, about the Northern rail timetable changes that have caused such misery to my hon. Friend’s commuters, which I am sorry to hear about, but unfortunately the situation is the same with Southern railway at the other end of the country. I make a plea to the Department for Transport to impress on the franchises the need to sort this out. The timetable change has been worked on for many months, so they really should have been prepared.

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There is surely no north-south divide in this situation.

The fault of the services, as I will explain, can be traced back to significant delays to the Network Rail upgrade works on the electrification of the Manchester to Preston via Bolton route. That has had a knock-on effect on Northern’s ability to run its timetable properly. Network Rail is ultimately the Government’s responsibility. What are Northern rail, Network Rail and the Department for Transport going to do to urgently solve the problem so that people can get into Manchester in the morning for work, so that pupils can get to school, and so that people can get home again?

The greatest—but by no means only—problem with the new timetable relates to the glaring gap in the morning rush-hour commuter service to Manchester. The service originates in Buxton and picks up passengers from Hazel Grove station, as well as from Woodsmoor and Davenport stations, which are just outside my constituency boundary but still used by a great number of my constituents. The train service is vital for people to get to work.

The new timetable, which came into effect this week, removed the two most popular peak-time trains: the 7.50 am and 8.01 am from Hazel Grove station, which went on to call at Woodsmoor and Davenport. That leaves a glaring hole. The new timetable has three trains in the space of half an hour between 7.40 am and 7.55 am, but then nothing calls at those three stations until just after 8.20 am. As I said, Hazel Grove no longer has the 7.50 am or 8.01 am service, and the 37-minute gap between 7.35 am and 8.12 am is far too long at that time of the morning.

Hazel Grove does fare slightly better, because an East Midlands train does call there, but it does not stop at later stations. Woodsmoor now has a 45-minute gap in service between 7.38 and 8.23, and then there is nothing until after 9 am. Similarly, Davenport has a 45-minute gap in service between 7.40 and 8.25, and then nothing until after 9 am.

The changes are having a massive effect on people’s ability to get into Manchester before 8.30 am. Oddly, from 9 am, the services resume to three an hour—at 10, 20, and 35 minutes past respectively. That is obviously a better service, but it comes too late for people to get into Manchester for work, and the situation is causing massive disruption. Many commuters are faced with the choice of being late for work because of taking a later train, or being forced to take an earlier train only to arrive at their place of work unreasonably early.

The change in the time of the arrival of the train from Buxton from 8.04 to 7.38 causes problems for local schools. For example, many pupils at Stockport Grammar School used the 8.04 service. The new timetable will have a significant effect on parents having to co-ordinate dropping off their children in the morning and arranging suitable childcare.

It is not only the gap in services that is causing the problem. The loss of two train services means that the same numbers of passengers are forced into fewer trains, so when a train does arrive, passengers have to stand in cramped conditions—they do not even have the privilege of a seat. People are in effect paying a premium rate to travel at that time although there are actually more regular services off-peak.

The situation was already bad with the 7.50 and 8.01 services, as they were generally quite overcrowded. One commuter even told me that last week their train had to be met by an ambulance at Piccadilly station because a passenger had passed out due to a combination of the hot weather and cramped conditions.

These changes will have a damaging and hurtful impact on the family and professional life of many of my constituents. Sadly, the view I hear from residents is that they have the impression that Northern, the Department for Transport and Network Rail do not care about passengers. There is extreme anger. The two words that have appeared most often in the dozens of letters and emails I have received on the subject have been “ridiculous” and “unacceptable”, and I must agree.

It is not just the weekday morning service that has been impacted, as the Sunday timetable also changed. It sees the last train to Romiley in my constituency from Manchester Piccadilly moved from 22.20 to 21.45, so the service runs 35 minutes earlier. That means people are no longer able to use the service after visiting Manchester on a Sunday evening, particularly if they are going to theatres and concerts as most events finish at 10 pm or later. The 22.20 train was already too early as passengers usually had to leave events so that they could make the last train home. Now there is absolutely no chance of people getting the last train at 21.45. Again, the situation is ridiculous and unacceptable.

I know that the Government are working hard to rebalance the economy and to support northern cities such as Manchester and the conurbation through the northern powerhouse strategy. Getting commuter train timetables right is essential for that. The impact of poorer services—cancelled trains, uneven timetables, unavailable rolling stock and overcrowding—will spill over from the rail network and on to our roads. The upshot will be that people are forced back into their cars. Money was recently invested at Hazel Grove station...
on a new multi-storey car park to encourage train travel, but now the morning service is so poor as to put passengers off. As the Minister knows—I have raised this many times in this House—the A6 corridor from my constituency into Manchester is one of the most heavily congested roads in the country, so a modal shift from rail back to road is not the direction in which we ought to be heading.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is spot on in identifying the cause of the challenges faced by Northern rail with the implementation of the new timetable: the delay caused by electrification on the Manchester-Bolton-Preston line, which has had huge consequences. He has articulated the impact on his constituents incredibly clearly, but this is also happening in other parts of the franchise, including across the Pennines on the Leeds-Harrogate-York line. Does he agree that it is critical that Network Rail works with the Northern franchise holder and the Government, and keeps colleagues informed so that we know where we are? Does he agree that it should conclude the work as early as possible while planning appropriately? This is about planning to get more people off the roads and on to the railways.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend’s assessment is correct. We cannot get into a situation in which the buck is simply passed from one organisation to the other. It is clear that people need their commuter trains, and that is the end of the story as far as I am concerned.

This whole affair is clearly a great disappointment for Northern rail passengers, who need and deserve a proper service. However, I fear it could also detract from otherwise welcome and long-awaited improvements such as electrification, the 1,300 extra train services introduced across the Northern rail network, and the replacement of the uncomfortable, creaking and quite frankly detested Pacer trains, which I am assured is still on track.

Northern rail has been responding to customers by saying there is nothing it can do about the new timetable. It explains that the timetable is not the result of any decision made by Northern rail, but that it is, as my hon. Friend suggested, delays encountered by the Bolton electrification project, which is of course being delivered, albeit rather slowly, by Network Rail, that have had an effect on the timetable bidding process.

When Northern rail bid for the May 2018 timetable back in autumn 2017, it planned to include services in what has now become known as “the gap”. But those services were rejected by Network Rail, which has the ultimate say on the timetable. Such rejections are not uncommon in a timetable negotiation process, and in the normal course of things, the train operator would have negotiated with Network Rail to move services around a little to make sure all the services could fit in.

During the negotiation period, however, Network Rail announced that the electrification programme from Manchester to Preston via Bolton would not be ready in time for the May changes, which brings the delay to the completion of the project to two years. In the short term, the situation has severely affected plans to increase services and capacity across the Northern network.

Northern rail received the notification in January 2018. To be fair, that was incredibly late in the process, given that it normally takes at least six months to build a new timetable. Northern rail’s timetable planners have been working solidly on the new timetable since then, but have not been able to fit services into the gap.

To make matters worse, Northern rail had to bid its timetable around those of other operators that had already had their timetables agreed by Network Rail. Just as airlines have to secure runway slots, rail operators have to bid for platform space at stations for their trains. The problem for Hazel Grove, Woodsmoor and Davenport services is congestion at Manchester Piccadilly.

The morning peak into Manchester, as could well be imagined, is incredibly congested, with many other operators bringing people in from right across the country and the wider region. It will be even busier from May, with TransPennine Express services coming into Piccadilly and heading to Yorkshire.

I have no doubt that Northern rail wanted to run services in the gap but, due to how congested things are at Piccadilly, it seems that that is just not possible. Apparently no more services will fit in. If Northern rail had been advised three months earlier of the delays to the Bolton project, there is every chance that it would have been able to maintain the existing peak service and build a better new timetable, if not one as good as it was. Regrettably, Northern rail did not have that chance.

When I met Northern rail’s regional director in April to discuss these issues, I said it was unacceptable for passengers to be deprived of morning services, particularly given the substantial gap in the timetable. I made it clear that the proposals will cause considerable inconvenience to all commuters. Following that meeting, the regional director undertook to make representations to Network Rail to see whether a compromise could be found.

There has been one glimmer of success in this whole affair. Residents close to Rose Hill station in Marple contacted me about the hour gap in the outbound evening service between 5.09 pm and 6.10 pm from Manchester Piccadilly, which had arisen because Network Rail had, bizarrely, scheduled a maintenance train to be on the line at the time. However, following my meeting with Northern, it agreed to run a 5.34 pm departure in the new timetable to provide an extra evening service. That is a small bit of good news. I was pleased to be able to work with Friends of Rose Hill Station on this, and I wish to place on the record my thanks for all its hard work.

Northern rail is placing the blame for this sorry situation on Network Rail. As Network Rail comes under the control of the Department for Transport, I am looking to the Government at least to bang heads together and hold these organisations to account.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the Minister a number of questions. How can this terrible service represent value for money for commuters? Does he agree that the time has come for Transport for the North, the regional transport body, to conduct a formal assessment of whether Northern rail is in breach of its performance targets, as set out in its franchise agreements? If that is determined to be the case, what action can Transport for the North take? What are the reasons for the further delay to the biggest infrastructure project necessary for Northern’s modernisation—the electrification of the Manchester to Preston route via Bolton—which has caused this mess up of the timetabling process?
What assurances can he give that this work will not be further delayed? Do passengers really have to wait six months for the next timetable review, or can the Minister promise today to get things moving much more speedily? I am determined to keep working constructively with all concerned to get the urgent improvements to rail services that my constituents deserve, and I very much look forward to hearing the Minister’s reply.

3.31 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Thank you for allowing me to speak briefly in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for letting me do so and congratulate him on securing the debate. I promise to be brief, as I did when securing the opportunity to speak. Let me try to distil how urgently we are calling on the Government to intervene on the issue of Northern rail. The timetable issue is very significant and the hon. Gentleman set it out cogently. It is simply not acceptable that Network Rail’s failure to deliver on time is causing such carnage right across the north of England, for his constituents and mine.

Let me briefly set out the situation we have seen this week as a result of the change in the timetables. This May was supposed to be the moment when, after the months of suffering that my constituents have been through because of totally inadequate services from Northern, all of the jam arrived. We were supposed to have new carriages and an improved timetable, and then it would all have been worth while.

Yesterday, however, constituents were getting in touch with me to show the situation at Ulverston station. At school leaving time, 3.15 pm to 3.20 pm, children who now have to leave school early to get on to these services because of the changed timetable—that damages their education—turned up to find a single-carriage train coming from Lancaster. It was already full, but there were an estimated 200 students at Ulverston station, at least 50 of whom were left behind. The following train was cancelled. There is a clear safeguarding issue here.

It is vital the Government take heed of the situation. We have been urging the Minister’s colleagues to take this up for months. There are finally signs that they are waking up to the travesty of Northern rail’s services, but will the Minister please take back the message that we are experiencing a truly dire situation on the Furness line, up the Cumbria coastline and on the Windermere line in Cumbria, all of which are now operated by Northern? Not only are schoolchildren affected, but passengers are absolutely at their wits’ end and local businesses are clearly being damaged by the lack of reliability.

I understand that the Secretary of State said this week that Northern rail’s failures were now his No. 1 priority—well, okay, after all this time we will take him at his word, but it is vital that he delivers on this. There are things that can be done, not least because the performance is so bad that it is surely time for the Department formally to investigate whether Northern is meeting its basic customer service obligations. What can be done to unlock this deadlock with Network Rail? How can we get back to the kind of service that people pay top whack for and are simply not getting?
faster and more comfortable journeys, with new and direct services across the north and beyond. Indeed, this week’s timetable change, although we have properly and appropriately focused on the negative feedback that has occurred, has also been one that has delivered an extra 1,682 train services a week across the network.

As I have said, the Department for Transport is monitoring the situation very carefully. My colleagues have made it clear that if these teething problems are not resolved in the coming days, they will hold the industry to account—not merely the operators, but Network Rail itself, which is, I am afraid, at the heart of the problems that we have at the moment.

The beginning of the week, as my hon. Friends have noted, was a challenging time for customers of Northern and the TransPennine Express, and operators have appropriately apologised for the disruption. It is sometimes forgotten that they were upfront—perhaps not upfront enough—about the kind of disruption that they were expecting and the scale and the number of the changes. It is also right to note—the Secretary of State noted this himself earlier today—that many thousands of railway staff are working flat out to deliver the benefits of this enormous investment programme, and we should be celebrating their efforts. No one, least of all I or my colleagues, or indeed any Member of this House, wishes to see passengers face disruption, let alone on the scale that has been identified in the specific cases that have been picked out today. We understand the frustration that many have felt with this week’s service. The hope is that passengers will become a little more understanding as these initial issues are addressed and as the wider benefits start to feed through.

As colleagues across the House will know, in this case, the franchises are managed by the Rail North Partnership jointly on behalf of the Department and Transport for the North. I am assured that the team, which is based in Leeds, has been closely monitoring the situation and liaising with both operators. There is a timetable recovery plan against which Northern expect to be monitored by the Rail North Partnership team. In response to my hon. Friend’s question, I would not be surprised if a slightly more formal process of internal assessment were set up.

It is absolutely right for passengers to be compensated if they are affected by disruption. I hope that it is understood across the House that the Department has, with some effectiveness, worked with train operators to promote passengers’ awareness of their compensation rights. Rail passengers are now more willing and more able than ever to demand and to receive, without undue disruption to their own timetables or cost, the compensation that they are due. Figures published for 2016-17 showed that more than £73 million was paid out to successful claimants—an increase of 63.8% on the previous year.

Both Northern and TransPennine Express operate this delay repay compensation scheme, which allows rail passengers to claim compensation for each delay of more than 30 minutes or more whatever its cause. There are no exclusions for weather or for other delays outside the control of the rail industry. One suspects that quite a lot of this compensation will spike as a result of the experience that we have had over the past few days.

In the case of multi-modal tickets, delay repayment compensation is payable for delays that occur on the rail element of journeys covered by these tickets. Of course, the train operating companies and the relevant local transport authorities remain responsible for this policy. The Department has worked very closely with the rail operators to ensure that the claims process is as swift and as simple as possible, including through online claim forms, smartcards and online apps.

Let me turn now to the timetable. Northern has planned for some time to introduce these changes in two phases—one in December 2017 and the other in May 2018, with the latter being larger and more relevant. These were supposed to be underpinned by planned line speed improvements and electrification of the route between Manchester and Preston. Again, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove, in a very incisive analysis, put his finger on the central problem, which was that this electrification did not take place on schedule and that all of these knock-on effects, and of course, in a network, knock-on effects themselves have knock-on effects and the result creates further disruption.

The effect of the delays to the completion of the Manchester to Preston upgrade meant that Northern had to move some of its service enhancements to a later date. Further service enhancements for Northern and TransPennine Express are planned for introduction from the end of this year through until 2020. I am sure that colleagues will be working closely with the operators to ensure that they are put in place with minimum disruption. As a result, although the operators will be delivering an increase of 1,300 new services a week from May 2018, TransPennine Express are planned for introduction from the latter being larger and more relevant.

It became apparent in the early part of this year that the electrification process would not be completed on schedule. My hon. Friend rightly targets the question whether enough notice was given at that time. This required a lot of rethinking and rejigging by Northern. Although we are in the midst of significant operational challenges, I am afraid to say that it is appropriate to recognise that they have not yet ended. Once wishes that it were not so, but there may still be some further localised service disruption. In a way, that is to be expected with any new timetable, but it is all the more regrettable given the current circumstances. Northern has assured us that it will continue to do everything it can to make certain that there is minimal service disruption and to keep customers informed. Officials in the Department have focused on ensuring that customers know that timetables are changing.

I will not go further than my hon. Friend in addressing the specific issues that he has experienced in his constituency and on the Buxton and Hazel Grove line into Manchester Piccadilly. He has done a good and accurate job of bringing these issues to the forefront of the House’s attention. It is worth pointing out, however, that we will continue to see further improvements over time.

In Greater Manchester, Northern will begin to operate two trains an hour between Buxton and Manchester Piccadilly, significantly increasing the capacity on one of the most popular lines into the city. There will also be six trains an hour on weekdays between Rochdale and Manchester Victoria, as well as an hourly Sheffield to Manchester Piccadilly service every day. In Cheshire, Northern has made it clear that it will operate two weekday trains every hour between Southport and Manchester Victoria, two morning peak services...
from Southport to Alderley Edge via Manchester Piccadilly and two evening peak services from Alderley Edge to Southport via Manchester Piccadilly. A host of other changes and improvements have been put in place.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the frequency improvements and particularly the upgrade of the rolling stock, with the removal of the Pacers. In the context that the franchise is improving and has ambitious long-term plans—I ought to own up that I was a Minister at the time of the franchise renewal so am slightly marking my own homework—we are talking about identifying the blockage that is stopping the benefits being delivered. Can he take back to the Department and all relevant officials the message that we need a concentrated effort on removing that blockage, with the completion of the electrification works, to allow the significant benefits of the new franchise ambitions to be delivered for the people of the north?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That point is all the more forceful from someone with his experience and terrific track record in the Department, and officials and those in the industry will take it properly seriously.

If we look more widely, the position remains in many ways extremely positive. The Government will have spent more than £13 billion between 2015 and 2020 on improving and modernising transport in various forms across the north. We are building HS2—the first new north-south railway in this country for over a century—and will be providing better journeys through the new Northern and TransPennine Express franchises, albeit once the current disruption has settled. We are also investing well over £1 billion in improvements through the Great North rail project. As has been mentioned, Northern and TransPennine Express trains will be brand new or completely refurbished, and all Pacer trains will be gone. All that is to be welcomed.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove and all colleagues for the contributions they have made. Once this present phase has been completed, passengers on Northern rail will benefit significantly through some 1,300 extra services a week and rail users will have many things to be hopeful about for the future—not just brand-new trains but improvements to stations as well to service quality. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), has spoken to the chief executive of Transport for the North and the Mayor of Greater Manchester to underline his and the Department’s commitment to improving performance for passengers. We continue to work closely with rail companies to drive down cancellations, and to support Network Rail and the wider industry in delivering these significant improvements. I suggest that those are all things for which we will ultimately be very grateful.

Question put and agreed to.

3.50 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 14 May 2018

[ANDREW ROSINDELL in the Chair]

**Grenfell Tower Inquiry**

4.30 pm

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): We begin the debate with a 72-second silence to mark the lives lost in the Grenfell Tower fire.

_A 72-second silence was observed._

4.31 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered an e-petition relating to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and I am grateful to you for that 72-second silence, which I know will be treasured by all involved. The prayer of e-petition 206722 says:

"Bereaved families & survivors call on PM to exercise her powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 to appoint additional panel members with decision making power to sit alongside Chair in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry: to ensure those affected have confidence in & are willing to fully participate in the Inquiry".

The petition goes on to say:

"To secure trust in an establishment we feel has been distant & unresponsive, & to avoid a collapse of confidence in the Inquiry’s ability to discover the truth, it is fundamental that... The Inquiry is not led by a judge alone. Panel members must be appointed with relevant background, expertise, experience, & a real understanding of the issues facing those affected"

and

"Legal representatives of bereaved families see all evidence from the start & are allowed to question witnesses at the hearings".

As we start this process, it is important to realise that it needs to be a people-led process at every stage, the reason being that real people’s lives are being affected now and real people’s lives have been lost. If you will indulge me for one second, Mr Rosindell, I will read out the names of those whom we are here to commemorate as much as we are here to fight for justice for them: Victoria King and her daughter, Alexandra Atala; Amna Mahmud Idris; Gary Maunders; Deborah Lamprell; Rania Ibrahim and her children, Hania and Fethia; Gloria Trevisan and Marco Gottardi; Fathia Ahmed and her children, Abufars Ibrahim and Isra Ibrahim; Raymond “Moses” Bernard; Mohamed Neda; Hesham Rahman; Nadia Choucair, her husband Bassem Choucair and their three children, Mierna, Fatima and Zeinab, and the children’s grandmother, Sirria Choucair; Hashim Kedir, his wife Nura Jema, and their daughter Firdows Gomes; Abdulaziz El-Wahabi, his wife Fauzia, and his son, Yahya and Yaqub Hashim; Logan Gomes; Abdulaiz Azizi Wlahab, his wife Faouzia, and their children, Yasin, Nur Huda and Mehdlez; Ligaya Moore; Khadidia Saye and Mary Mendy; Jessica Urbano Ramirez; Farah Hamdan, her husband Omar Beldadi, and their children, Malak and Leena; Mariem Elgwahry and her mother, Eslah Elgwahry; Mohamednur Tuccu, his wife Amalahmedin and their daughter Amaya; Berkht Haftom and her son Biruk; sisters Sakina and Fatima Arafah Abdi; Isaac Paulos; Khadija Khalloufi; Vincent Chiejina; Kamru Miah, Rabeya Begum, Mohammed Hamid, Mohammed Hamid and his family; Mohamed Hamid and his family; Joseph Daniels; Majorie Vital and her son, Ernie; Sheila Smith; Hamid Kani; Steve Power; Mohammed al-Haj Ali; Denis Murphy; Zainab Deen and her son, Jeremiah; Abdelslam Sebar; Ali Yawar Jafari; Anthony Disson; and the 72nd person, who died a while afterwards, was Maria Del Pilar Burton.

We must absolutely express our sympathy to the families of victims and the survivors, and pay tribute to the emergency services, volunteers and all those involved in supporting those in desperate need.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I would like to make an early suggestion to my hon. Friend, based on the experience I had with a charity set up after the World Trade Centre disaster. We will need to consider a memorial for the victims. Is he aware that when 67 Britons were killed in the World Trade Centre disaster a charity was set up in New York, called the British Memorial Garden, with a small London end, which one or two of us were involved in, and that a memorial garden was built in New York, called the Queen Elizabeth Garden? I strongly commend to him that something similar is done in London now for Grenfell.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know that the community have expressed an interest in doing something along those lines. There is a process in train and it very much needs to be community-based. I know the Minister will take that on board and he may say more about it.

I also thank the petitioners—Adel Chaoui, Karim Mussilhy and Sandra Ruiz—and all those who have signed the petition. As of now, the number of signatories is 156,659. I know that Stormzy and the like had a lot to do with that, but it is more than that—it is a community coming out and expressing solidarity, and a country expressing solidarity. I was going through the names of victims and their stories just yesterday. Nobody can fail to be moved by the stories and pen-sketches that have appeared in the lead-up to this debate, particularly in The Guardian this morning.

I thank Grenfell United, for the dignified and resolute way that it has represented its community, and Inquest, the independent charity that has supported the community with expertise in the investigation of contentious deaths involving both state and corporate bodies, for its work.

Some things have changed since the petition began. I know that Grenfell United is happy with the appointment of Sir Martin Moore-Bick because of his experience and expertise in regulation and law. It appreciates that that expertise will be valuable in determining what happened, but they believe that the question as to why might not be tested sufficiently without further panel members, in addition to those originally determined by the Prime Minister on 21 December 2017.

However, the written statement by the Prime Minister last Friday was a very welcome move. Appointing two new panel members will add much to the inquiry, but Grenfell United feels that more may be required to ensure that the panel has a diversity of experience beyond that of the two extra members.
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman was reading out the names of victims very movingly, one of the things that I think would have struck all of us was the diversity of people in Grenfell Tower, as is the case with North Kensington and in modern London generally. Grenfell Tower was a symbol of diversity. Does he agree that, if this inquiry is to win the public confidence of such a diverse community like the Lawrence inquiry did some years ago, it needs to reflect that diversity at every level, so that all of the communities who were there, and the relatives of the deceased, will know that this inquiry can speak for them?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I will discuss the make-up of panel members later, but it is right that at every level we respect and understand the diversity of the community that has been affected, in particular in North Kensington.

Will the Minister tell us whether the number of additional panel members—two have been added so far—will be kept under review? It is important that the panel is not restricted—the panel needs to reflect the investigation, rather than the other way round. We do not want to restrict the questions the panel can ask, the avenues the panel can go down and the expertise that panel members bring just because we do not have enough panel members with the right expertise.

Paul Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware whether the Prime Minister has responded to the other two demands made by the survivors and the relatives of the victims of this tragedy: first, that legal representatives of the bereaved families are able to see all the evidence from the start of the inquiry; and, secondly, that the families are allowed to question witnesses at those hearings?

Paul Scully: That is something I will touch on later, because I know those things are very important to the Grenfell community—they are the second half of their ask in the petition.

In a statement, the Prime Minister highlighted the extensive nature of the inquiry. Some 330,000 documents have been received so far—many more are expected—and about 183,000 have had a first-stage review by Sir Martin and his team. Will the Minister explain how the Prime Minister can be sure that two additional panel members will be sufficient and offer enough diversity of opinion should the inquiry continue to grow in complexity?

The hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) mentioned the make-up of the panel. There would undoubtedly be concern if all the panel members were white middle-class Oxbridge alumni, but the community understand that the make-up has as much to do with experience as with ethnicity and background. When I spoke to him last Friday, Adel, one of the petitioners, cited the appointments of Dr Richard Stone and the Most Reverend Dr John Sentamu—then Bishop of Stepney—to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry panel as an excellent example of how members should be chosen. Those individuals had a wider understanding of the community and brought a very different insight to the inquiry from that of Sir William Macpherson, a retired High Court judge—now Lord Macpherson—and Tom Cook, a retired deputy chief constable. Lord Macpherson himself credited his panel of advisers with playing a crucial role in shaping the inquiry’s important recommendations.

Sir Martin has appointed 547 core participants to the inquiry, 519 of whom are individuals from the Grenfell community. They will receive relevant evidence in advance of hearings and be able to make opening or closing statements at some of them, suggest lines of questioning and, with permission, ask witnesses questions through their own legal representatives. That number of core participants is unprecedented, but the petitioners have noted that their role remains limited next to that of a panel member, who can make decisions and ask questions without notice. Such questions are more likely to get a straight answer, rather than one that has been developed while the witness has been preparing for the inquiry hearing.

The second part of the petition asks for greater scope for QCs to be able to question witnesses and review all the evidence. In asking for this, Grenfell United cites the Hillsborough inquiry as an example of how some of the key evidence that helped to get to the bottom of why things happened came from the questions posed by the families’ QCs. The petitioners feel that the impartiality of Sir Martin and his panel means that they will not be able to, or will not think to, ask certain questions that would be required to uncover crucial information, whereas the core participants’ QCs will not have that constraint.

The quick commitment to hold an inquiry is welcome, but the community are clear that they want it to be done properly the first time around, with the process not being rushed, but not being dragged out interminably either. One concern about the appointment of the panel members for phase two of the inquiry only is what would happen if those new members felt they could not make a judgment because they had not been able to analyse all the evidence from phase one and had missed the opportunity to question witnesses during that phase. The petitioners worry that that could risk preventing the inquiry from being able to come to comprehensive conclusions. If phase one needed to be revisited at a later date, there would be considerable impact on the families, with their having to relive everything yet again. Such repeats would also significantly increase the cost and time, which would risk damaging the credibility of the inquiry.

The petitioners believe that the police inquiry may well be the more significant part of getting to the bottom of what happened and why, and of bringing justice to those people who lost so much. With the inquiry starting before the police investigation had finished, there is a further risk that any delays will cause complications for both the inquiry and the police investigation.

I very much value the time that Grenfell United took to meet some 100 MPs in the Speaker’s apartments last week. In the briefing they shared with us afterwards there was a third request: that the Government undertake now to guarantee that any recommendations from the report will be implemented in full. Although I am sure we all understand the sentiment of that seemingly simple request, I would not expect the Government to go quite that far at this stage, before the inquiry has even started in earnest. However, it is important that the Government are open, understanding and responsive at every stage of the process, because the community believe that those three qualities have been lacking, certainly during the period leading up to the fire.
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good start to the debate. May I suggest that it has been wonderful how the Speaker has brought everyone together on this important issue and shown great sensitivity, together with Rose our chaplain, when it comes to how we as parliamentarians come to terms with something so dreadful?

Paul Scully: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the Speaker. He has shown compassion at every point; many of us saw how powerfully and emotionally he spoke at the reception last week. The Speaker’s office was on to my office last week when there was talk of a possible announcement by the Prime Minister. He is really keeping a keen, close eye on developments. That is as it should be; none the less, it is an absolute testament that we should pay tribute to him.

There is no doubt that we need to do everything we can to build and retain trust with a community who feel left behind. Those of us who spent a few moments on Parliament Square just before the debate will have seen the raw feeling that is still there 11 months on—and we can absolutely understand why. There are so many unanswered questions and so many people still unhoused—an issue I will return to.

Last week, a resident described what had happened as a tragedy in three acts: being ignored during the refurbishment of the tower, the fire itself, and the sense of abandonment at certain times afterwards. The Minister and other members of the Government have updated the House on several occasions about what is being done to rehouse those who lost everything last June. I do not underestimate Ministers’ efforts and the work they are undertaking to allow survivors to rebuild their lives, but we need to ensure that the Government go as far as they can to assure residents that they will not simply kick the inquiry—or any part of it—into the long grass. I dare say that the Lakanal fire will be mentioned a good few times during the debate, but we cannot countenance any situation in which recommendations are filed in the “too difficult” drawer. There can be nothing too difficult to ensure that there is no repeat of the Grenfell fire.

While I was speaking to Grenfell residents, they naturally raised other issues of concern, which I am sure will be mentioned in this debate. I heard that some people were still unable to move into new homes. A number of reasons were given, but the one that struck me were the considerable delays in getting gas certification for the properties. We need to address that sort of bureaucracy in some way, shape or form, so that efforts can concentrate on the more complicated rehousing needs, while the higher duty of care as a social landlord is still being met. I used to be involved with residential properties, and I know that gas certification is a relatively straightforward process that should take days to organise, not weeks, so will the Minister update us on what is happening in that regard?

People living in tower blocks around the country will be following the Grenfell situation carefully. I have been in touch with my constituents many times over the last 11 months, especially those in Chaucer House and Balaam House—two tall, recently clad buildings in Sutton. I understand their fears, and I will continue to be in touch with them until we have all the assurances and the remedial work they need. I hope that the Minister will continue to keep us up to date with fire safety testing. Will he tell us whether the new Secretary of State will continue to evaluate both the merits of banning desktop studies entirely and Dame Judith Hackitt’s recommendation to restrict their use?

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is taking far too long to ensure 24/7 security provision for tower blocks where the cladding has been found, and that the Government need to step up and ensure prevention work as a matter of urgency? That is not to mention the private blocks—Ministers have confessed that even they do not know how many are affected. There needs to be greater urgency in dealing with the prevention of future risks. Surely it is vital that the Government take that on board.

Paul Scully: When I was in the hon. Lady’s constituency, and in Newham—I was going around the boroughs campaigning in the local elections—seeing some of the tower blocks was a real eye-opener. There was one with, I think, 20 floors, that had 14 people working in it—one in reception and then fire wardens looking after two floors each. We find ourselves in that extraordinary situation when basic fire regulations should be put in place in those people’s stead. Yes, we can always do more, and I am interested in hearing what the Minister will say.

Paula Sherriff: The two lovely ladies I met at the reception last week had only just been rehoused. I am not familiar with the geography of London, but they said they had been offered homes all over the city. When I asked them if they had lost everything they had owned in the fire that night, they said it was not about material possessions but that they had lost a community.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. On the whole, most of the houses are within a couple of miles of the site. It is a relatively small, incredibly expensive area of London, so it is always going to be a huge challenge to give everyone what they need, but on the other hand, as I have been describing, we must rise to and meet that challenge. It is crucial that we do so.

Lots of people want to speak, so I will conclude. Will the Minister please convey my thanks to the Prime Minister for listening to the community in North Kensington and increasing the number of panel members, which was the right thing to do? The Grenfell community clearly will not have time to keep petitioning the Government, raising significant points of interest. The Prime Minister is committed to supporting everyone affected. The Minister is listening, as did the previous Minister with this portfolio, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma). I urge the Minister to continue in that vein. The people in the Public Gallery, in the Jubilee Room next door and outside on Parliament Square are looking to us to provide answers.

Within Grenfell United and other organisations are community leaders who are immense in their dedication and resolve. That is because they share the memories, the hurt and the uncertainty over their future, but they are 100% committed to getting their friends, family and neighbours to the other side—to a point where they can start to move on. While we still need to focus on the immediate programme of ensuring that everyone affected has a good home as soon as possible, getting this
inquiry right first time is so important to getting answers, securing justice, bringing some closure to a very dark chapter and, yes, ensuring that such a tragedy can never happen again.

4.51 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): First, I thank the Petitions Committee for making this debate possible. As the Committee will know, after the initial disappointing response from No. 10 to the request for a debate, I wrote to the Chair saying that I felt that response was inadequate. I am pleased that the Committee agreed and asked No. 10 to review its response. After months of extra work from survivors and the local community, many feel that this moment could be a turning point towards getting the justice they need.

I will lay out some of the concerns that the community and related local groups and representatives have about the public inquiry. I ask the Chamber to bear with me as I run through a few of the many occasions when the community has been badly let down since the fire at Grenfell Tower changed their lives for ever.

On 15 June 2017—the day after the fire and while the tower was still smouldering—the then Communities Secretary stated that, under the Bellwin scheme, immediate financial assistance would be offered to the local authority to support Grenfell-affected people. The former Housing Minister guaranteed, on behalf of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the Government, that every family would be rehoused in the local area. That guarantee has not been delivered. On 16 June 2017, the Prime Minister committed to rehousing those who had lost their homes within three weeks at the latest and as close as possible to where they had previously lived. She set the public inquiry in motion, and assured those affected that they would be able to help shape the scope of the inquiry. Those commitments have not been delivered.

On 17 June, the Prime Minister stated that the support on the ground from Kensington and Chelsea Council had not been good enough and ordered immediate action. She then confirmed the deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby and announced that the inquiry would be open and transparent and that Government and Ministers would co-operate fully—three further commitments that are undelivered. A week later, the Prime Minister again stated that the support on the ground had not been good enough, and that a taskforce had been set up. She reassured people that the fire would not be used as a reason to carry out immigration checks, and that all victims would be able to access the services they need, “irrespective of immigration status”. Those reassurances have not been delivered.

I have in my file a record of all the pledges, commitments and guarantees made by the Government. So many have not been implemented. Since last June—it has been 11 long and very painful months for all those affected—the Government have been criticising the failures of Kensington and Chelsea Council, saying that it is simply not good enough. The taskforce report was unequivocal in its criticisms of the council’s response and gave a number of recommendations that the council has still not implemented. Despite that devastating report, the Government will not listen to the calls of residents’, groups and the Labour councillors who support them for commissioners to be called in to deal with the council’s frankly shocking ongoing failure to rehouse victims.

Last week I had one of my regular meetings with the team in charge of rehousing. They are on their knees. Finger-wagging from the Government will not help; they need outside assistance now. I take this opportunity to repeat our request to the Government to call in commissioners to take control of rehousing, which frankly is in chaos. It is yet another example of how Grenfell-affected people have been badly let down while the Government refuse to take actions that are within their power.

Let us now look at who has and has not been granted core participant status. More than 500 individuals have been granted the status. Quite correctly, those who have been directly affected—the survivors and bereaved family members—have been granted core participant status. While Kensington and Chelsea Council has been granted CP status, the opposition Labour group, bizarrely, has not. It opposed the Conservative council on so many of its social housing policies, including how the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower was carried out and the location of the school at the foot of the tower. The Labour group of councillors has been considered, in some kind of joint enterprise judgment, to be part of the council. Despite two appeals, Labour councillors—including the ward councillors for Notting Dale, where the tower is located—have been refused separate CP status. While supposedly being considered jointly accountable, the Labour group has no access to lawyers and no access to documents that are part of the inquiry.

I personally requested CP status as MP for Kensington, as someone with experience as a board member of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation until 2012—I am well acquainted with the dysfunctional nature of the organisation—and as a member until 2014 of the Housing and Property Scrutiny Committee, which is supposed to scrutinise the TMO. I was also refused by the judge, as apparently I have “nothing to add”. The chair of the Grenfell Tower compact—a kind of residents’ association—was directly involved with the negotiations throughout the period of the refurbishment, and they were also refused.

We have heard about some bereaved family members granted CP status whose visas have expired and who have been forced to return to their home countries. They have been told, despite previous assurances to the contrary, that they are not to be afforded extensions to their visas so they can attend the inquiry, as is their right. Shockingly, they have been told that they can watch proceedings on TV. I give those examples to underline the frustration of those concerned at being excluded from the inquiry, which is so important to their grieving, their peace of mind, and their demand for justice.

Unfortunately, there is a precedent for the frustration at the results and recommendations of a public inquiry. From June 2016 to June 2017, I sat on the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority at the Greater London Assembly, which was charged with London-wide organisation and planning of these services. Much of that time was dedicated to lobbying Government for the implementation of the Lakanal House inquiry recommendations of 2013. Six people had died in a preventable fire that involved external cladding and
fire spread. If the Lakanal House recommendations had been implemented, Grenfell Tower would not have burned. If they had been implemented, 72 lives would not have been lost, yet to this day, despite the then Secretary of State's insistence that they have been—the Lakanal House inquiry recommendations have still not been implemented.

Whether it is our community or the various industries concerned, there is little confidence that the recommendations of the Hackitt report, due within two weeks, will be implemented either. What do we have to do to ensure the safety of those for whom we have responsibility? Do they not have a right to life? How can the Government state that no stone will be unturned and that everything is being done when so clearly it is not? The Government state they have given the council £72 million towards housing and other necessary services. Meanwhile, a fourth food bank is about to open to serve the immediate Grenfell area. I find that shocking and unacceptable. How can the Government stand by and wag their fingers while Kensington and Chelsea Council is so clearly failing in its statutory duties?

Some Grenfell-affected people tell me that they have had enough of hearing that politicians are honoured and privileged to have met them and heard their stories. They have heard enough about resilience and dignity, as if somehow it is a surprise that people living in social housing have any kind of integrity and discernment. They feel they are being told, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—in another context—to “be quiet, be grateful, know your place”, and that somehow, if they behave appropriately, according to some unwritten rulebook, they will get their dues. Some people feel they are being played, or that there is a “divide and rule” ploy to split the community. If that is so, it is a misjudgment because in this matter the community is united. Let us have no more platitudes, no more lionising those you wish to control, and no more attempts to pacify, neutralise, sideline and mollify people whose genuine and justified concerns are being ignored.

Grenfell-affected people, represented by Grenfell United, Humanity for Grenfell, and other more or less formal groups, are asking for no less than what they are due. They do not want charity—they want reparations and that somehow, if they behave appropriately, according to some unwritten rulebook, they will get their dues. They feel they are being played, or that there is a “divide and rule” ploy to split the community. If that is so, it is a misjudgment because in this matter the community is united. Let us have no more platitudes, no more lionising those you wish to control, and no more attempts to pacify, neutralise, sideline and mollify people whose genuine and justified concerns are being ignored.

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There has already been criticism about the very narrow remit of the inquiry and the fact that social, economic and political considerations are not to be considered. Survivors and bereaved family members have expressed their concerns, but were not listened to. The announcement on Thursday that only two additional panel members will be appointed to only the second phase of the inquiry is welcome, but we know they can be appointed at any time. Many feel, after so many disappointments and failures, as I have just described, that there will be full confidence in the inquiry only if the additional panel members are appointed without delay. We ask that that is expedited now.

5.2 pm

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for presenting this important debate.

Grenfell Tower was quite simply an horrific tragedy that will doubtless have an effect on all of us for the rest of our lives. As someone who served as cabinet member for regeneration on my local authority, I am keen to have concrete answers as to how it was allowed to happen, who must be held accountable, and what will be done to prevent it from happening again.

I am sure that none of us here or anywhere else across the country will ever forget waking up on that Wednesday morning to see those terrible images of that blazing inferno in the heart of our capital city. Lives were lost that should never have been lost, and lives were also changed for ever. It could all have been avoided. That is why I welcome the findings of the Hackitt review’s interim report that calls for a culture change within the construction industry, which should take on much greater responsibility for what is built and how it is built.

The interim report also highlighted several broad areas for change, including improvements to the process, compliance and enforcement of regulations, as well as providing and creating a quick and effective route for concerned residents’ voices to be heard.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): In the interim report, Dame Judith stated that she would not recommend detailed changes to the technical requirements. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with groups, including the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Local Government Association, who have repeatedly called on Dame Judith to recommend bans on combustible materials on tower blocks and on so-called desktop studies? Does he not agree with me that the only solution is to ban combustible cladding?

**Giles Watling**: I absolutely agree that we must ban combustible cladding. It should never have been used in the first place. We must move on and that is why I was talking about how the construction industry must take on greater responsibility for what is built and how it is built.

I am pleased that the Government will consider any recommendations made by the review and how they will interact with the requirements of the construction product regulations. That is a step forward, but we still have many steps to take, including the work that Ministers have been doing with local government officials and organisations to provide support to the victims—both in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and in the long term. The autumn Budget 2017 also committed £28 million of additional community support to victims—both in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and in the long term. The autumn Budget 2017 also committed £28 million of additional community support to victims.
I call on all my colleagues to support the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). It is a truly cross-party endeavour. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government helped to draft the Bill ahead of its publication. It will ensure that everyone is entitled to a decent home and that all properties should be free from potential risks to the health and safety of occupants. That really should go without saying. We can all agree that provisions must be put in place to ensure that such can happen everywhere. Having read the Bill, I agree with Shelter that it would help to achieve that aim by enabling meaningful action to be taken on poor and unsafe living conditions for renters.

The Bill will build on a raft of policies introduced by the Government aimed at driving up standards in the private and social rented sectors. Those include empowering local authorities to fine failing landlords up to £30,000. From April, local councils will also be able to issue banning orders to put the worst offenders out of business altogether. Passing the Bill would be another positive step towards ensuring that such a tragedy never happens again.

Although we have done some good work, I am conscious that questions remain unanswered, so it is right that we are having this very important inquiry and that the inquiry panel was expanded. Those we are seeking to provide answers for must feel certain that the inquiry is working for them. An expanded panel will provide that certainty, and all Members of the House must now allow the inquiry to proceed without its being used as a political football. In the face of such tragedy, we should all work together.

I do not say that the issue is not political—everything is political, from planning decisions to housing—but we need rational and responsible politics if we want to do right by the people who lived in that tower and by the countless people who live in other such towers across the nation. By doing that, we may well be left with the courage and dignity of the survivors and their representatives and lawyers, are able to ask uncomfortable truths of those who were failed before the fire, and who have been failed after the fire as every promise made to them has been broken. The inquiry is not for the Government, and it is not for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It is for the victims. It is for the people who died in the Grenfell fire. It is for all who managed to get out of the tower, but still relive that night every single day. It is for the bereaved families and their broken hearts. It is for everyone who is grieving and carrying the burden of loss around with them, like a scar burned into their soul. It is for the people who saw the burning, saw people jumping to their deaths, and still have to look at that tower every day. It is for the people who are still living in hotel rooms, 11 months on.

This is about more than just a panel of advisers. The people have been badly let down. Of course there is deep mistrust of authority within the community. Of course they have no faith in the state and the establishment. If the Government lose sight of who the inquiry is for, it ceases to be an inquiry. It becomes a talking shop and an exercise in spin. It is up to the inquiry to ask tough questions and interrogate the authorities on behalf of the Grenfell families. That is why it is so important that survivors and families, and their representatives and lawyers, are able to ask uncomfortable truths of those who give evidence to the inquiry.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman makes some very fair points. Does he accept, though, that the Prime Minister has not ruled out including other panel members at a further phase of the inquiry? She has simply said, in the interests of expediency and getting answers as quickly as possible, “Not at this stage.” Phase two of the inquiry may be open to the addition of more panel members.
Mr Lammy: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I would simply say that we should have had those panel members right from the beginning. That was the evidence of Macpherson, when John Sentamu and Richard Stone were so important to the community. We should have those panel members now. Quite understandably, the community will want to get into the detail of who those panel members are, and how they can have a say and influence that. If we have an inquiry that fails to represent the people in whose interests it is supposed to act, it has failed before it has even begun. I do not want it to fail. I want it to get to those answers, but trust is important within that.

It is important that we understand the role of the state in this, because if you are middle class in Britain, you only really rely on the state to care for you if you get ill, if you send your children to Church schools, maybe because you use a leisure centre, or to take your rubbish away. However, if you live on the 22nd floor of a tower block, the state literally has your life in its hands. It is the state that you rely on for the roof over your head. It is the state that you rely on to come up the stairwell and save you and your family from a burning building. It is the state that you rely on to come up the stairwell and save you and your family from a burning building. It is the state that has told you to stay put. It is the state that has failed to install working fire alarms. If you cannot afford to be in the private sector, you are at the mercy of the state. That is the bottom line. It is the state that has failed, so it is the state that has to work hard to regain the trust of the Grenfell families.

Why does trust matter? Because trust in the inquiry is a precondition of justice. If there is no trust, there will be no justice. A lack of trust will affect participation. If those affected do not fully participate, we cannot and will not get to the truth. If we do not get to the truth, we will not get justice. If we do not get justice, we will get injustice—more injustice.

Representation, which is at the heart of this debate, matters. Look at the Grenfell survivors; look at them clearly. Look at the families of the bereaved and the community of north Kensington protesting outside Parliament today, and sat in the public gallery during the preliminary hearings. Then look at the Cabinet—not just this Cabinet, but Cabinets under the Government that I was part of. We do not have representation. We do not have the experience of living in a tower block estate.

Let recent history serve as a reminder of what happens when we do not have that representation. We get residents associations being ignored time and time again when they raise fire safety concerns with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. We get a local authority that cares more about saving money than the lives of people living in social housing. We get a council leader in a local authority in London—a city with 700 tower blocks of 11 floors or more—who had never even set foot in a tower block before she became leader. We get a local authority that cares much more about how the tower block looks in appearance to the rich folk who live around it than the lives of those inside it. We get two thirds of Grenfell households still living in hotel rooms and temporary accommodation.

When the voices of people living in social housing were ignored and marginalised, what did we get? We got a towering inferno, burning into the sky as a reminder of what happens when the state does not listen to those it purports to serve. We got the senseless and avoidable death of people who burned to death in their homes.

At a memorial service for Hillsborough, Professor Phil Scraton read the poem, “Their Voices Will Be Heard”:

“Shattered by loss but unbroken in spirit
In the face of injustice you never backed down
You forced them to listen, you sacrificed your lives,
You bore witness with dignity on the day of reckoning
And their voices, your voices, have been heard.”

The voices of Grenfell Tower have not been heard yet. Their voices were not heard before the fire, and before the Prime Minister did the U-turn that brings us to this point today. This is a test for the leadership of the Prime Minister. Can the Government regain the trust of the Grenfell family? Theresa May talks about burning injustices, and this injustice burned. If the inquiry fails to gain the trust and confidence of the survivors and the families of those who lost their lives, we will not get justice. I remind the Government of what Neville Lawrence said in 2012, almost 20 years after the loss of his son Stephen:

“The loss itself, together with the lack of justice, have meant that I have not been able to rest all this time.”

That point must hang in the air. How do we regain that trust? How do we demonstrate that we really get what representation means? How do we honour those lives? How do we recognise that it is the state that has failed, and how do we ensure that we are not too establishment to put the state and those who assisted it—the private contractors and others—on trial?

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. I advise Members that there will be an informal six-minute limit to speeches for the rest of the debate.

5.18 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for introducing the debate. It is a pleasure to speak after the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), many of whose comments I agree with entirely.

There is no doubt that what we witnessed at Grenfell was a complete failure of our system, on the most horrific scale and with the most horrific consequences. Everyone who is associated with the system, including myself—we are part of the system—should apologise to those who lost their lives. There were 72 needlessly lost lives, and hundreds more lives ruined, because of what happened at Grenfell. It is entirely unacceptable that this could happen in this day and age. It is our 9/11, but it is entirely self-inflicted.

I have had the pleasure of meeting many members of Grenfell United and local residents, and I pay tribute to their determination, their composure and their steadfast approach to getting answers and finding solutions. No doubt they feel they have been subject to injustice and discrimination, and that they were treated like second-class citizens in the lead-up to this terrible tragedy. Those are their words, not mine. They now, quite rightly, want answers and solutions, but the first question I would ask if I were in their situation is, why would I trust a system that has already let me down?
The feelings behind this petition, which 156,000 people have signed, are understandable. There is a clear need for additional panel members so that those affected have confidence in the system, to ensure that the people on the panel have the relevant background and experiences, and so that the legal representatives can ask the right questions and see the right evidence. To reiterate what I said earlier, as I read the Prime Minister’s letter, she has not ruled that out. Clearly, we need to get answers as quickly as possible. The letter said “not at this stage”. There are two distinct phases to the inquiry, and phase one is a fact-finding mission: it is about the what, not the why. The most important time to look at the panel members is when we look at why it happened. I have had discussions about that. We must look at why this happened and get to the bottom of that.

Grenfell United applied for a judicial review, which was heard by the High Court on 4 May. Lord Justice Bean and Mr Justice Edis looked at the question of additional panel members and conceded in their conclusions that there are arguments either way. Clearly, the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and the Hillsborough independent panel are examples of where that has happened, but there are examples of where it has not happened. They said that an initial report is required as soon as possible, and that they therefore understood the current position.

Their conclusion said that phase two of the inquiry may be an appropriate time to include different considerations and to cover a larger number of issues. [Interuption.] Those are not my words; they are the words of those judges. That is the right thing to do, and I spoke to a justice chief executive about that point at Mr Speaker’s reception last week.

There are other big questions that need answering, certainly about rehousing, but the important point is that this tragedy must never happen again. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has looked at this issue, and we are very concerned that Dame Judith Hackitt’s interim report seems to imply that there will be an outcomes or risks-based approach, rather than a simple prescriptive approach to completely ban combustible materials. We have had correspondence with Dame Judith Hackitt about that point. In a letter of March this year, she said that in current regulations, “there is currently a choice between using products of limited combustibility or undergoing a full-system test...The former”—non-combustible materials or products of limited combustibility—“is undoubtedly the low-risk option.” I cannot think that Parliament would ever countenance a higher-risk option after what we have been through. It is absolutely critical that that inquiry, which reports on Thursday, also comes up with the right conclusions.

We absolutely need confidence in the inquiry. The request about phase two seems reasonable to me. We must clearly do everything we can to support and rehouse those affected. Future regulations must be as clear and risk-free as possible to ensure this never happens again.

5.24 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Part of the Government’s response to Grenfell must be to ensure that it can never happen again, but nearly a year later, far too little has been done to give people living in blocks like Grenfell with similar cladding that very important reassurance. In 2009, the Lakanal House fire caused the loss of six lives. In 2013, the coroner reporting on that tragedy told the Government that the fire safety guidance was confusing, unclear and not fit for purpose, and that it needed to be revised, but the Government did nothing. In 2016, flammable cladding was put on Grenfell Tower, and in 2017 Grenfell Tower went up in flames. Had the Government listened and acted, those people would be alive today. Industry figures show that there is still an average of one fire a month relating to that kind of cladding. How long will it be before one of those fires is not put out? Eventually, that will happen unless we take that cladding down.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, Ministers stood up and declared that the cladding was not compliant with the guidance or the regulations, but the Government’s chief fire safety adviser signed off specification for the same kind of cladding for use on high-rise residential blocks. That emphasises the coroner’s point, after the Lakanal House fire, that the regulations and guidance were unclear and confusing. Ministers did not know, because they cannot interpret the guidance any more than anybody else can.

We will have to wait and see what the Hackitt review comes out with, but there are widespread concerns that it is compromised because there are so many individuals on it representing vested financial interests, and the early reports of what is coming out of the review do nothing to allay those fears. The Government must act without further delay.

My concern, which is widely held in the sector and by people living in blocks that have the same kind of cladding as Grenfell, is that a money-go-round is operating in the fire safety sector. The BRE makes considerable revenue from running fire safety tests for cladding manufacturers, which are able to design their own tests and keep rerunning them, slightly differently, if they fail, until they get the result they desire. They are then able to keep the detail of those multiple tests, and even the fact that they have taken place, secret on grounds of commercial confidentiality. That simply cannot be right. That gives the BRE, which also drafts the fire safety guidance, a direct financial interest in allowing the use of semi-combustible cladding, which is banned in many EU countries, because non-combustible cladding would not require the same level of very profitable testing—of course, it also would not result in so many deaths.

Ministers need to start listening to independent sources of advice. The chair of the Government’s fire safety expert panel is a trustee of the BRE. The culture that allows that is why nothing has changed since Lakanal House or Grenfell last year. One of the reasons why Ministers do not want to recognise these failings is that they do not want to accept their share of the responsibility for the tragedy that happened at Grenfell Tower, but they must recognise failings if they are to put them right. Ministers must now change course. There can be no more Grenfells, but there will be another if Ministers do not act.

5.29 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate, but I have lived in London all my life. I am 42 years old and of a west African background. My mother, who still practises as a barrister
at the age of 74, had one or two relatives in Trellick Tower, which is near Grenfell Tower, so I spent time there as a boy.

One of the things that is missed about this whole debate is that that location, Notting Hill, with the race riots and the carnival, is very important to the Afro-Caribbean community. It is an area that I have known on and off all my life, although I do not know it intimately, and many here know it much better. I assure the House and those who hear the debate that I have not really engaged as much with this issue as I might have, given my responsibility in the Treasury as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Chancellor—I was appointed just when this tragedy happened—but what I have to say, as a Londoner, is that I found it extraordinary that 72 people died in the tragedy.

I have lived in and around London all my life, but I have never heard of anything similar before. The Grenfell fire was a huge tragedy and a national scandal. People on both sides of the House, but on the governing side in particular, have to be generous and open enough to recognise it for what it was. Frankly, it is a disgrace that that sort of thing can happen—that a tragedy and loss of life on that scale can happen in London. As a governing party, we cannot walk away from it. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea cannot walk away from it either—although I am not saying that it has done. We have to understand the history of London—of that part of London—to understand the resonance for many people in such an appalling tragedy.

What happened over the decades in Notting Hill? Initially, it was the hub of the Afro-Caribbean community, and many people came to Britain from the Caribbean and Africa to make a home there, but over the past 10, 20 or 30 years what people call gentrification has happened. The area originally had a vast connection with people of diverse communities and faiths, but over 20 or 30 years property prices increased and there was a new influx of much wealthier inhabitants. The area changed and—I am not saying that this happened, but there is a suspicion that it did—the priorities, values and interests of the people running the borough changed. As more people with more money came in, there is a suspicion that the people who were left behind commanded less of the attention of the local councillors or even perhaps of the Government.

We have to talk about that context—about North Kensington and Notting Hill, and remembering the Notting Hill race riots—when we look at how scarring the tragedy was. Nothing like that has happened in London before, certainly in my recollection.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am a London MP, and some of the shocking statistics that we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) about the housing situation of the Grenfell families sound eerily and uncomfortably familiar to my casework, given our housing load and the struggle that my local authority has to rehouse people. All of our constituents are entitled to a decent place to live, but the situation of the Grenfell families is particularly egregious, and this goes directly to the point about trust made by my right hon. Friend: if, now, the state locally and nationally cannot mobilise effectively to ensure that every Grenfell family has a decent home to call their own, what does that say to the entire country about the ability of government locally and nationally to deliver the priorities of the people? Housing is such a basic need—I urge the hon. Gentleman, as a Treasury PPS to take this message back to the Chancellor—and we need action on housing across London, but for goodness’ sake we should have moved heaven and earth to ensure that those people had a decent home.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I cannot talk about the circumstances in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but clearly housing is a need. Specifically, however, I want to talk about this tragedy and its location, and about how resonant it was. I do not have much time, so my final remarks are addressed to colleagues on the Government Benches. This is an incredibly emotive and resonant issue. In many of the speeches—not perhaps today—and the things that I have read, there is massive compassion but not enough empathy about how important the issue is, and how seriously people of different faiths and communities treat it. There is a danger that people reciting statistics or even facts simply lose sight of the human element.

A national scandal happened in June last year. From my point of view, Grenfell is the biggest challenge that the Government face—forget Brexit and all the rest of it. Grenfell asks us questions about who we are as Conservatives, what our values are, and our ability to connect with people from the wider community and with new immigrants. I shall not mention Windrush—we have talked a lot about that—but I say to the Government and to other Conservative Members: we have to be very sensitive. We have to not just give the impression but feel that we are batting on the side of the people who have been affected. We can make lots of speeches—although I do not question our motives or emotional response—but I warn my fellow Conservative MPs that this is a big question about our own motivations and values. The eyes of the world and certainly of people in London are watching us carefully.

5.35 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a genuine honour to follow the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and to hear some uncharacteristic honesty from the Government Benches about people who feel left behind. I am speaking about people’s feelings and, if we get this wrong as the inquiry unfolds, about what we will be deciding to do to people’s feelings.

Last week, in Speaker’s House, I met the auntie of Tazmin Belkadi. She is a little girl: both her siblings and both her parents were killed in Grenfell. She is now being raised by her family, who wish for her to have a normal life—a life just like my children’s or the lives of the children of everyone else in the Chamber—rather than having to deal with just having the identity of a kid who was in Grenfell.

I have met children of the Hillsborough disaster who were seven years old when it happened. I have met children of the Birmingham pub bombings families who were nine and 10 when it happened—43 years later the rictus remains, the pain and suffering on their faces: not ever because of the incident in fact, but because of their continuing fight for justice for their families. At every stage, people have not considered their feelings, or how it is never to be able to grieve properly while still having to fight.
For 43 years, my constituent Julie Hambleton has fought to get some semblance of truth about what happened to her sister. She was a child when her sister died, and every time I speak to her she cries about it as if it is 1974 again. I was not even born, but that is as real to her today as it was all those years ago. Tazmin Belkadi deserves better than that life, growing up trying to ensure that her sisters and her mum and dad get justice. It is in our gift to do that for her—to ensure the passage of facts and truth, and a mea culpa by those who ought to stand up to say, “We did this wrong.” That would stop that little girl from being the future Julie Hambleton or Louise Brookes, whose lives have been changed immeasurably by having to fight the state.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that the pastoral skills of Bishop James Jones, who led the Hillsborough inquiry, brought significant closure for some of the Hillsborough victims and their families? He is now leading the inquiry on contaminated blood products, a long-standing injustice for the victims. Although they can never bring the departed back, the correct assembly of skills brought together—particularly those pastoral skills—can assist the families in bereavement. We have every hope that the same will be true for the victims of Grenfell.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady; she has been an ally to the families of the Birmingham pub bombings and she knows a thing or two about how families go through these situations. It is vital that we take real care of the feelings of the people involved. So far, that has not happened. We have come to an impasse where they have already had to fight with a petition to get us to listen to a basic thing that they were asking for. That should never have happened.

Let us grease the wheels and not think that these families are unreasonable in their demands. It was raised with me at Speaker’s House that the building is being covered up, and that the families did not it to be covered in white, as if it would fade away and be invisible. They do not mind it being covered up; they recognise the trauma it causes for children in the community, especially when they have to look up at it—although there is a misapprehension, as one could imagine. They wanted it to be covered in a vibrant colour. That just was not listened to. When they complained, they were made to feel a little like they were being a bother.

I want those people to be told that nothing is a bother. I want us as a group of people who make decisions, and the Government, to be a parent to these people. When my son says to me, “I don’t want to go to school”, or “I think I’m being a bother”, I say to him, “Nothing you need is a bother to me. I’m going to help you in your life, to make sure that you feel that I care and I have your best interests at heart.” We have failed in the past so many times to stop people feeling like a bother.

I will finish on the fact that there is a class issue. People recognise hierarchy and feel they cannot speak up. We have to make sure that we never act supreme over these people, because nobody knows more about what happened, and the what of the initial phase at Grenfell, than the people who lived there. The absolute expert in that is Tazmin Belkadi—and she will be for the rest of her life.

5.43 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. It is a particular pleasure, and perhaps a daunting prospect, to follow my friend, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). As Brummies, I feel “friend” is the appropriate word. It is appropriate that I should follow her, because I want to open my remarks by talking about the idea of sentiment and feeling.

My understanding is that some people postulate that there are five stages of grief that people move through, beginning with denial, then anger, and ending eventually in acceptance, although as the hon. Lady said, I understand that that period of acceptance may never come. The feeling may diminish over time, but originally, I was approaching this situation from a much more technical position.

I am a civil engineer by degree and a member of the Chartered Institute of Building, so I was giving some thought to the complexity of the panels, how they may be configured and where else they might be deployed. Of course I would do that because, as well as being a member of the Chartered Institute of Building, I chair the board of the housing association in Walsall. We have 20,000 houses. Following the Grenfell disaster, we had to review our buildings in order to determine whether we had any aluminium composite materials—ACMs—in buildings that we were building or cladding at the time. We determined that, in one case, we had exactly those elements present in one of our buildings. Although it was relatively low rise, we fully appreciated that the people living in that building would be concerned. It was not a question that would be answered by referring them to a technical building regulations document that would allay their fears. They needed reassurance on the basis that a tragedy had happened and they wanted to ensure, beyond reasonable doubt, that they would not be involved in a similar tragedy.

One of the things that helped to move me along massively was the opportunity to meet Grenfell survivors last week. I spoke to Hisam, who had lost six family members. The level of grief is incomprehensible to me. I lost my father 18 months ago. That feels like a dreadful tragedy, but he was an 83-year-old man who had a stroke and we had the opportunity to spend time with him before he passed away. It is not a comparable situation at all. I cannot begin to understand the level of grief experienced by those affected.

While speaking to Hisam, I thought, “Are you reassured with regard to the way the Government are handling this situation?” He explained to me that they wanted to bring family members over from another country to offer support to those who were grieving in this country. The barriers that they faced were incredibly intractable. When finally they were given the opportunity to bring family members over, my understanding is that it was for a two-week period. Sometimes we have processes that people follow by virtue of some sort of diagram or detailed specification, and we lose sight, as an hon. Member said earlier, of the fact that we are talking about people, not processes.
Similarly, Hisam had a child who had been affected and who had missed some time from school. He hoped that some one-to-one education might be provided to help that child catch up with the education he had lost. Originally, that was refused by his school. He needed to move to another school before, eventually, the original school said, “Actually, we could have provided some support after all.”

This is not a technical question about composite materials and ACMs; this is about how we treat people. I see at first hand just how complicated that can be. I used to be the assistant chief executive of the YMCA in Birmingham. We had 300 accommodation units for formerly homeless young people. We had a building that we refurbished that used to be a social care building in Birmingham, so we had an architect design a scheme for us and we refurbished it to create 33 flats. That was two years before Grenfell.

In the light of Grenfell, we went back to the fire safety experts—in fact, we brought in new experts—to review the layout of the building and ensure that we would be able to manage a safe and secure building for the vulnerable and frequently chaotic young people that we serviced. Dreadfully, we found that some items in the layout of the building needed to be addressed in order for us to regain that confidence. That building had been designed and refurbished only two years previously, yet there was an opportunity to reinterpret and be more secure in the judgment that was applied.

I sincerely hope, although I fully appreciate that it is unlikely, that we will be able to help people to move through all those stages of grief and to reach a point where they feel a level of acceptance. As a Government of MPs, not just the governing party, it is beholden on all of us to ensure that we provide that support from a people point of view rather than a process one.

5.49 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). Becoming an MP is daunting, as I see at first hand just how complicated that can be.

I led for the Scottish National party when we debated the scope of the inquiry on the Floor of the House in July. Like others, I said that there should be a panel of advisers to sit with the judge chairing the inquiry. That was one of the demands of BME Lawyers 4 Grenfell, which said there should be a diverse panel. Like others, I followed my speech up with a letter to the inquiry and to the Prime Minister, renewing my request for a diverse panel and adding that the terms of reference should be as broad as those of the Macpherson inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s murder.

To be frank, that seemed to me like a bit of a no-brainer. It is an absolute disgrace that it has taken 10 months and a public petition to wring a concession from the Prime Minister on the appointment of the panel. Like others who have spoken, I am concerned that we do not yet know for certain how many people will be on that panel or what background they will be drawn from. Will the Minister reassure us that the lessons from the Macpherson inquiry, which we were all reminded of by the powerful BBC documentary about Stephen Lawrence’s murder, have indeed been learned?

When I met survivors and bereaved families last week, they said to me that they felt it was “morally reprehensible” that they had had to campaign so hard to get that concession about the panel while they were grieving and trying to put their lives back together. I fully endorse that sentiment.

The Prime Minister has at last listened to the Grenfell victims on that. We now need assurances that she will listen to the inquiry’s recommendations and that there will not be the same fight to ensure that those recommendations are followed, no matter how uncomfortable they may be for those in government and their friends—including their party colleagues—on the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. and learned Lady is making an excellent speech. I wonder whether she has looked at the aftermath of the Manchester Arena attack, which happened around the same time. Mayor Andy Burnham instigated the Kerslake review very quickly, and put the families and their wishes at its heart. That review has already reported, and every single recommendation has been agreed to.

Joanna Cherry: I of course endorse that. I had hoped that the days of the sorts of cover-ups we saw after the Bloody Sunday murders and Hillsborough were over. I think they are, but I understand why the families of the deceased and the survivors of this terrible tragedy still require assurance.

As a lawyer, I feel strongly that there must—not should, but must—be equality of arms at the inquiry. In a previous life at the Scottish Bar, I represented the families of bereaved people at fatal accident inquiries in Scotland, which are a bit like inquests. In general, I found that unless the family of the bereaved had their own counsel, who was well prepared and able to ask difficult questions, the truth was not got at. The state did not seem capable of getting at the truth without the assistance of counsel fighting for the family. But counsel cannot do that with one hand tied behind their back. As others have said, it is very concerning to hear that only a tiny percentage of documents have been disclosed so far. Can the Government guarantee that issues with disclosure will be addressed?

It is a disgrace that promises to rehouse the survivors of this terrible fire have been broken on no fewer than three occasions. I want to say a little about that before I sit down. This tragedy illustrates the wider, very real issue of the neglect of social housing in this country. When I say “this country”, I mean England. I am happy to say that in Scotland, even under the constraints of Tory austerity, we have taken steps to address that by building tens of thousands of new social homes and getting rid of the ridiculous right to buy. Again, I would like to hear assurances from the Government that lessons will be learned from this tragedy and from the council’s failure to rehouse about the need to build social and affordable housing for everyone who lives in this great city, so that they can live in the area they belong to and in their community in affordable, safe housing.
5.54 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I would like to add to the debate by drawing the parallels between the fight of the Grenfell survivors and their families—I know some of them are here today—for truth and justice and the synonymous struggle in my city, Liverpool, of the families of the 96 victims of the Hillsborough disaster, who we can at long last say were unlawfully killed.

The pattern is consistent: powerless people's voices are ignored by those in power. The parallels are everywhere—prior to both disasters, concerns were raised but ignored; after the disasters, powerless families wrestled with authority and the law for truth and justice. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Hillsborough Justice Campaign and the Hillsborough Family Support Group for their role in offering support and solidarity to the survivors and the families of Grenfell. It took them 27 years of tireless campaigning to get the truth about what happened at Hillsborough, and the fight for justice continues to this day. That cannot happen again in this situation.

When bereaved families campaign for justice, they deserve openness, transparency and access to the very same tools that are available to the powerful. That is why we need a Hillsborough law. We need to make it a legal duty for public authorities and public servants to tell the truth and, more importantly, challenge the culture of denial that far too often pervades public institutions.

Although it is a welcome step forward, the appointment of just two panel members to sit alongside the judge in the Grenfell inquiry, and only in phase two, is not enough. Panel members for the families must be brought into the heart of the inquiry right now. The legal representatives of bereaved families must be able to see all the evidence from the start and be allowed to question witnesses at hearings. Surely, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), it is time to call in the commissioners at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. She raised many questions, which I hope the Minister answers.

Right from the start of this process, there have been too many failures to give families and victims the truth and hope they need in the system. If the Grenfell inquiry is to deliver truth and justice, the Grenfell survivors and bereaved families, more than anybody else, must have full confidence in it. Those necessary steps then might just start to build trust, and the Grenfell survivors, families and friends might not be left to climb the same long, obstacle-ridden route that the Hillsborough campaigners have had to travel, but instead be set on a path that leads swiftly to the truth and justice they deserve.

5.58 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): This was of course a tragedy—that goes without saying—but, as was put so powerfully by so many people, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), it was also a national shame. It was a disgrace. That it could have happened in our country is unthinkable. It is a matter of shame that we could not keep those people, many of whom came to our country, safe.

We cannot change the past, and nothing that we say or do in this debate can begin to mitigate or soothe the pain suffered by so many families. It is not intended to.

Our job is to focus like a laser on ensuring that justice is done, and specifically on ensuring that the inquiry is properly constituted. We have to ensure that one dreadful injustice is not replaced by another.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way.

Alex Chalk: No—I will in a second.

Notwithstanding the points powerfully made by the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), I want to pay tribute to the dignity of the community in the face of unimaginable pain. Why? Because at the time it happened, I had a child who was five—I am not unusual; many people in the Chamber will have children—and I remember reading about the case of Isaac Paulos. I cannot say how I would have responded if it had been my child, but I doubt it would have been with such dignity.

I also pay tribute to the media, who have told the stories behind the statistics. I do not know whether anyone else in the Chamber read the story of Marco and Gloria, the Italian couple in their 20s who moved to London to find work as architects. Marco’s family and friends have written a children’s book, turning what happened into a fairytale. It is a story of unbearable poignancy, and just one of many tributes, but we must always remember that these are not statistics; these are people.

[Phil Wilson in the Chair]

That, perhaps, all goes without saying. What is really important is that we add value in the debate. The conclusions drawn must have credibility and legitimacy, so we must strike the right balance, ensuring that the panel that considers these incredibly grave matters is not, on the one hand, unwieldy and slow or, on the other hand, too narrow as to lay itself open to the suggestion of having conclusions arrived at by individual whim.

There are precedents, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the SNP spokesperson on justice affairs, showed. I remember the Hutton inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly. Its advantage, in one view, was that it considered matters quickly, between August 2003 and January 2004. However, as everyone in the Chamber remembers, when it published its findings, it had a credibility issue. We must ensure that we do not repeat that mistake.

Many in the Chamber will have spent time in the criminal courts, and we know that jury verdicts have their currency and legitimacy because juries are derived from the communities they serve. They do justice by reflecting the common sense and shared experience of people in everyday life. That ought to be the bedrock of how we go forward.

From my experience, just an appeal from a magistrates court in a relatively modest case will involve a judge and two lay assessors. That is why it is critical that the other members of the panel, which includes Mr Justice Moore-Bick, have decision-making power. They cannot simply be there to be thought of as making up the numbers; they must bring their weight of experience from the community and shared understanding. By the way, over many centuries lay people have shown themselves well able to analyse complex issues and do justice. To those
people who might suggest we have simply a single judge, it is no answer to say: “Oh, it’s too complicated, too difficult, too technical.” Lay people are capable of understanding—of course they are—as long as matters are properly presented, and I am sure they will be.

Having decided on that format, we must let the tribunal get on. There must be cool, forensic analysis of the evidence so that the answers we get are valid. Whatever the consequences that flow from the inquiry—consequences there will be—they must be built on solid ground. This is our task. This is our duty. We owe the victims nothing less.

Whatever the consequences that flow from the inquiry—

6.3 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am pleased we are debating Grenfell—though it took 150,000 members of the public to bring us here—and I am also glad that we will debate it again on Wednesday, when it is the Labour party’s Opposition day debate subject. Speaking for myself and my constituents in Hammersmith and Shepherd’s Bush, we could debate it every day until we get justice for the bereaved, the dead and the survivors, and real assurance—not just words—that it will never happen again.

As a neighbouring constituency, we experienced Grenfell in three separate ways. First, we experienced it directly. I will never forget waking up at six o’clock that morning when Grenfell was still burning to hear messages on my phone telling me what had happened and watch it. I went down there later that day and spent most of the rest of the week there, to try—I do not think I was very useful—to give some moral support to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She has shown today that she does not really need that. At the time, I think she had been an MP for four days, and she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically, as her speech, which she dealt with it fantastically.

Secondly, it affects us as neighbours. Let me give an example. Our local authority offered help on the day in the form of accommodation and assistance but received no response. We found out later—we were not told—that 52 households were placed in budget hotels in Hammersmith and, nearly a year later, 17 of them are still there. Only six have been made permanent offers of accommodation. Those are real failings, and I cannot help but agree that even now—this is a party political point in a way—I wish the same faces were not still in charge in Kensington town hall, because I do not think they have learnt their lessons.

We have seen instances where 52 households were placed in budget hotels in Hammersmith and, nearly a year later, 17 of them are still there. Only six have been made permanent offers of accommodation. Those are real failings, and I cannot help but agree that even now—this is a party political point in a way—I wish the same faces were not still in charge in Kensington town hall, because I do not think they have learnt their lessons. There is still a role for commissioners if we are actually to take it as seriously as Government Members as well as Opposition Members say they wish to do. There were such singular failures by that authority, and they continue to this day.

Given the limited time, let me talk about two aspects—there are many others, particularly on the physical and mental health of survivors and the wider community—of the wider consequences: social housing and fire safety. Grenfell is the result of a systematic denigration and demoralisation of the social housing sector in this country over 30 years. We experience that in Hammersmith, where insecurity is introduced through short-term tenancies and there no longer being a duty to discharge housing duty in the public sector. Social housing is second or third-class, so the people who lived there were ignored. Their views were not taken into account. What was good enough for them would not have been good enough for other people. That continues to happen.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said, the sale of social housing properties is deliberately making the housing crisis worse, and none are being built. There has been no money for investment in social housing across London since 2010. Then we are surprised that the housing crisis is as bad as it is.

Let us look at fire safety, which has many aspects. I am still waiting for what I was promised six months ago: information on the cause of the fire. We know it started in a particular type of fridge-freezer in a particular flat. That is a common electrical fault that affects hundreds if not thousands of properties across London and the country, yet we know no more about that.

We know there are substantial problems with cladding and insulation, but the response on that has been entirely inadequate, as it has been on means of escape, and on other fire safety measures and advice such as the “stay put” policy. I do not regard the Royal Institute of British Architects as a radical left-wing organisation, but it is a good organisation and it has asked that we use only non-combustible cladding. Is that unreasonable?

Yet I had an instance of a landlord who wanted to replace one type of partially combustible cladding that had failed a test with a type of partially combustible cladding that had passed a test. I am pleased to say that, in response to me and residents protesting, they backed down.

We need buildings with more than one means of escape, but in my constituency buildings on the Grenfell model of design have been proposed and approved since the fire happened. We need sprinkler systems in blocks, and not on the random basis of whether an authority can afford it.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andy Slaughter: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will not, because there is very limited time.

We also need to stop this farce of desktop studies and all of that. It is insulting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said, that the Hackitt inquiry may propose business as usual, and the police inquiry, leaked to the Standard, may say, “It’s all the fault of the workmen who put the stuff up in the wrong way.” I am sorry; the fault will go far, far beyond that. And we are here today because even now the public inquiry has not got the full confidence of the residents. I support a public inquiry, doing a thorough investigation, but there are more urgent matters that need to be dealt with before that, in relation to social housing and fire safety. We need to get on with them. I have heard warm words today, and have been hearing them for the past year. Frankly they do not get us anywhere. What gets us somewhere is action, which is lacking at the moment. I hope we continue to debate the matter every day.

I apologise for the fact that I shall not be here for the winding-up speeches, Mr Wilson. I wanted to speak because of the close relationship I mentioned, but also,
particularly, because I want to say that the debate must continue until the action we require is taken to ensure justice for Grenfell and the safety of the millions of people living in Grenfell-style conditions across this country.

6.10 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Wilson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for securing this important debate.

As a former fire officer with 31 years’ service, I pay tribute to the bereaved and survivors of the Grenfell fire, and their tireless personal campaign for truth and justice. It is only through justice, answers and accountability that we can ensure that nothing like the Grenfell fire ever happens again, as has been said. I am pleased that the Government have at last listened and agreed to appoint additional panel members to the Grenfell Tower inquiry. That must be a welcome step, but I hope it will not be the final one.

I pay tribute to the London fire brigade and other emergency service personnel, whose response to the fire did much, I am sure, to save many lives. I can appreciate what a vast operation it must have been to bring that horrendous fire under control. We must ensure that the Grenfell community receives the support needed to rebuild lives. The previous Housing Secretary was right to denounce Kensington and Chelsea Council’s slow progress on rehousing those who lost their homes in the fire, and I hope that his successor will redouble the Government’s efforts to accelerate the council’s response to those who need new homes.

It is already clear that a series of failings led to the needless, pointless deaths of 72 individuals last June. I understand that in November 2016, the Grenfell Action Group raised concerns about poor fire safety standards at Grenfell and predicted a catastrophe. It is clear that no one listened. The question is: “Who did not listen?” There are ample and tragic precedents for fires spreading rapidly up the exterior of tower blocks, owing to flammable or unsuitable cladding. In May 2017, the London Fire Brigade warned all London councils about the fire safety risk from external cladding, following a fire in Shepherd’s Bush in 2016. Again, the question is who did not listen to the fire brigade.

It is essential that the Grenfell Tower inquiry, and also Dame Judith Hackitt’s independent review of building regulations and fire safety, should get to the truth. They must be bold, transparent and wide-ranging. It is a question of truth and justice for the bereaved and survivors of the Grenfell fire. A weak or diluted inquiry and review would let the Grenfell community down, and lead to vital lessons not being learned.

As we speak here in Westminster Hall, thousands of people living in tower blocks across the United Kingdom are anxious about the safety of their homes. It is imperative that the inquiry and review set an agenda for change that will deliver justice for the Grenfell community, give tower block residents nationwide the safety and dignity they so richly deserve, and remind all authorities of the importance of fire safety. Fire safety should not play second fiddle to decoration and visual appearance, but should be the priority, where people live and work—and, indeed, in some hospitals where I understand there are cladding issues. Lastly, the inquiry and review should make sure that the horrors of the Grenfell fire are never repeated.

I commend South Ayrshire Council, where I was formally a member, which has three tower blocks that are 42 years old, and which 15 years ago took the wise and important decision to retrofit sprinklers.

Finally, perhaps I may take the House back 45 years to August 1973 and the Summerland leisure complex fire on the Isle of Man, where there were 50 fatalities. It was a tragedy and I am sure that it haunts many to this day. In his book on that event, Dr Ian Phillips described it as “one of the most forgotten and trivialised disasters in the post war history of the British Isles”.

Neither Summerland nor Grenfell resembled their original designs and specifications at the time of the tragic fires. In the case of Summerland, that was because it was heavily modified—those concerned changed their mind while it was being built. In the case of Grenfell it was because of the recent refurbishment and modifications, and the failure to listen to residents’ concerns. At Summerland the fire spread rapidly, aided by the poor fire resistance of Galbestos cladding and Oroglas sheeting that formed part of the walls and roof of the seven-storey leisure complex. The nation has clearly never paid heed to the Summerland fire tragedy. We must pay heed to Grenfell.

6.16 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I want to speak about my experience of meeting Grenfell survivors in Speaker’s House last week. I spoke to people who had lost family, and was impressed by the dignity of their reaction. I spoke to a man called Antonio, who had survived the Grenfell Tower fire. Having lived to tell the tale, he wanted to speak to me about his experience. I hope that the House will bear with me as I describe something of what he went through.

Antonio was nodding off when he suddenly got a text from a family member telling him that the tower was on fire. He was on the 10th floor and had not realised it was on fire, but when he looked out of the window he saw thick black smoke circulating outside. He was not sure what to do, and decided to try to escape down the main stairwell. As he tried to do that, he realised that the smoke was so thick that there was no way he could survive. He said he felt he would have choked if he had gone down the stairs, so he went back to his room.

Honor. Members will be able to imagine Antonio’s agony while he waited there. He said he thought about whether he would ever see his friends and family again, so he tried once more to go down the main stairwell and escape from the burning tower. Once again he saw the thick smoke and realised there was no way he could go down the stairs. He decided once again to go back to his room—unsure this time whether he would make it out.

Then, at 6 am, our firefighters came and saved Antonio. They took him outside and he was reunited with his son, whom he lives with on the 10th floor. He told me that after the tragedy and upheaval he had faced, and the dreadful wait in that room, unsure whether he would live or die, he was put in a temporary hotel. He asked the council when he would get a permanent home and was promised that it would take three weeks.

Andy Slaughter
Those three weeks came and went and Antonio was not placed anywhere. He was passed from pillar to post, hotel to hotel and temporary accommodation. Then he was promised that he and his son would get a permanent home by Christmas. The House needs to bear in mind that Antonio and his son were not even together but were in separate temporary accommodation; but he looked forward to being with his son in December. Christmas came and went and he was still not placed in a permanent home. He went back to the council, which said, "If you give us six months we will make sure that you are placed in a permanent home.”

Not only had Antonio had to suffer the fire, and the loss of friends, families and neighbours; he also did not have a permanent home to go to. That is why I appeal to Ministers today to say that we have already failed the Grenfell survivors, and the people who did not survive, once, and that we cannot fail them again by not giving them permanent homes. I make a plea for the council to be held to account on the promises it made, and for the promises of permanent homes to be carried out. The statistics about one in three households not getting permanent accommodation, and a further third being in hotels, can wash over the people who read them, but does not have permanent accommodation leads to the realisation of the impact on their lives.

In the time remaining to me, I want to talk about Richard Stone, who has been mentioned a few times. He was an advisor to the judge in the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. I have known him since I was a teenager. The inquiry dominated a large part of Richard’s life. I see him often and he has spoken to me about it many times in the past 20 years. He has said that in his mind the inquiry served a few purposes. The first was justice—justice for the family of Stephen Lawrence, but also for all the young black men out there who had faced institutional racism. In the same way, this inquiry must be about justice—not only for the people who died in Grenfell Tower and the families and friends who are still mourning their loss, but for all those families who live in high-rise buildings in London and around the country, and who feel so unsafe.

Anecdotally, I have had Bangladeshi families from across the country emailing me. Many hon. Members will have heard the tragic story of two Bangladeshi young people who refused to leave their elderly parents in Grenfell Tower. Their elderly parents could not move and they did not want to leave them, so they died along with them. Bangladeshi families who live in tower blocks have been emailing me to say that they feel unsafe.

The second thing Richard Stone keeps coming back to is how the inquiry must look into the institutional and systemic failures in society. The Stephen Lawrence inquiry was about institutional racism; here, it is about our collective failure to make people feel safe in tower blocks and the fact that we have not tested the claddings in tower blocks and private blocks across the country.

In Camden, we did test one of our high-rise blocks. There was immense disruption to residents, but the council took them out and replaced the cladding. It cost £40 million, but you cannot put a price on people’s lives, and now people are back there. We know that we caused immense disruption to the residents, but it was the right thing to do, because if we want to address this failure, we have to test the cladding in all tower blocks and not just in a few.

Finally, Richard Stone comes back to one thing over and over when he talks about the Stephen Lawrence inquiry: that there is no point in conducting an inquiry such as this if it is just about giving politicians a pat on the back, saying we are doing it because we have to, making ourselves look good or getting votes. The reason why we do it is that we want to address the injustice of what has happened. If the Government do not commit now to implementing the report’s findings, there is no point in having an inquiry. The whole point of implementing the findings of a report is to show that all lives matter, that black lives matter and that, whether people live in a mansion in Chelsea or a tower block in Kensington, all lives are equal for us politicians in this room.

6.21 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I absolutely agree with everything my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) has just said. I rise to say that we in this place should be ashamed at the lack of progress that has been made to date. Saying that it can never happen again and saying to the survivors, “We understand and we’re here to support you” cannot just be warm words.

Everything that Grenfell United has had to do to date should make us feel ashamed. The fact that there was a bell-mourning service for Big Ben but not to mourn the lives of people who have died, the fact that it had to ask for a service to be held to remember those who lost their lives, the fact that it had to set up an e-petition to say, “Let’s make this inquiry fair and independent”—all that is absolutely disgusting. We should be ashamed.

We have had a promise after promise, so why, 11 months on, are families still not housed? We had a chance to meet and speak to the Grenfell survivors at Speaker’s House, but why did they have to ask whether they could come along and share their experiences—share with us that they had to escape from this and the lives that have been lost? Still we have questions about whether it should be now or phase two. That is completely unacceptable.

I feel that we are elected to this place to be a voice for those we represent. We are elected to speak to those in power and to make change come about for those we are elected to serve. The fact that they have had to fight—fight when they should have time to grieve and to be there with their loved ones, fight for accommodation, fight for their voices to be heard, fight for an inquiry, fight for people to be put on a panel—is completely unacceptable. I rise to say, in this short period of time, that we can do more, we can do better and, if we want this never to happen again, we must implement the recommendations that are made.

If recommendations such as those made after the Lakanal House fire had been implemented, we would not be in this position today and people would not have needlessly lost their lives. I ask—I implore—the Government: you can do something. Do not sit back and say warm words about how this could be different, how you care and how you want this never to happen again. Do something.
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I am honoured to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) and I agree with every word she has said. Many people here have spoken about the dignity with which the victims and survivors of Grenfell have spoken, but why should they have to hold it together in trying to persuade this place to take action? Why do they not have the time to grieve for the people they have lost, their families, friends and loved ones? To hold it together, to come to Speaker’s House, to persuade and fight for this Government to act—that should not have to be the case, and I am very sorry it has been.

I will make two practical points and one broader point. First is an issue that many hon. Members have spoken about: the appalling lack of action on rehousing those who have lost their homes in Grenfell. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) pointed out that 72 households are still living in hotel rooms and 64 are still in temporary accommodation. Even worse than that is the fact that over half of those families have accepted permanent accommodation, but they cannot move into it because it is not ready.

That is 68 houses. Are you telling me that with all the money, influence and power not just of the council, but of the national Government, we could not get those homes ready for people to move into? Where there is a will, there is a way. The problem is that there does not appear to be the will to sort out those 68 homes for people who have already accepted that accommodation. What is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea doing? How hard can it be? I hope the Minister will answer that question at the end of the debate.

Secondly, I follow up on the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) made about the children who have been affected—who have lost not just their parents, but their sisters, their brothers, their cousins, their friends and their neighbours. This has affected the whole community in that area. I do not believe that either the council or the Government have understood just how widely and deeply it has affected people.

I have heard from the Grenfell families their real concern that, when children wanted to go to visit the tower because it would help them to grieve and to say goodbye, they were told they could not go because it was not safe. They were not asking for the children to go inside, just to go and look and say goodbye, and to feel close to the people they loved. The state knows best—but it did not in this case.

On the point about education, I am deeply concerned that families have had to fight to get the catch-up help they need for their children. We have to put that extra investment into those children, so that they can live as normal a life as possible, fulfil their hopes, dreams and potential, and become the people they want to be. I ask the Minister to look at that again, too.

Thirdly, on mental health, I know that many child and adolescent mental health services advisers have been put in place, but my concern is over the much longer term. If someone ends up needing a physical operation as a child, on their heart or their limbs, they get follow-up support throughout their life, because we know that those physical impacts early on have a big impact later in life. Where is that help and support for the mental health of those children in the longer term?

My final point, which many other hon. Members have made, is that there is nothing—nothing—to be feared from putting the families at the heart of this process. In fact, quite the reverse: there is everything to be gained, because we will not get to the bottom of what happened or have a proper plan to put things right in future unless the families are front and centre. Do not repeat the mistakes of the past. We have heard from many hon. Members about Hillsborough. We know what went wrong there. Do not repeat those mistakes. It is actions, not words, that matter. I hope the Government will act.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank all the people who signed the petition, which has given us the chance to put our demands to the Government on behalf of the bereaved people of Grenfell Tower and the wider community in Kensington. It is always people outside this place rather than Members themselves that push it to progress.

To be honest, like many others Members have said, it should not be this difficult to secure a debate to convey to the Government the demands of survivors. It should not have taken a petition or the precious energies of campaign groups for those to be heard. Everything I have seen about this horrific incident shows that that is part of a pattern. The people in Grenfell Tower were not, and are still not, listened to. They were not listened to before their homes were destroyed and they were not listened to in the immediate aftermath, nor in the months that followed.

It is clear that the lives of Grenfell Tower residents were placed at risk, not only because of the refurbishment—residents warned that it was shoddy and that corners were being cut—but because of the ongoing management of the block. I cannot seem to get over the fact that residents repeatedly warned that the building was unsafe. They produced a long list of issues that needed to be addressed, yet nobody listened. I was told outside that there was a group that blogged about their concerns for five years before the fire. Imagine the worry of someone going to bed each night knowing that, although they had done everything within their power to keep their family safe, their home was not safe and that nobody would listen.

Why is it only when death occurs on a huge scale that these people’s calls become significant or newsworthy? What is it about our society and the system we live in that judges working class people’s voices as so meaningless that they are only given weight and validity or heard on their death? Even that has been a fight. I would like for us to consider for one second why the people of Grenfell Tower have been treated if they were the wealthiest residents of Kensington and Chelsea. In fact, would this have happened at all if they were the wealthiest residents?

Why is it that the Government and Kensington and Chelsea council do not just give these people every single thing that they want without a fight? Why is it taking a battle to get a process that residents have confidence in, and that they believe will deliver justice...
and truth? When confidence is so low—understandably, after everything we have heard today—how can Ministers not see that what they think is appropriate in this situation is actually irrelevant? The only thing that is relevant, and the only experts, as has been said, are the residents of Grenfell Tower and the surrounding communities.

I do not believe that any Member here has ever experienced their home being burned to the ground or their greatest concerns being ignored by the state, or has ever had to rely completely on the state to get them and their family out of a hotel room and into a home. Why do these people, who know so much about their own situation, have to go through such a battle, on top of their grief and having to rebuild their lives? That is against the backdrop of deregulation, cost cutting, gentrification and the demolition of democratically controlled local housing, and of complex, distant and unaccountable tenant management organisations and cuts to fire safety inspectors. My own area of North West Durham is a long way from Grenfell Tower, but we have lost 50% of our fire safety inspectors since 2010. We do not have great tower blocks like Grenfell Tower, but we have huge concerns over that.

On top of that, the demands of generations of people have not been listened to. Those demands are modest, to say the least. What they ask for must be granted by the Government and the council. If not, the Government and the council will let those people down and, I believe, will re-traumatise them. That would only confirm what working-class people up and down the country have come to believe: the state and the Government actively work against their interests, even when they are in the most difficult of circumstances.

All they ask for is an independent expert panel, akin to the one afforded to the Macpherson inquiry, and that that panel is representative. The two members announced on Friday is a start, but it is not enough, and it should not have taken all this time to do such a simple thing. They also want a guarantee that all residents will have a permanent home by the one-year anniversary. If that does not happen, action should be taken against Kensington and Chelsea Council—action that is proportionate to the failings of the people responsible for Grenfell Tower.

As has been said by many Members, the deadline to re-house survivors has been moved time and again, as if it does not matter at all to the council or the Government. People are still living in hotel rooms, their lives on hold. I believe that, if there was enough care, they would have permanent homes, and this bureaucracy would not be preventing them from moving on. The hundreds of times we have returned to our homes since the Grenfell Tower fire is a luxury not afforded to those people who, through no fault of their own, lost everything on that night. A year to rectify that is simply not good enough.

The bereaved people’s legal representatives should be able to see all the evidence—from the start of the inquiry, and should have access to all the documents relating to the inquiry. They should be given whatever they need to properly represent their clients. Finally, we want a commitment from the Government that they will implement in full all the inquiry’s recommendations, and not pick and choose those that are most convenient.

I fully support the demands of the people of Grenfell Tower and Kensington. I hope the Government will do the right thing and announce today that they will grant all those people’s wishes. What a terrible disaster in the history of our nation. Living in one of the richest countries in the world means absolutely nothing if those riches are diverted from communities. As somebody—I wish I knew his name; I will find it out—so eloquently said at the protest outside, “The Government need to defend, represent and listen to the people and not the market—for once.”

6.36 pm

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I fully agree with the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) that the time for fine words and sympathies is up.

However, I must admit that I was fortunate enough to meet some of the survivors and the bereaved from Grenfell Tower last week. It was a most moving experience, and I admire the courageous individuals who have experienced terrible tragedy and are now fighting so that a tragedy like Grenfell will never happen again. It is shocking that justice has not been given to them without a fight. For years, the residents of Grenfell Tower were disregarded and ignored, and they were failed by those whose duty it was to protect them, yet they still need to fight.

The only acceptable outcome now is that the Government listen to every concern of the victims of Grenfell Tower and commit fully to implementing the outcomes of the public inquiry. I echo everything that hon. Members have said on that. The Prime Minister’s announcement last week to accept two extra members on to the panel was welcome, but it has to be properly seen through—with the full agreement of the residents at all stages—and increased if necessary.

Without pre-empting the outcome of the inquiry, the lessons of the Grenfell tragedy are very clear. We must ensure that tenants and residents across the UK are listened to when they raise concerns regarding the quality of their housing. To ensure that residents are listened to, there must be clear channels of accountability. The Government need to improve awareness of how tenants can raise complaints effectively, and there should be means of redress when action is not taken.

I am encouraged by Dame Hackitt’s interim report, which criticises the systemic lack of responsibility and enforcement within building regulations. The current system is completely broken, with builders and developers specifying and then signing off their own work. That cannot be right. Currently, decisions are made that prioritise price at the expense of people’s wellbeing and, ultimately, their lives. That cannot be right.

Grenfell Tower was a symptom of the failure of successive Governments to invest in quality social housing. We cannot leave social housebuilding and maintenance to the private sector. Until the Government take radical action in building the quality and quantity of social homes that this country so desperately needs, many of the problems highlighted by the Grenfell tragedy will remain.

The terrible tragedy of last year must serve as a call to action. We must fight for tenants’ rights, wholesale reform of building regulations and investment in social housing. Most importantly, we must continue to speak up in the House for the victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. One in three Grenfell households are still living in hotel rooms, and a further third in temporary accommodation. More than half the Grenfell families
who are still in hotels or temporary accommodation have accepted permanent accommodation, but have been unable to move in because of council delays. That is not acceptable. The tragedy of Grenfell Tower must never happen again, but the timid and inadequate response of Kensington and Chelsea Council is not good enough. We must call for action to be taken. The time for fine words is up.

6.40 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to follow all the fine contributions to this debate. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on securing the debate and on reading into the record the names of those we lost. It is very important that he did so. I know so little about who those people were, but I hope that in due course we will all come to know much more about them. It was an honour to meet relatives of the deceased in Speaker’s House—I think we all felt that. I am sure that we will come to know them very well in this place.

I am the Member of Parliament for Wirral South, but from 2006 to 2010 I was the councillor in the London Borough of Southwark for the Brunswick Park ward, which contained the Sceaux Gardens estate, in the middle of which was Lakanal House. On 3 July 2009, Lakanal went up in flames. I can see that block in my mind’s eye as real as if it were that day. Six people, including a one-month-old baby, died in that disaster, and the inquest found that those were unnecessary and preventable deaths. We have heard people in this debate say that the Grenfell fire must never happen again. To me, those words are meaningless, because it has happened again—it is happening again. I saw Grenfell on the television, and to me it was alarmingly familiar. I have seen what the families have gone through since the day of the Grenfell Tower disaster. That, too, is alarmingly familiar, because unfortunately neither the disaster nor the secondary tragedy of the Government’s response to the disaster needed to happen.

Other hon. Members have talked persuasively about the recommendations following the Lakanal fire. It is a matter of great grief to all of us who were involved with Lakanal that the recommendations and the conclusions of the inquest were not progressed with more rigour. But there is something else. The Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, commissioned Bishop James Jones to report on the experience of the Hillsborough families. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) has talked about how the disaster needed to happen.

The third issue is the Hillsborough law proposals, which were first put to this House by my friend, Mayor Andy Burnham. Those proposals include reform of legal aid so that we get the parity of arms to which the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), alluded. The importance of that is absolutely clear. I worry greatly that we will again get into a situation in which families are worrying about legal costs and whether their legal advice will be sustained, while the state has all before it—whatever expensive QC it needs. Let us prevent that from happening now before the problem arises.

Fourthly, and most important to me, is a duty of candour. This is not party political. The Government have already implemented a duty of candour for NHS staff, but I want to change the situation in every council and every Government Department up and down the country, where people are told, “Don’t admit you were wrong. Don’t accept responsibility. Don’t give the information out. Don’t make it publicly available. Because you will be liable.” I want the lawyers to say to them, “You know what? You’ll be liable if you don’t tell the truth. You’ll be liable if you don’t give the information out.” Trust the public.

The Government, as I have said, accept the policy for the NHS. Let us just make it real for every other representative of the state in our country, because in the end the central question that we have to ask ourselves is this: what kind of country do we want to live in? Who are we really as British people? Are we the kind of people who see grieving families and want to worry about whether we might be responsible, or are we, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, the kind of people who want to reach out and help? I thought that our country had changed radically since 1989. I worry that I was wrong.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Before we hear from the Front Benchers, I say to them that I would like to leave two or three minutes for Paul Scully to sum up the debate.

6.47 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I rise to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party, which is the third party in this Chamber and the principal party in Scotland, but I think I speak on behalf of the overwhelming majority of people in Scotland when I place on the record our support for the Grenfell campaigners in trying to get to the bottom of what was visited upon them.
We watched in horror at the scenes unfolding on our television screens on 14 June last year, conscious of the unimaginable terrors that were being visited upon the people trapped inside Grenfell Tower. In the months that have passed since then, that sense of horror has given way to a sense of solidarity, and a desire to stand with the people of Grenfell as they try to get the answers to questions that they so richly deserve. I associate my party and myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), and I take her advice about how it is very easy in a debate on this matter—indeed, we have witnessed people doing this—to get platitudinous in describing the campaigners. I do want to make one point, though. I have observed how the Grenfell campaigners have prosecuted their case, and it seems to me that they have a level of integrity that is head and shoulders above those from whom they are seeking redress, and that is highly commendable.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, most hon. Members here who also represent urban constituencies were concerned about another question as well. Could it happen again and could it happen in their area? That preoccupied many of us. In my own city of Edinburgh, there are 44 high-rise tower blocks managed by the local authority and another 80 in the private sector. I commend the work of the officers of the city council and the fire service, who very swiftly did a review. It was not a desk review but an inspection on the ground, and it concluded that the materials that had been used in the Grenfell cladding were not in use in my city, for which I am grateful.

I am grateful also that the Scottish Government have undertaken a review of safety regulations in tower blocks, trying to improve on the 2005 fire regulations, which are already more stringent than those that apply in the rest of the United Kingdom. I cannot be satisfied, however, that it will not happen again—that would be complacent—until we know the outcome of this inquiry, until the questions about how and why this happened, and what needs to be done to ensure it does not happen again, are put in the public sphere. That is why I support those campaigners in fighting for the widest and most effective inquiry possible.

I want to address the points that the petitioners have made. A lot of people have talked about the welcome news that the Prime Minister has decided to widen the leadership of the inquiry process and appoint advisers. Like others, however, I am bemused that it has taken months of campaigning, parliamentary debates and 150,000 people signing an e-petition to grant what is surely the most reasonable request in these circumstances. I say to Government Ministers—I invite them to respond—that it is critical who these appointees are. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that whoever is put in the position to advise and support the chair of this inquiry not only must have empathy with the survivors of Grenfell and the relatives of those who paid the ultimate price in this tragedy, to understand and know what those people are going through, but must have the confidence of the Grenfell community. If the Government allow the inquiry to go ahead without those leading it having the confidence of the people at the centre of this matter, it will be stillborn and we will repeat the circuitous history of previous inquiries in this country. We have been down that path before. This is an opportunity to get it right.

The petitioners’ second point is about what is happening right now to the people who survived. I find it unbelievable that nearly a year later there are so many people languishing in temporary accommodation, who have not yet been given a proper, permanent roof over their heads after undergoing this horror. I just do not understand it. I say to those who mentioned the unfortunate term “political football”, I am not making a political football of this, but to pretend that this can be divorced from policy and political considerations is naivety bordering on the irresponsible. Questions have to be asked of the people who are in charge of public administration in Kensington and Chelsea about what is happening.

The historical context is apt here. It is no coincidence that Kensington and Chelsea has always been one of the boroughs in the country with the lowest proportion of public housing. I will put this in words that the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) might agree with. I do not want to make this a party political football, but let us put it this way. It is clear that the majority of people who have the fortune to live in Kensington and Chelsea are relatively well off and content. Public administration in the borough is being executed by, and in the interests of, those people, who are well off and relatively content. The needs of those who are at the other end of this unequal society are not being adequately listened to and put into public policy. I cannot see any other reason why these people would have not been rehoused almost a year later.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned the right to buy, which is not irrelevant either. I do not condemn or criticise the people who bought their council house over the last 20 years, but I condemn the people who sold it to them, because they did so without any regard for the consequences of that policy. The consequence of it now is that there is not enough housing to go around. When a catastrophe such as this happens, the public authority is unable to respond to it. That is not good enough.

I wondered just how difficult rehousing those people would be, even if we had to rely on the public sector. I have asked colleagues, “Why don’t they just buy some houses in the private sector?” That is what local authorities used to do. It was explained to me how difficult and expensive it all was. I checked, therefore, on the way to this debate. It is true that some of the house prices in Kensington and Chelsea border on the obscene. There are dozens of places available to buy in excess of £20 million. But I put into the filter on rightmove.co.uk this question: how many family-sized properties—two bedrooms or greater—are there today in Kensington and Chelsea on the market at a price tag of less than £1 million, which is a reasonable price for central London? The answer is that today in Kensington and Chelsea there are 512 properties on sale, which could house these families, so I suggest that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea goes and buys some of these houses and moves these people into them.

The question, however, is for Ministers, because this has been going on for nearly a year. We need to hear that Ministers are prepared to set a deadline on the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, by which time it must provide a plan for the permanent rehousing of every one of the Grenfell survivors. If that deadline is not met, it is incumbent on the Government to take
[Tommy Sheppard]

the matter into their own hands and ensure that this is delivered. They can no longer hide behind the inadequate excuse of leaving it to the local authority.

The petitioners’ final point is about the need to listen to the inquiry’s conclusions. I do not want to pre-empt them, but I seek assurances from the Minister in two regards. First, if the inquiry demonstrates that there is a need to change policy on housing provision, financing and regulation in this country, will he commit to bringing forward legislation to enact those recommendations? Secondly, if the inquiry finds, as many suspect it will, that the real problem is not in the original construction of the tower block, but in the re-cladding that took place between 2014 and 2016, and the decisions that were made, which arguably put price above the health, safety and wellbeing of individuals, then I want an assurance from the Government that those responsible will face the consequences of their actions, and that they will be charged and subject to criminal proceedings, if it is relevant to do so. I hope the Government will give us those assurances.

To conclude, the one good thing in all this is that, because of the experience that these people have been through, we have an organised community that is sceptical and critical, and which will keep an eye on this inquiry, and come back to us in this place and get our support anytime that they need it. Not only do they speak for the people of Grenfell; the actions they are taking to ensure that this inquiry works will benefit all the people of this country.

6.57 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. We are having this debate for one reason only, namely the tireless campaigning by the bereaved families and the survivors, and the overwhelming public support they attracted as a result. The e-petition, signed by over 150,000 people, forced this debate, and we should be clear that it forced the Prime Minister’s welcome shift from her previous position on Friday, when she granted a panel of some description in the Grenfell inquiry.

That is testament to the efforts of the bereaved families and survivors, but after everything they have been through, they should never have had to wage such a campaign. Far too often in this country, politics seem to act as a dam holding justice back, rather than helping justice to flow. Hillsborough, Stephen Lawrence and Bloody Sunday are all examples of when the state did not use its great powers to deliver truth and justice, but instead blocked truth and justice for years and years. In all of those cases, the state was accused of a cover-up by those affected. Distrust was sown. We cannot allow Grenfell to join that list.

Race, class and power are at the heart of this. Justice delayed is justice denied, so it is essential that the Grenfell inquiry gets it right first time, but it has got off to a rocky start. Most people will find it frankly unacceptable that to get justice, the bereaved and survivors of Grenfell have had to hold marches and organise rallies, petitions and lobbies, when they are still in shock about the horrific events that they witnessed and lived through, when they have lost everything, and when they are still trying to rebuild their lives and secure a home, as we have heard.

Friday’s decision to grant a panel of some description can be a stepping stone to justice, but for that to be the case, we need to be clear that it is not the end point, but a staging post. It needs the Government to draw the wider lesson. It must win the hearts and minds of those affected by the Grenfell fire.

A public inquiry aims to get to the truth as a key step to delivering justice. No inquiry can ever achieve that if it does not have the trust of those directly affected, and no inquiry can ever assume that it will automatically have that trust, nor can it demand it. Trust must always be earned. That is why the demands for an inquiry panel were important, and why it became a totemic issue for the full confidence of the bereaved, the survivors and the wider public.

From the start, survivors said that they wanted a panel to help to tackle the obvious distrust. It was always a reasonable demand. As we have heard, the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, which marked a watershed in uncovering institutional racism, had a similar type of panel overseeing it. As we have also heard, that panel reflected a wealth of relevant experience. That diversity was its strength, as Lord Macpherson later stated. That legitimacy led to calls for widespread change, which must be replicated with the Grenfell inquiry, but the demand for Grenfell was ignored, misrepresented and then denied. That further damaged trust and confidence.

Trust would have been stronger had the panel been granted when the demand was first made 10 months ago. Trust would have been stronger had the Prime Minister not waited until just days before Christmas to formally reject the panel. Now it has been granted, however, it needs to be a sign that the Government are going to behave differently. The ball is in the court of the Government, and specifically of the Prime Minister, who is the Minister nominated under the Inquiries Act 2005.

The Government have taken a step in the right direction, but lots of questions remain unanswered. I will put those questions to the Minister, and hopefully he can give me guarantees. I will also write to him later and, with the inquiry set to restart very soon, I hope that I will get an answer within seven days. As mentioned earlier, on Wednesday, there is an Opposition day debate on Grenfell and housing. If we do not get answers quickly, there will be an Opposition day debate on the inquiry itself.

Much of the discussion has focused on the panel, but I want to make an important clarification. We are here to debate not just the panel, but the whole petition launched by affected families and backed by 150,000 signatories. That petition is entitled, “Call on PM to take action to build public trust in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry”. As well as a panel, it asks that,

“Legal representatives of bereaved families see all evidence from the start & are allowed to question witnesses at the hearings”.

I would argue that we have had a partial response to one of the petition’s demands. We need answers to much more. Why is the panel going to sit only in phase two of the inquiry? What if the panel members need to revisit issues in phase one? Where are we with the second demand in the public petition about survivors’ lawyers having all the evidence from the start? Just a tiny fraction of the material has been disclosed to lawyers so far. Where are we with lawyers being able to cross-examine
the witnesses, as happened in the Lawrence inquiry? The families cannot be expected to negotiate with the Prime Minister through public campaigns and petitions, so we need to know.

What formal mechanisms are there for bereaved family members and survivors to request more panel members? What formal mechanisms are there to guarantee the ongoing confidence of survivors and of the bereaved family members in the inquiry? How do they make formal requests and what is the formal public way of responding? We need greater clarity from the Government on all those things. As one family member said to me: “We must do what is necessary, not what is convenient.” There must be no repeat of the delays and denials we have seen in recent months. The Government must meet all the demands of survivors and of the bereaved.

In bringing my remarks to a close, I will highlight a key flaw in the current inquiry process. We are relying on the Prime Minister, who is the Minister nominated under the 2005 Act, as I mentioned, to do the right thing, but surely justice should not be about the conscience or whims of one person, however powerful. Surely justice should be a right. That is why I urge the Government to press on with the Hillsborough law, which the bereaved Hillsborough families advanced as a way of preventing what happened to them from happening to others. I hope the Government will provide parliamentary time and support for the passage of such a Bill into law.

Martin Luther King once said: “Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.” We need to ensure that our laws serve justice and are not seen as a block to justice.

7.7 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Chamber has been packed with MPs from all sides, as it was when many of us gathered together two days after the disaster in this very room, frankly stunned by the enormity of what had happened in north Kensington and what was unfolding before our eyes. Some MPs have not had an opportunity to speak. Next to me is the Minister for the Constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on setting the tone so well at the start of the debate by reading out in such a poignant way the names of the 71 precious lives lost. He was quite right to add to that list the name of Maria Del Pilar Burton, who very sadly died earlier this year.

When we met almost 11 months ago, we were reeling. This afternoon, we meet clearer about what we are dealing with. In terms of loss of life, we are dealing with the worst disaster to hit this country since Hillsborough. We are dealing with a disaster that should not have happened. Those 71 precious lives should not have been lost that night. The lives of their friends and families should not have been torn apart by trauma and grief. More than 300 people should not have been made homeless—most of them losing all their possessions. Local residents who did not live in the tower should not have been traumatised by what they saw and heard that night, which will stay with them forever.

First responders have not been mentioned so far, but police, fire and ambulance staff should not have had to face what they had to face that night to keep the peace and save lives, often at huge risk to themselves. Grenfell will always be part of their lives.

Since then, of course, thousands of people have stepped up to try to help, either because they are part of the extraordinary voluntary effort or because it is their job and their duty. Grenfell will always be part of our lives. Of course, for all of us, as expressed so powerfully this afternoon and before in Parliament and through the media, there remains profound shock and horror across the country that such a disaster could happen in modern Britain.

Given all that, we cannot put everything right, but as a country we can and must do at least three things. First, we must honour the dead in the most appropriate way. I thank those people—many of them are sitting in the Public Gallery this afternoon—who have worked with us on the first steps of a process that I believe will lead to a beautiful and appropriate memorial on the site of the tower, which is a journey with the community at the driving wheel and the voice of the bereaved carrying the most weight.

Secondly, we must do everything we can to help the bereaved, the survivors and the traumatised residents to heal, and to rebuild their lives and—as far as is possible—their hope. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) was absolutely right that that must be done in a way that is human at all times and not bureaucratic and remote. Have we succeeded in that fully? No. But that must be our continued aim. For the homeless, that means settling in new homes that they like and that they feel safe in.

Can I expect the House to have full understanding of all the underlying complexity? No, of course not. It is absolutely right to express frustration, rage and disappointment at the pace of progress. In fact, the Government have put on the record our profound dissatisfaction with the pace of progress.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that, when we started this process, of the category A households—residents of the tower and the walk—210 needed to be rehoused, and we are now in a situation where the number of households in emergency accommodation who have still not accepted offers is down to nine. That is nine households too many and nine households that I am personally committed to trying to sit down with and meet personally, to understand how they are feeling, but it would be wrong to say that no progress has been made or that no action has been taken.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I will give way to the hon. Lady, who did not have a chance to speak earlier.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for giving way. Nobody here can doubt his commitment, but he has just said that the Government have put on the record
their frustration. Can the Government put some resources behind resolving this question, so that we do not have to listen to more stories of people who have been through something horrific and are still without settled accommodation?"

**Mr Hurd:** With respect to the hon. Lady, it is not an issue of resources; there is no shortage of resource that has been directed to this problem. If she happens to drill down into the underlying details of every single case, she will see that it is not an issue of resource. It is an issue of a deep underlying complexity about some of the things that are still getting in the way of a victim of the disaster finding the home that they feel is right for them and that they feel secure in, which ultimately is all that matters.

Last but not least—it is the theme of this debate—we must deliver truth, we must deliver accountability and we must deliver justice, because we must ensure that such a disaster never happens again, so that no family has to go through this hell.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I suggest to the Minister that it is absolutely vital that victims, the families of victims and the wider community have some faith in the process in terms of finding the truth, and that we as a Government do all we can to give buy-in and credibility to the people, who are the most important piece of this whole problem and tragedy.

**Mr Hurd:** I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. I have said it before and I will say it again: I spend a large part of my working day trying to do exactly that. We have to deliver truth, accountability and justice, not least because without those things the victims cannot heal and we cannot heal after the trauma of this terrible disaster.

I believe that the Prime Minister did speak for the whole country when she said last June that the public inquiry must

"get to the truth about what happened and who was responsible, and to provide justice for the victims and their families who suffered so terribly."—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 168.]

This debate is not about the destination; it is about how we get there in a way that those who are the most important and most affected by the disaster feel comfortable with.

I join with others, notwithstanding the entreaties of the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), in paying my own personal tribute to the highly dignified way in which the victims of this disaster, not least as represented by Grenfell United, have resisted—let us be frank about this—attempts at the start of this process to agitate and cause unrest. They have resisted that and said, “That is not for us. We are going to conduct ourselves with dignity and peace. We are going to march silently and we are going to make our case. And we are going to make an argument.” They have won that argument. I have sat alongside the Prime Minister as she has listened to many of the people sitting at the back of Westminster Hall today while they have made their argument. They have won that argument, and I congratulate them on that.

Many people have argued, “Oh well, this is a straightforward thing. She should have given it a long time ago.” It is not straightforward. Changing the structure of a public inquiry is a big deal. It is a big decision. Let us be frank as well: there are also good reasons to set up an inquiry and to put it in the hands of a single judge, one with a tremendous reputation for integrity and forensic ability. There are good reasons for doing that, but the Prime Minister made it very clear that she would keep that decision under review, and she has done exactly that. She has the power to review the make-up of the inquiry panel at any time during the inquiry and she has done that. She has listened very carefully to the argument; as I said, I have sat next to her as she has done that and I know exactly the demeanour that she took into those meetings. However, she has also looked at the scope of phase two, and recognised its growth and complexity.

Phase two of the inquiry will look at original design, construction and subsequent modifications of the tower; the inspections carried out during the modifications; the governance and management of the tower; the communications between the residents of the tower and the council and the tenant management organisation before the fire; what fire advice was given to the residents; how central and local Government responded to recommendations relevant to the risk; and how central and local government and the tenant management organisation responded to the aftermath of the fire. As we get into this process, there are more and more suggestions about other things that need to be looked at in phase two.

The Prime Minister has looked at all that and combined it with listening to the arguments made by Grenfell United and others, which are rooted in their strong contention that the process needed to carry the trust of the most important people in it: those people most directly affected by the disaster. She has taken her decision.

I reassure the House that there is no intention of hanging around in identifying the two other panel members that the Prime Minister has agreed to. All Members will recognise that time needs to be given to making sure that we get this absolutely right in bringing to the table the right combination of experience and expertise to fill any perceived gaps, so that those individuals carry the confidence of the community. That is absolutely fundamental to the Prime Minister and my undertaking is to continue working with the community. I am sure that Sir Martin understands that completely as well. The intention is to get on with identifying and appointing the panel members in consultation with Sir Martin as soon as possible.

The petition also considers that, to secure trust in the inquiry, legal representatives of the bereaved families and survivors should be able to see all the evidence from the start and be allowed to question witnesses at the hearings. For the information of the House, the inquiry has received some 330,000 documents and has conducted an initial review of more than 180,000. The expectation is that more will follow. The inquiry must review the documents, first of all for relevance and to identify duplication, and then to decide how each document fits into the picture that the inquiry is building up.

The inquiry has been disclosing documentary evidence to core participants on a confidential basis since February and continues to do so in the run-up to the start of the
hearings. It will disclose further relevant information as the hearings progress, and it must be right that the independent public inquiry is allowed to determine how and when it discloses information. As the inquiry moves forward, it will develop its picture and assess the relevance of the documentary evidence as it progresses.

Joanna Cherry: MPs are advised that only a tiny percentage of the relevant documents have been disclosed so far to core participants’ lawyers. Given the recent scandals over lack of disclosure by the Crown Prosecution Service in England, can the Minister give the families of the deceased and the survivors sitting here today reassurance that disclosure will happen fully and orderly for this inquiry?

Mr Hurd: I am absolutely sure that that is the intention of those leading the inquiry. The process I have set out is one that is absolutely familiar and typical in relation to public inquiries. When we are talking about hundreds and thousands of documents, some judgments have to be made and some judgments will be challenged. I think there will be transparency in the form of regular bulletins from the inquiry. I would like the hon. and learned Lady to know well: people are worried about how long the process will take, and they are right to be, given some of the examples of the past. So these are judgments for the inquiry, but I think there will be transparency around the process and it will be open to challenge.

The third part of the petition is about the right to question witnesses. Core participants are able to suggest lines of questioning that the inquiry should pursue and, with permission from the inquiry, can ask witnesses questions through their own legal representatives. The inquiry rules are clear that the recognised legal representative of a core participant can seek permission to ask questions of a witness giving oral evidence. In his response to the inquiry’s procedural hearing in December, Sir Martin said that he would approach with an open mind any such applications, and that is the approach he will take.

Alison McGovern: While the Minister is covering that aspect of the inquiry, will he respond to my point about parity of arms? I know that legal resources are being made available to the families of those we lost at Grenfell, and that is a good thing, but I worry about getting into a situation in which, yet again, the state has vastly more resources at its disposal for lawyers than families do. That inequality cannot be tolerated, I am afraid.

Mr Hurd: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s concern, as will anyone who has read the Bishop’s report. I also worked on the response to the death in custody review, in which exactly the same point was made by Dame Elish. There is a fundamental point here on which I hope we will make significant progress in our responses to the Bishop’s report and the death in custody review.

I wish to reassure the House about the scale and pace of the inquiry. I should also put on record commendation of the way in which Sir Martin has not only stepped up to the responsibility but driven the process at pace. Many of those who have campaigned for the change have been at pains to point out that it is not a personal criticism of him. There is tremendous respect for his integrity and his forensic ability. He is driving a very complicated process at pace. He has granted 547 core participants to the inquiry, 519 of whom are individuals from the Grenfell community. That is an unprecedented number.

Procedural hearings to consider matters relating to the conduct of the inquiry have taken place and on 27 April the inquiry published a timetable for its phase one hearings, which will focus on the factual narrative of the events on 14 June 2017. Before the evidential hearings start on 4 June, there will be two weeks of hearings, beginning on 21 May, commemorating all those who lost their lives. That will provide an opportunity for those families who lost loved ones at Grenfell Tower to commemorate them as individuals, calmly and with dignity. The bereaved families will be able to memorialise their loved ones in any way they think best, whether as a presentation, an audio recording, a short film or in any other way. That shows the inquiry’s commitment to ensuring that the bereaved, the survivors and the residents are central to its work. The counsel to the inquiry has said that by “starting the public hearings in this way, we can ensure that, however technical and scientific the issues may become”— and they will— “however dry, however legal, we will never lose sight of who our work is for and why we are doing it”, and he is right on that.

Following the commemorations, the evidential hearings will begin on 4 June. They will hear evidence from the inquiry’s expert witnesses and London fire brigade personnel. The hearings will run until the end of July. There will be no hearings in August, as the inquiry prepares to hear evidence from the bereaved, the survivors and local residents, starting on 3 September and running for approximately four weeks. Further expert witness evidence will be heard during October, and the closing statements will be made in the week beginning 29 October. Sir Martin will prepare an interim report following the end of the phase one oral evidence hearings, and the programme for the phase two hearings will be issued nearer the time.

Kevin Hollinrake: Bearing in mind the lack of confidence in the local authority, where reasonable concerns exist in the community, whether about the local authority, the inquiry or rehousing, is the Minister confident that clear processes and channels are in place for those concerns to be raised directly with the Minister and acted upon?

Mr Hurd: Since the start of the process, Ministers have been sitting down with representatives of Kensington and Chelsea and all the other state agencies that are working together on Grenfell to challenge things we have been told and to ask ourselves how we can support the statutory agencies in their work, so I can give my hon. Friend that assurance.

I wish to make reference to the fact that the public inquiry is, of course, not the only route to truth and justice. Only one Member of Parliament has mentioned the other route this afternoon, which is the criminal investigation. Let us be clear, the Metropolitan Police Service has started one of the largest criminal investigations ever outside counter-terrorism, with a dedicated team of approximately 200 officers, many of whom I met on a recent visit to Hendon. The team are extremely professional and very, very dedicated to doing the job
properly. They are fully engaged with the public inquiry and are focused on four key areas. To give an idea of the scale and complexity of what they are dealing with, approximately 460 companies have been identified as having some involvement in work on Grenfell Tower, and the current estimate is that about 35 million documents will have to be processed. Let us not lose sight of the criminal investigation, because it is also a critical path to justice.

In conclusion, I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) that there is no walking away from Grenfell. That would be a complete abdication of our responsibility to our fellow citizens who have suffered a terrible wrong. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley said, we know in this place just how badly the state has failed in the past in such situations, and we cannot fall into that trap again. Parliament will hold the Government of the day fully to account on that fundamental truth. Justice is a precondition of the healing we want to see. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said that trust was a precondition of justice; in fact, it is the passage of facts and truths that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley talked about, combined with the forensic investigation that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) referred to, that are the preconditions. However, we cannot proceed without trust.

We cannot proceed without the buy-in of those who are the most important in the process, those most directly affected, those who lives have been ripped apart by this disaster. They need to trust the process. That is at the heart of and underpins the Prime Minister’s decision, which is a big one. To change the course of a public inquiry is a big decision that is not taken lightly, and she has done so because she recognises the fundamental truth of the debate, which is to put the needs and feelings of those most affected by the disaster at the heart not just of the public inquiry, but of all our thoughts and all our processes, to try to help on this journey towards healing, recovery and a rebuilding of lives and hope. So no, we are not going away on Grenfell. We must deliver truth, justice and accountability.

7.29 pm

Paul Scully: I pay tribute once again to the campaigners, and I want to explain to them and the people watching that if they have seen MPs drifting in and out, it is because of the nature of this House and of our different priorities at any given time. I hope they will have seen that the interest in the debate—we have had four Cabinet Ministers coming in and out—shows the importance that we place upon solving the situation and bringing justice to the people who are most affected. Of all the speeches, the last one, by the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), really had the balance right between the raw passion that is still there, for her from Lakanal, and her approach to solving the problem. That is what we must do. We need action.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 May 2018

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH in the Chair]

Infection Prevention and Control

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered raising standards of infection prevention and control in the NHS.

This issue has been brought to my attention by a number of health organisations, and by lobby groups within the House as well. We are very aware that 5 May marked World Hand Hygiene Day and I am very glad to have secured this debate, to draw attention to the importance of infection prevention and control in the NHS and, in particular, the role of good hand hygiene in raising standards.

The first time the matter came to my attention was when my brother Keith had a serious motorbike accident some 12 years ago. Whenever we visited him in the Royal Victoria Hospital, we were told by the nurses to wash our hands: “Everything has to be very, very hygienic here.” We washed our hands almost to the point of obsession because in that ward people were between life and death, and infection could have meant the end of a life.

This year, World Hand Hygiene Day focused on raising awareness about sepsis. We all know about sepsis through our constituents and the stories in the press as well. The World Health Organisation estimates that sepsis affects some 30 million patients worldwide every year. In response to a business question that I put to the Leader of the House, she suggested I seek a debate in Westminster Hall on the matter. As I am not very often here, I thought I would introduce a debate myself for a change—it would perhaps be an occasion. Here in the House as well. We are very aware that 5 May marked World Hand Hygiene Day and I am very glad to have secured this debate, to draw attention to the importance of infection prevention and control in the NHS and, in particular, the role of good hand hygiene in raising standards.

The first time the matter came to my attention was when my brother Keith had a serious motorbike accident some 12 years ago. Whenever we visited him in the Royal Victoria Hospital, we were told by the nurses to wash our hands: “Everything has to be very, very hygienic here.” We washed our hands almost to the point of obsession because in that ward people were between life and death, and infection could have meant the end of a life.

This year, World Hand Hygiene Day focused on raising awareness about sepsis. We all know about sepsis through our constituents and the stories in the press as well. The World Health Organisation estimates that sepsis affects some 30 million patients worldwide every year. In response to a business question that I put to the Leader of the House, she suggested I seek a debate in Westminster Hall on the matter. As I am not very often here, I thought I would introduce a debate myself for a change—it would perhaps be an occasion. Here in the UK, there are 44,000 deaths from sepsis every year and it is high. People worry about that. My constituents worry for a time, he was always catching infections there. I am not saying that that was the fault of anyone, but I had thought that the possibility of infection would be greater when they go out and come back in again—but hopefully that same level of hygiene control is being done by the hospital as well.

When I notified him of the debate, Professor Didier Pittet said:

“In the early 2000s, the NHS was the first ever health system to use a hand hygiene promotion strategy modeled on the World Health Organisation’s. This strategy went on to be active in 186 of the 194 UN member states. I call for the UK and the NHS in particular to reinvigorate hand hygiene promotion as the main strategy to reduce infections. The WHO hand hygiene promotion strategy saves between 5 and 8 million lives in the world every year, and will save hundreds of thousands in the UK.”

So, the importance of the debate is clear.

I spoke to the Minister before the debate and gave him a copy of my speech, to make him aware of what we are trying to do and the questions I want to ask him. I have absolutely no doubt that the shadow Minister and all of us here will be saying the same thing. We are looking for the same thing. There are some pilots in place and some recommendations coming from across the NHS, and we want to look towards those as well.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend talks about similarities and about issues being the same. Does he agree that, on the various standards—all of which are improving all of the time across the United Kingdom—we should all strive for best practice, with the most successful practices being replicated right across the United Kingdom in all the devolved institutions?

Jim Shannon: What my hon. Friend says is wise—we always hear very wise words from him, no matter what the debate. If we have best practice in Middlesex, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Newtonards, Bangor or Belfast—wherever it may be—let us replicate it everywhere else. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

It is true that here in the UK we have made good progress in reducing the number of healthcare-associated infections over the past 10 to 15 years. The introduction of mandatory reporting of infections in the early 2000s has certainly helped to track the trends. When we look at some of the things we have done, there is good news. In 2003-04 the average quarterly count of MRSA bacteria was 1,925, but by 2008 it had reduced by 57% to 836—a significant reduction. Although that should be a cause for celebration, rates of healthcare-associated infections remain stubbornly high. Today’s debate is really about getting to the stubborn hard-core hygiene-related infections that do not seem to want to move.

The results of the most recent point-prevalence survey show that the number of patients contracting an infection in hospital is staggering. Every one of us knows how important the matter is. When my dad was in hospital for a time, he was always catching infections there. I am not saying that that was the fault of anyone, but I had thought that the possibility of infection would be greater at home—in hospital you expect it to be lower. Unfortunately, in the cases that I am aware of of people going into hospital with an illness, the rate of infection is high. People worry about that. My constituents worry about it, and I believe that everyone else’s do as well.

One in every 16 patients contract an infection in a UK hospital. That is only 6.4%, but it is 6.4% too many. There are 5,000 patient deaths every year from healthcare-associated infections. That is the thrust of the matter. If we are having deaths in hospital due to these infections
we need to address the issue, and I look to the Minister for some thoughts on how we can do that. I am confident that he will come back with something that will help us in our debate.

The human cost of infection goes without saying. However, healthcare-associated infections also have a significant financial cost, which cannot be ignored. The health issues are one consideration, but the financial spin-off is also great. If we can address the infections early on, we can reduce the financial implications and also the deaths and infections. At a time when the health service is facing an unprecedented strain on services, reducing that financial burden is all the more pressing. It is estimated that hospital-acquired infections cost the NHS in excess of £1 billion a year, which is 0.8% of the health service's total budget. That is not an insignificant amount; £1 billion would change a lot of things for the health service and also, I believe, for people’s lives. That amount includes the immediate costs of treating patients in hospital, and also downstream costs due to bed-blocking—we all know the problems with bed-blocking. The costs are especially relevant, given the challenging winter that the NHS has just come through, with hospital capacity reaching 100% in some cases.

If I ask my constituents back home, where we unfortunately have a non-functioning Assembly, what the key issue is for them, they will say that it is health, and it will continue always to be health. If I may make a political statement, but not for any reason other than to illustrate the point: if Sinn Féin were to grasp what is important—and health is one of the things we can agree on—we could move forward together.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I spent some time in hospital a few years ago and it was a positive experience with a happy outcome—and I escaped infection. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important to get right locally the fundamentals of fighting the global threat of anti-resistance to so-called superbugs?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; we have got to get it right in our own hospitals and across the NHS and the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and then we can look further afield to other countries. He reminds me that last year I had occasion to be in hospital three times for various operations. I never had any infections. I had nothing but the best care. The surgeon’s knife went in the right direction and removed what had to be removed. It was important to do that. The important thing is that we have hospitals and an NHS that are excellent. When the NHS works well, it is the best in the world, but sometimes we need to think about things.

The cost of infections to the NHS includes the immediate costs of treating patients in hospital, bed-blocking and so on. There are also issues with hospital capacity, which has reached 100% in some cases. The World Health Organisation estimates that 50% to 70% of hospital-acquired infections are transmitted by hands, so improving hand hygiene must play a central role in any strategy to reduce hospital infections. It would be remiss of me not to note the work carried out by the Secretary of State to improve patient safety in the NHS—let us give credit where credit is due. In November 2016, there was a commitment to halve gram-negative infections by 2020. The Secretary of State announced he would appoint a new national infection prevention lead, Dr Ruth May. Both are important steps in bringing down infection rates and show a commitment to do so.

Given that 50% to 70% of hospital infections are transmitted by hands, I was encouraged to see alongside those measures a commitment for the NHS to publish staff hand hygiene indicators for the first time. If hand hygiene is done—it should be, and perhaps there are indications of places where it has not been—then publishing hand hygiene indicators will allow benchmarking between hospitals and help drive up standards of hand hygiene. If we can have a system that can help drive hand hygiene, we should have it. Perhaps the Minister can respond to that point in his summing up.

The policy should not be implemented by weighing or counting cartridges used in hospital hand sanitiser dispensers. If it is done by the number of cartridges used, we might be under the impression that things are going the right way, but there has to be a wee bit more to it than that. Without factoring in patient bed numbers and staffing levels, the information is, I gently say, somewhat meaningless in showing hand hygiene compliance levels. The intention is right, but other factors need to be looked at.

The Secretary of State is a strong proponent of the use of reasonable technology in the NHS. Like me, he believes it has the power to radically change how we deliver care. Electronic monitoring technology can monitor hand hygiene to deliver real-time, accurate data to drive behavioural change. We want to see behavioural change where staff are not as active on hand hygiene as they should be.

Electronic monitoring is an innovative practice that is used internationally. Studies from a hospital in the US have shown that following the adoption of the technology, hand hygiene compliance improved by 30%. If we use that methodology, hopefully we can replicate what has happened in the US and reduce infections. That 30% increase corresponded with a 29% decrease in the number of MRSA infections, saving that one hospital more than $400,000. Here in the UK, electronic monitoring is being piloted at a number of hospital trusts in what the Care Quality Commission describes as “outstanding” and “innovative” practice. It goes back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) said in his intervention: where we see good things happening, we should be doing those things across the whole United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) also referred to that.

If the results from the US are replicated here in the UK—they can be—the national adoption of electronic monitoring technology could see 30,000 fewer infections, saving the NHS more than £93 million. More importantly, it would mean less infection, fewer people staying in hospital and fewer deaths. Dr Ruth May, the national infection prevention lead, said that, “the collection, publication and intelligent use of data...will ensure organisations improve infection control and help...poor performers get the support they need”.

[Jim Shannon]
Those are very wise words. While I welcome the announcement of the hand hygiene indicator policy, it appears that progress on its implementation has stalled. I suppose that is the point I am coming to and the reason for this debate. The Department of Health and Social Care has missed its own deadline to publish the data by the end of 2017. Data is so important in drawing up a strategy, policy and vision of how we can address the issue.

We have been collecting mandatory data on the number of healthcare-associated infections, such as MRSA and Clostridium difficile, since 2004. When hand hygiene is so critical to reducing the number of healthcare-associated infections, it is difficult to see why it has taken more than 14 years to publish data on staff hand hygiene—data that we are yet to see. I find that incredible. I spoke to the Minister last night, so he knew I would raise this issue. The key issue for me is how we use the data we have to make a policy and a strategy from which we can all benefit. To mark World Hand Hygiene Day, the World Health Organisation is calling on Health Ministries worldwide to make hand hygiene a marker of care quality. If we do that right, we will be going in the right direction.

Will the Minister consider making hand hygiene a national marker of care quality? Will he, on behalf of the Secretary of State, outline who is responsible for the implementation of the policy? Will he set out a clear timeline for the collection and publication of this data, which is critical to driving up hand hygiene standards in hospitals? Someone walking through the door of any hospital will always first notice the smell. They will probably notice the warmth of the hospital, because it is there to care for patients and those who are ill. They will also see nurses running about with their gloves on. Hand hygiene is important for them, but we need to drive it a wee bit harder from the ministerial point of view and the local hospital point of view, to ensure that it happens.

Publishing data on hand hygiene compliance is a simple first step in improving hand hygiene, which is essential to raising standards of infection prevention and control in the NHS. It will save lives and money, and we cannot afford further delay. The UK and the NHS have been at the forefront of worldwide infection prevention and control strategies since the early 2000s. While a good deal of progress has been made since then—we welcome that progress, some of which has been significant—there is much work to be done to realise the Secretary of State's ambition: that the NHS will be the safest health service in the world. We should strive to be the best. In many cases, we are the best, but we can certainly do better. The role of good hand hygiene in reducing hospital-acquired infections and improving patient safety cannot be overstated. We must also acknowledge that the current method of direct observation in monitoring hand hygiene in hospitals is no longer fit for purpose, and that technology can and should play a role in changing behaviours.

I look to the Minister for his response. I thank all Members for taking the time to come to Westminster Hall on a Tuesday morning to make a contribution. We look forward to those contributions.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): I do not propose setting a time limit on speeches. It might be helpful by way of guidance to suggest that if everyone speaks for no more than 10 minutes, it should be possible to accommodate everyone who has indicated that they want to speak.

9.48 am Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing a debate on a matter that is of great personal importance to me, as I lost my own father to MRSA that he caught in hospital.

In 2011 my dad, Clifford, went into hospital for a routine operation to drain fluid from his lungs. What should have been a 20-minute procedure turned out to be two and a half hours as trainee doctors practised on him. The whole event was a real catalogue of errors regarding cleanliness in the hospital. To begin with, the cleaners kept their mop buckets in the room where the procedure was done—it was not a sterile environment. Also, located in the adjacent rooms were patients infected with MRSA. So, the staff did the procedure next to rooms where people had MRSA. Also, a number of doctors and nurses came into my dad’s room and did not wash their hands. I saw some of the same nurses later, having cigarettes outside in their uniform. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) mentioned patients doing the same. One nurse came into my father’s room to administer some antibiotic cream that was to be placed in my father’s nose, and she used her bare hands and did not wash them afterwards.

The scale of the problem is vast. The World Health Organisation estimates that 50% to 70% of hospital-acquired infections are transmitted by hands, and that more than half are preventable through good hand hygiene. Yet, in the UK, a patient admitted into hospital has a 6.4% chance of contracting a hospital infection. In total, more than 300,000 patients are affected by hospital infections in the UK every year. There are 5,000 patients who, like my father, die from a hospital infection every year. That is 5,000 too many. For me personally, it meant that my wonderful dad, my hero, never got to meet my husband; my dad never got to walk me down the aisle at our wedding last year; and my beautiful baby son Clifford, who is named after my dad, never got to meet his amazing granddad. That is just my own personal story. There is an inadequacy in existing practice.

The Government have done a lot to move forward on hospital-acquired infections, and I know that the Secretary of State and the chief medical officer really do care about the issue, as I have had several meetings with them over the past three years and my all-party group on patient safety has worked closely with them. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has also worked closely with me on this. The chief medical officer has done a great deal globally to lead the way in highlighting antimicrobial resistance.

However, it is important that this debate draws attention to the fact that the current system of hand hygiene monitoring in hospitals needs updating, and is inaccurate and outdated. There are better monitoring systems out there. The old system allows poor hand hygiene practice to spread, and can put patients’ lives at risk. The system currently in place is known as “direct observation”, and there are three fundamental flaws within it. First, many of the nurses currently performing direct observation...
audits on colleagues are not trained to perform such tasks. That means that audits are often incomplete, inconsistent and ineffective.

Secondly, direct observation artificially inflates reported compliance, owing to something called the Hawthorne effect. Naturally, staff wash their hands more frequently when they know they are being monitored. In 2015 I ran a hand cleanliness awareness campaign here in Parliament and 40 colleagues, cross-party, signed up to it. The Deb Group collaborated with me on my Handz campaign and I was astounded at the research that the group showed me. It has conducted peer-reviewed research that shows that the true levels of hand hygiene compliance are in fact between 18% and 40%, rather than the 90% to 100% typically recorded in UK hospitals. That means that direct observation as a means of monitoring artificially inflates reported compliance by as much as 50%. We cannot begin to address the problems of poor hand hygiene when our hand hygiene audits report figures of 90% to 100% compliance.

To increase hand hygiene standards in our hospitals, basic behavioural psychology dictates that we need accurate and timely feedback to drive behavioural changes. Yet direct observation audits are often only completed quarterly or, at best, monthly.

The Government have had a big focus on patient safety and there has been a renewed focus over the past five years, from initiatives to reduce prescribing errors to the commitment to halve gram-negative infections by 2020. If my right. hon. and hon. Friends will permit me, I must thank the Secretary of State for driving those initiatives and for his personal commitment in trying to make the NHS the safest healthcare system in the world.

Looking to the future, the Secretary of State said that the 10-year plan for the NHS must enable it to be “more tech’d up”, so my question to the Minister is: what role can and should technology play in raising standards of infection prevention and control in the NHS? Electronic hand hygiene monitoring offers the potential to improve health outcomes and save money at a time when health services are coming under increasing pressure. Improving hand hygiene requires behavioural changes that are reliant upon frequent, accurate and relevant feedback. In his review into NHS productivity, Lord Carter discussed the need to have, “real-time monitoring and reporting at NHS leaders’ fingertips”.

Electronic monitoring can deliver real-time, accurate data to drive behavioural changes. There are currently pilots in electronic monitoring technology in two acute hospital trusts in England. The Care Quality Commission has noted the innovative practice to improve hand hygiene using technology as an area of “outstanding practice”. However, the technology is not new; it has been in use in the US for several years.

The UK has one of the safest healthcare systems in the world, but 5,000 patients a year dying from hospital infections is 5,000 too many. Does the Minister acknowledge that, to improve hand hygiene and reduce the number of infections in our hospitals, using direct observation as a means of monitoring hand hygiene is no longer appropriate or effective? Finally, does the Minister agree that using technology, if adopted in the right way, offers an excellent opportunity to improve patient safety and reduce the £1 billion in associated costs of hospital infections?

9.54 am

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. It reminds me of a debate on much the same topic that we had a few months ago. Its aim was to find out from the then Minister when the Government might enforce the strategy they had announced. It is a pity that we are repeating that debate a few months later and we still do not have the answers. The quest has not been out very clearly by the previous speakers. There is not much advantage in repeating it, but, just to reinforce the point, we are talking about 5,000 deaths annually. The World Health Organisation estimates that half of those are preventable through effective hand hygiene. I do not know of other situations in UK life where we could have 2,500 people die each year unnecessarily and that would not be a national scandal. We would do anything we possibly could to fix it. There are things we can do to save a large proportion of those lives that are not very difficult or expensive. Our strong message today is: let us get on and do them.

I accept it will not be easy. We are not talking about finding the number of people who do not practise any hand hygiene and making them practise it; we are talking about making sure that as many health staff as possible get up to the very high levels of compliance with hand hygiene rules, rather than being in the middle. I suspect that no health service staff are deliberately not cleaning their hands as they ought to. We know they work in high-pressure situations. They do their very best for patients, and occasionally some behaviours creep in that perhaps should not. The important thing is to have processes in place that can identify when performance is perhaps slipping and then remind people, gently and constructively, how important hand hygiene is. That is why we need accurate and sensible monitoring.

We all know what happens when a colleague in a team says, “We have got to do one of these audits today. I’ll go round and watch to make sure you are all practising the right hand hygiene.” We all know what will happen. We have all been in those situations. We are all very careful to make sure we wash our hands as best as we possibly can. We all think we know the same rules, so we all comply with the same things. The person observing probably does not know the rules any better than those being observed. It is no surprise, therefore, that we end up with near 100% compliance. In fact, it is a surprise that we do not end up with 100% compliance in that situation. It is like the driving test. I have never looked in my mirror as much in my life as on my driving test, because I knew I was being checked on that.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is there not a simpler approach? Should not the audit be unannounced and carried out by people like secret shoppers, which is a technique that we use in Scotland?

Nigel Mills: Yes, that would be clear progress. However, I sense that we would notice an unknown person walking round the ward with a clipboard, which might make someone behave more carefully. I am not sure how easy it is to stop the word going round the hospital that such work is being done, but I accept that that is better than
one member of the existing team doing it. The question is: can we find a better way of monitoring compliance and getting the data we need, so that we can work out what is happening, see what the trends are, and find out whether they are reflected in infection rates? As hon. Members have pointed out, there are various techniques on the market to do that electronically.

Simply counting how many times the ward dispensers are squeezed will not work because we need to know the type of ward, how many patients there are and how sensitive the work is to know how many times people need to squeeze the dispensers. We need a system that says, “On a ward carrying out this sort of activity with this number of patients, we would have expected this level of hand hygiene-compliant moments, and we actually got this many squeezes on the dispenser. That is only a quarter of what it ought to have been. That tells us there is a big problem on this ward.” Or it might tell us that we got 80%, which is probably a sensible level to get.

In my constituency is the Deb Group, a large employer that produces hand hygiene gel and monitoring techniques. I accept there are many rivals on the market and many different ways of monitoring. Some people prefer to have each member of staff wear a badge with a sensor that can tell how often that member of staff approaches a hand hygiene gel dispenser, so that we can monitor at an individual level rather than a ward level.

All those ideas are out there. We need the Government, and presumably the Care Quality Commission or NHS Improvement, to say to hospitals, “We want you to collect real data. We don’t want you to do stupid observations that give you 99% compliance, which we know is meaningless, just so that you can tick a box to say that you’re compliant. We want you to collect real data. We don’t mind how you do it, and we’re not going to punish you, take money off you, or put you in special measures if that data shows that you’re at 25% or 35% compliance, and all your rivals are at 97% because they’re doing it wrongly. We want you to do it properly, get the data, use the data, and improve your performance where you can see that it is linked to infections being too high.”

When the CQC reviews hospitals and other health environments, it should check that hospitals are collecting that data sensibly and using it to improve performance. The CQC should be very serious about that when it assesses a hospital. Can we see that hospitals know what their performance is, have a plan in place to improve it, and are improving it, and that infection rates are falling? It would be a serious matter if hospitals were not doing that work properly—if they were just having a quick half-hour assessment now and again, and producing data that they must know is complete rubbish.

We have the right plan; we know what we want hospitals to start doing. Let us get it in force, and task the CQC to ensure that hospitals are doing it. Let us set out clearly what we want hospitals to do and ensure that they are not too scared to go down that line, thinking that their data will suddenly get worse and they will be punished for it. Let us do what we know we need to do, and hope that we do not have to come back in another couple of years to talk about the fact that 2,500 people have died because we have not managed to put something in place that is easy and relatively cheap, and that we know works.

10.1 am

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. Naturally I wanted to take part; this issue is important to my constituents in Moray, as it is to those of all other right hon. and hon. Members. Furthermore, the hon. Member for Strangford is an assiduous contributor in this place. Indeed, some of my debates have been supported by him, so I was keen to reciprocate the support that he gives to others by coming along today.

The role of healthcare is, in essence, to treat and heal patients. That is why healthcare-associated infections, where someone acquires an infection in a hospital or another healthcare facility, can be so cruel. They can also be especially dangerous. Healthcare-associated infections, or HCAIs, lead to comorbidity and can interfere with the treatment that people are in hospital for in the first place.

Naturally, in today’s debate, which is looking at UK-wide issues, I want to focus, as I am sure the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) will, on what we are doing in Scotland, and I will pick up on some of the points that have been made about sharing best practice across the country. It is particularly concerning that in Scotland, according to a Health Protection Scotland report, the incidence of HCAIs in intensive care units is higher than other parts of hospitals, with an incidence rate of 2.7% in 2016. Likewise, surgical site infections are among the more common HCAIs, with, for example, an incidence rate of 1.37% in the first 10 days after a caesarean section. Surgical site infections can be especially painful for patients, and in some cases can even require further medical intervention afterwards.

Healthcare-associated infections are distressing, painful and often dangerous to patients, and are costly for the NHS. Such infections frustrate, complicate and even undo the hard work of our medical staff. They exacerbate the strain on hospital resources, and cost money in compensation payments. In 2016-17, for example, 89 wards and 97 other bays were closed across Scotland due to outbreaks of norovirus. Clearly, action is necessary to prevent and control infections in hospitals and other NHS facilities. By reducing the incidence of HCAIs, the NHS would no longer need to treat those infections, and would avoid the complications that are caused in the treatment of the disease or disorder for which the patient was originally admitted to the hospital or healthcare facility.

Moreover, reducing instances of healthcare-associated infections will help to reassure patients seeking treatment in the first place. Unfortunately, some people, especially elderly people, worry about the possibility of picking up an infection while in hospital. That can lead to reluctance to seek treatment in the first place, which can be very dangerous. It is vital that we work to reassure people that an NHS hospital is a safe place where the risk of infection is low.

In Scotland, the picture for progress on preventing HCAIs is mixed, and there is more to be done by the Scottish Government in that area. In positive news, there was a decreasing year-on-year trend in the incidence of clostridium difficile infections between 2013 and 2017. However, the incidence of HCAIs in intensive
care has crept up slightly, from 2.5% in 2014 to 2.7% in 2016, while the incidence of ventilator-associated pneumonia increased by more than 26% in the same period. There has been some good work, but there is room for improvement.

The NHS faces a number of challenges with respect to preventing infection—from the density of people in one place to the threat of superbugs and resistance to antibiotics, as we heard earlier. It is thanks to the hard work of our NHS staff across the country that infection rates remain as low as they are. There has been a discussion about unannounced hospital inspections. The main hospital in Moray, Dr Gray’s, was subject last November to an unannounced inspection. The findings were reported earlier this year. Importantly, it was found that the standard of domestic cleaning and compliance with standard infection control precautions was good. However, the head of quality care at the healthcare environment inspectorate said:

“NHS Grampian must ensure the environment is maintained and, where possible, refurbished to allow effective cleaning and reduce the risk of infection.”

Despite all the great work by the staff in Dr Grey’s and other hospitals, their hands are slightly tied behind their back if we have older, crumbling buildings that need capital investment. There is much more that we can do to support our staff, who want to do the best for patients but are sometimes hamstrung by the conditions in which they work.

There is still room for improvement, and the Scottish Government must ensure that staff have the support they need to make further inroads in the fight against HCAIs. That should include the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland working with their counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom to share ideas and good practice, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) highlighted in his intervention. This issue does not stop at the border; we can learn from one another. Will the Minister explain how health departments across the country share best practice and work together to ensure that we deal with this important UK-wide issue?

There must be zero tolerance for failings, such as poor hygiene that can put patients’ health and lives at risk, as we heard in the very emotive speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). Remarkably, as recently as 2013, one in 10 senior medics in Scotland were not complying with hand hygiene standards. That is a worrying message, and the situation must improve.

We should be proud and thankful that we live in a society where we have high-quality universal healthcare, with a low risk of infection. However, in every part of the United Kingdom we must not stop striving to control, and hopefully prevent, such infections from occurring in future.

10.8 am

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, the hon. Gentleman has attended some of the debates that I have led in previous months, so I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in a debate that he has introduced. I know the topic is important to him, and he made a great and passionate case when introducing the debate.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), I am not sure whether I can do justice to some of the issues that have been outlined. I do not wish to repeat things that have been said in a far better way than I could say them—I am by no means an expert in this area. My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) and I have known each other for many years. I know how difficult it was a number of years ago, with the loss of her father, and what a passionate advocate she has become for infection control and resolving some of the issues that have been mentioned. I cannot hope to match some of the discussion that we have had today.

As a relatively new Member of Parliament, I have been surprised in the 10 months since the election by the number of people who have come to my surgery to raise these sorts of issues. I am not new to politics—I was a councillor for eight years before becoming a Member of Parliament—and perhaps because previously I was looking at a different section of government and how it operated, but I was taken aback by the harrowing stories and challenges that many constituents have highlighted and have been willing to share with me.

There are a couple of issues in particular that have come through. The first is anaemia and the second is sepsis, which the hon. Member for Strangford has raised, and I have tabled some parliamentary questions on them. On anaemia, the best way to prevent infection is to prevent people from going into hospital in the first place. We need to reduce admissions, but it is a challenge to achieve that in our health service. One reason why many people are admitted is that they have undiagnosed illnesses, they experience problems and they automatically go to A&E. They present in a way that could be avoided.

The Anaemia Manifesto Steering Committee estimates that around 4 million people live with iron deficiency. It can be a secondary diagnosis, which means that people present with symptoms that they think are something else, but which in fact are anaemia. That costs the NHS up to £50 million every single year. Recognising and acknowledging that, and doing more work on anaemia, might help to address some of the admissions issues we have. Anaemia is the fourth most common cause of admissions for people over 75. It is, by common consent, an underdiagnosed and undertreated condition, and addressing that could be a route to reducing infections, by reducing the number of people in hospital in the first instance.

Sepsis has been discussed. I have heard about a number of cases about sepsis in my surgery: a lady with a young child whose life has been completely changed as a result of contracting sepsis, and who now has a completely different outlook and different requirements in how she lives her life, because of the limitations that sepsis has created; and a family who lost their mother to a sepsis infection that was not identified early enough. I could see the pain on their faces when they were talking about this hugely personal challenge that they had faced and which was created by sepsis.
There is recognition of the problem, and the Department of Health and Social Care is doing an incredible amount to raise sepsis awareness, and to move forward the acceptance that more needs to be done, but there remain challenges in diagnosis, in ensuring effective monitoring when people are in hospital, and in appropriate and adequate treatment. I am aware of the sepsis action plan and the public information campaigns on sepsis that are under way and which no doubt will continue. My parliamentary question was answered a number of months ago; it remains the case that there is a gap in understanding and focus in the health service on sepsis. I am sure that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Minister are seeking to close that gap as quickly as possible, but there is more work to be done, particularly with more than 100,000 cases a year and the deaths that the hon. Member for Strangford has outlined.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments earlier. To underline the number of deaths, Northern Ireland had a peak in 2008 of 191 deaths where C. diff was mentioned on the death certificate. That has been reduced to 67. It comes down to the hard core of problematic infection that is still there. That is where we are looking for some direction from the Minister.

Lee Rowley: I absolutely agree. I think everybody would recognise that there is more work to be done. I will not take up any more time. I welcome the commitment from the Government on matters such as sepsis. There is acknowledgment across the House and from the Government, I hope, that there is more to be done in this area—there is public concern and a desire for public focus—and that process is already under way. I hope it can be restated and redoubled. We all recognise that there is further progress to be made so that we are not here in five or 10 years’ time, debating the same subjects, listening to the same stories in our surgeries.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. As he said, it is only a few weeks since the World Health Organisation’s “Save Lives: Clean Your Hands” campaign and we are a few weeks since the World Health Organisation’s for securing this important debate. As he said, it is only a tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that there is such a thing as corners, I would be delighted with a white cloth—checking under the beds and the trolleys and on top of the curtain rails. It is really important that the environment is clean.

Bed occupancy is another issue. We know that the NHS in England has been under pressure for quite a long time, because the number of beds has halved over the past 30 years. England has one of the lowest bed ratios in Europe, at 2.4 per 1,000. Bed occupancy has been more than 95% and the recommendation for a safe level is 85%. The average in Scotland is 83%. That will vary between rural and urban areas, but if there is no time to clean the bed between patients, the risk increases. If the hospital is under pressure with a queue down in A&E, people are going to cut corners.

As the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) mentioned, the fabric of the building is crucial. If something is cracked or broken or old or wooden, it is not possible to clean it properly. That is why we have the Healthcare Environment Inspectorate in Scotland, which—believe me—turns up unannounced, poking around in every nook and cranny, looking under trolleys and wheelchairs, in the toilets and the shower rooms. That also includes external unannounced observation of people washing their hands.

I will turn to staffing levels. Across the UK we face nursing workforce challenges. Although we are struggling with a 4.1% nursing vacancy rate in Scotland, in England at the moment it is more than 10%. That creates pressure on everyone else on the ward. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) said, there is a temptation, if not to do no hand hygiene, perhaps not to spend long enough with the gel on the hands and not to take quite the same quantity.

It is important to remember that clostridium difficile is caused by the overuse of antibiotics. It may spread from patient to patient due to poor hand-washing, but the initial problem was overuse and prolonged use of broad-spectrum antibiotics. It is very important that that is controlled. We need to think about sources, such as pressure sores and intravenous access, whether it is a peripheral drip or a central line. An important one at the moment is the management of urinary catheters. How long is it left in place? Is it too long? If it needs to be in longer, is it being changed regularly?

We also need to monitor surgical site infections. In Scotland, two wounds are monitored so that we are aware of whether things are improving or worsening. Although the hon. Member for Moray complains about a 1.37% wound infection rate after C-section, that has actually decreased over many years, and for hip replacements the rate is 0.63%. Some of that is not due to hand-washing. I have been a surgeon for more than 30 years and have seen the change from big interrupted black silk sutures that allowed penetration points for infection, to subcuticular invisible mending that means that the wound seals very quickly, using better dressings and glue to seal the wound so that there is less risk of external ingress. There is also a plan to add bowel surgery and vascular surgery—a dirty operation and a clean operation—because that is how we can monitor if something more general is going wrong.

Like the rest of the UK, in Scotland since about 2000 we have been trying to tackle infections. We lost our white coats and had to wear short sleeves—I still do. We were not allowed watches—I still do not wear one—and hand-washing and hand gel were promoted. Nevertheless, in 2007-08 an appalling outbreak of clostridium difficile in the Vale of Leven Hospital affected more than 150 people and caused 34 deaths. That wake-up call made us realise...
that tackling healthcare-acquired infections cannot be done in isolation; it must be part of a quality improvement and safety drive.

We created Healthcare Improvement Scotland, and in 2008 we established the Scottish patient safety programme, which was based on principles from Boston but was the first national patient safety programme. It is a structure on which we can hang evidence-based practice about many of the challenges that put patients at risk. It involves not the great and the good sitting in an office, but frontline champions from all health boards and all areas. It is driven by outcome data, which is shared, published, peer reviewed and actioned. We have to make hand-washing, like patient safety, part of daily practice; it must not sit on a shelf in a folder.

The Scottish patient safety programme was started to tackle all risks. I came across it as a surgeon, because it was used to tackle surgical errors such as wrong-site surgery and drug errors—patients being given the wrong drug—but it also addressed healthcare-acquired infections and hand hygiene. We had ward champions and unannounced audits carried out by people from other wards. I must say, unfortunately, the worst performers in every audit were the doctors. That is why we had to publish the results, put them on the doors of the ward and literally name and shame. We also did a lot of education with relatives, because they come in from outside. In recent years we have made our hospital grounds smoke-free to try to tackle the issue of staff and patients forming a mug of smoke that people have to walk through to get to the door.

All infection-control measures are brought together in one manual, the “National Infection Prevention and Control Manual”, which means that everything is in one place. If there are five or six different initiatives and guidelines, they can sometimes be slightly different and can end up causing confusion.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the importance of antimicrobial resistance, which will make it harder to tackle infection. Our behaviour in healthcare is helping to drive it. We are threatened by a more complex quality improvement structure makes it easier to share good practice. That is what we are talking about today. We want to see a culture in which every hospital unit, every doctor, every nurse, every person in the theatre, every person in the radiology department, is part of patient safety. In Scotland there are no financial incentives to meet standards, either for the hospital or for the staff; it is just pure clinical competitiveness. Nurses and doctors go to work to do a good job, and if we give them the tools, the education and the training, they will do that. We also have to give them time and support. Having a more complex quality improvement structure makes it easier to share good practice. That is what we are talking about today. We want to see a culture in which every hospital unit, every doctor, every nurse, every person in the theatre, every person in the radiology department, is part of patient safety. In Scotland there are no financial incentives to meet standards, either for the hospital or for the staff; it is just pure clinical competitiveness. Nurses and doctors go to work to do a good job, and if we give them the tools, the education and the training, they will do that. We also have to give them time and support. Having a more complex quality improvement structure makes it easier to share good practice. That is what we are talking about today. We want to see a change in approach, not in a protocol folder on a shelf, but in the DNA of staff.

In Scotland we established the Sepsis Collaborative, which ran from 2012 to 2014. It focused on just one measure: the national early warning system, which was about delivering antibiotics. His contribution was wide-ranging and feuding, and he highlighted the good timing of the debate, given that 5 May is World Hand Hygiene Day. There is a particular focus this year on sepsis, to which a number of hon. Members referred. We should reflect seriously on the staggering figures they mentioned: there are 30 million infections worldwide a year and 44,000 deaths in this country, and we could save between 5 million and 8 million lives a year through greater awareness and control. We all want to tackle sepsis very seriously.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that there will not be any political disagreement today, as we all want the very best outcomes in this area. He was right that good progress has been made, particularly over a longer period, but it could be argued that we have plateaued. The infection rate remains too high. I am sure that we all agree that the figure of 6.4% across the NHS is far too high. He talked about the human and financial cost—he mentioned the figure of £1 billion. He made the fair point that this has downstream effects, as beds are occupied unnecessarily. It is always regrettable if any patient is in a bed because of something avoidable, particularly given that the number of beds across the NHS is at an historic low.
It was pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). She has spoken on a number of occasions about this important subject, and she spoke again about the personal tragedy of her father’s death. She has been a consistent and vigorous campaigner on the issue since she came to this place. This is the first time I have heard in such detail the appalling circumstances surrounding her father’s death and the basic hygiene breaches that took place. I doubt that any member of the public, let alone any trained medical professional, would consider what happened there to be acceptable. That highlights the difficulties we sometimes face in tackling these issues.

The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) made a considered and thoughtful speech about a wide range of issues. He referred to the World Health Organisation’s figures, which suggest that about half of the associated deaths in this country are preventable. He was right to say that in no other area would we be prepared not to tackle such a figure with great vigour. I agree with him that staff are not deliberately flouting hygiene standards, but the pressure of work sometimes means that standards slip. From the vacancy rates referred to by the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Aryshire (Dr Whitford), and from regular staff surveys, we know how much pressure staff are under in the NHS. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted accurately the difficulties with the existing audit processes and how they are not necessarily the best. He summarised perfectly the false comfort that we derive from the belief in 100% compliance rates. We know from what we have heard today that when audits are not taking place, compliance is considerably less than 100%.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) had clearly done a lot of important and excellent research to come up with all those statistics across a whole range of environments. He showed that there is no uniform picture in tackling infection control and suggested that the condition of the buildings might sometimes be an impediment to best practice. He rightly said that that is an area where many things can be learned from across the border, or indeed across the world—best practice should be disseminated.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) talked about the need to reduce hospital admissions as one way of reducing infection rates. He mentioned anaemia in particular: apparently 4 million people have an iron deficiency and anaemia is the fourth most common cause of admission. He also mentioned sepsis and the possible gap in understanding or focus in the NHS, although we have heard today that a lot of awareness-raising is going on in that area.

It has been almost two and a half years since we last discussed this issue—January 2016—so today’s debate provides us with a useful opportunity to take stock of progress. We heard about a number of recent positive initiatives but, as the hon. Member for Strangford highlighted, levels of healthcare-acquired infections remain stubbornly high, and in some cases they are increasing. Reductions in the rates of MRSA and C. diff are welcome, but the increase in MSSA and E. coli over the past five years is worrying. Furthermore, about one in every 16 patients will still acquire an infection while being cared for by the NHS in England, and every one of those infections requires additional NHS resources and, more importantly, leads to great patient discomfort and reduces patient safety.

According to the most recent figures from Public Health England, the fatality rate is 28.1% for MRSA cases, 19.7% for MSSA, 14.7% for E. coli and 15.1% for C. diff. We cannot overstate the seriousness of acquiring one of those infections. Furthermore, the Department of Health and Social Care reported recently that, sadly, E. coli infections led to the death of more than 5,500 patients in 2015, at an estimated cost to the NHS of £2.3 billion. The impact on patients and their families is devastating, while the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance adds to the significance of the issue.

In the US and Europe alone, antimicrobial-resistant infections are estimated to cause more than 50,000 deaths a year, and that figure is projected to increase significantly, as we have heard. A report by the World Health Organisation states that resistance is frequent among bacteria isolated in healthcare facilities, with antibiotic-resistant bacteria causing over half of all surgical site infections. We cannot overstate the importance of tackling the issue.

Healthcare of course carries inherent risks, and even if we were to take every possible preventative step, it would still be possible to acquire an infection. However, as I mentioned last time we discussed the matter, it has been estimated that about 30% of infections could be avoided by better application of existing knowledge and good practice. Much of that improvement could be realised through improved hand hygiene practices. Although we have known that for decades, the method of monitoring hand hygiene in hospitals remains outdated, inaccurate and, as we heard from the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, flawed.

The monitoring method relies on direct observation by nurses, which leads to compliance rates being overstated and takes up hours of nursing time when staff on the wards are already overstretched. Staff naturally wash their hands much more frequently when being observed directly, which results in clearly overstated compliance rates of 90% to 100%. Academic research has found that typical compliance is actually between 18% and 40%. The international best practice to which the hon. Member for Strangford referred demonstrates that electronic monitoring of hand hygiene can decrease the risk of infection by 22%, which would not only save the NHS money, but save lives. We therefore welcomed the November 2016 commitment by the Secretary of State that staff hand hygiene indicators would be published for the first time by the end of 2017. However, as we heard, that deadline has elapsed and we seem to be no nearer to seeing implementation. Will the Minister tell us when we can expect to see the detail of that long-overdue improvement?

On 19 March, in a written response, the Minister mentioned that Public Health England had carried out some initial analysis with the available data, but that the data was incomplete, so it does not truly reflect hand gel usage. I accept that it might not provide an accurate representation of the NHS as a whole, but will the Minister set out what the analysis that he has received has found, and whether any of that information might be useful in the interim until the full dataset is available? Two ongoing pilots into the use of electronic monitoring technology within the NHS have also been mentioned.
Has he made any assessment of those pilots? What plans do the Government have to look at universalising good practice, if it is shown to be as effective as early reports suggest?

As with any type of infection, healthcare-acquired infections can trigger sepsis, particularly in people who are already at risk—for example, those with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, or those who are immuno-compromised, such as those receiving chemotherapy.

The majority of cases do not derive from a hospital setting, but with 150,000 cases a year and 44,000 deaths, many of them preventable, sepsis is a critical safety issue for the NHS. The challenge is to recognise it in its early stages, before multiple organ failure sets in, and to implement rapid treatment. If it is left untreated for hours, the chances of death increase rapidly. Sepsis in its early stages is often dismissed as something less serious, so I ask the Minister to advise us on what processes are in place to monitor patients at risk from sepsis. What steps will he take to ensure that treatment is started without delay?

In conclusion, around the world and in this country we spend vast sums of money on researching innovations to tackle illnesses and improve our welfare, but tackling hospital-acquired infections better would potentially put us in a position to prevent thousands of unnecessary deaths each year through the most basic of steps and the dissemination of best practice.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister to respond to the debate, I remind him gently that it is customary to leave a short period at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to wind up. 10.38 am

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): As always, Mr Howarth, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I join the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate, which provides an opportunity for the House to emphasise the importance of raising standards of infection prevention and control in the NHS. He was kind to pay tribute to the Secretary of State for his work on patient safety, and on putting that front and centre in his priorities. As the hon. Member for Strangford also asked if we could publish more. To pick up on the remarks of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire on the way information is published in NHS Scotland, dialogues are already taking place. I am happy to ask officials to ensure that, as part of the collaboration that is already under way in NHS Improvement with colleagues in the Scotland and England NHS, we look at best practice to ensure that we are working with and maximising the learning from both sets of NHS.

Public Health England has carried out some initial analysis of the available data to determine the suitability of the data available for publishing. Currently, the data is incomplete and will not truly reflect the usage of hand gel. We are exploring how to improve that data. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire commented that transparency on what is being done and on variance in performance around infection rates is a key driver of prevention.

Dr Whitford: The Minister may know that as a breast cancer surgeon, I was involved in developing the breast cancer standards for Scotland. The only action was peer review—putting everyone’s performance up at an annual conference. No one wants to be at the back of the class; in actual fact, seeing genuine performance drives up quality.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is right that peer review is always a powerful motivator. That sort of transparency drives behaviour, so we need to ensure
that we do that in an effective way that does not alarm patient families, because of the publication of data that could be misrepresented by those who have different objectives. The need to get more publication of data is an important point, which the hon. Member for Strangford and others raised, on which we need to do further work.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) asked in his intervention about the specific issue of patients going outside to smoke, and whether there was an associated infection risk, for example through drips. I am advised that there is no additional risk of infection, as long as the drip is well managed. If colleagues have specific issues about the infection risk associated with that, that is the nature of the debate and helpful to know.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andylovich Ross) spoke of the pain and distress to patients caused by infections, and the important link to buildings. Although that is relevant in Scotland, to which he referred, I accept that the point would also apply to the England NHS. The state of the buildings and the maintenance programme have a part to play, not just in the Scottish NHS, but in the England NHS as well.

The hon. Member for Strangford asked whether hand hygiene could be a national marker of care quality. The Department is considering how we could do that effectively. The points he raised were heard and I will ensure that they are addressed. As and when we have any update, I will be very happy to share that with him.

Overall, a great deal of progress has been made. We are committed to reducing the number of infections. Since 2010 we have made excellent progress on MRSA and C. difficile. In the 12 months ending March 2018, MRSA cases were down 54% on the 12 months ending May 2010, and C. difficile infections were down 47%. Considerable progress has been made, but as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned, although we have made progress in slowing the rate of increase of E. coli infections, there is more to be done to bring that rate down. NHS England has the challenging objective to bring that down by 20% as part of its mandate. As a result of slowing that down, there were 2,400 fewer cases of infections than there would have been with the previous trend.

Clearly, there is more to be done on E. coli and it is an area of considerable focus in the team. Those cases also have a fiscal cost of between £3,000 and £7,000 per infection, but the much more material cost is the patient safety issue and the harm that accrues as a result. NHS Improvement is leading this programme, aimed at a 20% reduction in E. coli bloodstream infections in 2018-19. It is an ambitious but important target. NHS Improvement has begun working with the medical director of NHS England, Steve Powis, on setting up pilots with local health economies across England to engage and assist in the reduction. That may be an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) wishes to pick up with me after the debate—how we can work together, given her powerful but extremely sad experience of the events that befell her father.

Colleagues recognised the considerable amount of work on antimicrobial resistance, which is an important factor in treating infections. Our latest estimate is that over five years, there could be an extra 6,000 deaths attributable to pan-antibiotic resistance. Lord O’Neill’s review on AMR said that drug-resistant infections will cost the world 10 million extra deaths a year and $100 trillion by 2050. Those are pretty scary figures, but they underline the importance of preventing infections occurring in the first place.

That brings me on to patient safety. Following the tragic events at Mid Staffordshire and the subsequent public inquiry led by Sir Robert Francis, the NHS embarked on a journey of improvement based upon three strands: better regulation, greater transparency and a culture of learning. Assessing the risk of, and preventing, detecting and controlling the spread of, infections, including those that are healthcare associated, is addressed by the fundamental standards of care, enshrined in regulations, that all Care Quality Commission registered providers are expected to meet. A number of colleagues mentioned the role of the CQC as part of the checks and balances that need to be in place.

In November 2016, the Secretary of State launched new plans to reduce infections in the NHS, including the sepsis commissioning for quality and innovation. Through that, we have incentivised hospitals to improve their sepsis care. Independent CQC inspections have focused on E. coli rates in hospitals and in the community. In addition, we have appointed a national infection prevention lead to ensure a sustained focus at national level, improved training and information sharing, so that NHS staff can cut infection rates and, through the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence’s 2017 guidelines, highlight standard principles and advice on good hygiene.

Considerable progress is being made. Data published in 2017 suggests that four in 10 of all E. coli blood infections cannot be treated with commonly used antibiotics. Infection prevention and control is a key element of tackling antimicrobial resistance, and hand hygiene plays an important part in that. We are working extensively with stakeholders, including the royal colleges, academia and the research community, industry and our expert advisory groups, to inform our next steps.

Several colleagues, including the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, mentioned sepsis. We have made significant progress since our focus to improve sepsis practices increased in January 2015. There is new NICE guidance and a new national CQUIN measure to incentivise providers to improve the identification and timely treatment of sepsis. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire was absolutely right about the time-critical nature of that treatment. That work is already delivering change. The most recent data, which is for the third quarter of 2017-18, shows that emergency department assessment for sepsis has increased from 52% to 92%, and in-patient assessment has increased from 62% to 84% since April 2016.

Considerable progress has been made, which reflects the renewed focus across the NHS, in England and Scotland, on the time-critical nature of sepsis treatment, but we know there is more to do, which is why a new cross-system action plan was launched in September 2017. That plan outlines a range of activities to ensure that the NHS is on the highest possible alert to tackle that devastating condition. Indeed, just recently, on 25 April, NHS Improvement issued a national early warning score 2 patient safety alert to support providers
to adopt the revised NEWS2 to detect deterioration in adult patients, including better identification of patients likely to have sepsis.

My colleague the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), hosted and gave a speech at the launch of Health Education England’s paediatric sepsis e-learning package, which, again, is about raising awareness at an early stage. That training package was informed by clinicians and by parents whose children sadly passed away from sepsis, so we can learn from those tragic events and ensure that warning signs are better picked up at an earlier stage.

As several Members recognised, hand hygiene plays a key role in infection prevention and control, in supporting patient safety and in our efforts to address antimicrobial resistance. Considerable progress has been made—MRSA has more than halved and C. difficile has reduced by just under half since 2010—but, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire rightly said, E. coli remains a key area for renewed focus. We have successfully slowed its growth, but we now need to reduce it significantly. Part of the challenge is that a lot of it occurs outside the hospital setting, in the community.

I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House on this shared objective in an area where shared practice, from both England and Scotland, can help. We can learn from each other and from Members’ experiences in their constituencies. We will continue to embed hand hygiene practice and promote awareness of it in the NHS, not just through World Hand Hygiene Day but through debates such as this one.

10.54 am

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for their significant and helpful contributions. The shadow Minister mentioned that everyone was on the same page and saying the same thing. I love debates of this type, because they show that we can all work in a cross-party way and make significant and helpful contributions. Let me look at the thrust of what we are trying to achieve. We are trying to bring deaths down—we have got them down to a certain level—and to implement a constructive strategy and policy to move forward with diagnosis and monitoring. Members also referred to the desire for increased public focus, and to the failure of buildings.

I am sure Members will not mind me saying that we are blessed to have the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) here. I think we all acknowledge that she brings a wealth of knowledge to this place. I say that sincerely—I mean it, as I think we all do. We can all benefit from what she knows and from what is being done in Scotland.

The Minister told me before the debate that he was standing in for a colleague. He stood in very well, and I thank him for his constructive responses to every one of our comments. Much progress has been made. We are encouraged that a strategy is in place to try rigorously to reduce infection. Members’ contributions were all helpful, constructive and positive, and I hope that the debate leads us to where we all want to be, with disease reduced and perhaps someday done away with in all hospitals. The Minister referred to a shared objective. Yes, everyone in the House has a shared objective, and we all hope that together we can make it happen. I thank each and every Member for their contribution, and I wish them well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered raising standards of infection prevention and control in the NHS.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.
Administration of Justice: Daniel Cresswell

11 am

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the administration of justice in respect of Daniel Cresswell.

I sought this debate to address a plainly wrongful conviction of my constituent, Daniel Cresswell. It is one of the most serious individual miscarriages of justice that has been brought to me about a constituent in more than two decades in Parliament. Every agency, from the investigating officer through to the Crown Prosecution Service and the legally aided defence barrister as well as the route to the Court of Appeal, the Criminal Cases Review Commission and, to some degree, the prison system, have all failed Daniel Cresswell alarmingly.

The assorted oversight systems could not produce any remedy, either. They included the then Independent Police Complaints Commission, West Yorkshire police professional standards department, West Yorkshire police’s operational and political oversight in the form of its chief constable and its police and crime commissioner, the legal ombudsman, the Bar Council and, to date, even the Government as represented by Ministers. The formal purpose of the debate is to invite the Minister, on behalf of the Government, to instruct a judge to review the whole handling of the case, as agencies and their oversight systems have collectively failed. However, I must say I have no expectation that he can or will put a review in hand. Indeed, any number of junior Ministers are responsible for some element of failure in the system that individually they oversee.

I have the highest respect for the Minister selected to reply on behalf of the Government, and I know that today he can only really listen before consulting his colleagues as to whether the Government will act further. My primary objective is for this speech to serve as a point of reference for my constituent as he embarks on his post-prison life. This speech is for him, and I know the Minister will not be too distressed if I take most of the time available.

As Daniel Cresswell seeks to provide for himself and his family, he will be able to evidence that his Member of Parliament is convinced that his conviction is wholly unsound. Any putative employer, friend or acquaintance of Daniel Cresswell should be able to use this speech to understand why any assessment of his character should not carry the burden of the state’s conviction of him for the serious offence of rape that led to a sentence of seven years in prison.

In summary, Daniel Cresswell was fitted up by the female partner of a major debtor of the company that employed him—a debt he was engaged in pursuing. He allowed himself to be manoeuvred into a position whereby the woman spent the night in his hotel room. She made an allegation of rape from what is alleged to have happened when they woke up the following morning. The investigating officer was indolent in the extreme and wholly one-eyed when investigating the complainant’s. The defending barrister chose to present a case that was fatally confused by her own view of how to achieve an acquittal, not the defendant’s own account. All avenues of appeal and accountability were either systemically closed off or wilfully obstructed by oversight systems protecting their own.

What was not established in the investigation and trial process, and should have been, was that the complainant had a motive and created the means and opportunity to make a charge against the investigating officer of a company seeking to recover a debt in excess of £80,000. Equally, having made a serious allegation against a previous employer, her character was not introduced in court.

I will not name the complainant as the law requires. However, I will name deliberately and purposefully under the protection of parliamentary privilege the investigating officer: Detective Constable Clare Barran. I am satisfied that there is a prima facie case not only that she failed in her duty in the pursuit of truth and justice but that she lied both in the signed documentation that supported her investigation and in her testimony at the trial at Leeds Crown court.

I can only headline the key issues in the time available, but they were the subject of a 29-page submission to the IPCC. All attempts to have West Yorkshire police properly review the investigation were obstructed by that force, including by its chief constable, Dee Collins, and the subsequently elected police and crime commissioner, Mark Burns-Williamson.

I had a meeting and correspondence with the then Police Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), around December 2016. He encouraged the family and me to engage the police and crime commissioner as offering an improvement on the then current complaints model, which he described as in need of reform. Our experience has been that this PCC has woefully failed to hold his force to account.

The investigating officer was indolent in the extreme when it came to establishing Daniel Cresswell’s account and wholly one-eyed when investigating the complainant’s. Daniel Cresswell spent 415 days on police bail, and, after a year, the telephone records that would have supported his account, which he sought to hand over to the police—the request was declined—were deleted in the usual way by the telephone company, the police inexcusably having failed to request their protection. The only independent witness was not interviewed for 15 months and, while his recollection will plainly have degraded in that time, the police and CPS between them prevented his statement from being disclosed for a further 3.5 years. The video evidence that my constituent sought to protect as supporting his account of the evening became somehow accidentally and irreparably damaged in police protection.

There is then the issue of the central piece of forensic evidence that involves my constituent’s semen appearing on the complainant’s knickers. His account is that he awoke to find her artificially inducing it. The forensic examination made clear that, “secondary transfer cannot be ruled out”, but DC Barran altered that to, “there is significantly more than mere transference”.

In the words of the forensic scientist “a trace” amount of DNA is termed by DC Barran as “a significant amount”. The complainant’s initial statement that her underwear had been “washed once” was changed by DC Barran to, “washed a number of times”.

Let me turn to Daniel’s representation by his legally aided defence barrister, Fiona Rowling. My review of the case is that her belief was that whatever happened in that hotel room would have been consensual. Therefore, rather than adequately challenging the complainant’s account, or advancing my constituent’s account that he had in fact been indecently assaulted, she attempted to present his account and her belief in parallel. Her performance in front of the jury was described as incoherent and disjointed, and it was muttered and mumbled so quietly and unintelligibly that the disdain and shocked disbelief of the faces of the jurors was conveyed as far as the public gallery. The transcript does not capture the shockingly poor manner of her delivery, which was seen as jaw-droppingly bad, as one member of the jury regarded her with his mouth wide open in astonishment.

Fiona Rowling’s defence strategy had shocked the family when she stated on the first day of the trial that she did not want to make the complainant out to be a liar. Advice was sought from a local Leeds solicitor about whether she could be removed from the case when she refused to follow her client’s instructions. One has sympathy for hard-pressed criminal defence barristers working on legal aid, but that quality of performance cannot be excused or form part of our justice system. Afterwards she asked her client to apologise to his family.

“who may have the impression that that didn’t go very well”. Her performance was the subject of a complaint to her chambers— unsurprisingly that was rejected—followed by a formal complaint to the legal ombudsman, which bewilderingly found her performance “reasonable”. The legal ombudsman offered a final appeal to the Bar Council, but since the legal ombudsman was put in place because of concerns over the adequacy of the Bar Council as the regulator of professional standards, unsurprisingly that did not result in a satisfactory resolution either, and it was formally out of time. This investigation, and particularly the failure of the legal ombudsman to seek first-hand accounts of the woeful inadequacy of Fiona Rowling’s court performance, was another avenue of accountability that was closed to the family by rules and processes, and I hope that a judge reviewing the entire conduct of this case would seek to investigate that fairly.

In the wake of that one-sided investigation and incompetent defence, my constituent found himself sentenced to seven years in prison. That is when his family sought my help, given the administration of his sentence. Unsurprisingly, he maintained his innocence, and here he fell into a very difficult challenge for the prison service: what to do with myriad offenders— particularly those charged with sexual offences—who maintain their innocence? Among their numbers will be men like Daniel Cresswell, whom I believe to be innocent, yet they are now being doubly punished.

For two and a half years I had the pleasure of working with Michael Spurr, Chief Executive of the then National Offender Management Service, as his overseeing Minister. He said in a letter to me that, “in prisons running the sex offender treatment programmes, priority will be given to those who are willing to address their offending behaviour. Mr Cresswell is maintaining his innocence of the offences for which he is currently imprisoned and he is not ready to participate in a programme solely designed to address his sexual offending”.

DC Barran signed a certification on 3 August 2013 saying that she,

“is not withholding any evidence that will support the defence”,

yet her own notes clearly show that she was aware on 28 May 2013 that the forensic science officer, having received new evidence, had concluded that either party could be telling the truth. Although that shows that DC Barran was aware the forensic science officer accepted that Mr Cresswell could be innocent, she withheld that information from the defence for 13 months, disclosing it only immediately before the trial. I happen to believe that that fatally misled the defence barrister on the strategy she should have employed for the trial. The original statement from the forensic science officer—which DC Barran knew was wrong—was submitted to the CPS and defence along with the above-mentioned certification in August 2013. It was only after 3.5 years that it emerged that she had conducted an interview with Dean Sygrove, the only first-hand witness, which was also not disclosed to the defence.

All the failures of the police investigation served to aid the prosecution and harm the defence. Had the actual evidence as to the course of events that led to my constituent and the complainant being together in the hotel room been disclosed, my constituent’s account would have been supported and the credibility of the claimant would have been undermined. What limited evidence there was from the hotel room received the same biased treatment.

We should at least understand the wider climate in which this police officer was operating: the climate in which DC Barran left my constituent on police bail for 415 days and took 15 months to interview the only first-hand witness, and where, contrastingly, she took one day to seek what she believed was confirmatory evidence for the claimant from the hotel. Ironically, I left office as the Minister for Criminal Justice in September 2012, two weeks after this alleged offence was reported to the police. I was well aware of the public policy anxiety to improve the number of convictions arising from complaints of rape to the police and indeed to support and encourage victims of rape to make those complaints to the police. This was not a climate created by Alison Saunders, the retiring Director of Public Prosecutions, but it was rocket charged under her term of office. Given today’s circumstances, with the discrediting of so many high-profile sexual offence investigations having revealed the one-sided and one-eyed way in which the police and prosecution have sought to deliver convictions and not give the defence the benefit of the information they hold, I personally think it is inconceivable that this case would now pass muster even to arrive at a decision to charge.

Alison Saunders’s recent claim that there are no people in prison today as a result of failures to disclose evidence on the part of the CPS must be nonsense. First, she cannot know, and secondly, the first-hand experience of my constituent plainly suggests otherwise. Daniel Cresswell is another victim of the enthusiasm to improve the conviction rate in rape trials. However, it is the interest of justice that has been sacrificed in this process, along with Daniel Cresswell’s liberty for three and a half years and his future reputation, which this speech is designed to at least alleviate.
As such, Mr Cresswell was detained in a prison much further from his home than would otherwise have been the case. His family visits were impacted as a consequence, and that also appears to have been used as a lever to try to get him to co-operate with his sentence plan—a position that to him was plainly impossible.

In my letter to Michael Spurr of 23 November 2014, I made a suggestion as to how the situation could be improved for non-compliant convicted sex offenders. Regrettably, however, given the litany of different parts of the justice system that need a reference in this time-limited speech, I cannot develop those thoughts further here. However, given the Minister’s responsibility, I am sure that he will give the matter the thought it deserves. I believe it is a growing systemic problem, given the number of sex offenders in custody, alongside our enthusiasm—understandable in many ways—to improve the conviction rate in rape trials. Given the way that such trials are now being conducted, the possibility of convictions such as that handed to Daniel Cresswell should give us pause for thought about the administration of justice.

After a wrongful conviction, the usual course would be to go to the Court of Appeal. An appeal must be made on the facts and points of law, but given the circumstances of this case and the finding of facts by the jury, the family were advised—almost certainly correctly—that the chance of success at the Court of Appeal was frighteningly small. Therefore, two routes were pursued: an attempt to hold the investigation to account by seeking an investigation by the West Yorkshire police professional standards department, and what is known as a “non-appeal application” to the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

The formal complaint to West Yorkshire police was made in December 2014, and after five months of no progress, the family sought help from the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the police and crime commissioner. That eventually led to an investigating officer being appointed, and throughout 2015 and into 2016 the inquiry was prodded by Daniel Cresswell’s father-in-law, Richard Cordle, who is a retired police officer. It is entirely down to Richard Cordle, who had the expertise to understand the failures in the police investigation system and—happily for Daniel—the time and determination to bring West Yorkshire police to account, that the quality of evidence about the investigation and the rest is so convincing. Indeed, it has completely convinced me of the inadequacy of the entire investigation process.

There is an unhappily fat file on the to-ing and fro-ing between the police force, Mr Cordle and the IPCC, which was occasionally reinforced by letters from me to the chief constable, inviting her to give the matter her personal attention. Any review of the process will demonstrate that this was a police force protecting its own, given that the investigating officer could potentially be facing a trial for perverting the course of justice. That conclusion is supported by the fact that an investigation did not proceed on the basis of such seriousness; it is supported by the failure of the police to interview their officer under caution, and by the delay and obfuscation of the professional standards department and the chief constable. That was topped off by the inaction of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which culminated in letters from me to Dame Anne Owens that even today remain unanswered.

In parallel to that was the route taken to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Understandably, the work of the CCRC is of particular interest to those trying to reverse an injustice. Through the United Against Injustice conference, and the claims of the erudite CCRC spokesman, David James Smith, the family gained encouragement about the powers that the CCRC could employ on their behalf to gain access to undisclosed and securely held material post trial—material that they would not otherwise know about or have access to. However 16 months after embarking on the CCRC route, they were told that it would not utilise those powers on a “fishing expedition”. The family feel utterly let down by the CCRC and are left with the belief that its function is to provide closure and to protect the status quo within the justice system.

Meanwhile, the lack of progress consumed almost half of my constituent’s time in custody. Every day of delay by the CCRC, the IPCC and the PSD of West Yorkshire police made the practical benefits of a remedy—Daniel’s release from his custodial sentence—less meaningful. The family maintain that the CCRC’s failings are borne out in the statistics—in its own headline figures. I welcome the newly created all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice, chaired by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), which aims to campaign to improve the lot of the wrongly convicted, and reform the appeal system. Mr Cresswell’s family are now involved with that.

Stymied by a police force that will not investigate its own, by a police and crime commissioner who refuses to hold his own police force to account, by an Independent Police Complaints Commission that failed to get another force to investigate West Yorkshire police, by the actions of West Yorkshire police, and by the inability of the justice system as it is currently administered, my constituent has almost no effective remedy left. I understand that consideration is being given to finding out whether an out of time approach to the Court of Appeal might be possible. However, given the advice that has been received and the record of the Court of Appeal in cases such as this, personally I doubt the likelihood of success by that route.

Daniel is now out of prison and trying to rebuild his life. I am delighted that he has started so successfully. It is the purpose of this speech to be a published point of reference to my belief in my constituent’s innocence of the charge for which he was sentenced to seven years in prison. It is also my hope that those in a position to help him in future, in employment or in any other way, will pay due attention to this review of the multiple failures of our system of justice. Daniel Cresswell has been poorly served by the justice system, and I hope that this speech will help him to put the experience behind him. He has, however, been incredibly well served by the unstinting love and support of his family, who have enabled me to make this case and this speech for him today.

11.22 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). That was a tribute by Dame Anne Owens, a powerful and heartfelt speech. I had the opportunity to meet Mr Cresswell and his family briefly beforehand, and I join my hon. Friend in paying particular tribute to Mrs Cresswell.
and her parents for the extraordinary compassion, faith and energy that they have put into the case over so many years. My hon. Friend raised a number of serious issues and it is difficult for me to go through every one in turn, but serious allegations were made against the police, the lawyer, the court process and the way evidence was used, West Yorkshire police, the police and crime commissioner, the Crown Prosecution Service and, ultimately, the Prison Service.

It is, as you will be aware, Mr Howarth, a very important principle of English law that Justice Ministers do not comment on individual cases. For better or for worse, for 1,000 years the principle of this building has been that judges and juries are independent of politicians, and therefore I am not able in this case to comment on what happened in that courtroom. The grounds for appeal, as my hon. Friend pointed out, cannot be that the jury came to the wrong decision; the appeal can be made only on the basis of new evidence or a legal error. That has been central to this case.

Perhaps I may touch on the broader issue of miscarriage of justice in general and on the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice that has been set up. There is no doubt that miscarriage of justice does occur, and as the Ministry of Justice, we need to be aware of that. We have seen it in high-profile cases, such as that of the Birmingham Six. Research in the United States suggests that between 2.3% and 5% of convicted people in American prisons are in fact innocent. We need to take that very seriously, in thinking about our entire legal system. Miscarriage of justice can happen for a range of different reasons. It can happen directly through perjury. I am not in a position to comment on the present case, but we must be aware that there are cases of perjury by victims or by police officers. There can be issues to do with insufficient evidence, or with expert testimony. There can be instances of confirmation bias—people's prejudices affecting the outcome of a case. A good, functioning legal system—and the British legal system has for 1,000 years had reason to pride itself on being one of the best legal systems in the world—has to remain ever-vigilant for these dangers of miscarriage of justice. Although Mr Cresswell has now served his term it is very important, for the sake of others who in future might go through such a situation, that we are absolutely rigorous about making sure that miscarriages of justice do not occur.

I take my hon. Friend's speech very seriously. I will circulate it to my colleagues in both the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, to ensure that everybody dealing with the police, with the Crown Prosecution Service, with the operation of legal aid and ultimately with the prison system, is aware of the very serious allegations that have been made today. I want to conclude with a strong tribute to Mrs Cresswell for all the energy, faith and compassion that she has shown, and to my hon. Friend for the compassion and energy that he has shown in presenting his constituent's case.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.
than ever to equip as many people as possible—young and old—with at least some basic knowledge about our legal system and their legal responsibilities as well as their rights.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this important debate. As a former family lawyer for 23 years—that takes me back—I recognise the arguments he is making and will make. Does he agree that a public legal education programme should also focus on our diverse communities up and down the country, where language can often be an issue and a barrier?

Mr Jayawardena: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. She has been a champion of greater diversity, and she is of course right that we should not exclude any community from the legal system. I will deal with those points later also. PLE, where it is implemented, provides people of all ages and backgrounds with awareness, knowledge and understanding. As a Conservative, I believe in people—the duty, desire and ability of people to look after themselves, their families and one another. PLE helps people do just that. It gives them the confidence to do it, and to gain the skills they need to deal with disputes and gain access to justice, in consequence improving the accuracy, efficacy and fairness of our justice system.

Equally important, however, is that PLE helps people to recognise when they may need support, what sort of advice is available and how to go about getting it, giving people their independence. In other words, I believe it can create less Government intervention in people’s lives, allowing them to get on with living their own good lives where they cause no harm to others.

Above all, PLE enables people to become fully participating citizens in our big society, whether through jury service or by serving as a magistrate, which I am proud to say my father has done for around 15 years, instilling in me the same example of those values of public service and participation in the legal system as colleagues here in Parliament do. PLE increases citizens’ knowledge of this mother of all Parliaments, the birthplace of parliamentary democracy, where we make the laws that others implement. It increases political engagement and, I hope, will increase representation.

Without understanding how our legal system works—without understanding actions and their consequences—people cannot live John Stuart Mill’s harm principle or understand the realist decisions that politicians must make. Without proper PLE, people vote for—dare I say—wishful thinking policies, borrowing potentially trillions of pounds more on our country’s credit card without thinking through what it really means. PLE and public financial education are similar and equally important, but I fear that PLE is often the forgotten half of that important paradigm.

One of the most important groups for us to reach with PLE is young people. Good PLE in schools will develop, by extension, fully participating citizens, who have the tools to confidently engage in our democratic parliamentary system under the rule of law, and therefore citizens who do not respond to views different from their own with violence such as we saw in the 2011 London riots, or by potentially no-platforming public speech as others do, or indeed by demanding a second referendum to overthrow the democratically expressed will of the British people without any consideration for the other side of the argument. Who knows? Some might even be encouraged to pursue law as a career—I should say that my wife is a non-practising solicitor—helping to expand the capacity of the UK’s world-leading services industry and, consequently, our economy.

Organisations such as the Citizenship Foundation have been working in hundreds of schools and colleges for almost 30 years to help deliver an important part of citizenship education. By helping legal professionals to partner with schools and young people and helping teachers to deliver engaging citizenship education, they aim to help “young people to understand their rights and responsibilities as active citizens”.

Pupils at schools in my North East Hampshire constituency benefit, too. One of the Citizenship Foundation’s PLE initiatives is an annual mock trial competition, run in conjunction with Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service, with Hampshire heats, including a magistrates mock trial at Winchester Crown court, a Southampton heat and Bar mock trials at nearby Reading and Guildford. Thousands of pupils take on the various roles involved in criminal cases, such as prosecutors, witnesses, defendants, court clerks and jurors, and learn skills such as advocacy, public speaking, cross-examination and critical thinking, as well as understanding how the court system works.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the experiences of his constituents, but does he agree that while it is a very good thing for people to know their rights, being able to enforce them in a real court is what really matters, and that the Government’s cuts to legal aid and court closures have cut people’s ability to do that?

Mr Jayawardena: It is a shame that some people have to play politics on a day when we can commend the work of outside organisations that are doing much good work in schools, in my constituency and others. Indeed, by encouraging more young people to understand their legal position, I hope—I have mentioned it already and I mention it again—that more people will be able to take the right action, so that they need not face action in the courts. I think we can actually help people to help themselves to better understand their position in the legal system, and to find where they can get the advice they need.

If the hon. Lady will allow me to continue, I think it is absolutely fantastic that legal professionals, who are the experts in this area, are so involved. The cases in those mock trials are heard in front of real judges and magistrates, who give feedback to the teams. Some 2,000 legal professionals, including solicitors and barristers, volunteer their time to support these events. As Members of Parliament, I think we have a platform to encourage more dedicated legal professionals to get involved and to support those initiatives—indeed, to commend those initiatives and thank them for what they do.

Another example of a great PLE initiative that we need to see more of, and which might help to address the point raised by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), is the legal branch of the Experts in Schools scheme. The scheme trains volunteer professionals from the Citizenship Foundation’s 40 corporate legal
partners and matches them with schools, where they deliver sessions on subjects relevant to young people, such as social media or consumer rights.

As well as providing classroom resources for topical legal issues and immersion conferences led by leading barristers, the Citizenship Foundation wants to reach young people directly. It produces a pocket-sized guide to the law—“Young Citizen’s Passport”—which is now in its 17th edition. Millions of copies have been distributed. I put a call out here and now to fellow Members to encourage our generous and fantastically civic-minded law firms up and down the country, and indeed the wider voluntary sector, to consider whether they can help with this in the years ahead.

Other organisations also have worthy PLE initiatives, such as BPP University’s Streetlaw programme. Showing them and potential for everyone to succeed, BPP University law students research, design, draft and deliver interactive presentations on the law to community groups that might not have access to legal information or education, or to those groups that may have a negative perspective of the legal system. Those can include basic presentations on civil and criminal rights to primary and secondary school classes in disadvantaged communities, helping children to learn about the legal system, the courts and the people who appear in them in an interesting and enjoyable way, as the group is currently doing across London. At the other end of the spectrum, I would contend, they can be presentations to enhance prisoners’ understanding of the role that law plays in civic society while imparting general legal information, with the aim of equipping prisoners with the skills and knowledge that will facilitate their reintegration into society upon their release. Those are absolutely critical in ensuring that no one is left behind.

BPP University also has a third branch of the scheme that works with several shelters and charities to provide highly practical presentations to homeless people, who are sadly part of the group of people who are largely sceptical of the English legal system. That takes us back to the principles that I voiced at the start: helping people to help themselves, empowering people to become fully participating members of society and allowing people to live their own lives within the law.

These smart initiatives I have highlighted make a great start, but we must do more to provide a legal foundation that stays with people throughout their lives. That is why I regularly speak to pupils at my own local schools about democratic engagement, and why I participate in schools’ citizenship events, such as the model United Nations. I know that many Members do likewise, and I encourage all Members to do so. I also regularly speak to the headteachers of my local schools, and I will raise PLE with them in the months and years ahead to encourage participation in all the great schemes that I have highlighted.

However, I believe that Members of Parliament can go further. We should strongly encourage local schools to make time for initiatives from local charities, even if they do not have time to teach the full citizenship course. Academy trusts, for example, could create the resources to provide such PLE and other citizenship education centrally and then alternate between which of their schools they direct that resource to. Indeed, they could share those resources with neighbours and vice versa.

Further, the Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement recommended a statutory entitlement to citizenship education from primary education to the end of secondary education, inspected by Ofsted. I am not here to make the argument that statutory involvement by the state is the way forward, although, as with any instance of major market failure, if the teaching of PLE, citizenship and fundamental British values should fade, the Government should rightly consider the good that they could do by stepping in.

However, we miss the point if we talk only about schools. PLE is not just about schools. It can be, and is being, delivered in all sorts of community settings to interested groups by members of the legal profession, but we must not reach interested groups only. There are a range of vulnerable or at-risk communities for whom a greater understanding of their rights, responsibilities and risks is really important.

For example, with our ever-aging population, the elderly are vulnerable to doorstep, phone or online scams, as are we all. In Hampshire in January, a fake detective sergeant, allegedly from the Met, conned a lady in her 70s out of more than £10,000 after phoning her continuously—harassing her, in effect—and sending a courier to her house to supposedly investigate counterfeit money.

There exist phishing, smishing and vishing, and we expect our vulnerable communities to keep up without providing them with PLE. We can do more. The disabled, those with mental health problems, the isolated and lonely and other vulnerable groups also face risks. We are seeing more instances of cuckooing, where gangs travel to towns and befriend vulnerable people, only to take over their homes. That is not good enough. We must do more.

Educating people and their friends, family and neighbours in the signs to look out for and their responsibilities to help one another would help to protect people and help fulfil the duty I talked about earlier—people looking after themselves, their families and their communities. As Sir Robert Peel said when he founded the Metropolitan Police in 1829, as a Conservative, the founding principles of policing a democracy are that, “the police are the public and the public are the police”.

Everyone has a role.

I have highlighted a whole range of great voluntary sector PLE initiatives and great engagement from the legal professions—both as part of and in addition to their pro bono community work. PLE has links with the school curriculum, police engagement and scam-awareness initiatives, and I commend the Solicitor General for spearheading important work to co-ordinate and focus PLE, so that it reaches as many communities as possible. I am not alone in doing so; his efforts have been commended by the voluntary organisations that I have heard from. Clearly, better co-ordination of PLE initiatives and goals will ensure that everyone works together more effectively. His working group of professional and voluntary organisations does just that. He is doing good work, and may it continue.

Just as with health education or financial education, the long-term effects of public legal education include: fully participating, responsible and engaged citizens;
better-functioning public services which are under less pressure and are better able to target resources; and potential savings for the public purse. The British justice system is held up as a shining example across the world. If that alone was not a reason to shout about it from the rooftops—educating the public about its benefits—then improving the accuracy and the fairness of its outcomes must be.

Greater PLE would improve our legal system by ensuring better educated and engaged jurors. It would improve our legal system by creating confident witnesses, aware of the importance of their testimony and often supported factually and emotionally by the Citizens Advice witness service. It would improve our legal system by bringing about the wider participation, and therefore better representation, of communities, as a result of citizens acting as magistrates, for example. It would improve our legal system by helping victims to recognise that they need support and enabling them to seek it in the right places, rather than their circumstances going unreported and unresolved. It would also improve our legal system in many, many other ways.

I am very pleased that we have been granted the opportunity to discuss the excellent PLE already going on in our country. However, I believe that it is more important than ever to equip as many people as possible with knowledge about their legal responsibilities—as well as their rights—under our great British legal system.

2.49 pm

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), partly because this debate has been an education for me. When I was growing up, as the son of a bus driver, in a typical Irish community in Birmingham, I aspired to be a JCB driver, largely because the people I saw around me were involved in construction of some sort and it is easy to aspire to be something that we can see.

I managed to spend a considerable portion of my life without interacting with lawyers of any sort, and when I did, I saw that largely as a negative thing. When I was purchasing a house, I clearly needed to use the services of a conveyancing solicitor. Once we have settled on a house that we think we can afford to buy, all of a sudden there are additional costs that need to be built into that model, so the cost increases and I think, “Oh my god, I have had to pay for this service that I didn’t think I needed and I have paid what felt like an unreasonable fee for it, and these posh lawyers are the people who benefit from it.” Little did I know that although good legal advice is expensive, bad legal advice can be very expensive. Only later did I come to appreciate just how brilliant some people in the legal profession can be, and just how necessary.

The next time that I engaged with solicitors was perhaps even less fortunate—it was when I was getting divorced. Again, the process seemed to cost me considerably more money than I had thought it would. It was an already perilous position to be in, but I needed to engage lawyers at least to mitigate the loss that I was experiencing. My point is that, clearly, if people do not engage with the law and solicitors except at a time when they are absolutely necessary to them in order to navigate life, their experience of them might be fairly negative.

Why do I make this introduction? I do so because I believe that I am the Conservative MP who represents the most deprived constituency represented by a Conservative MP. I believe that approximately 25% of my constituents do not have a passport. They certainly do not have high levels of education and they will definitely not be meeting solicitors or other legal professionals as a matter of course, so the law is, I imagine, probably something for them to fear. If people do not know it, do not understand it and are not aware of what their obligations are under it, life is likely to be all the more difficult, so for me, part of the reason for being excited about the concept of public legal education is the opportunity that it will give me, as an MP, to enhance my engagement with schools in my constituency and also, hopefully, to engage with legal practices in Walsall and give them the opportunity to come into schools and educate young people.

The reason for that is twofold. First, if people are introduced to the law and legal professionals and become more familiar with them, their greater understanding will allow them, I hope, to navigate the law more easily on their own and, should they need to engage professional legal services, they are likely to be better informed as to where to find them. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the idea that schools interacting with legal firms will give young people, particularly those in my constituency, the opportunity to aspire to be something brilliant.

Since I have become more engaged with lawyers—let us face it: an awful lot of them end up becoming MPs—I have developed greater respect for the profession. We do not see them as people who are just going to take our money off us; they are actually nice people, deep down inside, and very useful. Many of them have great careers. What a unique thing for people in my constituency to aspire to.

Before I came to the Chamber this afternoon, I was speaking to some people from Lloyds Banking Group about a programme called Women in the Real Economy. The idea is that 10 MPs will be mentoring young people—young women—who otherwise would not have access to the networks and opportunities that might be naturally available to more middle-class families. What a great programme that is. We will be working in pairs—it will be me and a representative from Lloyds bank—to help those young women to develop skills and talents that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to develop. How great, then, that the timely arrival of this debate means that I have learned from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire about a number of the programmes that are available to schools and that I can engage some of those young women in them, so that they not only can aspire to great careers in professional commerce—as they might do through Lloyds Banking Group—but can be given some introduction to the law and perhaps, therefore, go on to pursue a career in law in future.

I wholly endorse the concept of the programme under discussion—the idea that we might educate people sooner and quicker. Young people will not be frightened of the law, but will have a grounding in it and a basic understanding of it and their obligations under it, but more importantly for me, the idea that some of them may go on to aspire to become legal professionals in the future is a great endorsement of this programme.
2.55 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard; I am not entirely sure that I have done so before. It is wonderful to see you in the Chair today.

I thank my geographical neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), for calling the debate, because it has given me, like my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), an opportunity to look more closely at the work that the Solicitor General has been driving forward in this sphere. I shall speak particularly from the experience that I have had over recent years chairing the Women and Equalities Committee, which has given me an insight into things that I would like to draw on today. Of course, with the Solicitor General in his place, I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done here. As a solicitor, he might be forgiven for am sure. I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done in this area. As a solicitor, he might be forgiven for thinking that all of us know about these things.

The other critical part of the law is the political will to ensure that laws have the intended effect. Having been a Minister and been privileged enough to take laws through this place, I know only too well how they can sometimes not have the impact that we want them to have. One law that I believe has had a significant impact, although it probably still needs to go further, is the Equality Act 2010. It has had a significant impact, but we need to do much more to ensure that it has the political effect that was intended at the time. I think this is where public legal education can come into play.

I wholeheartedly welcome this debate, the concept of public legal education and the excellent work that the Solicitor General is doing. Will he explain how what
he is doing sits alongside the role of regulators, such as the Solicitors Regulation Authority, which has a statutory duty to promote the public understanding of citizens' legal rights and duties? We recently had an opportunity to hear from the Solicitors Regulation Authority in one of our Select Committee hearings. I hope that the SRA will look more closely at this area in the future, particularly given the problems that many people are having with the way in which their employers may be using the law, which is not always as transparent as it should be. Many laws require people to know that they exist before they can come into effect, nowhere more so than when it comes to equality rights. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire for bringing this issue to the attention of the House. I will listen carefully to the Solicitor General’s response, to hear whether he feels there is more he could do when it comes to the understanding of equality law as well.

3.5 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) for introducing this pertinent debate. When I was asked to speak on this yesterday, not having a legal background, I must admit that I found the issue a bit daunting, until I looked into what it was actually about. It is very simple indeed. It is about citizens’ awareness of public legal procedures. It turned out—quite remarkably—that I am actually a patron of a public legal education entity, the Mason Hayes Charitable Trust, which is run by Marcus Hayes of Mason Hayes Solicitors. We work with the University of Sussex, placing law students and lawyers in primary and secondary schools, mainly in the Midlands. We bring some of the law students into Parliament to learn about how the law is made in this place and the ways in which we can enhance parliamentary process. We bring them in to show them exactly how laws are made here. We are linked to this issue. It is important that we reach out to the public to show them that the law is not something to be frightened of. The law plays into our everyday lives. All of us will have to use the services of a lawyer at one time or another. It is important that we teach our citizens how to access that market and that part of our society.

My son, Thomas, who is a postgraduate law student at BPP, participates in the StreetLaw programme, run by BPP’s pro bono centre. He goes out to schools and teaches young people how to access the law, what the law is about and how it functions in our everyday lives. These are important issues that we have to cover. In my Morecambe constituency, we have many fine law firms—too many to list, and it would be inappropriate to single out any one of them—that do the same thing. It is good to know that the law profession is giving something back to the citizens who support and use them. I ask the Minister, how can we enhance this going forward? It should not be seen as a scary subject, as I thought it was when my colleague approached me to talk about it. It is not a scary subject, as I have explained. I am involved in it and I did not even know I was involved in it, not only as a Member of Parliament, but as a citizen. I wholeheartedly endorse public legal education. We should do this in a fashion that helps the society we are making in this great country.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on securing this important debate. I am fortunate indeed to have been surrounded by the law for the past 30 years, from studying it as a 16-year-old for A-level and going on to study at degree level to becoming a barrister and spending 18 years as a lawyer, and then in the past three years trying to help make the law in this place. In a way, this debate is about how we can help young people ensure that they never have to come across somebody like me. I believe absolutely passionately that young people should be put in a position where they can understand rights and wrongs, rights and responsibilities and the way to settle disputes without the need for them to escalate. That is why I am passionate about the concept of public legal education in our schools. I feel to a certain extent that we are almost there, and this is the bit I want to reference with respect to the Minister.

A year or so ago, I served on the Children and Social Work Bill Committee, and a big discussion was held on personal, social and health and economic education. It came up in a narrow fashion because the discussion was about sex and relationship education and whether that should be a compulsory curriculum subject. In my mind, there was a great opportunity to go broader than that to teach our young people something wider than the citizenship curriculum subject that we have at the moment.

Citizenship is a hugely important subject that covers the rule of law, the ability to articulate debate, volunteering, and how to plan one’s life in future, but it could be so much more, and public legal education could easily fold into that. Although it has been confirmed for primary schools that compulsory relationship education will come in—and for secondary schools, sex and relationship education—by September 2019, I think we are somewhat in the dark as to what will occur to the concept of PSHE on a wider basis. I would like to see PSHE established on a compulsory footing, but I would also want to make sure that we do not overload our schools with yet another subject in the curriculum.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is making an extremely important speech. The law is already there; the Secretary of State has put in place a law that can make PSHE compulsory. It just needs to be enacted. I hope my hon. Friend welcomes that, because the Government have actually done something that had been not done for 17 years by Governments of successive colours.

Huw Merriman: It will be down to the Minister to confirm this, but my understanding is that although there has been some form of commitment—we are absolutely clear as to what has been brought in for primaries and secondaries with regard to compulsory relationship education—so far that clarity has not been given for the wider PSHE. I look to the Minister to confirm that, but my research, certainly from February, tells me that that was indeed the case, and that is the commitment I want to see from the Government.

On the current challenges for teachers, I have long taken the view that while it is essential to get the basics of English and maths right in our primary schools—we
have known for many years that they have failed in that regard—I feel that there is a strong emphasis on those two subjects and they lead to the exclusion in some schools or a lack of attention in others regarding the wider curriculum subjects that will give our young children and pupils the ability to navigate their way through the challenges of life, which is as essential as giving them the basics in English and maths.

I will not delay any further. I know that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who speaks with great knowledge on this matter, has had to cross out part of her speech, so I hope she will get some time back. I look forward to hearing from the Minister as to whether PSHE will be introduced and whether that gives us a golden opportunity to advance public legal education within that sphere.

3.13 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to follow my hon. Friend, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who secured this debate. Like others who have spoken, I too had to educate myself on this subject before I came to speak in this debate. It is really important to welcome the work that the Government are doing in setting up a public legal education panel because the law can appear very complex and intimidating, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not as lucky to be as educated as we in this Chamber are.

The trouble with the law, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) has referenced, is that it tends to affect us at the times in our lives when we are undergoing a lot of stress because of life events that come at us out of the blue, such as divorce or bereavement. It has touched me recently in the case of my mother, who is a dementia sufferer. I have had to apply for a lasting power of attorney and go through an entire process, which has been extremely difficult and complicated. There has been help for me, which I have welcomed, but I think a lot of people struggle with such concepts at difficult times in their lives.

We live in a society where there are still a lot of myths around the law. One area is very important. Women still sometimes believe in the concept of common law marriage, which is a concept with nothing behind it, yet sometimes people believe that they have some rights and protections in a relationship. They find out when it is much too late that they do not have protections and are left in a devastating financial position, sometimes losing access to their property or their children. I very much hope that the concept of public legal education can reach out to all areas of society and help people when they have tragic and difficult life events.

I am delighted, like other hon. Members, to mention the work that the Government have done to protect the elderly. My mother, who is a dementia sufferer, has mentioned, and she was right to do so. There are many small business employers—I was one myself—who feel terrified of battling with employment law, and better awareness in that regard would help them as well as the employees whom she talked about in detail. I will conclude so that others can speak, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire for securing the debate.

3.18 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on securing this important debate and on speaking so well in it. I do not want to be a churl, but I have to correct something that he said when he referred to the British legal system. It is not a nationalist point I am making. I can assure him that many of my colleagues at the Scottish Bar who are members of the Conservative and Unionist party would be just as anxious to say that there is of course a separate legal system in Scotland.

Mr Jayawardena: I was, of course, simply waiting for the hon. and learned Lady to call me out on that point.

Joanna Cherry: I should nevertheless declare an interest as a member of the Scottish Bar of some 20-odd years’ standing, although I have not practised since I was...
I am very proud that in Scotland I benefited from a free legal education. That was back in the 1980s, but law students in Scotland still benefit from the fact that there are no tuition fees there. It makes law more readily accessible to people from poorer backgrounds, although there is a lot of work to be done on that. I want to come on to discuss what my profession is doing, in the Faculty of Advocates and the Law Society of Scotland, to encourage people from more diverse backgrounds to enter the profession. In Scotland, public legal education starts at an early age because the study of human rights is part of the curriculum for excellence in Scottish schools. It is part of the core element.

3.21 pm

_Sitting suspended for a Division in the House._

3.38 pm

_On resuming—_

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): For the sake of clarity, this debate may now run until 4.17 pm, and the sitting as late as 5.50 pm, unless there are more Divisions in the House—that is not currently anticipated, but who knows?

Joanna Cherry: As I was saying, public legal education in Scotland begins at an early stage. Human rights is part of the curriculum for excellence that is taught in Scottish schools, and it is a core element of the health and wellbeing module of that curriculum. Schools in Scotland work in collaboration with organisations such as Amnesty International to deliver the human rights element of the curriculum.

I am a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which is carrying out an inquiry into the enforcement of human rights and attitudes towards them. Last week, we heard evidence from a number of witnesses who said that there is a demonstrably different discourse about human rights in Scotland. They put that down to the teaching of human rights in Scottish schools, as well as to media in Scotland, which are less hostile to the concept of human rights.

Good human rights practice in Scotland flows from that less hostile environment towards human rights. The witnesses giving evidence to our Joint Committee last week gave an example of that the embedding of human rights in the new Social Security (Scotland) Bill, which I am proud was introduced by my good friend and colleague Jean Freeman, the Minister for Social Security in Scotland.

The witnesses also spoke of the wonderful work done by the Scottish Youth Parliament on legal education and rights. The Scottish Youth Parliament is a grassroots project—run in conjunction with the Scottish Parliament—that does a lot of good work in the area of human rights principles and children’s rights.

I am sure that other hon. Members present will, like me, have in their constituencies schools that are part of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools project. I am advised that 1.5 million children across the United Kingdom go to a rights respecting school. I am proud that I have worked with two schools in my constituency, Redhall School and Oxgangs Primary School, on rights respecting. The children were particularly interested in the importance of respecting the rights of child refugees.

Why teach human rights, and indeed legal education, in school? Scotland’s curriculum for excellence aims to enable students to become responsible citizens. As other hon. Members have said, learning about the law, rights, respect for others, and a commitment to participate in all aspects of public life helps children to grow up and aspire to be good citizens.

Students across Scotland, particularly law students, are involved in the delivery of public legal education through the Scottish Universities Law Clinic network. A number of universities in Scotland run free legal advice clinics for members of the public.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. and learned Lady is making some good points. She is absolutely right that a lot of law students can give their free time to such projects, but is there not a real problem in that some of the bigger law firms do not sign up to pro bono work and do not free up their solicitors to spend time in schools or to do other important pro bono work? What are her thoughts on dealing with that?

Joanna Cherry: I very much encourage those who have benefited from a free legal education in Scotland and beyond, and who are now doing well out of being lawyers, to engage in pro bono work. I am proud that the Faculty of Advocates and the Law Society of Scotland do that and encourage firms and individual advocates in Scotland to do it too. I will return to that in a moment.

The Edinburgh Napier law clinic is in my constituency. Edinburgh Napier University is a relatively recent deliverer of legal education in Scotland, but I am proud to say that staff and students have set up a voluntary clinic to provide free legal advice and assistance. We have a considerably more generous legal aid scheme in Scotland than in England and Wales, but nevertheless people fall through the cracks, and they can benefit from law clinics such as the one established by Edinburgh Napier University. One of the clinic’s main objectives is to broaden the concept of access to justice, and that is really what this debate is about, at least in part. Public legal education is about educating people and giving them access to justice.

I am also proud that Edinburgh University, which is not in my constituency but is my alma mater, has a free legal advice clinic, as does Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of Strathclyde, Aberdeen University, Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen and the University of the West of Scotland. Those law clinics are thriving. Many MPs and Members of the Scottish Parliament refer their constituents to them from time to time.

The Faculty of Advocates, which is the Scottish Bar, of which I am a member, also runs a law clinic or a free legal services unit, which is part of its commitment to promote access to justice. That means that members of
the public can be referred through certain organisations, such as citizens advice bureaux, to get free advice and representation from practising advocates in Scotland.

Jim Shannon: Has the hon. and learned Lady experienced the issue of local citizens advice bureaux being deluged with personal independence payment and employment and support allowance forms? In a great many cases, they find themselves unable to give that legal advice because of the change in the benefits system.

Joanna Cherry: Yes, I have. My constituency office in Edinburgh South West, on Dundee Street in Fountainbridge, is next door to the local citizens advice bureau in Fountainbridge library. We work closely together on this sort of issue. Citizens Advice provides an amazing service. In my experience, Members of Parliament who work in conjunction with it can have successful outcomes in fighting issues of administrative justice in the UK social security system. That is a much-neglected area; we need to look at how the social security system is functioning or, in my experience, not functioning, and failing to properly respect people’s rights. We need to look at all the facts of the case. As in the immigration field, there seems to be a considerable amount of capricious decision making, which is why it is important for people to have access to legal assistance in facing down that unfair decision making.

I am happy to say that on a number of occasions, I have referred constituents to the free legal services unit at the Faculty of Advocates with good outcomes. The Faculty of Advocates also arranges open days to encourage students from schools across Scotland to come and see what life as an advocate is really like.

I am proud that the Faculty of Advocates has done much to increase its diversity since I was called to the Bar in 1995, when I was one of a small number of women advocates in Scotland and there were no female judges on the senior Scottish bench. Now, our second most senior judge is a woman and we have many women on the senior judicial bench in Scotland, but there is still quite a long way to go before we achieve parity with the men.

There is also the issue of trying to encourage more people from working-class backgrounds and from diverse and BAME communities to come into the law. As well as holding open days, the Faculty of Advocates runs a couple of mini trials—or mock trials—initiatives, which are particularly directed at kids from schools and backgrounds from which people would not normally be expected to end up at the Bar, to try to break down the barriers and to show that—if I am allowed to say this—the law can sometimes be fun, and that it is not just for posh people who went to a private school. I hope that my former colleagues are making some progress in that area. They run the mock trials as part of the Citizenship Foundation, which has been mentioned. It is a cross-UK foundation that is supported north of the border by the Faculty of Advocates.

Another way that legal professionals can contribute to legal education is by providing briefings to parliamentarians working on Bills. In the three years that I have been here, I have had invaluable assistance from briefings provided by the likes of the Law Society of Scotland, the Law Society of England and Wales, the Bars of Scotland and of England and Wales, and organisations such as Liberty, and Justice. I am proud that the Faculty of Advocates actively contributes to law reform north and south of the border under the excellent chairmanship of Laura Dunlop, QC, who was my pupil master, although she is not responsible for any of my mistakes—only for the good parts.

The Law Society of Scotland also provides fantastic briefings. I could not have done my job as an MP properly without its assistance in the last few years, particularly the assistance of Michael Clancy, who is the head of law reform there and is well known to parliamentarians from all political parties. In more general terms, it has also engaged in significant activity in the area of public legal education.

The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) mentioned StreetLaw. The Law Society of Scotland participates in the StreetLaw project. That involves sending out StreetLaw trainers to teach students and schoolchildren about the law, the legal process and the sort of knowledge and skills that students can use to recognise and prevent legal problems in their lives, and perhaps also to prompt them to consider participating as legal professionals in later life.

All the Law Society of Scotland’s StreetLaw trainers are law students studying in Scotland who undertake this work on a voluntary basis. I am very proud to say that they are supported by two major international law firms in doing so—CMS Cameron McKenna Nabarro Olswang, and Pinsent Masons. They have also had support from the Law Society of Ireland and from international leaders in public legal aid education, such as Harvard University, Georgetown University and Penn State University.

As well as participating in the StreetLaw project, the Law Society of Scotland participates in a charitable foundation, which was set up to give bursaries to students and to support summer schools, schools programmes, visits and events. The Law Society of Scotland is also playing an active role in a campaign to increase diversity in professional services in Scotland.

Just before I draw to a close, I will add a note of caution. An awful lot has been said today about the importance of public legal education, but public legal education should never be viewed as an easy way to plug the gaps left by legal aid cuts. Access to justice should always be our paramount concern. Public legal education should be more about developing capacity and not really about answering specific legal problems because of unmet needs due to gaps in the legal aid system.

Recently we saw a leaked Ministry of Justice report that revealed judges in England and Wales are concerned that legal aid cuts are leading to an increase in the number of defendants without legal representation. I think it is fair to say that the extent to which legal aid has been cut in England and Wales has pushed many people out of eligibility for it in crucial areas of justice, meaning that vulnerable people are often left without legal aid and appear in court or before a tribunal without a lawyer. That is not just my view; it is also the view of many of the witnesses who have given evidence to the inquiry by the Joint Committee on Human Rights into the enforcement of rights. It is also the view of Amnesty International, which has said that the cuts
included in LASPO—the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012—have created a two-tier justice system in England and Wales.

Recently in Scotland, we had an independent review of our legal aid system. It highlighted that, despite the fact that we spend less per capita in Scotland on legal aid than is spent in England and Wales, legal aid is far more widely available in Scotland and covers a wider scope of categories than it does south of the border. As I say, that was not a Scottish Government review but an independent review, chaired by Martyn Evans, the chief executive of the Carnegie UK Trust. It shows that it is possible to have legal aid that is more widely available without actually spending any more money. So, where there’s a will, there’s a way.

I end by urging the Solicitor General to be cautious about letting public legal education plug the gaps that legal aid should fill, and I urge the UK Government—as I have done on previous occasions—to carry out an independent review of the legal aid system in England and Wales, rather than the in-house Government review that is going on at the moment.

3.53 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I draw attention to my relevant entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a non-practising barrister at Civitas Law in Cardiff. Indeed, I practised as a barrister for some years before entering Parliament in 2015.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on securing this debate on a very important subject and I join him in congratulating the many organisations that contribute to public legal education, which includes professional bodies such as the Law Society and the Bar Council, but also many other organisations, within our communities all around the country.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s passion for citizenship education, not only as taught in our schools but as part of lifelong citizenship education. He spoke very powerfully about scams and other matters when, of course, knowing your rights is important, whether that is at the age of 20 or much later in life. The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) spoke very powerfully about a really important point to take from this debate, which is that nobody should ever feel that the legal profession is not for them. We want anyone to aspire to be in the legal profession on merit and not because of background.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) set out well how law shapes our lives and she spoke very powerfully about the issue of maternity discrimination. The only thing that I will say about that is that we all need to be grateful to the Supreme Court for declaring tribunal fees unlawful, because I am sure the right hon. Lady will appreciate that between the introduction of the fees in July 2013 and the date on which they were declared unlawful by the Supreme Court the number of maternity discrimination cases fell significantly.

Mrs Miller: My point was much broader than that. Far more people are affected by maternity discrimination than bring maternity discrimination cases. Although the point that the hon. Gentleman has made is factually correct, I hope he agrees that it is important to think about those women who would never even have understood that they had been discriminated against. That is the point I was making.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not disagree with the right hon. Lady, and she is absolutely right to say that the problem is broader. However, she will appreciate that there must be an ability to enforce your rights outside the tribunal; otherwise, of course, the right loses its meaning. I think that we all hope that, now those fees are gone, we will get back to a position where everyone who wants to bring such a case is able to do so.

I do not doubt for a moment the Solicitor General’s commitment, and I know that he has been at the forefront of efforts to set up a panel that will co-ordinate work in this area. I will quote what he said when he set up the panel, because I agree with it:

“Teaching people about their legal rights and responsibilities, together with helping them gain the confidence and skills to get access to justice, can really make a difference to people’s lives—as well as our legal system.”

The new Panel will help drive forward Public Legal Education, so more people can reap the benefits.”

That is all absolutely right.

Similarly, I do not disagree with what the hon. Member for North East Hampshire said when he maintained that one of the benefits of public legal education might be that more people can settle disputes outside court. That is absolutely right, as well. Of course we all want to see that; we do not want to see unnecessary litigation.

At the same time, although it is not my intention to be unduly partisan in a Westminster Hall debate, I have to record the concern that exists about the ability of people to enforce their rights before a court irrespective of their wealth. “Our system of justice has become unaffordable to most”—those are not my words, but those of the previous Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas, who said them in January 2016 in his annual report to Parliament. There is concern that we have to put alongside an absolutely correct drive towards greater public legal education a similar ability for people to enforce their rights before our courts if they need to do so.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned a concern that exists about people in a very vulnerable position not having access to legal aid to enforce their rights. A very good example of that is state help in benefits cases, when people are indeed in a very vulnerable position and looking for advice as to how they can best enforce their rights and ensure the continuation of their income.
The statistics on this are stark. In 2012-13, 83,000 people had the benefit of state help in those circumstances; by 2016-17, the figure was 440. That is a swingeing cut in help and assistance for those people to enforce their rights, and it is a great concern.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is not in his place at the moment, rightly made the point that with the changing dynamics of our courts, with virtual courts and online courts, the idea of public legal education is becoming more important than ever. Far more people are representing themselves before the courts. In one sense, that reinforces the point about more public legal education, but there is a concern about the family courts in that regard. There has been a leap in those representing themselves from 45,000 people in 2012-13 to 64,000 in 2016-17, and the worry is that there is no protection in family courts for perpetrators of domestic violence to cross-examine their victims. Such a measure was included in the Prisons and Courts Bill, which was lost just before the general election of last year—I served on the Public Bill Committee. When will that provision be brought back? It would command wide support across the House, and the sooner it can be brought back and put into effect, the better for everyone concerned.

Legal aid is a huge concern across a number of areas, whether that is immigration, civil legal aid or criminal legal aid. I have looked at the figures, and between 2010-11 and 2016-17 there was a £950 million cut in legal aid. No wonder the legal profession has been driven to take the action it has, but it is about far more than figures; it is also about the idea that early legal advice can save money. I commend to the Solicitor General my noble Friend Lord Bach’s report, published in the past 12 months, in which precisely that issue of early legal advice is proposed as something that should be absolutely central in our justice system.

I think there is consensus about the importance of public legal education, and I am grateful to all those who do work in that area. I do not doubt for a moment the Solicitor General’s commitment and I am sure that progress will continue, but the means by which people can enforce their rights before the court should not be based on their personal wealth. At the same time as enhancing our public legal education, let us put legal aid back to where it was meant to be when it was introduced in 1949 as the fourth pillar of the welfare state.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that the debate closes at 4.17 pm. If the mover of the motion were given two minutes to have the final word that would be wonderful.

4.3 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I will do that, Mr Streeter. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as it was under Mr Pritchard’s. It is almost a challenge for me to fit into the few minutes I have, everything I want to say on a subject I have a long interest in and passion for.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) for reminding us clearly and comprehensively about the unwritten contract, the Burkean principle that is so important to many of us, and for reaching into the present day by illustrating some of the excellent initiatives going on around the country. I will come back, if I may, to some of the observations made by the shadow Solicitor General and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but I will begin by reminding everyone what public legal education, or PLE, is.

PLE provides people with vital awareness, knowledge and understanding of their rights and those of their fellow citizens. It builds their confidence and the skills that are needed to deal with the disputes that no doubt encroach on the lives of many of us, and it ensures effective access to justice. I was at the independent Bar for many years before I was elected to this place, and I played my part in the delivery of public legal education in schools and colleges in south Wales. I wanted to bring that experience with me into my role as Solicitor General. It is ever more important to ensure that the people of our country understand the law and their rights and responsibilities within it. Public legal education breaks down barriers of knowledge, circumstance and access. As we have heard, PLE is provided by myriad community-based organisations—youth workers and health workers, for example, and legal professionals themselves—all doing their part to ensure that particularly those people with social and economic disadvantages still can get the support they need.

The shadow Solicitor General made the observation that legal aid is a pillar of the welfare state. It is more than that; it is about access to justice. Both he and I, as practitioners, have seen Governments of various colours take legal aid measures that have resulted in reductions in overall eligibility, and the remarks of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West were particularly interesting in that regard. Frankly, I do not think that any Government have got it absolutely right. I could go into a long history lesson about how in 1949 only High Court family cases were eligible for legal assistance and that under successive Governments that assistance was enlarged to a point at which under the Thatcher Government—some would think this almost ironic—84% of the population of England and Wales had some form of eligibility for legal aid.

Joanna Cherry: An independent report published just a couple of months ago shows that 70% of the population of Scotland is eligible for legal aid, yet less is spent per capita on that aid than in England. With a bit of imagination, there could be wider availability of legal aid in England. Scotland shows that it can be done.

The Solicitor General: I am always interested in the hon. and learned Lady’s observations, but I am not sure whether 70% coverage is the right balance. I will consider with interest what she has said and study the issue more carefully, rather than making remarks that are not based on a full study of the evidence. I will, however, concede the point that public legal education is not some substitute or easy fix for eligibility for legal aid. It is a much more long-term approach, which focuses naturally on children and young people and is designed, above all, to give people the knowledge and the wherewithal to avoid the pitfalls of litigation and court proceedings in the first place. We have a very different aim in mind when it comes to spreading the provision of PLE. I pay tribute to all the organisations in Scotland that do so much work, the law clinics in particular, which the hon. and learned Lady mentioned—we have those in great measure too south of the border.
It is not just motherhood and apple pie; there is a statutory underpinning to public legal education in the Legal Services Act 2007 which, among its regulatory objectives refers to “increasing public understanding of the citizen’s legal rights and duties” and “improving access to justice”.

It is not an option for the Government, or indeed any of the regulatory bodies, to neglect those objectives. I am glad that the Law Society, the General Council of the Bar and the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives here in England and Wales play their part in ensuring that PLE is spread as far and wide as possible within the professions. Both the Attorney General and I, as the pro bono champions of the Government, work closely with those involved in PLE and support initiatives to increase its profile and reach more members of the public.

Dr Poulter: I come back to my earlier intervention, and put the same question to my hon. and learned Friend. There is a challenge, despite the best efforts of the Law Society and the Bar Council in encouraging pro bono work, as some of the big law firms, which are all about billable hours, do not free up enough of their solicitors to do important pro bono work. What does my hon. and learned Friend think the Government or the Law Society could do to encourage a more responsible approach from some of those firms?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important point. For those of us who were in the full throes of private practice, very often the delivery of PLE was a better use of our time than our having to immerse ourselves in often very unfamiliar areas of law, with all the concomitant risks. My message to the big firms is: where there is an issue about availability, allow members of the team to go into schools first thing in the morning. I have seen that in several state schools in London. I have joined employed barristers and solicitors helping to deliver citizenship foundation courses, for example in social media law. To see the engagement and sense of ownership that young people have when talking about issues so close to their everyday lives—when they suddenly understand that law is not some remote, dusty concept, but reaches into their existence and everyday experience—is quite a sight to behold.

I want to outline and underline the work that we are doing with the public legal education panel, which has been formed from leading organisations in the field to promote the importance of that work. It was convened by me last year. It involves the professions and organisations that promote the importance of public legal education panel, which has been formed from leading organisations in the field to promoting the importance of that work. It was convened by me last year. It involves the professions and organisations such as the Citizenship Foundation and Law for Life. We are bringing together organisations in a joined-up way to help work out where the need is and what the provision is currently. I have two sub-groups working on those issues.

There are two types of PLE. “Just in case” PLE is all about ensuring that people have skills, information and knowledge about their rights. “Just in time” PLE is all about giving people knowledge and support when a legal issue happens to arise. Both types of provision are equally important, and we are working our way towards getting a better understanding.

Through organisations and such events as National Pro Bono Week, I can champion the importance of PLE through the community, whether it is delivered in schools, to people who are homeless or those in prison, who really need to understand their rights and, most importantly, their responsibilities. Last year during Pro Bono Week, I took part in a session on social media and the law being delivered by university students to local secondary school pupils in Chester. It gave young people a chance to learn about their rights and the surrounding law. One issue that arose was the increasing problem in schools of young people taking videos of fights and other incidents in the playground. The session was about understanding what the sharing of those videos meant for privacy, the rights of the individuals involved and the problems that we are all familiar with here, but which all too often young people sadly only learn about to their expense after the event. I was proud of and impressed by the commitment of the university students delivering the sessions. That has been backed up in recent months by my experience at the Kent law clinic at the University of Kent in Canterbury. Law students there are not only delivering support and advice to members of the public; they are also helping to spread public legal education more widely.

We have some shining examples of the work that is going on, and I pray in aid the work of His Honour Judge Wildblood, QC at the Bristol family court. He is allowing his court to be used for public debates about the law. He is even using local drama groups to help to educate young people. He is bringing together the legal community in Bristol and the surrounding area in a most effective way. With that sort of leadership, many great things can be achieved but here, Mr Streeter, is where you and other colleagues come into play. As has been said by many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), there are opportunities for colleagues to take a lead in their local communities and work with local firms of solicitors or legal practitioners to help to deliver public legal education in our schools.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I know the Solicitor General has done his fair share of school visits over the years. Does he agree that there is still work to be done on diversity and encouraging more people to apply to the profession? We can all make a difference by visiting our local schools and speaking about these matters.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Only last Friday I was doing that at a school in my constituency, the Ridgeway. I was talking to young people in the sixth form who did not have a background in the law. He is bringing together the legal community in Bristol and the surrounding area in a most effective way. With that sort of leadership, many great things can be achieved but here, Mr Streeter, is where you and other colleagues come into play. As has been said by many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), there are opportunities for colleagues to take a lead in their local communities and work with local firms of solicitors or legal practitioners to help to deliver public legal education in our schools.
PLE. It is a matter for schools to determine how to deliver it, but by working collaboratively with professionals, a lot can be achieved.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) made some important points about access in the workplace, particularly for women who have no knowledge—I say that with respect; it is not their fault—about their rights. That is why the regulatory objective in the 2007 Act is important. More has to be done to deal with the question of empowerment of our citizens via the regulatory bodies. That would not just include lawyers, even though the 2007 Act has that remit. I will go away and think about her point very carefully. Perhaps we can use it as the start of an important discussion. I thank all hon. and right hon. Friends and Members for taking part today. The law is not some mystical holy of holies and lawyers are not the high priests. We should demystify it, and that is where public legal education is so important.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Mr Jayawardena has 20 seconds to wind up.

4.16 pm

Mr Jayawardena: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank all my right hon. and hon. Friends and all Members for taking part. My lasting memory of this debate will be my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke outing me as a mere mortal for not having been a lawyer and for only having gone to the LSE. Sir Arnold from “Yes, Minister” would have said, “Oh, I am sorry.” I am not.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

ADHD Diagnosis and Treatment

4.17 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD.

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. A few months ago the enormoussness of the struggles and barriers that those with attention deficit hyperactive disorder face on a daily basis was brought to my attention by an inspirational woman who approached me in the hope that we could establish an all-party parliamentary group for ADHD. Seven months later, I proudly chair that APPG, along with the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). We have held our launch and our first meeting, which was on the economic impact of ADHD, and today we have our first parliamentary debate on the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD.

That inspirational woman is Michelle Beckett, the founder and CEO of ADHD Action, an incredible charity set up to support and offer advice to people struggling with their condition. Everyone on the APPG, some of whom are here today, would agree that we would not be here today without Michelle’s work and dedication to the issue. I would therefore like to place on the record my thanks, and those of the APPG, to Michelle for the incredible work she does.

In the months since we created the APPG, I have become ever more shocked by the stories and experiences shared with us about the diagnosis and treatment process that has been letting people down. It has been doing so in three ways. The first is stigma and attitudes. That is true of mental health more generally, and I am pleased that this debate is during Mental Health Awareness Week, which is a yearly reminder of the progress yet to be made in treating mental health in parity with physical health.

Looking at societal attitudes to ADHD in particular, we see a variety of misconceptions and stigmas. ADHD is often seen as a condition that only affects boys. It is sometimes interpreted as the product of poor parenting or just excused as naughty children playing up. All those ideas are false, but the impact of those misconceptions is enormous. Children may not be offered the correct support, and adults with the condition are often undiagnosed or even unaware that they might have ADHD.

An undiagnosed child in school, without the support they need, will in all likelihood fall behind their classmates and struggle to obtain top grades. Almost half of all school exclusions involve pupils with special educational needs. That is a truly shocking statistic, and it underlines the importance of exploring further ADHD-specific policies, perhaps in the mental health Green Paper or as part of the special educational needs and disability code of practice.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, ADHD can continue into adulthood. A constituent of mine is lobbying for it to be given the recognition it deserves. Does my hon. Friend agree that ADHD should be classed as a disability for the purposes of the law, including accessing benefits?
Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right that we need more awareness of ADHD. I know that people who suffer with ADHD have called for their own Act—something similar to the Autism Act 2009.

In the midst of cuts to school nursing provision, and a school funding and teacher recruitment and retention crisis, the number of school exclusions of pupils with special educational needs is no fault of our hard-working, dedicated and professional healthcare workers and teachers; it is the product of an underfunded and under-resourced health and education system. We cannot go on treating children with ADHD simply as naughty kids, and being unable to afford the time or resources to help them. Instead, we must support those young people and focus their education around their skill set.

The second way we are letting people with ADHD down is through diagnosis. A recent survey with more than 800 responses revealed that 70% of respondents had waited 18 months or more for an ADHD diagnosis, than 800 responses revealed that 70% of respondents down is through diagnosis. A recent survey with more than 800 responses revealed that 70% of respondents had waited 18 months or more for an ADHD diagnosis, 9% of whom were, shockingly, waiting for more than three years.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I recently asked three parliamentary questions on waiting times for assessments for ADHD, and for all three the response was that those figures were not collated. We cannot do anything about it until we have accurate data. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister and the Department should be collating that data?

Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend, the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ADHD, for that intervention. He is absolutely right to mention that the lack of data causes a mismatch and a bit of a postcode lottery, which I will address later.

At a recent APPG meeting, we heard stories of people waiting years for a diagnosis—years battling without the support or guidance they need, falling behind in school, or struggling in their occupation. We heard stories like that of my constituent Mick, whose son has suffered enormously, falling into crime before he was diagnosed, which unfortunately is all too common. About 25% of male prisoners are thought to have ADHD.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She mentioned that about 25% of male prisoners are thought to have ADHD. Does she agree that early intervention and diagnosis of ADHD would not only reduce crime and save money, but improve the life chances of people with ADHD who fall into the criminal justice system?

Jo Platt: I completely agree. ADHD in the criminal justice system is an area that evidently needs a lot more investigation. The simple fact that an estimated 24% of the prison population are thought to have ADHD is a cause for concern.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate, and I draw attention to my declarations in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. To enable early diagnosis, or any diagnosis at all, having the workforce in place is key. Recruitment of specialist child and adolescent mental health services doctors is a real problem. Unless we get that right, we will not deliver the service that patients and their families deserve.

Jo Platt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I completely agree that we need to highlight the workforce, but before we do that we need the data to see how many people we need in all workforces. Again, I will come to that point later.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing today’s debate. Do they agree that one of the additional complexities in the workplace is the bureaucracy of the workplace assessment? If the Minister takes anything away from today regarding those living with ADHD in adulthood, it should be that that process urgently needs review in terms of its effectiveness and the impact on those with ADHD in the workplace.

Jo Platt: I completely agree. We have focused on young people in school settings, but that affects adults enormously.

I received a message from a constituent, Diane, who felt that she was different at school. Diane’s story speaks to the point, made by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), that adults are affected too. Diane went under the radar as she was high-functioning. She passed her GCSEs but failed at university as she felt that she could not concentrate. Diane developed mental health issues and has spent most of her life on anti-depressants, which she found did not work. She was unable to keep a job or a relationship, and in her 30s she tried to take her own life. It was only when her doctor advised her to be tested for ADHD and she was treated appropriately that her life turned around. That is not an uncommon story.

Since the debate was publicised on the House of Commons Facebook page last week, it has become clear that the scale of the diagnosis crisis is even greater than I could have imagined. The post was seen by 37,000 people and was engaged with by more than 1,000 people, shared right across the country. We saw stories of five-year waits and longer, of people forced to get a private diagnosis costing up to £1,000, and of children in school without the support they need. I urge the Minister to head to the Commons Facebook page and read some of the powerful stories.

After reading those stories, I could not help but wonder how in 2018 our healthcare provision can be so unresponsive to a condition that affects so much of the population. Earlier I quoted from a survey but did not state what the average waiting time is for a diagnosis across the country. That is because such information is not collected by the NHS or the Department of Health and Social Care. We have no idea what the average wait for diagnosis is, and therefore there are no target times.

From the unofficial data that is collected, it seems that we are likely encountering a vast postcode lottery that is unfairly dictating the speed of a diagnosis and the support available. Just take the comment of Sian on Facebook. Her son in Wigan has received excellent care, which she described as “life changing”. However, she teaches in a neighbouring constituency where children are waiting more than a year for diagnosis and encounter a far more confusing process. Without the diagnosis...
data, we have no way of either assessing the effectiveness of the current diagnosis process or identifying areas of good practice. That data must be collected before we can begin to assess our treatment strategies.

The third way we are letting people down is through the lack of an integrated support strategy for those with ADHD. By looking at each impact of ADHD in isolation—at just the medical impact, just the impact in educational settings, or just the behavioural impact and the social implications of the condition—we, as a society, are failing to offer the whole-system approach to ADHD, and to mental health more generally, that is needed. Tackling ADHD should be about transforming lives; not just responding to symptoms, but working to unlock the full potential of the incredibly creative minds that those with the condition possess.

The current approach to ADHD is not fit for purpose. Too many are falling through the net; too many are still waiting for a diagnosis after years on a waiting list; too many are without the right support; and too many are living undiagnosed with a condition that can have a severe impact on their daily life. I introduced today’s debate because of stories such as Becky’s, Sam’s, Hugh’s, Sarah’s, Claire’s, and the countless others who got in contact with me out of desperation, and who I know will be watching today.

What changes do we need? First, there needs to be more research. A recent Demos report highlighted that ADHD is under-researched, particularly its social and economic impacts. There also needs to be research into the difference made by early access to diagnosis and treatment to the long-term outcomes and costs of people with ADHD.

Secondly, the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care need to collect data on waiting times. As we have seen, there is a vast postcode lottery across the country that determines the speed of diagnosis and the level of support. The system is grossly unfair and is reducing the life chances of people, based purely on where they live.

Thirdly, we need a streamlined and integrated approach to the support process we offer to children and adults with ADHD. As I have mentioned, those living with the condition are no less able but are often not suited to traditional methods of learning. We must implement a strategy that diagnoses an individual with ADHD speedily and then, crucially, signposts and tracks that individual through a system that promotes educational or employment opportunities suited to their skill set. More broadly, that means that as a society we must be unafraid to promote the untraditional or unconventional routes to success, to promote the creative industries, and to destroy the social stigma that too often forces individuals down the academic route.

In my own borough of Wigan, we have seen the beginnings of such an approach. The local clinical commissioning group has implemented a new joint mental health strategy that is designed to facilitate the seamless interaction of healthcare professionals with support services and education providers. The early signs are promising. Already we have seen the average local young people to thrive. However, there is still a long way to go. The strategy addresses ADHD only in children and its implementation is too recent to see the long-term local impact. The local nature of the strategy also highlights yet again the importance of a national framework to achieve equality of provision across the country.

Bambos Charalambous: Is my hon. Friend aware of the Government’s mental health Green Paper? Does it contain anything of substance in relation to ADHD? Is there any strategy? If it does not, does she think it should?

Jo Platt: The Green Paper is a step in the right direction, but it does not go nearly far enough to confront the enormous scale of the challenges we face. In the case of ADHD, it is important to remember that the condition is neuro-developmental and not a mental health issue.

I have a final ask of the Minister: I invite her to a meeting of the APPG to listen to some of the experiences of people with the condition and to understand the barriers they face. ADHD is highly treatable and is, in many ways, a great asset, but only if it is harnessed correctly. I hope that in this Mental Health Awareness Week we can commit to the beginning of a fundamental transformation in our approach to ADHD. No longer can people be waiting years, if not decades, for diagnosis; no longer can social stigma form a barrier against success; and no longer can we leave such enormous talent locked, restricted and hidden away in society. Now is the time to act. I hope that we will see from the Government the strategy and the leadership needed to support those with ADHD and break down the barriers to success that thousands across the country face today.

4.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) not just on the passionate and articulate way in which she has introduced this important subject, but also on setting up the all-party parliamentary group. I am delighted to accept her invitation to come to a meeting and to hear some of the stories. I would also, through her, extend my congratulations to Michelle Beckett for her work in raising awareness.

The hon. Lady has highlighted that this group of people face quite intense, if unconscious, discrimination, because the way that our education system is set up does not really address their needs. That is something we should all wish to tackle. There are similarities with the way that autism and conditions such as dyslexia were treated in the past. If the abilities to learn are not there, people can fall out of the system. The truth is that they have a very different skill set and we should all be endeavouring to draw that out and, at the very least, not make them feel marginalised or discriminated against.

As we have heard from other hon. Members, it is that sort of discrimination that leads them to fall out of the mainstream and perhaps fall into the criminal justice system, which is something that could easily be avoided if we were all more sensitive to it.

The hon. Lady mentioned data. I will take that away and look at it. It is fair to say that it is only very recently that the NHS has started to collect data regarding autism, for exactly the reasons highlighted today—the postcode lottery in terms of how different areas treat
the condition. Quite often, it depends on having somebody in the area who gives a damn to give some leadership on the issue. Clearly, that is not good enough, as it will fail far too many people. I will go away and look at that. We have just introduced a new dataset for autism and I do not see any reason why we cannot extrapolate that methodology to look at ADHD. There is no doubt that we will continue our dialogue on these issues.

**Dr Poulter:** The Minister is absolutely right to highlight the issue of data, or the lack of it. In the interests of parity of esteem, is it also worth looking at introducing access targets in mental health for access to child and adolescent mental health services, which do a lot of the assessment of people with ADHD? Would that help drive better data collection in the NHS? Measuring against a target forces local healthcare providers to collect the data that is necessary to drive improvements.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I am just about to come on to issues about waiting times. The methodology that my hon. Friend suggests is absolutely right. Although it is Mental Health Awareness Week and we are looking at the issue through that prism, this is not just about mental health; it is about a learning disorder, and goes beyond that. Compartmentalising people who fall out of the mainstream as those with mental health issues is equally discriminatory, but we do need to ensure that we have the right care pathways for them to meet their needs.

**Dr Poulter:** I did not intend to come across as discriminatory in the point that I made; it is CAMHS professionals—mental health professionals—who tend to do the assessments for ADHD in children. What is the Minister going to do about the recruitment crisis in CAMHS? Without those CAMHS professionals, we shall not be able to provide the diagnosis and delivery of care.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** My hon. Friend will be aware that we have addressed those issues in the Green Paper. We are investing in a whole new workforce in support of CAMHS, which will have a direct relationship with schools, where it will be possible for a lot of the wraparound help to take place.

I would like to make some progress on the specifics of ADHD and move on from CAMHS. The hon. Member for Leigh highlighted the massive variation in services across the country. I fully acknowledge that there are long delays for some to see a specialist and secure a diagnosis. That will clearly have a negative impact on those living with ADHD and their families, who can also find the experience confusing.

We are determined to see improvements in the patient journey. There are NICE guidelines. The earlier the diagnosis the better, and the better the chance of getting the right support and better outcomes for the individual. The NICE guidelines were published in 2016 and set out the process for managing ADHD for people aged three years and above. The guidelines aim to improve the diagnosis of ADHD, as well as the quality of care and support for people with an ADHD diagnosis.

An updated guideline was published in March this year, which particularly addresses under-diagnosis and misdiagnosis of ADHD in girls. People think it is just about behaviour, but in girls it does not play out in exactly that way; there is a lot to be done in education on exactly what this condition is. As the hon. Lady said, people think it is about bad parenting or bad behaviour when it is much more complex. The guidelines advise practitioners to be alert in such circumstances to the possibility of ADHD. We will be failing girls if we do not raise awareness of how that might be playing out.

The guidelines also recommend that people with ADHD would benefit from improved organisation of care and better integration of child health services, CAMHS and adult mental health services. Although NICE clinical guidelines are not mandatory, we expect health and care professionals and commissioners to take them into account fully as they design and put in place services to meet the needs of their local populations.

**Dr Poulter:** The Minister is absolutely right to highlight the issue of data, or the lack of it. In the interests of parity of esteem, is it also worth looking at introducing access targets in mental health for access to child and adolescent mental health services, which do a lot of the assessment of people with ADHD? Would that help drive better data collection in the NHS? Measuring against a target forces local healthcare providers to collect the data that is necessary to drive improvements.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** On best practice, I asked the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) about the Department for Work and Pensions’ workplace assessments. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the DWP about how effective they are for adults with ADHD in the workplace?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** On best practice, I asked the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) about the Department for Work and Pensions’ workplace assessments. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the DWP about how effective they are for adults with ADHD in the workplace?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I will be happy to look into that in response to the hon. Gentleman’s question. The Government are trying to encourage as many people into work as possible, and we want to get an additional 1 million people with disabilities into work. Employers should treat people sensitively, and people with ADHD
can be valuable members of the workforce. I will be happy to have a conversation with my colleagues in the DWP to encourage that. Those people have a skill set that can be extremely productive for enlightened employers who are prepared to make concessions and work with them effectively.

I acknowledge that data is an issue. Without robust and comparable data about waiting times, we do not have the tools with which to challenge local areas, but hon. Members can raise anecdotal evidence in advance of our being able to put together a suitable dataset. I have asked my officials to explore with NHS Digital what data can be made accessible via the mental health dataset. We also need to work alongside the Department for Education, because people with ADHD start manifesting issues in school.

A number of hon. Members said that it is important for employers to improve outcomes for people with ADHD. Unless we get people with ADHD into meaningful employment, there is a risk that they will fall into the criminal justice system, quite unnecessarily. Work is not just about earning a living; it contributes to people’s psychological wellbeing and gives them a sense of belonging, purpose, confidence and self-esteem. As I have said many, many times before, work is good for people’s health, so we need to ensure that nobody is excluded.

People with ADHD can be well skilled, highly qualified and employable individuals, with exceptional and unique talents, who can bring real benefits to businesses. I am more than happy to bang the drum to encourage more employers to be sensitive to people with ADHD, as they should for people with autism, who also have big skill sets that they can offer to employers.

I do not have much time left. I thank hon. Members for their contributions. This group of people has been poorly served for a very long time. I therefore welcome the establishment of the all-party group and I look forward to having ongoing dialogue with all its members. I hope that, before long, we can achieve some material differences and improved outcomes for all those people.

**Question put and agreed to.**

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### Historic Allegations against Veterans

**Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** We will move directly on to our next debate, which is extremely popular. There will be 20 minutes for the winding-up speeches. After Sir Henry Bellingham has spoken for a smart 10 minutes, that leaves about 30 minutes for eight Back-Bench contributions. My maths tells me that that is just over three minutes each. I will not impose a time limit, but if hon. Members have a voluntary time limit of about three minutes each, let us see how we get on. Let us not have too many interventions in this important debate.

**4.47 pm**

**Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered historic allegations against veterans.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. The first and foremost duty of any Government is to protect and defend their citizens from internal threats and threats from abroad—away from the UK. Young servicemen and women put their lives on the line. Parliament and the Government have a duty of care to them at the time and a subsequent duty of care when they become veterans. I will talk mainly about Operation Banner in Northern Ireland, but other hon. Members may well talk about other theatres.

We know that 3,500 people were killed in the so-called troubles. Of that number, 2,000 were killed by republican terrorists, 1,000 were killed by loyalist paramilitaries and 370 were killed by security forces. In total, 722 members of the security services, which mainly comprised serving British soldiers, were killed. No other army in the world would have shown the sort of restraint that our Army showed in Northern Ireland. The very fact that twice as many soldiers were killed by terrorists as terrorists were killed by the police and armed forces on the other.

Mr Streeter. The first and foremost duty of any Government is to protect and defend their citizens from internal threats and threats from abroad—away from the UK. Young servicemen and women put their lives on the line. Parliament and the Government have a duty of care to them at the time and a subsequent duty of care when they become veterans. I will talk mainly about Operation Banner in Northern Ireland, but other hon. Members may well talk about other theatres.

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All those cases have been investigated fully, but there are a few outstanding terrorist cases. I entirely understand and accept the need for closure. I also understand the implications of the Good Friday agreement and the legacy issues, and I feel for the families and loved ones who want some sort of closure. Of course, matters are complicated by the 365 Royal pardons that were granted, by the on-the-run letters and by the 500-plus prisoners who were released on licence between 1998 and 2000. So far, everything has been weighing much more heavily against the former servicemen and in favour of the terrorists. There cannot be any parity or moral equivalence between terrorists and paramilitaries on the one hand and the police and armed forces on the other.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): How can soldiers on duty be equated with terrorists and death squads? That appears to be what is happening here. There is a confusion and a bringing together of those two groups. They are being dealt with as one single group, and we therefore have an amnesty for all. That is, of course, abhorrent and immoral. How do we deal with that?

**Sir Henry Bellingham:** We have to draw a distinction: the police and armed forces were acting under statute. They showed immense bravery, professionalism and courage, and they were acting in support of the civil code and authorities. They were also acting under the
Yellow Book—which the colonel, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), knows only too well—and if they deviated from it, they were dealt with severely.

A number of colleagues present will remember the case involving the four soldiers from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. A farmhouse was broken into and two civil rights campaigners, Michael Naan and Andrew Murray, were shot. There was an investigation; two sergeants were charged with and convicted of murder and another was convicted of attempted manslaughter. All three were sentenced to long prison terms. The officer in charge, who was not actually present—though, to be fair to what happened afterwards, he covered up—was charged and given a suspended sentence, and he resigned his commission. It is fair to say, therefore, that events and incidents as such that were dealt with incredibly firmly.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I would like my hon. Friend to address the point that was raised by the Army legal service that that was the end of the matter—in 2011. He was told it was totally the end of the matter—that he could go back to his grandchildren, back to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), and enjoy the rest of his life, get on with the rest of his life. And that is what Dennis did.

We move forward to April 2015—four years on. There is a dawn raid on Corporal Major Hutchings’ home in Cornwall. He is in extremely bad health. He is arrested in a pretty high-handed manner, taken to Northern Ireland for four days’ questioning and then charged with attempted murder. The case is ongoing.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does he agree these that historical allegations cases against veterans, particularly from the troubles in Northern Ireland, and particularly that of Dennis Hutchings, give little confidence to our school and university leavers when they think about a career in the armed services?

Sir Henry Bellingham: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I do not think that any other country in the world would treat its veterans in this way. It is a straightforward breach of the armed forces covenant and is bound to have an impact on morale and, as he points out, on recruitment.

We have heard a number of very encouraging quotes from the Prime Minister and other Ministers. In 2017 the Prime Minister said that, “we will never again in any future conflict let those activist, left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave, the men and women of our Armed Forces.”
Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend believe, as I do, that if a statute of limitations is introduced, it should cover all theatres, so that veterans who have served honourably in Iraq and Afghanistan—even those who have faced disciplinary action but been cleared of any charge or wrongdoing—can get on with their lives? Also, does he know anything about the case of Major Robert Campbell, which is an exemplar of the bad justice meted out by the Iraq Historic Allegations Team? Does he agree that a statute of limitations should not be limited to Northern Ireland?

Sir Henry Bellingham: I shall come on to the statute of limitations point in a moment—I shall close my remarks shortly—but my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point.

As we know, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) took action when he was Secretary of State for Defence. He wound up the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which had cost roughly £40 million, but that has not solved the problem. Yesterday I saw that Leigh Day is looking at up to 200 cases involving Iraqi veterans. Indeed, any solicitor anywhere can raise a case against a veteran if they feel like doing so and feel there is enough evidence. This problem will simply not go away.

I believe very strongly that the Ministry of Defence and the Government have that duty of care that I mentioned earlier. They have to draw a line under this situation. The only way I see for us to do so is to deal with all veterans on an equal basis across the UK, across all campaigns and across all theatres. There should be a statute of limitations on that basis, with an override whereby compelling new evidence that became available could be looked at; but otherwise, after five or 10 years or some clear limit—the Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations) Bill, a private Member’s Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), mentions 10 years—those veterans could at least get on and enjoy the rest of their lives.

In conclusion, I am giving the Minister a way forward. If we do not take that way forward, I think we will have really serious problems. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in her consultation, has made it clear that she will not consider a statute of limitations in the context of Northern Ireland. Therefore, let us have a statute of limitations covering the whole of the UK.

I have given the Minister a way forward but, as I said, our Northern Ireland veterans were sent there when they were young men and women, and they are now a good deal older than most of us. They risked everything. Many of their friends were killed; many were injured. Many suffered the most appalling mental illnesses. What the Government, and this Department in particular, owe to them now is no ordinary duty of care. It is something much more fundamental and profound. In some ways, the duty of care that we owe to current servicemen and women is perhaps more sacred than the duty of care we owe to people who fight in a world war, because the people who fought in Northern Ireland, or who went to various theatres such as Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, had a choice. They could, like Dennis Hutchings, have gone into the Army and risked their lives, or they could have had the easy way out—an easy life in civvy street. They could have had a very different life. But they did not. They risked their lives. They are not asking for a great deal. They are not asking for an increase in their pension, or for any monetary handouts or further recognition. All they are asking for is not to be betrayed by the Government who they put their lives at risk for.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for obtaining the debate. Only last year I met a constituent who is, sadly, fearful of a knock on the door, or a letter, calling him to court. He served his country and had been retired for nearly 30 years. He put his life on the line for his country; he had taken lives for his country, yet he now feels that his country is not supporting him. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not right at all?

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am grateful for that intervention. I shall now conclude. The point is that these veterans are not asking for a great deal; they are simply making a request of this Government of all Governments—a Conservative Government who, at every possible opportunity, stand up and say that they support veterans. I have given the Minister and the Government a way forward. I hope that they will take it. I hope that all these veterans can then get on with the rest of their lives. They deserve a retirement free of the fear of a knock at the door.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I shall intervene once, as I know that many Members want to speak, but I need to speak up on behalf of a sergeant-major who served 22 years, including in Aden, Cyprus and Northern Ireland. He sent me an email today in which he said:

“From my side of the fence, it is fair to say that ex-service personnel feel betrayed beyond belief by the fact that the Government has not only failed to stamp this out immediately but has actually pursued the policy of opening even more doors for those who would wish to investigate incidents so that they can lay some form of blame on those who were, quite simply, carrying out orders.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that what is happening is completely wrong?

Sir Henry Bellingham: This problem—this challenge, this crisis—facing these veterans can be solved. We look to the Minister to come up with solutions and give the House this afternoon some hope for the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Winding-up speeches will begin at 27 minutes past 5. There are three minutes for each speech.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) on bringing the matter forward.

Increasingly, what is to all intents and purposes a private vendetta against the security forces is becoming a witch hunt funded by the public purse, at massive emotional and physical cost. What a world we now live in—while someone like Gerry Adams is taking a legal case attempting to overturn his conviction, the Democratic Unionist party will stand by the men and women in question as individuals who have been attacked merely because they dared to wear a British uniform in Northern Ireland. I declare an interest as one of those who served in the Army and was privileged to wear that uniform.
**Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP):** Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the country and Parliament put our young men and women in an incredibly dangerous position as part of their operational duties, they must make very difficult operational decisions, sometimes with tragic outcomes, it is appalling that they should then be subject to the full rigour of the criminal law, instead of the events being looked at in the light of the context in which they happened?

**Jim Shannon:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

General Lord Dannatt, the former Chief of the General Staff, said this week:

“There should be no obligation on soldiers to co-operate because they have previously given evidence on the assurance of no further action being taken when this has proved a false promise.

I think this is an extremely unwelcome, worrying move. I served in Belfast in 1971 and had 25 to 35-year-old soldiers in my platoon who would now be in their 70s and 80s. Asking them to recall shootings from back then is outrageous.”

Hear, hear, I say.

I ask Members to picture a 75-year-old gentleman who served his days in Northern Ireland. He lost his friends and saw the unthinkable. Meanwhile, those who literally know where the bodies are buried are the ones pulling the strings, involving themselves in political life and pointing the finger at men and women whom they hate with a passion, as they are British. The man who murdered Ulster Defence Regiment soldier Lexie Cummings in Strabane walked freely around his home town wearing a mayor’s chain. Yet a 75-year-old whose only crime was to decide to serve Queen and country is being interrogated. Every single person who voted no to the Belfast agreement on the principle that it was unfair must make very difficult operational decisions, sometimes with tragic outcomes. Those who were trying to undermine the state? That is why I wanted this issue included in the consultation paper, and I am very disappointed that it has not been.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend said, we should not reopen cases that have not only been investigated previously, but where the suspects have been told that the case has been concluded and that the investigation is over. It is morally wrong that people should have these cases reopened all over again. Thirdly, a number of the potential suspects and interviewees are elderly. They are fearful. They need and deserve the full support not just of the Ministry but of the chain of command. These were people doing their duty: carrying out the orders of others and the guidance that had been given to them by their superior officers. They deserve the full legal, financial and moral support of the current Army chain of command.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** Thank you very much for setting a good example. I call Bob Stewart.

5.6 pm

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** The Government will maintain that they have no choice but to follow the rule of law with regard to prosecuting historic allegations against veteran soldiers who fought in Northern Ireland. What total twaddle! If so, which rule of law was followed when PIRA terrorists who killed so many people were released, pardoned and given promises that they would not be further prosecuted after the Good Friday agreement and other deals? I afraid I am coming to the view that the Government are resorting to craven appeasement of Sinn Féin. They are scapegoating a few old soldiers. Is that a price worth paying? My God, it is not. How can our Government mollify Sinn Féin using old men who ran huge risks for all of us, as collateral? Have we lost our sense of decency?

Not one member of the Cabinet has seen operational service for their country. Not one of them has had to make a split-second decision to open fire when his or her life was threatened, as so many soldiers did. May I mention that the Minister for the Armed Forces, the right hon. and gallant Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), is not a member of the Cabinet—yet?

This seemingly vindictive persecution of veteran soldiers has gone unresolved for too long. Successive Governments’ lack of leadership on the matter is appalling. I am very angry about the betrayal of our service personnel. This matter is fixable. I call on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Secretary of State for Justice and, indeed, the whole Cabinet and the Prime Minister—because we have collective Cabinet responsibility—to grip this and sort it out.

5.9 pm

**James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), I would like to make just three points. First, an amnesty involves difficult issues. It is right that they should be debated here. If there is a line to be drawn, when exactly in time should we draw it? How do we properly distinguish between those who were in the service of the state and those who were trying to undermine the state? That should be debated not only here but in the province.

That is why I wanted this issue included in the consultation paper, and I am very disappointed that it has not been.
Ian Paisley: These issues are only sensitive among a very narrow band of people who did not give a toss about the life of any soldier in Northern Ireland.

James Heappey: That may be the case. I will talk about something slightly different in the short time I have available, drawing on my own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than getting into the intricacies of Northern Irish politics.

I served in Afghanistan twice, as a platoon commander and then, latterly, as the adjutant of 2 Rifles in 2009, with a tour to Iraq in between. As a platoon commander, I was only too aware that I was training my soldiers to go out on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, to remove the safety catch and open fire, acting entirely on instinct in the heat of the moment, drawing on everything they had learned in their pre-deployment training and everything they had seen on the tour hitherto. We have to give soldiers the confidence that, on the rare occasions on which they take those decisions—on operations in hugely dangerous situations—and get them wrong, the system will back them up and will agree that they followed the rules of engagement, and that, once all the investigations in theatre are complete, that is them done.

When I was the adjutant of 2 Rifles in Sangin in 2009, arguably on the most kinetic of the Operation Herrick tours, there were lots. Every day I would start shooting incident reports and other sorts of incident report that would go on up to the Herrick taskforce at brigade and would be immediately looked over by lawyers and the Royal Military Police. That process was robust, and when there was any doubt in investigators’ minds, the investigation continued beyond the brigade, up to division, and was looked at thoroughly.

Soldiers have to know that that process is complete, and that when it is done the nation will stand behind them. Otherwise, in that split second when the safety catch has to be removed and lethal force has to be applied, they will hesitate. That could cost them their life.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I will briefly make three principal points. First, without the bravery and sacrifice of British troops—supported by the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, GC—there would never have been a peace process in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is a most distinguished Minister, and I respect him for that. He talks about bravery and sacrifice. He should also refer to discipline. I have never met anyone in the armed forces who ever felt that every single soldier, sailor and airman always acted with total and complete probity. There are some people who breach the code. Does he honestly think that an amnesty, which would exclude every single person, should be allowed? Should he not listen to the words of David Cameron following the Saville report, maybe study Ballymurphy and have a look at some of the incidents that quite clearly have to be investigated? By all means do not penalise the elderly, but also do not try to put everybody into the same category.

Mr Francois: All these cases were investigated at the time. That is exactly the point. They have already been looked into, and the people concerned have already been cleared.

Tony Blair said, “This is not a time for clichés, but the hand of history is upon us”. Well, that hand of history, if it were there, was only there because of the tremendous bravery and sacrifice of all those British Army personnel on Operation Banner for three decades in the run-up to 1998.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: I am afraid I will not.

Secondly, the Government consultation was originally going to include an option for a statute of limitations, but that was pulled at the eleventh hour. Why? Was it because of political pressure from Sinn Féin? Why did the Northern Ireland Office suddenly buckle and take that out of the consultation, so that it was no longer a formal option to be considered?

Thirdly, we all want to see the power-sharing Executive restored in Northern Ireland, but not at any price. There will be no equivalence in this system. There is no point in saying, “Oh, but the terrorists will be investigated as well,” because they have been given letters of comfort by Blair—they are off the hook. But the letters received by British servicemen who were investigated and told they were in the clear do not count, do they? They are still being investigated by the PSNI. We saw what a farce the Iraqi Historic Allegations Team was. It was so bad that it had to be closed down by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) when he was Defence Secretary.

The proposals from the NIO are morally disgraceful. I have never been so annoyed with my own Government. We need a statute of limitations for Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan, and we need it soon.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Minister here—as a Defence Minister, he can reflect this issue right across the Government. As a veteran of Operation Banner who has been involved in this issue for many years, I am angry. We want to hold the NIO to account. I strongly believe that there is a cadre of officials in that Department who can think up a thousand reasons why they should not do something. Just occasionally, they should be encouraged to think about how they can solve a problem that is an affront to every decent person in this country.

I have a solution, which builds on what my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) proposed. It will come before the House on 15 June. Okay, it is a ten-minute rule Bill and it has got to the bottom of the list—we all know how this place works—but the Government should pick it up and run with it. I suggest that there should be a 10-year statute of limitations for all servicemen who serve on operations. I agree entirely that there can be overrides and caveats, and I am happy to talk about the time—I am happy to talk about anything—but we must get the principle in law so that the young men and women currently training with my son in the British Army know that the system in this country will stand by them when they make the awful decision to take somebody’s life, under all the constraints we impose on them.
We are in a situation in which a 78-year-old man with kidney failure—a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray)—is being taken to court. What other country would do that? Why are we so shaming? I know that we have a devolved justice system in Northern Ireland, and that the people who take that case forward will have to be held to account for that, but we have reached the point where we as a society must ask, “Is it right to take an old man who is in poor health away from his family and put him through this?”

I believe that we have a solution. I am desperately keen that we should work constructively with all elements of the Government. If we start from the basis that it is all too difficult, nothing will happen, but we have to find solutions.

5.17 pm

Mrs Sherryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It will start by reading a message from another of my constituents, a Mr Dennis Blagdon. He wrote to me this weekend:

“I feel ashamed to be British that the government would let this serious lack of justice happen”

to Dennis Hutchings. Mr Blagdon continued:

“Is he a man who is ill, who is being hounded for a job which he was employed by the government at the time to do. It was war.”

We cannot put it any simpler than that. Northern Ireland was war. Mr Blagdon added that,

“a shot was fired which, unfortunately, killed a person. TO THIS DAY, NO ONE KNOWS WHO FIRED THAT FATEFUL SHOT. Why should this poor man, who is dying, be held responsible? This guy is a lovely man, who I have met on many occasions. Please just let him live his last days in peace.”

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Has my hon. Friend put her finger on the very problem—that one side, the IRA, called it a war and behaved as if it were a war, whereas the soldiers were expected to work by the book?

Mrs Murray: My hon. Friend is quite right.

I will not take much time to repeat what has already been said, but the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland was originally formed from the Northern Ireland Office and the Ministry of Justice. We do not have an Executive in Northern Ireland at the moment. I am calling on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to address this immediately by announcing the consultation paper. As far as I am concerned, my constituent, Dennis Hutchings, has suffered enough. I have been informed that he has been cleared twice and, to be honest, the evidence has since been destroyed—evidence that he could have used in his defence. I agree with the Government when they say that the current process is flawed, and I call on them to do something about it and let Dennis Hutchings, my constituent, go free now. He is a hero who did his job. Let him go free.

5.20 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) for securing this important debate. I will speak very briefly.

The issue is very pertinent to my constituency. Generations of Aldershot soldiers served in the Province and still live in and around the Aldershot area and in the borough of Rushmoor. The savagery and brutality of the troubles were brought home to Aldershot in February 1972 when, through an IRA atrocity, a bomb was exploded outside the headquarters of 16th Parachute Brigade. Seven civilian staff were killed and 19 were wounded. The treatment of Dennis Hutchings has aroused some very strong feelings in and around my constituency. I share that sense of moral outrage. I clearly put on the record my support for the statute of limitations proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), and I would like the Ministry of Defence to legislate for that, possibly for 10 years, to cover veterans.

It is important to point out that soldiers do not expect to be above the law. Any legislation would cover those who had already been investigated, just as Dennis Hutchings has been investigated. They expect only natural justice, and that is what we should seek to provide for them.

It is important that the statute covers theatres other than Northern Ireland. Several veterans have been treated very badly in their experience of dealing with the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, and I draw attention to Major Robert Campbell, who has experienced eight different investigations. He has been cleared of wrongdoing and has been abysmally treated by the IHA T process. Although IHA T has been closed down, the danger is that its legacy unit, the Iraq fatality investigations unit, is still prosecuting individuals. That is why those individuals need to be covered by a possible statute of limitations.

The contract between the military and the Government depends on trust. The Government have to deliver on that. That is what Dennis Hutchings, Major Robert Campbell and the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan deserve, and it is what we in our community and in our society should demand. We should demand natural justice for our veterans.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): There are two more Back Benchers to go. They have two and a half minutes each, please.

5.23 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I rise to speak with a great deal of humility, having heard the distinguished speakers who have gone before me, who have served and who have great experience in such matters. I rise only because I would like to add something from a slightly different perspective. I have not served; I am a lawyer and I approach the debate from a legal perspective, because there is a legal as well as a moral element to it.

By nature, I am very cautious about the increasing role of law in warfare, simply because the mindset of a lawyer is so different from that of a soldier, by necessity. Lawyers are cautious and risk-averse. They explore every option. That avenue simply is not available in circumstances such as those described by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey). The military are all about the can-do attitude that was described by
my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). That is even more the case when we look at cases in retrospect.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has just said, nobody is suggesting that the military should be able to act with impunity; all that is expected is natural justice and fairness. If laws of war or engagement are broken, of course they should be held to account, but not years and years after the event. The spectacle of repeated historical allegations is absolutely deplorable, and set against a set of standards that were often simply not available at the time. THAT is a classic example of that, and Northern Ireland much more recently.

I would like to add one thought on a limitation Act, from a civil law perspective. I used to practise in an area of industrial disease, representing people who had suffered from horrible illnesses such as mesothelioma. In those circumstances there is a statute of limitations—the Limitation Act 1980—so after a certain amount of time companies can expect not to be pursued. There are good reasons for that: memories fade, documents get lost, standards change, and knowledge and attitudes change. Therefore, after a reasonable amount of time, they have a reasonable expectation that they will not continue to be pursued.

Here there is a clear imbalance. For example, the IRA did not keep records, while the British Army does. In civil law we would look at things very differently. I entirely support the suggestion for a statute of limitations simply because we have a similar thing in civil law. We are currently providing assistance and protection to historical industrial companies that are facing only civil claims and not soldiers, who may face serious matters that would turn their lives upside down.

Our veterans should be entitled to know that when they serve, they can go home with gratitude and not have to look over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. The Government should be clear. The public view the spectacle of Britain turning on its own with absolute disgust. We must bring peace to veterans who have worked so hard to bring peace to us.

5.25 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Thank you for including me in the debate, Mr Streeter. All the contributions have been incredibly thoughtful, not least that from the leader of the debate, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham). There are two aspects to this: can it be done, and should it be done? The lawyers are debating whether it can be done, but those who focus on the negativity of one legal academic who gave evidence to the Defence Committee and on his aspiration that it should apply to terrorists and those who engage in paramilitarism in Northern Ireland are wrong. It can be done. Much more thoughtful legal evidence was given to the Defence Committee as part of the report we prepared seeking a statute of limitations. There has not been enough focus on that.

There has been focus on the rule of law. We set the rule of law in this country. Releasing prisoners in 1998 or in 2000 in Northern Ireland was anathema to at least the 30% of the population who voted against the Belfast agreement, but it was passed in this House and it became the rule of law. When Tony Blair signed comfort letters secretly and quietly and told individual IRA paramilitaries that they would not be pursued for the crimes they committed in this country against this state, that was notionally against the rule of law, but he did it.

There were no hang-ups in the Northern Ireland Office about the on-the-runs procedure. What happened to John Downey, the person responsible for the Hyde Park bombing here in London? He went to court and the prosecution stalled on the basis of an on-the-runs letter. Therefore, when we hear about the rule of law and practical implications, we should remember that we are sovereign in this country—we set the rule of law and the tone—and having appraised ourselves of the moral implications and the moral imperative that, after 20 years of appeasing those involved in paramilitarism and trying to destroy this country, there is a greater prize in protecting those who serve to defend the principles of this country, it can be done, and it should be done.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): We come to the Front-Bench speeches. The Scottish National party and Labour party spokespeople have five minutes each and the Minister has 10 minutes.

5.28 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) on bringing forward the debate. All of us in the Chamber are proud of our armed forces. Our veterans are an asset to our society, deserving of our thanks, respect and support. We support them because we are proud of them, because we know they have been trained to the highest standards and conduct themselves with the utmost integrity and because they operate to bring peace to areas of conflict.

That confidence in the behaviour of our military personnel enables them to continue carrying out their duties with full public support in every theatre of war. However, when the actions of individuals call into question the integrity of our armed forces, we must address that. That is not to say we should not protect ex-service personnel from bogus legacy cases. Members and former members of our armed forces must be treated fairly when accusations of wrongdoing are made. We know about the huge backlog of cases in the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which means that serving members and former personnel face extended periods of uncertainty over accusations that have been made. The case of Major Robert Campbell has been mentioned today, and I think we would all agree that that is not acceptable.

We must also have confidence in the institutions of the police and judiciary in Northern Ireland to serve the people. Responsibility for policing and justice matters in Northern Ireland is devolved and should be respected as such. The PSNI legacy investigations branch should be given adequate resources for such investigations so that they are not prolonged unnecessarily. In the north of Ireland, we know that few families escaped the suffering and the violence.

This debate is timely, given the actions we saw yesterday from the Israeli military. The callous manner in which civilians, including children, were mowed down, demonstrated to the world a military not operating in a manner that we would consider exemplary, but we
cannot brush over our own past. Events such as the Ballymurphy massacre, into which an inquest is currently taking place, or the Bloody Sunday murders, are a stain.

James Heappey: I am sure that the hon. Lady will want to clarify that. I am sure she is not, but she seems to be saying that whatever happened on the border of Gaza yesterday has perhaps some equivalence with the behaviour of the British armed forces during their service in Northern Ireland, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Carol Monaghan: That is absolutely not what I said. I said that that was a military behaving in a manner that was not exemplary.

We know there were terrorists on both sides in Northern Ireland, but the idea that people can murder with impunity cannot be tolerated. Those carrying out the atrocities we are talking about today were not terrorists. They were sent to Northern Ireland to keep the peace, not to enflame an already volatile situation. We expect the highest standards from our armed forces and that requires them to operate within, not outwith, the rule of law. The actions of a few individual members of the armed forces during those events brought them down to the level of the terrorists. That is something that should cause us all shame.

Several hon. Members rose—

Carol Monaghan: Our service personnel should rightly be held to the highest standards of behaviour, but they should also be supported fully by the Ministry of Defence when allegations are made. That certainly means being offered proper legal representation and support. Our armed forces have our gratitude for the difficult work they do on our behalf, in defending us and our values, sometimes in traumatic and highly stressful situations. The hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) talked of his own experience. He described the very best practice, where he was aware of what was going on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is not giving way.

Carol Monaghan: For the public to have full confidence in our military, there must be some accountability when they operate outwith the rule of law, and there must be due process.

5.33 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I will confine my remarks to Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) did. I congratulate him on securing this extremely important debate. As a young man, I well remember the horrific reports on the television about the troubles in Northern Ireland. At the height of the troubles, there were more than 27,000 military personnel, in more than 100 locations. They were there as part of Operation Banner, the longest continuous campaign in the history of the British Army. Let me place on record my appreciation and my highest possible regard for the professionalism and the commitment of our armed forces personnel in the most difficult of conflicts.

Ian Paisley: I think the point that the hon. Gentleman is emphasising is that so many armed service personnel in Northern Ireland acted to the highest standards and showed massive restraint in the face of being terrorised, whether at Warrenpoint, Ballykelly or Narrow Water. We should look up to our soldiers and be extremely proud of the way in which they conducted themselves over decades of service.

Wayne David: The hon. Gentleman is obviously better aware of the situation in Northern Ireland than just about any Member here. I certainly concur with his remarks, and I hold in the highest possible esteem, as I said, the personnel of our armed forces and the commitment they showed.

There were 3,260 deaths during the troubles. In 2006, the then Government established the Historical Enquiries Team to examine all deaths attributable to the security situation. In September 2014, the Historical Enquiries Team was disbanded, and in its place PSNI set up the legacy investigations branch. As we are only too aware, there have been significant criticisms of the process by which legacy investigations are currently undertaken. The Prime Minister’s comments last week are a clear indication of that.

However, it is worth noting that it has been argued that PSNI’s statistics indicate that more of its legacy investigations branch. As we are only too aware, there have been significant criticisms of the process by which legacy investigations are currently undertaken. The Prime Minister’s comments last week are a clear indication of that.

Addressing legacy issues was a key part of the Stormont House agreement of December 2014. It was agreed that principles including the promotion of reconciliation and the rule of law should be upheld, that the suffering of victims and survivors should be acknowledged and addressed, and that there should be a facilitation of the pursuit of justice and information recovery. It was also argued that human rights should be respected, and that all investigations should be balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable. To that end, the agreement set out the establishment of a new, independent Historical Investigations Unit. I understand that the Government have now produced a consultation document, and that there will soon be a public consultation exercise on the new mechanisms for handling outstanding legacy issues.

The Defence Committee argued in its April 2017 report that there should be a statute of limitations protecting both former members of the security forces and paramilitaries. It was recognised that such a statute had to be equally applicable to all those involved in the conflict, and that there ought to be a truth-recovery process. That was the argument put forward.

At the end of last year, the British Government indicated that a statute of limitations might be included in the consultation. I understand from press reports that that will not now be the case. Personally, I am not persuaded that such a statute is the best way forward. However, I would like to know from the Minister why the Government have seen fit to exclude the suggestion from the public consultation. While I realise that the consultation will be in the hands of the Secretary of
Historical investigations in Northern Ireland currently involve numerous inquests and investigations into the small minority of deaths attributed to the state. Meanwhile, many terrorist murders go uninvestigated. All those involved, not least the victims and survivors of terrorism, along with former members of the security services, deserve a better approach than the current flawed system, which is not working well for anyone. The Government are committed to putting this unacceptable situation right.

The Government believe that the institutions proposed in the 2014 Stormont House agreement are the best way to ensure a fair, balanced and, crucially, proportionate approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. On Friday the Government published a consultation and draft Bill that set out in detail how the Stormont House agreement institutions could be implemented.

The key institution in the context of today’s debate is the proposed historic investigations unit, or HIU. The HIU would be responsible for completing outstanding investigations into troubles-related deaths within five years. Critically, that would include around 700 murders by terrorists that are not currently being investigated. In addition, the HIU would be required to act in a manner that is fair, impartial, proportionate, effective, efficient and designed to secure public confidence.

Mrs Murray: Can the Minister explain to me how this new unit will prevent my constituent, Dennis Hutchings, from being prosecuted, because I do not think that it will?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is aware that that is an ongoing process. She and I met, at her request, the last time we had such a debate to discuss her constituent in detail, and the ongoing support that he is receiving from the Ministry of Defence.

In delivering our manifesto commitment to consult on how the Stormont House agreement could be implemented, the Government are clear that they will not take forward any measure that could have the effect of targeting, discriminating against or otherwise putting at a disadvantage our veterans. As part of that commitment, the Defence Secretary has asked the Defence Committee to play a role in scrutinising the detail that has been proposed. In particular, he has asked the Committee for its views on whether what has been put forward will meet the Government’s aim that any future investigations will be conducted in a way that is balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable, with no prospect that veterans will be targeted or discriminated against.

Emma Little Pengelly: Is the Minister aware that the issue emerged in parallel with and subsequent to the Stormont House agreement through a decision by the chief constable to refer all state-related deaths to the case load of PSNI’s legacy unit, ergo it will go into the historical investigations unit? This is a new and emerging issue since the discussions on the Stormont House agreement.

Mark Lancaster: Of course, there are a number of emerging issues, and this is proving to be one of the difficulties in trying to get consensus on how we move forward. Members will also be aware of last year’s Defence
Committee report recommending that a statute of limitations covering all troubles-related deaths involving the armed forces should be established, alongside a non-criminal mechanism for ascertaining the facts surrounding the deaths. That report, and indeed today’s debate, demonstrate that there is support for an alternative approach to dealing with the legacy of the past.

In the limited time I have, let me say that Members do not have to take the Government’s word on this. I am sorry that the Chair of the Defence Committee is not here, but I encourage all Members to look at that report and the legal evidence given to it over the challenges—that is probably the best way of describing them—about moving forward under the statute of limitations approach. That said, the whole purpose of the consultation is to try to move the issue forward. There is an open question as to how we move forward, and the suggestion of the hon. Member for North West Norfolk is a perfectly reasonable one to be put forward into the consultation. As we have just launched a consultation, it would be premature for me to commit to what that way forward will be. That is why I encourage everybody, particularly veterans and Members, to contribute to that consultation so that we can attempt to find a sensible way forward.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my right hon. and gallant Friend for giving way. Does he agree that theatres other than Northern Ireland, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, should be included in the consultation?

Mark Lancaster: The consultation, as published, is specific to Northern Ireland. However, this is a wider issue that impacts operations in other theatres. I take this opportunity, in the 20 seconds I have left, to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), who did so much in his tenure as the Secretary of State for Defence to move these issues forward—not least when it comes to other theatres—by closing down IHAT from 30 June last year.

5.47 pm
Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the 70th anniversary of the NHS and public health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. The 70th anniversary of the NHS is an important time for the country, but it is also a special time for Blaenau Gwent. Aneurin Bevan, and the health service he created, was born and bred in Blaenau Gwent—in Tredegar. Since Nye’s death in the 1960s, Blaenau Gwent MPs have followed in the footsteps of a colossus. We in the borough are immensely proud and fiercely protective of his legacy. When he said he wanted to “Tredegar-ise” the NHS, he was basing his plans on the Tredegar Medical Aid Society, a mutual and an organisation established for all, supported and funded by the people of Tredegar, whether they be miners at the Ty Tris colliery, like my grandfather George, quarry workers at Trefil or nurses at the St James Hospital. If Bevan established an NHS for the 20th century, at this anniversary it is important that we ask ourselves what sort of NHS we need for the 21st century.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I should declare an interest as a biographer of Aneurin Bevan. Before my hon. Friend moves on to talk more generally about the future, does he agree that the decision to nationalise the NHS for years to come. Other challenges cannot be replicated across our country.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As always, she is ahead of the game—I will come on to that point shortly.

Obesity is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer. Diabetes leads to significant complications, including, in extreme cases, amputation. The consequences for our society are massive. NHS England has said that around £16 billion a year is spent on the direct medical costs of diabetes and conditions related to being overweight or obese. That is more than the cost of delivering all our countries’ police and fire services combined. The Government cannot shirk their responsibility to tackle the issue head on. When the next chapter of their childhood obesity plan comes into effect, it needs an effective UK-wide public health drive. It needs to do more to deal with that priority. The 2015 Conservative manifesto pledge to clamp down on advertising unhealthy brands vanished into thin air by the time of the first childhood obesity plan.

It now looks like junk food ads may be banned from programmes where three quarters of the viewers are children. That is to be applauded. It is a good thing, but it fails to tackle the big primetime shows that families gather around the sofa: shows such as “The X Factors” and the aptly named “Saturday Night Takeaway”. That is without mentioning, with the World cup on the horizon, the premium advertising space around sport. There is a real contradiction when fantastic displays of athletic prowess are bookended by burgers and packaged with pizzas.

Alongside others, Cancer Research UK is pushing for a 9 o’clock watershed for junk food adverts, and the Government must consider that proposal seriously. It is not only me who thinks that; the head of the NHS, Simon Stevens, thinks it would be a good way to tackle this scourge. He believes that even the likes of Facebook must be roped into any plans that limit junk food advertising. The Jamie Oliver Food Foundation suggests having mandatory training for GPs and health professionals to talk about weight in a helpful way and to refer patients to nutritional experts. Whatever the Government decide, they will need to be bold in the face of pressure from the industry heavyweights and their lobbying teams. When plans emerge from this Government, every organisation should be doing their bit.

I was pleased to see the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, take real steps to address junk food advertising last week with his announcement that such adverts should be banned from the tube and bus networks. Almost 40% of London’s 10 and 11-year-olds are obese or overweight. The Mayor is taking a positive step to
tackle what he has rightly called “a ticking time bomb”, and that must be supported. However, it is up to all public bodies, including devolved Administrations, councils and housing associations, to weigh in. Primary schools should promote walking every day to their pupils. It is about using soft power and nudge, as well as improved regulation to make legislative and cultural change.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is talking about action to tackle childhood obesity and junk food adverts, and also about Jamie Oliver. He will perhaps be aware that Jamie Oliver met the First Minister of Scotland on Monday and welcomed and supported the Scottish Government’s plan to halve childhood obesity by 2030. Would he care to welcome that, as Jamie Oliver did?

Nick Smith: I am pleased to welcome that support for a UK issue that we all need to work on.

With further support, we could achieve the healthy lifestyles that so many people want by using influence and our voices. I want to round this speech off with one initiative that I think deserves real backing. It will help our society get on track to healthier lifestyles. To return to Bevan, the initiative is about harnessing community support to deliver improved health for all. Dame Kelly Holmes teamed up with the NHS and parkrun last weekend to encourage people to “take care of yourself” in the build-up to a special parkrun for the NHS on 9 June. My local parkrun group is the Parc Bryn Bach running club, and I can report what a difference such initiatives can make. After a year of running every week, my blood pressure is down and I have tightened my belt a few notches.

I am grateful for the esprit de corps of my local running club. Parc Bryn Bach has Saturday parkruns, special Sunday sessions for parkrun juniors and is a backer of the brilliant NHS Couch to 5k scheme. Just a few Mondays ago, it had 150 people running through a wet, windy April evening to get their fitness up. Over three months, many of those local people will gain confidence and a level of fitness to help them change their lifestyle. The camaraderie and support on offer is fantastic, and that is what makes these schemes fun to join and easy to keep up. Unsurprisingly, the club membership has doubled in recent years, and the coaches and volunteers include many health professionals. They are a great team. I am pleased that the Welsh Labour Government have seen the value of that. Welsh Athletics is supporting clubs with regional Couch to 5k programmes.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on his passionate speech that marks this historic anniversary and the part that his constituency and the wider south Wales region played in the formation of the NHS. Does he agree that in order to tackle our modern health challenges it is important that we have further investment and that the UK Government match the Welsh Government’s passion and commitment to this most cherished national institution?

Nick Smith: As usual, my hon. Friend and neighbour makes a very good point. I went on his Merthyr parkrun a few months ago and had a good time.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Nick Smith: I am pleased to give way to my other neighbour.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those involved in parkrun. Will he join me in congratulating the volunteers who make parkrun possible in his constituency and in mine in Pontypool and Cwmbran, where I too have taken part in parkruns, but I have not quite reached my hon. Friend’s running level yet?

Nick Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for supporting parkrun. Perhaps we should have a south Wales eastern region parkrun championship at some point in the coming months. He is absolutely right about volunteers and the running club supporters who are out there at 9 o’clock on a Saturday morning, or sometimes on a Sunday morning for the junior parkrun, in parks all across the country. They do a great job in all weather. It is brilliant to see. More than 30,000 runners took part in parkruns in Wales alone last year. It is that sort of activity with cross-body support and backing from our community role models that can make a big difference to making such schemes stick.

When Nye wanted to Tredgar-ise the national health service, he wanted a service built on community where we all bought in and all had a stake. In that spirit the public health challenges we face 70 years on should not be tackled alone. To truly take care of ourselves, we need a society that sets us up for success, a system that has our backs, a public service that recognises what needs to be changed and how to do it. The Government have a real chance to honour the anniversary of the national health service in the months ahead, not with pomp and ceremony, but with the sort of action that people will celebrate another 70 years from now.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Numerous Members wish to speak and I intend to start the summing-up speeches at about 10.30. Members are not particularly time limited, but speeches of six or seven minutes will get everybody in.

9.42 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing this important celebratory debate.

On 5 July this year we will mark 70 years of the NHS across the whole of the United Kingdom. Although now a devolved matter, the same core principle of safe, effective, person-centred care applies and it remains free at the point of delivery throughout the United Kingdom. I have no doubt that, no matter where we live on these islands, the NHS is the British institution most loved and valued by the public.

For the past seven decades, millions in the United Kingdom have known that they can rely on the NHS in their hour of need, to treat them when they are sick or injured and help them keep fit and healthy—most importantly, without discrimination. That principle has worked well for 70 years because of the dedication of
generations of hard-working NHS staff. In this anniversary year, it is only right that we should thank all NHS staff, past and present, in Scotland and across the United Kingdom for their dedication and service. Mr Hosie, I should have declared an interest. I have two daughters who are nursing professionals in NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

This is indeed a time to reflect on the progress that the NHS has made since 1948 and consider what steps we should take over the next seven decades to ensure that the national health service continues to provide the best possible service to the British public, who very much rely on it.

In 1948, the newly created NHS was more concerned with childhood malnutrition than with obesity. Penicillin, discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming, physician and Nobel prize winner, who was born in Ayrshire in Scotland, in 1881, was a relatively new and revolutionary treatment. Polio, tuberculosis and rickets were of major concern as opposed to dementia, the diabetes that was mentioned earlier, and the cancer conditions experienced today.

It is worth noting the progress that the NHS and society in general have made in recent years in recognising the need for improved mental health provision. Health is health, whether we categorise it as mental or physical. The UK Government’s introduction of parity between mental and physical health was a vital and important step forward, and I am glad that the Scottish Government have followed suit.

As our population ages—I fall into that category—and our society changes, the challenges that the NHS faces in health promotion and health and wellbeing will continue to evolve. We need an NHS that is adaptable and committed to embracing new technologies such as genomics wherever possible, and it must be well resourced to meet the increase in demand. I mentioned earlier the dedication of the staff, but it is crucial that there are enough skilled staff to meet today’s demanding and changing workload. Sadly, today’s national health service as a whole has vacancies and challenges in recruiting across the spectrum, whether nurses, allied health professionals or medics. There are too many gaps in the system, which has led to significant funds being paid on overtime and expensive agency nurses. We need to resolve the long-standing UK-wide conundrum of delayed discharges from acute care beds by ensuring that patients are cared for safely in the most appropriate, supported environment.

Over the past 70 years the NHS has been a great success based on a great principle. We are living longer and healthier lives as a result. May I commend the Labour Government who, 70 years ago, in the dark days of a post-war Britain, had the courage and foresight to create the national health service, and also successive Governments, including, dare I say, Conservative Governments, who have supported the service that we all continue to value so much?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): If I were able to make a speech, which I cannot, I would talk about public health even before the health service. However, let me remind everyone that on the creation of the national health service in January 1944, Henry Willink, a Conservative Minister in the coalition Government, held up the first White Paper that said, “national health service”.

Bill Grant: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was being extremely kind today to my colleagues in the Labour party. The war prevented the launch at that time, but the general principle and the welcoming of a national health service has been good for the United Kingdom.

Finally, a line from a Robert Burns poem that was penned more than two centuries ago in 1780. It is four verses long but I will recite only one line. It is called, “Here’s to Thy Health”, and it reads as follows:

“I’ll count my health my greatest wealth
Sae lang as I’ll enjoy it”.

9.47 am

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate.

If we look back over almost a century, so much change has happened and so many developments have taken place, but one thing has remained constant: our world-leading, history-making and much loved national health service. Let us think about the founding principles of the national health service. It is comprehensive, universal and free at the point of delivery; millions of lives have been saved and millions of people treated and restored to good health; and it has tens of thousands of decent, hard-working and much-loved public sector workers.

As we approach the 70th birthday of the national health service, to those workers I say thank you for your compassion and sacrifices. For always going the extra mile and for standing firm in the wake of the millions of Tory cuts that we have seen since 2010 and the Scottish National party cuts in Holyrood since 2007. Decisions taken by politicians of all political parties have had an impact on our national health service. I was proud of the previous Labour Government’s record investment in our NHS. We delivered lower waiting times, faster operation times, a GP in local communities and vital investment in infrastructure and facilities. Sadly, it is not all good, and we cannot take our NHS, its workers or its mission for granted.

My local hospital, Monklands, serves many of my constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. It is one of the busiest hospitals, and just a few months ago there were reports that it needed more than £30 million worth of repairs. There are leaks, and wards are closing. We will look at Monklands hospital. Sadly, on a personal note, one day when I was in Parliament my mother, who is 85 and has dementia, was sent home from Wishaw hospital in a taxi after waiting two hours, with no food and no toilet facilities. My father is 88 years old. They both saw the NHS born. They have been taxpayers all their lives. My father cannot understand why his wife, at her age and with her illness, was treated that way. All that in the 21st century. Thankfully, my mother is now back at her care home, and has settled down a little bit.

Sadly, thanks to the Scottish Government’s failure to invest, more than £3 million was spent on agency staff—that would have paid for more than 100 nurses. Across Lanarkshire in the year 2016-17, more than £10 million was spent on agency staff in three hospitals: Wishaw,
Monklands and Hairmyres. To quote the leader of the Scottish Labour party—my leader—Richard Leonard, we need to stop these private companies “sucking money out of the NHS”.

I do not want to sound too negative. I am proud of the NHS, and I am proud of its workers. I will work with anyone and everyone who wants to see it funded, supported, protected, defended and enhanced. That is why I am here: to defend and fight for public services, to champion public sector workers, and to fight for the right to a hospital bed, an appointment with a GP and an operation in good time.

As Bevan said in 1948, the national health service must meet everyone’s needs, be free at the point of delivery, and be based on clinical need, not the ability to pay. That is our mission; that is my focus. As we come together to acknowledge and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the national health service, we must recommit ourselves to delivering that noble aim and objective. Happy birthday, NHS.

9.51 am

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. Let me begin by reassuring the Minister that I am not going to give a list of all my medical complaints—I seem to have a tendency to do that at these debates. I will just say that they are very few in number. As one of the officers for the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes, I agree with what the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) said about diabetes, and the way we need to tackle it by fighting obesity and waiting for the effects of that to come through.

If there were one birthday present that I would like to give the NHS, the Prime Minister has already given it: a long-term plan for the NHS and a multi-year funding settlement in support of it. That is very important for a number of reasons. We all know that the NHS has suffered its most challenging winter for many years. We also know, as Opposition Members have pointed out, that we are living in an ageing society. By 2020, there will be more 70-year-olds than there were five years earlier. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) is right to say that the number of 40 to ensure that we put people’s health back on track. We have seen severe cuts, not least to our Sure Start centres, hundreds of which have closed. From the evidence that they produce, we know about the real impact that they have, particularly on our young people. Health visitors are an initiative that the Government took up in 2010, following Labour’s urging that we must increase the number of health visitors. That number has now fallen, from the 4,200 additional health visitors that David Cameron put right at the heart of his Government, back to the numbers before that Government. There is a real crisis among that vital workforce, with ever-increasing workloads.

We have had workforce cuts, financial cuts and service cuts in public health. Public health is about long-term outcomes, and when we are dealing with austerity and cuts, we are looking at having to support tomorrow, not the future. Public health has been a very poor relative in the austerity programme, and I can witness that in my city. In Acomb in York, since 2011 I have seen childhood obesity more than double among my community. I have also seen health checks cut; those are vital at the age of 40 to ensure that we put people’s health back on track.

Long-term contraception has been cut, and smoking cessation services demolished—unless, of course, people pay for them. We have seen a 90% fall in the number of people able to access smoking cessation services, in an area where the number of people who smoke is higher than the national average. Those are the real consequences of cuts. In York, the clinical commissioning group denies surgery to people who have a high body mass index or who smoke, yet the support services to help
people change their lifestyle and behaviours are not there any more—a complete nonsense. That is why it is really important to put the focus back on public health.

Over the past week, I was most shocked by a letter I received about substance misuse services in York. York is now 148th out of 148 authorities when it comes to drug-related deaths of people in treatment and across the community as a whole. Most people will be shocked to hear that about York, but when I look at what our local council have done in absolutely slashing funding to those vital services, I am not really surprised—and, of course, the most severe cuts are still to come. What will that mean to the people in my community whose life chances are being taken away from them?

Across mental health services, the sustained lack of investment over such a long period is having a real impact on health outcomes. People have been hurt by cuts and hurt by political decisions. It need not be that way. We all know it is the most vulnerable, the poorest, the people who really need the state’s help who fall down when the state stands back.

We have heard so much about young people in the debate, for whom interventions are even lower than for older people. For people in their latter years, public health virtually does not feature. For people in York on this 70th birthday, because we want to celebrate the future with everyone.

We know that so many people are being failed, and the most vulnerable are being failed the most, but we can change things around. Public health does not actually cost a lot of money compared with acute services. So, I trust that from today, we will take the spirit of Nye Bevan and ensure that we invest in the very people who will depend on our NHS in the future.

I want to touch on the 70th birthday of the NHS, which is so important for so many of us, and draw the Minister’s attention to what we are doing in York. York is now 148th out of 148 authorities when it comes to drug-related deaths of people in treatment and across the community as a whole. Most people will be shocked to hear that about York, but when I look at what our local council have done in absolutely slashing funding to those vital services, I am not really surprised—and, of course, the most severe cuts are still to come. What will that mean to the people in my community whose life chances are being taken away from them?

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We have heard so much about young people in the debate, for whom interventions are even lower than for older people. For people in their latter years, public health virtually does not feature. Such interventions save the NHS so much money—it is a no-brainer—so why cut those services? That question comes not just from me, but from directors of public health I meet regularly in my constituency, and across the board. They want to understand what will happen when the public health grant is withdrawn. I hope the Minister can reassure them today that he will ensure that they will receive the funding needed to sustain services into the future. They also want to know how the Department of Health and Social Care will work with directors of public health to ensure that their long-term goals for improving the community’s public health will be funded.

We need to look seriously at the workforce in public health, which has been decimated. We have to look at funding to sustain that for the future health of our nation. We need to look at outcomes, not just inputs. Let me take the child measurement programme as an example. It is a nonsense that we know now how obese children are, but we cannot afford the interventions to change the trajectory of those children’s lives. That means that the programme does not work. We need to examine how we change the life chances of so many people across the country.

I want to touch on the 70th birthday of the NHS, which is so important for so many of us, and draw the Minister’s attention to what we are doing in York. When I heard what his Department was rolling out, I thought it quite lacklustre—it lacked ambition—so I pulled together the health leaders in York to drive forward a public health initiative to mark the 70th birthday. It involves the clinical commissioning group, the acute trust, the mental health trust and the local authority. We are working together to launch in July, as part of that fantastic celebration, a whole programme intended to transform the health of our whole community.

I have a meeting with businesses to talk about how employers can change the life chances of people who work for them. We are meeting faith and community groups to talk to about people that they engage with. We are going to have a touring pop-up event across the city over the NHS birthday to provide advice, health checks and services, and simple programmes, because we do not have a lot of money. I know from Health questions that the Minister will meet with me, as the Secretary of State said, to talk about this initiative. We are going to have health walks at lunchtimes. We are going to have basic tests to understand health measures, as well as advice, information, encouragement and the promotion of better understanding, looking at diet, exercise, behaviour and the choices that people made. We are determined to touch the thousands of lives of people in York on this 70th birthday, because we want to celebrate the future with everyone.

We know that so many people are being failed, and the most vulnerable are being failed the most, but we can change things around. Public health does not actually cost a lot of money compared with acute services. So, I trust that from today, we will take the spirit of Nye Bevan and ensure that we invest in the very people who will depend on our NHS in the future.
being used to the maximum it could be, in terms of treating people locally. I believe it is an issue of funding, which other hon. Members have also highlighted. What bothers me about what I think is happening in my constituency is that it seems to be taking us rather worryingly near to the sort of inequalities that my father spoke of. In other words, a person who lives in a very remote area of Caithness or Sutherland might not get the same deal as someone who lives in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen, because it is harder to access services. That is the challenge for the Scottish Government, and for us all. Surely to goodness a person should not be disadvantaged because of where they live. That is what lay behind the Beveridge report, which in a way was influential on Nye Bevan bringing into being the NHS: the idea that no matter who someone was, or where they lived, they had an equal right to the service.

I do not know the answer. Health is devolved to Scotland, which I accept. It is rightly the property of Members of the Scottish Parliament and Ministers in the Scottish Government, who I am sure do their level best, but if there is a perception in Westminster that one part of the UK—it may be Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland—is perhaps not functioning quite as it should, and on something as fundamental to our lives as the NHS, at the very least there has to be a conversation between UK Ministers and Scottish Government Ministers to say, “Is it going okay for you? Is there something we could do better? Is there something that can be co-ordinated better throughout the UK to make sure that whether someone lives in Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland, they have the same access to health services?”

I give notice that this is an issue to which I will return, while of course always recognising the difficulty of the fact that health is a devolved matter and there are therefore limits on what I can say. I do not intend to be silent on the issue.

10.9 am

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) said, the antecedents of the NHS are to be found in Tredgar and in the Beveridge report, which preceded it. Disease was one of Beveridge’s five great evils. Infectious diseases such as polio, diphtheria and tuberculosis caused people to die in their early and mid-50s on average. The need for a sufficient and healthy labour force to rebuild the economy necessitated combating those diseases, which also caused a high rate of infant mortality. The need for a better, longer-living workforce drove much of what Beveridge looked at.

There was in fact a good deal of state funding provision before 1948 to cope with the devastation of disease, but what Bevan did, against tremendous opposition within the service and politically, was to centralise the system, nationalise hospital provision, create standards across the country and, crucially, give people the assurance that they would always be seen and treated, based on their need, not their ability to pay.

The health service was built on a tripartite structure of hospital, GP and community services. In return for good terms and conditions, clinical freedom and autonomy in the system, the doctors finally agreed and the NHS was born. It was a wonderful achievement, but it was also a wonderful compromise. Over the past 70 years, the tensions in that compromise—the local versus the national, the role of clinical autonomy, priorities and the quality of the service—have regularly surfaced. There are always crises—astonishingly, every year there is a winter.

We now treat 1 million people every 36 hours, and employ nearly 2 million people. We are very grateful for everything they do, and we celebrate them today on this 70th year. However, the challenges are different today, and the service should therefore be different in the next 70 years. This anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate the achievement, revisit the compromise and set a course that is as resilient for the next 70 years. The diseases that are with us today—cancer, cardiovascular, respiratory and liver disease—are very different. Depending on a person’s social class, dietary risks, tobacco and obesity are the biggest contributors to early death and disability. Alcohol and drug misuse, and lack of physical activity, are also key. We are finally starting to appreciate the impact of mental health and social isolation on physical health.

Life expectancy has increased, but the prevalence of people living with one or more limiting long-term illnesses has changed the picture of healthcare demand, and that requires the system to change. In Bristol, women live an average of 64 years in good health, but a further 19 years in poor health. For men, the figures are 63 and 15 years, but that average masks a huge range in social class. Several areas of my Bristol South constituency are in the bottom 5% in England for male life expectancy. In 2010 the Marmot review told us that such health inequalities cost us approximately £36 billion to £40 billion in lost taxes and costs in welfare and to the NHS—that is a huge amount of money. We must prevent and manage life-limiting diseases and address the silent misery of families who support and cope with people living with them.

Accountability is a major issue for the service in the next 70 years. We need to start treating patients and the public as assets to the health service, not as nuisances. We need somehow to introduce democratic accountability into decision making. The complex fragmentation of the health service makes it wholly unclear where responsibility, and hence accountability, lies. From the bottom up, hundreds of bodies are involved. The 200-odd clinical commissioning groups are members’ clubs with no element of either direct or representative democracy, and they are plagued with conflicts of interest. At the top, there is not just the Department and Ministers, but a raft of arm’s length bodies, which Members of Parliament find it impossible to navigate. I worked in the system for a CCG, and I still find it really difficult—it is an absolute mess.

One reason for the mess is the disaster of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, but the NHS has been poor on accountability since the early centralisation. It has always been fragmented in a way that makes accountability harder, and it has always seen itself as separate from the rest of the local system, which has democratic accountability. That is a problem. It has always been riven by powerful vested interests that distort the general accountability. That is a key part of Bevan’s compromise, and I think we need to revisit it.
Presented with a well-made case that is supported by, dare I say it, experts or informed leaders, the public will make difficult decisions. I know local politics can make things difficult when tough issues such as service changes are necessary, but excluding people does not make that any easier. Making a hard case to local people and their MPs is challenging work, but if that does not happen decisions gain no legitimacy. We can keep the “N” in the NHS, but we need to give local people far more control to make it more resilient for the next 70 years.

It looks like we are going that way. We have heard about the experience in Scotland, and this is also a devolved matter in Wales. Very interesting things are happening in Manchester, but we need a much better debate about what local looks like. We must recognise that the key issues for now are the money and the workforce. Technology gives us huge opportunities, including on some of the workforce issues.

I want to finish by talking about leadership. I joined the health service as a manager in the late 1980s, and I am very proud of the role that managers play in the services. General management, which was introduced in the 1980s, has few friends, partly because it was associated with the Thatcher era of reforms, and partly because it threatens clinical autonomy and freedom, which were fundamental to Bevan’s compromise. We should use this anniversary to celebrate managers and leadership in the NHS. We need good clinical and non-clinical managers to make the changes we want to see, deliver the efficiencies we need and keep making the system safer. I hope that they can also help leaders make the NHS more open and accountable. We need that for the next 70 years.

10.16 am

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a sincere and genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing this debate and for his thorough and measured speech. He talked about the challenges we face in the NHS, about austerity—obviously, across these isles, we all face the challenge of dealing with austerity constraints—and about obesity. I mentioned earlier that on Monday, Jamie Oliver met the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, here in London. He backed the Scottish Government’s target to halve childhood obesity rates by 2030 with a new healthy weight and diet plan, which is due to be published this summer. It will include action to restrict promotions that advertise junk food, including multi-buy deals on unhealthy products.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fantastic parkrun, which is one of the best lifestyle movements—if you will pardon the pun, Mr Hosie—that we have. It is free, run by volunteers and accessible. It is 5 km—an anyone of any ability can manage that. This morning, I managed to get some miles in the bank before this debate, alongside my Scottish National party running club colleagues. The hon. Gentleman is more than welcome to join us any time he wishes. The invitation is open to all: we are ecumenical.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) gave us a very good historical lesson about how far the NHS has come. He was very comradely in his cross-party acknowledgment that Labour founded the NHS, and rightly so. In his comradeliness, he neglected to mention any of the NHS measures in Scotland, which are no doubt helped in no small part by the intervention and support of his daughters. It is right that we pay tribute to NHS workers. The NHS in Scotland is the best performing in the UK.

My constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), perhaps missed the tone a wee bit, but I understand his anxiety. He talked about Monklands Hospital, which is in my constituency. Of course, the SNP Scottish Government have committed funding to build a new Monklands Hospital. We are all aware of the challenges previous Scottish Governments faced with the accident and emergency service at Monklands Hospital. There was potential for a downgrade, but the hospital’s future is secure and we are going to get a new service. The hon. Gentleman talked about funding, and of course the NHS in Scotland is supported by record funding levels. However, the hon. Gentleman is right that, like all NHS services, we are not without our challenges in Scotland. In that regard, I hope that he pursues the case that he mentioned, involving his mother. It is right that where there are problems they are called out and we learn from them.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the need for a long-term plan for the NHS. We all agree with that. He also talked about care not being properly integrated, but in Scotland we have legislated to integrate health and social care, so we are further down the road to seeing it realised. He was right to mention that public health must be central—we must all remember that, and remind ourselves of it.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was right to pay tribute to Dame Tessa Jowell, who personified dignity, passion and eruditeness in her final months of campaigning on health issues. We all pay tribute to her work and pass on our sincere condolences to her family.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) gave a very measured speech based on experience and personal testimony. He is right that the NHS is fundamentally about fairness, and he was right to pay tribute to our NHS staff, as we should all do—it should be something to unify us all. He talked about ruralia and distance, and I benefit from experience in that regard because I am originally from Orkney, so I well appreciate the challenges of local service delivery, which are not too dissimilar from the ones that he faces in his constituency. I know, however, that the Scottish Government are aware of that and that the door is open to him should he seek to make representations or come up with ideas.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the potential for UK conversations, but as I have said, the Scottish health service is performing well according to any number of measures. The issues and conversations that we are having are about funding, and about breaking the austerity stranglehold that affects all our local public services. Perhaps he will join us in continuing to challenge UK Ministers to end austerity.

The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karim Smyth), too, gave a very good speech based on experience. She spoke about the new challenges that we face and how they have changed over time. She mentioned obesity, as I have, and alcohol abuse. The Scottish Government have intervened to legislate for and bring in, after much challenge, a minimum unit price for alcohol in Scotland.
UK Ministers are following developments to see how progress is made. When discussing NHS staff, it is right to mention frontline staff—our nurses and doctors—but we should also mention the decision makers, leaders and management level. I have a good working relationship with my local decision makers and managers, and the hon. Lady was right to mention them.

I want to touch a wee bit on my personal experience of the NHS. In many ways, it has shaped where I am, and I am personally indebted to it. First, when I was a young boy, not that much older than my son is now, I pulled a kettle of boiling water down on myself. The scars are still there on my arm and chest, a physical reminder of what happened. Had it not been for swift and expert intervention at the time I would not have had the full use of my right arm, so I am personally indebted to the staff in Kirkwall and Aberdeen for what they did for me.

Those who know me and my slightly accident-prone nature will be surprised to learn that my next major intervention from the NHS was not for 20 years, when I dislocated my knee running on a running track, ending what little there was of my athletics career. However, it could have been far worse. Had it not been for the swift intervention of the surgeon at Ninewells Hospital, John Dearing, who worked within the week, because of the nerve damage I sustained when I dislocated my knee I would not have had the full range of mobility in my legs that I have now. As I have said, I can still run, and play football and rugby equally badly, but I would not have been able to have it not been for his swift and timely intervention, so I am very grateful.

I am sure that many of us in the House are indebted to the NHS in one area that we have not really talked about, other than the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. I am certainly grateful to the NHS for the wonderful experience of the birth of my two children. Sometimes we take such services for granted, in particular when we hear about the experience of friends in America, for example. Anecdotally, if we make an analogy with the recent delivery of the royal first-class the whole way to the Lindo wing for the same price that it would cost to have their baby delivered in America. We should all remind ourselves of how fortunate we are in many regards in this country.

I know that we do not all have positive experiences when we interact with the NHS. I deal with complaints about the NHS, just as any MP, any Member of the Scottish Parliament up the road, or any colleagues of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate and for his excellent speech. He is rightly proud of his roots in his wonderful constituency and the connection that it holds with Nye Bevan and the founding of the NHS. I am sure that he and his constituents will enjoy the 70th anniversary celebrations, and I look forward to hearing all about them.

I am grateful, in particular when we hear about the experience of friends in America, for example. Anecdotally, if we make an analogy with the recent delivery of the royal baby of a leaflet distributed before that launch—I wish I had a better copy, but I treasure this one. It says:

"Your new National Health Service begins on 5th July. What is it? How do you get it? It will provide you with all medical, dental, and nursing care. Everyone—rich or poor, man, woman or child—can use it or any part of it."

It went on to say:

"But it is not a 'charity'. You are all paying for it, mainly as taxpayers, and it will relieve your money worries in time of illness."

The crux of it for our citizens was that they would no longer have to make that awful decision—the choice between debt or, in some unfortunate cases, death. Everyone would now receive healthcare publicly provided and free at the point of use.

I have got my own family anecdote which, as we have the time, I am going to share with you all this morning. I am sure we all know all these family anecdotes. Mine involves my Aunty Ella and my mam. My Aunty Ella was born before the start of world war two and my mam was born in 1945—so you can see straightaway that there is going to be a great anecdote here.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate and for his excellent speech. He is rightly proud of his roots in his wonderful constituency and the connection that it holds with Nye Bevan and the founding of the NHS. I am sure that he and his constituents will enjoy the 70th anniversary celebrations, and I look forward to hearing all about them.

I would also like to thank the other hon. Members who spoke this morning for their thoughtful contributions to the debate—the hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Henley (John Howell), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who speaks for the Scottish National party, and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Bristol South (Karim Smyth).

This is the first speech that I am giving on the 70th birthday celebrations of the NHS, and it is a genuine honour and privilege to be able to do so here today as the shadow Minister for public health. On 5 July, 70 years ago, the Health Secretary, Aneurin Bevan, was handed the keys to Park Hospital in Manchester, now known as Trafford General Hospital, and launched our national health service. I have my own little photocopied memento of a leaflet distributed before that launch—I wish I had a better copy, but I treasure this one. It says:

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I have got my own family anecdote which, as we have the time, I am going to share with you all this morning. I am sure we all have all these family anecdotes. Mine involves my Aunty Ella and my mam. My Aunty Ella was born before the start of world war two and my mam was born in 1945—so you can see straightaway that there is going to be a great anecdote here.

Now, I do not know why—they must just have been unlucky—but in both of their childhoods they suffered from pneumonia. Pre the NHS, when it was my Aunty Ella who had pneumonia, my nana had to go to the doctor's surgery every morning, where he would hold out his hand, and into his hand she would place a coin—a shilling or whatever. Then she would hold out her hand and into her hand he would place a tablet—obviously, penicillin or some form of medicine. Then she would go home and give it to my Aunty Ella. This went on nearly a week.

My nana was very poor, working class, and she says that in those days, in order to get the medicine to get it on the tablet, she would pay a visit to the pawn shop on her way, and pawn whatever was valuable to her at that moment. It tended to be sheets, or a son's suit or her husband's suit. She did that in order to get the tablet.
Now fast forward to when my mam, who was born in '45, got pneumonia, after the health service came in in '48. My nana did not have to pawn anything: she did not have to go to the doctor's surgery at all, because a district nurse knocked on the door every day and went upstairs to where my mam was lying in bed with pneumonia, gave her an injection and left. No pawning of sheets, no handing over of money, no stress—that was the difference. Therefore, all of us—I do believe that it is all of us—are committed to those founding principles. We on the Opposition side of the House especially, will continue to fight against the privatisation of our NHS for those reasons.

To quote a phrase often falsely attributed, I now understand, to Bevan, but one I repeat because it rings true no matter who said it:

"The NHS will last as long as there are folk with the faith to fight for it."

I am pleased to say that 70 years on, there are still plenty of people with the faith left to fight for it. I hope that we will all—though maybe not us personally—be celebrating our NHS for 70 years more, and 70 years after that, and so on. It changed the lives of people then and it is still changing the lives of people today.

Bevan had huge ambitions, but he never would have imagined all those years ago the successes we have had in medicine because of the development of the NHS. I will talk about a few of them now. In 1952, Francis Crick, a British scientist, and James Watson, an American student, made one of the most important scientific breakthroughs of the 20th century, when they discovered the molecular structure of DNA. The discovery helped revolutionise medical treatments in the NHS and elsewhere, improving prevention and treatment of disease. For example, we know now that a BRCA gene mutation can cause a number of cancers in both men and women, who now have the option to have preventive surgery in order to reduce their risk of developing cancer.

In 1954, Sir Richard Doll, a British scientist, published a study in The British Medical Journal co-written with Sir Austin Bradford Hill, which established the link between smoking and lung cancer. That very important study has since led to increased smoking cessation policies from successive Governments, including the ban on smoking in public spaces by the Labour Government in 2006 and the current Government’s—and the Minister’s—tobacco control plan. Smoking prevalence is decreasing across the country, and I am pleased to say that smoking rates in the north-east are declining faster than the national average, thanks in no small part to support from programmes such as Fresh North East, which has seen around 165,000 people quit smoking since 2005.

In 1958, vaccinations for polio and diphtheria were launched, to reduce deaths from both diseases. I am pleased to say both those terrible diseases have now been eradicated from the UK. Others, such as TB and MMR vaccinations, have now become a key part of NHS prevention work. We were in this Chamber just two weeks ago debating the extension of the HPV vaccination to boys after its successful roll-out to girls in order to prevent cancers caused by that virus. Bevan could not have imagined such developments—or maybe he did, such was his vision.

In 1960, doctors at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh completed the UK's first kidney transplant, using a set of 49-year-old twins. Incidentally—perhaps it was the pneumonia—my Aunty Ella, who I have mentioned once already, went on to have kidney failure; and just a decade after the first transplant in Edinburgh, she became one of the first to receive a kidney transplant in Newcastle Freeman Hospital. That helped her live long enough not only to see her own children grow up, but to see her first grandchildren born. In 1968, a team of 18 doctors and nurses at the National Heart Hospital in London, led by surgeon Donald Ross, carried out the first heart transplant in this country. There are now more than 50,000 people living with a functioning transplant thanks to organ donation and transplantation in the UK, giving them more time to spend and treasure with their families.

In 1988, breast cancer screening was introduced, offering mammograms to women over 50. We have now increased the number of women who are eligible for breast screening. That helps with early diagnosis and survival rates, which are now at 78% for 10 years or more—excellent figures. None of this would have happened if it were not for our NHS and the everyday heroes that work within it. The NHS is the UK’s largest employer, with over 1.5 million staff from all over the world and more than 350 different careers. Those people are kind, caring and passionate about their patients. They just want to get on and do their job, but sadly, they are finding this more and more difficult, with funding cuts and thousands of unfilled vacancies, when more and more is expected of them.

We on the Opposition side of the House do not take our NHS or the workforce for granted, and neither should the Government. It has to be said that for the last eight years, the NHS has been in crisis. We have ever-growing waiting lists, patients waiting on trolleys in overcrowded hospitals, and people being told not to go to A&E unless it is an absolute emergency. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister announced a funding plan to mark the 70th anniversary of the NHS. I hope the Minister will inform the House how much of that funding will go to improving and establishing public health services. There is a huge funding gap within the NHS, but with the right public health services we can help people to live healthier lives and support them in their endeavour to do so, which, in turn, will save money.

It is estimated by the King’s Fund that since local authorities became responsible for public health budgets in 2015, on a like-for-like basis, public health spending has fallen by 5.2%. That follows a £200 million in-year cut to public health spending in 2015-16 and there are further real-term cuts to come, averaging 3.9% each year between 2016-17 and 2020-21. On the ground, that means cuts to spending on tackling drug misuse in adults—cut by more than £22 million compared with just last year—and smoking cessation services—cut by almost £16 million. Spending to tackle obesity has also fallen, by 18.5% between 2015-16 and 2016-17, again with further cuts in the pipeline in the years to come. These are vital services for local communities, which would benefit their health and life expectancy, but sadly, they continue to be cut due to lack of funding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent said in his excellent opening speech, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure—a line that I will certainly be stealing for future speeches—and that is why, 70 years on, we must focus on public health initiatives.
That is why I am so pleased that he made today’s debate about public health, rather than its just being on the 70th anniversary generally. Not only can such initiatives help people live healthier lives, but they will save the NHS—and, in turn, the Treasury—money. I think the technical term for that is a no-brainer.

In closing, I will return to Bevan’s wise words. He said: “No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means.”

This Government have the means to make people in this country some of the healthiest in the world. I hope that they will take those means and ensure that vital public health services are provided to society to do just that.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as usual. Does she agree that one of the issues with devolution, and some of the experimentation we have seen, is the separation of knowledge between the health service and providers of our public services, particularly in England? We can learn from the experience that has been gained, particularly in Wales, where there is much more integration between those areas, and transfer the learning about public health that has come into local authorities, so that they understand the need to work better with local health services.

Mrs Hodgson: Absolutely. That point had not been covered, so I am pleased that my hon. Friend has made it. There is best practice in Wales, and even in Scotland—we are always hearing in these debates about some of the wonderful things going on in Scotland, aren’t we, Minister? We should learn from where there is best practice. Where good things are happening, that knowledge should be spread across the NHS, especially if it will lead to better public health and, in turn, save money.

I was just coming to the end of my contribution. I just wanted to say that we want to go on to see more successes, such as the ones I listed earlier, over the next 70 years. I am sure we will. With medical technology and science the way they are, we probably cannot even imagine the sorts of advances that we will see. I hope those will all be within the publicly funded national health service that we are all so proud of, for many years to come.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): What an interesting debate. I echo the view of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), that it is a privilege to be in this position at this time in the NHS’s history. I feel like I know her Auntie Ella personally—what a lovely family anecdote that was. That real example was a good reminder of what the NHS has brought to families.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on securing the debate. Those who know me know that I certainly share his passion for this topic. Winchester cannot claim ownership of Mr Bevan, but Florence Nightingale established a hospital in my city on the hill—the Royal Hampshire County Hospital—which is much loved and is still there doing great things.

It has very committed and caring staff. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said that the NHS was a great achievement but that there were also a number of compromises. If I may say so, she was very astute to put it that way. As many Members have said, we live with that achievement but there are many compromises.

The NHS is of course 70 years old this year. Much has changed in our society and our health since 1948. Our health needs are very different, and we have better drugs and diagnostic tools. When the NHS was born, life expectancy was 66 for men and 71 for women; today it is 79 and 83 respectively. That is incredible. In 1948 there were more than 34 deaths for every 1,000 live births; today there are just five, although that is still too many.

I will start where every Health Minister should, by thanking our NHS staff for all they do, day in, day out, to make our NHS something that we are incredibly proud of. There was a great awards event this week in London, at which the Duke of Cambridge spoke, which showcased so many wonderful examples. Indeed, Mr Bevan would be amazed at the work that goes on today across the NHS.

We want to use the NHS70 moment to reflect on the last 70 years of patient care, to celebrate the innovations in the NHS, to raise awareness of the many ways we can support the system and, probably most importantly, to promote the public’s role in the future of the NHS and the importance of taking care of our own health and using the NHS wisely—and, yes, accountability, which the hon. Member for Bristol South wisely raised. I am giving her a lot of credit. (Interruption.) “Keep going,” she says.

So much of this debate is about our changing society, but the NHS has consistently been a universal service that is free at the point of need. That will continue. However, as several Members said, we are facing many different challenges from those we faced back in the ’40s, such as the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. He sits on the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes. I was bitterly disappointed that he did not give us any of his medical updates, but I know that those will come another time. In fact, we heard a couple of medical examples from the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). The rising prevalence of type 2 diabetes is a great challenge for us, as is cancer. Both can be reduced if we tackle obesity and encourage more people to lead healthier lifestyles, so that is where I will focus.

The Government take the public health challenge we face incredibly seriously. We have responded by putting prevention at the heart of public policy making. We have taken quite stringent steps. As the shadow Minister said, we are a global leader on tobacco control. We were the first country in Europe to introduce legislation to bring in plain packaging for cigarettes, off the back of the smoking ban in public places. She rightly mentioned Fresh North East, which is a very good example—it is in many ways the apple of my eye in this policy area. I hope at some point, if the arithmetic in this place ever allows, to go and see it for myself. I will let her know if I do—perhaps we can do that together. In April we introduced the soft drinks industry levy, which is a big public health measure. In recent years we have vaccinated more than 1 million infants against meningitis and an additional 2 million children against flu.
We have run award-winning public health campaigns, including Be Clear on Cancer, which I am very invested in, and Act FAST, the public health stroke campaign. They all sit with the inheritance of the landmark Don’t Die of Ignorance campaign about the AIDS challenge we faced in the late 1980s—I am surprised that was not mentioned. That campaign still makes the hair on the back of the neck stand up, does it not? It was an incredibly impactful and powerful piece of work that came out of the public health movement.

I want to cover a lot of things, but let me return to diabetes, which is a major challenge. Preventing diabetes is a huge priority for the Government. According to Diabetes UK, which I saw just last week, about 5 million people in our country are currently at high risk of developing type 2 diabetes. If the current trend persists, one in three people will be obese by 2034 and one in 10 will develop type 2 diabetes. Some of the risk factors for type 2 diabetes, such as poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle, which can lead to obesity, can be changed. We know that 61.4% of adults are either overweight or obese; and 26% of adults and 20% of children aged 10 to 11 are obese. The obesity crisis has been decades in the making, and tackling it is a real challenge. It will not be turned around overnight, and no one pretends that it can be. That is why tackling obesity is absolutely a Government priority. I will come back to that point in a moment.

I mentioned the NHS diabetes prevention programme, which is aimed at providing people aged 40 to 60 who are at risk of diabetes with personalised help with healthy eating and lifestyle, and bespoke physical activity. So far, as I said at Health questions last week, more than 170,000 people have been referred to that programme. Those who are referred get tailored, personalised help, and that is really making an impact.

Neil Gray: It was remiss of me when talking about childhood obesity and lifestyle changes not to commend those who started and spread the daily mile challenge in our schools. Perhaps the Minister will touch on that, and on its roots in Scotland.

Steve Brine: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I touched on child obesity, which is one of the top public health challenges, if not the top challenge, for this generation. Overweight and obesity-related ill health is estimated to cost the NHS in England about £5.1 billion each year. The estimated total cost to society is between £27 billion and £46 billion per year. Our child obesity plan, which was published back in 2016, is informed by the latest evidence and research in the area. At its heart is a desire to change the nature of the food that children eat and make it easier for families to make healthier choices. Since we published the plan, real progress has been made on sugar production. Since the introduction of the soft drinks industry levy, which I mentioned, sugar has been drastically reduced in around half of all soft drinks products that fall under the levy. I recognise the daily mile, which was rightly raised by the hon. Gentleman, which he said started in Scotland. It is in England as well, though not as much as I would like to see it—we have an ambition for it to do much better.

Many Members mentioned child obesity, and we have always been clear that the child obesity strategy is the start of a conversation and not the final word—we call it chapter 1 for a reason. We continue to monitor the progress we have made since the publication of the strategy a couple of years ago, and if further measures are needed we will take them.

Let me touch on physical activity, which the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent rightly spoke about. People know that being active is good for their health and they want to do more, but the truth is that many of us are simply not active enough to benefit our health. Only 66% of men and 58% of women in England meet the chief medical officer’s recommendation to be active for at least 150 minutes a week. Children are no better, with only 23% of boys and 20% of girls being active for at least 60 minutes a day. As we get older, we become less active. It is recommended that we do muscle strengthening and balance exercises on at least two days a week, but the most recent health survey shows that only 1% of the adult population in England meet that guideline.

Why is that important? We are facing an ageing population and there is good evidence that being active reduces the chance of falls, depression and dementia by up to 30%. That will help people stay healthy and independent for longer, and we need that to happen if the NHS is to be sustainable for its next 70 years. People need to understand why being active is important and have a clear understanding of how much activity they should do and the impact that can have on their health. I was pleased to hear parkruns mentioned by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, because they are incredibly important. I have them in my constituency at the River Park leisure centre.

It is vital that we acknowledge the importance of good mental health, which was mentioned a couple of times in the debate. Everybody’s mental health is on a point on the spectrum and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said, mental health is just the other side of the coin of physical health. Good mental health is so important to leading positive and productive lives and to the NHS. This is Mental Health Awareness Week, but really every day should be a mental health awareness day. Mental health is a key priority for the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, which is why last December we published the Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health, backed by more than £300 million of funding to improve access to services and, crucially, mental health support in schools.

Just yesterday I was at the Maudsley Hospital in London, looking at the incredible work it has done in bringing us to a smoke-free NHS. We identified mental health in-patients as a key target in the tobacco control plan. I saw the important work being done, which I would recommend to any Members who think they could inspire their local areas to follow that lead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock was dead right to mention delayed transfers of care—delayed discharges—which are a key component and in many ways the magic key to the NHS. It is also always nice to hear Robert Burns quoted in the Chamber, but I am sorry that he did not sing it—maybe next time.

I understand why the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) made the speech he did. He certainly put down a marker for the Scottish Government, who govern his constituents.
[Steve Brine]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley for mentioning the long-term economic plan—I have not said that for a while—and the multi-year funding plan that the Prime Minister talked about at the Liaison Committee. He is dead right. That is exactly what we should be doing, and it is exactly what we will do.

As always, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke from the heart about health matters. She mentioned the integrated public health plan for her city, which sounds great. Local application of what is good for local areas is right, and I look forward to hearing more about her local area when we meet.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) raised questions about the devolution settlement. Of course, we talk across England and the devolved nations, but the settled will of this Parliament and of the people in this country is that we have a devolution settlement. Devolution can bring difference, and that can be good or bad. Yes, we do talk and share best practice, and I know that NHS England and Public Health England talk to their counterparts in the devolved nations all the time.

On good and bad difference—this is not political knockabout; it is just some facts—it would be remiss of me, as a Conservative Health Minister, not to put on the record that since 2010 we have increased NHS spending each and every year, even as we have had to take some very difficult financial decisions, given the state of the public finances we inherited. The NHS now has £14 billion more to spend on caring for people than it did in 2010. To give that some context, over the past five years funding for the NHS increased in Wales by 7.2%, in Scotland by 11.5%, and in England by 17.3%. I say that not to make a political point; it is a simple fact that should be put on the record.

Let me take this opportunity once again to congratulate the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent on introducing this timely and important debate. As we have seen, the challenges that the NHS faces are radically different from those it faced in 1948. The debate has shown us why we, the Government, the NHS and the people we all represent, wherever they live in this United Kingdom, are all part of the solution to the deep and significant public health challenges we face as a nation. They are also all part of the inheritance of that health service that we are all so proud of.

In the short time available I have tried to show how seriously the Government and the NHS take those challenges. We must use all the opportunities we have at our disposal and that long-term health economic plan—I like saying that—to address the big public health challenges facing our nation. Only through the combined efforts of the Government, the NHS and the people in our country who are taking responsibility for their own healthcare, as technology increasingly allows them to do, which was another good point made in the debate, can we truly tackle the public health challenges we face and make sure that the NHS does not just survive for another 70 years—we are not interested in that—but thrives and goes from strength to strength, being a preventive health service as much as a treatment health service. That will truly honour Nye Bevan and everyone else involved in its establishment back in the '40s.

Nick Smith: I thank my comrades and other colleagues for their contributions. I agree with the Minister that it was good to hear a Rabbie Burns poem emphasising good health. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) praised health service workers, and I was pleased to hear that his mum is better and at home now.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) emphasised the enormous contribution that Tessa Jowell made to her career. I too would like to support and emphasise that. From the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) we heard about the huge difficulties of getting healthcare on the Scottish islands before 1948. He supported the then Attlee Government’s legislative jewel in the crown: the establishment of the NHS. I thank him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) emphasised the importance of William Beveridge and the thinking he did to address the five “giant evils” in 1942. That was important for our Labour Government after the second world war. I was pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) about the Scottish Government’s plans to halve child obesity. I support that, and of course it should be done everywhere. I was also pleased to hear that our parliamentary running group is getting stronger weekly.

I was glad to hear the Minister emphasise the importance of addressing child obesity, but we really must do better. I will not accept his political barbs about the NHS across our country. I remind him that Churchill and the Conservatives voted against the establishment of the NHS in 1948, and that crucial fact is never forgotten—certainly not in my constituency. I want to praise Nye and the people of my constituency for their contributions. I agree with the Minister that it was good to hear a Rabbie Burns poem emphasising good health.
Reproductive Rights

11 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That this House has considered access to reproductive rights around the world.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, in a debate that should concern everybody in the country who is committed to equality. Abortion lies at the heart of equality for women, and men and women can never truly be equal until they have equal control over their own bodies. Abortion is the most common procedure that women of reproductive age undergo, and one in three women in Britain under the age of 45 have an abortion in their lifetime. In truth, those of us committed to equality and to ensuring that women are able to make choices about their own bodies can never be too vigilant, or think that the law in this country, let alone around the world, brings us equality and human rights. That is because there are continued attacks on that basic freedom for women, and that is what the debate is about.

I have seen and read the Minister’s words, and he knows that I am a fan of his persuasive abilities. However, I want to test whether the Government will learn the lesson of the suffragette movement, which is that it is deeds not words that matter, especially when it comes to equality. The Government must not simply say that they are committed to ensuring that women have the right to decide their own sexual and reproductive health; it matters that they act, including in response to any threats to that right.

There is a big variation around the world in access to abortion. Although 98% of countries permit abortion to save the life of a woman, only 62% allow it to preserve a woman’s mental health, and 63% to preserve a woman’s physical health. Only 27% of countries provide abortion on request. There has been some progress. For example, in recent years there has been a heated national debate in Bolivia when it was discovered that women were being turned in by their healthcare providers. A 16-year-old girl who arrived at hospital haemorrhaging was later apprehended and accused by hospital staff of having had an abortion. New legislation in Bolivia now allows abortion in the first eight weeks of pregnancy for a broad range of circumstances.

Canada decriminalised abortion in 1988. As a result, not only is Canada’s abortion rate lower than in the United Kingdom, but it enjoys the world’s lowest rate of maternal mortality from abortion. Abortion is legal in many parts of South Asia, including India, Nepal and Bangladesh, although it is not always accessible. In some African countries, for example, South Africa and Ethiopia, abortion is permissible and reasonably accessible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that sensitivity to African culture must be foremost when dealing in and with African nations, and that we must always take into account their belief systems regarding sexual health and reproduction?

Stella Creasy: First and foremost, we should listen to African women, and they are consistently clear that they would like control over their own bodies. Being forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy is no freedom or liberation at all.

For every country where there is progress, we also see the tightening grip of the anti-choice movement. Let us not call it “pro-life”; there is nothing pro-life about forcing a woman to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

In Europe—our own continent—Poland now has some of the strictest rules on abortion in the world, and abortion is allowed only if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, if the woman’s life is in danger, or in cases of severe or fatal foetal abnormality. Consequently, 80,000 Polish women a year go abroad or seek illegal abortions at home.

America now has a President who says that women should be “punished” if they have an abortion, and a Vice-President who believes that women who have a miscarriage should report it and hold a funeral. One Governor signed a law that states that it is illegal to have an abortion once a foetal heartbeat has been detected. Given that heartbeats can be detected as early as six weeks into a pregnancy—sometimes before a woman even realises she is pregnant—that is no freedom or liberation at all.

In El Salvador, abortion is illegal with no exceptions, and that horrendous ban violates the basic human rights of women in that country. At least 23 women and girls remain in prison as a result of the abortion ban, and one woman, Teodora del Carmen Vasquez, walked out of prison a few weeks ago after more than a decade of imprisonment. She was sentenced to 30 years for aggravated homicide, and released only after the Supreme Court ruled that there was not enough evidence to show that she had killed her baby. Abortion may be permitted in Rwanda, but Rwandan police unjustly arrest and imprison hundreds of women on abortion-related charges—such women make up 25% of the female prison population.

The number of maternal deaths resulting from illegal abortions represents the truth: banning abortion does not stop abortion; it simply makes it unsafe. In Africa, a quarter of all those who have an unsafe abortion are adolescent girls. Indeed, about half of the 20,000 Nigerian women who die from unsafe abortions each year are adolescents. It is insulting to suggest that African women do not deserve the rights that we would fight for in our country and around the world. Africa shows us how vital international aid is, as is the job that the Minister is intended to do. Abortion is relatively legal in Zambia, but only 16% of women have access to abortion facilities—in Zambia’s Central Province, there is just one medical doctor for more than 110,000 patients.

Closer to home we see the impact of restrictions on access to healthcare services for women. In the Republic of Ireland, the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act 2013 imposed an almost total criminalisation of abortion. Ireland is one of a few countries in Europe with such highly restrictive abortion laws. The Irish constitution currently affords equal rights to the life of a foetus and to the life of a woman. However, the 18,000 women from Ireland who have travelled to the UK since 2012 reflect the fact that stopping access to abortion does not stop abortion; it just puts people at risk, including—increasingly—at risk from taking pills they have bought online. At the end of this week the Irish will go to the polls. I plead for dignity, for compassion in a crisis, and to ensure that every Irish person can care for their own at home, that there will be a yes vote.
But who are we to lecture? We should not forget how we treat women in our own backyard, particularly in Northern Ireland, which has some of the harshest laws and punishments in Europe for women who undergo an abortion. A woman with an unwanted pregnancy in Northern Ireland must either travel to the mainland or procure abortion pills online. Since the Government agreed to fund those abortions on the NHS, more than 700 women have travelled to England or Scotland from Northern Ireland. However, those are the women who are able to travel and get away from family commitments, who are not in a coercive relationship, and who have their travel documents. Little wonder that the United Nations condemned the United Kingdom for its treatment of Northern Irish women, which it called cruel, degrading and inhuman.

The Minister might say that each of those examples is due to separate policy decisions in those countries, but I want to sound the alarm and call attention to the fact that that might not be the case. Increasingly, around the world, far-right organisations and extreme religious groups are co-ordinating and funding anti-abortion and anti-choice campaigns. We in this House are used to debating the impact of foreign countries interfering in our democracy—perhaps in referendums—and we should be alive to the fact that those foreign organisations and countries are interfering in a woman’s basic right to choose. The real “The Handmaid’s Tale” is now unfolding.

In 2013, American and European campaigners met in this capital city to plan their campaign. It is called Restoring the Natural Order: an Agenda for Europe, and it seeks to overturn basic laws on human rights related to sexuality and reproduction. Since that meeting, we have seen the impact of those organisations, and the funding they have provided. We have seen how they produced results in Poland with the ban on abortion, and with bans on equal marriage in several central European countries and action on LGBT rights. We have seen how they have targeted international aid in the UK, Europe and America.

In 2013-14 the European Citizens Initiative, One of Us, called on the European Commission to propose legislation that would ensure that EU funds could not be used to fund abortion. It garnered 1.7 million signatures, and although the EU rejected that petition, given the impact it would have on women’s healthcare, that was by no means a one-off. Such rhetoric is coming back.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I very much agree with my hon. Friend and commend her comments. Does she think that now is the moment for the Government to give enthusiastic backing to the SheDecides movement that has emerged since the decision by the American President, Donald Trump, to reimpose the global gag rule? In the light of her comments about anti-abortion campaigners coming together, that would be a powerful signal of Britain’s opposition to that movement.

Stella Creasy: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and am extremely proud of the work that he did in government when the global gag rule was first introduced, standing up to what it represented as well as putting our money where our mouth is. We should recognise that the global gag rule under the present President is far worse than the original one. It states that no US funds will go to any organisation that provides for women to be referred for abortion, or advocates doing so. The policy may be called “protecting life in global health assistance”, but it is clear that it is leading to an increase in maternal deaths. Trump has expanded the rule that was in force under previous Republican Presidents to cover all US health assistance funds, whereas previously it was only about family planning.

Marie Stopes International estimates that its loss of US funding will result, between 2017 and 2020, in 6.5 million unintended pregnancies, 2.1 million unsafe abortions and 21,000 maternal deaths, let alone the impact on access to reproductive healthcare, including work on HIV, gender-based violence and sexually transmitted diseases. We can already see the impact. In Swaziland, the prevalence of HIV is among the highest in the world at 18.5% of the general population. The Botswana Family Welfare Association provided a range of healthcare and family planning services, and 60% of its funding has been threatened, because America is—or was—the largest funder of overseas healthcare. In Swaziland, family planning, antenatal and post-natal services and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases are key services from the Family Life Association of Swaziland, and there has been a clear impact. US support accounted for 25% of its annual funding. That is why there is now a massive funding gap that needs to be filled.

I am sure that the Minister will tell us about a summit to be held in this country in June promoting the idea that abortion is part of the services that we provide around the world, but we have not, as a country, put our money where our mouth is. We have not put money into the SheDecides fund. That matters. It does not matter if we are funding other services: our approach matters because of what the global gag rule represents, what a co-ordinated attack on a woman’s basic right to choose means, and what that says about the world, and our commitment to equality. That is why it matters whether we contribute. It is about solidarity. It is also about saying that there should be no shame in seeking an abortion. I hope we would all want women to be safe, and abortion to be legal, and rare—but we do not want women to suffer in silence or to be oppressed as the network in question would want. That network brings together President Trump and his supporters, and Russian oligarchs, in funding organisations that claim to promote family values—but only the ones that they choose.

In Poland, the “stop abortion law” was drafted by ultra-conservative lawyers from an organisation called Ordo Iuris. Agenda Europe, an organisation that started here, in our country, was able to attract senior members of the Polish Government, including the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Konrad Szymaniski, and the Polish Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Aleksander Stepkowski, who was also president of Ordo Iuris. The same groups are now active in Ireland, in the referendum. It is little wonder that Google and Facebook have been so concerned about the impact of foreign organisations on the fairness of the Irish referendum that they have stopped all foreign-funded advertising about the Irish referendum on their platforms. Agenda Europe summits gather a veritable “Who’s Who” of anti-choice and anti-LGBT movements around the world, such as the architects of...
the Croatian traditional marriage referendum, the citizens’ initiative on traditional marriage in Romania, HazteOir in Spain, which has sought abortion restrictions, and the French organization Les Survivants, which claims that everyone in French society shares a collective trauma, potentially, because of the experience of abortion. The organisation even developed a Pokémon app where the aim of the game is to save Pikachu from abortionists.

Such rhetoric and funding are clearly having an impact on our democracies and on women; they are having an effect. Indeed, Agenda Europe has targeted the Council of Europe. It would be useful to know who it works with in this country, because it is not transparent about it. If the Minister recognises the danger of the rhetoric and of a lack of solidarity over women’s basic rights, will he investigate the links between organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, Christian Action Research and Education, which funds an all-party parliamentary group in this place, and Agenda Europe? Those groups do not just mobilise and target politicians; they also spread lies such as abortion causes breast cancer, and claim that Planned Parenthood is involved in the illegal selling of foetal tissue. In development, they spread rumour that the west is involved in the illegal selling of foetal tissue. In development, they spread rumour that the west is involved in the illegal selling of foetal tissue.

In addition, women are being criminalised for obtaining abortion pills, reflecting how our legislation and evidence that 92% of abortions are carried out at less than 12 weeks. For example, in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland accessed pills online, to create an abortion, from Women on Web. Twenty-six per cent. were aged between 30 and 34. The majority were mothers. They were women making their own choice about how their own body should be treated. Without legal access to the pills, they risk problems. There is currently a judicial review in Northern Ireland of the case of a 15-year-old girl, whose mother procured abortion pills for her online. The girl’s case was referred to social services as she was in an abusive relationship, and somehow the GP notes were turned over to the police. Even with a suspended sentence, that young girl will have a criminal conviction. This country must not leave her in that situation. We must act to protect young women around the world making choices about their bodies. Women deserve access to what is a basic healthcare procedure, and do not deserve to be shamed for making choices about their bodies. They deserve our trust, and do not deserve to have to fight for their rights every day against a shadowy organisation involving the collusion of religious and far-right groups. They deserve a Government who will stand up to that network and stand with them.

Will the Minister investigate whether any of his ministerial colleagues have met representatives of Agenda Europe, whether in a parliamentary or political capacity? Did they, for example, take part in the decision to give Life money from the tampon tax? Have Foreign Office ministers met Agenda Europe in their lobbying work in Europe? What action is the UK taking to assist Polish women who now face one of the most restrictive regimes in the world, or to fight for the rights of women in El Salvador? Will the Government change their mind and commit to putting money into the SheDecides fund to send a strong message that those who seek to make men and women unequal will not be tolerated? Will they ensure that the laws governing access to abortion in Northern Ireland fully comply with international human rights law, including the decriminalisation of abortion? Will they act to give the idea of buffer zones legal status in the UK, and promote it elsewhere? To put it simply, I trust women and we are asking whether the Government do.

11.19 am

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for what she has said today and for her work in this area over a long period of time. I want to say at the outset that I am not sure that I or the Government are the targets of what she has been saying. She spoke about a variety of things in relation to, for example, and set out a variety of attitudes with which the Government entirely agree. We are not in league with those who put a different case on abortion. Our abortion policy is clear and, as I will set out, it is clear in relation to other parts of the world. It is forward-looking. It is fully in favour of access to vital services. It is not a reluctant policy; it is a policy we advocate and are clear about.

A number of the matters that the hon. Lady raised are not within my remit, either in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or in the Department for International Development, so let me start with as much agreement as possible with the general sense of where she was coming from, while making it clear that some of the issues she wishes to tackle do not fall within my ministerial remit. It might be helpful if I first set out what we do, and the money we put in, to support women right across the world to have access to safe abortion. If she is not aware of that, it will help her and her colleagues; being aware, it is something she can champion as part of her advocacy. That she has a Government and a country that want to do what I am setting out will, I hope, form part of her argument.

Every woman, regardless of where she lives, possesses the same reproductive rights. Every woman has the right to make decisions about her own body. Every woman...
[Alistair Burt]

has the right to decide whether, when, and how many children to have. Every woman has the right to make decisions that affect her own life. But the reality is that not all women are able to exercise those rights. That is why this Government, through the Department for International Development, are working tirelessly to be a loud and strong voice for access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services. We are working to enable women and girls to have sexual and reproductive choices, to avoid unwanted sexual contact, injury and infection, to make informed decisions about childbearing, and to face fewer risks in the course of pregnancy and childbirth.

The UK is the world’s largest donor to the United Nations Population Fund and the second-largest donor for family planning. Access to voluntary family planning information, services and supplies is fundamental to women’s and girls’ empowerment. It means they can avoid a life of early, multiple and frequently dangerous pregnancies and births, and instead complete their education and fulfil their potential. That is why we have driven global investment and innovation in family planning through major summits in London in 2012 and 2017.

We have committed to spending an average of £225 million a year on family planning over the next five years, enabling nearly 20 million people to use contraception, preventing 6 million unwanted pregnancies and so preventing more than 3 million abortions, many of which would be unsafe.

The UK has a proud record of putting women’s and girls’ rights at the centre of its international development policy. Addressing gender inequality and empowering women and girls underpins all our work to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development recently launched the new “DFID Strategic Vision for Gender Equality”, which is a call to action to all our development partners to step up and act to address gender inequality in all its forms. Sexual and reproductive health and rights is one of five foundational areas in the new vision. We believe, and the evidence tells us, that that vision will work to transform the lives of women and girls, and we will continue to lead on and invest in it.

I am proud that the UK is leading the way on this. Leadership means not shying away from issues such as access to safe abortion, where the evidence shows that access to safe services saves women’s lives. We are clear that access to safe abortion is a crucial element in the full range of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights services. That is not a reluctant position, but a position that firmly focuses on rights, on saving lives and on amplifying women’s voices where some seek to deny them their voice and their rights. Our policy position paper sets out that approach in full.

Stella Creasy: Does the Minister recognise that by not being part of the SheDecides fund and by not putting some of the money he is talking about into working with other nations to send a clear message that those who seek to defund women’s rights and family planning organisations because of their objections to abortion, the Government are acting in a counterproductive way? The message that sends is that the people spreading an anti-abortion message, such as Agenda Europe—I hope he will check whether his Department has met with organisations involved in Agenda Europe—are winning. By putting the money he is talking about into the SheDecides fund, we could send a strong message about whose side we are really on. That should be women, because we trust them.

Alistair Burt: I do not think there is any message that we are not. I am pointing out the work we are doing. The hon. Lady called for deeds—not words or association with movements just for the sake of it and for the symbolism, but what we are actually doing. I will look at SheDecides. The position, as I think she knows, is that my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), then a Minister in the Department, went to the launch of SheDecides. We support the objectives of SheDecides. We are putting support into a whole range of services. I understand the symbolism and the point she makes. I will look at that and see whether there is more to be done than simply supporting and putting money into what SheDecides does. If an attachment to SheDecides makes a difference, that may be something that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will want to do.

I urge the hon. Lady not to take our decision not to be formally involved in that, but to support that work, to mean that all the other work we are doing either does not matter or is not important enough. That is dancing on the head of a pin. It degrades all the work that all our colleagues are doing all over the world to defend women’s rights, promote women’s services and promote access to safe abortion, just because we are not doing one thing that she would like us to do. I am not sure I want to go down that route. I would rather defend what we do and how positive and forward-looking it is.

Gareth Thomas: I do not think anybody on the Opposition side questions the investment that the Government are making through the Department for International Development—I welcome that. The concern is that the Government have not had the courage to stand up to the American President over his reintroduction of the global gag rule and to show solidarity with all the other countries that have challenged him and are seeking to galvanise even greater investment in access to reproductive services, to plug the gap that the American decision on the global gag rule has left.

Alistair Burt: I take the point. Again, our work concentrates on advocating for the best services, and on getting individual states and people within those states to understand the purpose and importance of access to safe abortion. Being involved with political movements is a different question. We are keen to ensure that the work we do supports the policies behind something such as SheDecides, which is what we are doing.

Stella Creasy: I just want to clarify that Agenda Europe and the work that Donald Trump and Mike Pence are doing is a political movement.

Alistair Burt: And we have no interest in that either.

Stella Creasy: SheDecides is an international aid initiative. It is a cross-country initiative by Governments in response to that political movement. Indeed, the point of this debate is to sound the alarm about that
political movement around the world, whether it is interfering in the Irish referendum or in international aid. By not standing up to it, we are by default encouraging that political movement as it becomes stronger and therefore women are more oppressed by it.

Alistair Burt: I have already given a commitment to go back and look at the engagement with SheDecides. I will make it quite clear: we support the overarching principles of SheDecides; a Minister attended the launch; we work with all partners who are promoting universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; and we think that it is most sustainable to demonstrate our commitment to those issues through long-term, sustained support for sexual and reproductive health and rights. We face the consequences of US policy not just in this area, but in others. The response we have delivered so far is to put investment and support into the work that is done, and to say, “This is the best answer to those who wish to close it down.”

I take the point that the hon. Lady and colleagues have challenged me on in relation to the SheDecides movement, but I ask her not to be completely distracted by that. Our deeds in supporting and promoting services, the £1.25 billion that we are putting into this work through our support for family planning services, and the work we are doing in a variety of other areas—I can set them out in a letter to the hon. Lady, as we are running short of time—demonstrate our commitment to what is done.

I take the point about the political movement. I have no knowledge or any connection with the other movement she speaks about—I have never met Europe Now, or whoever they are. I am not aware of any contact in the Department, but I will check. But I would not want us to be pinned on this question in this debate, in which the hon. Lady has spoken about things that I believe in and I want to see. She has spoken about things that change the way we work, and attended the launch of. In all fairness, she is trying to find a very small area of difference between us.

Gareth Thomas: That is not fair.

Alistair Burt: That is how it sounds. The message from this debate should be, “We support each other, and we support what we are trying to do.” If we campaign together, we might have even more success with this policy than we already have.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am
Sitting suspended.

Housing and Access to Legal Aid

2.30 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered housing and access to legal aid.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Main. Before I start, I want to thank the House of Commons Library, which provided me with advice and information for the debate, and the Ealing law centre.

Having been an elected councillor for 25 years before coming to this place, I know how important good-quality, early professional help is in preventing so many issues, but particularly homelessness, indebtedness and other related problems. I also know how important early advice is in preventing problems from escalating, which causes stress to families and costs to the public purse. The sooner and the earlier, the better and the cheaper.

Legal aid for housing advice was withdrawn by the Government between 2012 and 2013. At that time, we saw problems that were already there begin to escalate. More and more people were having problems trying to keep their home and to keep it safe and warm. Demand for social housing was increasing but there was an acute shortage, owing to the right to buy and the ending of Government funding for new council and other social rent housing.

Related to that was the escalation of private sector rents beyond the means of average wage earners, let alone those on low and minimum wages. In my constituency, private sector rents are three to four times those of council rents. There is also the related use of one-term tenancies, as landlords can afford to gain possession of a home and then rent it to someone else who is able to pay a higher rent in the inflated west London housing market. The escalation of zero-hours work and low-paid self-employment also affects the ability of many people on low incomes to pay their rents, while for many people, some of whom are working and some of whom are not, cuts and changes to many benefits and tax credits mean that there is less to live on. Finally, the draconian universal credit rules were introduced, which—apart from providing less to live on than legacy benefits—expect claimants to wait for five weeks with no money at all. In my constituency, five weeks of rent for a family can be anything up to £2,000.

It is therefore hardly surprising that more people need more help with housing and debt, or that landlords can get away with providing more substandard private sector housing, where repairs need catching early before they make homes dangerous. MPs and councillors offer advice, but too often it is left to underfunded organisations and their many advisers, who might not be legally qualified, to help; they might be willing and able, but one often needs legally qualified people, even at an early advice stage.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that there has been a serious decline in
the number of providers of housing legal aid? In my area of Barnsley there are only two, which is simply insufficient. It leaves those most in need isolated and often without the help they need.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are parts of the country with no appropriate legal advice services. For people in rural areas, having to travel tens of miles to find the appropriate advice, when they are already on a low income, is shocking.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. North-west Wales has only one provider of housing legal aid for a population of more than 300,000 people. Travel has already been mentioned, but we should also note that a single provider might not have the capacity to deal with the needs of all its potential clients, and may well have to put people on lists based on their needs. Some people who need urgent help might not be reached. Secondly, that single provider may also—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is not making a speech. There should be no first and secondly; there is one intervention.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. The other problem if there is only one legal aid provider is that both parties might go to them. There are then problems, because to whom should it offer help and advice?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Even when there are providers that can provide legal advice, such as Citizens Advice, cuts to their financial situations mean that it is thrown on us to help people out.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The cuts to local authorities and other parts of the public sector have affected the voluntary sector, which has so often been the alternative provider of professional, consistent, good-quality advice and support to people who need it.

There is currently no law centre in my area. When I was a lead member on Hounslow Council in 2010, we increased the funding for the citizens advice bureau, but demand for the local CAB escalated well beyond that. The philanthropic centres and foundations—the Big Lottery Fund and so on—are often left to pick up the pieces, but pressures on their funding are getting greater. Overall, less good-quality professional help and advice is available in the sector, and I urge the Government to address that as part of their review, which I will move on to in a moment.

As I was saying, MPs and councillors are not professional legal advisers. At best we should signpost and provide basic advice, but we do not have the capacity or skills to provide the detailed advice that people need, even at the early stages of problems arising. I will give a couple of examples that Vicky Fewkes of the Ealing law centre provided me with. They concern people who much of the time were not eligible for housing legal aid. In all cases, the welfare and benefits work that was done was under grant funding, not legal aid.

First, a constituent was in substantial rent arrears due to universal credit issues. Her tenancy was jointly in her name and that of her partner. However, she had been abused by her partner, which led to their separating and her partner moving out. Universal credit would not pay her full rent due to the tenancy being in both names. She was given time to transfer the tenancy into her name and resolve the universal credit issues. The adviser worked with her and managed to resolve the matter, and to retrieve about £5,000 in universal credit housing payments. She kept her home—at substantial cost to the public sector, of course. That case was not funded through legal aid, but I believe it should have been.

In another example, a constituent was in arrears of more than £2,500 following the stoppage of her employment and support allowance and housing benefit. She had four children, aged between 11 and 19, and she suffered from depression, anxiety and physical problems. Her housing benefit had been cancelled due to the required information not being supplied. The caseworker worked with her and her husband to claim backdated housing benefit. The caseworker liaised with the council and worked with the husband to answer all the council’s questions and provide the required evidence. The hearings were adjourned until the ESA and housing benefit issues could be resolved. The ESA decision was appealed and overturned, meaning that she eventually got a backdated ESA payment and £4,000 in housing benefit being paid into her rent account, meaning that she kept her home. She was a council tenant. If she had been a private sector tenant, that landlord would not have waited for her income situation to be resolved.

Vicky says of the crisis navigator role at the Ealing law centre:

“The Crisis Navigator is part of a Big Lottery funded Help through Crisis Project. This work is essential and is not being funded by Legal Aid as it stands at the moment. A lot of problems arise from insecure work (variable hours/zero contracts). These then impact benefits and rent arrears as a result. If clients are evicted if they are housed by local authorities, then the temp accommodation rent is so high and Housing Benefit is being paid for this.”

In my area, west London, housing benefit caps are well below the rent even for poor-quality private sector housing. Finally, Vicky says:

“It really would make sense to provide benefits support at an early stage.”

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which I will refer to as LASPO, made fundamental changes to eligibility for legal aid. Under LASPO, applicants must pass three basic tests. The case must be within the scope of the legal aid scheme; there is a financial means test to pass; and there is a merits test, looking at the applicant’s chance of success in the case and a cost-benefit analysis of providing legal aid funding. Matters that are included in the scope of legal aid are homelessness; allocations; accommodation for asylum seekers; repossession of a rented home, but only when the loss of the home is imminent and the landlord has sought an order for possession; lawful and unlawful eviction from the home; injunctions relating to harassment; antisocial behaviour cases in the county court; disrepair, but only when there is a serious risk of harm to the
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned early legal advice. Of course, one recommendation from the Bach commission is that early legal advice can help to save money in the long run. The Law Society estimates that the cost of early legal advice on housing benefit claims would be £1.7 million to £2 million each year, but the costs through affordable evictions are often far greater for individuals, councils and the NHS. Will—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Would the hon. Lady sit down? There is plenty of opportunity to speak. These are not interventions when they are of such length. Please form a question quickly to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

Ellie Reeves: Does my hon. Friend agree that reintroducing early legal advice would help to solve the housing crisis?

Ruth Cadbury: Absolutely. My hon. Friend anticipates what I will come on to in a minute.

Not only are early-stage disputes between landlords and tenants no longer eligible for legal aid, but housing benefit advice is no longer eligible. That is particularly worrying because of the many changes to the benefits system, to which I have referred. As I said, when people transfer to universal credit, there is no payment for up to five weeks. That is a lot of money and a lot of heartache, particularly for tenants in the private sector whose landlords are not prepared to wait until things are resolved. However, the situation is worrying even for housing association or council tenants. I try to reassure them by saying, “Don’t worry. The council will not evict you on this basis.” However, it is still stress and worry that people do not need, and many people go and borrow money, which they can ill afford to repay, from friends, relatives and payday lenders. It causes massive problems.

Since LASPO was introduced in 2012-13, there has been a 58% fall in legal help for housing cases in England and Wales; the number has gone from just over 85,000 per annum to just over 35,500 per annum. As we have mentioned, LASPO has caused a critical decline in the number of housing legal aid providers, from 646 in the year before LASPO to 427. The Law Society found in July 2016 that one third of legal aid areas have just one solicitor providing specialised housing advice through legal aid. Areas such as Surrey, Shropshire and Suffolk had no legal aid provider specialising in housing. That is shocking.

A review of LASPO in respect of legal aid for housing advice and aid is urgently needed, but I want to focus now on the area raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves)—early legal advice. Without early legal advice, a problem can escalate, which costs the tenant stress and possibly the loss of their home. That causes knock-on costs for the public purse, poor health, homelessness and debt. I have met several families in my surgery and in my work as an MP outside the surgery who did not seek early advice. They left their home when the landlord asked them to; they did not wait for the court order, let alone the bailiffs. As a result, they were deemed intentionally homeless, so the housing department was able to discharge its duty to house them. How many people know the ins and outs of housing law sufficiently to know what I know, which is, “Wait until the bailiffs arrive”? Most people want to do the right thing. They are scared by their landlords. They think that they can sofa-surf for a while and sort something out. Reality is not like that, particularly in the very high-cost areas of west London that I represent.

As I said, if people are deemed intentionally homeless, the housing department is able to discharge its duty to house them. If they have children, then under the Children Act 1989 social services, quite rightly, have to find them a home. That is yet more work and costs for already overstretched social workers, who are not housing specialists, and it means that social services are competing for the small amount of private sector accommodation from which the housing department is seeking temporary accommodation. And there are all those people who come to live and work in London, who are also looking for accommodation.

Under LASPO, legal advice is not available for disrepair until it affects the tenant’s health, or for possible eviction unless a possession notice has been granted. In November 2017, the Law Society called for legal aid to be reintroduced for early advice in respect of family and housing law, saying:

“Everyone knows that if you catch a problem early, you’re more likely to stop it getting worse.”

The Law Society research showed that, on average, one in four people who received early professional legal advice had resolved their problem within three to four months, but for those who did not get any legal advice, it was not until nine months after the issue first occurred that one in four had resolved their issue, and those getting no early advice were 20% less likely on average to have their problem resolved.

The Law Society, in making its report, was not angling for more work for its members—in fact, probably the opposite, as it recognises that legal problems, like so much in life, are easier and cheaper to deal with early on. The Law Society estimates that restoring housing benefit advice to the legal aid system could be done for about £2 million a year. That is based on the cost of pre-LASPO advice in relation to housing benefits. It also suggests that restoration of early advice on mortgage arrears, which is now outside the legal aid remit, could prevent escalation of arrears and further costs of possession proceedings and, by the way, reduce some of the additional costs arising from legal aid cuts.

I am really pleased that in April, the Labour party announced its new policy to restore legal advice in all housing cases. That came from one of the recommendations of the justice commission chaired by Lord Bach, which was established by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) when he became leader of the Labour party; it was one of the first things he did in that role. The Bach report estimates that restoring legal advice funded by legal aid could help up to 50,000 households a year to enforce their housing rights.
By responding to Labour’s announcement and starting to provide funding for early professional legal advice for housing matters, the Government would really be making a difference to many people in our constituencies. That would almost certainly mean a lower volume of cases going to court, as they could be resolved earlier. Wider benefits and savings would include avoiding health issues caused by significant disrepair; not having to pay housing benefit for high-cost temporary housing; fewer people becoming homeless; and fewer leaving rent arrears and mortgage debts unaddressed.

Everyone should have the right to a safe and decent home, so I ask the Government to take the opportunity presented by the review of LASPO announced last October to recommend returning to the legal aid scheme the ability to obtain legal advice for housing matters, and to have a fundamental review of legal aid as it applies to housing issues. I look hopefully at the answer that the Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on 23 January this year on this very issue.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on bringing this issue forward. It is a pity that there are not more hon. Members here, but there are debates in the other Chamber and I suspect that is where most are.

We live in a time when there are more breakdowns in the home. The family home no longer has the nuclear family. This sad breakdown has life-changing aspects for the children. It also puts more pressure on housing, as more houses are needed. The necessity of legal support is a by-product of that. The hon. Lady outlined the issues we experience every day in our constituency offices, dealing with those going through a family break-up. The Relationships Foundation, in a report which I hope others have had a chance to look at, calculates that the annual cost of family breakdown has risen to an all-time high of £51 billion. That gives us an idea of the financial cost involved in the breakdown of couples and their lives. That figure—up from £37 billion 10 years ago—takes into account the cost to the taxpayer of families splitting up across areas including tax, benefits, housing, health, social care, civil and criminal justice, and education.

A BBC poll from the week before Christmas found that one in 10 of 16 to 25-year-olds had spent at least one month sofa-surfing, and it has been said that up to 60% of youth homelessness is down to family breakdowns. We want to address the issue of legal aid, and we would also address some of the issues of homelessness by doing so. Every one of us is concerned about homelessness. We cannot not be concerned, if we look at what is happening in our constituencies and further afield. Almost half of 15-year-olds do not live with both parents, which is double the OECD average. We also have one of the highest percentages of lone parents in Europe. These stats show not only the extent of relationship breakdowns, but the impact of those breakdowns upon housing in particular, and why we need to focus, as the hon. Lady said, on how we address those issues.

Family breakdown has put a lot more pressure on so many aspects of life. Further, with this amount of separation and difficulty, people need access to sound advice; moreover, they need help. This is about giving the right help at the right time to those who need it. It is up to us to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to provide the help and support that is needed for people to live their lives.

I do not watch much TV, but I do get the chance when I get home at about 11 o’clock or 12 o’clock at night, when “Can’t Pay? We’ll Take it Away!” is on. That programme shows people in the most desperate circumstances. In some of those cases, the people have brought it upon themselves, but in many cases people find themselves in difficulties because they do not understand the legal system. They do not understand what the power of eviction means when the enforcement officers come to change the locks on the doors or ask them to leave. There are some important things to address there.

We need to put on the record our thanks to some of those charitable groups that step in to help those who are homeless and who have problems. There are many good people out there from church groups and community groups—all round good people, who do charitable work. I have had men in my office who have made personal mistakes. I am nobody’s judge in this world—far from it—and I never will be, but sometimes things happen and relationships break down. That is the nature of where we are. I can, however, do one thing, and that is to help that person. Those people have had to leave their family home and they have no idea of what to do next. They do not know what the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or housing associations are in Northern Ireland. They do not know how to change their tax code, address the issue of benefits and many other things. That all adds to the stress of the marriage breakdown. People have no idea of the help that should be received and often end up paying over the odds for sub-standard housing, which they feel they are unable to fight against and change.

The beauty of legal aid is that it allows people to understand the bare minimum when they expect of a landlord or a housing body, I have seen the look of fear on the faces of people who come to me. I have to refer them on for legal advice, as the hon. Lady mentioned, because I am not legally qualified. When they ask me about a legal matter, I have to say, “I do not have the capacity or ability to respond to that, but I can point you in the direction of someone who can.” It is our job to point them in the direction of someone who can give them legal advice.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have a good relationship with the solicitors in the main town of Newtownards, where I have my advice centre. I can often phone up and ask them—without any charge—“What advice would you give to someone in these circumstances?” That is a rudimentary thing. They say, “Well, I suggest you do this, that and the other.” There are many people out there who would like to help. It would not be legally correct for me to give them advice.

When I know that someone does not have the money for legal advice, I make phone calls to the solicitors that I know in town.

Legal aid is a way of enabling those who work, but cannot afford a legal battle to know their rights and, more importantly, to have access to justice. We have to
have access to justice to help the people in the greatest need. The Independent recently produced an article, which I will quote for Hansard:

“Households earning more than £2,657 a month before tax are excluded from legal aid, while many that earn substantially less than this are only eligible for partial financial help... Some of those who qualify for legal aid but are not on state benefits still have to make a contribution towards the cost—at a level which is often far beyond their means.”

That is what I see in my office and, I believe, other hon. Members see in their offices and in their contact with their constituents.

Although I disagree with legal aid funds being used for multimillion-pound test cases—I do not want to see that money going there—which has become all too common, I firmly believe that legal aid access must be expanded to those who work but who still live hand-to-mouth. Let me back that up with some figures. It has been stated that 60% of families living in poverty in Britain have at least one member of the family working. They work to live and cannot afford the luxury of legal advice. As the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said, many of the people who come to me have a low wage and are unable to afford legal aid. They are in a grey area that, unfortunately, precludes them from seeking legal advice. It is also telling that of that 60%, the majority live in private rented accommodation and therefore may need access to legal advice, and yet are precluded from that as well.

I look to the Minister for some help, ever mindful of the shadow Minister’s contribution will be close to what we are all saying. We look to the Minister for a response. We need to look again at the parameters of legal aid and stop those who use public money to fund their personal agenda, while still allowing those who are being treated unfairly, yet cannot afford to pay the price of justice, to access legal aid, especially in the realm of housing.

2.57 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this debate. It is one in a series of debates we have had in Westminster Hall on access to justice and legal aid more generally. That is essential, as we keep pressure on the Government during their internal review of the operation of LASPO.

From the outset, the hon. Lady identified the clear importance of early advice and the benefits that can bring in avoiding the escalation of difficulties and challenges into outright crises, and also in terms of cost. She put the debate in the appropriate context of a crazy housing market, austerity and cuts, challenges posed by universal credit and the complexity of housing law. All of that means that good and early advice is absolutely essential, but unfortunately it is becoming increasingly difficult to access. I join the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in paying tribute to those who are doing immense charitable work to support homeless people who have fallen foul of the challenges identified. They are overworked and under-appreciated. As he recognised, the key is to deliver advice that can prevent homelessness in the first place.

In my view and the view of my party, LASPO was a disastrous piece of legislation based on the utterly ill-conceived idea that taking whole swathes of civil law outside the scope of legal aid would be key to cutting costs, but would have no impact on access to justice. From the Justice Committee to the National Audit Office, from the Public Accounts Committee to the Lord Chief Justice, from the legal profession to third sector organisations, nobody has a good word to say about the changes introduced by that Act. The Justice Committee found that LASPO had unambiguously failed in three of its four stated goals: targeting legal aid towards those who need it most; delivering better overall value for money; and discouraging unnecessary and adversarial litigation. In relation to the fourth target, the Committee stated that, “while it had made significant savings in the cost of the scheme, the Ministry had harmed access to justice for some litigants”.

Housing is an area of law that highlights many of the Committee’s points. Although a handful of housing law elements remain in the scope of legal aid, the absence of funding for early legal advice illustrates everything that is wrong about LASPO. Allowing legal aid for those who are about to lose their house but not those who are in rent arrears or struggling with housing benefit, is frankly absurd. It does not target legal aid at those who need it most. It provides legal aid to exactly the same people, but only after the crisis has become full-blown and perhaps impossible to resolve, instead of in its early stages when resolution would have been much easier. Nor does it deliver better value for money, because to fund someone defending eviction proceedings in court is clearly significantly more expensive than giving a small amount of advice earlier in the process. Self-evidently, it does not help to discourage adversarial litigation, except in the sense that some tenants will simply not manage to challenge rogue landlords, which I will come back to later. The Justice Committee pretty much says that in express terms, stating:

“The Ministry’s efforts to target legal aid at those who most need it have suffered from the weakness that they have often been aimed at the point after a crisis has already developed, such as in housing repossession cases, rather than being preventive.”

As regards cost savings, it would be interesting to see a detailed analysis of the impact of removing many elements of housing law from the scope of legal aid. We should include in that not only the extent to which costs are moved from the provision of early legal advice to defending evictions in court and other such crisis procedures, but the financial impact on other services such as those relating to homelessness, housing, social work and health.

Instead of achieving the goals set for it, LASPO has left advice deserts, as was highlighted in several interventions. One third of legal aid areas have been left with just one specialist housing solicitor to provide legally aided advice, and some areas have none at all. The overall number of providers is down by a third, and it is actually a surprise that it has not fallen further, given the 58% fall in the number of legal help matters started for housing since LASPO was introduced. In 2016-17, there were almost 50,000 fewer cases than before the Act came into force, and that is a year in which exceptional case funding for housing and land law reached a record high of seven successful applications out of 48.
We need to ask who benefits from the system. In this area of law, it can only be those rogue landlords who breach tenants’ rights and who will increasingly be left unchallenged. LASPO can only have encouraged a culture where a lack of access to easy legal redress leads to more problems with rogue landlords across England and Wales. According to the Law Society, advice on housing benefits, rent arrears and other housing issues could be restored for as little as £2 million. It is an absolute no-brainer. The Government do not need to wait for any review to get on with that.

None of that is to deny the pressures that the Government face in terms of spending and ensuring that the legal aid budget is sustainable. However, my party does not believe that taking vast swathes of important legal advice outwith the scope of legal aid is the answer; in fact it can be utterly counter-productive, as this debate has shown.

That is why, in government in Scotland, we have continued to fund a legal aid system that is comprehensive in scope, including housing law, and generous in its eligibility criteria. The Scottish Government are considering the recommendations of the independent report that they commissioned to ensure that the system is made sustainable for the future, not through crazy cuts to the scope of legal aid, but through innovation, enhancing fairness and flexibility.

LASPO should be scrapped by the UK Government and they should go back to the drawing board. That is almost certainly what any independent report would tell them. If the Government’s internal review merely seeks to tinker around the edges, it will be seen and called out as the whitewash that that would undoubtedly represent. As I have said, there is no need to wait. The case for comprehensive legal aid for housing issues is overwhelming.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this important debate. I confess that I feel a heavy sense of déjà vu standing opposite the Minister once again: it is another week and another debate. I confess that I feel a heavy sense of déjà vu standing opposite the Minister once again: it is another week and another debate on the devastating impact of the Government’s cuts to legal aid. This time the issue is housing.

Most of us expect the right to a decent home that does not suck in two thirds of our income each month, that does not give us health problems and that does not endanger our safety. For too many people across the country, however, that expectation is simply not a reality anymore. We have a housing crisis in this country. Home ownership among young adults has collapsed. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the chance of someone owning their own home has halved over the past 20 years. The number of council houses is at a record low. The Government have overseen the lowest number of affordable homes since the 1920s, which pushes more and more people to spend years in the private sector, but they have not made it safer or more secure to be a tenant; they have made it much harder.

Because of the cuts in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, it is now more difficult to challenge a rogue landlord, to obtain compensation for damages to health and property because of poor living conditions, or to access basic advice that could prevent someone from losing their home down the line. New figures that we have uncovered show that 4,815 fewer people a year are being granted civil legal aid for representation on housing matters, including faulty repairs and poor maintenance of a property by landlords, as well as more serious issues such as possession of a home or where a tenant’s health or welfare is at serious risk. That is a drop of one third over the past five years—close to 5,000 more people a year are being denied the right to challenge poor living conditions and unfair treatment. Does the Minister recognise that there is a crisis in access to legal aid for housing issues?

The Government have set the bar so high for legal aid that housing lawyers warn that it is “very difficult for a tenant to obtain funding in order to bring a claim against their landlord.”

Legal aid is available in disrepair cases only where it can be proven that there is “a serious risk of harm to the health or safety of the individual or a relevant member of the individual’s family”. That bar means that a persistent cough that is likely being caused by mould or damp, or risk of accidental injury because of shoddy work, is often not enough to qualify for legal aid. If someone develops serious health problems as a result of poor living conditions that landlords refuse to sort out, the Government have taken away the legal aid to obtain compensation.

Ministers might argue that for the most serious cases, legal aid may still be available through the exceptional case funding scheme, but only 13 cases have been approved for exceptional funding since the legal aid changes were introduced—out of 211 applications. The truth is that people are simply being denied access to justice and have nowhere else to turn. It is the same old story of a two-tiered system; justice in this country is available only to those who have the money to pay for it.

That is not just the case for taking a claim to court. Many housing issues can and should be resolved at an earlier stage by people getting the right advice about their rights, but the Government’s cuts to housing legal aid included the removal of early legal advice. The effect is that tenants must now wait for a minor damp problem to have a serious effect on their family’s health before they can challenge a bad landlord and force repairs to be made. Rather than resolving a dispute with a landlord early with good legal advice, tenants face the point of being made homeless before they have access to legal aid. Since the introduction of LASPO, the number of cases of legal advice for housing has more than halved. It is not just housing cases; overall, the total number of legal advice cases has fallen by three quarters, which means that more than 400,000 fewer people are getting housing advice. That is not just bad for tenants; it is short-sighted policy making that will ultimately cost the country more.

The vice-president of the Law Society, Christina Blacklaws, has said:

“The current situation is unsustainable. If early advice was available to those who need it, issues could be resolved before they worsen and become more costly for the individual — and the public purse.”

The charity Citizens Advice estimates that every £1 of legal aid spent on housing advice has the potential to save £2.34 to the public purse. Lack of support to

[Stuart C. McDonald]
resolve a case early means potentially far more costly court proceedings down the line.

It is not just by helping to avoid court that early advice benefits the public purse. Social problems such as homelessness and debt, and health problems that come with not sorting out housing issues early, are a ticking time bomb for the Government. At the end of last year the Law Society published research that found that a quarter of those who received early advice resolved their problems within three to four months, compared with an average of nine months for those who did not receive early advice. Those costs must be factored into any assessment of the savings realised from cuts to legal aid. Will the Government, as part of their review of legal aid, publish their own cost-benefit analysis of the wider impact of reducing early legal advice?

Labour Members agree with the President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, who described the Government’s legal aid reforms as “a false economy”. That is why we have announced that a Labour Government will restore early legal advice in housing cases to prevent small problems escalating into big ones. The impact of the Government’s cuts is not only being felt in cases where legal aid has been removed. Even in cases where individuals should still be entitled to legal aid, such as risk of homelessness, tenants are finding that support is not available because lawyers in their area have had to close up shop.

Hon. Members have already referred to the legal advice deserts, so I will not repeat those findings, but I will say that figures uncovered by the Bach commission on legal aid confirmed that, finding that the number of civil legal aid providers specialising in housing has declined by a third, from 681 to 449. What urgent action are the Government taking to reverse those trends to ensure that no area is left without a single legal advice provider?

The Government’s changes have made it simply not possible to operate for such a narrow category of cases, and the impact has been devastating. We are living through a time of high repossessions of homes and homelessness has risen by 78% since 2011. Yet at the same time there has been a steep decline in the number of challenges brought against eviction, according to figures from the Legal Action Group. Charities such as Shelter have warned that thousands of people a year are being made homeless because they cannot find lawyers to help them prevent eviction. The Government’s changes to legal aid have brought nothing but misery and pain since they were introduced. We have waited six years for the Government’s review into legal aid, but victims cannot wait any longer. I urge the Minister to heed the advice of the Law Society and legal professionals across the country and reinstate early advice for housing matters and take action now to prevent any more families being forced into destitution because of the lack of legal aid.

3.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to a debate on such an important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing it. She is highly committed to this issue as she was a shadow Housing Minister. I offer my congratulations to her on completing the London marathon at the end of April, raising money for two causes, including the housing charity Shelter, which does excellent work.

The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the importance of the work that third parties do to support people in society, such as the work of the Law Centres Network and the CAB. There are many pro bono organisations put forward by the legal profession and, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, church groups. I, too, would like to add my support for the work that they do.

I want to emphasise the importance of the legal aid system. The Ministry of Justice spends £1.6 billion a year on legal aid, one fifth of the Ministry’s overall budget, which is not an insubstantial sum. It is right that we spend a significant amount of money on legal aid, but there are not unlimited resources available to the Government, so it is right that we spend the money on the people who need it most: those who are the most vulnerable, those who face the most significant issues in their lives and those who have no alternative to legal support. Those principles are fair. It is right to recognise that this debate takes place in that context.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth suggested there is not enough legal aid support for legal advice. I will identify and correct some apprehensions about legal aid and housing. As many hon. Members have identified, legal aid for housing assistance is available. Legal aid, including early legal help, is available to help those who face homelessness to access accommodation and assistance. It is available to defend individuals who are being evicted from their home or having it repossessed; to ensure that homes are safe for habitation; and to obtain injunctions preventing harassment from landlords and others.

Legal aid is available for judicial review if a local authority subsequently fails to take action or those affected wish to challenge the conduct of the local authority. For example, if the rehousing proposed is not suitable, legal aid would be available to bring a challenge. It is available if there has been a significant breach of convention rights or abuse by someone in a position of power. Legal aid is also available to bring a damages claim. As I have mentioned, the Government have protected legal aid for those facing the most challenging situations in their lives, whether that is the threat of homelessness or dangerous conditions that pose a risk to the life, health or safety of their families.

Ellie Reeves: I note what the Minister says about situations where legal aid is available, but does she not accept that, since the LASPO reforms, housing cases have fallen by 50%? That is a huge increase in the number of people not getting access to justice in housing cases. Does she agree that the review of LASPO should reverse that?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Lady has identified, there is a review into the changes that were made. The Act aimed to cut legal aid, so availability was reduced in many areas. However, the fundamental principle behind the changes in the Act were to ensure that those who most needed help and could not get it from any other sources retained the ability to get legal aid. As I have mentioned, that is being reviewed.
I have identified the areas where we provide legal aid in housing, but we need to look at how it is provided. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth identified, it is important that we have early legal help. Last year, we spent nearly £100 million on early legal advice across all categories, including housing. Advice for housing is available through face-to-face meetings or through telephone advice. The telephone service offers services beyond that which can be provided at local centres face to face. For example, the telephone service can offer interpretation in more than 170 languages, including British sign language via webcam, which operates over the weekend. Last year, there were more than 20,000 instances of advice provided by that system. It allows individuals to access advice quickly and easily.

Legal aid is also available for representation at hearings. People can access representations from individuals already engaged in their case and giving them legal help. In addition, the housing possession court duty scheme is a vital service that offers on-the-day advice and advocacy at court to anyone facing possession proceedings. Individuals in danger of eviction or having their home repossessed can get free legal advice and representation on the day of their hearing, regardless of their financial circumstances.

The hon. Members for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) talked about gaps in advice, which they called advice deserts. We in the Ministry of Justice are committed to ensuring that everyone has sufficient advice to help, wherever they live. I should make it clear that the Legal Aid Agency regularly monitors market capability to ensure that there is adequate provision around the country, and moves quickly to ensure that face-to-face advice is available to prevent gaps appearing. Of the 134 housing and debt procurement areas for legal aid across England and Wales, all but one currently have provision. The Legal Aid Agency has recently secured provision for the remaining one and services will commence there shortly.

On the procurement of legal aid services, the Legal Aid Agency has recently re-tendered for new civil contracts to start in autumn 2018. The procurement includes contracts for both face-to-face advice and telephone advice for housing matters. I am pleased to say that the Legal Aid Agency received tenders from more than 1,700 organisations wishing to deliver face-to-face civil legal aid work. Those organisations submitted over 4,300 individual bids. Successful applicants for face-to-face contracts were notified in January. The new contract encourages providers to be flexible as to where and how advice can be delivered, including making better use of technology. A good level of response was received, with an overall increase in the number of providers wishing to do the work. In areas where an access gap is identified, the Legal Aid Agency will take steps to secure provision. In addition, to reflect the nature of today’s society, we have developed a user-friendly digital tool that makes it clear to people when legal aid is available to them. If someone is unsure which organisations offer legal aid in a given area, they can use the “find a legal aid adviser” tool on gov.uk to find the 10 nearest organisations to them that have a contract to offer advice and assistance through legal aid in that category of law.

A number of hon. Members raised issues that went wider than legal aid for housing. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth spoke about welfare claims. We work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that it gets decisions right first time and they do not end up in a tribunal. We are making changes using technology to improve the social security tribunals. The hon. Member for Strangford rightly identified the consequences of family breakdown. At the Ministry of Justice we are looking at ways to avoid the impact on families of conflict resulting from breakdown.

The hon. Member for Ashfield made some broad points about the Government’s record on housing and I should like to clarify the position. The Government have done a significant amount to improve the housing stock and to help first-time buyers and people who want to leave home. We have built 1 million homes since 2010. House building is at its highest level since the crash. We have abolished stamp duty for 80% of first-time buyers and brought in landmark legislation—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—to improve the life of people who have no home and sleep rough on the streets. Fewer than 3,000 local authority homes were built under Labour from 1997 to 2010. Since 2010, nearly 11,000 homes have been built.

Many hon. Members mentioned the LASPO review. The reforms in question were made under LASPO, and I have said that they were founded on the principle of ensuring that legal aid will continue to be available for the highest-priority cases. It is important that legal aid should be focused on those least able to pay for representation. The changes were subject to a significant amount of scrutiny in during the passage of the legislation through the House of Commons. They were debated extensively and amended before they were approved by Parliament.

As the Scottish National party spokesman, hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), pointed out, we are in the process of a broader review of legal aid. Matters covered by the review will include housing advice changes and early legal advice. Given that there is an outstanding review, the debate is a valuable opportunity to listen to the many thoughtful points made by hon. Members. We are currently engaging with a wide range of stakeholders across the legal sector, individually and in consultative groups. The first round of consultative group meetings took place last month, and they were well received. We are keen to hear from as many interested parties as possible, to establish the impact of the changes.

As well as looking back over the record of LASPO and some previous decisions, it is crucial that we look forward to ensure that access to justice, to which legal aid makes a hugely valuable contribution, will be maintained and will meet the needs of a modern society. We are investing £1 billion to transform courts and tribunals and build on our world-renowned justice system, so that it will be more sensitive to victims, more modern—so that it works more efficiently and swiftly—and more accessible. As part of that we shall digitise our services to make them easier for the public to use. It is essential that we continue our work to ensure that legal aid is made available to the most vulnerable, as part of that wider approach to making the justice system fit for the 21st century.
3.24 pm

Ruth Cadbury: I thank hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made valuable points supporting the gist of my reasons for bringing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), from the Opposition Front Bench, committed a Labour Government to addressing the issue of early legal advice on housing. I thank other hon. Members who are no longer in their places but who made valuable points, drawing on their experience in the House.

The debate is about a fundamental issue of access to justice. I felt that the Minister made positive points about the amount of money going into legal aid and early legal advice, and new initiatives to make such advice and support more accessible, but I am concerned that, when the situation is looked at from the ground, there are still massive gaps, and there is inadequate provision, given the level of need in the country’s housing crisis: £100 million for early advice does not go very far, because I assume that it would include translation costs, which the Minister mentioned, representation in court and so on. It is good to know that the existence of deserts of provision is being addressed, with one new contract being let, but that still does not deal with the number of people queuing for advice and being turned away because there is not adequate provision. Organisations and legal firms are also going under, or ending relevant work; those skills and that knowledge are being lost for lack of funding—funding that would be for people who would never be able to pay for legal advice and assistance.

The Minister asserted that a not insubstantial sum is being paid through legal aid for housing matters. As hon. Members have eloquently said in support of my arguments, that might be compared with the cost to the public purse of homelessness and the sort of disrepair that means people, including children, must go into hospital with severe asthma due to very bad damp in their accommodation. If people in those situations were able to obtain early legal advice landlords might be forced to address the issue before it became a health crisis. That is the cost to the public purse of homelessness—and there are social care, stress and mental health costs when families are in acute housing need.

The Minister talked about new housing. We have said time and again in the House that the level of funding for truly affordable social rented housing from the Government is nothing. What is being provided is coming from local authorities and housing associations, from other resources—capital that should be spent in other areas. It is the first time since the early 1920s that a UK Government have spent nothing on social rented housing. By the way, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 does not address street homelessness. It provides, without any resources, for additional local authority duties that may help to prevent homelessness. In itself it is no bad thing but it does not address the present crisis. I ask the Government, so that we may address, substantially, the fundamental issue of the lack of access to justice in housing, to reparation early advice under legal aid, and carry out a serious review of all legal aid for housing issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered housing and access to legal aid.

3.28 pm

Sitting suspended.
Mr and Mrs Miller: I beg to move, That this House has considered violence and harassment at work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to be able to lead this very timely debate. It is timely because in just 12 days’ time the Minister, and indeed the Government, will have a unique opportunity to act in support of the unbelievable courage of thousands—probably millions—of women across the globe who have spoken out as part of the #MeToo campaign about sexual harassment that they have endured at work.

Such women include Zelda Perkins, here in the UK, who spoke out against sexual harassment perpetrated by Harvey Weinstein. That took raw courage—something that the Women and Equalities Committee has seen in so many of the submissions to our current inquiries on sexual harassment. In just 12 days’ time, on 28 May, the International Labour Organisation will meet in Geneva to discuss a new possible global law: an ILO convention on ending violence and harassment in the world of work. The convention is an opportunity to move from #MeToo to #TimesUp, and to ensure that the world of work is better protected.

As a member of the International Labour Organisation, the UK has not only a right to be there, but a right to support that important work, and to speak out and urge others to do the same. I hope that today’s debate will give the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who is my neighbour, the opportunity to update the House on the Government’s position and progress on this important issue. The Government have an immensely proud record of acting globally to tackle violence perpetrated against women around the world. This is yet another opportunity to take forward that clearly articulated strategy to take action against the form of violence that affects more women than any other: violence and harassment at work.

Violence and Harassment at Work

[David Hanson in the Chair]

4 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered violence and harassment at work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to be able to lead this very timely debate. It is timely because in just 12 days’ time the Minister, and indeed the Government, will have a unique opportunity to act in support of the unbelievable courage of thousands—probably millions—of women across the globe who have spoken out as part of the #MeToo campaign about sexual harassment that they have endured at work.

Such women include Zelda Perkins, here in the UK, who spoke out against sexual harassment perpetrated by Harvey Weinstein. That took raw courage—something that the Women and Equalities Committee has seen in so many of the submissions to our current inquiries on sexual harassment. In just 12 days’ time, on 28 May, the International Labour Organisation will meet in Geneva to discuss a new possible global law: an ILO convention on ending violence and harassment in the world of work. The convention is an opportunity to move from #MeToo to #TimesUp, and to ensure that the world of work is better protected.

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I thank CARE International—the Co-operative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere—for its support in preparing for today’s debate, and I highlight the incredible work that team does and their professional insight into how we can address these issues. The Women and Equalities Committee first considered the issue of sexual harassment back in 2016, shortly after we were established, and around the same time that the International Labour Organisation started its work on a worldwide convention. The ILO should be applauded. When other organisations were, frankly, still in denial about the most prevalent form of violence against women, the ILO was doing the necessary preparatory work for this month’s meeting.

Here in the UK, the prevalence of sexual harassment is in no doubt. More than three quarters of respondents to the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s recent survey reported experiencing sexual harassment at work, and in 2016 research by the TUC and the Everyday Sexism Project found that more than half of women in the UK had experienced sexual harassment at work—a figure that rises to two thirds for young women in particular. Since our initial work, the Women and Equalities Committee, which I chair, has launched two further inquiries into these issues: one on sexual harassment of women and girls in public places, and one on sexual harassment in the workplace. Our initial work was on sexual harassment in schools.

Thanks to the tenacity of CARE International and other organisations, we also have evidence on how these issues affect women similarly around the world—those women who make the clothes we wear, grow the food we eat or build the gadgets we depend on. We must ensure that the #MeToo movement does not go down in history as simply a flash in the pan, but as a significant milestone for the whole world on our path towards equality. To do that, we need to keep the pressure up and ensure that abuse and harassment is never part of anyone’s job description, wherever they live in the world. The ILO conference gives us another opportunity to show real leadership, by tackling an issue that affects many millions of people in the UK and worldwide: violence and harassment at work.

It has been interesting to see in the ILO’s work that tackling violence and harassment is not only a moral imperative; there is a very strong business case for it as well. In the same way that many UK businesses advocated for the supply chain reporting requirements in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, because they wanted all businesses to operate on a level playing field and for no one to have an advantage by ignoring abuses of people’s rights, many businesses realised that a strong international convention on ending violence and harassment at work can help to ensure that the conditions in their factories, farms, pack houses and workshops within their supply chains are both decent and justifiable to the public.

The UK Fashion and Textile Association has already publicly supported the potential new ILO convention, and committed to working with the British Retail Consortium and others to promote the convention among its members. That is very important support. Businesses know that it is increasingly important to get human rights issues correct, and it was clear from the CBI’s response to the Committee’s recent inquiry into sexual harassment in the workplace that they understand that for the UK. I know that the CBI will support other employers’ associations taking an equally positive view, and I hope that it will continue to encourage others to see the merit in such a convention.

In addition, there has also been considerable research showing that harassment and violence at work has considerable costs for business. CARE International conducted research last year in Cambodian garment factories and found that more than 30% of the women who worked there had faced sexual harassment within the previous year while at work. Not only is that wholly despicable, but the research showed that such harassment directly leads to lower productivity, revenue loss and missed days of work, costing the industry many millions of pounds and dollars a year. Clearly, that cost gets added to the cost of the goods that end up in the shops.

What specifically are we asking the Minister—my hon. Friend and near neighbour—and his Department to do regarding the International Labour Conference? First, we want to see a convention, and we need to see it supported by a detailed recommendation. Only through that approach can we ensure that whatever is adopted will be legally and morally binding on many countries—including, of course, the UK.
Without the international legal status of a convention, we will frankly only be making a polite request to countries to improve how they tackle these issues. With a convention, countries have to be committed to taking steps to put in place an effective framework. They might drag their feet or attempt to ignore the problem, but a convention means that they have to answer on a regular basis to the International Labour Conference, and to the many millions of men and women in their own countries, whether via the workforce or the whole population in an election. If they are a country that exports to the UK, Europe or other nations, they can also be held to account by business and ultimately, and importantly, by our consumers.

It might appear to us in the UK that if there is a convention that addresses the issue in more formal workplaces, we will have dealt with the problem, but in many countries around the world only a tiny proportion of the workforce work in such formal workplaces. In India, for example, more than 80% of the female workforce are in the informal sector. In countries such as Nepal the figure rises to more than 95%. The convention needs to cover not only women who work in formal workplaces, but those who work outside these workplaces. I hope that the Minister can give some indication of the Government’s understanding of that necessity within the convention and say that they will be supporting that approach. In this country, an increasing number of workers are self-employed and I am sure that Members would not wish to see the mere lack of a traditional workplace used as an excuse to avoid responsibility for women being harassed by their de facto employers.

Similarly, we need a convention to be clear on the responsibility of companies down their international supply chains. That is an issue that the UK has a great deal of experience in driving through as a positive approach. The UK led on fighting modern slavery by making businesses aware of the importance of the supply chain in that approach. That is why I am hoping that when the Minister responds today he will be able to add some flavour of how the Government might be able to help other members of the International Labour Organisation effectively put in place that sort of convention and give it maximum impact for women in their countries.

Even in the UK, where we have a relatively strong legal framework for dealing with harassment and violence, many women still suffer, so I ask the Minister to think about perhaps the one third of countries that have no such laws in place. Let us all be clear that a new convention can only be part of a much bigger picture for tackling the appalling treatment of people in the workplace. It is an essential part, but only part of an overall solution. We also need to see civil society and people in general challenge the norms that make it hard to speak out when one person suffers from, or sees, sexual harassment in the workplace. The #MeToo campaign has catalysed opinion and raised the issue to the top of the agenda and, unusually, to appear in a debate where the majority of Members present are native Liverpudlians. It cannot happen that often, but perhaps it will happen more often in future. I also congratulate my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate, and on the leadership that she has shown on the issue recently. She has invested an enormous amount of political capital and energy into driving the agenda and pushing it up the political priority list; she is to be commended for that.

I mentioned CARE International research on the costs of harassment in Cambodia, but that has to be part of a wider campaign to help women understand what sexual harassment is and why they should no longer have to stand for it, and to help employers face up to and understand the problems it causes and how widespread it is. Our Select Committee heard evidence this morning from a number of different organisations that are working in the UK to try to make it clear to people in the workplace what sexual harassment is. We have some of the best and most developed laws in the world on equality and employment protection. That the natural acceptance of sexual harassment is still part and parcel of the price of being employed in 2018 Britain is appalling. There is still a need for a great deal of work. How much greater are the issues in those countries that do not have those legal frameworks, do not have equality and human rights commissions, and do not have that very real sense of fairness and justice that we have in our country? It is an enormous issue and I am very pleased that the International Labour Organisation is so far ahead in finding a way of engaging Governments around the world in resolving this.

As parliamentarians, we all know that this year is an exceptionally important year for our Parliament, as the centenary of the introduction of women’s suffrage. Many of us were there when the statue of Millicent Fawcett was unveiled a couple of weeks ago—the first sculpture of a woman in Parliament Square. She is holding a banner that says, “Courage calls to courage everywhere”. It can never have been a better statement to make than as part of this debate today.

We need the Minister to call to courage everywhere when he or his officials attend the International Labour Conference at the end of this month, so that we can send a very strong message that the UK wants to protect women’s rights—not just here in the UK or when it comes to the campaigns that we are known for internationally, such as combating violence against women in areas of conflict or female genital mutilation, but also in ensuring that women no longer have to face violence and harassment in their work. We are expecting a truly effective global convention to emerge from the proceedings in Geneva that has the full weight of support from the UK Government behind it—not just from the Minister’s Department, but from the Foreign Office and beyond—and for this Government to continue to lead the way in extolling the rights of women to enjoy equality around the world, by ensuring that workplaces are safe for every woman, everywhere.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse): It is a great pleasure to serve in front of a fellow Liverpudlian, Mr Hanson, and, unusually, to appear in a debate where the majority of Members present are native Liverpudlians. It cannot happen that often, but perhaps it will happen more often in future. I also congratulate my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate, and on the leadership that she has shown on the issue recently. She has invested an enormous amount of political capital and energy into driving the agenda and pushing it up the political priority list; she is to be commended for that.

The Government take this matter extremely seriously. We welcome the inquiries by the Women and Equalities Committee into sexual harassment in the workplace and in public places, and the International Labour Organisation’s initiative on ending violence and harassment in the world of work. We all have a responsibility to
[Kit Malthouse]

bring an end to inequality and injustice and to do that, we must work together across gender, social, political and national divides.

Sexual harassment can have a significant impact on those who are subjected to it. Nobody should be subjected to unwanted conduct of a sexual nature or be put in a compromising situation, and the law in the UK on harassment, sexual assault and rape is clear. Whether it is in the workplace, on the street, or part of domestic or sexual abuse, unwelcome advances that intimidate, degrade or humiliate are an abuse of power. The simple truth is that sexual harassment, in any situation, is unacceptable.

Workplace harassment is unlawful under the Equality Act 2010, which provides a remedy for harassment specifically in employment and other paid work, the provision of services, the exercise of public functions, the occupation, disposal or management of premises, education and associations such as private clubs. The Government believe that the criminal law also provides protection against violence and harassment for both men and women in the working environment and elsewhere. However, we keep the legislation under review to ensure it works as intended, and on all these matters we await with interest the outcome of the Select Committee inquiries.

On an international basis, we know that violence and harassment is a crucial barrier to women’s economic engagement and to gender equality worldwide. We know that if women had the same role in labour markets as men, up to an estimated $28 trillion, or 26%, could be added to global GDP in 2025—but we also know that it is not about the economic argument alone. Violence and harassment of women is an endemic human rights abuse, which prevents women from reaching their potential and living the life that they choose.

We have a responsibility to act as a global leader. We have strong laws on violence and harassment in the UK, but as my right hon. Friend said, many countries around the world do not have such protections. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has been clear that we should be proud to put British values on this issue at the centre of our international development work. She has launched a global call to action on gender equality and has put women’s economic empowerment at the heart of her Department’s economic development strategy.

We are working to tackle violence against women and girls around the world. Through our “What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls” programme, we are working in 12 countries across Africa and Asia to demonstrate the economic cost of violence and to understand the most effective approaches to prevention. The programme will reach up to 100,000 people worldwide. In Bangladesh, it involves working with textile workers to address violence against female garment workers in four factories in Dhaka. It provides workplace training to male and female workers to raise awareness and build skills, and works with management to develop workplace policies and systems to address violence.

We are putting the economic empowerment of women and girls at the heart of the Department for International Development’s economic development strategy, which was launched earlier this year. It focuses on trade as an engine for poverty reduction and investment in sectors that can unlock growth. All our economic development work will tackle gender discrimination and will deliver safer, more secure work with higher returns for women. We are having a real impact: between 2011 and 2015, we helped 36.4 million women gain access to financial services and helped 3 million women to improve their land and property rights across the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke rightly spoke about our stance at the ILO convention in Geneva later this year. The Government are committed to ending violence and harassment against workers worldwide. I assure her that we are fully engaged in discussions at the International Labour Organisation to develop measures that, if agreed, would provide an international legal framework in this area. My officials recently met CARE International, the CBI and the TUC to hear their views on the proposed measures. They will be attending the ILO conference in Geneva later this month for the first of two committee discussions on the proposed instrument.

The Government are already in a strong position to champion the need for international provision—particularly in the light of our leadership on modern slavery and gender-based violence initiatives. We recognise that there is a potential benefit in closing the gap in international law. In negotiating a new instrument, the UK will be looking for sufficient alignment with UK criminal and civil protections, on which the UK is already in a strong position. The definitions and scope of any instruments need to be reasonable and justifiable for all parties, and they must allow for practical implementation and enforcement. Our stance generally is constructive, and we are listening.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend the Minister is choosing his words very carefully in talking about the negotiations and discussions that will be going on towards the end of the month. He is talking about the development of an instrument, but in my remarks I clearly said it is important to have a convention, which would have far more weight than recommendations. Will the Government support a convention?

Kit Malthouse: As I say, we are going to the conference with an open mind about what may come from it. We are generally supportive of the initiative on ending violence and harassment at work, which the ILO is undertaking. We need to be assured that what is produced is consistent with British practice and law, and is justifiable. Much of the devil of that work will be in the detail—particularly on some of the definitions. We definitely support an international push—we can assist it in ways other than just having an international initiative—to improve the situation of workers across the globe.

The UK is proud to be a global leader in efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls in all its forms, including through our leadership on efforts to eradicate modern slavery—one of the worst forms of abuse. I am proud that, in my time as deputy mayor for policing, I produced the first ever violence against women and girls strategy in a global capital city. That work was commended by the United Nations.

Everyone should be able to go to work without fear of violence or harassment, no matter who they are, where they work or what they do. The Government will continue to press for real progress through instruments
such as the sustainable development framework and organisations such as the ILO, to help make this a reality worldwide.

Question put and agreed to.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I would normally commence the next debate in these circumstances, but unfortunately the Minister is not here, for obvious reasons—the debate starts at 4.30 pm. I therefore have to suspend the sitting until 4.30 pm.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fortified Flour

4.30 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent spina bifida and anencephaly.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, in this important debate on the potential for the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent neural tube defects. Every week in this country two children are born with a neural tube defect, most commonly spina bifida and anencephaly, and every day two pregnancies are terminated as a result of the diagnosis of such conditions in the womb.

The neural tube is the structure in the embryo that becomes the brain and the spinal cord. It should close between the 18th and 28th days after conception. Failure of the neural tube to close completely and properly leads to conditions such as spina bifida, affecting brain development, mobility, and bladder and bowel dysfunction—other right hon. and hon. Members have personal experience of that and will talk with great knowledge about it—and anencephaly, a fatal condition in which the brain does not develop.

In 1991 a seminal piece of research on prevention of neural tube defects for the vitamin study group of the Medical Research Council by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald showed conclusively that supplementing the diets of women with folic acid, a naturally occurring nutrient found in spinach, liver or Marmite, prior to conception and during the first trimester of pregnancy could reduce the incidence of NTDs by up to 70%. In response to the data, the Conservative Government at the time introduced new guidelines that recommended that all women should take supplements of folic acid prior to conception and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Eighty-one other countries around the world, however, including the United States, Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, Indonesia, Argentina and Canada, took a far bolder position, mandating the fortification of flour and flour-based products in their countries with folic acid as a public health intervention for whole societies. They did so having recognised the data and the long-established fact that at least 40% of pregnancies are unplanned, so NTDs might develop in the womb often even before those women realise that they are pregnant.

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The recommendation of voluntary supplementation in our country led to an initial increase in the number of women taking folic acid before conception. The proportion went up to 35% in 1999, but by 2012 it had started to fall back, to just 31%, with much lower numbers seen in the more deprived socioeconomic sectors of society and in black and minority ethnic communities. Among pregnant women aged less than 20, on average just 6% supplement their diet before conception.

In short, the position that we have taken in our country under successive Governments has led to increasing health inequalities, with poorer, more marginalised and younger women having greater risk of their children being born with spina bifida or other conditions. By contrast, in the United States, which in 1998 started mandatory fortification of rye and wheat flour, and in 2016 introduced a new programme to fortify corn flour so as to target the Hispanic population, we have seen a
reduction in NTD pregnancies of almost 30%. In Canada, one study of the prevalence of NTDs showed a drop from 4.56 births per 1,000 to 0.76 per 1,000 after fortification. Had we in this country followed the same route as Canada or the US, we would have seen 2,000 fewer pregnancies with a neural tube defect between 1998 and 2012. That is a sobering thought for the advisory committee in the UK to consider.

In fact, the scientific evidence in the case for fortification is not really contested. That is why the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition to this Government and previous ones—it used to be called COMA, the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food Policy, but understandably changed its name—back in 2000 responded to the evidence and to the US move by recommending that our country should go down the route of mandatory fortification. SACN repeated that recommendation in 2006, in 2009 and in July of last year.

The most recent SACN report, surveying all the evidence available around the world about the benefits and the possible adverse consequences of folic acid fortification, stated:

“Conclusive evidence from randomised controlled trials...has shown that folic acid supplementation during the early stages of pregnancy can reduce the risk of the fetus developing neural tube defects”.

It goes on to maintain its view, expressed consistently by scores of scientific advisers to the committee over the years, that Britain should be fortifying our flour to prevent NTDs. The key question as far as I am concerned—not as a clinician or expert, but as someone who understands the value of evidence-based policy making—is this: why have this Government and previous Governments not acted on the advice and the evidence to take similar steps in our country?

The principal excuse offered by Ministers is that the evidence is mixed and that some studies have shown some possible risks associated with having higher levels of folic acid or folates in our bodies. In particular, two risks have been talked about: first, that higher levels of folates may mask vitamin B12 deficiencies in individuals, possibly leading to anaemia and neurological damage; and secondly, that higher doses of folic acid might run the risk of increasing the likelihood of certain cancers. As far as I can see, however, all the evidence and the science produced over the intervening 25 years have largely debunked such concerns.

The SACN has looked at all the evidence in last year’s review and previous ones and stated, on the issue of B12, that folic acid intakes up to 1 mg per day are not associated with neurological impairment in older people with low vitamin B12 status. The most recent SACN review stated that

“studies of folic acid supplementation and observational studies, indicate either no relationship with cognitive decline or a lower risk associated with higher folate status.”

It goes on to note:

“The prevalence of vitamin B12 deficiency with or without anaemia did not increase after mandatory fortification in the USA.”

Since the SACN provided that evidence, a further, critical study has been done by Professor Sir Nicholas Wald, who produced the original research suggesting the use of folic acid in flour, and Professor Sir Colin Blakemore, who is well known to right hon. and hon. Members. The study shows definitively that there is no evidential base for the suggestion of a maximum tolerable level for folic acid. The question of it masking vitamin B12 is therefore no longer taken seriously by the scientific community in our country or overseas as a reason for not introducing folic acid into flour.

On the potential connection between high folate levels and overall cancer risk, again I quote the SACN’s latest review:

“Findings from the different study types are inconsistent but overall do not suggest an adverse association. RCTs—randomised controlled trials—show no effect of folic acid supplementation on overall cancer risk. The MTHFR genetic studies suggest higher folate concentrations reduce overall cancer risk.”

Again, observed data from America, Canada and other societies do not show any adverse effects of increased cancer risk.

Support for the notion of mandatory fortification comes not just from our country or the SACN, but from a volume of organisations that I shall reference at some length. Shine, the brilliant spina bifida and hydrocephalus charity in this country; the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; the Royal College of Midwives; the British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society; the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare; the British Dietetic Association; the Governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, where only last year the Scottish Government said that they wished to introduce mandatory fortification but were unable to do so on a Scotland-only basis; the chief medical officers in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; Public Health England; Public Health Wales; NHS Health Scotland; Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland; the Faculty of Public Health; the Food Standards Agency; Food Standards Scotland; Colin Blakemore; Nick Wald; Jeff Rooke; and me.

There are many people who think this is a very clear case where the evidence should lead to a policy change. Why do the Government not agree with their own advisers and with the overwhelming majority of scientific opinion? Why, in the light of the evidence, do they appear to have dragged their feet—not just this Government, but the previous Labour Government and, indeed, the Conservative Administration before that?

On 2 May, in response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on the case of mandatory fortification, the Minister said:

“No assessment has been made of potential merits of adding folic acid to flour on pregnant women or children.”

That seems to be slightly at odds with what I have been saying for the past 10 minutes—that there seems to be a lot of evidence in support of it. He went on to say that the recent SACN report, which was published in July 2017,

“made recommendations in respect of folate levels and developing foetuses. Ministers are currently considering the issue of mandatory fortification and will set out their position in due course.”

We find ourselves here because I am looking for the Minister to set out the Government’s position in due course. They have had a quarter of a century to mull over the position, in the light of the evidence. I know the Minister, who I have great regard for, is a man of action. I look forward to him setting out the Government’s case and getting on with it.
4.42 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing this important debate and on the eloquent and cogent way that he set out the case for the fortification of flour with folic acid.

When the facts are set out and the evidence is adduced, it is a very compelling case. It is all the more surprising, when one hears the weighted evidence of the arguments in favour of it, that something has not yet been done in this country to ensure the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. The hon. Gentleman said that that has happened in many major countries across the world with vast populations. He mentioned Brazil, the United States and Canada; they are big countries with very strong regulatory regimes in which this practice has been carried out. Therefore, there have been multiple opportunities to have all the scientific evidence evaluated and to have all the upsides and downsides considered. It is very clear that the upsides are so massive that they require this country to follow suit. It is a shame that we are not yet in a position in this country to have mandatory fortification of flour.

It has been 27 years since the Medical Research Council published its research demonstrating that supplementing women’s diets with folic acid before the early stages of pregnancy reduced the chances of the pregnancy being affected by neural tube defects. That was in 1991. It was in 1990 that my son, Andrew, was born with spina bifida. Very soon after he was born, we became experts in the whole area of spina bifida: the reasons for it, how it develops and all the rest of it. Even back then, the great Professor Norman Nevin, who was an expert in the field in Belfast and did a lot of research, was a massive advocate for the mandatory fortification of flour, even before it was widely known about. He wanted to ensure that young parents who were planning to have children were better educated about the need to take folic acid and the general low levels of folicates in the adult population and young people generally, because it was a massive problem and would store up big problems in future.

The reality is that as a result of not taking those measures, children are born with spina bifida or anencephaly. Children need not be born with those conditions if the parents have the right information and the mothers take folic acid at the appropriate time. The evidence shows, and it has been spelled out already, that it is too late once pregnancy has started. Many pregnancies are unplanned; many people even today, in 2018—never mind back in 1990 when my son was born—have no awareness of the need to take folic acid. They think it is something rather exotic—why on earth would they even consider such a thing? Even the name sounds a little strange.

People do not take the necessary steps and, as a result, children are born with severe disabilities. That presents great challenges to them, and often life-changing effects on their families. Often, as sadly was the case for my son, these children do not live a long life. Our boy died when he was eight years of age. In the process of his short but extremely rewarding and rich life, he underwent numerous procedures in hospital and numerous hospitalisations, sometimes lengthy. That had an impact on him, his family and his siblings.

The reality is that for all those children who are born with spina bifida and who live with it and are treated, many other children in the womb who are diagnosed with having a neural tube defect are never born. The hon. Member for Pontypridd and I recently hosted an excellent meeting in Portcullis House, which a lot of people attended. One of the things that came out of that was that, sadly, it appears that in this country we effectively deal with this problem simply by terminating foetuses that are diagnosed with a neural tube defect. That is how the vast bulk of these foetuses are treated.

It is a terrible thing that otherwise healthy babies and foetuses are in this situation as a result of a lack of action by society, successive Governments and by all of us, who have not done what other countries have done, which could be done at very little cost with no scientific downside, and which would reap enormous benefits for everybody. This is something that we need to take very seriously.

Over the years, my wife and I have done some work to try to educate people about the need to take folic acid. My wife, very bravely, did a number of television interviews when Andrew was alive. He even appeared on the television programmes. The process of education and telling people is not cutting through. It is not doing the job. It is not reaching the people it needs to reach at the time it needs to reach them, before they fall pregnant. We need to step up to the plate.

I will not repeat the scientific evidence, which has been laid out well by the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Pontypridd. I am simply adding my voice to the plea for the Government to act on the advice of their own Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and listen to the voices of all those who speak in favour of this measure. They should listen in particular to the voice of Shine which, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, is a fantastic organisation that does tremendous work to help kids with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and parents who have lost children. As I learned over those many years of intense engagement with clinicians and others, who often said, “Well, you tell us how Andrew’s feeling, because you know better,” parents do know. The Government need to listen to parents and potential parents—people who have lost children in the womb or, totally understandably, felt unable to have a child with that condition.

This is a very important issue. It does not seem to me to be taken seriously enough, primarily because, relatively speaking, not a lot of children are born with spina bifida nowadays in the United Kingdom. As I said, I think that is partly because a lot of children with the condition are simply terminated in the womb. If it prevents even one or two children from being born with spina bifida who otherwise would have been born with the condition, this will have been a step well worth taking.
Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), at 5.10 pm. Three hon. Members wish to speak before that, so will they split the remaining time accordingly? I call Stuart C. McDonald.

4.52 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for introducing this debate and for setting out the facts and the science so comprehensively. I entered the ballot to try to secure a debate on this topic, and I was unsuccessful in persuading the Leader of the House to allow a debate in Government time, so I am pleased that he came up trumps. I also thank both him and the right hon. Member for Belfast North, who made an incredibly powerful speech, for hosting the recent Folic Acid Awareness Day event in conjunction with Shine. I was very sorry to miss that.

Both hon. Members mentioned Shine’s fantastic work, but let me mention another charity. I recently battled through the heat of the London marathon to raise funds for two charities, one of which was Spina Bifida Hydrocephalus Scotland. SBH Scotland is a fantastic charity based in Cumbernauld whose specialist staff work across Scotland and are committed to providing a lifetime of information, support and projects to all those affected by spina bifida, hydrocephalus and allied conditions. It, too, is a strong champion of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid.

Like pretty much everyone else in the Chamber, I believe we are a long way past the point at which mandatory fortification became the right option. Intake of folic acid has been proven to reduce the number of pregnancies affected by neural tube defects, of which spina bifida is the most common. The Government themselves recommend that women who are planning a pregnancy or are within the first 12 weeks of their pregnancy should take a daily 400 microgram supplement of folic acid. However, only 31% of women take the correct dosage, and many do not begin until they are pregnant, when it is too late. We must keep in mind that 45% of pregnancies are unplanned—in those cases, there is no possibility to plan ahead. Overall, 75% of women of childbearing age across the UK are at increased risk of having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect due to having lower than the recommended level of folic acid.

There is no evidence to suggest that mandatory fortification would be anything other than beneficial, given that recent research, which the hon. Member for Pontypridd expertly set out, shows there is no longer a basis for setting an upper limit on folic acid intake. As we have heard, the argument is further strengthened by the experience in at least 81 countries, including the USA, Canada and Australia. Importantly, as I understand it, no country that has taken the step of mandating the fortification of flour has gone on to reverse it. It is clearly time for the UK to follow suit.

The issue is particularly pressing in Scotland, where proportionately more children are born with spina bifida than in other parts of the UK and folic acid levels are particularly low—lower than in the UK as a whole, which itself has low levels by international standards. As we have heard, the Scottish Government have supported compulsory fortification of flour for many years. Unfortunately, although power over the issue is devolved to Scotland, the advice from Food Standards Scotland is that realistically, given the way in which the flour and milling industries are structured, a response is better delivered UK-wide. That is what we unite to call for today.

The Holyrood Government, the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Department of Health, the Food Standards Agency, Public Health England, the British Medical Association, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and all the royal colleges under the sun are on board. The science points overwhelmingly in favour of mandatory fortification, but surely, when we listen to the individuals and families affected by neural tube defects—spina bifida and allied conditions, of which the right hon. Member for Belfast North gave an example—that overwhelming case becomes undeniable. I hope that the Government listen to the science and to the families affected, and act quickly.

4.56 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing this important debate and, as always, making an excellent case in favour of the fortification of flour and the science behind it. I also thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for organising the recent event in Parliament with the charity Shine, among others. Shine has worked for many years alongside my constituents, the Walbyoffs, on whose behalf I speak.

I will use my short contribution to give a voice to Paul and Liz, whose eldest daughter, Sara, lives with spina bifida. My hon. Friend for Pontypridd explained comprehensively how the conditions caused by a low level of folic acid during a mother’s pregnancy cause neural tube defects in an unborn child. Sara was diagnosed with the condition weeks before the birth of the family’s second child, Alis. Paul and Liz tell me that, had they known that earlier, Liz would have increased her dosage of folic acid during her pregnancy. Indeed, mums such as Liz would have benefited from the extra folic acid boost that would have come from the fortification of flour. The evidence suggests that, in as many as three out of four cases, that could be the difference between a baby being born with a neural tube defect and not.

Like many families across the country with a personal connection to the debate, Paul and Liz cannot understand why the UK has not introduced mandatory fortification of flour. Other food products, such as cereal, are fortifed with folic acid, but the rationale for excluding flour from fortification is unclear. There is clearly strong support for that among members of the medical profession. David Bailey, the chair of the BMA council in Wales, described mandatory fortification to prevent spina bifida as “an important and cost effective public health measure.”

On behalf of Paul and Liz, I urge the Government to look at this sensible proposal carefully and to act. As the right hon. Member for Belfast North said, all the evidence is there; all that is needed is action. I hope that the Government listen to this debate.
4.58 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. I congratulate him on presenting his case so well, as he did at the awareness day that some of us were able to get down to. As the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for health, I am aware of this issue and very supportive of the fortification of flour.

All the speeches we have heard were tremendous. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for telling a very personal story. Personal stories in these debates always carry substantial weight. His was a story that he and his wife have walked, and although we might have known something about this issue, we have heard a whole lot more. I commend him on that and assure him of our support. He knows that it has always been there for him, but on days when we tell personal stories we feel it a bit more.

When my parliamentary aide was pregnant, we got a surprise. In the mornings when she was under a little pressure, instead of shouts of “coffee” coming from her desk she would ask for water. By the time of her second baby, we all knew what “no coffee” meant—baby on board. You can imagine the apprehension I felt, Mr Hanson, on a Friday morning when I said to the staff in the office, “Girls, who’s for coffee?” If they said no, I knew they did not want coffee, but was there anything they wanted to tell me? That, however, is by the way. Why did my aide do that? It is simple: she told me, “Coffee makes the baby’s heart beat faster, so I need to stay away from it.” I wanted to make a contribution to the debate because she has lived through this.

Almost every mother I have ever known, as soon as they have that pregnancy test, has made changes to their lifestyle. They do it automatically, and in many cases right away, for the sake of the baby. They stop having alcohol and start on vitamins, reduce caffeine and increase their fruit and veg. By doing that, they naturally create—to use an Ulsterism—a better wee home for their child, which is what the mother is trying to achieve.

This is a personal story from my aide. They are told by the doctor to take folic acid, and of course they do, because it is important, but the problem is that ladies who have been on contraceptive pills find their folic acid store completely depleted. If they have not taken folic acid before pregnancy, it may be too late. With approximately 40% of UK pregnancies estimated to be unplanned, that is certainly an issue, so we look to the Minister for a good response. I mean this respectfully: you have to present your case, but when you simply say “the figures varied by age, with the highest use in women aged 35 to 39, of whom 38% took it before pregnancy, compared with only 13% of those aged 20 to 24 and 7% of those under 20”, I find it surprising that the figures are not higher. People would talk about stats, but the fact of the matter is that they tell a story—and these stats tell a clear story. When women take folic acid before and during pregnancy, it makes a difference. However, there is clearly either no knowledge or not enough information about it. We look to the Minister and the Government to step forward and do what is required.

I would also like to mention that whenever people come to my office for benefit claims and I see what medication they are on, it is important that they take folic acid. It is important that women take folic acid before and during pregnancy, and that is why I am here today. I commend the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on presenting his case so well, as he did at the awareness day that some of us were able to get down to. As the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for health, I am aware of this issue and very supportive of the fortification of flour.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): On adding folic acid to flour, we have potentially been putting fluoride into water, and that has virtually no health benefits. That has only dental benefits, which are about lifestyle choice, and that is different from those suffering because they are not getting folic acid through their diet. It is great that this issue has been brought forward, and we should look to put folic acid into flour and ensure that everyone gets it, because there are no negative sides to that.

**Jim Shannon**: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. We are already putting additives into many products we eat, to our benefit, and that is what we should be doing.

To return to taking folic acid supplements before pregnancy, of the half a million women in England surveyed, less than a third did so. The figures varied by age, with the highest use in women aged 35 to 39, of whom 38% took it before pregnancy, compared with only 13% of those aged 20 to 24 and 7% of those under 20. There was also a marked ethnic variation, with 35% of white women taking it compared with 20% of South Asian women and 18% of Afro-Caribbean women.

Just under two thirds of all women took supplements in early pregnancy, but the researchers say that is already too late. The current strategy of encouraging women to take folic acid before pregnancy is inadequate and, in particular, putting younger women and minority groups at a disadvantage. People always talk about stats, but the fact of the matter is that they tell a story—and these stats tell a clear story. When women take folic acid before and during pregnancy, it makes a difference. However, there is clearly either no knowledge or not enough information about it. We look to the Minister and the Government to step forward and do what is right.

I would also like to mention that whenever people come to my office for benefit claims and I see what medication they are on, it is important that they take folic acid. It is important that women take folic acid before and during pregnancy, and that is why I am here today. I commend the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on presenting his case so well, as he did at the awareness day that some of us were able to get down to. As the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for health, I am aware of this issue and very supportive of the fortification of flour.

While I understand the Government’s reluctance to become a nanny state who enforce rather than guide, we should remember that flour fortification is not new. To white flour, the UK adds calcium, iron, thiamine and niacin to replace the nutrients stripped and discarded when the bran and germ are removed from the wheat grain. That was introduced after world war two to help improve the nation’s health. We did it then for that purpose, so why in 2018 can we not do it for the purposes we are presenting to the House today? I do not agree with the nanny state argument. Sometimes, Governments have to take the initiative and do things that are important.
Today, milling is even more efficient at stripping the nourishing layers from the endosperm, which means that even less natural folate is left in white flour than there was when replacing other lost B vitamins was deemed necessary. There is, therefore, a greater need today for folic acid than there was in the past—even after world war two, when that was seen to be important.

I will conclude, because I am conscious of the timescale you gave us, Mr Hanson. The Government must consider this issue. I give my full support to the hon. Member for Pontypridd for bringing the debate forward, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North and other speakers. We have all come here with the same message, in an attempt to highlight this issue to the Government. Anything we can do to bring healthy babies into this world should be done without any delay. This seems to be a cost-effective way of helping mothers and their babies from the earliest opportunity. I am fond of the Minister, and he knows that. I look to him for a substantial response—no pressure whatsoever—on what we have proposed, with reasons.

5.8 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and to take part in this debate, which has been profound and poignant so far. I thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who gave an extremely good, well-researched, evidence-based case for the fortification of flour with folic acid. There is scientific evidence, and when we know that we can do the right thing, there is no reason not to do so. His case was strong, clinically based and backed by the royal colleges and practitioners we should be listening to.

We heard that every week two children are born with spinal neural tube defects and that, as a result of potential defects, many terminations occur. As someone who has experienced a number of miscarriages in my life, there is nothing more horrendous than losing a baby; you question every single thing that you have done and everything that you could have done. If something like this could make a difference for those individuals who find themselves in that traumatic situation and do not seek terminations and for those who have unexplained miscarriages, we should be doing it.

There is absolutely no cost that can be put on losing a baby that you very much want to have. Often the tragedy of it is that it is unexplained. It is not until it has happened four times—another issue that we must address—that there is even any research into why it might have happened, or happened repeatedly. There are many individuals who may be or have been affected, who might not even know that a simple step such as this could have made the difference. That is certainly a step we must take.

As we have heard, the scientific basis is there. The countries that are leading now and protecting their populations by fortifying their flour with folic acid—I say again, such a simple step—have found no adverse consequences. Those countries have implemented the policy over a long period of time; they are looking at the health benefits and finding that any concerns about health costs were unfounded. The research is unequivocal in that regard and must be listened to.

As has been noted, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have both written to the UK Health Secretary, urging him to take action and introduce mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid on a UK-wide basis, because that is what is required. I am often in debates where there is little consensus across the four nations, but this seems to be one of those unique debates in which we are all saying, “This has to happen,” from across parties and across nations. There seems absolutely no logical reason for not taking this matter forward timeously, to protect families from the trauma of that unexplained miscarriage or of finding out that they have a baby who is very sick, and perhaps having to have a termination that they never wanted, or a difficult discussion regarding how to care for a young child who they want to see reach their full potential and want to give all the love in the world to, but who will have medical complications throughout their life.

I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for an extremely profound and personal account in memory of Andrew. We must pay heed to people’s personal accounts. That is what must guide policy. They are real people who are being affected; we are talking about families, and we must do the right thing. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who has done a lot of fundraising in this regard—even running a marathon, which is something I commend him for doing, and unfortunately not something I will ever be able to do myself. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a health spokesperson for his party, made a good speech and asked important questions of the Minister, and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) advocated excellently for her constituents. For once, we are singing from the same hymn sheet. These are small nudges that we can make—small changes that make such a great difference. I urge the Minister to act.

5.13 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson; I think it is the first time I have had such a pleasure.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) for securing the debate and for his eloquent speech. As always, he showed his knowledge and passion on this important topic. I also thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who speaks for the Scottish National party and mentioned that the Scottish Government have looked at this policy and, as I understand the situation, concluded that it was impossible to bring in fortified flour on a Scotland-only basis because of the fluid nature of the UK food industry and the very fluid nature of flour. I therefore think it is definitely time that the UK Government looked at this issue again.

I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) for his brave and personal speech, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their excellent contributions to the debate. Finally, I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who raised this matter last week during Health and Social Care questions.
As we have heard, this issue has been on the table for decades now, and it is only right that it continues to be brought up at every possible opportunity. The UK Government continue their policy of voluntary folic acid supplementation for women of childbearing age, despite the evidence and the fact that the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey states that 91% of women of childbearing age have a red blood cell folate level below the level estimated to lower the risk of NTDs. I therefore ask the Minister what he is doing to encourage women of childbearing age to take folic acid supplements. Additionally, what steps is his Department taking to ensure that women of childbearing age even know that they should take these supplements?

Incidentally, this was something that I was aware of when I was having my children 25 years ago. We think things have moved on, but my young researcher in my office said that she only found out about it when she was researching for this speech. So, the message is not out there—not everybody knows this information. The voluntary approach means that, more often than not, those who do not need the supplements will take them, whilst those most at risk will miss out. Young mothers and those from the most socio-economically deprived areas are least likely to take supplements. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that these groups of women are included and reached?

I am sure that it will not come as a surprise to the Minister that as many as 40% of pregnancies are unplanned, and that means that many women will not have been taking supplements during the crucial phase, just before or just after conception. It therefore makes sense for flour to be fortified with folic acid, to ensure that women get the nutrients that they need in order to reduce the risk of NTDs. That already happens in over 80 countries worldwide, including the United States, Canada and Australia.

Currently, no countries in the European Union fortify their flour with folic acid. However, there is no legislation preventing any of them from doing so. Given the UK’s research on this matter, I believe that they are waiting for us to lead the way, and as we have heard, I believe Scotland is probably doing just that. Why are the Government not therefore taking the opportunity to lead the way and reduce NTDs, not only in the UK but, in turn, across Europe? I understand and sympathise with concerns about adverse effects that this may have on the population. However, there really is no evidence to suggest that from other countries that have fortified their flour with folic acid for many years.

I also note the response of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health and Inequalities from Health and Social Care questions last week:

“We have advice that if the intake of folic acid exceeds given levels, that can also bring health problems” — [Official Report, 8 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 537.]

However, the modelling undertaken by Food Standards Scotland in 2017 indicated that fortification at the recommended levels, with a capping of voluntary fortification and supplements, can achieve the reductions in NTD risk without increasing the number of people consuming the upper recommended limit. Has the Minister made any assessment of that finding, and could he stipulate where his advice is from? Finally, has the Minister’s Department made any assessment in the last five years of the benefits of fortifying flour with folic acid?

From this afternoon’s debate it is clear that there are benefits to the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. I really do hope that the Minister will take all of this away with him today back to his Department and reconsider this policy—unless, of course, he is going to announce that he is going to fortify flour forthwith.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I call the Minister, Steve Brine.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Thank you, Mr Hanson. Should that be the miller, Steve Brine? I like the notion from the shadow Minister that the European Union is waiting for us to lead. That is a new concept.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) on securing the debate and I thank him for devoting it to an issue that I know he cares about. He works closely with Shine, which he mentioned and which was mentioned by others, and is based in his constituency. It does some fantastic work supporting people with spina bifida and anencephaly and their families. I have asked my officials to see if Shine will come in and see me as soon as possible. It is not a charity that I know, so I want to speak to and get to know its staff.

I hope I can reassure hon. Members a little bit—I suspect it will not be a lot—that the Government and those who provide us with expert independent advice are looking incredibly closely at all of this, as I will set out. I will say at the outset that I am sorry to disappoint the shadow Minister, but I cannot give the House an exclusive announcement today, I am afraid. However, I may be able to give some encouragement.

Part of the pregnancy advice currently provided to women is of course to take folic acid supplements. The consequences of folic acid deficiency in the general population are that pregnant women are at greater risk of giving birth to low birth-weight, premature babies with neural tube defects. Unless someone is pregnant or is thinking of having a baby, they should be able to get all the folate they need by eating a generally varied and balanced diet. Women who are trying to conceive, or who are likely to become pregnant, are advised to take a daily supplement of, we say, 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods such as spinach and broccoli, which sounds lovely, and foods that are voluntarily fortified with folic acid such as, as has been said, a wide range of breakfast cereals.

As has been said by pretty much every Member who has spoken, around half of pregnancies are unplanned. Of those that are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers take folic acid supplements or modify their diet to increase their folate intake. That is one of the main reasons behind the calls for mandatory fortification and is one of the reasons why the debate was called.

UK wheat flour is currently fortified with calcium, iron, niacin and thiamine in accordance with the Bread and Flour Regulations 1998—introduced under the last Labour Government—which apply in England, Scotland and Wales, with parallel regulations in Northern Ireland. This mandatory fortification is a domestic, not an EU,
requirement and is done for public health reasons. It has the primary objective of restoring those nutrients lost during the milling process, with the exception of calcium, which is added in larger amounts than that lost.

To date, successive Governments have not considered that the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid is the best way of protecting public health and have instead promoted the use of supplements as part of a wide range of pre and post-conception advice to women of childbearing age. That may be merely stating the obvious of where we have come from, but it does not necessarily need to mean where we are headed.

While it may appear straightforward to just add folic acid to the existing mandatory flour fortification measures, a problem that arises with the proposal to move from the current advice of taking a measured supplement is of how to ensure that women are able to assess their folate intake if getting it from foods made from flour instead. Women in the targeted age group may not eat the relevant products in sufficient quantities.

We also want to consider the population’s wider dietary advice, and to educate women to encourage them to achieve a greater folate intake by way of eating those folate-rich vegetables that I mentioned earlier, rather than relying on flour-containing foods, which may not be the best contributor to a balanced diet. It will be necessary to consider properly women’s consumption of all wheat flour-containing products to fully understand the impact of any mandatory fortification on diet and folate intake levels. Additionally, we are aware that the universal fortification of flour with folic acid may not be readily accepted by the general public, especially when the measure is intended to benefit only a specific section of the population.

The aforementioned Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition—SACN; it was indeed called COMA—is a committee of independent experts on nutrition that provides advice to Public Health England, for which I have ministerial responsibility, and other Government agencies and Departments across the UK. It has recently updated the evidence on folic acid in response to a request from Food Standards Scotland, which was prompted by Scottish Ministers expressing a desire to proceed unilaterally with the mandatory folic acid fortification of flour north of the border.

In its most recent July 2017 report, SACN saw no reason to change its previous recommendations, made in 2006 and 2009, for mandatory folic acid fortification, to improve the folate status of women most at risk of NTD-affected pregnancies, provided that this is accompanied by restrictions on voluntary dietary fortification with folic acid. Again, this emphasises the need to fully understand all the sources of folate intake by women, to ensure that their health is protected as well as to protect their unborn children. The Wald paper, which is a new scientific paper published on 31 January this year in Public Health Reviews, has again raised this issue. However, the paper suggests that there should be no upper limit on folate intake, which would remove some of SACN’s concerns.

The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment—COT—is another independent scientific committee that provides advice to the Government on, among other things, the safe upper levels for vitamins and minerals. The Wald paper was brought to the attention of COT by its chairman, and COT agreed to take forward for further consideration the issue of tolerable upper limits for folate. COT discussed a scoping paper in March this year and will have its first detailed discussion in July to see whether Wald’s analysis of the data is correct and whether the original tolerable upper level recommendation is not appropriate. COT will then receive a second paper in September considering all of that and is hoping to be able to report its findings towards the end of this year.

I wanted to put that on the record because it is the advice I have been given, but I have to say that, frankly, I am the Minister, and that is not good enough for me. I want it sooner than that, so I have asked COT to come and see me by the end of this month to explain itself and to see whether we can move forward more quickly.

To conclude, I am moved by the testimonies given today. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) is a gentleman and an excellent parliamentarian, and his speech about his son, Andrew, cannot have been an easy one to make. I thank him for putting those personal things on the record in the way he did. There are many issues to consider, but I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment of the debate. I will do my utmost as the public health Minister, working with other colleagues across Government—this impacts on other Departments as well—to work through the issues to give the best effect to the aim of the debate as soon as we possibly can.

5.27 pm

Owen Smith: I thank the Minister for his response, but I have to say that I am disappointed by it. I am disappointed principally because I do not think he has taken the action that he could have on the basis of the evidence that has been presented both today and, more importantly, by the scientific community in our country and around the world over the past 25 years, as well as the lived experience of the 80-odd communities, societies and Governments around the world that have undertaken mandatory fortification with no evidence recorded in any studies of any of the potential adverse events in their populations that have been referred to in a few scientific papers.

The Minister concedes that the current process is not working because of low uptake of the advice and because so many pregnancies are unplanned. I am pleased that COT is looking at the Wald paper on tolerable upper limits and the evidence it presents that there is not one, because excess folic acid is excreted. However, I am intrigued to know—I will write to the Minister on this—whether COT has advised the Government not to introduce mandatory fortification and not to follow the advice from their other advisory body, SACN, formerly known as COMA. If it has not offered advice to that effect, I cannot understand where Ministers are getting the advice that tells them not to introduce mandatory fortification.

The only formal advice that Ministers have had from 2000 to 2017 is to do what all Members here and the scientific community have recommended and to get on with mandatory fortification. It is a mystery to me why the Government continue to suggest that there are serious scientific reasons for not doing it. I do not
believe that the Government have illustrated that and I do not think that the Minister illustrated that today; unfortunately, I do not think successive Ministers in all Governments have illustrated that.

Today has been a missed opportunity. However, I leave the Minister under no illusion that we will continue to raise this issue and to push for mandatory fortification. I look forward to debating it with him again in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to prevent spina bifida and anencephaly.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 May 2018

[Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair]

Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees

1.30 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, HC 369, and the Government Response, Cm 9569.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Sharma. Today’s debate will consider the report of what is now the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. At the time it was the Communities and Local Government Committee, but what’s in a name change, after all?

The report looked into the effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, which is an important subject. Perhaps it is a bit technical, and does not catch the main headlines in the popular press, but local government delivers important services to our communities, including social care services for the elderly and children, emptying the bins, sweeping the streets, running libraries, and producing housing. Those are all important services, and it is important that they are done well and that the performance of authorities is scrutinised and monitored effectively.

Let us go back, for those of us who can remember, to how scrutiny came about in local government. We used to have a system—indeed, some councils are going back to it—in which all councillors were involved in the decision-making process, in the sense that they were members of committees. Then we had the idea that the Cabinet system, because it worked so well at national level, should be replicated at local authority level. Cabinets were set up in local government, and a number of councillors were appointed to them. I think someone either in Westminster or Whitehall then had the thought, “What do we do with the rest of the councillors who are not on the cabinet, who now haven’t got committees to be on?”

Councillors perform a very important role as representatives of their local communities. Acting in their wards on behalf of their constituents is key to their role. Then someone thought, “What else can we do with them; they are sitting around the town hall, city hall or county hall with nothing else to do? Scrutiny committees are a good idea—we’ll have those.” I think it was a bit of an afterthought on top of the cabinet system, although people who devised it at the time might say that it was not. Unfortunately, for some authorities, it has remained an afterthought—somewhere we can put to one side those councillors who do not have much to contribute anywhere else or, sometimes, councillors who have too much to say somewhere else and are a bit of a nuisance to the leadership of the council. Those in the leadership put such councillors on a scrutiny committee, and hope that they will go away and do something that does not really affect them.

Unfortunately, some councils see scrutiny as a problem. People can raise difficult issues that should not be raised, and sometimes it can become an issue of party political contention. Opposition councillors get put on committees to make the life of the ruling party difficult, and ruling party councillors get put on them and told not to ask any difficult questions, because questions can always be raised in their group meetings afterwards. Councillors tell us that that is what is said to them.

However, there are very good examples of scrutiny; like Select Committees in this House, councillors challenge the executive, take on issues, investigate thoroughly and comprehensively, produce good reports and, rather than simply looking at something after the event, take policy initiatives and help to develop policy. Sometimes when there is a complicated issue—perhaps there is a general understanding in the council of where they want to get to, but not of how to get there—scrutiny committees can be really good at delving down and doing what they call “task and finish” to identify the key issues and technical difficulties, and come to agreed, well thought through conclusions. There are some really good examples of effective scrutiny.

There are good examples of councils going outside their council body and getting witnesses, expert witnesses and advisers in to help them, as Select Committees do. Unfortunately, such examples are rare. When councillors are asked why they do not get people from their local university to come in and help—those experts would probably be quite happy to be part of their local community engagement and democratic process—the response is often, “Oh—can we do that?”

We recommend looking at examples of best practice. Councils should learn from one another, and from the best examples of how to conduct scrutiny independently and effectively, by drawing in advisers from outside and engaging with the public in a meaningful way. Sometimes the way the public are engaged with—sitting at the back of a room while a council officer reads a report that has been written well in advance—is not very good. That does not engage the public, but we are looking at different ways of doing so. Taking scrutiny out to the community, setting up websites, and using social media are ways in which councils can develop and enhance scrutiny, as some of our Select Committees do.

This weekend I am going to Birmingham because the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, together with the Health and Social Care Committee, is doing an inquiry into social care. We are going to talk to the citizens’ jury that we have established to provide information and evidence to the inquiry. It is the first time that our Committee has done that. The Committee is also doing an inquiry into the high street. We are using a website to try to get the public engaged in feeding in their information about what is happening in their high street, and what they think should happen. We would like to see such initiatives reflected in local government. Sometimes they are, and local authorities can learn from one another as well.

The key recommendation of our report is about the culture in local government. Do those in the leadership, both politically and at officer level, see scrutiny as important? Do they see it as part of the council’s function, and as something that can add value to council decisions, or just as a bit of an irritant that can be put to one side and forgotten about? That was key to our
recommendations. The reality is that if councils value scrutiny and want to make it work, they can do it, even if they may do it slightly differently in different authorities.

I do not want to keep hon. Members for too long this afternoon, but the Committee made a number of specific recommendations. The Committee’s key observation was that Government guidance on scrutiny has not been updated for a long time. The Government have accepted that, and they will produce new guidance—we had a positive discussion with the Minister about that at the evidence session. That is a good starting point, because it means that we can look at some of the other recommendations positively. Scrutiny committees should report not just to executive members of the council, but to the whole council. Again, the Government have accepted that, and we welcome it.

We recommended that scrutiny officers should have the necessary skills to help members of scrutiny committees to do investigations into detailed policy matters. We should not just have a clerk system in which someone says, “We’re here to keep a record of attendance and get the witnesses in the right places.” It should be about helping members with proper monitoring and policy development. The Government have basically accepted that recommendation as well.

Another issue was scrutiny of elected mayors and combined authorities. When any deal is done, it is really important to look at scrutiny, and ensure that resources are available for it. Those mayors and combined authorities are a further step removed, in some cases, from the people who elect them. The arrangements can be complicated, and it is important that there is proper scrutiny of them. The Government have accepted that point as well.

Moving on to issues on which the Government’s response has been less enthusiastic, and those issues that need more consideration, the Government did not accept that a summary of the resources spent on scrutiny should be published each year alongside the summary of resources spent on the executive. The reality is that, in many councils, when cuts are made scrutiny is one of the things that gets cut, because it is a bit of an inconvenience and nobody will miss it if it does not happen. Of course, the executive looks after itself. That does not happen on all councils, but there is sometimes a feeling that that happens, because the executive makes the budget recommendations. We thought that saying to councils, “Look, just publish those figures,” was an interesting way of demonstrating the extent to which they fund scrutiny, compared with other functions of the council. The Government said no to that. It seemed to us a fairly harmless recommendation, and we do not understand why the Government did not support it.

The Committee also said that a statutory scrutiny officer should be appointed in every council. Why not? They exist in unitary authorities and in counties, but not necessarily in second-tier authorities—the district councils—which perform very important functions. Why not a statutory scrutiny officer there as well?

The issue of what information is available to scrutiny committees is absolutely key. Following our report, I have done two or three talks to councillors on scrutiny committees and scrutiny officers. Everyone started nodding at the point we raised the issue of what information is available. So many times councillors on scrutiny committees have been told, “You can’t have that information; it is confidential.” There are examples of councillors having to use freedom of information requests to get information from their own councils. That is ludicrous. It is nonsense. The words “commercial confidentiality” often appear as the explanation and the excuse.

The Government’s response in that regard was an attempt to be helpful. They said that there should not be a blanket refusal to provide information and that information should be dealt with on its own merits. The very helpful point was made—I hope it is given some prominence in guidance to councils—that when contracts are let by councils, clauses should be put in to make it clear that information can be relayed to councillors and not just to a handful of people on the executive. Companies tendering for work should understand that right from the very beginning of the tendering process, before contracts are let. The Government need to build on that in the guidance because it is an absolutely key point—if the information is lacking, scrutiny cannot be done.

In many councils, more and more functions are not delivered in-house but are contracted out to private companies. Officers delivering a service in house can be called before the scrutiny committee, but if the information about a private contract is classed as commercially confidential, the contract cannot be scrutinised and nor can the service to the public. At the end of the day, that is the key point. Addressing that issue is fundamental to getting scrutiny right in an age when so many services are now delivered by third-party contractors. We must make sure not only that the information is available but that those individuals who are running the contract have to come before the scrutiny committees as well.

We also called for scrutiny committees to look at the work of local enterprise partnerships. Billions of pounds of public money is spent by LEPs, which are almost unaccountable to any part of the democratic process. The Government were receptive to the idea and said that there should be proper oversight and transparency of the operation of LEPs. They said that they would go away to think about that and write to the Committee. I know that the post is occasionally slow in this country, but I think the letter has got lost in the post. We have not received it yet. I hope the Minister has one in his pocket this afternoon to hand across the Chamber.

Mr Betts: Okay. Clearly, I think it is an important issue. Who else is going to oversee the spending and work of the LEPs if not council scrutiny committees? That is very important.

There is something that somehow got lost altogether in the Government’s response. Currently, councils have a right to oversee their own activities and the officers who perform them, although they need to do more about commercial companies. There is a very good set of rules for the health service. The service can be scrutinised by local council scrutiny committees and the health service bodies have to provide information. Officers have to come to scrutiny committees and be questioned about that. What about the other important public services?
The Department for Work and Pensions provides a lot of services at local level. So do the police. I know that the police have their own scrutiny arrangements for local police panels—I do not know whether they are quite the same—but certainly, lots of public services, such as those delivered by the DWP, are very important at local level. They do things that affect the public locally, but there is currently no local oversight. We suggested that they should be put in a similar position to health service bodies and that officials should have to provide information and evidence and be available to appear before scrutiny committees. The Government seem to have missed that out altogether in their response, as though they were a bit uncomfortable about it. I know that it might mean talking to one or two colleagues in other Departments, but it is a good proposal and one that would help transparency and monitoring of Government activity as well. I hope the Minister will be able to say a bit more about that this afternoon.

We look forward to the Government’s guidance, as well as clarification of the one or two issues that I have identified, including that long-awaited letter, but to a large extent, at the end of the day it is down to councils. We can give them guidance, but we need to encourage them to take account of the report and to work with each other to improve scrutiny.

I know that the Local Government Association is starting to look at the issues. We had a very helpful letter just before the debate from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, which has an important role to play. It gave evidence to the Committee and is now working with the LGA on how to deal with a number of matters in a practical way. They are looking at the issue of councillor training, and at examples of good practice. They are looking at how councils can be helped to understand their responsibilities. I hope that they are going to look at the idea we recommended, which the Government said they were going to talk to the LGA about, of doing some pilots on the election of chairs of scrutiny committees.

Councils are, in the end—the Committee is very clear about this—locally elected bodies, and on the Select Committee we are all, by and large, localists who believe that things can be best done and organised at a local level, but we thought the idea of having chairs elected by the home council was quite a good one. We did not want it to be imposed on councils, but we suggested one or two pilots to show what could be done. The Minister might be able to let us know how far that has gone.

We certainly welcome the work that the LGA is now doing with the Centre for Public Scrutiny to take those ideas forward. We look forward to the guidance that the Government are eventually going to produce on the basis of the report.

1.46 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, for what I believe is the first time. It is also a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee and his presentation of the report. It is a unanimously agreed report that all members signed up to and agree with, and I speak as one who serves on the Committee. I spent 24 years as a local councillor before being elected to this place—no doubt you served many more, Mr Sharma. I know that the Chair of the Select Committee served in local government, as did the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)—I think she continues to serve.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): No longer.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady has stepped down.

I came up through the committee system. When I was elected leader of the council, the Deputy Prime Minister at the time offered me the opportunity to pilot the cabinet structure. I said, “I think I have enough on my plate without piloting this cabinet structure, thank you very much, Mr Heseltine.”

The advantages of the committee system have to be remembered. All councillors served on committees and committees were held in public—there was great interest in what they debated. There was a political benefit as well, in that officers produced reports and until the time they voted on a report, whether a councillor was in the political group in charge or in opposition, they could oppose and amend the report and put in new recommendations of a political nature, which divorced the officers from the political side of the decision making, but it also enabled the ruling group to row back from something that was possibly not in the public interest of their area. That was one of the advantages.

The big disadvantage was that the process was very slow and often cumbersome and uncertain. That is why almost every council in the country moved to the cabinet structure as quickly as they could. Its disadvantage is that decisions are made in private; they are not transparent to the public. Although cabinet or executive meetings are held in public, the most important decisions are taken in private before those meetings take place. Up and down the country, very few members of the public bother to attend cabinet or executive meetings, and the press—and councillors, in general—have given up interest. That is a really serious drawback.

Overview and scrutiny is a vital part of our democratic process. I will come to some of the recommendations that I am disappointed the Government did not accept in a minute. I take the view that overview and scrutiny are two separate things. Overview is the development of policy. The ruling group on a council should take ownership of it and really drive it as a means of developing policy for the whole council. Scrutiny is about examining decisions that have been made or are about to be made, and ensuring that they are fit for purpose, that they are the right decisions and that they are justified.

I served for 24 years on Brent London Borough Council, which is very confrontational, and we reached a constitutional settlement whereby the chair of scrutiny had to be from the opposition and elected by full council, exactly as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said. We were the pioneers. The two major parties agreed that that was the right way to go. At every council meeting, the chair of the scrutiny committee reported directly to the council with a written report on their scrutiny work, and there were questions to the chair of the scrutiny committee at full council. At times it was embarrassing for the ruling group, but there was proper scrutiny of the decision-making process.

I also served for four years as chair of the forward plan select committee, which sounds pretty horrendous. We brought together colleagues from across the council to scrutinise the work of the executive to ensure that they were delivering on their plan and that the responsible councillors knew what they were talking about. It was similar to the Housing, Communities and
Local Government Committee: whenever anyone visits our Select Committee, it is very hard for them to determine which political party its members are from, because we all want to improve the Government’s work and we are not party political. It is a model of good practice.

If scrutiny is not properly resourced, it tends to be an inconvenience. Senior officers say, “It would be a lot better if we could just get on with the job, rather than having to account to councillors.” The chief executives and chief officers of certain local authorities downplay scrutiny because they find it inconvenient; it gets in the way of getting the job done. I have less sympathy for that view, because the reality is that good scrutiny improves decision making, improves services and ensures transparency in the public eye.

I hope that when the Government issue their guidance on public scrutiny they will look at such measures. I am a localist—I believe it is absolutely right that local authorities make their own decisions about their processes—but it is good practice that the chair of scrutiny be elected by full council, and ideally that they be a member of the opposition. It is then up to them how to play it, but I suspect that if the opposition play it sensibly—if they call the executive to account, as opposed to playing party political games—the scrutiny will be very effective. That is a key item.

I also have concerns about private and confidential information that is not disclosed to councillors. I take the view that all information should be available to councillors on reasonable request, unless the legal officers certify that it should not be made available. The presumption should be that all information is available to councillors, not selectively. If there is a contractual or other reason to keep it secret during the decision-making process, that is reasonable, but once the decision has been made all information should be made available so that it can be properly scrutinised. I worry that serious errors—not underhand dealings—are often made by local authorities. There are concerns about how contracts are let and about decision making, and there are conflicts of interest among both councillors and council officers. That needs to be exposed in the glare of publicity, and the best way of doing that is through the scrutiny process. I hope that the Government will look at that in the guidance that will be issued, because it needs to be firmed up considerably. Because some local authorities do not take scrutiny seriously enough, we should publish the amount of money and resource available. It must be scrutinised, and the executive and senior officers must be held to account. That would enable us to see a proper comparison.

There is an opportunity here for a great renaissance in local government scrutiny. The executive or the cabinet makes decisions on behalf of the local authority. There is now a whole series of academy trusts—schools that are outside the control of the local education authority—so why should the local authority not scrutinise their work? I know that Ofsted does that, but why should the local authority not look at what matters for local people? As the hon. Gentleman said, why should the local authority not scrutinise the police in certain cases? In my experience, health authorities have tooth and nail to prevent information being provided to scrutiny committees. Even though they are required to provide information, they put every blockage they can in place. Then there is the fire service. I could go through every public service that affects a local area. Why should local authority scrutiny not be used to examine the services that are provided to the public?

We could go even further and be even more radical. We could look at the central Government resources that are applied to a local area. Perhaps they could be scrutinised by the local authority—I suspect that there may be some resistance to that idea from the Government. This is an opportunity to expand the role of local authorities and local councillors, who do a brilliant job of reporting issues that concern their constituents. We could empower them even more. By empowering them, we would give them an opportunity to shape the place they live and work in. That would put oxygen into the life of local authorities, and would encourage not only the press but local people to participate in their local authority’s work. At the moment, I am afraid the mood is, “Well, they just get on with it. We vote once every four years, or once every year, to elect local councillors, and unfortunately that doesn’t do the job.”

The Minister is new to his role, and was not responsible for writing the Government response to our noble report, so perhaps he can reconsider some of our recommendations in the light of this debate. That would show that he is not only reading and absorbing our reports, but listening to what we have to say.

1.58 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. After I came to this House, I joined the Communities and Local Government Committee, as it then was, last September. I was a local councillor, so taking part in the Committee’s inquiry into overview and scrutiny in local government was an easy passage into the Committee’s work. I felt confident in contributing to the inquiry. I have stood down as a councillor in Gateshead Council, which was a great regret to me. I think councillors have a huge role to play in representing their communities, but we cannot be everywhere.

Almost one year since my election, I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Committee’s report. It gives me a great chance to thank the many witnesses and the contributors to the report, and to acknowledge the huge contribution made by local councillors, especially back-bench ones whose job is to scrutinise the work of council executives and to take part in overview and scrutiny.

The report highlights a number of issues, which have been discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I want to talk about three things in particular: resources, information and training for councillors. There were a great many other recommendations, but I shall touch on those three.

First, in order to have effective scrutiny, which can contribute greatly to the running and effectiveness of an authority, it is important to have adequate resources in order to support members of the council in their work, as we have in Select Committees. To get to the nitty-gritty of council business, someone needs a lot of time, concentration and knowledge. Like my colleagues, therefore, I was disappointed when the Government did not agree to survey what resources are going into overview and scrutiny. It is important for authorities to be clear
about the need for overview and scrutiny committees to be resourced so that they can work effectively. By not conducting that survey, I am afraid that—as colleagues have said—we are letting the people, and the public, and those who care, down. I very much hope that the Minister will look again at the need to gather information about resources available to the committees.

Secondly, apart from officer time, a really important resource is information. One of the issues raised during our inquiry was the ability of committee members to access information about the council or about services provided by third parties and external organisations. Too often, committees are told that such information is covered by commercial confidentiality, so they are not able to look effectively at whether a contract is being performed as it should be and whether it is providing value for money. It is a positive move for the Government to say that local authorities should look at that positively, but we need to be much firmer about saying that those who scrutinise either council services provided by external parties or even internal services have the right to the full information necessary. We need greater transparency and better availability of information, so that it does not have to be dragged from authorities or external bodies, but is available to committees when they need it, when considering important reports.

Thirdly, I will touch on training. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East mentioned the letter we had from the Centre for Public Scrutiny, which talks about some of the work it is doing to strengthen scrutiny. It is important that elected members are very clear about how they go about scrutiny work, that they have the tools at their disposal to make the most of the information they have, and that they can do an effective job of scrutinising the work of the local authority, whether looking into particular services or at regular key performance indicators. It is important that people have the training and knowledge to know what they are doing, basically, and too often that is avoided.

I welcome the fact that the Government have accepted that idea that overview and scrutiny committees should report to full council. It is important that the role of overview and scrutiny and its significance are recognised and that there is space for the committees to report to full council, so that all council members are aware of what is happening and the important issues they are facing.

That is as much as I wanted to say. I certainly commend the report, and I hope that the Government will think again about some of the areas that we have pointed out.

2.4 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Blaydon (Liz Blackman), and I bow to their superior experience as councillors. I was a councillor for six years. It is a hard job, and I respect everyone who stands up to represent their community, putting their head above the parapet. I also have experience of the committee and scrutiny systems, and I have to say that as a back-bench councillor I preferred the committee system—I felt that I had more input—but I can see that that might depend on which local authority it is.

Scrutiny has to be a good thing. It is right and proper that the executive are held to account, that thorough assessment is made of whether policies represent real value for money, and that there is ongoing monitoring of how they affect the public. Scrutiny should not just be retrospective; it should also ensure that policy making can be improved. That is how we see scrutiny in Parliament—we hold the Government to account in debates such as this one, for example—and there is some parallel with local government, but sometimes councils do not always give their scrutiny committees the wonderful support and resources that we have in this place for our Select Committees. We have Committee Clerks, training, a wealth of resources and availability of information, which is why Select Committee reports such as the one we are discussing are so highly regarded.

Another issue in local authorities is that party politics can sometimes be more single state. As we know, in some parts of the country the Conservatives dominate, while in others things are the other way around. That is how constituents want it, which is quite right—it is democracy. However, that can have an impact on scrutiny. In some authorities one party sometimes has to hold itself to account, which can make life difficult for individuals.

What incentive is there for a back-bench councillor to criticise his or her own ruling executive’s policies? To do so has been described, in some instances, as not a great career move. That is something to think about. Our Select Committees have a mix of Members and some are chaired by the Opposition, so they are truly cross-party, with real legitimacy and standing as a result.

All that means we have to be more nuanced in how we look at local government. One size does not fit all, and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East, there is the culture. At their best, overview and scrutiny committees should be regarded as constructive, and as a critical friend, but there is a tendency, I fear, for some council leaders to see them as a challenge. That might be because of the political make-up of the council, but it might be an ingrained attitude—the executive makes the decisions, which are made in the best interests of the people, so challenging them is somehow disloyal. The report acknowledges that and points out that the culture at the top determines whether scrutiny is seen as effective.

Culture also determines whether councillors get the correct information to do scrutiny properly. That is a key issue that has been mentioned a number of times. When I was on the scrutiny committee, I had 24-page reports given to me the day before a meeting. I was also doing a full-time job, so that did not encourage effective scrutiny—it was in fact another way of discouraging it, which can be done either by giving no information or by giving so much information, in such detail, that no one reads it.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend makes a good point about how councils work. Their challenge is greater than ours here in the House of Commons, where not only do we have independent Select Committees, but even Government Members are a little more removed from Ministers on a daily basis than councillors are from the cabinet members. Councillors are often in the same room with cabinet members, or part of groups that make the decisions, which cabinet members are responsible, in a way that does not happen in the House. It is a bigger challenge, so getting that culture right is key.
Yvonne Fovargue: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: it is a challenge, but it is one that we must look at. I am pleased that the Government are responding and will produce good practice.

I shall single out two or three of the recommendations. I feel that a statutory scrutiny officer for all councils is fully justified. Yes, councils can make their own choices, but such an appointment at a senior level can only help to raise the standing of scrutiny, prevent it from being marginalised and make suggestions to the executive about how it could work better in future.

I register my support for the scrutiny of local enterprise partnerships. There is much that is wrong with local enterprise partnerships, not least their lack of transparency and accountability. I believe that scrutiny needs to follow the public pound. It should not matter if services are in-house or outsourced through complex partnerships or contracts; the public have a right to know how their money is spent, because they are all taxpayer-funded services. Councils can outsource their services, but not the responsibility for them. Part of that responsibility is allowing them to be scrutinised. I agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East that a lot of other public services affect the local area: the police, the fire brigade and academy schools. They should all be subject to scrutiny, because everything that happens there affects the local resident. Surely, that is what local councils are about: what affects their local residents.

I would like to single out the recommendation to increase the funding for the scrutiny of metro mayors. Perhaps if we had more resources in this regard we would have never had the scenario where the last Mayor of London avoided accountability over the release of funding for the abortive garden bridge, even though the stipulated conditions were not in place for that to happen. Taxpayers have been forced to pick up the £46 million bill.

I thank the Committee for its report, which contains some sensible recommendations. It is a challenge to improve the scrutiny of local authorities, because of their different make-up and how they differ from central Government, but we need to accept that challenge; it is an important function in any democracy. I was impressed by the remark the hon. Member for Harrow East made about putting the oxygen back into scrutiny by engaging the public again. Too often the public elect their councillors and do not think about them again for the next four years. They need to look at the decisions that those councillors make. Scrutiny is an important way that they can be involved in that.

2.12 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 Sharma, I think for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing the debate. I thank him and the members of his Committee for their important work. I stand here in some trepidation, responding to a debate in which I think I am the only parliamentarian who has not been a local councillor at some point.

Mr Betts: There is still time.

Rishi Sunak: One job at a time, perhaps. Collectively, there is probably over half a century’s worth of local government experience in the room. I pay tribute to that service. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East said that this may not be a topic that attracts front-page headline news, but nevertheless it is an important topic. It is a credit to him and his Committee that they took the time to thoroughly investigate a topic that deserves scrutiny but that otherwise may not have had the chance to be debated and aired in this place.

Scrutiny is fundamentally important to the successful functioning of local democracy, so I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the Committee’s findings. It has a key role to play in ensuring local accountability and the efficient delivery of public services. Scrutiny committees can play a key role in voicing the concerns of local people. I hope the Government response makes it clear that I value the role that scrutiny can play in supporting accountable and transparent decision making and the effective delivery of council functions. The principal takeaway point for me from the Committee’s report, which the hon. Member for Sheffield South East alluded to, is that the organisational culture determines whether scrutiny works well. Where there is a culture of welcoming challenge, the scrutiny process in councils is effective.

I would like to start by setting out the core principles that underpin Government’s approach to scrutiny, before turning to the specific recommendations of the report. First, councils are democratically elected bodies and are ultimately accountable to their electorate. Secondly, as a localist, I take the view that councils are best placed to know which scrutiny arrangements will suit their own individual circumstances. Thirdly, Government have a role to play in ensuring that councils are aware of what effective scrutiny looks like and how best to carry it out. Lastly, overview and scrutiny is just one part of the wider accountability framework for local government, along with the requirement to publish certain information online for transparency, the requirements for independent audit, the complaints process and the presence of independent local media.

The rationale behind the Government’s response was, therefore, to accept those recommendations that would increase councils’ understanding of the importance of scrutiny and how to conduct it, but to tread carefully with the requirements that would place additional requirements on local authorities or reduce their flexibility to decide for themselves which scrutiny arrangements to put in place.

I will turn to some of those specific recommendations. The Committee’s first recommendation clearly will enhance councils’ understanding of the importance of scrutiny and how to conduct it. The Committee pointed out, not unfairly, that statutory guidance was updated more than a decade ago. I was more than happy to agree to update that. I am keen that the new guidance is of genuine use to councils and is not just a tick-box exercise that simply restates their legal obligations. My Department is already at work with the sector to ensure that it delivers the right messages in the right way. Broadly, the guidance will seek to ensure that councils know the purpose of scrutiny, what effective scrutiny looks like, how to conduct it effectively and the benefits it can bring. More specifically, it will cover some of the specific things that were heard today, such as reports to full councils or the role of the public. I look forward to publishing that revised guidance before the end of this year.
The hon. Member for Sheffield South East and the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised the concern of public scrutiny of local enterprise partnerships. The Committee’s report seemed to suggest that it was the exception rather than the rule. I want to reassure hon. Members that I agree fully that local scrutiny is essential to holding LEPs to account. The local enterprise partnerships’ national assurance framework is set by central Government and LEPs must comply with it to receive funding.

Last year, one of the Department’s non-executive directors, Mary Ney, led a review into LEP governance and transparency. We are in the process of fully implementing all her recommendations; but I agree there is more to do to ensure that LEPs and local partners collaborate effectively to deliver better outcomes for the public. That is why we are currently undertaking a Minister-led review that will consider the role of local scrutiny in LEP governance. It will also bring forward reforms to LEPs’ roles, leadership, accountability and geography. It will be published in the coming months.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East and his Committee that he has not received the letter that he is due. I will ensure that gets to him in short order, to set out what has already happened and what is happening to improve governance and scrutiny for LEPs.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for that reassurance. We will get a letter in short order saying that something will happen in the coming months. Could the Minister be more precise about what “the coming months” might mean?

Rishi Sunak: I would love to be, but the review is being conducted by my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), so I do not have the exact timing to hand. The review was announced through the industrial strategy White Paper. I am sure that we will share as much information as we are able to with the Committee. The hon. Gentleman knows that, alongside that, the assurance framework is in the process of being reviewed and updated. That work is going on with people in the industry, including the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and officials. I will make sure that all that is contained in the letter, with as much transparency on timing as we are able to give.

Another key concern that the Committee raised was that scrutiny seemed to be a second-order matter for combined authorities. I assure hon. Members that I take accountability in these new authorities very seriously. I am confident that the framework we have put in place provides the basis for a robust and consistent approach to scrutiny for combined authorities across the country. In particular, the Combined Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Access to Information and Audit Committees) Order 2017 was a key step in implementing devolution deals, and will ensure effective accountability for the new budgets and powers that have been devolved.

Members raised the question of resourcing. The Government announced at the last Budget that they will make available to mayoral combined authorities a £12 million fund for financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20 to boost Mayors’ capacity and resources. Combined authorities are free to use that to ensure that scrutiny and accountability arrangements are effectively resourced and supported.

I turn to the recommendations that the Government are considering. Access to information was raised by all three Back-Bench Members who spoke—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Sheffield South East. They made a persuasive and compelling case that we should have a hard look at that area. As a new Minister, I tell my hon. Friend that the point about information was the one thing that really stuck with me. In our response to the Select Committee, we committed to looking at that and deciding how best to manage it.

I agree that scrutiny committees should be able to access the information they need to do their jobs effectively. I can see that some executives might seek to deny committees access to that information if they do not appreciate their obligations or understand the value of scrutiny. I want to take soundings from the sector and figure out how best to move forward before committing, but hon. Members’ case that this is something we should consider carefully will stick with me, and I will ensure that I take it away. If we decide that new measures are appropriate, I will of course come back to the Select Committee with those.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East also raised the role of elected chairs. My officials and I will speak to the sector and think about how best we can establish the impact of elected chairs on the effectiveness of scrutiny committees. In general, chairs should be selected on the basis of their skills, experience, integrity and objectivity, not of how amenable they are to the executive. Although the new guidance will remind councils that they already have the option to elect rather than appoint a chair, it is right that every council should decide for itself how to select its members.

Let me say a few words about some of the recommendations about which there is a small difference of opinion, which I hope I can explain. On the point about councils publishing a summary of resources, although the Government require councils to publish certain information for transparency purposes, making available details of the resources allocated to scrutiny would be difficult in practice, for the simple reason that councils often do not have a dedicated scrutiny officer or staff. Instead, they pull in resources as and when they are needed, so it may be difficult for them to produce accurate figures.

Bob Blackman: I remember that a former Secretary of State—namely, Sir Eric Pickles—believed absolutely in transparency, such that he insisted that every council must publish every item of expenditure in excess of £500. Given that I do not think that policy has changed, what is the problem with asking councils to publish what should be a considerably higher figure than £500?

Rishi Sunak: I agree that transparency is important, and I am glad that my hon. Friend supports the transparency agenda, which the Government continue to lead. Transparency is of course the best disinfectant and the best way for accountability to work in practice. There is a practical difficulty with trying to aggregate lots of small expenditures, which is why there is a
[Rishi Sunak]

£500 threshold in the transparency code. I agree that £50 here, £25 there and another £100 there may add up to a greater figure, but identifying all the individual components may be tricky. However, I agree that transparency is important.

The hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned training. In its report, the Select Committee suggests that the training offered to members and officers does not always meet their needs, and that the Department needs to better manage the funding it provides to the sector. Having looked into the training offer, I remain broadly happy with it. It already includes a specific two-day course for new or aspiring scrutiny chairs, and I am comfortable that, for now, it meets the needs of the sector.

I note that the Local Government Association wrote to the Select Committee to provide further details of the overwhelmingly positive feedback it has received about its training programme. The Committee will be aware that our new memorandum of understanding with the LGA sets out our expectation that it will remain responsive to feedback and ensure that the training it offers remains relevant and effective. However, I agree that training is important, and I hope that the response the Committee gets from the LGA reassures it that what is in place is at least a good foundation.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for those comments. Will he ensure that all authorities not only know that the training offer is there, but encourage their officers and members to take it up? We heard that not all authorities do that, so it would be really helpful if the Government, through the LGA, stressed that point.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is right. I note that in its oral evidence, the LGA recognised the need to get into councils that might not be doing scrutiny as well as they should. I think it will have taken that message away as a result of coming before the Select Committee and engaging on this topic, and I will pass that message on, too, to ensure that it was heard loud and clear.

Mr Betts: I am not sure whether the Minister covered this point. He spoke about the importance of access to information and about considering how that can be improved, but he did not make it clear whether that applies just to information held by councils themselves or to information held by other public bodies, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the police service and the fire service, just as it already applies to the Department of Health and Social Care and its bodies at local level. Does he accept that scrutiny committees have a right to scrutinise and access information and witnesses from those other public organisations?

Rishi Sunak: I was talking specifically about information relating to councils’ own functions in the first instance. On the broader point, which was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, there are existing mechanisms for health and crime because, when those structures were set up, those were the agencies that the sector felt it did the most partnership working with. I am happy to talk to the sector to find out whether there is appetite for a greater ability to scrutinise other bodies, whether that process would work practically, and whether the burden it would put on authorities is appropriate. It is important to recognise that many of those other parts of the public sector are scrutinised separately, and to ensure that there is not duplication of scrutiny. Every public agency tries to focus on its day job, so we need to get the balance right between having appropriate scrutiny and not duplicating scrutiny, which would mean taking focus and resources away from agencies doing their job.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for giving way a second time on this point. I hope that, having looked at that and talked to the sector about it, he will write back to the Select Committee with his findings. It is difficult to see where the Department for Work and Pensions has a spotlight shone on it often and effectively at local level. I recognise his point about putting burdens on local government. This is intended to be not a burden but an opportunity, which local authorities may take up if they wish. There would not be a requirement to scrutinise other bodies, but authorities would have the opportunity to do so if they wished.

Rishi Sunak: I will of course write to the hon. Gentleman when we have had conversations with the sector on that point.

Bob Blackman: I want to clarify the point about information, which goes absolutely to scrutiny. I made the point that the presumption should be that information should be available. Rather than the current position, in which officers grudgingly give information to scrutiny committees and suchlike, it should be for the legal officer to say why information should not be available. Will my hon. Friend look at that specific point in detail and come back to the Select Committee?

Rishi Sunak: Hopefully I can reassure my hon. Friend. The main point that I have taken from the debate from all contributions is about access to information and ensuring that it is not unreasonably withheld. It is tricky to get the balance right, making sure that time is not wasted and that information that is genuinely commercial or commercially sensitive in some other regard is protected. However, I have heard that message loud and clear and it is a fair point, so I will go away and think about it in more depth.

Of course, such conversations with the sector are already happening and if there is a path to do something different, we will consider it. I would be loth to commit to something now, but I can commit to examining the issue properly and seriously, given the weight and force of the arguments made.

It was reassuring to see that the Committee’s report acknowledges that scrutiny is working effectively in many councils. We should recognise that. Of course, we should accept that in some places it does not work as well as might be expected, but it does have a key role to play in ensuring local accountability and the effective delivery of services so it is important that councils know how to do it properly. I have committed to working with the sector to update the guidance, ensuring that it meets the needs of councillors and their officers, and I am happy to give further consideration to some of the topics I touched on earlier.

I thank hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss this important topic. We are talking about...
and as was raised in Members’ comments, Select Committees, and in particular the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which I am privileged to appear before, are a great example of how scrutiny can work in practice. It works best in this place—as it should in local authorities—when done on a collegiate basis, with people putting the interests of the public whom they serve first and working as a constructive friend of the people who are trying to make decisions. This Committee is a fantastic example for local authorities and the local government sector to look at. It is a pleasure to work with it, not just on this issue, but hopefully on other issues in the months to come.

2.31 pm

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for his response—whether it was positive or not will depend on the outcome of those further consultations. He gave us a general indication that he recognises the important role of scrutiny in local government, which is done well in many councils and not so well in others. Improvement is down to the sector, working with the Centre for Public Scrutiny. We look forward to receiving the guidance, which will be really important, and further information about how LEPs might be more effectively scrutinised.

The Minister has clearly got the message about information for scrutiny committees, which is very important, both within the council and hopefully more widely as we look at providing information to other public bodies. We look forward to his coming back to us on that point. Hopefully the Committee’s report and—eventually—the Government’s collective response can mean not just an improvement in scrutiny, which of itself is not the endgame, but an improvement in the public services that our constituents receive from their local authorities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the First Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees, HC 369, and the Government Response, Cm 9569.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.
[Ms Harriet Harman]

I think it is true to say that when the Joint Committee went into this inquiry, having heard the Minister say that there was a problem, we went in with open minds. We were not sure whether it was just a case of a flurry of stories from the Daily Mail saying, “All students have become snowflakes and are shutting down other students’ right to debate,” so we went in with an open mind. Indeed, I was quite sceptical about whether there really was a problem. But it is also true to say that at the end of all the evidence—we heard evidence from university administrators, student unions, student societies, particularly Jewish societies and Islamic societies, campaigners such as Peter Tatchell, trans rights protagonists and, indeed, Members of the House of Commons—we were all convinced that there was a problem and that the Minister was right to raise it. The question we considered was what was causing the problem and how it should be solved.

The Minister, when raising this matter, had said that the problem was students. However, we felt that the problem was not only students inhibiting one another’s time and opportunity to speak, but a number of other issues, such as the Prevent duty, the Charity Commission, university bureaucracy and the complexity of overlapping guidance. However, just as a starting point, we all ought to be clear that the phenomenon of people wearing masks and bursting into meetings, threatening and intimidating people and trying to stop them speaking, is not the right to protest; it is actually criminal activity.

None of us on the Joint Committee feels any sympathy at all with people who say that they are exercising their right to protest but come in with masks on and set off smoke bombs. We have an unequivocal view about that. For a start, we do not know whether those who have been doing that are actually students, because obviously they are masked. Sometimes, when their identity is disclosed, it turns out that they are not students. They should be charged for breach of the peace, threatening behaviour and any other criminal offence that suits the occasion, but certainly if they are students from the university and they are coming in with masks over their faces, they should be disciplined. That is not the right to protest; it is an inhibition on other people’s right to free speech.

It was a particular irony that, according to one newspaper report I saw, the masked protestors were coming in to protest that the university should be a safe space. Nothing is less safe than someone who is wearing a mask breaking into a meeting and threatening people, so we have no truck with that. However infrequently it happens, it absolutely must be stamped down on.

I will give hon. Members just a couple of examples. In March, the King’s College London libertarian society invited speakers in. The debate had been under way for about 30 minutes when a group of between 16 and 20 hooded and masked protestors stormed the front entrance of the Strand campus building, jumped over the security barriers, ignited smoke bombs and forced their way into the Safran lecture theatre. In the process, they knocked a security guard unconscious, and he was taken to hospital. A number of other staff and students were injured during the violent protest. Actually, we should not dignify that with the name “protest”. We are totally against it. We cannot have the disruption of meetings.

We also heard evidence from the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who in February had gone to speak at a meeting of the politics and international relations society of the University of the West of England in Bristol. Again, people with scarves over their faces and wearing dark glasses burst into the room. They were shouting that the hon. Gentleman was a bigot and various other insults and, as he made clear, it was evident that they just wanted to stop the event. There were 300 people there who wanted to engage in a serious discussion and four or five people who were determined to disrupt it. That is totally unacceptable, whether or not they are students.

Aside from the issue of people bursting into meetings, there are other inhibitions on free speech that we discovered through the evidence we took. We were concerned about the guidance issued by the Government in relation to the Prevent duty deterring some students, particularly Muslims, from inviting or questioning speakers they wanted to hear. The Joint Committee feels that the Government absolutely have an obligation to keep us safe and to keep the country free from terrorism, but the Prevent guidance is so widely drawn, particularly as it relates to universities, that undoubtedly some believe that they are in danger of breaching it and that they could be reported and get into trouble if they invite certain speakers. The Prevent duty states: “When deciding whether or not to host a particular speaker,”—

university bodies, including student unions—

“should consider carefully whether the views being expressed, or likely to be expressed, constitute extremist views...or are shared by terrorist groups.”

It might be that I am a vegetarian and my views on vegetarianism are shared by a particular terrorist group, but does that put someone in breach of the Prevent duty? We felt that the duty is in a good cause, but it is widely drawn in such a way that it inhibits free speech.

We therefore ask the Government to review the Prevent duty. It is about time it was reviewed generally, but perhaps they will do it with a view to looking at its impact on free speech.

Universities in England and Wales have a duty to promote free speech. It is different in Scotland. We had the benefit of the Scottish National party’s hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who helped us contrast the situation in Scotland with that in the rest of the UK. Under the Education Act 1986, universities in England and Wales have a duty to promote free speech, but the problem is that the way some of them go about it ironically ends up inhibiting free speech.

Hansard cannot show this, but hon. Members can see this organogram showing the process that students have to go through when applying for a meeting. There are application forms to fill in and time limits to comply with. Some universities require students not only to name the speaker in advance, but to give a biography of them and provide an advance copy of the speech they will make. That would not be possible with any of the speeches that I make in universities, because I prepare my speech on the train. The point is that it is inhibiting. It is all about risk aversion, what people cannot do and tying them up with bureaucracy.

Newcastle’s code of practice for freedom of speech for external speakers warns against people communicating in a way that might unreasonably offend others. That is
not acceptable. We should have free speech, even if it is found to be offensive by some others. Southampton talked a lot about speakers holding controversial views. The whole point about a debate is that it is two different views and therefore people should not shy away from controversy. Some of the university procedures are controversy-averse, which we thought was in opposition to free speech.

Another organisation that is controversy-averse is the Charity Commission, which is having a chilling effect on free speech. Its guidance warns student unions that they could risk their charitable status if they have controversies that could risk their reputation as a charity. We think that the Charity Commission goes way beyond the law and is having a chilling effect on students’ free speech.

No speaker has the right to speak in a university, but students have a right to hear who they want to hear irrespective of whether others might find it offensive or insulting. There is a place for meetings of, say, people who have been victims of sexual assault or those of a particular religion, but we cannot have the whole campus being a safe space with the lowest common denominator.

There is an overlapping set of guidance from many institutions, including the Equality and Human Rights Commission, so the Joint Committee drew up our own guidance. The Committee is heaving with lawyers with good political judgement, and we have expert legal advice — when you have the Lord Chief Justice on your Committee, you get the law right. That is what we have done, so we have saved the Minister and his Department any effort. We have issued guidance on free speech for universities and students when organising events. It states, “You can say whatever you like, so long as it is not against the law, and this is what the law is.” One simple piece of guidance is what is needed, because guidance under the Prevent duty, from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, from the Charity Commission and from the union administrations is all too much. We know that students have other things to do in their lives — I will not name them, and I probably do not even know what they are now — so they have to get on with their lives and they cannot be bound up with bureaucracy.

I thank the Minister for the way he has responded. His predecessor spoke a lot about this subject, but I could not detect any action. This Minister is actually doing something.

If we do not prepare students to engage in dialogue in an environment that promotes free speech, there is a serious danger that we will risk promoting extremism and factionalism within wider society. Only by understanding different views and beliefs and by, as one of our witnesses said, countering bad ideas with good ones, will we build community cohesion and break down prejudice and discrimination in wider society, which, at worst, as we know, can lead to violent disturbances within our local communities. That is something that none of us wants. Indeed, it is one of the purposes of the Prevent strategy. It is ironic that the strategy is in many ways defeating one of its key objectives in the way that it is applied at universities. I will come on to that in more detail shortly.

For the record, I will set the legal scene, which the Committee is now well versed in. Article 9 of the European convention on human rights states that,

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

Article 10 sets out the right to freedom of speech and a right to,

“hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority”.

and this “can extend to the right to say things which may...disturb the listener”, and which the listener might find offensive or even shocking. Free speech is not an absolute right. There are limitations on it to ensure that it is not exercised in a way that causes harm to others by, for example, inciting murder, violence or terrorism or stirring up racial hatred or hatred for other groups, or if it is defamatory or malicious or constitutes harassment. We found that within university settings the inhibitions and restrictions on free speech went much further than that. A number of factors were limiting free speech at universities. I will summarise them briefly, and go into detail about some of them.

As we have heard, there were incidents of unacceptable intimidatory behaviour by protesters intent on preventing free speech and debate. Unnecessary bureaucracy was imposed on those organising events. There was some confusion about what the Prevent duty entailed; for example, some students were frightened about the possibility of being reported for organising or attending events, and of being investigated, as a result, as potentially involved in extremism, which might draw people into terrorism. There was considerable confusion about that.

Other factors were regulatory complexity and confusion, confusion over the Charity Commission guidelines, and unduly complicated and cautious guidance from the Charity Commission itself about what student unions could or could not do in organising events and permitting speakers to attend. Safe space policies were often incorrectly used. Indeed, we did not find the concept of safe space policies helpful at all. It was applied too broadly and vaguely. We found that student unions were inconsistent in the way they applied the regulations on allowing them to hold events at the student union. The different types of group might include faith groups, groups with non-religious views, or groups with views on the Israel-Palestine conflict, right-wing or left-wing views, pro-life or anti-abortion views, and views on transgender issues or Islamophobia. There were many minority views and
beliefs—a huge swathe. University authorities’ oversight of the issue, under the legal duty to secure free speech that I mentioned, was inadequate. Another matter of concern was the chilling effect—an undercurrent of restraint among students, both as to their speech as individuals and as to the large number of events either not held at all or inhibited, and of which there was no report, although students wanted them to be held.

Members of the Committee are not aware of one reason why I was concerned to hold the inquiry, which is a personal experience I had at one university. I shall try, in giving examples, not to name the particular university, as I think that might be unhelpful. I had been asked to speak about work I had done in Parliament—so, ironically, it was all in Hansard—on sex discrimination in relation to abortion. I was speaking in a room slightly smaller than this Chamber. The back wall was entirely glass windows and on the other side of it was a large courtyard or quad. To my right was one pop-up banner describing the organisation that had invited me to speak—the university Life organisation, on which two small feet were depicted. After I began to speak about what I had done in Parliament, which is on the public record, a university official in uniform came into the room and said, “Your event is causing offence.” There was a startled silence in the room, particularly from me. The official said, “It is causing offence to the students who are sitting in the bar on the other side of the quad.” They could not possibly have heard a word I was saying. It could only have been the sight of the banner. I was certainly saying nothing unlawful at all. We came to a compromise in the end. The official suggested that if we drew the giant curtains across the back of the room, so that the students in the bar could not see what was going on, we could carry on with the event and I could finish my speech. I know that this is not the only time when there has been an endeavour to put restrictions on parliamentarians at universities.

I was concerned about the issue and pleased about the inquiry, because I think the chilling effect and unreported inhibition of speech is far wider than we recognise. Often the chilling effect inhibits students with minority views, and that emboldens students who want to silence or censor views they consider wrong or offensive. I was more convinced about the resultant chilling effect by evidence from Professor Adam Tickell, the vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex. He said he had been unaware of the scale of the problem:

“It was only in preparation for this session that I became aware of the cases”.

Those cases included students being interviewed by Prevent officers, students subsequently telling the student union president that they were afraid to speak their minds, and Muslim students saying they were afraid to go to their campus prayer room. That is evidence from one of our witnesses that there is more to the issue than the public have been aware of for some time.

I join the Committee Chairman, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), in thanking the Minister for the interest he has taken in the issue. He told the Committee that just as important as the evidence of restrictions is

“what is hard to measure: the large number of events that do not happen at all, either because organisers are worried about obstruction or because the overzealous enforcement of rules makes them seem more trouble than they are worth.”

He added that,

“some of this is quite difficult to gather evidence for.”

I thank the Universities Minister for the lead that he is giving, and for the fact that he told the Committee that he would hold a

“summit to thrash out not only where the responsibilities lie but to make sure that they do not cut across each other and in so doing achieve the opposite of what all these guidelines are meant to achieve, which is to promote free speech.”

I should be interested if the Minister would today update the House on what he is doing to take forward what he said, and how he expects to tackle the issue in the coming months. It has become clear to me as we have examined the issue that it will not be resolved purely by the publication of our report, however important the Committee may think it. We have highlighted an issue that will take considerable tackling by a number of organisations and bodies.

I want to talk in a little more detail about the Charity Commission.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful case, and I am most grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Chair of the Committee, for the way she led the inquiry.

Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps universities and, indeed, student unions could take a more proactive role and encourage debate, rather than waiting for debates to come up, and seeing whether they are lawful and whether they should go ahead? They could perhaps take a more overt stance. The range of issues debated in universities is often pretty narrow. I look at the range of debate here and the global concerns about the problems of youth unemployment or, for example, the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo over the last 10 to 20 years, where 6 million people have been killed or died as a result of civil unrest and other disturbances. I rarely see debates in universities on these incredibly important matters. They tend to be confined, albeit on important issues, to a fairly narrow range.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point, as always. I will refer back to it in a moment in relation to the Charity Commission’s guidelines. The actual wording of clause 43 of the Education (No. 2) Act 1986 imposes an obligation on university governing bodies to take

“such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured”

on both university and students union premises. I have written underneath, “proactive”. This is a proactive clause. It requires them to take steps to secure free speech, so I entirely agree. It does not help, for example, when, as charities, students unions have been told that they can devote resources to or campaign only on issues that further their charitable purposes. The Charity Commission has interpreted this—I think, and our Committee agrees—in a far too narrow way. The Charity Commission guidance for students unions indicated that it would consider it acceptable for charitable students unions to comment on

“street lighting near the campus”
because the issue affects students as students, and therefore fulfils their charitable purposes. The Charity Commission would consider it unacceptable for students unions to comment publicly on issues that do not directly affect the welfare of students as students, such as, “the treatment of political prisoners in a foreign country.”

That is the Charity Commission’s own example, illustrating the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford.

The Minister told our Committee that the Charity Commission guidance should “go further and facilitate the promotion of free speech. It should be giving students unions the permission to host debates about controversial issues and expose students to a wide range of viewpoints. That should be the core purpose.”

That is quite right. It is not just preferable that free speech is promoted and protected in universities. It should be a prerequisite for any university that is going to achieve its educational purposes. I am pleased that the Charity Commission has acknowledged as much this week and has announced in response to our report that it will create new guidance in this area. Helen Stephenson, chief executive of the Charity Commission said yesterday:

“charitable students’ unions, universities and other higher education providers can challenge traditional boundaries, encourage the free exchange of views and host speakers with a range of opinions, including those who might be controversial or divide opinion.

These activities are entirely in line with their aims to promote education.”

That is a pleasing response to our report.

Jeremy Lefroy: I believe this year is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. He was born in Trier in Germany. He was effectively expelled from Germany because he was the editor of a newspaper that exercised the right of free speech. For those students perhaps slightly to the left of some of us here today, I point to the example of Karl Marx, who was the victim of university or town authorities in Trier, because he wanted to exercise free speech. From whatever political point we look at it, free speech is absolutely vital to secure the rights of individual citizens, as he was trying to do in that case.

Fiona Bruce: That is an excellent example. I hope it will also encourage students to the right of Karl Marx, because I have spoken to a number of students who have recently said, “I wouldn’t admit to being a conservative on campus.”

Our Committee concluded that the concept of safe spaces, having been extended to entire university campuses, is unhelpful. It is not only unhelpful. If minority views are supressed across the whole campus, but they are not views that are promoting terrorism or inciting the kind of activity I referred to earlier, the concept is actually against the law, impinging on the right to free speech under article 10 of the European convention on human rights. A number of students unions tried to argue in evidence to us that it was necessary to limit speakers who cause harm through speech—harm caused because people might find speech disturbing or upsetting. As our report says, however, this is counter or detrimental to free speech. Regarding safe spaces, we say:

“Whilst there must be opportunities for genuinely sensitive and confidential discussions in university settings, and whilst the original intention behind safe space policies may have been to ensure that minority or vulnerable groups can feel secure, in practice the concept of safe spaces has proved problematic, often marginalising the views of minority groups. They need to co-exist with and respect free speech. They cannot cover the whole of the university or university life without impinging on rights to free speech. When that happens, people are moving from the need to have a “safe space” to seeking to prevent the free speech of those whose views they disagree. Minority groups or individuals holding unpopular opinions which are within the law should not be shut down nor be subject to undue additional scrutiny by students’ unions or universities.”

I hope that university authorities will take careful note of that.

On the Prevent strategy, we had quite some evidence. I want to reiterate what the guidance says. As our report states, under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, the guidance states that higher education bodies, “when deciding whether or not to host a particular speaker…should consider carefully whether the views being expressed…constitute extremist views that risk drawing people into terrorism or are shared by terrorist groups.”

Those are important words—“risk drawing people into terrorism or are shared by terrorist groups”—if a little wide, but the issue of terrorism is critical. The guidance goes on:

“In these circumstances the event should not be allowed to proceed except where”

the educational bodies “are entirely convinced that such risk can be fully mitigated”.

That is the legal position, but I will also cite some of the evidence we received about that and about hate speech.

An organisation called CARE, Christian Action Research and Education, stated:

“One common occurrence is that certain speakers who are perceived as ‘extremist’ are being denied the chance to speak at universities, to discuss their ideas, and have their ideas challenged by others in an open debate. First, this drives any such ideas underground. Second, the definition of extremism, as identified in the Counter Extremism Strategy, is very broad, incorporates non-violent as well as violent forms of extremism, and does not necessarily relate back to the concept of terrorism. In his recent judgment in the case of Mr Salman Butt, Ouseley J confirmed that the Prevent duty is a duty to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and does not refer to all forms of extremism. Nonetheless, no steps have been taken by the Government to confirm the correct interpretation and scope of the definition of what constitutes ‘extremism’ and its impact on the Prevent duty.”

Some student groups, for example, have been prevented from holding events because the Church from which the speaker comes is considered fundamentalist or, in other words, extreme. Such an individual has not the slightest intention of drawing people into terrorism. I ask the Minister and his colleagues to look again at the counter-extremism strategy to ensure that its broad definition of extremism, which has been used by some universities, is not used to prevent free speech at universities.

Hate speech results from the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words, or the displaying of written material that is threatening, abusive or insulting and therefore intended to cause the person harassment, alarm or distress, or to stir up racial hatred. Although that is the definition of hate speech, and, as we were told in evidence, “it is meant to be used narrowly in relation to any speech that fulfils the particulars under the Public Order Act 1986…over time, the phrase has become embedded into everyday language to describe any statement that some may find ‘offensive’.”
At universities, there is an increasing tendency to conflate offensive speech with hate speech, which “has resulted in a far greater willingness to countenance censorship.” Several pieces of evidence to our inquiry showed that that was the case. As a result of those common misunderstandings, freedom of speech at universities has suffered. I would be grateful if the Minister looked at CARE’s evidence to the inquiry in particular, so that an appropriate application can be made in universities.

I will give a few examples of the kinds of issues that were mentioned to us in evidence. We were told of a university that introduced “emotional risk assessments” in December 2016 that were used in an “invasive and heavy-handed way”. They have resulted in the students’ association telling student groups “what they can and can’t do and say”.

In some cases, all of a student group’s activities, including weekly meetings, events and emails, that were to be sent to outside students or speakers had to be approved in advance by the students association. That meant that one or two people in the students’ association office could basically make the operations of that student group impossible. For example, they rejected events because they were “too provocative” and they would not allow discussions that made specific reference to the Manchester terrorist attack or Hurricane Gregroy, in case those specific incidents of suffering caused upset.

Another group was not allowed to have a stand at a freshers’ fair unless it was unmanned. A group at another university was told that it had to provide the name of any invited speaker, the topic and an outline of their talk 21 days in advance of the event.

We were told that at other universities there was a culture not only of safe spaces and hurtful speech but of trigger warnings:

“Students are encouraged to catastrophise when they hear something controversial or challenging rather than to engage with new ideas robustly.”

That is hardly a preparation for the world of work.

An ethics society was told that it could not hold an event because it would be asking for volunteers during it, and that contravened university policy guidelines. On further inspection, it was found that no such guidelines existed within the union or the university. Another group was told that it would be refused affiliation with the students union on the grounds that it was “violating union policies regarding discrimination and equal opportunity”,

but on reading the union policy, no such violation was found. Several groups, particularly pro-life groups, were prevented from holding events or exhibiting material at freshers’ fairs that, on further investigation, was found to be used in primary schools and in further education material.

There are real problems for many groups in arranging external speakers and organising events. The Alliance of Pro-Life Students said that,

“pro-life societies are often given undue burden to host events” and are

“subject to mediations to which other societies are not”.

Humanist groups said that student unions and universities, “repeatedly shut down expressive conduct deemed by them to be wrong, offensive, or harmful, particularly with regards to criticism of religious beliefs”.

Such groups told us that, “student unions were making arbitrary decisions about the views to which students should be exposed.”

They say that “many student unions” do not have clear or coherent democratic policies in place, which means that voting in a certain way, or no-platforming, or getting

safe space policies into official union policy is surprisingly easy. If unions had better guidelines for democratic policies, and their union officials faced actual sanctions for disregarding freedom of speech, the union, and therefore the university environments, would become both more democratic and more open to diverse viewpoints.”

As I have said before, the issue will not be resolved overnight. I am encouraged that the Minister is determined to address it. It is clear that since our report more instances have come to light. For example, a colleague on the Committee received an email from UK Lawyers for Israel this week that expressed a number of concerns about specific policies on university campuses, including ticketing requirements and restrictions on advertising.

It says that, although our report mentions that some pro-Israel events were disrupted, that happens on many occasions. The impact of such disruptions can be not only burdensome regulations and requirements for future events; the cost, time and administrative burden, and the need to protect people from hostile protests leaves students who run such societies exhausted and put off from hosting events. In an echo of another of our comments, UK Lawyers for Israel said that universities must impose penalties on students who incite, encourage or participate in the disruption of meetings.

It is a very full report; there is much more to it. I thank the Minister for his interest and look forward to his response and future action.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Hon. Members may be interested to know that I plan to start the wind-ups at 4 pm.

3.48 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I rise to speak as a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and it is a pleasure to do so. I have greatly enjoyed my brief time on the Committee, and I thank and congratulate our Chair, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), on her leadership and on bringing together an important and timely report.

The Committee has recently been debating the extent to which everyone in the country feels that they can identify with the language and existence of rights. Even for those who do not immediately speak the language of rights or who do not think within a legal framework of rights, the right to freedom of speech immediately resonates. Our right to stand up and say what we like within the law and in the way we choose is entirely central to how we live our personal and political lives. To feel that that right may be being inhibited in universities is particularly worrying. I say that as someone who taught for a number of years at King’s College London
and also taught at the University of Leicester; I did both very happily. I never came across anything of the kind that we have discussed in this report, but those were simpler times.

The truth is that, as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham laid out so clearly, we have a problem in some of our universities in the way in which students’ right to free speech is being inhibited. There are three basic methods by which it is being inhibited, which have been discussed by my colleagues, and of course they are: protest, shutting freedom of speech down; political attitudes of no-platforming that prevent people from being heard; and an unhelpful risk-averse bureaucracy, which is jamming up the process of holding events altogether.

It is particularly pertinent in the framework of university life that these problems are occurring, because “university”—the word itself—is intended to encompass everything, and to be open and broad, bringing in a range of views and people, in order to extend the learning and experience of those who come through it. Yet in too many cases we see the signs of a changing attitude that is preventing that from being the case.

It is obviously the case that protest itself is a form of freedom of speech, right up to the point where it inhibits somebody else’s right to express themselves. Cases were brought to our Committee’s attention. In particular, in what is now a reasonably famous case from, I regret to say, King’s College London—a university where I taught—masked protesters broke into a peaceful debate and set off smoke alarms, so that the building had to be evacuated, which completely shut down the discussion that was going on. That is absolutely unacceptable in the moment, but it has even greater ramifications because, of course, once a student event has been disrupted, at cost to the student body and to the university, those carrying out a risk assessment of such events in the future will take a much harder line. That means that every protest of that kind endangers the freedom of speech at future events.

Much the same is true with no-platforming. We were told that there were actually very few registered cases of individuals being no-platformed. However, once a policy of no-platforming on a particular issue is established, it means that there will not even be a discussion as to whether people should discuss that issue, because if they do not conform to the strictures laid down by the university or the student body they will not even have a chance to be no-platformed, because they will not even be considered as potential speakers.

We must encourage students and those working in universities to remember that if someone stands on a platform and breaks the law by giving a speech, it is the speaker themselves who is culpable; it is not automatically the student body or the university that must carry the can. Of course, if a speaker has previously broken the law and it is possible that they might use their platform to do the same thing again, that puts the university or student body in a slightly different area. However, ultimate responsibility must lie with the people who express such views, not with their audience or the organisers of the event. It is that which we need to be mindful of.

I completely concur with the statement by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham that we cannot expect speakers to have to submit their speeches in advance if they have never done anything wrong before. There is the example of the journalist Peter Hitchens being asked to submit his speech before he spoke to a student body as a prerequisite to his being able to stand on a platform. That can only be a veiled form of censorship.

Lastly, I turn to the bureaucratic process itself. I am a Conservative and so people would not expect me to stand up and extoll the virtues of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a little bit like jam; a little bit of is very good and very effective, but three pints of it is too much. So we find with the examples that we have seen from a number of universities where there is an excess of risk aversion.

What really happens through such byzantine processes is an attempt to prevent anything vaguely risky from happening, and in my experience that is not the purpose of university life. Indeed, university life is a time to take risks, experience new things and hear new thoughts. I say to the people who find themselves in this situation and pondering these issues in universities that there is absolutely no contradiction between adhering strictly to one’s own world-view and having an open mind. Unfortunately, awareness of that fact has been lost.

I commend to the Minister the recommendations that our Committee made. I am very pleased to hear that he held a summit—I think it was on 3 May—that brought together the National Union of Students, the Charity Commission and a number of other relevant bodies, at which this bureaucratic issue was discussed. I hope that our Committee’s report was part of the discussions then, and that those present were able to consider the principles that we have pulled together as a very simple legal and—I believe—effective way of ascertaining whether an event is acceptable.

The first point we make is that everyone has the right to freedom of speech within the law; the second is that universities should seek to expose their members and students to the widest possible range of views, while ensuring that they act within the law; the third is that if a speaker breaks the law, it is the speaker themselves who is culpable; and the fourth is that protest itself is a legitimate expression of freedom of speech.

With all that in mind, and as long as there is a clear and clean system of redress for those who feel that any of those principles are being inhibited, we will have a much better framework to ensure that students do not find themselves having to worry about the events they attend or the events they are holding, or having to worry about being unable to stand up for what they believe in.

I second the remarks made by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) that there is a danger—albeit a danger that I do not believe is currently very present in many of our universities—that we encourage a sort of intellectual monoculture in certain places, which would be the physical equivalent of the echo chamber that we hear about among groups on Twitter, whereby people only listen to their own views and only get feedback from people who are in broadly the same position as themselves, and whereby it might be considered acceptable to invite only four or five speakers from the same political party during the course of a year. I do not believe that that is in the spirit of a university education.
I end with one perhaps slightly over-dramatic quotation, which was written on the donors’ board in the old library at my university. I will spare everyone the Latin, but it is a quotation from the Book of Daniel:

“Many shall pass by and knowledge will be multiplied.”

We cannot hope for knowledge to be multiplied unless a plurality and a multitude of views are expressed and heard within our universities.

3.59 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. It is also a pleasure to speak to this report. I commend the Committee for it. It is a very interesting read, and I am pleased to hear that the Minister and the Charity Commission in England will pay some attention to its recommendations. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s speech later.

I was pleased to hear from all the members of the Committee who have spoken so far that they, too, agree that universities should be places of debate and discussion, disagreement and dispute. It is only by disputing the status quo that knowledge moves on, that the sum total of human knowledge is expanded, and that we learn more. Academic freedom, university autonomy and the right of scholars to think and do and say as they will are essential elements of universities. They are indispensable if we want to see universities be universities, and if we want the benefits to society that come from having universities.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) reminded us of how heated debate has always been part of university life. It certainly figured in my time as a student. Representing Edinburgh North and Leith, I must mention the role that academic freedom and freedom of speech played in the Enlightenment. Those freedoms were so important in incubating the freedom of thought and the rebellion against orthodoxy that underpinned the expansive thoughts of Enlightenment figures. Without those freedoms, we would not have had that Enlightenment, and we would not have the world as we know it today. Free speech has created our world and continues to create it anew.

In that context, I am pleased that universities in Scotland seem to be maintaining those freedoms rather well, and that the Scottish approach to regulation appears to be more effective than the rather heavily laden approach being taken in England. I was certainly pleased to hear from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) that England’s Charity Commission is now agreeing to reissue guidance. That was certainly something that figured heavily in the report. It is clear that students and university bodies are finding things confusing, to say the least.

Freedom of speech is not an indivisible right. It does not sit alone and gleaming like some immutable, omnipotent deity. It does not exist outside of human interaction or outside of society. There is no free speech without stout defence of it and without rational and reasonable care taken of the privilege. There is no free speech where we allow hate speech. Those repressed by the violence of hatred are not free to speak. Those cowed by hate speech aimed at others are not free to speak. Those practising hate speech are not speaking; they are shouting so loudly that they are excluding other voices. Hate speech is the enemy of free speech, and we should not allow it. That does not mean, however—many Members have made this point—that we should ban speakers we do not like or intimidate their supporters. The example given by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham was upsetting. It is depressing to think that people think they can force their opinions on others in that way or intimidate them in that way. Masked protesters are no better. Intimidation does not defeat hatred; it inflames it.

Our defence of free speech, and of the privilege of discussing possibly awkward topics, has to be stronger and more open. The report goes a long way towards making that possible, in a way. Our defence against hatred has to be rooted in a society that will not accept it, and in a broadside of opinion that says that tolerance and patience are virtues that we value, and that stand above personal advantage or tribal instincts. I certainly had great sympathy with what the right hon. and learned Lady said on safe spaces and on free speech in universities. Safe spaces exclude people as much as, if not more than, they protect people. Closing down debate by protest, exclusion or intimidation is censorship by the mob and cannot, in any mind, be the way in which we would want universities to function. Is it really the message that we want the students of today to learn? Do we want to say that the safest way of dealing with ideas that we find distasteful, opinions we dislike and people whose views we find abhorrent is to ignore them, shut them out and think that they will have no further effect on us? That surely would not be a sensible thing for them to think, and I think that there are significant parallels to be drawn with the Prevent legislation since it, too, appears to suggest that bad things will go away if we do not look at them.

It cannot only be me—it clearly is not—who looks at the effects of the Prevent legislation on our universities and questions how effective it is. As outlined in the report, having universities and student unions jumping through hoops to satisfy regulators about events on their premises is hardly likely to be the greatest blow any terrorist group has ever faced. It is only 20 years since the Good Friday agreement was made. That ended the troubles by rational means, and I cannot believe we have forgotten that it was not achieved by closing down debate in universities. In fact, some people might remember that a previous Government sought to deny “the oxygen of publicity”. That was a farcical policy, which did nothing to address the underlying issues.

Vetting the thousands and thousands of speakers who present in universities every year is not a solution, or even a partial one. Caimin Cross, Blunt, Maclean, Burgess and Philby did not need a “Moscow is swell” event at Cambridge to persuade them. The time and effort spent by universities and student unions on monitoring and adjudicating on events seems to me to be wasted. In my view, positive relationships between communities and public organisations are the key to preventing recruitment and radicalisation. That takes time and effort; it takes years and years of building trust, and it is far too easily destroyed by careless comments and attitudes.

I recommend Scotland’s approach on this to England’s regulators and policy makers. Do it in a spirit of seeking mutual benefit, and that is what you will move towards. To the students, let us say, “Do as you will. Attend meetings
or don’t, listen to speakers or don’t, but engage in the debates; think for yourselves. This is a time of your life that, as we all know, passes all too quickly. Suck it in, soak it up, make it count and enjoy it. And in the meantime, tell Government to back off—they always need to be told.”

4.6 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and it is a great privilege and honour to follow the introduction of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who so eloquently presented the conclusions of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I also pay tribute to the Committee members present—the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke so thoughtfully.

I am here because I am the Opposition spokesperson and they disagree with the debate, but I hope that I also bring other things to it. Having long been a member of Select Committees in the past—particularly education Committees—I appreciate the importance of the evidence-driven process, rather than obiter dicta being floated out sometimes, to be massaged and expanded by the mainstream media. All politicians want to get our message across, and some of us succumb rather too rapidly to that temptation.

I also come to the debate bearing many of the tenets that I was taught, including the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Historians are told to look at those things, but students of many other humanities disciplines depend on them, too. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for reminding us of the importance of the Enlightenment; the Scottish Enlightenment, in particular, played a part in that process. The classic statement of Enlightenment libertarianism—I will not quote it completely accurately—was by Voltaire and went something like, “I might hugely disagree with your opinions, but I will defend to the death your right to express them.”

Those are important principles. It is very good that the Joint Committee’s report, although it did not give us a great historical exegesis, went right back to some of those first principles and, importantly, to the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, which forms a useful context for its proposals.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham was absolutely right to say that context changes the things that students, or the general public, want to talk about. Without disrespect to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who is no longer in his place, I am suspicious of the idea that we can tell universities, “You should be talking about this, that and the other.” Students will talk about what students want to talk about. There may be more bread and butter discussed today at some points than there would have been when my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham and I were at university, but the crucial thing is that there should be spaces in which a broad number have that ability to talk. I am suspicious of the idea that we—particularly those of us who are perhaps rather more removed from their student days than others—should pontificate about what student unions should do, or choose to do. I think that way sometimes madness lies.

The report rightly talked about the potential dead hand of bureaucracy and inhibition. Sometimes, with the best will in the world, institutions and stakeholders get excited by the project and go ahead to develop things that sound thoughtful, but end up in an horrendous organigram, such as the one that my right hon. and learned Friend showed us. None of us is immune from that, but we need from time to time to cut away at it and, indeed, to make fun of it. When we were talking about bureaucracy I was reminded, as an historian, of the famous phrase in Philip II’s empire, “If death came from Madrid, I would be immortal.” That sense of bureaucracies or powers bringing those things to themselves and thinking that they have all the answers can produce that sort of position. It is reasonably clear where the boundary lies of breaching the right to free speech, and the example that my right hon. and learned Friend gave in that respect is a very important one.

I will touch briefly on the comments by the hon. Members for Congleton and for Brentwood and Ongar. The hon. Member for Congleton laid out well some of the ridiculousness of the hokey cokey of regulations. The particular account she gave of the curtains reminded me of the famous phrase in “Measure for Measure”, “man, proud man,
Early this month, as we have heard, the Minister set out some proposals and thoughts. I think he felt a little constrained about what he could say because of the view of his predecessor. Bringing together that group, as he did, is potentially a productive mechanism. Can he spell out some of the conclusions of the summit and, as importantly, who is to be held accountable for taking them forward? The Government must not try to micromanage free speech on our university campuses; some of the problems raised by this report need addressing, but they will not necessarily be addressed by micromanagement from Government.

Finally, I come to the implications. Academics of both right and left persuasions have always and often been arresting and controversial figures, so it is important that the broader questions about academic autonomy and freedom are recognised by the Government. Throughout the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the Opposition were clear that the new Office for Students should not be a micromanagement process for this. In terms of this activity, what does the Minister believe his responsibilities are, as opposed to those of the Office for Students, in terms of drawing up guidelines? If they are too widely drawn, they will produce some of the problems we have heard about today.

This is an excellent report, and I commend it. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham talked about the fact that the Committee had saved the Government a lot of time; I would also say money and possibly civil service time. Although I know very well that civil servants are loath to take anything simply as is, I suggest that the report could be a very important blueprint for solving some of the inevitable tensions and dilemmas in this area.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on securing the debate and thank everyone who has contributed to it.

Like the Joint Committee, I approached this issue with a fairly open mind. That said, I have a bent, so far as free speech is concerned. As president of the debating society at university, I was totally happy to countenance having my members had to make do with Mark Owen from Aziz, who was then the Iraqi Foreign Minister, but he deal with them was to challenge him. I invited Tariq Aziz, who was then the Iraqi Foreign Minister, but he was no-platformed by the Home Office at the time, so my members had to make do with Mark Owen from Take That instead.

I came to this with an open mind, but I clearly started from a position that free speech should be encouraged. We live in an open society and open debate is particularly important. If our democracy is to flourish, someone having views that are offensive to someone else is not sufficient reason to prevent them expressing those views— but expressing them does not mean that they should go unchallenged. Rather than trying to stop that person expressing such views, what we want is open debate.

I also approached the debate very consciously that, today, a word or couple of words in a sentence that someone utters can completely characterise and define their position. It is easy, as universities go through these issues, to get to a point where they might think that someone is an unacceptable speaker because of how
their views have been represented. They react to how the views have been presented, rather than listening to the argument. For all those reasons, it is important to be cautious in how we approach the issue.

When I appeared before the Joint Committee, four or five weeks into this job, I carefully calibrated how I expressed my position: I not only expressed concern about a creeping culture of censorship, but suggested that measuring whether we have free speech on campus by events that happen is not in itself sufficient. We do not know about the events that do not happen or, more importantly, about the events that happen but in a different way from how they would have happened had they been able to go ahead freely.

As Universities Minister, I have been going around universities speaking directly to students. I found it slightly amusing that, before I spoke at one university—the Universities Minister doing a Q&A with students—they had to read out the safe space policy. I just had to smile. I visited another university to discuss a number of issues, including free speech, and it was suggested to my team that, if we really wanted negative headlines, we should go ahead. I said, “Why don’t you invite lots of students from other universities nearby? You have the Universities Minister, and it would be good for them to be involved.” They said that they couldn’t invite them because they thought they would cause trouble. They were going to manage the invitation list. A video had to be played at the start of the event. As I spoke to my team about it, I ended up asking myself whether it was really worth doing the event at all. That is how censorship happens. I could see that I was second-guessing myself and what I was going to say. I am the Universities Minister. I hope that I might have some controversial views, but hopefully none that are sufficient for me to be turned away from speaking at any of our universities.

It is based on that experience, and the number of letters that I now receive from students across the country, that I have come to the view that the Committee is actually on to something here, in two important respects. The first is the bureaucracy and rules around free speech, whether from equalities law, the Charity Commission, which regulates student unions, or a university’s own policies, or a particular student union’s own policies. At best, it is so confusing that a well-intentioned person could somehow end up seeing censorship as the way to promote free speech, which is a contradiction in terms. At worst, it is very easy for wreckers to use that bureaucracy to frustrate views that they do not agree with and do not think belong on campus.

The Committee is not only on to something really significant here, but its work, which is even-handed and level-headed in its approach, provides a very good basis on which to proceed. It is a cross-party Committee and it has members from both Houses; it is not the Government party trying to use free speech as a wedge—that is the last thing I want to do. Free speech on campus should not be seen as a proxy for some of the wider culture wars in our society. If anything, it should be about helping universities with what they are best placed to do: fostering open debate and the free exchange of ideas. There are often clashes, but those clashes should be seen as positive, rather than something we want to rail against or stop.

I very much welcome the Committee’s report and its recommendations. I have been a Minister for a number of years now. When Ministers receive Select Committee reports, we often spend our time scratching our heads and thinking how to respond by doing the least we can and then moving on. However, this report provides a very strong basis for the Government to do what we can to promote free speech. That is why I held a summit, attended by the National Union of Students, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the Office for Students and the Charity Commission, so that we could all work together to resolve this issue in a way that works for all our universities.

The Committee has thankfully come up with not only a set of recommendations, but its own guidance. We are looking to produce uniform and simplified guidance, and the Committee’s work means that we can proceed in haste to produce that for the start of the next academic year.

Gordon Marsden: I apologise for interrupting the Minister while he is in full flow. On the summit, which was advertised and which we are told went well, it would be helpful to both Members and the Joint Committee if he could provide a synopsis of what was actually agreed and who was tasked with doing some of those things.

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. I will write to the Committee and I am willing to share that correspondence with the hon. Gentleman. It will include how the Government plan to proceed with the recommendations and the outcome of the summit. The Equality and Human Rights Commission holds the pen on the new guidance and regulations, so it will drive it, rather than Ministers or officials in Whitehall.

The Committee is on to something in highlighting overlapping and confusing regulations that frustrate, rather than promote, free speech. It mentioned the role of the Office for Students. Because the debate is almost out of time, I will set that out clearly in my follow-up correspondence.

I will mention something that I do not think the Committee touched on: the issue of culture. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) touched on the risk of a political monoculture developing on our campuses, so that, by default, certain ideas are seen as unacceptable. If free speech is to work, the same standards should be applied to all ideas, rather than believing that certain ideas should not be held because they are unpopular or unfashionable. Nigel Farage should be as welcome on campus as Jon Lansman, for example.

I also think that protest has a place. We want active debate, but we also want active and peaceful protest. However, protest becomes unacceptable when it is a deliberate attempt to prevent an event from taking place because the protestors disagree with the ideas that will be aired there. This is very difficult to solve, and it is one area that the Committee did not look at, but we really need to tackle it in order to ensure that our universities truly are bastions of free speech.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Freedom of Speech in Universities, HC 589.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 21 May 2018

[IAN AUSTIN in the Chair]

Sale of Puppies

4.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 213451 relating to the sale of puppies by pet shops and commercial third-party dealers.

The proposed ban is known as Lucy’s law.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin, in this immensely popular debate on a petition that collected more than 100,000 signatures in its first 13 days. It now has almost 150,000 signatures, with four months still remaining, making it probably the most popular dog welfare petition that the Government have seen in all time. I congratulate all involved in the writing of the petition and its promotion, including its creator, Beverley Cuddy, who is in the Public Gallery today. The petition is popular not just with the electorate, our constituents, but with Members, almost 100 of whom from all parties—when I last checked—had signed our constituents, but with Members, almost 100 of whom from all parties—when I last checked—had signed

Lucy’s law was launched in December 2007 at a Commons reception hosted by vet and campaigner, Marc Abraham, founder of Pup Aid—who is also in the Public Gallery—and supported by the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). Lucy was a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, a victim of the puppy farm system, used for breeding for many years with no regard for her health or welfare.

Media and celebrity support for Lucy’s law has been quite staggering, with titles such as The Mirror, The Sun, the Daily Mail and The Guardian all backing the campaign, as well as mainstream TV shows, such as “The One Show”, ITV’s “Good Morning Britain” and “This Morning”, and “The Wright Stuff”, and Sky News, Channel 4, and Channel 5 all giving support. Popular figures behind the campaign—it is not just politicians and constituents, but many celebrities—include Ricky Gervais, Brian May, Peter Egan, Sue Perkins, Clare Balding, Rachel Riley, Sarah Millican, Eamonn Holmes, Kay Burley, Gail Porter, Deborah Meaden, Jon Richardson, Victoria Stilwell and many others. The campaign is receiving a huge amount of attention.

Significantly, the next generation of social media influencers has also embraced Lucy’s law, with support from the UK’s top vloggers such as Zoella and online giant UNILAD, which has even made its own documentary about the campaign.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I strongly support a ban on third-party puppy and kitten sales. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be very useful for those people getting a dog for the first time to have a basic information pamphlet, pointing to where they can get help? That would do a lot to promote animal welfare.

Martyn Day: That is a very worthwhile suggestion. No one should rush into getting a dog or any pet; it should be something people think about in detail. Equally, when they make that decision, they should not make an impulse purchase of any dog from any source.

A ban on third-party sales has also gained much support from the most well-respected animal welfare organisations in the UK and beyond—the list is impressive.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his introduction to the debate. With others, I very much support the campaign behind ensuring a ban on third-party puppy sales. Cats Protection has made the point that such a ban should apply to kittens as well. Does he agree with that?

Martyn Day: I was wondering how to find a link to mention my cat Porridge in the debate—the hon. Gentleman mentioned the hon. Gentleman on his introduction to this important debate. Will he confirm that there has been some misunderstanding out there that this petition would actually prevent charities from helping to move on dogs? That is not the case at all; it would strengthen their hand.

Martyn Day: I shall come to that point in my speech, but that is exactly the position as I see it too. I cannot see how rehoming can be confused with illicit dog sales. They are simply not compatible.

To continue the list of organisations, it also includes IFAW—the International Fund for Animal Welfare—Cats Protection, as was mentioned, Mayhew, the Humane Society International, the National Animal Welfare Trust, All Dogs Matter, Pup Aid, CARIAID, or Care and Respect Includes All Dogs, Canine Action UK, the Karlton Index and so on. Lucy’s law is pretty widely supported by just about every relevant organisation.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the debate and everyone on their work in getting all those signatures. Does he agree that one reason for the policy’s popularity is that it not only makes good sense from an animal protection point of view, but it is much easier to enforce than the existing situation? In other words, far more people would be there to enforce a ban—not just the local councils, but the RSPCA, the police and trading standards—so it would be much easier to do so.

Martyn Day: I agree with the hon. Lady. She makes a good point, which I shall come on to in my speech. It seems so obvious that enforcing a ban is far easier and cheaper than a licensing system with more bureaucracy.
Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate. In addition to the worthy organisations that he has just read out, a group of MPs came to the same conclusion back in 2016, when the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs unanimously supported a report—

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Not everyone agreed.

Chris Davies: I am sure that the hon. Lady agrees that we should have reached a conclusion, and I am sure she has changed her mind since.

Martyn Day: Yes, I was intrigued to see the EFRA Committee report. We are covering a lot of old ground, but progress has been made and I welcome the work of the Committee in the early stages.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous with his time. I support the ban, but does he agree that the objection that is sometimes made to it—that the trade would go underground—is wholly bogus? The idea that prospective loving pet owners would suddenly start trawling the dark web is wholly far-fetched and a specious objection.

Martyn Day: Indeed. I shall make a similar point later. We cannot compare the seeking out and purchasing of a puppy or any family pet to love with the purchasing of arms, ammunition or drugs on the dark net, as some do. It is a completely different ball game.

A ban was in fact recommended to the Government in a 2014 e-petition debate, by the EFRA Committee in 2016, as we heard, and more recently by the manifesto of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. Sadly, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ignored all three calls and favoured a licensing regime instead. Notably, however, a Lucy’s law is now supported by the RSPCA, largely as a consequence of campaigning by people such as Marc Abraham and his team. I want to put that on the record—the reasons for the rejection have since gone, and the RSPCA is now very much on board, as I understand it.

Martyn Day: That point is not included in my speech, so I am grateful for the additional clarification.

Lucy’s law calls for an immediate ban on all commercial third-party sales of dogs. Commercial means sales as part of a business—for profit, not rescue. Third-party sellers are dealers; they have not bred the dogs themselves and they operate as middlemen between breeders and the buying public. Currently, the Pet Animals Act 1951 requires third-party sellers to be licensed as a pet shop, irrespective of the type of trading premises they sell from.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem with third-party sellers is that they create a fog around transparency and accountability? Does he also agree that banning third-party sellers would increase the financial gain for legitimate breeders and reassure dog owners of the legitimate provenance of their pets?

Martyn Day: Indeed, it would. What is the problem with third-party sales? The sale of puppies through commercial third-party dealers both sustains and is dependent upon the existence of puppy farms, where puppies are bred for maximum profit and with minimal regard for animal welfare. Currently, around 74 pet shop licences permit the sale of puppies in the UK, although very few high street pet shops sell puppies. But the third-party trade remains significant, with dealers operating from a diverse array of premises including private homes and puppy superstores. It is estimated that some 80,000 puppies may be sold by licensed third-party sellers each year. That legal, licensed puppy trade depends upon a fast transition through the point of sale. The incentives for a rapid turnover encourage purchasers to make impulsive decisions based upon an emotional response.

Puppies are sourced from breeding establishments in the UK and Europe—commonly, Wales, Ireland, Lithuania and Hungary—where output volume is often prioritised over welfare. That has a hugely detrimental impact upon the physical and mental wellbeing of the breeding dogs and their puppies, which are destined to become people’s family pets. The absence of any contract between breeders and the final owner helps to eliminate accountability, results in a dereliction of responsibility and provides no incentive for improvement.

The legitimate market for puppies bred in situations where welfare is a minor consideration contributes to the existence of establishments that fail to meet even the basic needs of abused breeding dogs such as Lucy. Overwhelming scientific research, together with evidence obtained from owners, conclusively demonstrates that this activity seriously harms animal welfare, through the trauma of transportation, the increased risk of exposure to disease, behavioural problems resulting from premature separation from the mother and lack of appropriate socialisation.

Puppies may be born with debilitating inherited diseases that are life limiting or require lifelong medication, and are at a high risk of catching life-threatening canine diseases, such as parvovirus. That often costs buyers hundreds of thousands of pounds in veterinary treatment. It is not uncommon for puppies to die within days or weeks. A sad litany of such examples was highlighted...
in the personal experiences of those who responded to and commented on Parliament’s digital engagement before this debate.

There are alternatives. My sister purchased her dog 14 years ago through a reputable breeder who had connections with the Kennel Club, and saw the mother in situation. The dog is very happy; it was at the Sunday family dinner last night and is doing well. Everybody needs that kind of family commitment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Was it at the table?

Martyn Day: No, but it is trained, which the breeder does not necessarily do and owners have to do themselves.

Poor hygiene standards throughout the chain frequently mean that many puppies are infected with bacteria, viruses and parasites that in some cases can be transmitted to humans, for example rabies in inadequately vaccinated imported pups. Puppies may exhibit significant behavioural issues such as separation anxiety, house soiling and nervous aggression. It is not known how many puppies die before they are even sold.

The puppy market is very lucrative, which means there are big financial incentives for breeders and sellers to minimise costs to maximise profits. Incredibly, and despite all that, the number of links in the chain means that often it is impossible to determine where the specific problem originated, and therefore extremely rare for any formal action to be taken against breeders or sellers.

The third-party trade via dealers and pet shops is regarded worldwide as a significant welfare issue, with an impact on breeding dogs, puppies and their new owners. Consumers are universally advised to see a puppy interacting with its mother in the place the puppy was born as the most fundamental step towards responsible pet ownership. This advice—rightly promoted by the current Government—is clearly in direct conflict with the ongoing legality of motherless third-party sales.

Today’s main question is, why is a ban necessary? Quite simply, a ban on third-party puppy selling removes the legitimacy of a source where adequate welfare cannot be ensured. That is imperative to assist purchasers to make an informed choice and to encourage responsible buying decisions. As mentioned, it ensures consistency with the Government’s own advice that purchasers should always see puppies with their mother; it aligns with the Government’s objective of improving dog breeding welfare; and it helps to tackle puppy dealing and trafficking.

A ban is vital to incentivise welfare improvements in high-risk commercial dog breeding establishments, through ensuring transparency, accountability and even increased financial gain for breeders. A ban will prevent the sale of puppies who have not been bred to welfare standards recognised by the national and devolved Administrations, and will remove the legitimate market for puppies who are bred in European countries where dog breeding welfare may be inadequately regulated. Ultimately, that will improve consumer confidence in the industry, and transactions would benefit the UK rather than breeders based abroad.

A ban removes the need for transportation from the breeding establishment, eliminates risks posed by exposure to pathogens in vehicles and the sale environment and prevents the transmission of disease between animals originating from different sources. A ban will improve the overall health of the UK dog population, by compelling and incentivising all UK breeders to adopt more responsible breeding practices and by reducing the risk of outbreaks of disease. There may also be a reduction in incidents of dog aggression arising from poor breeding and inadequate socialisation. A ban would reduce the regulatory burden on local authorities.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, in addition to discussing the merits of banning third-party sales, the Government should also place a statutory duty on local authorities to enforce the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and give councils sufficient resources to enforce the regulations under it?

Martyn Day: I have no problem in supporting that call. It is about a measure of packages; the Lucy’s law ban is the single biggest step towards animal welfare, but other things have to be done, too.

Enforcement action against illegal sellers can be undertaken and shared by various agencies. Illegal activity can be more efficiently tackled at a regional and national level.

What are the consequences? We have discussed many of the positive outcomes for animal welfare that a ban would achieve, so I hope hon. Members will find it helpful for me to address some of the concerns about potential consequences. First, let us deal with enforcement, which has been mentioned a few times. Enforcement is demonstrably more effective against illegal traders. Illegal trading is easier to prove and enables a more definitive and conclusive result, as evidenced by successful past prosecutions against illegal puppy dealers.

A partial ban on third-party puppy sales already exists, because the activity is illegal unless the seller holds a pet shop licence. If a seller is operating illegally, enforcement agencies have a mandate to investigate and prosecute. Licensing, on the other hand, effectively protects sellers if they appear to meet licence conditions, which are basic minimum standards, irrespective of additional welfare issues.

Angela Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that the recently reviewed licensing regulations represent a really serious attempt to significantly improve sale licensing standards? The sector has been grappling for years with enforcement problems by local authorities and the police. Resources are at the heart of the matter. Without resources, any new law will be meaningless.

Martyn Day: The hon. Lady makes a good point about resources. I am not disputing all the good work that has been put into licensing. However, a ban is simply much more effective and more cost-effective to introduce and police.

One of the points raised was about driving the trade underground. Trade can survive underground only if it has a sufficient market. But, unlike sellers of drugs and guns, commercial third-party sales of puppies are wholly dependent upon advertising to attract its customers. Although we commonly see and hear images and videos of puppies being smuggled and trafficked illegally, their route to market must be easily detectable if the ordinary member of the public is able to obtain the product overground, and it must be legal for them to be sold.
If third-party sellers are unable to utilise mainstream advertising channels, puppy buyers would continue to purchase from the most obvious and accessible sources, rather than deliberately seeking out illegal suppliers. The easier it becomes for people to buy puppies responsibly, the more likely they are to follow that path. Research has shown that prospective purchasers almost always aspire to making ethical and responsible choices. As they would have access to puppies from legitimate breeders, they would have no need to seek out illegally operating dealers. By comparison, if third-party sellers continued to be legitimate and licensed, there may be no means for buyers to discriminate between adverts placed by breeders and those placed by dealers. The continued existence of a legal third-party sector would also mask and provide a framework for the illegal trade.

It is worth noting that, if a ban were in place, online purchases from puppy sellers would always have to involve a final transaction, at which the pup must be seen with its mum in the place it was born. True online sales involve a delivery—that is, a third-party sale. As I mentioned, if animals are a business, it is already illegal without a pet shop licence, so there is no “gaping loophole” through which a dealer could pose as a rehoming or rescue centre. Under a ban or a licensing regime, concealing commercial activity would be fraud and tax evasion as well as an animal welfare concern, so it would be far easier to police.

It has been suggested that there are too few responsible breeders in the UK to meet the demand for puppies. One of the primary requirements of a good breeder is that they enable puppies to be seen with their mother. There is no evidence to suggest that too few breeders meet that basic requirement. Furthermore, the suggestion that any deficit in supply would inevitably be met by unscrupulous breeders and sellers—either legal or illegal—is not pragmatic. That is a defeatist approach and an acceptance that the law cannot protect dogs in the commercial trade. I do not think we want to see that.

What owners really demand is a physically and mentally healthy puppy, not just any puppy. Banning the third-party sale of dogs may be a catalyst for changing expectations, so that buyers are able to buy a responsibly bred puppy from a legitimate breeder rather than having a huge range of puppies available to purchase immediately from indiscriminate sources.

The apparently inflated demand for certain fashionable breeds, such as the French bulldog, may be artificial. Puppies are being purchased simply because they are available for sale. A market that is saturated with cheap, readily available puppies by third-party dealers is likely to encourage impulse purchasing and significantly reduce demand for more responsibly bred puppies. Removing competition from irresponsible breeders and sellers would increase the market for responsible breeders, so a ban most likely would increase the number of responsibly bred puppies. Even breeders who previously sold through third parties would meet the baseline criterion for a responsible breeder—that puppies can be seen with their mum in the place they were born. I have said that a few times, and it is fundamental to the debate.

Requiring all dog breeders to sell their puppies directly would result in more responsible breeding and purchasing behaviour, as there would be no chain to confuse or cloud the process. Third-party sellers are only a distribution channel, which prevents buyers from witnessing breeding dogs and their conditions, so a ban would not need to affect the number of puppies that are bred. Lucy’s law is vital to any attempt to reform dog breeding and improve welfare. It is clear that if no attempt is made to restrict the legal market for puppies to responsible breeders, measures to improve dog welfare—those to do with genetic and breed-related health, breeding, rearing and selling practices—are unlikely to succeed.

That brings me to the question of why robust licensing is not an alternative. It is impossible to ensure the welfare of puppies sold through third parties by imposing robust licensing that still permits the activity to take place. As I explained, the process of puppies being sold by third parties is inherently damaging, so the aim of protecting animals from harm by licensing could not be met even if licence conditions were adhered to. If the welfare of animals sold under the licensing regime were little better than those sold illegally, regulation of the trade would not offer any real benefits.

Licensing third-party sellers would also fail to tackle welfare problems prior to sale, including in breeding establishments. A sufficiently robust regime of licensing and inspection would probably deter unscrupulous sellers from applying for a licence, so it would not prevent that part of the trade from going underground. It is considered possible that third-party dealers may attempt to masquerade as rescue centres under a ban. That would be equally possible under a robust licensing regime.

There is no evidence to suggest that a robust regime of licensing and inspection would be any easier or cheaper to implement than a ban. Enforcement of a ban would involve only detecting illegal activity and implementing sanctions against those engaged in it. Enforcement of a robust licensing regime would in addition involve monitoring businesses’ compliance, which would require highly trained inspectors and multiple site visits. The Government’s objective is to reduce rather than increase the regulatory burden for small businesses and local authorities. That does not fit comfortably with imposing and enforcing detailed, mandatory model conditions.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is completely and utterly unrealistic to expect cash-strapped and time-stretched councils to tackle businesses with full-time staff who will do their best to hide any criminality and frustrate any enforcement action that is taken?

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point, which has been made a few times already and cannot be stressed enough. That is another reason why a ban would be far easier and more cost-effective.

The well-documented suffering that arises during puppy dealing by third parties demonstrates that those engaged in the trade have little regard for the wellbeing of the animals in their care. Without consistent monitoring and severe penalties for breaches, it is unlikely that demanding licence regulations would be complied with. The resources that would be needed to exert any sort of control are disproportionate to the small welfare improvements that may result from the process. There is no evidence that third-party sellers would be less likely to comply with a ban than with a licensing requirement, or that the number of illegal third-party sellers would increase if a ban were introduced.
Let me finish by considering the implications of a ban not being introduced immediately. Continuing to license the third-party puppy trade would legitimise and endorse animal suffering and leave consumers vulnerable to significant emotional and financial consequences. As long as third-party sellers create demand for a large number of cheap, intensively bred puppies, welfare problems will remain in high-risk breeding establishments. The regulation of breeding establishments cannot be improved where the incentives for substandard practice exceed the penalties.

Permitting the sale of puppies bred in Europe, both legally and illegally, under low welfare conditions and with little thought for genetic and physical health may deter breeders in England and the rest of the UK from having regard to those things. Continued competitive pressure from sellers who supply cheaper puppies without the constraint of having to adhere to demanding regulatory requirements may result in some responsible UK breeders reducing or even ceasing breeding activity. It may even require breeders in England and the rest of the UK from having regard to those things. Continued competitive pressure from sellers who supply cheaper puppies without the constraint of having to adhere to demanding regulatory requirements may result in some responsible UK breeders reducing or even ceasing breeding activity. It may even reduce demand for responsibly bred puppies and increase the market for irresponsible dealers and third-party traders.

An immediate ban on the sale of puppies by pet shops and other third-party commercial dealers would be a major step forward in putting an end to unnecessary animal cruelty and would help to eradicate irresponsible forms of dog breeding and selling such as puppy farming, smuggling and trafficking. There can be no doubt that Lucy’s law would help to protect breeding dogs, puppies and owners by making all breeders accountable and transparent, and ensuring consistent adherence to the Government’s advice that purchasers should see the puppies they intend to buy interacting with their mother in the place they were born. A ban on dealing puppies for profit could only raise welfare standards, and one is needed now.

4.58 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing the debate following the fantastic public response to the e-petition. I will keep my speech as short as possible, because several Members want to speak about this important issue.

It must be said that the leadership on animal welfare by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been nothing short of remarkable. The Government are doing great things to tackle the scourge of plastic, deliver cleaner air and water, impose one of the toughest ivory bans in the world, and raise animal welfare standards by introducing mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on their commitment to animal welfare and the environment, and I hope that they lead the way on this issue, too.

As an animal rights campaigner, a vegetarian and a passionate dog lover and owner, I was proud to see that 229 of my constituents had added their names to the petition. I am pleased that so many of them feel so strongly about the important issue of puppy farming, which I first became aware of back in 2015, a few months after I was elected. That year, I co-hosted an event in Parliament with Marc Abraham of Pup Aid, at which we screened a film about the horrors of the industry.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Marc Abraham—Marc the vet—who has done so much to get a united voice on what needs to be done and to encourage our residents to engage positively to support us in pushing the Government in this important area?

Andrea Jenkyns: My hon. Friend stole what I was going to say. I am sure every Member in the Chamber pays tribute to Marc. His passion has been second to none, so I thank him for all of his hard work.

After an initial meeting with Pup Aid, I discovered to my horror that my own dog, Godiva, was probably born on a puppy farm in Lincolnshire. The pet outlet in Lincolnshire where I purchased her looked clean and sanitary, and everything seemed in order. However, who knows what conditions Godiva’s mother was kept in? That is the problem with the current legislation. Many of us have an idea of what constitutes animal cruelty—beatings, abuse and dog fighting—and we now see that as wrong. We have, correctly, legislated to stop such inhumane practices, to protect dogs and other animals from being abused by their owners. Without a doubt, we as a society have come far on animal welfare. However, there is still much more to be done.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that by animal cruelty we mean not just beatings, thumpings and all the other terrible things that go on, but pure ignorance? People sometimes get hold of dogs, horses or animals generally and do not know how to look after them. Not long ago, I visited many residences with the RSPCA and saw people who were unable to look after their animals.

Andrea Jenkyns: I agree. I, too, have been out on the beat, so to speak, with our local RSPCA and have seen the conditions in which some poor animals live. My hon. Friend is right: education can do a lot to help tackle that.

Lucy, the Cavalier King Charles spaniel, endured a miserable start to her life. Her poor body had been ravaged after cruel puppy farmers, eager to sell as many young as they could in the pursuit of profit and greed, forced her to go through an obscene number of pregnancies. Vets advise that dogs should have only four litters in their lifetime and reproduce no more than once every year, but by the time Lucy had become useless to her breeders at the age of five, she would have had up to 10 litters, with her puppies ripped from her at four weeks—half the time recommended by vets. After having spent so much time pregnant in a tiny cage, Lucy could barely walk. Her hair was missing in patches and matted beyond repair, while her balding skin was raw from the ammonia burns she suffered from living continuously in her own urine and faeces.

Lucy’s law seeks a ban on the sale of puppies by pet shops and all third-party dealers, and states that all puppies should be seen with their mum when they are bought, in order for the transaction to be legal. It also seeks a ban on third-party or commercial sellers who remove puppies from their mother before they are sold, and transparency in the system to protect puppies from illegal farming and prevent them from being cruelly treated. I fully support all of those measures, as some puppy breeders and dealers clearly do not have the dog’s welfare at heart.
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I believe that Godiva has previously won Westminster dog of the year, along with her friend, so it is good to have an update on her. Does the hon. Lady agree that one particular problem is that people are not aware of where popular dogs, such as French bulldogs, are coming from? They are paying huge amounts of money, assuming—because of the cost—that their dog will have been well treated. People going for those popular, fashionable dogs need to be particularly vigilant.

Andrea Jenkyns: I wholeheartedly agree. As I said, when I bought Godiva, I made that mistake: having paid £550 for her, I thought she would have been from a decent, legitimate organisation, but clearly that was not the case.

Lucy died in December 2016, and I am happy to say that her later years were happier than her beginnings. We must do more to save countless other animals from suffering similar horrors to Lucy. Pup Aid has been campaigning on overbreeding of females since 2009, and I would like to take this opportunity to again congratulate Marc Abraham on his hard work on the campaign, as well as Lisa Garner, who is present and who rescued Lucy and ensured that she had a good end to her life.

As the hon. Lady has said, the public clearly remain naive to the horrors of the puppy farming trade, and that is why legislation is necessary to protect not just the puppies but their mothers as well as the public from facilitating this abhorrent trade.

Lyn Brown: A number of people have talked to me about how they were taken in by the sob stories of families in a flat who could no longer take a puppy so they had to give it away, with children roped into a farce and deception. We all need to be aware of the lengths to which people will go to exploit not only the animal but the person they are selling to, but the Government really need to legislate to give us the teeth so that we can keep them all safe.

Andrea Jenkyns: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I remind everyone that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) has said, education is key to moving forward and ensuring that we save as many animals as possible.

5.5 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am pleased to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who presented the situation clearly, including the various options and actions already being taken as well as those that are promised. I am pleased to say that the three Members of Parliament for my local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf—my hon. Friends the Members for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and me—have all signed the early-day motion.

My local authority has done something that I am very pleased about. At the end of February, a motion was put before the whole council to back Lucy’s law and support a ban on the third-party selling of dogs, and it was passed unanimously. There are not many Conservatives on my local authority, but various other parties are represented and everyone supported it. That is good news, because it is one of the largest local authorities in Wales. We have every hope that the Welsh Assembly—this is a devolved matter—will also support Lucy’s law.

Chris Davies: As a fellow Welsh MP, albeit from a different party—our constituencies nigh-on border—does the right hon. Lady agree that puppy farming has been a stain on animal welfare in Wales and that, sadly, certain parts of Wales are known for puppy farming, which is a great embarrassment to both of us, to all parties and to Wales?

Ann Clwyd: That is a good point. I was the Member of the European Parliament for the hon. Gentleman’s area at one time, so I am aware of the issues.

I think that Rhondda Cynon Taf is the first council not just in Wales but in the whole of the UK to stand up and be counted. We are proud of that locally. As I said, I have had support from my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda and for Pontypridd.

There are brilliant local campaigners in every area. Mine is called Eileen Jones, who sets up and co-ordinates rescue and action for Friends of Animals Wales. She sent me a message explaining how she feels. She says that in 14 years of the organisation’s work of taking in ex-puppy farm breeding stock that are no longer profitable because of age or illness, and sick, damaged puppies that cannot be sold, the people of Cynon Taf have provided emotional and physical support by volunteering, as well as financial support through donations and support for events and appeals. Many of the dogs have found local homes where, following rehabilitation and veterinary care, they have gone on to have wonderful lives; without the support provided by the local people, hundreds would have died in squalor.

Eileen describes how many sick puppies have been handed in, when the puppy farmers could not palm them off on dealers. Thousands of pounds raised by volunteers are spent on surgery. She gives the examples of Trigger, born with no anus or penis, who underwent two operations in a Bristol specialist hospital, but sadly died, and Rodney, a Westie pup with no back paws; £10,000 was raised to have him fitted with prosthetic feet. One little one, handed in two weeks ago, was diagnosed with a liver disorder, but after four days’ intensive care he died. That is a small example of the heart-breaking cases of puppies handed in by puppy farmers.

As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk mentioned, ex-breeding bitches and dogs are given up when they can no longer produce puppies. Eileen says that many are very sick and some are just worn out from producing litter after litter, and that basic treatment for each one, including spaying, dental treatment and attention to their ears and coat, is expected to cost an average of £2,500; and if they need specialist care, the cost rockets. The financial burden is huge and a recent intake from one farmer has already cost more than £6,000.

The hardest part, Eileen says, is the emotional toll from caring for sick and traumatised dogs. Sometimes it takes months, and on occasion it takes over a year, to gain their trust and for them to be well enough to go to a home. She gives the example of four Bichons that had to be shaved to the skin; two had huge tumours that were removed. Another dog, Erica, is dying. Eileen says that she had kidney failure so advanced when she was...
given to Friends of Animals a month ago that they have been able only to keep her comfortable and free of pain for whatever time she has. An end to third-party puppy dealing would shut down the ability to sell to dealers who come to Wales to buy litters to sell on in England, which leads to families buying sick pups and facing heartbreak and financial distress trying to find the money to pay vet bills.

Eileen added:

“Whilst we carry on talking, debating and procrastinating, dogs are suffering every minute of every day. How much longer must they wait for us to end this barbaric third party puppy dealing? Every single day is one too many. I support #Lucyslaw and if you really care you will too.”

I must say that I am a cat owner. I have a very old cat called Alfie, who has several offspring, I am sorry to say. He was in the finals of the Westminster cat of the year and always thinks he was robbed, so he will be putting in for it next time round. He is 14, and I know how much animals mean to people and comfort them, and what companions they are. I have always been an animal lover, and I think that the proposal is a sensible way to proceed.

5.14 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on bringing this important debate to us today.

I grew up with animals of all sorts, in an old farmhouse, and am the proud owner of three fairly noisy but lovely dogs. I was involved in various television series in the 1990s, and because of that I got involved in breaking up a puppy farming ring in Wales. It is a shame we had to do that, but it taught me a lesson. I went with a journalist and we posed as a youngish couple looking for a puppy. We insisted on seeing the dam. We wanted to see the mother of the puppies. A Cavalier King Charles was brought out—and not in the best of health. The little puppy that came along, which ultimately we named Pixie, was pretty poorly as well. We went through the process of buying the puppy because we wanted to tell the story to the world, and expose it. The atmosphere at the farm up in the hills of Wales was intimidating. The people in question wanted us to meet at a petrol station on the M4 and exchange the puppies there. They did not really want us to come to the farm, but we insisted and they wanted to do the deal, so we went to the farm. We were not allowed to see much of the farm, apart from the entrance and the room in which we were locked while they went to get the puppy and her dam.

The good news is that the coverage we got from that visit to the Welsh hill farm was enough to close down the operation in question. Because of that experience, I know something about the dreadful conditions into which puppies can be born. Those conditions should shame us all. It is wrong that unscrupulous dealers are breeding for profit and selling on through third parties with little regard for the animals’ welfare. It is about profit, and we should recognise that the practice has a serious impact on the animals themselves, through their lives. They have behavioural and physical difficulties. As we have heard, some are born without paws, and so on, and they have shorter lifespans. We need to do something about that. One of my dogs is an 18-year-old Jack Russell—bless her cotton socks. She had three litters very early on, and we managed to rescue her. She has had a happy life and continues to do so. We call her Hopalong Minnie. I shall of course support Lucy’s law, and we must move towards the objective of freeing the animals in question from terrible conditions.

The Government introduced a raft of measures to crack down on unscrupulous puppy breeders, which I support and welcome. I also fully support the Government’s call for evidence on a possible ban on third-party sales. The sooner we get the ban, the better. Otherwise, as the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, every day is a wasted day. We must get on top of the problem. A ban on third-party sales is the only response to the situation, and it would, as we have heard, be warmly welcomed by the RSPCA, the Kennel Club and many other important organisations in the sector. It would, of course, delight the people who signed the petition. I gather that the number of signatures went up extremely quickly—from zero to suddenly more than 100,000. It is fantastic to hear that. I ask the Minister to bear in mind the view of the RSPCA that the ban must be introduced alongside the measures the Government have already introduced. As its deputy chief executive Chris Wainwright put it:

“Together, these moves will offer better protection to puppies and their parents and reduce the number of families duped by rogue traders in this illegal multi-million-pound trade.”

Experts are clear that if we are to deal effectively with the issue, we need to ban third-party sales while implementing the measures to crack down on unscrupulous puppy breeders. Those two things cannot be separated. I ask that Lucy’s law be introduced without delay.

I believe we should recognise that many people who pick up a dog do not understand or appreciate what it means to own a dog. I raised the point about education and ignorance earlier; it is not deliberate cruelty. That was demonstrated effectively to me recently, when I was out with a fantastic local RSPCA chief inspector, Samantha Garvey, who deserves all the plaudits we could give her. We went from dwelling to dwelling, visiting several sites where dogs and some other animals were in awful conditions, and in the end we ended up rescuing a German Shepherd that was close to death. She had sores all over her body and could hardly walk. As the law stands in this country animals cannot just be seized; the owners have to be told: ‘This animal will die unless something is done about it now.’ The people who work for the RSPCA and go into those terrible conditions are amazing. We persuaded the owners to let us have the dog, and I am pleased to report that Tee is now doing rather well and has recovered.

To conclude, I ask the Minister to bear in mind the strength of public feeling. The Government must consider their response to the call for evidence. Let us get Lucy’s law enacted as soon as we possibly can.

5.20 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin, and a great pleasure to speak in the debate. That might sound like an odd word to use in this context; I do not mean that I take any pleasure in the subject, but we are often called a nation of animal lovers, and anyone who came in and listened to the debate would be in no doubt that that is true. It is an important debate, not least
John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady has spoken passionately about the consumer, but there is one group that she might have missed out: vulnerable people, particularly the elderly, who take those dogs in for companionship and are so badly let down. Does she agree that that is something we must also tackle?

Christine Jardine: Absolutely; that is a good point. We hear all the time that pets are not just a pleasure, but can be therapeutic. Increasingly, they say that teenagers suffering from stress should be around happy dogs, puppies or cats. As the hon. Gentleman says, people who are vulnerable need protection as well.

I do not think any of us would disagree that Lucy’s law must be enacted, and enacted fully. We need better enforcement of existing animal welfare laws. It is intolerable that any animal should be born and live in poor or unsanitary conditions, particularly for profit. We need mandatory licences for dog breeding to ensure that when a breeder is found to be mistreating animals, their licence is removed. I know that some people will say, “What about the hobby, or the person who has a dog and thinks it would be nice to have a puppy?” We have to ensure that is controlled as well, and that that puppy is entitled to the same protection.

We will need legal identification for all sales, to crack down on unlicensed sellers. When people go to buy a pet, it is a huge investment—several hundreds of pounds—and often that price tag reassures people that they are buying a puppy that has been brought up well, but no. We need proper licensing and standards, so that we know they are being enforced. Legislation must be updated to include online sales. Buying a puppy advertised in a newspaper has been established over years, although we must be careful that they, too, are licensed, but online is different. It is difficult if a child sees a puppy online and wants to buy it. We need protection there.

Protection is the key word in all this: protection for the animals that will be victims of the puppy farmers who will use them to have litters, protection for the puppies that will be born in horrible conditions and be maimed all their lives, and protection for the children, the families, the elderly and the vulnerable who will buy those puppies, hoping to give them a happy life, only to find from the beginning that they cannot. All those things must be done.

I leave hon. Members with one thought. The person who sells us the puppy, or sells us on the idea of the puppy, is not always the person we expect. We had a dog who died when she was about six and my daughter was four. My daughter started school and the headmistress said to her, “Ah, Mhairi Macdonald, I see you out with your mum every day walking the dog. I haven’t seen you for a wee while.” Mhairi looked at the headmistress and said, “The dog died,” and quick as a flash the headmistress responded, “Well, don’t worry, mummy and daddy will buy you a new one.” And we did. Sometimes we need protection from all sorts of sources.

5.28 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this important debate, and the members of the audience who have turned out today—members such as Marc Abraham, Beverley Cuddy and Lisa Garner—on having run and raised awareness of the campaign, and on having taken the issue up the public agenda; all power to your elbow. Although I cannot wear my rosette, I hope my tie is suitable for the debate.

Lucy, a gorgeous, beautiful Cavalier King Charles spaniel, was a victim of the third-party selling of puppies.
Raised on a puppy farm, she had a horrific and miserable life. Thankfully, Lucy was rescued by Lisa Garner in 2013 and became part of the loving home that she should always have been a part of. Sadly, Lucy died prematurely in 2016 as a result of her start on that very puppy farm. However, she has become a symbol of the movement towards greater animal welfare standards.

It will be no surprise to Members to hear that, having campaigned for a ban on electric shock dog collars, I fully support the introduction of Lucy’s law and a ban on the third-party sale of puppies. There are heartbreaking stories of puppies and kittens being separated from their mothers, kept in awful conditions and often transported for long distances before being sold. This practice is abhorrent, and I want to do all that I can to eradicate it, both in Scotland and across the rest of the UK.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has estimated that there is a demand for 700,000 puppies per year, which is significant. As the hon. Member for the UK.

However, she has become a symbol of the movement towards greater animal welfare standards.

Third-party traders operate in an environment that depends on low welfare standards and high-volume dog breeding, treating puppies like a conveyor belt factory product. Scientific research and evidence is conclusive: puppies sold by third parties experience a hugely detrimental impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. That can result in chronic medical problems, as well as severe behavioural problems, such as anxiety and aggression.

It could not be clearer that this practice is wrong, and it must stop. I wholeheartedly and warmly welcome the UK Government’s openness towards a ban on the sale of puppies by commercial third-party dealers. I welcome the consultation launched on 8 February calling for evidence on a ban in England. Introducing a ban would be consistent with the Government’s current advice—that purchasers should see puppies with their mother. A ban would incentivise welfare improvements and would increase transparency. A ban could potentially improve the overall health of the UK dog population and reduce the incidence of dog aggression arising from poor breeding and inadequate socialisation. A ban would end the abhorrent practice of puppies being sold in high street pet shops, garden centres and pet superstores.

Animal welfare is devolved to Scotland, and recent investigations have found that puppies are being mistreated by unscrupulous dealers north of the border too. For example, in Aberdeenshire, around 900 animals were taken from a puppy farm near Fyvie after a Scottish SPCA raid, as part of Operation Dolphin. The current UK Government action does not apply in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government are thus far supporting a Scottish SPCA initiative to regulate third-party commercial dog dealers, but not outlaw them entirely. I welcome that. It is important that the Scottish Government act to keep Scotland’s puppy welfare protections up to speed with the rest of the UK. Scotland must not fall behind.

To date, I welcome all the numerous actions the Government have taken to improve animal welfare. I know that the Minister cares about this and that it is high on his agenda. A failure to bring forward a ban would be a serious setback to improving the standard of animal welfare in the UK. We must take action to stamp out this barbaric practice. Lucy’s law can become the most transformational and significant change to animal welfare that we can make, so let us do it. We owe it to Lucy, and we owe it to all puppies trapped on these horrific farms.

5.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing it and for presenting his case so well. Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I obviously support Lucy’s law. I will comment on the situation in Northern Ireland, because some stats that have come through today will be helpful in backing up the debate.

I believe that the debate being secured through the petition mechanism demonstrates the will of the people. The people out there have clearly said that the issue should be debated in Westminster and that we should raise awareness of it. It means that we in this place can determine how better we can safeguard animals—dogs, in this instance—during the sale process. More than that, we are morally obliged to address it.

I do not remember ever not having a dog. I had one from the very early years of my life, whether Pomeranians, corgis, collies or Jack Russell terriers. They say that no one ever actually owns a Jack Russell terrier—it owns them. That is probably true. We now have springer spaniels, because we use them for hunting. I have never not had a dog.

When my wife and I first got married, I was not keen on cats, to be truthful, but she was, and therefore my life changed. That was the way it was. We now have four cats in the house, and one dog. The cats gather around the dinner table when we have our Sunday lunch and they all sit and look at us as if they are ravenous for whatever is on the menu. Every one of those cats was a stray that came to stay with us and never left, because they were well looked after.

The dog that Sandra had was badly abused and badly beaten. She became passionate about it and brought it home. It is now clearly over its fears—it does not run when we speak to it. It was probably a hunting dog at one time, and my wife lets me take it hunting now and again. She says it is not a hunting dog, but if I am free on a Saturday afternoon I usually take it over the fields for a run. It does not always listen, but that is just the way some dogs are. The point I am trying to make is that people can take dogs and the dog will always show them affection and love. All they have to do is show the same to it. When our dog is shown affection and love, it all of a sudden responds very positively.

Back home, I have heard on too many occasions of heartbroken children having their animals removed because they did not fulfil the injection and visa requirements for pets brought into Northern Ireland. The parents are left out of pocket and the children are devastated,
but the person whose responsibility it was that those requirements were met often gets away scot-free. They do not care. They are just about making money. This scenario must stop.

With the surge in designer dog breeds, more and more people are trying their hand at breeding and selling. The conditions that these animals live in is not always healthy, and at times is simply inhumane. Many of us will know of examples of just that. With the rise of sales from houses, it is clear that we must regulate for the sake of the dog and her puppies, but also for the family who pay big money for what is probably their dream dog, only to have the dog be ill or aggressive as a result of bad treatment.

Last week I met a member of the Dogs Trust team to discuss this debate and what they felt was needed. My wife Sandra volunteers at the local Assisi Animal Sanctuary, looking after cats and dogs; it is something she has always loved and wanted to do. That is where our cats came from, and ultimately they took over. She has also made it very clear that Assisi—in the charity sector—thinks that things need to change, and quickly.

The Dogs Trust has stated:

“We want to see an end to third party sales and the sale of puppies in pet shops as part of a package of coordinated measures. There are some crucial steps that the government must take to make a ban, and Lucy’s Law, effective and avoid unintended consequences.”

On priorities, it states:

“The licensing and inspection of anyone breeding or selling puppies must be robust and consistent.”

Giles Watling: There has been a flurry in my area of dogs being stolen to be used for breeding. It is worth putting on the record that Lucy’s law would deal with that in some way, through its knock-on effects. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jim Shannon: I do. Too often, a dog is stolen or goes missing. We see the adverts in our local papers back home when a springer spaniel, corgi, Jack Russell or whatever has gone missing. It is a family pet, but also much more than a pet. That is true for all of us as well as for those outside the Chamber. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The hope is that Lucy’s law could tighten up the legislation and make it much more effective.

The quotation from the Dogs Trust continues:

“Before this can happen, inspectors must have the full support of both the government and their local authority to enforce the right standards.”

I wholeheartedly support that as a basic measure—as a start. If a person is prepared to allow people into their home to buy a dog, it follows that they would allow someone into their home to assess whether the dogs are healthy and happy while being bred and, indeed, afterwards.

The Assisi charity group for which my wife works, the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the RSPCA and many other charities have now adopted a new criterion, which is that before they will rehome a dog, they visit the home—my wife does this for cats as well by the way—and it is only right that they should do so, because the home of the person who wants the dog or cat should really want the dog or cat; taking it into their home should be their full intention. I believe that home visits are one method of making progress.

The Minister, who we know is very responsive to the debate on this issue, will probably take that on board. I would like to hear his thoughts on introducing Lucy’s law as well.

The Dogs Trust has further said:

“We want governments across the UK to regulate rehoming organisations and sanctuaries and we will continue to campaign against this gaping loophole... If a ban was introduced, the options for getting a dog would either be directly from the breeder or from a rehoming organisation.”

That would be with the criteria that those charitable organisations have set down. They are good, strict criteria that work. If a person wants to give a home to a dog or cat—this debate is specifically about dogs—we should ensure that that is being done for the right reason. The Dogs Trust continues:

“As rehoming organisations are not regulated, and anyone can set themselves up as one, we are deeply concerned this would be exploited by puppy traders.”

Again, I believe that the point made is sensible and that what is advocated is only right and proper. Although we must not prevent those who have a heart to care for animals from being able to set up as a rehoming organisation, we must be able to stop people abusing that to circumvent the system. There are genuine people out there, and they would not fear regulation.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My hon. Friend is raising a number of issues that touch on devolution and the cross-jurisdictional nature of the issue; it would be easy for the Minister to say, “We can deal only with England.” I well remember working with the former hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, Richard Arkless, in relation to the puppy trades that existed in the Republic of Ireland, came through Northern Ireland and abused the ferry systems going to Scotland and the rest of mainland GB, so may I, through my hon. Friend, encourage the Minister to think not only of the devolution issues that exist in the United Kingdom, but of co-operation and collaboration with those other jurisdictions that feed into a drastic trade that affects our country but starts in or emanates from others?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That point needs to be put to the Minister. We all have concerns about puppy farming in the Republic of Ireland. Puppies can come through Northern Ireland and across on the ferry, but they can also come straight across from the Republic into Wales, so we may need to be doing things at that stage as well. I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words.

I believe that there must be an introduction of registration and licensing for all breeding and rehoming establishments, to create full transparency and traceability in the system. I support the calls that anyone breeding or selling litters of puppies should be registered.

Today’s Belfast Telegraph has some statistics on what is happening in Northern Ireland. It states that “councils in Northern Ireland destroyed more than 300 animals in eight months.”

It says that 166 unclaimed and 144 unwanted animals were destroyed, and cites David Wilson from the USPCA:

“The volume of dogs abandoned to their fate by heartless owners remains a major...welfare concern”.

We need to put this on the record. Mr Wilson went on:

“There are still too many dogs being farmed for profit by callous individuals, many of whom flout the requirement for
breeder registration... The availability of pets via the internet is entirely unregulated and contributes to the problem by encouraging impulse purchasing.”

I ask the Minister also to respond to that point.

The reason Assisi and other charities do home visits is that they want to see whether someone is truly enthusiastic about giving the dog or cat a home; they want to ensure that the enthusiasm has not worn off after a time. The report cites Mr Wilson saying that any would-be owners should “purchase using their head as well as their heart”.

With lifestyle and financial implications... “the only guarantee awaiting the unwary is often one of heartache and expense.” He urged people to “contact the USPCA”, or RSPCA, “or visit a local shelter to adopt ‘a deserving animal in need of a home, as 1,500 others did in the period covered by these statistics’.

“By doing so you will have played your part in addressing a problem that shames society,” he added.”

Time has beaten me. There are many other issues that I would urge the Minister to consider, such as the Government and the animal welfare sector working together to facilitate a marketplace dominated by ethical breeders. The message must be sent loud and clear that prospective owners should always see a puppy interacting with its mum and littermates. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) illustrated that with the example of a Labrador: the mother and littermates were there; the family were very closely associated and playing a part. If that happened in every place, that would be the place to be.

There must be a co-ordinated package of measures to ensure that a ban on third-party sales is successful, and we must carefully consider the implications of legislation to prevent it from being exploited as other attempts thus far have been. There is much to be done. I urge the Minister to work with knowledgeable charities—the Dogs Trust, among others—to ensure that the legislation passed is the best that it can be and that it stops bad treatment of dogs as well as the heartbreak of children.

5.46 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on introducing the debate. Let me give some background about myself. I am from a family of dog lovers. Our first pet was from the Scottish SPCA. We had that little fellow for 17 years; he grew up with my daughters. He was much loved by the neighbours, but he was a romantic wee dog and at certain times of the season he was not very popular with some of the neighbours. But he had a joyous 17 years in our family. When his time came and we lost him, I have to say that despite being a senior fire officer and, as I thought, a robust individual, I cried for 30 or 40 minutes—I really missed him. That is my background as a dog lover, and I am not ashamed at shedding a tear over losing a best friend.

I am pleased that this Government, with the help of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, have made animal welfare one of their top priorities, and the issue of commercial puppy breeding and sales is no exception. All pet owners would wish their dog to have the best possible start in life. That is especially important when thousands of animals are being bred every year by irresponsible breeders—the money makers—who separate them from their litters far too early and place them in wholly inappropriate and often traumatising conditions. As I am sure others will agree, that practice must end, to protect the puppy and the parents.

I welcome this petition and the common-sense approach that the Government are taking to ensure that our high standards of animal welfare apply to puppy breeders. The UK Government’s proposals are entirely sensible and necessary, and I hope they will satisfy the almost 150,000 signatories to the petition across the United Kingdom.

It is right that we ban the sale of puppies under the age of eight weeks and that we require licensed breeders to show a puppy alongside its mother before a sale is agreed or concluded. Those steps will help to ensure that puppies are not separated from their mothers or sold at an inappropriately early stage. In this world of internet shopping, it is vital that we clamp down on online sales where the buyer has not actually seen the puppy that they are buying. To ignore that expanding sales area would create an unacceptable loophole that unscrupulous breeders would surely exploit. I am pleased that the Government are working to ensure that that risk is addressed. It is also important that we have compulsory licensing for anyone in the business of breeding and selling dogs, and require that licensed breeders only sell puppies that they themselves have bred.

Those tighter restrictions on the industry will help to establish the clear accountability that we must have if we are to maintain the best possible standards of canine welfare. I am sure that trusted breeders will support those actions. I understand that the Government are currently examining evidence relating to the possibility of a ban on third-party sales of both puppies and kittens in England, and that a call for evidence closed earlier this month. I would welcome a ban as the outcome.

Much of the law relating to animal welfare in Scotland is devolved and it falls to the Scottish Parliament to protect puppies from unscrupulous breeders. I am sure they will do so, given the opportunity. We need action in Scotland. An investigation by OneKind, the animal welfare charity, recently revealed that some puppies in Scottish puppy farms are being kept in horrendous conditions. Although I welcome the Say No to Puppy Dealers campaign, it is clear that more must be done to clamp down on unscrupulous breeders throughout the United Kingdom.

I congratulate the Government on the work they are doing. I hope that the Scottish and UK Governments, and the devolved institutions, will work together—the movement throughout these islands was mentioned—and bring an end to unscrupulous puppy breeding and sales in the United Kingdom. Regardless of any changes made by Governments, I ask prospective purchasers to give due consideration to who they purchase their puppy from. Happy and healthy puppies should be our objective. We owe it to our best friends.

5.50 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for bringing the e-petition to Parliament and speaking in such a detailed manner. He outlined the
case for Lucy’s law in a thorough way, with best practice and evidence at the forefront of everything he said.

Lucy’s law was launched in December 2017 at a House of Commons reception hosted by myself with vet and campaigner Marc Abraham of Pup Aid, who is here today. It was supported by the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, which I chair. It is a pleasure to chair that group, which is entirely cross-party. Animal welfare—dog welfare in particular—knows no party lines. There are animal and dog lovers right across the House of Commons, our countries and the United Kingdom. We speak together on our love for animals, dogs and animal welfare issues.

The voices against Lucy’s law have gone—they have paled into insignificance. We are speaking with one voice today and I hope that the Minister heeds that. Across party lines, there is universal support for Lucy’s law. Now is the time to prevent further suffering. Now is the time for Lucy’s law. To those organisations that say, “We’d like a ban, but not now,” I say, “Why not now?” As the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, if we wait a minute longer, more dogs like Lucy will suffer absolutely appalling consequences.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I am glad that my hon. Friend is putting on record the Scottish National party’s support for Lucy’s law. We will have to work with our colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure that happens there, too. Given that this is a devolved matter, there is a golden opportunity in this debate for England to show leadership in the UK and take the initiative. If the Minister went further and faster, he would create a situation whereby the devolved Administrations would swiftly fall into line. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be good if the Minister gave an unequivocal statement in his summation?

Dr Cameron: I agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, we do not want to start a competition in relation to Lucy’s law, but if the Minister could make an unequivocal statement, that would be fantastic. I would be reduced to tears of joy if that happened. If the Minister wants to make an SNP MP cry, he should tell us that Lucy’s law will happen now.

I do want change in the Scottish Parliament. The matter is out to consultation, and it is extremely important to me. The First Minister and the Scottish Government are absolutely aware of my perspective. I am particularly dogmatic—forgive the pun!—when it comes to Lucy’s law.

Lucy was a beautiful Cavalier King Charles spaniel. She was a casualty of the legal, licensed third-party puppy trade, and was exploited within an inch of her life with absolutely no regard to her health or welfare. Lucy was rescued and adopted by Lisa Garner—who is here—in 2013. Despite Lucy’s horrific and miserable past as a breeding slave, she still had it in her enormous heart to love people. She made so many people think of Lucy’s law has resonated with our constituents and with parliamentarians. A recent survey of nearly 2,000 readers of Dogs Today Magazine showed that 96% wanted a ban on pet shops and third parties selling pups.

Lucy’s law continues to receive support from celebrities, the media and Members of Parliament. In Scotland, Lucy’s law has gained support from our own dog celebrity, the Wee Ginger Dug, as we fondly call him. In a newspaper only the other week, he gave his support for Lucy’s law. I believe that the Wee Ginger Dug was himself a rescued, abandoned dog, so he and his owner know only too well why it is so important to have Lucy’s law.

Lucy’s law calls for the immediate ban on puppies sold by commercial third parties, for example pet shops, but does third-party selling of pups always give rise to harm? It simply does and here are some reasons. Young puppies are transported huge distances, making them stressed and sickly, giving rise to behavioural issues from the anxiety of early separation and poor socialisation. Transportation invites premature exposure to disease. Exploited breeding breeds like Lucy live in terrible conditions and are hidden from sellers. Their stressed pups are at an increased risk of deadly diseases when transported legally or illegally. Commercial dealers an even bigger problem? The sale of puppies by dealers, using exactly the same pet-shop licence, to buy and sell pups, is not so obviously commercial and must be stopped to ensure protection of puppies, their mothers and our public.

Would Lucy’s law prohibit ghastly eastern European puppy trafficking? We believe it would. Van loads of sickly, puppy-farmed pups are currently arriving and can legally be sold only if the seller holds a pet shop licence. Lucy’s law would remove the legal reason for importing all these poor puppies, so all those vans could be turned back. Production in these despicable puppy farms would drastically reduce if the UK stopped being such a lucrative market for immoral traders. In the future, the condition of all puppies would be regulated in the UK, and our public.

In September 2014, there was an e-petition; there have been many significant attempts in Parliament to end them. In September 2014, there was an e-petition; in November 2016, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended a ban, as we have

Other hon. Members have mentioned their dogs. My dog Rossi is a French bulldog and was, I believe, puppy farmed. We went to get Rossi from the local dog centre. He is an integral part of our family. He was also a contestant in Westminster Dog of the Year, alongside the dog of the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). Rossi was runner-up on that occasion, but he is never runner-up in our home—he is always a winner.

There are not many high street pet shops, so why are dealers an even bigger problem? The sale of puppies by dealers without a shop is increasing. Most of them are selling out of normal houses in busy residential areas. Most pet buyers would know to be concerned about the provenance of pet-shop pups. The new breed of dealers, using exactly the same pet-shop licence, to buy and sell pups, is not so obviously commercial and must be stopped to ensure protection of puppies, their mothers and our public.

Would Lucy’s law prohibit ghastly eastern European puppy trafficking? We believe it would. Van loads of sickly, puppy-farmed pups are currently arriving and can legally be sold only if the seller holds a pet shop licence. Lucy’s law would remove the legal reason for importing all these poor puppies, so all those vans could be turned back. Production in these despicable puppy farms would drastically reduce if the UK stopped being such a lucrative market for immoral traders. In the future, the condition of all puppies would be regulated by the UK standards of animal welfare, importantly removing the legal trade for smuggled pups, which would also help to remove the framework for illegal activity.

If Lucy’s law is so simple, why do we not already have a ban on third-party puppy sales? In the last few years, there have been many significant attempts in Parliament to end them. In September 2014, there was an e-petition; in November 2016, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended a ban, as we have

As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk stated in his opening speech, the concept
heard; and in 2016, I led a debate on puppy farming. Another significant call for Lucy’s law has come from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation’s manifesto, which has not yet been mentioned by other hon. Members, but I will mention it.

**Jim Shannon:** You are their conscience.

**Dr Cameron:** I am their conscience, indeed.

Its patron, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), is present. All calls for a ban in the last few years have been ignored, so it is unsurprising that worrying levels of unscrupulous breeding and selling activities, such as puppy farming, dealing and smuggling, which are all facilitated by third-party sales, do not show any sign of decreasing.

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

The arguments against Lucy’s law are dead in the water. On the first—that licensing commercial sales would be better and easier to enforce—we know that that cannot be the case. A licence takes much more policing and enforcement compared with an outright ban. We only have to look at what happened with banning smoking cigarettes in pubs, and the issues that would have arisen if it could have happened in some situations and not others—it would have only confused the public. Regulating something that is licensed would also obviously require more resources than a ban. If there is a ban, the public can alert the authorities very quickly, so there will be no dubiety.

Dubiety is regularly seen in action with the alcohol licensing regime. The public will report underage sales, but it is difficult for the police to determine where underage drinking is happening, if it is in a place where both underage and overage drinking are happening. It is much more difficult to regulate and to respond to.

If some third-party puppy sales are licensed and legitimate and some are not, the participating members of the public are unlikely to whistleblow, but it is important that we enable the public to do that. As we have heard, people do not want to go to the black market to buy a puppy—that is just not something people do. They are good people who want to give a puppy a loving home, so let us make it as straightforward as possible.

Current Government advice contradicts itself: third-party sales are required unless the public can alert the authorities very quickly, so the animals get here after the most perilous of journeys. One presumes that many do not get here at all because they suffer in transit.

I agree with what has been said. I will not go through some of the more gory stories, but we have to recognise that they are there and take them up. I hope the Minister will take away from the debate the need for action. Most of us agree on the need for a ban. Regulation is always called for, but a complete ban seems to be the way forward in this case. Labour would support that as part of an animal welfare Act, which could likewise deal with other evils out there. As always, I am aware that it could become a Christmas tree Bill, which we stick on to things to ban—we all have our favourites—but that would be appropriate in this case because people feel passionately about it.

I thank those who introduced the petition and who support Lucy’s law. The message is that the Government need to act quickly and comprehensively, because this is a trade that should not be allowed to continue in the way that it has. Puppy smuggling is one of those animal welfare issues about which one thinks, “Why does anyone do it?” As I say, they do it purely because they want to make money. There is no other reason why the trade continues.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency has done some sterling work, alongside the Dog’s Trust, Battersea Dogs Home, Cats Protection, various other organisations and other private contributors, who have given me lots of information, which I do not intend to impart. We all know that this is a well-trailed area. It is known exactly what is going on and what should be going on.

Sadly, where the Government have acted—for instance, with the pet travel scheme—there is evidence that it has not helped, because people have perhaps used that as a
device to bring in animals where other means would not have been allowed. Of course, we would strongly argue that we need additional border guards. Whatever one’s view on Brexit—no doubt the Minister and I will debate Brexit again—we need to patrol and maintain our borders, because this unacceptable trade goes on daily. Whatever we feel about a ban, we could do more to crack down on what is coming through, because it is clearly unacceptable. I hope the Minister will say something about that. Surely we must have a means to deal with that, notwithstanding the need for a ban on the third-party provision of puppies, as well as cats and other animals, as has been said. It is not just puppies; we could get into rabbits, guinea pigs and so on. Sadly, these animals are being abused, because they are being bred purely for the worst of reasons.

International studies have shown that puppies obtained from pet shops have, as has been said, a lower life expectancy than other puppies and suffer much more from disease. That is made worse if they come here from other parts of the world, as they have already faced the problems of transit. Labour would support banning third-party sales, and we hope we can get on with it. It is no good just promising it; people now expect us to take action through Parliament, so we cannot allow a delay, no good just promising it; people now expect us to take action through Parliament, so we cannot allow a delay; and obviously this is also about welfare standards, traceability, transparency and accountability.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): What does my hon. Friend think would be the right sanction for those who broke a ban? Does he feel that they should face a custodial sentence or a fine? I want to ask the Minister the same question when he speaks, but I would like to hear from the shadow Minister first.

Dr Drew: I could have done with advance warning. That is a bit unfair; we are supposed to be on the same side. I think we should have strong sanctions in this area. It is not just a question of banning people from taking part in this trade; we should have the toughest sanctions. This is about animal cruelty. This is as bad as dogfighting or some of the cruelties inflicted on horses left in the worst possible conditions through the winter. It is awful and, as a nation of animal lovers, we should feel strongly about it, so I hope there will be the possibility of criminal sanctions, because these people are acting criminally. This is not some minor trade; people make serious money out of it, so they should be dealt with by the full force of the law, because of how these animals are bred and how they are kept, in the worst of conditions.

The sad thing is that these are often the animals that are bought as pets but end up in the shelters or rescue centres because of their health problems and other problems. Many of the wonderful voluntary organisations in this sector are full to bursting, because of these animals that have been discarded. Again, it would seem sensible to investigate further where those animals come from before they arrive in our shelters, because that is a serious worry. Whenever staff from the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home come here and talk to us, they say that they cannot take any more animals. They are forever having to make difficult decisions about how many animals they can keep, because they are inundated with people who think it is fun to have a pet for three or four months, but then realise that they cannot look after it and so dispose of it. Hon. Members have said this, but there is a sense of knowing the education process—“A dog isn’t just for Christmas; it’s for life”. People need to understand that it is a lifetime commitment.

This is also about resources, and I totally agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who asked where the resources are. It is no good having a ban if we do not enforce it or follow it up with prosecutions and so on.

I will make a final couple of points. As for this idea that people should take an animal only if it is with its mother and has clearly been bred through that particular animal, it is difficult to tell that, but registered and properly run breeders would pride themselves on providing that information, and they would be able to prove it. In a sense, they would have to be able to license themselves, by showing that a puppy was the offspring of the mother. That is where the care and the proper breeding process could be seen in its entirety.

As I have said, we are not talking about Brexit today, but it would be interesting to know whether we could go ahead and introduce a ban without having to go through all the EU regulations, because clearly elements of this are subject to EU oversight.

To conclude, I hope the Minister will say that this is something we all agree on. There is a consultation, but one hopes that everyone is saying that a ban is appropriate and can be progressed, and so we just need to get on with this, rather than waiting. We would prefer a ban as part of an overall animal welfare Bill, but it might be something we could introduce because of the level of agreement that exists, because of the harm being done and because of the duplicity involved. People end up with these pets, thinking they are doing something good for themselves and their children, when all they are really doing is fuelling this terrible trade. If we could get some clarity on where the Government are going on this, we will give our support in terms of any time that is necessary, but a ban is right, a ban is appropriate and a ban is needed.

6.16 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I am sure that even if this had been a contentious and divisive debate, you would have been impeccably neutral, Sir Roger, but may I take this opportunity to acknowledge the work that you have done in this area? You will be pleased to know that there was a strong degree of consensus throughout the discussion of this issue.

In addition, I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on the way that he introduced the debate and on being so generous with the number of interventions that he took from some Members who were obviously unable to stay for the full duration of the debate.

Finally, I congratulate the supporters of this e-petition, which has secured so many signatures in such a short time and attracted so many Members to Westminster Hall today to speak passionately on this important issue.

As several hon. Members will know, I have championed improved animal welfare when it comes to puppies and dog-breeding establishments for a number of years; in fact, since I was a Back Bencher. I advocated a reduction in the threshold before puppy breeders required a licence.
The background to this debate, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, is that the way that we treat puppies in the first few months of their life is, just as it is with a human child, incredibly important to their development.

The welfare charities in this sector can give many tragic examples of young dogs or puppies that come into their care and that they are simply unable to rehome because it is not safe to place them with a family. That is due to the abusive and neglectful way that they were raised in the first few months of their life. For me, therefore, tackling the way that we regulate and license dog breeders is particularly important.

The second issue that has long needed addressing is the introduction of new regulations to tackle the growth of internet or online trading. Some very good work has been done by the Pet Advertising Advisory Group and I commend all those organisations that have signed up to the group’s code. It is a robust code and the group has done well to draw it up.

One of the things we have done, which I will come on to, is strengthen the rules around online trading and the way that we license those who trade online, because there had been some doubt regarding the previous pets legislation, which dated back to the 1950s, about whether online traders were caught or covered by it. However, we have now clarified that matter.

The culmination of this process, during which I and others raised several points over a number of years, was a consultation on these matters to strengthen the pet licensing regime. I am very pleased to say that the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 passed on to the statute book earlier this year, and those regulations provide statutory minimum welfare standards that all licensed dog breeders and vendors of pet animals must meet. This is the first time that licensed breeders and sellers of dogs will be required to meet statutory minimum welfare standards.

Previously, those statutory standards were set out only in guidance but now they are a requirement before a licence can be obtained, which brings greater consistency. We have developed the new standards with the welcome involvement of the Canine and Feline Sector Group, which represents a broad range of vets, local authorities, the pet industry and welfare charities.

The new regulations and the new statutory code that goes with them achieve a number of things. First, there are clear regulatory requirements for licensed breeders and sellers to protect the welfare of the animals. Secondly, we have lowered the threshold for the number of puppy litters that someone is allowed to breed in a year so that more breeders can be brought into a licensing regime. That means that anyone in the business of both breeding and selling dogs will need a licence and, irrespective of whether they claim to be in the business of breeding, they will need a licence if they breed three or more litters a year. Thirdly, anyone selling pets commercially will need a licence, whether they are trading online or they are a pet shop. That addresses the point that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) raised. Licensed breeders must show puppies alongside their mother before a sale is made and they can sell only their own puppies.

In addition, pet advertisements will now require the seller’s licence number and country of origin and the residence of the pet to be included. The sale of puppies and kittens under the age of eight weeks is now banned, which closes a loophole that existed for some pet shops regarding some pets. Licensed sellers must also show puppies to the purchaser before a sale is completed, an intervention we have made to try to curtail the growth of online trading and, finally, a new licence condition applies to dog breeders to prevent the breeding of dogs with harmful genetic disorders, which addresses the point raised by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) about the tragedy of pets often having defects and health problems because they have not been properly bred or cared for.

The 2018 regulations come into force on 1 October and, taken together, represent a significant improvement in pet animal welfare legislation in this country.

Kerry McCarthy: What the Minister has outlined is very good as far as it goes, but it deals only with the more respectable end of the market, tightening up regulation there. Does he have any figures on how many puppies are bought and sold on the streets of the UK through the illegal trade—illegally imported, trafficked—as opposed to coming through breeders who are likely to abide by the regulations?

George Eustice: I was going to come on to that point and to the specific issue of the debate. The measures in the new regulations substantially tighten up areas where there were weaknesses in the law. In particular, bringing greater clarity to the fact that online traders must have a licence, and lowering the threshold of the number of puppies someone can breed before they require a licence, are significant steps forward. However, I am aware that for some years now several people have been calling for third-party sales to be dealt with and for there to be a ban on such sales—for puppies in particular and, called for by a number of others, for kittens.

It is fair to say that although the petition was launched only on 1 March, the public reaction has been rapid. It has already attracted more than 140,000 signatures, which shows the strength of feeling people in this country have for the welfare of dogs. However, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, even before that, the Government had made it clear that it was their intention to consider the issue. On 8 February, we announced a call for evidence to consider a ban on third-party sales of puppies and kittens. Such a ban means that pet shops, pet dealers and other outlets and licensed sellers of puppies and kittens would be unable to sell them unless they themselves had bred them. The implication is that anyone seeking to acquire a puppy or kitten would have to look to either an authorised breeder or an animal rescue or rehoming organisation.

It has been suggested to us that a ban could achieve several things. First, it could ensure consistency with Government advice that purchasers should seek to see puppies or kittens with their mother, which goes beyond the new regulations for licensed breeders and applies the condition to everyone. It could also assist purchasers to make informed choices based on seeing a puppy or kitten with its mother, and encourage responsible buying decisions. It could incentivise welfare improvements in high-risk commercial dog-breeding establishments by ensuring transparency, accountability and appropriate remuneration for breeders. Finally, and perhaps most
importantly, it could prevent the sale of puppies that had not been bred to recognised standards of welfare in this country. The Government, therefore, consider there to be merit in exploring that further. I am aware that there are consistent, though difficult-to-quantify, concerns about puppies that are bred overseas, smuggled illegally into the UK and then sold out of the boots of cars at service stations, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling).

At the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs we have been involved since 2015 in an operation to tackle the scourge of underage puppies being smuggled into the UK, something I feel strongly about. When I was responsible for this part of the brief in 2015, although we were doing work to strengthen regulations, I was concerned about the reports of large numbers of puppies being smuggled, particularly from the Irish Republic and east European countries, to be sold in the UK. Since 2015, our vets from the Animal and Plant Health Agency have been stationed at a number of ports and in just three years we have seized more than 700 puppies that were considered to be under 12 weeks old, the minimum before which they are able to be transported. That evidence of underage puppies being smuggled into the country suggests there could be a problem there that we ought to address, which is why we have run a call for evidence.

The call for evidence ran from 8 February to 2 May and we received about 350 responses, which we are currently analysing. The next step would, of course, be to consult on specific options. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) invited me to make her cry by making an announcement today. I will not be doing so today; I will stop just short of it, but hon. Members will be pleased to know that we anticipate being likely to introduce a consultation based on the early feedback from the call for evidence. They will, however, have to wait a little longer to see further details.

I want now to address a few wider issues, in particular regarding sentencing, because the pet licensing measures are only part of our work. We are also taking action to improve animal welfare in other areas. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced last September that we will increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences from six months to five years in prison.

There was an intervention earlier on the shadow Minister to consult on specific options. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) invited me to make her cry by making an announcement today. I will not be doing so today; I will stop just short of it, but hon. Members will be pleased to know that we anticipate being likely to introduce a consultation based on the early feedback from the call for evidence. They will, however, have to wait a little longer to see further details.

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Finally on enforcement—a number of Members raised the issue—we have provided in our new licensing conditions for local authorities to be able to go for full cost recovery to fund their work in this area. While the internet provides many challenges, it also provides a relatively easy way to identify people selling pets in the UK who are not legally entitled to do so.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for his response to the debate. A great many charities do excellent work on animal welfare. We know who they are; they have been mentioned. Is it his intention to correspond with those charitable organisations to gauge their opinion on how animal welfare laws can move forward? I think it is important we have their input in the process. Have they been part of it?

**George Eustice:** We work very closely with all the animal welfare charities. As was pointed out earlier, a number of the charities had some reservations about going for a third-party ban. They felt there were other more significant things we could do to tackle the problem of online trading. Now we have done those things, there is a growing consensus that extending the ban might be worth considering. I do not think we should hold it against those animal charities that had some concerns about the measure, but just to reassure the hon. Gentleman, we regularly engage with a whole range of animal welfare charities on that and other issues, and they have all contributed considerably to the consultations we have run.

6.35 pm

**Martyn Day:** It was a privilege to open today’s e-petition debate. I am grateful to all the Back-Bench and Front-Bench Members who have taken part in what has been a consensual debate. I was happy with many of the Minister’s comments, particularly that there was merit in exploring the issue further. I look forward to the consultation in due course. I genuinely feel that Lucy’s law would be the single biggest step towards ending unnecessary animal cruelty and reforming dog breeding welfare.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered e-petition 213451 relating to the sale of puppies by pet shops and commercial third-party dealers.

6.35 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*
I have repeated those calls in many subsequent debates, and there have been many in recent months, including those held by my hon. Friends the Members for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Both of their debates reflected the rising concern about the real, clear and present danger to the sector, and sought the attention of the Government so that they would act.

That danger has become very real since the autumn, with the announcement of job losses all over the UK. To date, 2,000 jobs have been lost among car manufacturers, and planned increases in staff recruitment have been put on hold. More widely, when the component suppliers and related sectors are taken into account, it is estimated that between 8,000 and 12,000 jobs at least have been lost in just eight months.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this crucial debate. Given the numbers that he mentions, does he think we ought to return to the subject of the last debate we had here—business rates? The car industry needs a shot in the arm; is it not time that the Government gave it one?

Matt Western: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The business rates situation handicaps the industry in this country and puts it at a significant disadvantage to competitors on the continent. Added to that are the energy costs that it faces: on average, there is a 74% premium on the energy costs on the continent.

Major manufacturers have told me that their greatest concern is that there seems to be little concern from the Government. It is disheartening that this apparent lack of interest flies in the face of the industry’s importance to our overall economy. The financial services sector is held up as the great driver of UK national wealth, but it is worth remembering the increasingly important contribution of the UK motor vehicle manufacturing industry. According to the Library, it generated £15.2 billion of value to the economy in 2017, which is 0.8% of total output. More relevantly, it represents 8% of manufacturing output. Likewise, it employed 162,000 people across the UK in 2016, equating to 1% of all UK employees.

In UK manufacturing, the automotive industry is the second most investment-intensive sector for total investment as a proportion of gross value added, although it is top in value terms, investing £3.6 billion in 2015. The west midlands has the largest number of people employed in the manufacture of vehicles in any UK region or country—perhaps that is why this subject is so close to my heart. The 54,000 employees in our region represent around a third of all motor industry employees in the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this timely debate. Not only are there direct employees, but for every direct employee there are probably two or three indirect employees—we are talking about the supply chain. There could be a massive effect if the problem is not handled properly. We need a transitional period, with electrification on the one hand and diesel on the other.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and I met the trade unions about this issue some months ago, and there is a lot of concern that it could affect jobs. With business rates, the Government...
are shifting expenditure away from proper funding through the taxpayer to local government. That creates a major problem for local government and for the efficiency of these industries.

**Matt Western:** My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. He is quite right about the multiplier effect on supplier industries—component manufacturers and so on. I totally agree with him about the importance of establishing a very clear pathway for the transition between where we are and where we have set ourselves to be in future. I will speak about that at some length.

The employment statistics are significant by anyone’s measure. The concern voiced by the industry is that direction is needed from policymakers, in particular with regard to Brexit and the UK’s future trading relationships, as well as to support for the transition to clean fuels. Without that clarity, it is inevitable that investment decisions will be placed on hold.

People will cite recent announcements at Luton and elsewhere as great news about the future of the industry, but many of us will understand that those sorts of decisions are taken many years in advance—those were taken way before the EU referendum. Without clarity, there will be a recruitment freeze or job losses, as we have seen. One example of the recruitment freeze is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham, where Dagenham has recently announced that it will have to put on hold 150 planned jobs.

Just over a year ago, in March 2017, Lloyds bank conducted a survey of the UK automotive manufacturing sector. It summarised that the vast majority—some 87%—of automotive manufacturers planned to create new jobs in the next two years. It estimated that, if those plans were replicated across all the UK’s automotive firms, a further 85,000 new jobs would be created. What a difference a year makes.

In the context of Brexit, there are concerns that there may be job losses in the industry in the long term. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee conducted an inquiry into the impact of Brexit on the industry and stated that, should the UK leave the customs union and single market, hundreds of thousands of jobs could be lost. It reported that “it is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK... The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market would be inevitable.”

Perhaps that should come as no surprise. Some have explained that job losses in manufacturing are an inevitability, and that we should embrace the loss of manufacturing in the post-Brexit era. One such voice is that of Professor Minford of Cardiff Business School, who has advocated “running down” the UK auto industry. In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in 2012, he said:

“It is perfectly true that if you remove protection of the sort that has been given particularly to the car industry and other manufacturing industries inside the protective wall, you will have a change in the situation facing that industry, and you are going to have to run it down. It will be in your interests to do it, just as in the same way we ran down the coal and steel industries. These things happen as evolution takes place in your economy.”

He echoed that statement in *The Sun* ahead of the EU referendum, writing:

“Over time, if we left the EU, it seems likely that we would mostly eliminate manufacturing, leaving mainly industries such as design, marketing and hi-tech. But this shouldn’t scare us.”

Well, I am afraid it scares me, and I think it scares many of us—for good reason.

A while back, the BEIS Committee stated that “it is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK... The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market would be inevitable”, and it would cost hundreds of thousands of jobs, as I said. The Committee concluded:

“Overall, no-one has argued there are advantages to be gained from Brexit for the automotive industry for the foreseeable future. We urge the Government to acknowledge this and to pursue an exercise in damage limitation in the negotiations. This involves retaining as close as possible a relationship with the existing EU regulatory and trading framework in order to give volume car manufacturing a realistic chance of surviving in this country.”

The Committee is not alone in voicing its fears. The automotive industry’s trade body, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, stated:

“There is no escaping the fact that being out of the customs union and single market will inevitably add barriers to trade, increase red tape and cost. Settling for ‘good’ access to each other’s markets is not enough as it will only damage the UK’s competitiveness and reduce our ability to attract investment and the high quality jobs that go with it.”

It is worth noting that in 2017, 86% of the UK’s imports came from the EU, while only 41% of the UK’s exports went to the EU.

Many say that the UK runs a widening trade surplus in motor vehicles with non-EU countries and a widening trade deficit with EU countries, and that leaving the EU and the customs union is therefore a positive thing. That is true, but the industry has responded by using its strength through the renaissance that I mentioned to reduce that deficit considerably. Importantly, the industry shows a determination to grow in other markets—it seeks to retain its strong position in Europe, but want to build elsewhere too. Other countries’ domestic manufacturers are doing that, and we can do so too. It is not a choice between one and the other—they are complementary.

Our remaining in a customs union is critical to the sector’s future. We must avoid at all costs losing tariff-free access to the EU. In the worst-case scenario, under World Trade Organisation rules, a 10% tariff on finished
vehicles and a 2.5% to 4.5% tariff on components would be introduced. Those tariff rates would cost the automotive sector at least £2.7 billion on imports and £1.8 billion on exports. Just imports alone would happen to the sticker price of vehicles in this country.

Ford has stated that rules of origin would “add a significant cost” to its business if UK-manufactured products were no longer considered to have originated in the EU. Similarly, Vauxhall has stated that any rules of origin changes “will have a drastic impact on UK trade with any countries outside the EU”.

It is critical that a future UK-EU trade deal includes provision for full bilateral cumulation, which would ensure that components produced in the EU were considered local UK content for the purpose of rules of origin, and that the automotive sector was able to benefit from preferential trading relationships established with not only the EU but third countries.

It is worth noting that the majority of Ford’s Bridgend output goes to the EU. Without a comprehensive UK-EU free trade agreement, engines sent to European assembly plants would attract a 4.5% tariff, increasing the cost to the consumer. In an industry where margins are wafer-thin, that sort of tariff may cause significant damage to the sector. The SMMT’s position is clear. It has stated:

“Should the UK and the EU no longer have a customs union arrangement, UK businesses exporting to EU27 countries would need to submit information about the origin of the product, the destination country, relevant commodity codes, Customs Procedure Codes, product value, a unique consignment number, as well as relevant safety and security information. This would represent a significant increase in bureaucracy, and undermine the competitiveness of British business. Compliance with these new requirements would be particularly challenging for SMEs that make over 90% of the automotive supply chain.”

The components industry and the highly integrated supply chain are crucial to this debate. Currently, an estimated 1,100 trucks from the European Union deliver components worth £35 million to UK car engine plants every day. The movement of those vehicles and the timeliness of their departure and arrival is crucial—every minute counts. However, about 78,000 people are employed in the supply chain here in the UK, supplying not just the UK but Europe. The sector is highly integrated with the rest of Europe in the case of both finished cars and component parts. For instance, the UK imported just under £14 billion of vehicle engines and other components in 2017, 79% of which came from the EU. Some may ask, why shouldn’t we transfer more of that back to the UK?” The complication is in scale, the strength of businesses and where they need to be located, and the geography of supply.

The manufacturers’ trade body, and the automotive trade body, the SMMT, have both called on the Government to protect that close integration. The financial reality of the chain’s fragility is underlined by the fact that some manufacturers face costs of up to £1 million an hour if production is stopped due to a delay in the supply of components to the assembly line. The SMMT estimates that a 15-minute delay to parts delivered just in time can cost manufacturers just under £1 million a year.

Let me give two examples. The manufacture of a single Delphi fuel injector takes more than 35 components, requiring 100 processes, and the elements for that come from 15 countries. The injector goes through 39 UK-EU border crossings and five UK-customs union border crossings. Another example is the Mini crankshaft, which crosses the channel three times in a 2,000 mile journey before a finished car rolls off the production line. The casting is made in France before being transferred to Hams Hall back in the midlands, where it is crafted into shape. Those pieces are then sent to Munich and inserted into an engine, which is then sent to Mini’s plant in Oxford, where it is installed in a car.

Related to all of that is the importance of type approvals, a much overlooked area that can add significant cost. One engine supplier—I will not mention its name—has estimated that, if we do not have harmonisation with Europe, it will cost between £300,000 and £500,000 per vehicle certification. In fact, the CBI noted that the two areas where convergence with the EU is of the greatest importance are the rules that determine how and by whom vehicles can be approved as safe for the road, and the Vehicle Certification Agency maintaining its ability to approve vehicles for the European market. It also mentioned maintaining pan-European rules on carbon dioxide and other air pollutants to ensure that international targets on clean air and climate change are met.

That brings me to diesel. In the early 2000s, the drive to achieve climate change goals led to the rapid uptake of diesel: from 17% of the total car market, it grew to 50% in just eight years. The manufacturers responded. Ford set up its Dagenham diesel centre, which I think employs 3,000 staff and provides for 50% of all of its global diesel production. Then came the Volkswagen dieselsgate scandal and subsequently the demonisation of diesel, which has led to a 33% drop in diesel sales so far this year. Once more, manufacturers have sought to respond where they have seen a lack of leadership, in this case perhaps from policy makers. Ford introduced a diesel scrappage scheme, as certain other manufacturers have done, and since September it has taken 21,000 vehicles off the road. The programme has been so successful that it was extended beyond December, when it was due to close, and is still running.

A tax on diesel was announced in the November 2017 Budget, with an increase in vehicle excise duty by one band and on benefit in kind by an additional 1% for all diesel vehicles. Some would say that that is kicking an industry when it is already struggling. The taxing of vehicles based on such a legislative standard has yet to be finalised or introduced by the EU; it is unprecedented and unrealistic. I suggest that the measure is counter-productive and merely makes worse the problem it seeks to solve. People are holding off buying new diesel vehicles and keeping on using older, polluting vehicles. Of course, the reduction in—or lack of—support for the diesel industry does not take into account the many hundreds of millions of pounds that it has already invested in manufacture, responding to the Government’s policy direction of five to 10 years ago.

Today’s diesels are the cleanest yet, having the same nitrous oxide and particulate emissions as petrol and 20% lower CO₂ emissions. To put it into context, it would take at least six of today’s new diesel cars to emit the same nitrous oxides as one vehicle put on the road just two years ago. The focus should therefore be on getting older vehicles off the road, not on penalising customers who wish to buy newer, cleaner diesels. Of course, the swing to petrol means a collective failure to
meet our carbon dioxide targets. Hon. Members will know that we are now seeing an uptick in carbon dioxide emissions for the first time in 15 years.

We see challenging issues in our deliberations over Brexit and the trading arrangements we face. That is best exemplified by the profound challenges faced by the automotive industry, one of our most successful industries. The industry has seen a renaissance, which was seriously damaged by the global financial crash, but it managed to sustain itself, and since then we have seen huge inward investment by various manufacturers, which has contributed to a 50% increase in manufacturing share, almost 10 years of steady growth and a consequent almost 30% increase in direct manufacturing employment in the sector, notwithstanding the growth in component suppliers.

The industry also faces the challenge of transitioning to cleaner fuels and a super-low-carbon future, and that is being disrupted by the uncertainty of Brexit and Government policy that seeks to penalise cleaner diesel-powered vehicles. It is currently one of the great paradoxes that, in seeking to improve air quality, the Government have managed to reverse the progress achieved over many years in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. As Mike Hawes, the chief executive of the SMMT, put it:

"The industry shares Government's vision of a low-carbon future and is investing to get us there, but we can’t do it overnight; nor can we do it alone. The anti-diesel agenda has set back progress on climate change, while electric vehicle demand remains disappointingly low amid consumer concerns around charging infrastructure availability and affordability."

To accelerate fleet renewal, motorists must have the confidence to invest in the cleanest cars for their needs, however they are powered. A consistent approach to incentives and tax and greater infrastructure availability and affordability.

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Many are calling on the Government to act now to reduce the effects of diesel taxation on the newest, cleanest diesel vehicles and amend the carbon dioxide bands to reduce the impact of new emissions standards on consumer vehicle excise duty. Failure to do so will threaten the future success and sustainability of businesses and the significant contribution that the sector makes to jobs and the UK economy. The orderly, managed transition I described is essential to enable the manufacturers to use their revenues today to invest in our tomorrow. Without that support, the sector could be seriously damaged in its need to compete with the likes of China who have the scale and state backing to invest in newer technologies.

We have grown used to having a successful industry that contributes greatly not just to our international trade but to our global manufacturing prestige. We would be fools not to support it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The winding-up speeches must start at 10.30 am, and 10 Back Benchers are trying to catch my eye. It is easy to work out: roughly three minutes each, please.

10 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate.

Job losses in the automotive industry are of great concern to everybody, particularly to those of us with car manufacturers in our constituencies. My constituency, Chichester, is home to Rolls-Royce, which is the single largest employer and employs more than 1,700 people in highly skilled, well-paid jobs. Nationally, the automotive industry provides 814,000 jobs, with an annual turnover of £77.5 billion—more than 8% of the UK’s manufacturing output. The car manufacturing industry is of great importance not just to Chichester, but to the whole country.

I began my working life in a car factory in Liverpool where I worked for seven years. When I first started work, the industry was introducing a supply chain mechanism called just-in-time. First developed in Japan, just-in-time manufacturing would revolutionise the industry and make UK car manufacturing competitive and able to compete effectively with the rest of the world. However, just-in-time manufacturing is logistically complex: components arrive from suppliers based all over the world on the same day that they are to be assembled into a car or a sub-assembly, thereby avoiding the need to store large quantities of inventory that add to overhead costs.

Over decades the automotive industry has created a highly integrated and fast-paced supply chain, and that has been facilitated in Europe through the free movement of goods within the customs union. A car comprised of parts from throughout Europe will be assembled in around 20 days from start to finish, but not a screw will have been made before those 20 days. A network of suppliers based all over the world will be involved, and parts will sometimes cross borders several times before becoming a sub-assembly that is ready for final production. To put that in context, a crankshaft in a car manufactured in the UK will cross the English channel four times before being assembled into the final car.

The success of the supply chain network depends on many parts moving in a frictionless fashion. Imagine the effect that even a small delay at customs will have. I am probably one of the few Members of Parliament who have spent days sitting in customs, desperately waiting for parts to be released, to dash them back to a car factory where a line of workers are sitting eagerly waiting for work. Stopping a line in the manufacturing business is a disaster—it means all the cost, none of the output. The car manufacturing industry is of great importance not just to Chichester, but to the whole country.

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Such delays make car manufacturing uncompetitive and would certainly lead to job losses. Car manufacturers will not risk that happening, and instead they will have to build warehouses to house stock. That will effectively set the industry back years, sending it back to the 1980s. What effect will that have on our roads? Lorries currently pass through customs in under two minutes, but if that time is doubled, it will have a huge impact on our ports and the surrounding roads. We must be innovative when we implement new customs arrangements and utilise technology to ensure there are no hold-ups at crossing...
The size of the UK’s car manufacturing industry is impressive, but we cannot take it for granted. Every new model is highly competitive, because a number of car plants located around the world will have similar capabilities but different labour rates and market conditions. As we leave the EU, the UK must remain competitive because increasing pull factors to other locations will seek to draw investment away from our shores. Thus far the industry has shown its support by investing further in the UK, and since 2010, jobs in car companies have increased by nearly 30%. If we continue to prioritise friction-free customs arrangements and continued close co-operation with the EU on rules of origin, harmonised standards and type approvals, I am optimistic that the automotive industry will continue to thrive and grow.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate. I fully support his goal of highlighting the need to support the car manufacturing industry, since it props up so many local economies in many ways.

The manufacturing base across the entire United Kingdom is important, but it is particularly important in Northern Ireland because of Bombardier, which employs some 4,000 people in the manufacture of aeroplanes. Bombardier is an essential primary and secondary employer in my constituency, as well as in neighbouring constituencies. It represents about 10% of our total exports and 40% of direct manufacturing jobs in Belfast, and its impact on wider manufacturing and the supply chain is felt across Northern Ireland. Investment in Bombardier is an investment not simply in job security but in local spending power. The hon. Gentleman made that point in his speech, and we understand it only too well.

County Antrim, which borders my constituency, is home to Wrightbus, which is a world-class bus manufacturer. It is increasingly recognised as one of Europe’s leading providers of passenger transport solutions, having established a reputation built on a foundation of high-quality design and world-class engineering. Many of the buses in London today come from Wrightbus in North Antrim, and people can enjoy their very good finish. The company offers the largest portfolio of vehicles in the UK, covering midi, maxi, full-size, double-deck, articulated and hybrid-electric categories—no one would have thought there were so many kinds of buses, but there are. The widest range of chassis has elevated Wrightbus to being the largest independent manufacturer in the United Kingdom. I have done my duty to my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) by highlighting that tremendous manufacturer in his constituency and the jobs that it creates, not only in North Antrim but across Northern Ireland because people travel to take advantage of those jobs.

The importance of such industries to the Northern Ireland economy cannot be overstated. Indeed, the manufacturing industry—with special reference to the motor manufacturing industry—was worth 25% more in 2017 than it was in 2007, although growth appears to have levelled off in the past year. According to Library papers, the UK motor vehicle manufacturing industry contributed £15.2 billion to the economy in 2017. That was 0.8% of total output, and 8.1% of manufacturing output—those are very important figures—and it employed 162,000 people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am conscious of the time, Mr Bone, and I want to ensure that other Members get to speak. In conclusion, therefore, there is capacity for more growth, but we have to speculate to accumulate. The industry needs support to thrive and—much like our industry at home—the dividend to the local economy is incredibly valuable. It is not enough to wait until the industry is on its knees; we must invest and support, and ensure that skills are taught for long-term survival. Most importantly, we must ensure in the post-Brexit era that we facilitate the industry to thrive globally. That can be done only by working in partnership and by doing all we can to help the industry foresee and meet the needs of a growing global market.

10.7 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this worthy debate on an issue that I know is important to his constituents. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers.

The British automotive industry has been the cornerstone of our economy and engineering sector for decades, yet it has known hardship in previous years. In 2000, the amount added to the economy by the motoring industry stood at £9.2 billion, but following the global economic recession, production slowed to £5.9 billion. Despite that, I am delighted to note that last year £15.2 billion was added to the economy by car manufacturing, and the number of those employed in that sector has also seen sustained growth.

Since 2010, employment has risen by nearly 30%, from 126,000 to 162,000 jobs. To put that in perspective, those involved in automotive construction account for approximately 8.1% of all manufacturing jobs in the UK, and according to recent research by Lloyds bank, there is potential for that figure to rise even further. The UK Government are keen to see similar progress on the environment and engagement with alternative fuels, which is one of the most pressing topics facing car manufacturers. As set out in our manifesto, we want a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2040, with the majority of cars and vans on the road in 2050 producing zero emissions. Although that is a considerable step, that commitment does not mean that we are turning our back on existing firms or on what has been achieved in the past. Instead, we wish to work with those organisations and guide them towards new and emerging technological avenues. I am sure all Members will agree on the vital need for such a change for the sake of the environment, but it would be wrong to present it as instantaneous.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made the point recently:

“There’s a place for diesel vehicles and will be for some time to come.”
I hope the Minister will clarify that that means we can do more to improve environmental standards with respect to diesel and electric cars and that we will produce new systems that will have a starkly different impact on the environment but will still be familiar and accommodate the specific wishes of the user. The need for clarity on the issue is paramount. We have already seen the detrimental impact of the demonisation of certain sectors in favour of others. What follows is a loss of confidence, a decline in production and the loss of jobs. As we move forward, it must be clear that different fuels are supported equally in the UK. Only by promoting a nuanced manufacturing industry that prioritises development over exclusion will it be possible to encourage further foreign investment and allow the industry to thrive.

10.11 am

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate on a sector that is so important to the city that I represent and the wider region. The automotive industry is at the heart of my home town of Coventry. The British motor industry was born there—the names originating there include Jaguar, Rover, Triumph and Armstrong Siddeley. The first ever British car was built in Coventry more than 120 years ago. The industry gave Coventry people much needed prosperity, and my city thrived because of that.

Coventry now boasts two world-class universities specialising in automation: Coventry University and the University of Warwick, with its Warwick Manufacturing Group. Coventry University is home to the National Transport Design Centre. The National Automotive Innovation Centre, a partnership between Jaguar Land Rover, Tata Motors European Technical Centre, WMG and the University of Warwick, is set to open this summer. It will be the largest automotive R&D facility in Europe and shows a commitment by the university and industry giants to continue Coventry’s history as the UK’s motor city. Jaguar Land Rover is now firmly entrenched in the makeup of the city, with the firm’s headquarters at Whitley. Recently JLR even declared its intention to make Coventry the heart of its large-scale battery and electric vehicle production plans. JLR brings jobs and security to my city, as it does for the wider west midlands. Its success and Coventry’s fortunes are inextricably tied.

With those things in mind, I share my hon. Friend’s desire to protect the UK automotive industry at all costs. The UK’s departure from the EU presents new challenges to the sector, which Jaguar Land Rover has openly stated may be detrimental to business. Uncertainty is bad for business. It is vital to offer safeguards to companies such as JLR and universities such as Coventry and Warwick to maintain the UK’s place in the industry. Yet protecting Coventry’s automotive status is vital not just for companies and universities but for employees. There have already been job losses in the west midlands, and people need guarantees, too.

I am thrilled to represent a city with a record as impressive as the one I have set out. I cannot wait to see the future developments in which Coventry will lead. I hope that the Minister will tell us the Government’s plans to help to protect the automotive industry and the jobs that it supports and to ensure that the sector thrives, in Coventry and more widely in the UK.

10.13 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing the debate. As we have heard from him and other hon. Members, the car industry is of strategic national importance. I am sure the Minister has heard that message loud and clear, so I will take the opportunity to focus on the issues facing the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency, which has lost nearly half its workforce in the past 12 months.

There is virtually no one in Ellesmere Port who does not have some connection with the plant. At its height, it employed about 12,000 people, but sadly, with recent job losses it employs only around a tenth of that number now. It is still a substantial number, however, and it does not take account of the many people employed in the supply chain and associated industries—or of the potential for much greater numbers if we were to increase from single-shift production again. The plant remains a big part of the local economy. Recent job losses there have meant our going against the national trend, with unemployment in the constituency shooting up in the past few months. Every job lost is of course an individual tragedy, but my job now, and the Government’s job, is to make sure that those jobs that remain are protected and built on, because they are exactly the sort of jobs I want to see as a central component of our future: highly skilled permanent jobs in the manufacture of something that is a source of national and local pride.

Whatever our feelings about history and the pride that the plant generates, we cannot expect sentimentality from the new owner, the PSA Group, which has consistently said that each plant will be judged on its efficiency. If there is truly a level playing field, I welcome that. As we have heard, there are many things that we can do with respect to business rates and energy costs, for example, that can help. I know that the Minister has had a quite long list of the things that we would like to happen. However, one factor may make the competition unfair altogether and render all the other good work that is done academic—and that is Brexit. We have a clear message that the current uncertainty is delaying investment decisions by the parent company. Some might say that is a ready-made excuse not to invest; but I do not want us to be in the business of providing people with excuses. I want us to be in the business of providing people with jobs. It is important to recognise that the automotive sector is one of our most vulnerable sectors, and we need to do everything possible now, as a priority, to safeguard jobs and investment. A bespoke trade deal for the automotive sector should be considered. After all, if it has been looked at for other areas, why not this one?

Vauxhall Motors has enjoyed half a century of production in Ellesmere Port. If that is taken away, a huge chunk of our identity will go with it, but it does not have to be that way. As hon. Members have said, the Government have a big challenge ahead, but I believe there are solutions, and we have heard some of them.
On behalf of everyone in the constituency, I express a sincere wish that between us we can all rise to that challenge.

10.16 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend. The Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate.

As many of my colleagues will know, Nissan has a large plant in my constituency, which employs about 7,000 people directly and 28,000 in the UK supply chain. It contributes significantly to the local and national economy. Nissan recently announced job losses at the plant, which was of course hugely disappointing news. Many people will have been concerned about the announcement, but I understand from speaking to Nissan at the time that, although it was unfortunate, the decision was due to anticipated drops in demand for vehicles currently under production. Based on business projections, it is expected that making the changes will allow for increased production of newer models in the future that will therefore provide more jobs in the long term.

With the uncertainty around the diesel industry because of Brexit, the move towards electric vehicles and drops in consumer confidence after the emissions scandal, it is easy to see how any loss of jobs can be seen as part of a wider concern. The motor vehicle manufacturing industry provided 7% of all UK manufacturing jobs in 2016, and it is only right to follow any changes closely and act to prevent further losses. With those points in mind, I want to talk about the Government’s target to ban all sales of new petrol and diesel cars by 2040.

The UK is in the grip of an air pollution crisis—the Environment Secretary was talking about this morning—with pollutants responsible for 40,000 premature deaths a year in the UK. I see two problems with the target, however. First, it is not ambitious enough to deal with the environmental issue with sufficient urgency or to ensure that the UK maintains its leadership on electric vehicles. Research shows that bringing the target forward by 10 years could nearly halve UK oil imports, support infrastructure in place not just for conventional electric vehicles, but for hydrogen-powered vehicles in the future.

Secondly, I do not see how consumers are being assisted in the industry-wide move away from more polluting cars and, ultimately, towards electric vehicles. Reaching any target will require a seismic change in consumer behaviour. In 2009, the Labour Government introduced a vehicle scrappage scheme designed to help the motor industry through the recession following the global financial crisis. It was co-funded by the Government and the car industry, and 400,000 claims were submitted. If we are now to expect consumers to move away from older and more polluting diesel and petrol vehicles, often at some expense, is it not right that the Government should assist them to do so, particularly when we consider that, historically, many consumers were encouraged to purchase diesel vehicles?

I had a lot more to say, but I shall leave my remarks there, to give other Members their moment in the sun.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest; I chair the all-party parliamentary motor group, which receives support from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the Motorsport Industry Association and the RAC Foundation. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his comprehensive tour of the challenges facing the UK’s automotive industry and his explanation of how this industry literally drives economic growth in this country.

In the short time I have available, I will focus on two areas, both of which my hon. Friend covered: first, the challenges of Brexit, and secondly the transition away from petrol and diesel production. As he said, when we have over 1,000 trucks coming in across the channel every day, delivering £35 million worth of parts to build 6,600 cars and 9,800 engines every single day, most of which then go back to the European Union by similar means, achieving frictionless trade post Brexit is vital to this industry. I simply do not see a way of doing that except by continued membership of a customs union.

My hon. Friend also mentioned regulatory alignment. Keeping the Vehicle Certification Agency’s ability to certify cars as safe for sale throughout the EU is key to the industry in this country. I ask the Minister what negotiations are going on to ensure that is the case, and how he feels that could be achieved except through as close as possible a relationship with the single market.

On skills, a key part of the integration of the industry internationally, particularly across Europe, is the ability to transfer skills from one country to another. Frankly, the UK’s visa requirements all too often get in the way of that, but the integration is at its closest with our European partners. I ask the Minister what negotiations are going on to ensure that, post Brexit, it will still be possible to transfer those skills between the UK automotive industry and partners on the other side of the channel.

Very briefly, in relation to the transition away from petrol and diesel, there are three challenges: anxiety over the range of electric vehicles, price and infrastructure. I hope that the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill will help to improve infrastructure, but I must say to the Minister that more needs to be done to ensure and to mandate interoperability of charge points. It makes no more sense to have differences on that than to have different domestic plug designs depending on whether someone has a Dyson or a Hoover vacuum cleaner. What is being done to ensure that we can achieve on-street charging? In particular, what negotiations and what work are being undertaken to try to enable wireless charging? What are the Government doing to ensure that there is infrastructure in place not just for conventional electric vehicles, but for hydrogen-powered vehicles in the future?

My last point is on the transition. As my hon. Friend said, there is something wrong when the cleanest diesels are being hit the hardest. Of course, the UK’s air quality crisis means there must be a trend away from petrol and diesel in the future, but the real challenge is to get the oldest and most polluting diesels off our roads, and we will not do that by hitting the cleanest ones. What are the Government’s ideas for getting those older, more polluting diesels off the road? At the moment, the signals being sent out by Government are confused.
10.24 am

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is a very personal debate for me, because my Ford engine plant employs 1,760 people and has 12,000 jobs associated with it. The plant covers the equivalent of 17 rugby pitches—we view size in that way in Wales. It produces one of five different engines every 30 seconds, and those go into seven different Ford models. Leaving the customs union means that the engines sent to European assembly plants will attract a 4.5% tariff, and it will inevitably lead to increased cost to consumers and loss of sales, leading to further loss of jobs.

Those of us who watch the automotive industry are concerned about the impact of Brexit and the confusion of Government policy on clean diesel. Changing diesel sales have not translated into petrol sales, and consumers are holding on to older products—cars and vans—for longer, slowing down air improvements. The Bridgend engine plant is a great example of the complex and integrated automotive supply chain across the EU.

There are a number of things we must be absolutely clear about. The Bridgend engine plant can be counted under originated content under the EU’s rules of origin. Components flow from the EU into Bridgend, and engines flow back. That must continue unimpeded. A frictionless customs regime is essential for us. Mass producers such as the car industry, as we have already heard, need the just-in-time delivery principle. A 15-minute delay to parts delivered just in time can cost over £850,000 a year. Storage of stock just increases customer costs, as the cost knock-on to the car manufacturer is passed on to the consumer. We need zero-tariff trade; that is a minimum requirement and should form the basis of any trade deal for the future.

We have already heard reference to minimum customs costs and delay in moving goods. Regulatory alignment—a prerequisite for minimising customs delays—is crucial in preventing cumulative cost and restricted customer choice as a result of trying to meet different standards. Ford would be especially impacted by a change of type approval if the VCA certification was no longer approved. Ford would be especially impacted by a change of type as a result of trying to meet different standards. In preventing cumulative cost and restricted customer prerequisite for minimising customs delays—is crucial.

Costs and delay in moving goods. Regulatory alignment—a prerequisite for minimising customs delays—is crucial in preventing cumulative cost and restricted customer prerequisite for minimising customs delays—is crucial.

To help the Dagenham plant to transition to future technologies, we need to provide stability today and in the near future. That can be done only by supporting modern diesel technology and production, yet diesel sales have fallen 37% since last year. Unfair criticism and a misunderstanding of the technology are threatening thousands of high-quality jobs in my constituency; plans in Dagenham for 150 new jobs in 2017-18 were shelved due to falling demand. The overall lack of clarity around modern diesel compared with older diesel is also hurting the environment. In 2017, carbon tailpipe emissions rose for the first time in two decades.

My overall point is simple: the Government have a role in restoring consumer confidence in new diesel technology. They have to begin to make the case for modern diesel technology and production, yet diesel sales have fallen 37% since last year. Unfair criticism and a misunderstanding of the technology are threatening thousands of high-quality jobs in my constituency; plans in Dagenham for 150 new jobs in 2017-18 were shelved due to falling demand.

10.27 am

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): As has been mentioned, this sector has been one of Britain’s greatest manufacturing success stories, providing thousands of jobs and a major contribution to our country’s economic growth. The story of my own constituency’s past cannot be told without an understanding of the sector, dominated by Ford’s Dagenham plant, which at its height employed some 40,000 workers. Today, Dagenham’s two engine plants produce 1 million diesel engines annually—50% of Ford’s global diesel requirement—and provide over 3,000 jobs. Some 89% of those engines are exported. The total turnover stands at £1.75 billion.

However, investment in Britain’s car industry has halved during the past two years. Brexit concerns and the demonization of diesel appear to be the two biggest challenges. The crisis of confidence in diesel vehicles and diesel technology was triggered by Volkswagen’s emissions scandal, but the upshot has been damage to not just VW but the whole sector. I am not seeking to defend older diesel engines, which, in truth, are more polluting than their petrol counterparts. However, we must bring some nuance back into the debate. All diesel technology is being tarred with the same brush, despite the fact that state-of-the-art diesel technology is a vast improvement over its predecessors.

As has been mentioned, those dirtier engines will, ironically, be kept on the road longer if consumers are misinformed about the difference between diesel technologies. It is clean-diesel technology that is being invested in in Dagenham. Ford invested £490 million in developing clean, cutting-edge diesel technology in Dagenham in 2014. This new generation of clean engines meets the Euro 6 emissions standards and satisfies Transport for London’s ultra-low emission zone. Modern Euro 6 diesel cars are the cleanest in history; they capture 99% of particulates and emit 84% fewer oxides of nitrogen than in 2000—a point worth making on the day the Government publish their new clean air strategy.

To help the Dagenham plant to transition to future technologies, we need to provide stability today and in the near future. That can be done only by supporting modern diesel technology and production, yet diesel sales have fallen 37% since last year. Unfair criticism and a misunderstanding of the technology are threatening thousands of high-quality jobs in my constituency; plans in Dagenham for 150 new jobs in 2017-18 were shelved due to falling demand. The overall lack of clarity around modern diesel compared with older diesel is also hurting the environment. In 2017, carbon tailpipe emissions rose for the first time in two decades.

10.30 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I first pay tribute to the excellent presentation made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I will speak about the human consequences of what will happen if the Government get this wrong.

Erdington is rich in talent, but is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. However, we are blessed with having the Jaguar plant in our midst. The industry has now become the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing. It has been transformed, but it is characterised by its troubled history and by tragedies. I remember working night and day back in 2005 with Tony Woodley to try to prevent the collapse of Rover, and I remember that awful Friday when the factory finally collapsed and 5,000 workers were made redundant. However, in 2009 we saw the establishment of the
Automotive Council—the first great industrial strategy—and the scrappage scheme to save the industry from collapse. The basis was laid for a future to be built on.

In 2010, Tata Motors took over Jaguar Land Rover from Ford. It brought in two gifted German industrial managers, one of whom—chief executive Dr Ralf Speth—is still there to this day. We worked night and day with them to turn around a factory that was doomed to close and where there was a funereal atmosphere on the part of the workers. I will never forget that wonderful day in October 2010 when we stood outside the main gate and said that the factory that had built the Spitfire during the war and two generations of Jaguars after the war was safe for the next generation.

That transformed the lives of thousands of local workers. I will never forget Warren, who is a big bear of a man. I first met him at a jobs fair that we organised. Four years later, he was moving into a house in Edwards Road, just down from my constituency office. He called me over and told me about how he was buying this little Edwardian terraced house. He said how he had been in and out of work for 10 years before getting that apprenticeship, and was now in a job that he described as secure, well-paid work that he loved. He then turned to his partner and said, “I’m moving into the house of my dreams with the woman of my dreams.” He said that could never have happened had it not been for the success of Jaguar Land Rover.

Lives were transformed and progress was built on. I actually pay tribute to some of the things that the Government did by way of continuity of policy, such as with the Automotive Council; the focus on the industrial sector and the engine plant; the skills initiative; and investment in research and development. All of that was welcome. As a consequence, we saw the number of staff at the factory double from 1,400 when it faced closure in 2010 to 3,000, while GKN—the parts plant just up the road—increased its staff from 500 to 800. Thousands of local people were given the opportunities that Warren had.

However, we now face deep and growing difficulties. Some 1,000 workers are being laid off at the Solihull plant, while 240 workers have been transferred from the Jaguar plant to Solihull. Why? Because of the combination of utter confusion over diesel on the one hand—forgive me if I say this, but the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has grossly mishandled this situation and has sent the wrong message, having a serious impact on consumer confidence—and Brexit on the other.

I have only a short time remaining, so I will conclude. I wholeheartedly agree with the points made earlier. Hope emerges from despair. I once again see workers on production lines despairing and fearing for the future. Our fortunes are inextricably linked with those of the European Union—crucially, through the single market and the customs union. If we get it wrong over Brexit, this country will pay a very heavy price, and the people who will pay that price above all will be the workers in the automotive industry.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I am advised that the minute’s silence has been moved from 11.30 am to 2.30 pm.

10.34 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing the debate. Critically, he highlighted the supply chain, which goes beyond the idea of the automotive industry and reaches every part of the industrial complex across the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in their place, mentioned the issues for Northern Ireland. In Scotland in 2016, there were 4,000 employees in the industry, representing 2% of manufacturing employees in Scotland and 2.5% of all motor vehicle manufacturing employees across the UK. It continues to be an important industry, for not only employment but the economy. The industry has seen a steady increase in output since 2010. In real terms, the motor manufacturing industry was worth 25% more in 2017 than in 2007, although growth appears to have levelled off in the last year.

However, as other Members have highlighted, we need to recognise that the sector is highly integrated with the rest of Europe, in both finished cars and component parts. For instance, the UK imported £13.95 billion-worth of vehicle engines and parts in 2017, 79% of which came from the European Union. From my perspective, if the UK Government continue with their desire to leave the customs union and single market, it will have a detrimental impact on the industry and will cost jobs.

That is why the industry has called for the UK Government to change their approach to Brexit and opt to remain in the single market and customs union, to facilitate trade and investment. I hope that the UK Government listen to those calls and take action to protect the sector’s close integration with the rest of Europe as they negotiate our leaving the European Union.

As the Scottish National party spokesperson for industries of the future, I welcome the Government’s announcement of the automotive sector deal as part of the industrial strategy, as that should boost investment in emerging technology and establish leadership in meeting future mobility and clean growth challenges. However, with countries such as Estonia and Singapore at an advanced stage of preparation, and with investment in infrastructure that will allow them to take advantage of industries of the future, there is a danger that the automotive industry, and many other industries across the UK, are unprepared for the inevitable advancement that will be made.

As the Member for West Dunbartonshire, I know only too well the impact of industrial policy that fails to meet the challenges of the modern age—the complete and utter collapse of the industrial complex. I would not wish that on any other Member. From my perspective, the UK Government must therefore step up and lead on the issues that put thousands of jobs at risk, which would have an immediate impact on local economies and feed into the larger economy.

10.37 am

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this important debate. He said that “the headwinds are strong and
many” for the automotive sector. He went on to point out 16 issues, including business rates; energy costs; the move from older energies to renewables; the UK’s future trading relationship following our withdrawal from the EU; a freeze on recruitment in the industry; our leaving the customs union; huge uncertainty for businesses owing to a lack of certainty on the Government’s position on a future customs union; the potential shift of manufacturing to EU countries; the kind of regulatory framework that will exist following our withdrawal from the EU; added barriers to trade; the potential loss of tariff-free access; what will happen if we return to World Trade Organisation tariffs; and changes to rules of origin rules.

Other hon. Members then set out many more concerns, including about the impact on SMEs, which makes up 90% of the supply chain, and the complex EU-wide production web and the multiple border crossings needed for the production of a single car. They also spoke of dieselgate and the punitive measures currently levied on some of the cleanest diesel cars, and—crucially—of the lack of confidence for the car industry and its uncertainty over the Government’s position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington also talked of how the automotive industry represents an economic bellwether and how crucial it is for the west midlands and his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) talked about the automotive industry’s transformative effect on Coventry, including her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the loss of almost half the jobs at the Vauxhall plant at Ellesmere Port. He repeatedly speaks up for his constituency. It was poignant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) explain so eloquently how a job for Warren was about so much more. We know that, in every industry, it is about so much more; it is the lifeblood of a community.

It has been said many times that the automotive industry is one of the UK’s most successful sectors. It provides employment to more than 150,000 people across the UK and last year contributed £15.2 billion to the economy. There is no doubt that the continued success of the automotive sector is vital for workers and families across the UK and for the success of our economy as a whole, but worryingly it has been going through a challenging time.

Although there was an uplift in April, car sales plummeted in March by 15.7% compared with last year, and almost 2,000 job losses have been announced during the past six months. In January, despite all the assurances from the Government when PSA Group took over, Vauxhall announced 250 job losses, on top of the 400 lost last year, at its plant in Ellesmere Port, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described. I pay tribute to him and to Unite the union for all the work that they did with PSA Group to protect as many jobs as possible for the future. In April, it was announced that Nissan would be cutting jobs in Sunderland, and last month Jaguar, the UK’s biggest car manufacturer—it employs 40,000 people—announced that it would be shedding 1,000 temporary contract workers in the west midlands.

Three reasons were listed for those cuts: low demand, with sales at Jaguar down by 26%; changes to tax on diesel cars; and the uncertainty caused by Brexit. Those three factors are all either wholly or partly within the Government’s control. They have complete control over the uncertainty on Brexit, or at least they would if they could sort out the Cabinet and it was not in so much chaos. They also have control over the confusion about taxation policy on diesel, but in recent months they have actually exacerbated it. Weak demand in the economy could be mitigated by Government policy through, for example, encouraging wage growth and Government spending to increase national income.

As has been said, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has highlighted just how important trade with the EU is to the automotive sector. It says that 1,100 trucks from the EU deliver components worth £35 million to UK car and engine plants every single day. The complex cross-border supply chains depend, crucially, on the free and frictionless movement of goods. Manufacturers are very concerned about that freedom and those frictionless borders being disrupted.

Mrs Hodgson: It has been one year, 10 months and 30 days since the UK voted to leave the European Union. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have therefore had more than enough time to sort out their negotiating position on the customs union, considering how important it is?

Laura Pidcock: That is right. I have outlined previously that perhaps some of the confusion and slowness in the process is due to the fact that an initial set of negotiations has to be carried out with two or three Cabinet members before negotiations with the EU can take place.

The SMMT says that “neither option currently being considered by government...would provide the frictionless movement of goods that UK automotive needs to maintain its competitiveness and productivity.” It is right that the Labour party has called for the Government to negotiate a new comprehensive EU-UK customs union covering all goods. That is the best way to ensure that there are no tariffs or customs checks within Europe, to support jobs, particularly the 2.1 million UK manufacturing jobs, and to help to avoid, crucially, the need for a hard border in Northern Ireland. It would be very helpful if the Minister could use his closing remarks to set out how the Government will ensure the future security of the automotive industry and those employed in it, going beyond the bespoke assurances to the likes of Nissan and Peugeot. Those were important, but we need more than that.

The automotive industry in the UK is a great success story. We have heard a tour de force in defence of the industry from all hon. Members in the Chamber, but it is currently under huge pressure, and sadly that shows through in the increasingly frequent announcements about job losses and in sales figures. It is incumbent on the Government to work with businesses, industry bodies and trade unions and listen to them when they express very clearly that the Government should prioritise a customs arrangement that removes the risk of tariffs being imposed. We must, as an imperative, seek to protect workers’ jobs and secure the future success of the industry as a whole, and I would be grateful if the Minister could now set out how he intends to do that.
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the 10 Back-Bench Members who have spoken and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen for keeping their comments short—I know how difficult that is—to give the Minister the chance to reply fully to this excellent debate. I would just like to remind the Minister to leave a little time for the proposer of the debate to wind up.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Thank you, Mr Bone, for the iron discipline that you have exerted on the Members of Parliament here today. It has worked, because I have the time that you originally said I would.

I commend the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) not just for bringing about the debate—he has always very eloquently represented his constituents who work in the automotive industry—but for his speech. I think that it was described by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), as a tour de force, and it was. I agreed with a lot of the things that he said; I agreed with contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. A lot of the views expressed are based on severe concern about the automotive industry. We all know how critical it is to our economy—specifically to the constituencies of hon. Members who have spoken today, but also to the economy generally.

I would like to put it on the record that the only comment that I could really object to—I do not take offence, because it is part of the political system to say these things—is that the Government do not really care about the industry or are not involved with it. I can say from personal experience that that is not true. The automotive industry is at the top of our list. As was well published in most of the press, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State uses the automotive industry in the Cabinet as an example of the complexity of business within the European Union. There are well known examples of what happens to different parts. I saw one part in a car factory that had been in and out of the country seven times. Hon. Members, in their contributions today, gave similar examples.

In relation to communication with and listening to the industry, hon. Members should know that I meet, as does the Secretary of State, every Wednesday morning with the business representative organisations. The particularly relevant one here is the Engineering Employers Federation, which represents thousands of businesses up and down the country; many of them are involved with the automotive industry. Stephen Phipson, the director of EEF, may be known to hon. Members. He has written a letter to one of the newspapers, explaining his recent visit to the Canadian-American border. He saw how complex, after many years, billions of dollars of expenditure and good will on both sides, movements across borders are even with electronic trading. A very important part of what we do in government is listening to people about that kind of thing.

I have made visits since I took on this portfolio, and I should say that I asked for the automotive industry to be part of my portfolio. I have not had constituency experience of it, but in terms of manufacturing and this kind of manufacturing investment, I realise, as does the Secretary of State, how important it is to the economy. I think that it is fair to say that I have met executives from nearly all the major manufacturers in this country. I have met senior Japanese executives from Toyota, for example. That was with the Secretary of State, who made very clear the critical importance of frictionless trade between this country and the countries in the European Union. I agree with the comment made today that this country is not a big enough market on its own to sustain a healthy automotive industry.

The population is 60 million. The demand for new cars in a good year could be between 1 million and 2 million, along with all the components. This is big business. These are very complex parts. It is not as it was when the car industry started. We have to be part of a larger market. In whatever way it is worked out, it has to enable companies to do business as they are now. That includes regulatory matters, the frictionless—or near frictionless—movement of goods and the ability to recruit necessary labour. On a recent visit to BMW’s Mini plant in Oxford, I saw—I may be wrong by 1% or 2%—that 21% or 22% of labour there was from the European Union. Fortunately for our economy, there is not a large number of unemployed people in the Oxford area and it is clear that that labour will have to come in, to work in a good career, in a fantastic company and in a fantastic factory.

I mention all that because the engagement aspect has not been communicated enough to hon. Members. Members, but is a very important part of what we do. I believe that the interests of the automotive industry have been reflected in the negotiations. The shadow Minister made an eloquent speech, but she said that one of the delays has been a disagreement among the Cabinet on how this should be approached. That, however, is part of democracy. There are different views within the two major political parties. That is a legitimate part of democracy. I wish everyone agreed with me. They do not always, but I believe we will prevail. I had better make some progress.

There has been speculation today in the press that the decline in the diesel market has been caused by uncertain messaging. I think that it was the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) who suggested that comments made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs had been prejudicial to the diesel industry. It is important to note, however, what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said about this last week:

“Diesel cars have played an important part in reducing CO2 emissions from UK road transport. They can still play a valuable role in further reducing CO2 emissions during the transition to zero emission vehicles.”

We have stated that we will end the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040. That is a general European-wide policy. But we will shortly publish the Government’s “Road to Zero” strategy, which will set out the gradual steps that we will take over the coming years to deliver our mission. The mission is for every car and van in the UK to be effectively zero emission by 2040. I think that will prove to be significantly beneficial to the UK car manufacturing industry.
Richard Burden: Consumer incentives will have to be part of the package that we hope will incentivise the shift towards zero emissions. The Government have scaled back both the plug-in car grant and the grant available for the home charging of electric vehicles. Does that not send out a confused signal, if we are trying to encourage people to make that shift?

Richard Harrington: One of the issues is not reducing the amount of grants, but where the grants should go, which I am happy to discuss separately with the hon. Gentleman, as I need to make progress due to lack of time. There are questions: for example, should hybrid cars receive the same grant as all electric cars? I would be delighted to meet him to talk this through, formally or informally.

I want to stress the importance that the automotive industry has to us with regard to the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), while stressing frictionless trade, mentioned Rolls-Royce in her constituency and how it might appear as a small blob on a map compared to vast production, but it is critically important to the country and the local economy. I would be happy to accept her kind invitation to visit with her.

Investment generally in the UK auto industry is important to us. The industrial strategy and landmark automotive sector deal show how the Government can work with industry at the forefront of new technologies, to ensure that we remain the destination of choice for future investment decisions. There was good news, which hon. Members have mentioned, about the Luton plant with the Vivaro vans. Toyota announced that it will build the next generation Auris in Derbyshire. Those decisions are not to be sneered at, but are important. While I accept that decisions are made over a long period, I think that 10-year decisions for any significant investments are also important, but they can be pulled. Like any decisions, a company can decide to do that at the last minute for whatever reason it wants—for example, if it is short of money or if there is uncertainty in the market or points are raised about Brexit. Although they are long-term decisions, they are not decisions until they are finally made. BMW’s investment in the electric Mini and Nissan’s investment in Sunderland mean that since 2016, this country has won every single competitive model allocation decision by major car manufacturers. That does not mean we can take it for granted.

I would like to speak for an hour on the EU exit issue. I cannot, however, due to your quite rightly ruthless chairing, Mr Bone. The Government have reached an agreement on the terms of the implementation period, but we have to plan for all scenarios. I have a lot of confidence that we will leave with a deal and that a no-deal scenario in March 2019, which I think would be disastrous for the automotive industry—I am happy for that to be on record and will defend it to anybody—is significantly less likely. I hope that it is totally unlikely. I hope that it does not happen and I believe that it will not happen. There needs to be a competitive market as part of a European-wide industry. It has been a huge success. It was Mrs Thatcher who persuaded many of the Japanese firms to invest here, because of the market that they would be involved in. Whatever hon. Members’ different views about Mrs Thatcher are, I think that they will all agree that that has been a good thing for the country.

Our vision for the UK is clear. We are seeking a comprehensive solution, which includes most of the things that the industry wants, such as vehicle standards, one series of approvals and simple, frictionless movement for parts and labour, where it is required in the industry. We are pleased that the Government are producing a White Paper, which will set out in detail the UK’s future customs relationship, providing detail on precisely these issues, such as tariffs, rules of origin and mutual recognition, which are important to the industry.

I am happy to take up this discussion afterwards. I am meeting the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and others later today, and I am happy to meet any hon. Member to talk in more detail about this complex issue. In conclusion, hon. Members should know how strong the automotive sector is for us. We are a strong manufacturing nation. I believe that we will be a lot stronger. I thank everyone for their attention today.

10.58 am

Matt Western: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this wide, but clear and focused debate on such an important industry. This industry has been a phenomenal success for the UK and we should all be proud of it, but it is being handicapped. We have heard from around the Chamber how the industry faces great challenges, such as clarity and direction over Brexit and the transformation to cleaner energy. On both challenges, it is within the Government’s gift to set a policy to assist the industry—not necessarily to advantage the industry, but certainly not to disadvantage it as at present.

The industry has been extremely competitive, but it is being made uncompetitive as a result of contradictory policies from the Government, particularly the decisions of the Chancellor to further penalise a product that is critical to an orderly transition to a zero-carbon future, while achieving the international climate change obligations and reducing CO2. I simply urge the Minister to revisit both those areas urgently. Whether it is diesel or the transition, we are hampering and damaging the most crucial manufacturing industry in this country.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Child Sexual Exploitation and Consent to Sexual Intercourse

11 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of child sexual exploitation and consent to sexual intercourse.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am delighted to see that the Solicitor General is here to respond to the debate. I put on record, however, that I am disappointed that no one from the Home Office is here to discuss the issue. It was intended that the Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), would be here, but she is not. However unintentional that may be, I find it suggestive of a lack of interest in this topic—it is not the first time that I have had difficulty in engaging the Home Office on the issue.

Recent press coverage of child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs in Telford has enabled many victims to come forward. Some speak about historical crimes that they have not previously reported; others speak of the enormous challenges that they have faced in getting justice. I will focus on the latter point.

Anyone listening to the debate will be astonished, as I was, to learn that a child as young as 13 can be targeted and groomed for sex with multiple men, and that those men can say to police, by way of defence, “I had no reason to believe that she did not consent. I had no reason to believe that she was under 16.” In such circumstances, unless the victim can show otherwise, the police may not have the perpetrator charged with any offence at all. All the perpetrators have to do is say, “The victim willingly met for sex and did not tell me her age.”

It is worth pointing out that, under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, under-age sex is an offence and consent should not be a factor, but in practice, the police can take a different approach. That suggests that they may not fully understand grooming and the power that a perpetrator can exert over a victim who has been groomed. A child who is groomed into acquiscence is not willingly and voluntarily consenting to sex, but they may not get justice unless they can show that they made the perpetrators aware of their age and that they were unwilling.

Grooming is coercion, and it brings about a sense of control over the victim. It can be subtle or indirect, or it may be direct, by way of a threat to shame a child by exposing their sexual activity to their parent, school or friends. Either way, it is a process of psychological manipulation to force a vulnerable child to do something that they do not want to do and would not otherwise have done. That cannot be equated with consent. Just because physical force is not present, that cannot be grounds for the police to infer that a groomed child is consenting.

How can the authorities assume that a child as young as 13 would willingly consent to sex with multiple men? Let us be honest: in the cases I am talking about, the men are not in the child’s social network—they are not young teenagers from the child’s school, or known to the child’s parents or older siblings. They are groups of adult men targeting young girls through street grooming or in takeaways and restaurants. How can the police possibly assume with good reason that the targeted child consents simply because she did not refuse sexual intercourse? Consent must be freely given without duress or coercion. Consent is a voluntary act.

A young girl in Telford was groomed for sex with a group of men. The grooming began while she was celebrating her 13th birthday in a local restaurant. While she was still 13, she became pregnant by one of those men, and her parents realised what was going on and went to the police. The identity of the perpetrators was not an issue and arrests were quickly made. Two things went wrong, however: the police failed to identify that the men were connected to each other, or that the child had been groomed. The police treated the men as if each one was in a separate relationship with the child. She was treated as willingly engaging in sexual activity with men she had voluntarily chosen to have a relationship with.

The offences the police were to consider in the case were rape and engaging in sexual activity with a child under 16. The police accepted that the perpetrators could not have known from the victim’s actions that she did not consent and, further, that the perpetrators reasonably believed that she was over 16, as she had not disclosed her true age to them until after she became pregnant.

It is clear in this case that the child could not articulate in the testimony that she gave to the police the psychological impact of grooming and coercion. When it was put to her by the police, she accepted that she had not told the perpetrators her age and that she had not refused sexual intercourse. Despite not wanting to have sex with any of the men, she accepted that they would not have known that she did not want to have sex, so the police did not ask the Crown Prosecution Service to bring charges.

The grooming was ignored: she had not said no, she had not been physically forced and she was over 12, so it could not be rape, and as she had not revealed her true age, the perpetrators had a reasonable belief that she was over 16, so it could not be sex with a minor.

The destruction and damage to the girl’s life and to her family is impossible to communicate. The family exhausted every avenue in their battle to get justice. One perpetrator, who had sex with the child again while on bail, received three and a half years for sex with a minor, but all the agencies upheld the police’s position when complaints were brought. The family were told that it was right that no charges had been brought against the other perpetrator in the case. How do the parents explain that to their daughter? What message does it send to perpetrators if no charges are brought in such a case?

I want to believe that that is a one-off, isolated case, because under the law consent should not come into it at all. However, the family wrote to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the CPS, the professional standards board, the Home Office and the Prime Minister, and all the parties that responded took the view that the police’s course of action was correct.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on an important local and national issue, and on attracting to the debate the Solicitor General, who is probably the most qualified person in Parliament to respond. The police can always learn lessons, but charging decisions are often a joint
exercise with the Crown Prosecution Service. Some of the cases she refers to are of vulnerable young adults who are known to the local authority. Telford and Wrekin Council, which is a key stakeholder in the issue, needs to get on with conducting the independent inquiry, appointing an independent chairman, restoring public confidence in the local council and ensuring that victims get the justice they deserve.

Lucy Allan: I fully agree with my hon. Friend that the Solicitor General is an eminent and learned colleague. I also agree with his point about Telford and Wrekin Council. Now that it has decided that it will have an investigation into child sexual exploitation in Telford, it is imperative that it gets on and appoints a chairman. We have already waited two months, and I cannot see that anything has happened yet. I hope it will take the opportunity to delay no longer on that. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point.

To return to the case that I was raising, the family wrote to all those different parties and the answer was that the case had been correctly handled. The CPS sent a letter to the family about the perpetrator who was responsible for the victim’s pregnancy, which said: “It was right that no charges have been brought in this case.” It explained why it came to that conclusion by saying that “the prosecution must prove that a victim was not consenting to the sexual intercourse and...that the person accused did not reasonably believe that the victim was consenting.” It went on to say that the victim “was clear that although she may not have wanted sexual intercourse...the suspect would not have been aware from her actions at the time that she did not want to have sexual intercourse...as such a charge of rape is not appropriate and indeed the police did not seek a charging decision from the CPS for an offence of rape.”

It then addressed the possibility of bringing a charge of sexual activity with a child under 16, and said: “The prosecution must prove beyond reasonable doubt that the suspect did not reasonably believe the victim was over 16. We could not prove this to the required standard. The victim agreed that she had not told the suspect her age until after she discovered that she was pregnant. I believe a jury may have doubts as to whether the suspect is guilty. For these reasons, it was right that no charges were brought against this suspect.” I repeat that it was judged “right that no charges were brought against this suspect”.

The authorities were telling the father of a child victim of abuse that there was no good reason to prosecute the men responsible.

Anyone else looking at the facts of this case would see grotesque and traumatic abuse and exploitation of a child by multiple perpetrators; anyone else would understand the lifelong impact that this horrendous crime would have on this child and her family. But the police did not see that. When I discussed this case with them, it was almost as if they thought that it had been the child seeking out the perpetrators and not the other way round. They did not value the account given by the victim. They did not see an abused child; they saw a young woman who had failed to reveal her true age willingly engaging in sexual activity with multiple men.

Social services became involved in the case after the event and held multi-agency meetings; in fact, they held a number of them. At every one of those meetings, what was discussed was a behavioural contract for the child—a code of conduct for the victim. It was the victim who was placed on a curfew and not allowed out after school. I am sure that everyone in the extensive cast list at those multi-agency meetings meant well and wanted to protect the child from further harm, but why was it her behaviour that was in question and not the behaviour of the men who had committed the crime?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech, and what I am hearing is really concerning. The thought occurs to me that when an older man seeks to have sex—consensual sex, as he may think it is—with an obviously young girl, surely it is up to him to find out the girl’s age, so that he can be confident that she is old enough to engage in sexual activity, rather than his just being blithely able to say, “I thought she was old enough”.

I assume that the girl in this case looked young; surely the onus is on the adult to ensure that she is of the age of consent.

Lucy Allan: Indeed—the hon. Lady makes an excellent point. She and I would both have reached that conclusion and many members of the public would, too, which is why I am glad that it has now been placed on the record.

It is difficult for me to understand why it was the victim’s behaviour that was in question and not the behaviour of the men. It is almost as if it is an accepted norm that predatory grooming and exploitation of young girls will happen, and that it is the victim who must be controlled and not the perpetrators. That is not a world that any of us want a young person to grow up in. We all want to see vulnerable young people being protected, but does that really mean that young girls should be prevented from going out after school? In this case, the known perpetrators were released without charge and without any monitoring of their behaviour. That is more than just victim-blaming; it is a failure even to see that there is a victim.

That suggests that something is very wrong, because how is it that the police could fail to see an abused child when an ordinary member of the public would see one? The police acted as if this was a young woman freely entering into multiple relationships with multiple older men, each of whom—the police thought—did not realise they were doing anything wrong, as they thought she was over 16. In fact, one of the men suggested that he thought this 13-year-old was 18.

Are the police undervaluing or not even accepting the testimony of victims while accepting the testimony of the perpetrators, or is it just that they do not understand what grooming is and the impact that it can have on the way a child behaves? What is apparent is that there is no requirement to consider the impact of grooming and coercion, or the power that a perpetrator can have over a child victim, when the decision is made about whether to ask the Crown Prosecution Service to press charges.

Under sections 9 to 11 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, sex with a child under 16 is an offence irrespective of consent, and I am sure that the Minister will confirm that. Given that law, there is therefore no reasonable basis that in a case such as this, there is no need for the victim to prove that she did not consent or that the perpetrators knew her true age. In reality and in practice, however,
when a child is 13 or over, certain defences can be used, and indeed are used, that are readily accepted by the police without the defendant having to do anything more than simply tell the police their account of events. It must be wrong that individual police officers can, in effect, act as judge and jury and decide not to ask the CPS to charge, particularly in a case such as this one where some very serious offences have been committed.

Grooming is the means by which someone is forced to do something against their will. How could anyone believe that a child who is being groomed has free will to decide whether to have sex with their abusers? That is why we need to have an investigation in Telford and why I am delighted that there will now be such an investigation. Otherwise, how are we going to work out what needs to be done, so that the police and the authorities in general can respond differently in the future? I am glad that the local council has finally agreed to commission such an investigation, although it is due to the work of journalists, who brought some of these issues to light, that the investigation is now happening. I am very pleased that the press has the freedom to report on these issues and bring them out into the open.

I was going to ask the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle, to review the specific case that I have referred to today. I took details of the case to the Home Secretary in March, delivering them in person to the Home Office. I have not yet had a response, and I should be most grateful to receive one, if not from the Solicitor General then from the Home Office in due course. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who is also Minister for Women, will take the time to read the details of the case, which I have given to the Home Office, and indeed the report today’s debate.

In a case where it is clear that a child is the victim of multiple acts of abuse by multiple perpetrators, there should be no reason for that child to show that the abusers knew she was 13 years old. Why should she have to show them that she did not consent to sexual activity, and why, in this particular case, was there no evidence of grooming given to the CPS? I know that it is for the prosecution to prove guilt, but in a case such as this the prosecution is not even being given the opportunity to prove guilt, because no charges were brought. The victim and her family were dismissed by the authorities, more or less on the say-so of the male perpetrators.

In light of what we now know about grooming and child sexual exploitation, I ask the Solicitor General to consider whether it is time to update both the guidance to the police and perhaps the Sexual Offences Act 2003, particularly when it comes to the definition of consent. As I have said, consent cannot be implied by the absence of refusal or the absence of physical force. Coercion and force can and do take many non-physical forms.

As more such cases come to light and we find out more about what is happening—the case that I have referred to is a recent case, not a historic one—it is essential that the police actively look for evidence of grooming that can then pass on to the CPS, which has to make the decision about charging. However, if the CPS does not have the evidence of grooming, then it cannot take it into consideration.

Most children in such circumstances will be unlikely to know that what has happened to them is grooming or coercion, and they certainly cannot be expected to volunteer that information if all they are asked is, “Did you make it clear to the suspect that you did not want to have sex?”

We have come a long way in our response to this crime, but we must now consider whether the law is protecting children and young people from grooming and exploitation. As each case comes to light, we cannot just go on wringing our hands and saying how horrific it is that different cases are emerging up and down the country. If the law does not protect our children from being groomed and targeted for sex, we must update it.

I thank the Solicitor General for listening to what I have had to say today. It is only by listening to the experiences of MPs in their constituencies that the voices of victims are properly heard, and that is why I am disappointed that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department is not here today. The full picture can emerge only by our listening to the voices of the victims, and we need to understand how the law operates in practice, not just how it is written on the statute book. Only by understanding that we can take the necessary action to prevent this abuse happening to more victims. I would be most grateful if the Solicitor General could set out what action can be taken in cases such as the one I have described.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I had been expecting, as Chairman, that a Home Office Minister would be here, but we have an excellent substitute: the Solicitor General.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

May I put on the record the reason for my presence at this debate, bearing in mind my ministerial responsibility as superintendent of the Crown Prosecution Service of England and Wales? As this debate has been quite rightly focused by my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) upon questions of law and the prosecution of these offences, it is entirely appropriate that I am appearing in Westminster Hall today.

May I assure my hon. Friend that I have already had an important conversation with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, who is the Home Office Minister with responsibility for safeguarding? Indeed, Home Office officials are here today with me.

I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend that I have already had an important conversation with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, who is the Home Office Minister with responsibility for safeguarding?

I speak not only as a Minister; I have many years’ experience in prosecuting just this type of offence. Having taken what is now the Serious Crime Act 2015 through Parliament as a Minister, I am proud that in that Act we updated the law to remove old-fashioned references to child prostitution in acknowledgement of the fact that when it comes to consent we are dealing with children. These are children who deserve the protection of the law, and to apply to them the standards that can be applied to fully mature adults is a betrayal of their vulnerability and a failure to safeguard them. Over and above everything, the issue must be one of safeguarding.
Underlying some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised is perhaps a failure, at times, by the respective agencies and their representatives to understand that safeguarding must come first and therefore that the point of view of the child—the victim—is paramount, rather than considerations of another kind. If people understand that, we will make even further progress.

I have been part of a number of inter-ministerial groups on child sexual exploitation, from my time as a member of the coalition Government right through to this year, and I have been impressed by the sense of purpose the Government have shown in seeking to co-ordinate and improve the work that needs to be done to safeguard children. We have had new legislation on safeguarding and a robust response to the appalling incidents in Rotherham, Rochdale and other local areas that shone a light on the problem often encountered by young people in getting their story regarding child sexual exploitation heard and believed.

My hon. Friend raised a specific case, of which I am aware, and I know that she has written to colleagues in the Home Office. She will get a response; I will undertake to ensure that by writing to her. It would perhaps be invidious for me to make detailed comment on the merits of the case, as a further inquiry investigation is under way, but I take on board her points. She drew the important distinction between consent and knowledge of age, both of which issues I will deal with now, in general terms.

When a case meets the threshold, the police should refer it to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. That decision is then made by an independent prosecutor in accordance with the code for Crown prosecutors and CPS legal guidelines. On consent, it is important to draw a distinction between consent in fact and consent in law. In fact, the threshold for absence of consent in law is somewhat more rigorous. A child under the age of 16 cannot in law consent to a sexual act. Therefore, a person is guilty of a child sexual offence such as sexual activity with a child contrary to the 2003 Act if sexual activity takes place and the child is either under 13 or is under 16 and the perpetrator does not reasonably believe them to be 16 or over.

My hon. Friend referred to the question of reasonable belief and I assure her that the test is rigorous and takes into account all the evidence in the case. Proof of the age of a child is of course a simple, straightforward matter—date of birth can easily be proved. The question of reasonable belief often depends on the circumstances, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the old chestnut of, “I didn’t know her age. She didn’t tell me,” does not mean that the police and the prosecution are suddenly discharged of any responsibility to bring the case. Wider circumstances need to be considered and assessed. Each case must stand or fall on its facts, and the perception that somehow at all times the burden should be on the child to prove their position is not correct. It is important that we as Ministers and parliamentarians get that message out there, so that young people know that if they come forward they will be taken seriously and treated properly.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) knows well from experience—we have worked together on such issues and I am grateful for her presence and her intervention today—that it is vital that young people know that we have moved on from the appalling response we saw in Rotherham and other local authorities and that that approach is no longer acceptable. The courts themselves, in sentencing, now readily acknowledge that. The idea that somehow a child can consent in any way to sexual activity, where consent is not an element of the offence, is no longer relevant in sentencing. Indeed, the courts no longer give defendants any mitigation or concession for so-called implied consent on the part of a victim who is a child. That has been an important development as well.

In the context of offences of rape, other than the rape of a child under 13 for which consent is not necessary, the absence of consent must be proved regardless of age. The definition of consent is that a person agrees by choice and has the freedom and capacity to do so—and there comes the issue. Again, it is important that we send the message out clearly that the age and circumstances of the complainant—the victim—must be taken into account in understanding age and capacity.

Acquiescence is not consent, and that message is vital, particularly in the context of some of the child sexual abuse of which we are all aware. The fact that a vulnerable or young person has been groomed starkly raises the reality that he or she may have been placed in a position in which they have merely acceded to sexual activity, rather than having given real, meaningful consent. The despicable actions of those who prey upon such young people should, and have, come under scrutiny when considering the issue of genuine consent. Even in the absence of clear evidence of grooming, a victim under the age of 16 is likely to be considered vulnerable, regardless of whether the defendant believes them to be older. Evidence that a victim has been drugged or is so intoxicated that they no longer have capacity to consent may also support the absence of consent per se.

Mrs Hodgson: I am not privy to all the facts of the case, but in the light of what the Solicitor General said about the age of consent being 16, I really struggle to understand why the men are at large and not behind bars. I am curious about that.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to reiterate the point that has been made. I cannot comment on the specific case, but it is clear to me that we have moved a million light years from perpetrators being able to get away with such things with impunity.

Lucy Allan: Did my hon. and learned Friend say that there will be a review into the case I have put before the Home Office?

The Solicitor General: There is indeed a further investigation as a result of my hon. Friend’s letter and I have committed to writing to her about the outcome.

The tools that the prosecution now has are considerable. We even have tools relating to sending sexual communications to a child ahead of any grooming, which came into force last year, and for young people between the ages of 16 and 18 we also have preventive measures, such as sexual risk prevention orders. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter. I undertake to respond to her more fully in relation to the
specific offence and I reassure her that this Government, and this Solicitor General, take child sexual abuse extremely seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

A one-minute silence was observed in memory of the victims of the Manchester attack.

2.31 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the national funding formula on social mobility.

My thoughts are with all those affected by the terrible atrocity last year in Manchester. We lived in Manchester for many years, and our children went to the arena many times. It could have been them.

A few weeks ago, I joined headteachers from Bath who had given up their Saturday to march through the city because schools are in the depths of a funding crisis that the Government are refusing to acknowledge. We are at a point where teachers are quite literally shouting in the streets, trying to get the Government to listen to them. Today, I am calling on the Government to listen—to listen to the people who are tasked with preparing the next generation for their lives to come, and to listen to them when they say they do not have enough money to do so.

The issue should not be a political football. Teachers simply do not have the resources to do their jobs properly. In 2015, schools were promised they would be funded in line with inflation. Later they were promised that “each school will see at least a small cash increase.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 536.]

That has not happened. Schools are facing higher costs from increased pupil numbers, pensions, national insurance contributions, pay awards, inflation and the apprenticeship levy, while facing a reduction in the education services grant. By 2020, £8.6 billion will have been taken out of the system.

School budgets are at breaking point, with 55% of academies reporting deficit budgets and 75% of secondary schools saying they are spending more than their income. Some 23 local authority areas will see cuts of at least 5% by 2019-20. Some 91% of schools face real-terms cuts by 2019-20 as compared with 2015-16. As cuts continue, teachers as well as support staff are lost, because staffing forms around 85% to 90% of school budgets. In the last two years, 15,000 posts have been deleted in secondary schools.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Out of curiosity, I want to pick up on the point the hon. Lady is making and on funds being moved from one part of the country to another. Does she accept there are circumstances where some schools have historically received more funds but have perhaps had demographic changes, while other areas have also had demographic changes but need more funds? There has to be a point where a reallocation is necessary. We need that reallocation in West Sussex, for a start.

Wera Hobhouse: I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, but if he will allow me, I will point out how things look for my local authority of Bath and North East Somerset,
where school funding per pupil is falling in 58 schools and increasing in only 17. I would like to see local authorities where that balance is different.

In my local authority, three out of four schools are losing funding. For example, under the new funding system, one school in my constituency—Twerton Infant School and Nursery—will see a 0.5% increase next year. However, in September, it will be paying its teachers 2% more. It will also be paying its support staff between 2% and 5% more. If we add inflation on top—it is currently 2.5%—the financial outlook starts to look incredibly bleak. The school is facing a funding black hole of at least £50,000.

During Education questions last week, I asked the Minister whether school funding was rising in line with inflation. He dodged the question and suggested that the Government were helping schools by giving them advice for managing their energy bills. That very same day, the headteacher at Twerton Infants, George Samios, had been sitting with his business manager trying to find £50,000 in savings. Needless to say, £50,000 is significantly more than the school’s energy bill.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that, while raising teachers’ pay on the main scale 2% and 5% more. If we add inflation on top—it is currently 2.5%—the financial outlook starts to look incredibly bleak. The school is facing a funding black hole of at least £50,000.

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Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for that intervention, but it is very clear that talking in percentages hides the real picture and does not tell us the per pupil funding. My headteacher in Twerton is absolutely clear that per pupil funding is going down, year on year, and the pupils who are particularly suffering are those who need extra support.

Nick Gibb: With regard to Twerton Infant School, I was talking about per pupil funding. It will rise to £5,457 per pupil once the national funding formula is implemented in full, compared with the national average of £4,189 per pupil.

Wera Hobhouse: I am listening to my headteacher, who has given me the numbers. If he gets a 0.5% increase, but has to pick up increases in teachers’ pay and in support staff, his overall funding is going down. If the Minister is happy to meet with me and that headteacher, we can probably discuss it at an individual level.

If children do not receive the right support, they do not reach their full potential, which is a national tragedy, because we lose out as a country. We lose out on the nurses and teachers of the future, the software engineers and the hospitality professionals—the list is endless. We deprive Britain of the people who will continue building its prosperity. The worst thing is that the loss of opportunity particularly affects children and families from poorer areas.

In my maiden speech, I said that whenever I mention that I am the MP for Bath, people go, “Ooh, Bath, how beautiful!” It is, but like almost every other place in the country, Bath suffers from serious inequality. One fact illustrates that perfectly, and it is well known in Bath, but perhaps not outside it. Twerton Infant School, which I mentioned, lies on the number 20A bus route. Three stops on from Twerton, life expectancy increases by seven years. Let that sink in for a second—seven years’ difference over a five-minute bus journey. The so-called “fair funding” formula eradicates the extra funding that used to go to schools in catchment areas with high levels of deprivation.

Jeremy Quin: We all agree that funds must be there to support those most in need. Personally, I welcomed the national funding formula’s emphasis on ensuring that children who come from deprived backgrounds, or who have English as a second language and need extra support, get that targeted support. That is in addition to the pupil premium, which was a great triumph of the coalition. I think the hon. Lady is being a little unfair on the national funding formula.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I go by what I see on the ground. I have just explained that I am a trustee of a multi-academy trust. We are facing a problem with the of local authority staff, particularly in welfare and support roles. Trusts are meant to pick up those roles. They cannot, because they do not have the money, so staff who are helping young people with difficulties are not supported. That is the tragedy.

The important point is that the schools that most need the support are losing the most money. However, as we know from an announcement last week, the Government have found some extra money—£50 million for grammar schools. To me, that clearly demonstrates that the Government are committed to inequality. Inequality has no place in our society. Every child has the right to achieve their full potential, and should receive the support and education to do so. That costs money, and the state has a duty to provide it.

Schools are in a funding crisis. I very much appreciate the Minister’s being here today. I urge him to listen not just to me, but to teachers and headteachers across the country.

2.45 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate. It was very short-notice but, as she flagged up, this is an important issue.

This is one of those fascinating debates where it is a bit like the old cliché of apples and pears, in the sense that one side says one thing, and the other side tweaks it a wee bit, says, “It’s an apple, not a pear,” and stands the argument on its head. Rather than going round in circles, which we can do, frankly, for hours, I will mention one point in particular that strikes home to me.

I have been involved in politics for nigh on 20 years, and previously I spent many years in business. In all the years that I have been in politics, I have discovered that senior public sector people very rarely put their head above the parapet—for obvious reasons, as doing so can put their career in jeopardy. Whether that is right or wrong is irrelevant to the argument. The main thing is that colleagues will remember that, last year, 5,000 headteachers across the country not only wrote to their Members of Parliament and to the Government but went on a march, because they were so anxious about what they said were real-terms cuts to our schools budget. Before I get on to those cuts, I reiterate that I have never seen, in all my years in politics, so many senior people within schools say, “We can’t be doing with this any more. We’re going on a march. We need the money, otherwise our schools are in trouble.” That was so significant to me.

Clearly I know a lot of my local schools, and I met a lot of the heads both when I was first an MP and during the time after I was briefly deenestrated before coming back as the Member of Parliament. I have known some of those people for a long time. I can even remember, in the halcyon days of the coalition, trying to get them to go public on particular issues. There was no way that they would put their head above the parapet, because they did not need the grief. On this issue, however, heads across the country—in Labour, Conservative and Liberal areas across England—were so angry that they rose up and said, “Our schools are facing a crisis.”

To be fair, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), listened and came up with an additional £1.3 billion. I am quite sure that there were sound political reasons for that as well, because of the snap election, but I will give her due credit because I think she deserves it. Despite our being on different sides politically, I thought that she was a good Secretary of State.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend agree that it was slightly concerning that that £1.3 billion was not new money? When the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sit, questioned representatives from the Department
on where that money would come from, they said that the vast majority of it was coming from so-called efficiency savings. At the time, they were unable to tell us exactly where the money was coming from. Does my hon. Friend share my worry about that?

Stephen Lloyd: I entirely agree. A lot of it was apparently not new money, and anyway, even with the best will in the world, it just held everything in place for 12 months—it did not solve the problem. As my hon. Friend has emphasised, as we began to pick into and drill down into those figures, what did we discover? We discovered that quite a lot of it was not the new money it was initially alleged to be.

Having said that, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Putney. I believe that her heart was in the right place and that she was fighting the schools’ corner as strongly as she could. I certainly think she was probably more on our side of the divide when it came to grammar schools, which is possibly why she is now the ex-Secretary of State—but who am I to make such an allegation?

I come back to the important fact that the headteachers—the people who know—say that funding is going down; there are not net increases, and it has been going on for years and causing real problems. Teachers have not had a decent wage increase in many years, and again, there is a real cross-party push on that. We are hearing soundings from within Government that there is an appreciation that teachers’ wages need to be increased more in line with inflation, similar to the situation in the NHS. However, it is terribly important, to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), that that is done with new money. If we finally do get that salary increase for teachers, and there is the same story of efficiencies—after seven years they are really beginning to cut into the lean muscle, with the fat having gone from the whole sector—that will be very disappointing. If the Government sign off a good pay increase on the one hand but then on the other hand say that that is done with school budgets, we will go even further backwards.

I have known the Minister a long time; I hold him in genuine respect, even with our disagreements in the past. I urge him to make a statement today about the scale of the salary rise and a commitment that it will be funded by new money and not taken from school budgets, which would just make a bad situation chronic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and I have tabled an early-day motion today, specifically urging that the Government find new money to pay teachers a decent increase after their many years of getting static salary increases. I urge hon. Members to sign the early-day motion; I am sure it is very much a cross-party aim that many of us would support.

As I said, it comes down to apples and pears. The National Audit Office—as we all know, it is a highly reputable, respected body—says that in 2018-19, schools will experience additional cost pressures of 1.6%. That may not sound an awful lot, but after a few years of consistent 1%, 2% and 2.5% rises, and a failure to get net funding increases, it adds up considerably. The additional cost pressure comes on top of several years of static Government funding and increases in pupil numbers, salary increments, employer national insurance contributions, employer pension contributions and inflation, meaning that real school budgets have seen a decline of—wait for it—about 15%.

I was in business for years before I went into politics. I know how to trim and how to make efficiency savings. When times are tough, we have to go through efficiency savings. I wholly signed up to those necessary efficiency savings in coalition, but there comes a time when a line needs to be drawn. If someone is looking at a 1.5% real-terms cut in their business, school or hospital, they are heading for a car crash. That is why I, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who is the Liberal Democrat lead in this area, and the Labour party urge the Government to make a longer-term, significant increase to contributions to the schools’ budget, as well as a separate increase to teachers’ wages.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend recognise from meetings he has had with headteachers, as I have had, that the reason why this is significant is that roughly 75% of a school’s budget goes on its teaching and support staff? The reduction in budget can only come from what is left. Schools have now got to the point where they can cut no more without affecting frontline staff, and that will lead to a drop in the quality of service that we can give children and parents across the country.

Stephen Lloyd: My hon. Friend is so right. We know that is true. Hon. Members will have spoken to their local headteachers and visited their schools. The number of teaching assistants has been slashed, and support for disabled children is under tremendous pressure. The schools are creaking—there are no two ways about it. I know that the budget is huge and there are thousands and thousands of schools across the country, but having proper funding is such a crucial part of our nation’s future.

I reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath about grammar school investment. I thought that, after the catastrophic consequence of the snap election in 2017 for the governing party, the whole idea of grammar schools had been kicked into the long grass. Suddenly, out of nowhere, it got into the headlines last week—another £50 million for grammar schools. There really are better ways than grammar schools in a society where we are trying to give everyone the same opportunities to succeed. Without banging on about it, there is so much empirical evidence that shows that they are counterproductive and do not improve outcomes for disadvantaged people. There is so much evidence there that I will not even bore the Minister by outlining it.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath for securing this really important debate on an issue that affects our future and our children’s future. I had the pleasure of welcoming pupils from a wonderful school in my constituency called Shinewater this morning. I know it well; I have visited it probably one gazillion times over the years that I have been either the MP or the parliamentary candidate. It is in a more disadvantaged part of my wonderful constituency of Eastbourne, in Langney. It is a great school with passionate teachers, and the sort of school where the Liberal Democrat policy of the pupil premium, which we delivered when...
we were in coalition, makes such a difference. That additional funding and support means that children who may not have the obvious advantages that I and many other Members of Parliament have had have an equal chance to have a very successful life in their jobs and relationships.

It was wonderful to welcome the children here. They were all about six or seven years old. Many of them had never even been on a train, let alone an underground. It is so long ago that I was that young that I can barely remember, but it was a pleasure to welcome them. I know the pressure that school is under. It is a good school, and it is doing its best and doing well, but it does not have anywhere near the number of TAs that it used to have. Its funding for special educational needs is severely stretched, and likewise its funding from the county council. It is the sort of school where the teachers go the extra mile, beyond anything that any teachers would have even contemplated 30, 40 or 50 years ago. They do it because they are passionate about the children and the school. I urge the Minister to help us to help schools such as Shinewater around the country—to give them the budget they deserve, to give the teachers the salary rise they deserve and to secure our schools’ funding and future for many years to come.

2.59 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am most grateful to be called to speak, Mr Walker, in particular because, only about five minutes ago, I intimated to you that I had not prepared a speech and did not intend to deliver one. I am most grateful that you have found time for me. This is an important subject, which it was important to raise, and I thought it deserved a longer airing in the House than would otherwise have been the case.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing the debate. My colleagues in West Sussex and I campaigned long and hard for a national funding formula. We were pleased to get a 5% increase in overall funding for the county, so I suppose I should congratulate the hon. Lady on doing better than that—the hon. Lady or, if I may be so bold, her predecessor. A 7% increase is possibly one of the highest increases achieved by any area of the country as a result of the NFF reallocation.

The hon. Lady is right that one can do a lot with statistics, but those I have seen show that we have, as a country, rightly put a huge emphasis on education. I think we have more than doubled our per pupil funding since the early 1990s, and we needed to: we expect a lot more from schools and teachers than we ever did before, and I pay credit to their huge commitment. Perhaps the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe we spend more per pupil on education than France or Germany. We need to—it is an investment in our future, and I am delighted that we make that commitment as a country. We owe it to our children and to our country to ensure that we have a fantastic cohort of children coming through.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In my constituency, we get £17 less per pupil, so when we talk about funding increases, it is important to bear in mind that, outside London, the situation is not the same for every constituency—the funding formula may not be fair for areas that are deprived.
ability and give our kids the head start in life that they need and that we all want for them. However, the NFF is right to go beyond that: we also need to allocate according to the characteristics of the pupils, be that speaking English as a second language, being in receipt of free school meals or having low prior attainment.

Education is part of the answer to help the country achieve better social mobility—it is only part of the answer, but it is an important part. Surely an NFF approach through which we recognise the individual characteristics of pupils is the right approach. The NFF is not the perfect answer, and I shall continue to work on it and to bend the ear of the Minister, but it is a step in the right direction, and the Government were right to introduce it.

3.5 pm

[Jeremy Quin]

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate and for her eloquent and detailed speech outlining the key issues facing our schools and the negative impact that some of the Government’s decisions are having on our children. I also thank the hon. Members for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) for their contributions, and other Members for their interventions.

It is safe to say that there is a consensus in the Chamber: we all agree that our system of school funding should be designed to improve social mobility. Sadly, that is probably where the agreement ends, because everything the Government does flies in the face of improving social mobility—from their inaction on low pay and insecure work to their punitive welfare reform measures, which led the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to conclude that almost 400,000 more children have been plunged into poverty in the past four years and that the number of children in poverty is due to soar over the next few years to a record 5.2 million. The new schools funding system is no different: it will not achieve social mobility.

Children should never be denied the same opportunities in life just because of the place they were born. Yet in the north, two to three-year-olds are less likely than those in other areas, for children with low prior attainment and for speaking English as a second language, being in receipt of free school meals or having low prior attainment.

Children should never be forced to choose between funding the day-to-day expenses of their schools and getting the high-needs funding that is vital to so many of their pupils’ needs.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that. I think I can pre-empt what the Minister will say. He will tell us that there is funding for children in disadvantaged areas, for children with low prior attainment and for children eligible for free school meals. That is correct, and it is welcome, but it is simply not good enough. It is not good enough, because it ignores the wider issues facing schools in terms of the implementation of the funding formula and the impact of the first cuts to school budgets in a generation.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree that headteachers are not just making that up? For example, a headteacher in a deprived area in my constituency is not laying off support staff because he enjoys doing that; he is laying off support staff and those who help vulnerable children because he does not have the money.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I agree. I have had representations from headteachers, staff and support assistants in my constituency as well. That problem faces schools throughout our country—they are put in an intolerable position because their funding has been cut and cut.

The Education Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have both said that every school in the country will receive a cash-terms increase to their funding. We know, however, that that is simply not the case, as do the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies and the UK Statistics Authority, which has repeatedly told the Government that that claim is not accurate. Perhaps the Minister will get it right this time. I am sure that by now his Department has received the local funding formula for every local authority in the country. Can he tell us how many schools will face a real-terms cut to their budgets, and is he able to tell us where those schools are?

The Minister has told us of the local authorities that have written to his Department to seek permission to top-slice their budgets to fund additional high-needs support. How many schools across the country will see their block funding cut as a result of those decisions? Such cuts should not be necessary. Schools and councils should never be forced to choose between funding the day-to-day expenses of their schools and getting the high-needs funding that is vital to so many of their pupils’ needs.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and for raising the issue of special educational needs provision. The education, health and care plan system is not working in places such as Oxfordshire because the county does not have the resources to deliver it. Although the schools are able to come up with the plans, they and the county do not have the money. Is this a picture that she has seen, because it is inundating my inbox?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. A recent local ombudsman report said that the picture of ECHP plans across the country is dire, and local authorities are often spending more money on tribunals to rectify decisions they made in the face of cuts, rather than actually implementing the plans in the way they should be implemented in the first place.

The fact is that school budgets have been slashed for the first time in a generation. The National Audit Office found that, since 2015, £2.7 billion has been lost from school budgets in real terms. If the Government were not making cuts to school budgets, it would be possible to introduce a new funding formula in a way that was equitable and sustainable and that could actually improve social mobility, but the Government are failing to do that. When the revised funding formula was put forward after the snap general election, one of the major changes was the introduction of a minimum funding level per pupil in secondary schools. Given the way that the formula allocates funding and the extent to which it allocates more funding to disadvantaged pupils, a minimum
funding level would be particularly helpful to schools that take a very small number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds—in other words, grammar schools.

When the £4,600 minimum per secondary school pupil was announced, the Government committed an extra £1.3 billion to schools over two years. How much of that additional funding will find its way to grammar schools? It seems to us in the Labour party that finding extra funding to go to grammar schools—most of them in areas represented by the Minister’s colleagues on the Conservative Back Benches—is not a policy that will increase social mobility. In fact, it will do the opposite and focus resources more and more on the pupils who need it least, while those who need the additional support and additional funding will simply not have access to it.

We do not object to the principle of a minimum level of funding per pupil. However, it is worth remembering how the Conservative party arrived at that policy. When the funding formula was first devised, the Government did not believe that there should be a minimum funding level. Only after their Back Benchers—particularly those representing schools with more affluent intakes—raised concerns that they did not see enough extra funding in the formula did the Minister come to believe in the policy.

Although we welcome the belief in the minimum amount to which every single pupil should be entitled, I wish the Government would do this properly. Instead of finding a fraction of the funding that our schools need by making cuts elsewhere in an effort to buy off their own Back Benchers, why did the Minister not push to end the cuts to school budgets and increase per pupil funding in real terms for every single child, not just a minority of children?

Despite there being some elements of the funding formula that we welcome, the funding that goes to the most disadvantaged pupils is being cut in real terms year after year. Despite the rhetoric from the Government, the pupil premium has been falling in real terms every year since 2015. They have failed to increase the funding in line with inflation, which has led to the funding falling in real terms. In fact, it has fallen by £140 million.

A recent article in the press noted: “A Department for Education source confirmed that in real terms the amount per pupil spent on the pupil premium specifically has fallen.”

Will the Minister confirm today that the per pupil spending on the pupil premium has fallen in real terms? Will he also tell us why, in reducing the funding formula, the Government have not ensured that that vital funding is protected?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is very generous for allowing me to intervene again. Does she agree that the pupil premium introduced by the coalition Government was a powerful thing because it followed every single pupil around? The fact that funding per pupil is now being cut is a tragedy and is counter to what was radically introduced during the coalition Government.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. It will come as no surprise to her that I am a big advocate of the pupil premium and pupil premium plus.

Does the Minister really believe that the funding formula can truly support social mobility when it has not included meaningful protection of funding for the most disadvantaged students in our schools? He might say that the funding formula does not distribute pupil premium funding, but it would be disingenuous to act as though the two issues could be meaningfully separated.

The issue of school funding and how it is allocated includes the pupil premium, whether the Minister considers them to be the same issue or not.

I sincerely hope that, in answering our questions and after listening to today’s debate, the Minister will show some appreciation of the fact that it is simply not possible to really improve social mobility when the Government have cut school budgets for the first time in a generation and are slashing the funding that goes to the most disadvantaged pupils year after year. Frankly, Minister, our children deserve better.

3.16 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate. I will start by saying that standards are rising significantly in our schools: 1.9 million more pupils are in schools now rated good or outstanding compared with 2010. Children are reading better thanks to our reforms and we secured the highest ever scores in the PIRLS—the progress in international reading literacy study—of nine-year-olds’ reading ability when that was published last year. The proportion of young people taking at least two science subjects at GCSE has risen from 63% to 91%. Nine out of 10 young people now take at least two science subjects at GCSE.

The attainment gap between those from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds has closed by 10% both at primary and secondary level. We are spending record amounts of money on our schools: £42.4 billion this year, rising to £43.5 billion from next year. We are spending £2.5 billion on the pupil premium: £13 billion since 2010. None of that could have been afforded had we not made careful decisions about public spending across Whitehall when we came into office in 2010, tackling a historic budget deficit of £150 billion, equal to 10% of our GDP. The country was on the verge of bankruptcy owing to the banking crisis of 2008-09 and because of decisions taken by the previous Government.

We brought that down to about 2% of GDP. We have the highest level of employment in our history and the lowest level of unemployment for 40 years, and that has enabled us to maintain spending in real terms per pupil in our schools.

Of course, there have been cost pressures, particularly in the three years leading up to last year: higher national insurance contributions, which help to deal with the deficit, and higher employer’s pension contributions to the teachers’ pension scheme are costs that schools have had to absorb. We are helping schools with our school resource management advice on how they can manage those costs.

Nick Gibb: Under the national funding formula no school will see a cut in funding this year or next year. They will all receive, through the national funding
formula, the money that is allocated to local authorities, which will be a rise of at least 0.5% for every school in the country and up to 3% this year for the lower-funded schools. How those local authorities allocate the funding to the schools this year and next year—we are allowing local discretion as we transition towards the national funding formula—will be for them to decide, but every local authority is receiving sufficient cash to pay at least a 0.5% increase to every single school in their area.

Wera Hobhouse: Can the Minister explain to me how advice increases funding? Advice is not the money that the schools need. In Bath, which has definitely not had a particular drop in population, 58 schools are losing and 17 are gaining. Almost three out of four schools are losing funding. How can the Minister explain that loss in funding?

Nick Gibb: Perhaps I may turn to schools in the hon. Lady’s constituency. Funding for Bath and North East Somerset will rise by 8.8% once the national funding formula is fully implemented. That is an increase of £8.4 million under the national funding formula. As my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) said, it is one of the largest increases for any area. To take some individual examples of schools in the hon. Lady’s constituency, Bathwick St Mary Church of England Primary School will have a rise of 9.5% once the national funding formula is fully implemented, and there are large increases for other schools in the constituency. She cited Twerton Infant School, whose funding level is £5,457 once the funding formula is fully implemented. That is significantly higher than the national average for a primary school of £4,189. In the move to a national funding formula, there will be schools that do not get as big an increase as schools in, for example, Horsham, or, indeed, other schools in her constituency that were underfunded, according to the formula. She happened to pick the one that was receiving a smaller increase than others, but that is because its per pupil funding of £5,457 under the formula is significantly higher than the national average.

Wera Hobhouse: Figures are figures, and can be turned one way or the other. I said in my speech that the funding increase received per pupil is 0.5%, but the extra pressures, which have been acknowledged, are mounting up to 4.5%. That is a lot of pressure—more than the extra funding. I worry about schools that are getting even less, because the head teachers in Bath do not lay people off for the fun of it. They do it because they do not have the necessary resources any more. Figures and percentages will not take that away. Will the Minister explain why headteachers have to lay off staff?

Nick Gibb: In circumstances where headteachers feel they have to do that, it is because they need to manage their funding within their budget. Funding for schools goes up and down depending on the number of pupils. If they have fewer pupils, they will of course receive less money per pupil and the overall budget will be less. That sometimes means planning for staff not to be replaced.

Stephen Lloyd: On that basis, how does the Minister explain the fact that in the past 18 months or so the number of schools releasing teaching assistants has grown faster than in the previous five years? Does he accept that that must be because of budgetary pressures and that, if it happens across the piece, it could lead to severe challenges down the line?

Nick Gibb: We have a benchmarking website where schools can look at their pupil-staff ratios. We have a tool that schools are using, called the curriculum-led financial planning tool. Schools can examine their curriculum using the tool, which was developed by some schools in the north of England—the Outwood Grange multi-academy trust—to ensure that over a three to five-year time span they are planning their staffing to reflect their curriculum. I think that a lot of schools are applying that tool and becoming more efficient. We are helping schools to manage their resources in a way that ensures they can balance the budget.

Every school will, according to the national funding formula, receive an increase in funding of at least 0.5%, but the Secretary of State has acknowledged on many occasions, as I have today, that there have been cost pressures: employers’ national insurance contributions have risen, as they have across the public and private sectors, and there are higher employer’s contributions to the teachers’ pension scheme. We think that is the right thing to do, to get the balance of the cost of those things spread between the schools and the taxpayer and to help to deal with the deficit. We are helping schools to tackle those cost pressures, but the hon. Gentleman should remember that we are spending record amounts of money on schools—£42.4 billion this year rising to £43.5 billion next year. We have been able to do that and maintain per pupil funding in real terms because we have a strong economy and have managed the public finances in a sensible way, bringing down the deficit and keeping public spending under control.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for his acknowledgement of the increased cost pressures. Another cost pressure—welcome, in a sense—is the rise in pay, particularly for teachers on the main pay scale. I want that to continue, because as the Minister knows teacher retention and recruitment is a major issue in the sector, but does he agree that if it does continue we will at some point need new money in the system, so that we do not keep eating away at the tiny amounts left until it is necessary to cut the number of teachers to make the numbers work?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady will know that the School Teachers Review Body, the independent pay body that makes recommendations about teachers’ pay, has reported to the Department, and we are looking at that report. We will respond to it, and I hope that that will be before the summer recess; that is our intention.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I have been following the Minister’s remarks on overall funding. Does he seriously think that what the Government are now implementing makes up for the £2.7 billion lost since 2015 in the first cuts to school budgets in a generation and for all the neglect since 2010?
Nick Gibb: I remind the hon. Lady that last year schools funding was £41 billion. This year—2018-19—it is £42.4 billion, and in 2019-20 it will be £43.5 billion. As the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, that will allow us to maintain school and high-needs funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years. The IFS also pointed out that by 2020 real-terms per pupil funding will be some 70% higher than it was in 1990 and 50% higher than it was in 2000.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) acknowledged the extra £1.3 billion brought in, which we were able to identify last summer. We have been able to ensure that all schools, and all areas, will attract some additional funding over the next two years and have provided for up to 6% gains per pupil for underfunded schools by 2019-20. We have therefore, Mr Walker, gone further than our manifesto pledge—and I should have mentioned at the outset what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship; I was keen to get stuck into the debate. Now every school in every area will, under the national funding formula, receive at least 0.5% more per pupil this year than it received in 2017-18 and 1% more in 2019-20. The significant extra investment in schools demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, receives an excellent education.

During consultation on the formula, we heard that we could do more to support the schools that attract the lowest per pupil funding, something that the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned in her remarks. We listened to those concerns—something that I am criticised for, but I thought it was important to do so—and our formula will rightly direct significant increases towards those schools. In 2019-20, the formula will provide a minimum per pupil funding of £4,800 in respect of every secondary school and £3,500 in respect of every primary. That ensures that every school will attract a minimum level of funding through the formula, no matter what its pupil characteristics are. In addition, those schools will be able to attract even larger increases, as we have not limited their year-on-year gains to the 3%. Some of the lowest-funded schools in the country will therefore attract gains of more than 10% per pupil by 2019-20—something that I now understand the Labour party opposes. It therefore opposes, for example, the increase under the national funding formula of 10.1%—some £145,000—for Newbridge Primary School in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath. That minimum funding also applies to St Stephen’s Church School, which, under this system, will receive a funding increase of 17.5%, or £214,000. Beechen Cliff School will receive a 10.9% increase in funding, equal to £427,000, once the national funding formula is fully implemented.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will give way once I have finished this list, which I have to say is rather long. Hayesfield Girls’ School in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath will receive an 8% increase, equal to £335,000, once the national funding formula is fully implemented, and Oldfield Secondary School will receive a 9.4% increase of £414,000. Saint Gregory’s Catholic College will receive an 8.2% increase once the funding formula is fully implemented, equal to £293,000.

With the national funding formula, we have been able to allocate funding to schools that historically have been underfunded. We listened carefully to the f40 campaign, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham was part, and we want to deal with the historical unfairness of schools that have been underfunded year after year. We are addressing that, and the examples I have given show that we have a national funding formula from which schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath are benefiting. Bath is getting one of the biggest increases of any local authority in the country, and I had hoped that she would come to this debate to congratulate the Government on taking a brave stance in implementing that funding formula.

Wera Hobhouse rose—

Mrs Lewell-Buck rose—

Nick Gibb: I will give way to the hon. Member for Bath since I mentioned her, and then to the shadow Minister.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister is generous in giving way. I am grateful on behalf of any school that receives extra funding, but that extra funding should not come at the expense of other schools that most need more funding. To me, a fair funding formula should be based on the biggest need. As I said earlier, every child from whatever background should receive the education they deserve, but if we are to address social mobility, we must focus on those who need the most support. In Bath, schools in the most deprived areas are losing out, which is not acceptable.

Nick Gibb: But those schools are funded at significantly above the national average for schools, and if we are moving towards a national funding formula, that will be the consequence. We addressed that in our 2017 manifesto when we said that no school would have a cut in funding to get to the national funding formula position, but we changed that when we came back after 2017 and secured extra funding of £1.3 billion. That enabled us to introduce this minimum funding from which many schools in the hon. Lady’s constituency have benefited and to ensure that no school will have a cut in funding, since the worst that can happen is a 0.5% increase in each of those two years.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Minister is talking about fairness and equity in the system, but what does he say to a school in the north-east that, according to the National Education Union, is set to lose £8,000 per pupil? How is that fair?

Nick Gibb: What the NEU is doing with its school cuts campaign is misleading. It is taking the cost pressures that we have acknowledged and telling the public that those are funding cuts. I have been clear that no school has had a funding cut. School funding went up in real terms per pupil in the last Parliament, and that increase has been maintained in real terms.1 The NEU is talking about cost pressures that have had to be absorbed, not just by the school system but by other parts of the public sector and the private sector. The hon. Lady will know that once the national funding formula is fully implemented, funding in South Tyneside will increase by 4.5%, which is equal to £3.9 million more going into schools in that area.

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Mrs Lewell-Buck: I was not going to intervene again, but the Minister mentioned my area, and I will not take any lessons from him about what is happening to schools on my patch. Teachers come to see me on a regular basis saying that they are at breaking point because the cuts are damaging their ability to continue. Some schools are saying that they will have to go down to teaching just four days a week. I am sorry, but the Minister is wrong when he talks about how great things are for school funding in south Tyneside.

Nick Gibb: I am saying that thanks to the £1.3 billion extra funding that we secured, schools in south Tyneside will receive an extra 4.5% once the funding formula is fully implemented, which is equal to £3.9 million.

[Interruption.] I have acknowledged that over the last three years, up to 2017-18, there have been cost pressures. Higher employer national insurance contributions have had to be absorbed not just in the school sector but across the public and private sectors, and there have been higher teachers’ pensions contributions, which was the right thing to do.

Jeremy Quin: I am slightly frustrated, so I will share my frustration with the Minister. I would like more money to be spent on schools—I think everyone in the Chamber would like more money to be spent on pupils, and we would like better standards even more. I know that standards are rising, and what is being achieved on the attainment gap is great. However, I am frustrated because when the Conservative party came into office with its coalition partner, there was a £145 billion deficit that the kids of today were going to have to pay back. It is all very well wanting more and more money spent on things, but that money has to be raised. In the past, billions and billions of pounds were being left for the schoolchildren of today to repay, and that is not fair either.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a good point, because that debt also carries an interest charge, which is similar to the overall amount of money we spend on schools each year. If we were to go down the Labour party’s route of promising even more expenditure and borrowing tens of billions of pounds to renationalise whole swathes of the private sector, as was promised during the general election and has been promised since, we would add even more to the interest that we have to pay each year. Indeed, we would have to pay something like £9 billion more in interest charges than we pay already.

When fully implemented, the national funding formula will lead to a 4%—£3.4 million—increase in the constituency of the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), and in Oxford West and Abingdon the increase will be 2.4%, which is £1.2 million extra for schools. Once the funding formula has been implemented in full, there will be a 3% increase in funding for schools in Oxfordshire as a whole, which is £10.5 million. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon referred to high-needs schools, and those schools will get an increase of 3.7% to £60.6 million. That important money is being spent on the most vulnerable children in our society, which is why there has been a 3.8% increase in funding in her area.

Layla Moran: Does the Minister understand the frustration not just of the teaching profession but of parents? I am a governor at one of the schools in Oxfordshire that he mentioned. Perhaps he is suggesting that the board of governors and I are not managing our money or resources properly. I assure him that we are doing everything we can for this issue not to affect frontline services, but it does. My question is simple: does the Minister accept that although he can spout numbers—it is true; these are facts—the reality on the ground in schools such as Botley Primary School in my constituency is that teachers are at breaking point, and parents are beginning to see the real effects of the cost pressures that are played off against the increases in funding that the Minister lists?

Nick Gibb: We have to live within our budget, and the Treasury has to work with the tax receipts it receives and deal with the historic budget deficit it inherited. Somebody has to lend the state that money, and they would not lend us £150 billion every year if we showed no sign of reducing that figure to something more manageable and did not plan ultimately to eliminate it altogether. That is what is happening. That is why we have a strong economy and the lowest level of unemployment for 40 years, why there are opportunities for young people to have a job once they leave our school system, and why fewer children are living in workless households. That is all part of how to manage the public sector in a serious way, which is what the Government have been doing since 2010. That is why we have been able to maintain school funding in real terms over that period, spend £23 billion on capital funding for schools, and fund an increase of 825,000 school places to deal with the increasing pupil population.

When we came into office in 2010, we discovered that the previous Government had cut 100,000 school places, despite the increase in the birth rate at the turn of the millennium. We were very sensible in how we managed the capital budget and the revenue budget at a time when we had to tackle a very serious budget deficit as a consequence of the banking crash in 2008.

Stephen Lloyd: The Minister has been talking a lot about the national fair funding formula and the additional money in the constituencies of the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and of my hon. Friend the Members for Bath and for Oxford West and Abingdon. When exactly will that national funding formula come in? Does the Minister acknowledge that when it comes in, it will be taking over from cuts of upwards of 20%? There is an awful lot for it to make up for.

Nick Gibb: It came in this year, for 2018-19. In the first two years, because of the transition, we want to allow local authorities to have some discretion over how they implement it on a school by school basis. Most authorities are moving quite close to the national funding formula if not moving to it fully, but some want to tweak it for the two years of the transition, and we have allowed that. As I said, we acknowledge that there have been cost pressures, and are helping schools to manage those cost pressures. Going forward, as the IFS said, we are maintaining funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years, because we have managed to secure an extra £1.3 billion.

We are absolutely committed to providing the greatest support to the children who face the greatest barriers to success. That is why we have reformed not just the schools formula but high needs provision, by introducing a high needs national funding formula. It will distribute funding for children and young people with high needs more fairly, based on accepted indicators of need in each area. The extra money that we are making available means that every local authority will see a minimum increase in high needs funding of 0.5% in 2018 and 1% in 2019-20. Underfunded local authorities will receive gains of up to 3% a year per head for the next two years. Overall, local authorities will receive £6 billion to support those with high needs in 2018-19, up by more than £1 billion since 2013-14.

I will draw my remarks to a close, to allow the hon. Member for Bath to make a final contribution to the debate. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Our prime concern is the investment we are making in schools and the steps we are taking to ensure that that money reaches the schools that need it most. That is why we have introduced the national funding formula.

We have been reforming our schools system since 2010, by changing the curriculum to improve the way children are taught to read and the way that maths is taught in our schools. We have reformed our GCSEs so that they are on a par with some of the qualifications taken in higher education institutions around the country. We have been improving behaviour; we have given teachers more powers to deal with bad behaviour in our schools. Standards are rising in our primary and secondary schools, and the attainment gap between children from wealthier and poorer families is closing by 10% in both. Clearly there is more to do, but we are on the right track. Our funding formula is a fairer and more transparent way of distributing funding to our schools.

3.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the hon. Members for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

I thank the Minister for his response. He has been eloquent in telling me how much funding the schools in my constituency have received, and I am sure that on an individual basis, some schools have increased their funding. But the overall picture is that of a funding crisis. I would not have been on the march that I mentioned at the beginning of the debate if headteachers were not so desperate about the situation they are in. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne that this is the first time that people from the profession have gone directly on to the streets to shout about that. I urge the Minister to listen to the professionals—to the headteachers and the teachers across the country—who say that they are in crisis. I urge him to listen to the trust of which I am a trustee. We are very worried, because our reserves are running low and we cannot support schools, particularly in our more deprived areas in our multi-academy trust, because the funding is not there.

If we really are committed to social mobility, it is important that we look particularly at the schools in our more deprived areas and make sure that they receive extra support, rather than support being taken away from them. I will take him up on what he said about extra funding for high needs areas, and I will scrutinise that. I am not quite certain whether that is new money. I agree fully with Members who have said today that we need new money. The 0.5% extra money per pupil that has been put into the system does not make up for the pressures from extra pension contributions, inflation and pay rises. Whatever figures we are bandying around, I believe what I see on the ground. I listen to the parents and the teachers, and I look at the young people in my constituency. We should do so across the country, and make sure that young people do not lose out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of the national funding formula on social mobility.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.
Somerset County Council: Unitary Status

Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair

4 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Somerset County Council’s plans for unitary status.

Thank you for calling me, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) in his place, joining me today. This is an important subject to us, because it concerns the county of Somerset. A fortnight ago, the leader of the county council came to Westminster and threw an unexpected spanner in the works for all Somerset Members, who got no advance warning of the desperate plans to turn the whole county into a unitary. One by one, he spelled out his vision to us, and we were collectively gobsmacked—we had had no warning.

We knew that the county council was squeezed, and we understood the pressures of providing the most expensive public service with a small grant from Government. We also recognised that the writing had been on the same wall in Taunton for years. Fun enough, it was back in 2006 that the idea of a Somerset unitary was originally conceived. I was there at that time; unfortunately my hon. Friend was not, but I believe that he was a county councillor.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): No.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: He says from a sedentary position that he was not, so that is me in the doghouse already.

The idea came from the dangerous mind of the chief executive, a tiny little man called Alan Jones—no surprises there. He was ruthless and he wanted a “lean, mean council”—his words. He went for the quick fix of getting rid of the district councils, and said the county could handle on it, but it is between £11 million and £18 million. We knew that the county council was squeezed, and we understood the pressures of providing the most expensive public service with a small grant from Government. We also recognised that the writing had been on the same wall in Taunton for years. Fun enough, it was back in 2006 that the idea of a Somerset unitary was originally conceived. I was there at that time; unfortunately my hon. Friend was not, but I believe that he was a county councillor.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: He says from a sedentary position that he was not, so that is me in the doghouse already.

The present leader of the county council is still running with the idea 12 years later, and I am afraid that it is as wrong now as it was then. This is what rings alarm bells in my mind: Somerset County Council has never been good with money. I have looked at its books just to prove how bad it is. In 2007, it had only £11 million in the general reserve fund. Here we are, 11 years later, and it still has about £11 million—it is difficult to get a handle on it, but it is between £11 million and £18 million. That may sound like a lot in certain quarters, but it is chickenfeed when the overall budget runs into hundreds of millions. If an unexpected crisis happens—normally it does—there is nothing to fall back on, and unfortunately we have had that in Somerset. Occasionally, the place floods.

Alan Jones liked to pretend that everything was going well, but it was not then and it is not now. The county needed to borrow £376 million in 2007, so Napoleon Jones did a dodgy deal and signed his life away to IBM. He even persuaded his mates in Taunton Deane Borough Council to follow suit. Only two councils did so; the only other organisation to do so was the Avon and Somerset police force, known as the police farce. Together they created a thing called Southwest One, an overblown IT monster that it was boasted would save money faster than anyone could print it. The two councils apparently stood to gain £200 million in savings if everything went according to plan, but it never does—not in Taunton, anyway. Welcome to the south-west bubble: our proud county town—that is what it is—where backhanders are normal and nobody trusts the leaders. The two councils handed over a mass of public money to a multinational, and they wondered why it went belly-up.

If only little Jonesy had got away with creating a unitary, there would have been even more money for—guess who?—IBM. Many of us know of it. The plan was taken over by the districts, but it was doomed because the public did not buy it. When the county council refused to hold a referendum, we—me and the MPs at the time—organised it ourselves, along with the district councils who, regardless of political colour, all subscribed to it. Two hundred thousand people voted, and 84% of them said no.

By July 2007, the people had spoken and unitary Somerset was dead in the water. My hon. Friend the Minister might like to know this. He is the Member for Richmond—I helped on the by-election for his predecessor, Mr William Hague, only because I was in the Army and had a car—and North Yorkshire had also planned to become a unitary, but that plan was rejected by the Government at exactly the same time. There is historical precedent.

As for the Somerset IT monster, Southwest One had only two councils on its books, which made its own death inevitable. Then along came the international financial crisis, the credit crunch and the grim dawn of austerity, which we all remember with no great fondness. Austerity for everybody? Not in Taunton. Jones was sacked by the county in 2009, but it cost £300,000 to get rid of him. Down the road at Taunton Deane, the other IBM champion, Penny James and Shirlene Adam are still in the top jobs and, I am afraid, heading for another IT disaster. They say that donkey dung floats—we have incontinent donkeys galore in Taunton.

By 2012, Somerset Council’s borrowing was on course to hit £410 million, which means shelling out £100,000 every single day just to keep the loans going. All the while, the price of providing vital children’s services and social care was going up, and I say gently to my hon. Friend the Minister that Government grants were coming down.

There is plenty of evidence that the council cannot control what it spends and tackles big problems by taking even more ridiculous risks. The learning and disability service was outsourced, for example, which made financial sense only if the savings added up, but, just like with Southwest One, the real cost outweighed the benefit. Learning and disability burst its budget and then faced extra cuts.

There are ongoing problems in several parts of the council. A recent peer review found that only 65% of promised savings actually took place, so I am afraid the reserves are running out. They were dwindling three years ago when a budget freeze was imposed, but things have got worse. By September 2016, the cabinet talked about declaring the authority bankrupt. It did not happen then, but it is dangerously close to happening now.
I am indebted to the work of Kevin Nacey, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil knows well. He has been the head of finance at Somerset County Council for donkey's years. He has done the accounts since 2006, but he has had enough: as the latest county calamity began, he announced an early exit. Mr Nacey is off to pastures new, and—dare I say it?—a big juicy carrot: he will soon be in charge of the books of the donkey sanctuary, Eeyore would say of all this, “How very appropriate.”

I have several direct questions for the Minister. We have to work through this; we cannot go on like this in local government. Last week, he and I had another debate on the future of Taunton and West Somerset, which—dare I say?—the Government managed to get through. I feel I was unfair in what I said at the time, but I gently say that I strongly believe that the Government are not playing fair with local government. Last week I was a little more profound, but I was more cross; this week I am more measured.

Local government does matter. The Minister’s constituency covers a vast geographical area—he has a seat bigger than mine, and I always think that Bridgwater and West Somerset is pretty large—and the problem for all of us is that the democratic deficit cannot be taken away without leaving a problem. Where unitary status has happened in very big counties, it has created enormous stresses, not least on the MPs in those areas. When councillors have to look after more and more, and deal with more and more, that deficit gets big. I ask him to pass this point on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: please think about the future of local government. I do not wish to spend whatever time I have in this place getting up every time I can to say to Ministers, “Could you please defend local government?”

Reorganisations are never good. In 1974 the Government of the day created Avon, which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil is aware of. They created North Somerset and Bath and North East Somerset, which is now a unitary and is struggling because it is too small for a unitary. Maybe we as a county need to talk to Devon and to North Somerset.

Mr Fysh: My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech about the history of local government in Somerset. Does he not think, though, that to deal with the overhang of debt that the Liberal Democrats left the county with in 2009, it has been necessary to take a raft of difficult decisions? Is it not worth at least exploring ways of saving the taxpayers money? This proposal might be a solution, but like him, I would say it is imperative that we ensure no democratic deficit is created through the process.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He was a county councillor, and so was fully aware of the situation—more so than any of us. I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) who I know had a pressing engagement, has made it here. He will recognise this point, because he wrote a devastatingly good article that follows on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil has said. My hon. Friend puts forward a good case that we must look at the debt, look at our options and look at our future. I will take that first point first, if I may.

My hon. Friend is right that it was the Liberals who created the debt—not the Conservatives, but the Liberals. We are now living with that legacy, but it has to be faced. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that it is our social services that are pulling us down. The problem we face is that we do not have enough money to take care of the neediest in our community.

The second point my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil makes, which I have made before and which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Wells agrees with, is that we should also look to our neighbours. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells wrote a good piece about looking toward BANES, and I mentioned looking toward Devon. We have no parameters—we could look at either of them—but we need democratic accountability. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that if we are going to go through with any form of unitary, we need to have a referendum. If we need to look to the people of BANES to split up the ghastly edifice that is Avon and get our old county back, we will do that.

When Councillor Fothergill came to the House—he was very courteous; it was a very courteous meeting—I asked him directly about a referendum. He said, “I will hold negotiations or conversations with our stakeholders.” To me and to my hon. Friend the Members for Yeovil and for Wells, the stakeholders are our constituents. They are our stakeholders, not the Avon and Somerset police farce, based in Bristol, or the ambulance service, now based in Exeter. I believe, or the fire service, based wherever the heck it has got to now. We, the people of Somerset, are the stakeholders. That is who we represent.

I would like the Minister, if possible, to say a referendum should be held. We did not hold one in West Somerset. When I had to put my views gently to the Minister last week, I said that the majority of people who took part in what can only be described as a pretty desultory consultation were against that proposal, but they were ignored. I hope that will not be the format for the future.

I say to the Minister, please do not underestimate the ability of Somerset to fight back. We have done it once, and we will do it again. The last time was the battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, which happened in my constituency, very close to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells. We marched on London. This time we are coming by train, so we will not get it wrong, and I assure the Minister that we will do what we have to in order to overturn this decision. I therefore urge him to think constructively about a great county such as Somerset. We have had our traumas, but we have a team that is blue throughout, and we want to keep that.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that, while a referendum is certainly the way to finish this process with full public support, the problem with referendums in recent years is that people have sometimes gone into them with incomplete information at their disposal? We must insist that the county council and the districts fully resource the analysis of all possible courses of action, so that a decision can be made on our future as a county based on all facts, rather than those selectively presented to engineer the outcome the county council desires?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I could not have put it better myself. My hon. Friend does a phenomenal job up on the north flank of Somerset. He is absolutely correct in
what he says. We must take local opinion into account—not
by saying in some waffly way, “Well, it’s quite a good
idea,” but by saying, “A referendum must be held.” As I
think my hon. Friend alluded to, his preference would
be to go north and look toward BANES, if possible. We
need to talk about that. It is no good the county council
leader’s turning up in the House of Commons to try to
persuade MPs of a course of action.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am not from Somerset;
I am an MP for Oxfordshire, which of course is thinking
of going through a unitary process as well. Does my
hon. Friend think it is wise for councils that are thinking
about that to share common experience and the enthusiasm
that he has for a referendum on these issues?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend and I have
worked together for many years, and I totally respect
his guidance and thoughts on this. That is a wake-up
call to the Minister. We need to have referendums,
because this process is not working the way it should.
We need to take public opinion into account, and a
referendum is the way to do that. The Government need
to make sure that they insist on referendums and therefore
that we have democratic control, as opposed to a democratic
deficit, which is where I started in the first place.

I therefore say to the Minister that this plan is a
dangerous, unwarranted and unnecessary intrusion into
government in Somerset. We will talk about it and look
at it, but at the moment there is no merit in doing it. In
fact, it would be more sensible for the districts to take
over the county’s functions than for the county to take
over the districts’ functions, because the difference is
that the districts will not go bust.

4.17 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 Hollobone,
for what I think is the first time in my new role. I
congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater
and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) not only on
securing this important debate, but on his continued
engagement on the topic of local government. I have
enjoyed the discussions I have had with him in previous
parliamentary Committees and debates, and I look
forward to many more. It is also a pleasure to see my
hon. Friends the Members for Yeovil (Mr Fysh), for
Wells (James Heappey) and for Henley (John Howell)
contribute to the debate, and perhaps we may have the
honour of hearing from my hon. Friend the Member
for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson)
later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and
West Somerset will have heard me say before that the
Government are committed to considering locally led
proposals for unitarisation and mergers between
councils, where requested. He will also have heard me
say that the Government are not in the business of
imposing top-down solutions on local government; we
wait to hear proposals delivered, developed and initiated
by local government.

Only last week, as my hon. Friend mentioned, we
discussed in a Delegated Legislation Committee the
draft secondary legislation that, if Parliament approves
and it is made, would implement the merger proposal
that was submitted to the Government by two district
councils in Somerset, West Somerset and Taunton Deane.
Today we are considering the possibility of Somerset
councils wishing to pursue further restructuring to form
unitary local government in Somerset.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for
Housing, Communities and Local Government said
earlier this month, the Government believe that there is
space and scope for unitary authorities, and where
unitary authorities can seek to make a difference, the
Government will support that. However, we want to
hear from the sector itself on the benefits that can be
experienced, and we will listen.

There are two unitary councils in the ceremonial
county of Somerset—Bath and North East Somerset
Council and North Somerset Council. It is important to
put on the record that the Government have not received
any proposals from the county council or any of the
district councils for further unitarisation in Somerset.
However, should such locally led proposals emerge, we
would of course consider them.

If such proposals were to emerge, the Government
have laid out previously the three specific criteria
that we will use to judge them. It will be helpful to
Members if I lay them out. The first criterion is that
the proposal is likely to improve local government in
the area, by improving service delivery, giving greater
value for money, yielding cost savings, providing
stronger strategic and local leadership, delivering more
sustainable structures and avoiding a fragmentation of
major services.

The second criterion is that the proposed structure is
a credible geography consisting of one or more existing
local government areas and that the population of any
proposed unitary authority must be substantial.

James Heappey: Since the county council kicked off
this conversation a couple of weeks ago, it has come to
my attention that the Government have a figure in mind
for what “substantial” means, in terms of the minimum
size of an authority. Will the Minister offer any detail
on that?

Rishi Sunak: My predecessors, the Secretary of State
and myself have previously laid out that a unitary
authority should contain at least 300,000 people or
more. That figure comes from research conducted by
the Department in the past. However, each proposal
will be considered on its merits.

The third and final criterion is that the proposal
commands local support. In particular, the structure
must be proposed by one or more existing councils in
the area, and there must be evidence of a good deal of
local support for it.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Will the Minister say these
wonderful words: there should be a referendum?

Rishi Sunak: I am afraid that I cannot say those
specific words; indeed, that is not the Government’s
previous guidance. The criterion is that there should be
evidence of a good deal of local support for the proposal,
including from business, the voluntary sector, public
bodies and local communities.
My hon. Friend will know from the various proposals that the Government have already considered that there have been a range of ways to demonstrate that good deal of local support. Other areas have engaged electoral and polling agencies to conduct representative polling, county and district council members—who represent people in different areas—have voted and extensive engagement exercises and consultation processes have happened. There are various mechanisms, but the key is that, at the end of the day, there must be evidence of a good deal of local support.

I will elaborate a little further on what a good deal of local support means, as opposed to the mechanism for establishing that it is there. We would like to see a good deal of local support, which we assess in the round across the whole area—from business, the voluntary sector, public bodies and local communities. We do not mean unanimous agreement from all councillors, stakeholders, councils and residents. However, we expect as much consensus from councils as possible.

My hon. Friend talked about democratic deficits, and he is right to highlight the importance of local democracy. From parish councils and all the way up, strong local democracy serves communities well and can make a difference to how people live their lives and to the area that they call home. We have seen in previous reorganisations and restructuring an increase in the incidence of parishing, revitalising that most local form of democracy. For example, in Wiltshire, Salisbury became a town council and restructuring an increase in the incidence of parishing, revitalising that most local form of democracy. For example, in Wiltshire, Salisbury became a town council and establishing that it is there. We would like to see a good deal of local support means, as opposed to the mechanism for establishing that it is there. We would like to see a good deal of local support.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I was not aware of that; I appreciate the extra time.

It is important that the councils of Somerset think long and hard about how best to serve their communities and about how to deliver the public services that people rely on, whether adult social care, children’s services, strategic planning or transport. It may well be that innovation and re-organisation will help to deliver for the people of Somerset, but it is crucial to note that that decision should be taken by the people of Somerset themselves. It will not be for the Government to impose a top-down solution.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I will be very brief; I promise I will not wind up the debate. Mr Hollobone. I am confused, because the Minister says that there must be local involvement, but also that local stakeholders must support the proposals. Most of West Somerset’s local stakeholders are not based in the county, funnily enough. Ambulance services are based in Devon, the fire brigade is based in, I think, North Somerset and the police are up in Avon. I would love to know how that will work. I ask the Minister to think this through. The most important people are the 500,000 based in the county of Somerset.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and he is absolutely right to demonstrate that local people should have their say and that their voice should be heard. However, it is also important, when these deliberations are made, that we consider effective local government as one of the criteria. In any local area, there will be institutions and stakeholders, who may or may not be based in that area, who will make a difference to the delivery of local services, and their views will form part of those deliberations.

My hon. Friend started the debate by saying something that I wholeheartedly agree with: local government matters. I take that very seriously, as I know does the Secretary of State. That is why the Government will remain committed to responding and listening to proposals that come forward from local government. We will not seek to impose our view, but where there is a desire and a thrust for more change and innovation—whether in Somerset or elsewhere—we will look to support those involved, according to the criteria I have laid out. In conclusion, I commend my hon. Friend for the continued passion he has shown in ensuring that local democracy in Somerset remains vibrant and strong.
4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying to discuss the persecution of Christians please be kind enough to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly? Let me say right at the start that this is an hour-long debate and an awful lot of hon. Members wish to speak. Depending on how long the mover of the motion speaks for, it is likely that other contributions will have to be limited to two minutes or less.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians overseas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Given the amount of interest from colleagues, I will keep my remarks as short as possible in order for them to have the maximum amount of time to speak.

In April last year, a young Nigerian woman, Dorkas Zakka, was murdered, along with 12 others in Kafanchan, simply for attending an Easter mass. Local priest Father Alexander Yeycock said that Nigerian military units stood by and did nothing while the murders took place.

Last November in Mina, Egypt, a mob surrounded a Coptic church, threatening worshippers inside, many of whom were also physically attacked. Local Coptic leader Anba Macarius says that the Egyptian authorities have done nothing to bring those responsible to justice.

Asia Bibi was sentenced to death by hanging in Pakistan in 2010. Thankfully, that sentence has since been suspended. Two Pakistani politicians who advocated on her behalf and opposed Pakistan’s blasphemy laws were assassinated.

In May last year, two churches in Sudan were destroyed on the orders of the Sudanese Government. In June last year, 33 Christian women in Eritrea were imprisoned by the Eritrean Government simply for taking part in prayer activity.

Just two weeks ago, Pakistani man Suneel Saleem was beaten to death by a group of doctors and security guards—a group of doctors, Mr Hollobone—at the Services Hospital in Lahore, Pakistan, when he protested about the anti-Christian abuse that his heavily pregnant sister had suffered at the hospital. A man was beaten to death by doctors in a hospital simply for being Christian.

In January this year, in Tamil Nadu, in southern India, a mob pursued and beat a priest and three companions outside a police station. Despite their desperate pleas for help, the police stood by and did nothing. We have heard nothing by way of condemnation of these sorts of attacks in India from Prime Minister Modi.

According to a petition presented to Parliament last year by Aid to the Church in Need, such attacks have been taking place in about 50 countries worldwide. In India alone, about 24,000 Christians were physically assaulted last year. In Iraq, the majority of the Christian and Yazidi populations have come close to being wiped out.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am very interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying about various countries persecuting Christians. I hope he will come on to North Korea and China, which have also been persecuting Christians; in fact, that has been going on for a long time. In Egypt, the Coptic Church has been persecuted for years and years. I hope that the Minister, when he winds up the debate, will tell us, for a change, what the British Government are going to do about it. Perhaps we should look at aid for a start.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman pre-empted my speech in two or three regards, but as he mentions North Korea, I will say now that Aid to the Church in Need ranks North Korea as the worst country for Christians to live in. Accurate information is of course hard to obtain, but ACN estimates that at least 200,000 Christians have gone missing in North Korea since 1953. North Koreans who are found practising as Christians face arrest, torture and imprisonment, and there are worrying examples of Christians being publicly executed in North Korea.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I take my hon. Friend back from North Korea to Iraq and the middle east, but may I first make a general point? There are so many hon. Members present who want to speak—I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate—that I suggest he sponsor a longer debate in the future so that all of us will have a chance to speak. However, may I also invite him to praise the work of Open Doors, which has been working with the Christian communities in Iraq and Syria?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend. Perhaps we should all get together and ask for a Backbench Business debate one Thursday, when we could debate this matter more fully. Let us all, as an action, take that away to the Backbench Business Committee. I will note down who is here, so that I can get in touch after this debate.

I would specifically like to praise Open Doors. I did write its name at the top of my notes, but in my haste to get the debate started and not to take up too much time, I overlooked it. In fact, I can see sitting in the Public Gallery Rev. Sue Thomas from St John’s church in Old Coulsdon, in my constituency, who I have been discussing this issue with for some time, and who works with Open Doors. I thank Open Doors for its work in this field, and I specifically thank Rev. Sue Thomas.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The Open Doors charity has found that, overall, persecution of Christians has risen for the fifth year in a row. Such persecution—indeed, persecution of any religious group—is abhorrent and unacceptable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government must put the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, at the heart of their foreign policy and use all diplomatic means available to ensure adherence to international law?

Chris Philp: I agree very strongly with the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman has expressed. I will come on to what I believe the UK Government could do in this area, or could do more of, but whatever efforts are being made at the moment, worldwide they are not enough, because as the hon. Gentleman has just pointed out, the problem of Christians being persecuted is getting worse, not better. The direction of travel is the
wrong one, and it is incumbent on those of us in the United Kingdom and other countries who have or can have influence to do a lot more than we are doing at the moment. We need to reverse the trend.

There are many examples of where the trend is getting worse. We all know about the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria, where 276 Christian schoolgirls were kidnapped several years ago; 112 of them are still missing. In Myanmar, where Rohingya Muslims have been persecuted, Christian converts have been persecuted as well. About 100,000 Christians are living in displacement camps as a result.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Actually, there was a bid to the Backbench Business Committee for a wider debate, but unfortunately it was rejected—we should try again. He has just mentioned the Chibok girls. May I, through him, remind colleagues of early-day motion 1246 about the plight of one particular girl, who had to spend her 15th birthday still in captivity because she is refusing to renounce her faith? If all colleagues were willing to sign that early-day motion, that would be very helpful.

Chris Philp: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue and draws attention to a very important early-day motion. So many Christians subjected to this sort of persecution show tremendous faith and tremendous bravery by standing up for their faith in the face of the most appalling threats. The example that my right hon. Friend cites is truly inspiring and tells us how seriously we must take our duty to protect girls such as the one to whom she refers. They deserve all the support and protection that we can possibly give them. I deliberately chose the examples that I gave earlier because in all of them a Government—a nation state’s Government—failed to take action to protect Christians being persecuted, whether it was those army units in Nigeria standing by and doing nothing, the police in Egypt and India standing by and doing nothing or, in the example from Sudan, the Government themselves imprisoning Christians.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is itemising the huge displacement that there has been. Does he agree that, in relation to the middle east alone, we are talking about unprecedented movements of Christians out of their historical homelands, and we really need to address that problem?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I have been raising individual cases, because they tell a painful and powerful story, but behind those individual cases lie hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Christians being persecuted and displaced, particularly in the middle east. We cannot stand by or walk by on the other side. We must take action.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important debate. I was reminded that when I was the parliamentary churchwarden for St Margaret’s, we did some good work trying to engage the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to get an interface with some of these countries where we are not getting through. Could we be optimistic and get something moving back on that kind of track?

Chris Philp: I hope we can. The hon. Gentleman is driving at the point I was just beginning to make. We understand that there are terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, that do terrible things, and we are quite rightly combating them. However, I chose the examples I did very specifically, because in those examples, Governments of nation states—some of them Commonwealth members, and some of them allies of the United Kingdom—have either stood by and done nothing or, in some cases, actively encouraged and facilitated the persecution I have been describing. It is unacceptable that allies of the United Kingdom should stand by and allow this kind of persecution to take place. As a powerful western nation, we have levers at our disposal to influence these countries that are allowing the persecution of Christians to take place under their nose—and knowingly, deliberately and intentionally doing nothing.

The most obvious lever that we have was referred to by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), namely the overseas aid budget. It is a good thing that we spend £13 billion a year on overseas aid, which is 0.7% of GDP. That gives us enormous influence. Much of that aid is spent bilaterally. It goes directly to countries rather than via third-party agencies such as the United Nations or the European Union. I believe we should use the power that aid donation confers to achieve the change we want to see.

For example, the largest bilateral recipient of overseas aid is Pakistan, which receives about £350 million a year. Yet, Christians there are persecuted terribly with violent acts. The court system in Pakistan often prosecutes Christians using blasphemy laws, which are wholly contrary to any notion of free speech or religious freedom. I believe we should be looking at imposing some conditionality, particularly on aid we give directly to another Government. We should ask that they do more and not just pay lip service and say fine words, which generally speaking they do, but that they take real action to prevent the persecution of Christians, whether it is in the court system, or through the police and other armed forces standing by and doing nothing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree, on a more positive side, that we need to expect the Department for International Development to take far more account of the work that Christian and other faith-based organisations do? It does not take enough account of the strength of the work that those organisations do in development on behalf of the people of that country. My right hon. Friend the Minister has been an exception to that in his role in the Foreign Office, but that needs to spread to DFID, which cannot be a religion-free zone.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right. Christian charities and organisations often show enormous courage in going into areas where Governments and the UN fear to tread, and they do work protecting Christians who are not being protected by anybody else. I endorse my hon. Friend’s point, and I hope the Minister will specifically reply to it in his remarks.
I am clear that we should be using the overseas aid budget as a means to influence behaviour by sovereign Governments. In this country we offer full religious freedom, quite rightly, regardless of faith, to everybody. I am proud that we do, but in return we should be demanding that Christians and people of any faith around the world receive precisely the same religious freedom. Where that religious freedom is not extended by unenlightened Governments, we should be doing everything to change that.

We allow some countries, for example in the middle east, to send quite large amounts of money into this country to promote their domestic faith, which is fine, and we are happy to let that happen, but at the same time, those very same Governments that are sending money here are denying religious freedom over there. That is fundamentally unfair, and it should end.

I am conscious that time is pressing on, so I want to conclude. There are two reasons why I believe this issue should be at the top of our foreign policy and overseas aid agenda, and why we need more than warm words from some of these overseas Governments. There is a human rights dimension. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. There is a human tragedy, in that individual Christians are being persecuted in the most appalling ways, as I described in the examples I gave. I also believe that it serves our national interest to see human rights promoted, because if we help these countries become more tolerant—if we help human rights take root—that will in itself combat extremism. Where there is tolerance and respect, extremism will not flourish. There is an overwhelming human rights case for pushing this agenda hard and properly, and there is a national interest argument as well.

I know that lots of hon. Members want to speak, so I will conclude now. This is an important issue and one we all feel strongly about. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Would all those seeking to catch my eye please stand? I have to call the Front-Bench speakers at 5.7 pm. There are 12 Members standing, and there are 20 minutes left, so the time limit will have to be 90 seconds. It is amazing what you can say in 90 seconds, so I expect some powerful speeches. If there are loads of interventions, I am afraid that those at the back of the queue will not be able to contribute.

4.46 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for bringing this important debate. He so eloquently put forward the argument about the persecution of Christians. We have clearly seen a considerable increase in attacks by armed Fulani herdsmen on predominantly Christian farming communities in northern Nigeria. To get an understanding of the scale of these attacks in the past three years, I note that the Fulani herdsmen, armed with AK47s and in some cases chemicals, are believed to have killed more men, women and children than Boko Haram.

Egypt is home to the middle east's largest Christian community—comprising some 10% of the population—the majority of whom are orthodox. The spread of ISIS-affiliated groups in the country has seen a significant rise in their persecution. In February 2017, the group released a propaganda video vowing to wipe out Egypt's Coptic community and this followed the killing of 28 Christians by a suicide bomber in the Coptic Orthodox cathedral of St Mark in Cairo, in December 2016. Last year, two church bombings killed 49 people and another 29 were killed when extremists attacked people travelling to a monastery in May.

Given the time constraints, I will conclude by reminding the Minister that in 2017, in its report on human rights, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that freedom of religion and belief was now considered "a key and integral part of the work" of the UK Government and one of three areas that the Government would be prioritising. I urge the Minister to ensure the Government stand by that commitment.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I would like to speak with particular reference to China. A recent hearing of the Conservative party human rights commission, which I chair, heard—as the Aid to the Church in Need report, which has already been referred to, says—that persecution in China has notably increased recently.

There are 127 million Chinese Christians, yet we have heard that, partly as a result of the revival of Christianity in China, the Chinese authorities are now cracking down even more strongly than previously, not just on the unregistered churches, where we have heard that thousands have been pulled down, crosses have been pulled down and clergy have been routinely detained, but now on registered churches and even house churches, the small churches where groups have met legitimately. Officials are going into those homes, removing any Christian items and replacing them with a picture of the Premier.

This spring, new laws were implemented to prevent certain groups of people from going to church in China, including people in certain types of employment, and even—quite shockingly—to prevent the taking of a person under 18 to church. Increasingly, apart from the imprisonment of the clergy, the human rights lawyers, who used to be able to defend the clergy from unreasonable accusations, have also been imprisoned. I understand that it is now virtually impossible to find such a lawyer in China—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

4.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the opportunity speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on introducing the debate. I welcome the Minister and look forward to his important response. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, many things come to my attention. In Nepal, the new anti-conversion and blasphemy laws threaten Christians. In Nigeria, Christian farmers and
others have been murdered in their thousands by the armed Fulani militias. In Pakistan, at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert, forcibly married or sold into prostitution annually.

I would like to leave something for the Minister to do in these 90 seconds—it is a bit like that radio programme “Just a Minute”. He should develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe FORB restrictions; develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities; increase Government expertise internally or via external experts; and introduce mandatory training for employees of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development who work in countries with severe levels of discrimination against religion or belief.

Those steps will address the persecution of Christians. This year, 100,000 people will die for their faith, 200 million will be persecuted and 2 billion will live in an endangered neighbourhood. When we put those figures into perspective, we know why this debate is so important. That is why I am very happy to support the hon. Member for Croydon South.

4.52 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing this debate. In the brief time I have available, I will compliment Open Doors on its work.

The necessity for this debate is shown by an attack on the Emmanuel Christian College, which Open Doors has been supporting, that took place on 14 May in South Sudan, where 10 people, including five children, were killed. Although the details are unclear, witnesses blame the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. That is a sad reminder of the risks people face to do what many of us take for granted in our daily lives, which is to declare our Christian faith, to go to church and to wish to share that faith with others.

This is not just about the state actors—the traditional idea of a Government oppressing their people—but the non-state actors, such as Daesh, which have brought so much terror to the middle east and, in particular, to Christian families there. In the Minister’s response, I am interested to hear what work he plans to do with Governments who want to change their policies to allow more religious freedom and to support Governments who are genuinely struggling to deal with extremist elements within their nation states that cannot be dealt with by normal law enforcement mechanisms.

The key part is about stopping the persecution not just of Christians, but of people who freely choose which faith they have, or who have no faith. All Christians should stand for that fundamental right.

4.53 pm

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). I will be brief and talk about one person in China: Gao Zhisheng, a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer who is best known for his work defending Christians, Falun Gong adherents and other vulnerable social groups. He is believed to have been forcibly disappeared by the authorities since August as a result of his work on sensitive cases and his open letters to Chinese political leaders.

Gao was detained and tortured numerous times before being convicted of inciting to subvert state power. He was sentenced to three years in prison and was released on 7 August 2014 with serious health problems. He was disappeared again in August and I met his daughter not long after being elected.

My only ask is that the Minister makes direct representations to the Chinese authorities to revise all regulations and legislation pertaining to religion to ensure that they align with international standards on freedom of religion or belief, as set out in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, in consultation with religious communities and legal experts. That is my ask. The Minister should get on with it.

4.54 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I place on record my huge respect for people of all faiths who are persecuted around the world for their faith and, in the context of this debate, particularly for Christians who face horrific circumstances that we in this country can only imagine. We honour their dignity and courage.

Persecution is not always about violence and killing people. It often takes more subtle forms where Christians and people of other faiths are excluded from certain parts of society and from obtaining certain jobs—in some countries they cannot work in the public sector—and are perhaps put under surveillance. We should be conscious of all forms of persecution that Christians face around the world, not just the most extreme.

To echo other hon. Members, our Government should do more to use the influence they have, particularly through the Commonwealth and our overseas aid budget, to ensure that the rights and freedoms of Christians around the world are protected and to challenge countries where that is not the case. Like other hon. Members, I place on record my huge respect for Open Doors and the incredible work that it has done over decades to raise the issue of the persecuted Church around the world and to support persecuted Christians. It is a sad reality that despite the organisation existing for more than 50 years, its work is more needed in our world today than ever before. We should support everything that it and others do to support the persecuted Church.

4.57 pm

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Given the time constraints, I will focus on the Coptic Orthodox Church. In Islwyn, St Mary’s and St Abu Saffiam’s Coptic Orthodox church is the first in Wales, and hundreds of people from across Wales go to worship there every year. I was lucky to be invited when my son, Zachariah, was three weeks old. I went with my wife and we celebrated our first mass with the Copts there. We were so welcomed.

Although Coptic Christians in my constituency and across the UK can freely worship without persecution for their beliefs, the same cannot be said for those in Egypt and elsewhere. Many will remember that a Coptic church just south of Cairo was targeted in a horrific
Governments are struggling to keep a lid on extremism and the majority of whom follow Islam, which is recognised as the state religion. There have been many examples of attacks on Copts, especially women and girls, being kidnapped, forced to marry and converted. That needs to stop. I agree with hon. Members who have said that where Governments are struggling to keep a lid on extremism and protect Christians, we must do all we can to help them in word and deed.

4.58 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The largest Christian community in Africa is in Nigeria, a country for which I am the Prime Minister’s trade envoy.

The centre and south of Nigeria are tolerant places where faiths live side by side in happiness. The problem comes in the north and north-east of the country, where there is a great deal of radical Islamism. Christians are caught in the crossfire there between ethnic or illegal groups as they pursue their vendettas against other groups.

Nigeria did not stand by, however, after an attack on a Christian church. The President was summoned to Parliament and he condemned the attack in the strongest possible language. The Parliament suspended its sittings for three days. Before it did that, it passed a no-confidence motion in the security chiefs. That is a strong indication of the feeling across the whole of Nigeria—we should not forget that the President is a member of the Islamic faith—that the attack on the church was not to be tolerated.

4.59 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for securing this important debate.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege to meet the Reverend Yunusa Nmadu, the chief executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide Nigeria and general secretary of the Evangelical Church Winning All, who gave me an insight into the awful situation facing Christians in Nigeria, particularly in the north of the country. I was told of the worrying rise in the number of young Christian schoolgirls being abducted and then subjected to forced conversion and forced marriage. I heard about Leah Sharibu, the sole Christian among the Dapchi girls abducted by Boko Haram on 29 February, who remains in captivity.

The rise in attacks by the Fulani militia was also highlighted to me. It is reported that since 2011 such attacks have displaced some 62,000 people and left 6,000 dead and many more injured, in what observers have described as some form of ethnic cleansing. In the same timeframe, the Fulani herdsmen have destroyed some 500 churches in Benue state alone.

I trust that the Minister will be able to use this moment to encourage the Government of Nigeria to meet their constitutional and international obligations to uphold freedom of religion and belief for all citizens. The examples that I have highlighted just touch on the issues in Nigeria, but there is certainly a great need to press the Nigerian Government to overhaul their existing security arrangements, so as to protect vulnerable communities from the threat posed by the Fulani militia.

I hope that the UK Government are able to raise those concerns, and that the Minister will join me in urging Nigeria to tackle the proliferation of small arms and to address the violence caused by the armed bandits and the Fulani herdsmen, among others.

5 pm

**Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for chairing this crucial debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for securing it.

Sadly, persecution of individuals due to their religious belief is nothing new. However, there is no doubt that communities of Christians that might once have expected to live in peace now face new threats that go hand in hand with rising political violence, attacks on free speech and discriminatory law making in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia. The Minister will be aware of the appalling attacks that took place this month on churches in Surabaya.

What can we do? I know that the Minister has been developing a strong relationship with Indonesia, and I would like to know how the UK is sharing our security expertise with nations affected by Islamist terror, what work we are doing to share expertise on deradicalisation, and what engagement we have had on anti-blasphemy laws that are affecting Christian and Ahmadiyya communities.

What can we do to encourage thought leadership in regions such as the middle east? Saudi Arabia clearly wishes to rebrand itself very carefully as a more modern nation, in part to satisfy a growing demand for change from its young and vibrant population but also to diversify its economy. How can we harness that drive and carefully encourage the kingdom towards a more moderate approach, which other nations might be inclined to follow? I would be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that.

It has been mentioned before, but we also have leverage through our aid budget, with some £350 million going to Pakistan alone each year. Understandably, that development package is highly controversial among many of my constituents, but in so far as the Government wish to continue that aid relationship I agree with other Members that it ought to be conditional.

5.2 pm

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): This issue is an extremely important one, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing the debate.
It is shocking that more than 2 million Christians around the world are persecuted simply because of their faith, and like many hon. Members today I commend the work of Open Doors. What stood out for me on its world watch list was the fact that many of the countries on the list are also synonymous with luxury holidays, such as the Maldives and Mexico.

We need to talk more about this issue and not be afraid to talk about it. We are traditionally still a Christian country, and this issue does not necessarily get the airtime that it deserves. We have leverage with our international aid budget, enabling us to push countries to do more and to stop persecuting people simply because of their faith. We should also ring-fence a proportion of our international aid specifically to address this issue, because it is so important. In addition, I want us to ensure that our aid does not have unintended consequences, whereby we try to further causes such as education but actually make the problem worse.

I also note the work of SAT-7 in my constituency of Chippenham. It is a broadcaster across the middle east and Africa that tries to promote Christian values but also tolerance of and respect for all religions, which we all want to see. Also, I echo the comments made earlier about SAT-7 being unable to get donations from the Department for International Development just because of its religious background.

5.3 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone—thank you for calling me to speak, given that I have already made an intervention.

I return to what is happening in Nigeria. The 2018 world watch list names Nigeria as the country with the largest number of Christians who have been killed, at 3,000. In fact, 6,000 people in Nigeria have been killed by the radicalised Fulani herdsmen since 2011. Can the Minister give us some assurances that the Government will examine the spread of such terrorism into the central and south of Nigeria, since those parts of Nigeria have ceased to be the focus of the Department for International Development’s responsibility? Nigeria is a vast country that lies on a fault line between Islam and Christianity. There should be very real concern in our country about Nigeria, which, after all, is a Commonwealth country upon which we should be able to bring some pressure to bear.

Will the Minister also come back to the question that I asked in my intervention about what the Government are doing to get the last of the Chibok girls freed? These poor girls have slipped all too easily from the attention of the media around the world, and to think that a girl had to spend her 15th birthday in captivity just because of her unwillingness to give up her most profound belief shocks me to the core. I hope that by having this debate we can do something to ensure that those girls are not forgotten.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Then Mr Phil will have the time remaining at the end to sum up the debate.

5.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing this very important debate. He made a powerful speech, which at times highlighted very disturbing, even harrowing cases from across the world, and he talked about the fundamental human rights that are jeopardised when people are not free to practise their religion.

As Christians in the UK, we can be subject to verbal abuse, but nobody ever prevents us from practising our religion. We have had many contributions this afternoon, and I will mention some of them. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about the rise of ISIS and the difficulties that presented for the Christian community. The hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) both talked about the Christian community in China and the fact that 127 million Christians in that country are in great danger. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) all talked about the Christian community in Nigeria. In fact, Nigeria is one of the countries where Christians face the greatest degree of persecution.

A number of Members have mentioned the Open Doors world watch list, and I will just highlight some of the countries on it. No. 1 on that list is North Korea, where persecution is led by the state, which sees Christians as hostile elements that have to be eradicated. Neighbours and family members, including children, are highly watchful and suspicious, and will report anything to the authorities. If Christians are discovered, they are either deported to labour camps or killed on the spot, and their families suffer the same fate. Meetings for worship are virtually impossible to arrange and so are conducted in the utmost secrecy. The churches in Pyongyang that are shown to visitors serve mere propaganda purposes.

In Somalia, family members and clan leaders intimidate and even kill converts to Christianity. Al-Shabaab, the radical militant group, relies on a clan-based structure to advance its ideology, forcing sheikhs and imams to teach jihad or face expulsion or death, so it is not only Christians who are targeted in Somalia but Muslims too. Christians from a Muslim background in Somalia are regarded as high-value targets, and at least 23 suspected converts were killed last year.

In Sudan, there is a complex cultural mix, but the Government are implementing a policy of one religion, one culture and one language. Under that authoritarian rule, freedom of expression is curtailed and the persecution of Christians is reminiscent of ethnic cleansing. Some Christians disguise their faith, even from their children and even after death, preferring to be buried in a Muslim cemetery rather than a Christian one.

In Pakistan, Christians suffer from institutionalised discrimination, with occupations that are regarded as low and dirty being officially reserved for Christians. I want to highlight the work of a Glasgow-based organisation called Global Minorities Alliance, which has produced a number of reports. Some of its staff travelled to Thailand to see some of the Pakistani Christians who had travelled to that country. What they found was that
It is hard for us to understand why people feel that they are under threat from other religions, that what other religions do threatens their position, or that they are so entitled, and so confident in their own righteousness, that they should impose their views on other people. It is important that we increase and improve religious understanding. The Minister probably knows that there is a very good centre for religious understanding at the London School of Economics and Political Science, led by Rev. James Walters. We also need to consider how we can use our aid money. We need to think more open-mindedly about what misunderstandings we have, as well as about those of other people, without in any way saying that any of the abuses are acceptable.

In Vietnam, there are arrests, imprisonments, torture and extrajudicial killings, yet the Home Office wants to send a constituent of mine, who is a Christian, back there. When I asked the Bishop of Durham for examples he knew of persecution, he raised that of a Jordanian Christian woman who came to this country and was then interned in Yarl’s Wood before she claimed asylum. We need to use the aid programme and we need to speak out, but will Foreign Office Ministers please also talk to the Home Office so that the very people who have been victims are not re-victimised in this country?
of persecution. Its latest watch list charts a swathe of Christian persecution stretching from northern and western Africa to North Korea.

I should at this point like to touch on the situation in Nigeria—an issue that a number of Members expressed concern about. In addition to the challenges presented by Boko Haram, particularly in the north and on the north-eastern border with Cameroon, Nigeria faces daily violence in its central regions, between Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim Fulani cattle herders. That cycle of violent clashes has resulted in countless deaths, particularly in recent years, and even in the destruction of entire villages, which we of course condemn.

I fully understand the concerns that have been raised. I should stress that this is a long-running conflict with complex causes, including land, farming rights, grazing routes and access to water, as well as the religious divisions referred to. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), I warmly welcome President Buhari’s engagement on the issue. It is imperative that the Nigerian Government and the military work together with the affected populations to bring perpetrators to justice and develop a solution that meets the needs of all the communities affected, as British officials will continue to encourage them to do.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) wanted some reassurance. The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Nigerian vice-president following the abductions of the Dapchi, and the Prime Minister herself, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, raised these issues with President Buhari on 16 April. Our view is that the attacks on schools must stop. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden is right, unfortunately, that the terrible events in the north-east of the country and the abductions—still—of over 100 schoolgirls have disappeared from the media, and this is an opportunity to raise the issue, as we will do in Abuja and beyond.

Returning to the broader theme, Christian persecution takes many forms. As we have heard, places of worship in far too many countries are targeted, shut down or even destroyed. Followers are discriminated against, subjected to mob attack and criminalised—in some cases, by the state. Many live in fear for their lives, and others or would, indeed, risk making them more vulnerable.

In whatever form it manifests itself, all religious persecution is abhorrent and deplorable. Governments, religious groups and right-minded people must do all they can to bring it to an end. I am glad that point was raised by a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), among others.

In our work around the globe, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will stand up for religious freedom—full stop. We do not do that simply for Christians; indeed, one has to recognise that for us to stand up exclusively for Christians would risk protecting a minority perhaps close to many western hearts to the exclusion of others or would, indeed, risk making them more vulnerable.

I assure Members—I saw this in my most recent visit—that we do our best to recognise that the persecution of Christians has become much more profound in particular parts of the world, not least China. I hope to come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) later.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister talks about bringing perpetrators to justice. Two years ago in a debate in this House, Parliament voted by 278 Members to nil to call on the Government to take action to hold to account the perpetrators of genocide against Christians, Yazidis and others in Syria and Iraq. Will he say what action has been taken since then, or perhaps write to us? In his response then, the Minister’s colleague said that the UK is taking an international lead on the issue. Will the Minister meet Lord Alton and me to discuss the genocide determination Bills we have introduced in our respective Houses? They would go some way to addressing the issue.

Mark Field: I will meet my hon. Friend. If she will excuse me, I will write to her with some of the details she has asked for.

We believe that religious freedom is a bellwether of broader individual freedoms, democratic health and, ultimately, economic health. For all those reasons, it is a priority for this Government to defend and promote the rights of not only Christians, but peoples of all faiths and none so that they can practise their faith or belief without fear or discrimination.

I could say much—time is running tight—about aspects of the bilateral work we do. Earlier this month, I visited Nepal. I expressed concern to Prime Minister Oli in a meeting I had with him that uncertainty around provisions of the new penal code might be used to limit the freedom to adopt, change or practise a religion. Those provisions can especially target Christian minorities. I also raised concerns about freedom of religion or belief and about the protection of minority religious communities in Pakistan with the Ministry of Human Rights during my visit to that country in November.

Needless to say, we will continue to raise concerns with the authorities in China at our annual UK-China human rights dialogue and on other occasions about the increasingly worrying and widespread persecution of Christian minorities—particularly those converting from other religions. Our values form an integral part of our relationship with China; indeed, the Prime Minister raised human rights issues when she met President Xi and Prime Minister Li earlier this year.

Chris Philp: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I only have a small amount of time left.

So far this year my ministerial colleagues have raised issues about freedom of religion or belief with counterparts in such places as Iraq, Egypt and Burma. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) mentioned Indonesia. We have made representations to the Indonesian Government to ensure that the proposed blasphemy laws are not applied on their current rather discriminatory basis. I will be going to that country for four days in August and will raise those issues then. My hon. Friend will appreciate the strong intelligence and security relationship we have with Indonesia. That is not in any way to forgive any of these issues, but we have important intelligence relationships, not least because of the global threat, particularly in Mindanao, which is just the other side of the Philippine border.

It is not just about Government-to-Government work. I could say much about NGO and project work, but I think it would be worth while to focus the end of my
comments on issues around aid conditionality that have been brought up by a number of Members—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

It is important to state that the Department for International Development has its own faith-based principles that provide a framework for engaging faith partners in development. It also wants to actively support faith-based NGOs to apply to the UK Aid Connect fund, which is a funding pot for smaller NGOs.

In addition to our discussions with Governments, it has been suggested that UK overseas aid should be entirely conditional on recipient Governments taking concrete action to end religious persecution. I reassure the House that we challenge our development partners precisely and specifically on these issues, in whichever country they arise. There may be countries where we disapprove of what they are doing.

This is a non-religious issue, but in Cambodia we have had opposition leaders being locked up. However, equally, we have long-standing relationships in aid and development terms, particularly in mine clearance in parts of that country. The interests of some of the most vulnerable are at stake. If we do not clear those mines, arable land will not be able to be used. While it is right that these things are conditional and that guidelines are set down, we equally have to recognise that we are sometimes acting for the most vulnerable with a range of aid programmes. Simply to cut off that money mid-flow would not be the right way forward.

Generally, DFID will assess a country’s commitment to each of the four partnership principles. One of those is a commitment to human rights, which includes freedom of religion or belief. Evidence of a lack of commitment to the principles influences decisions on how much aid is given and in what manner it is passed out. For example, it might mean that aid is provided through civil society organisations, rather than Government bodies. Our aim is to support projects that can stimulate positive change in the countries concerned, such as our project to help secondary school teachers promote religious freedom in classrooms across parts of north Africa.

The hon. Member for Croydon South specifically mentioned Pakistan. As I have said, Ministers have raised concerns with the Government in Islamabad this year. We are doing a great deal of work through our projects to try to benefit religious minorities in Pakistan. Last year, for example, we had an £800,000 FCO project to counter hate speech and a £200,000 project to celebrate Pakistan’s religious diversity.

We should all be proud of the life-saving impact of our overseas aid on persecuted religious groups. While we do not allocate humanitarian support to them specifically—because we believe it could be counterproductive—our policy of prioritising those most in need means such groups are often the beneficiaries.

I share many of the concerns that have been raised by other Members. The situation is desperate in Iraq and Syria. Some 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq as recently as 2003. It is understood that fewer than a quarter of a million now remain. Likewise, in Syria, huge numbers of Christians are now in refugee camps in Lebanon or have fled the country. Very few, I suspect, will feel it is safe to return any time soon.

In conclusion, I thank Members for all their contributions. I fear that a 90-second speaking limit does not do anything like justice to the passion they all feel. Less is more sometimes, but not always in every parliamentary debate I have been part of. As a Government, we will continue to defend the fundamental right of religious freedom, not least because of our commitment to the universal declaration on human rights. I very much hope that other Members will have a chance to speak at much greater length. I will endeavour to look through this debate in Hansard and reply individually to each Member whose points I was not able to pick up in this contribution.

5.28 pm

Chris Philp: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in this afternoon’s debate. It was a great shame that time was so constrained. I have noted down everyone who was present, and I will follow up and try to organise a proper full-day Backbench Business debate on this important topic at the earliest opportunity.

This debate shows there is cross-party support for pursuing the issue. I think every major party was represented in today’s contributions, and there is agreement around the Chamber about the need to do more, because things are getting worse, not better.

I once again thank Open Doors for its work raising this important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) has been a Parliamentary Private Secretary in this debate, and he has done a lot of work with Open Doors, which is based in his constituency. I know he is a great friend and supporter of the Open Doors movement.

I welcome the Minister’s remarks on overseas aid conditionality. I am glad he made the comments he did, but I would go a little further: no Government who are failing to take action on this issue should receive any overseas aid from this country on a Government-to-Government basis. Where there are mine clearance programmes or we are dispersing aid through charities, that work is valuable and should not be threatened, but no Government who stand by and allow this persecution to happen should receive a single penny of aid from the UK taxpayer.

Religious freedom, whether it is for Christians or any other group, is of fundamental importance. It is a fundamental human right and a mark of our civilisation as a country and as a world. We must do everything we can, and more than we are currently doing, to ensure that religious freedom is protected around the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians overseas.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 May 2018

[BALERT OWEN in the Chair]

BAME Communities: Stop and Search

9.30 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the effect of police stop and search powers on BAME communities.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. Stop-and-search is often referred to as the litmus test of police-community relations, and it is one of the first encounters that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds have with the police. Those early interactions can shape how young people view the police for the rest of their lives, especially when they, their family or their friends are searched repeatedly. Members from all parties will undoubtedly have heard accounts from their constituents of deeply negative experiences of stop-and-searches and other types of police-initiated stops, such as detentions at ports and airports under counter-terrorism legislation, and stops under road and traffic legislation.

Unfortunately, we have debated stop-and-search time and again due to the way that it has been misused since the 1960s. Recently, the Government initiated a series of reforms backed by cross-party consensus, which I will refer to. However, numerous inspections by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary—in 2013, 2015 and 2016—found that many chief officers are frustrating that process because they are “failing to understand the impact of stop and search” on people’s lives. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government seek to carry on reforming these powers and prevent the backsliding that we have seen in the last couple of years.

I stress that stop-and-search can be a useful tool to detect crime, but only when it is used in a very targeted way. Claims are often made about how useful stop-and-search is, but they are not backed by scientific research and, in fact, often contradict the evidence base. Stop-and-search is neither the solution to crime problems nor, in fact, often contradict the evidence base. Stop-and-search is, but they are not backed by scientific research way. Claims are often made about how useful stop-and-search is, but they are not backed by scientific research.

After initially declining, disproportionality has shot to new heights in the past two years. Estimates for last year show that black people were searched at more than eight times the rate of white people, and people from mixed, Asian and other ethnic backgrounds were searched at around double the rate. Under the “false view that that will solve the problem? When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she rightly called that “a knee-jerk reaction on the back of a false link.”

In fact, the police’s own data show that most searches are for drugs, rather than knives, guns or other weapons, and that the proportion of searches for drugs is actually increasing. For most forces, that figure is consistently more than 50%, and in a number of cases it is even above 70%. Will the Minister outline what the Government are doing to ensure that stop-and-search is actually targeted at violent crime?

Ironically, that increase has occurred at a time when police forces have signed up to the Best Use of Stop and Search scheme, the main purpose of which is to increase trust and confidence in policing by addressing the disproportionate impact of stop-and-search on ethnic minorities and by giving communities a stronger role in scrutinising those powers. Although that has delivered a welcome 44% reduction in the use of stop-and-search and has improved detection rates, if we probe behind the headlines we find that little else has changed.

After initially declining, disproportionality has shot to new heights in the past two years. Estimates for last year show that black people were searched at more than eight times the rate of white people, and people from mixed, Asian and other ethnic backgrounds were searched at around double the rate. Under the “suspicionless” powers in section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, black people were searched at 14 times the rate of whites, mixed people were searched at twice the rate, and people from Asian or other backgrounds were searched at a slightly higher rate than whites.

Clearly, the benefits of scaling back excess searches of people who would not otherwise have been searched have not filtered through to ethnic minority groups. As with the Government reforms following the Brixton riots in the 1980s and the Macpherson report on the mishandling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, we are at risk of giving up too soon and allowing stop-and-search to regress to unacceptably high levels of disproportionality and grief.
[Naz Shah]

In her final months as Home Secretary, the Prime Minister argued that
“there is still a long way to go.”
That is partly because numerous HMIC inspections have shown that most chief officers are failing to show leadership in addressing stop-and-search. At one point, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, declared:
“The Conservatives have become the party of equality.”
So can the Minister explain why the current Prime Minister has allowed disproportionality to increase and reform to grind to a halt under her premiership?

Communities have been left wondering whether the Government remain committed to reform of stop-and-search, particularly because the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), did not give it the attention it deserves, despite it having been so central to her predecessor’s race equality agenda. The Prime Minister has also failed to live up to her promises to introduce monitoring of traffic stops and remove individual officers’ ability to use stop-and-search where they are found to be routinely misusing it. Will the Minister affirm that the Government are still committed to those proposals and say when we are likely to see them?

The powerlessness of ethnic minority communities to scrutinise and shape police policies and practice is a crucial issue that remains unaddressed. The true test of a democracy is the way it treats its vulnerable and minority groups.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady will know that a hugely disproportionate number of black young men are victims of knife crime. Will she agree to survey victims’ families—those who are most closely affected—to see whether they agree with her? I strongly suggest that they want tougher sentences for knife crime, they want tougher sentences for the criminals who are convicted and they want more stop-and-search.

Naz Shah: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that, and I will address some of those issues. I am not sure that conviction rates support what he suggests, but I will look into that further.

Police and crime commissioners were elected to democratise policing, but few have prioritised issues facing ethnic minorities. The best stop-and-search schemes give the public opportunities to accompany officers out on patrol, but they place most of their emphasis on scrutiny of stop-and-search records and data at police consultation groups.

The University of Warwick recently conducted the most comprehensive study of how members of the public in five police force areas try to provide input into police practice. It showed that police-public consultative groups have become the main forum through which the police make themselves accountable to the public, although those groups lack representatives from ethnic minorities and young people, who are most affected by policing. It concluded that those groups have become talking shops and are viewed as merely rubber-stamp committees by frustrated members of the community who want to make a difference. That is because there is no obligation on police officers to amend their policies or practice in the light of recommendations from the public. Even more concerningly, some senior officers responsible for organising these groups are either misleading the public about their use of stop-and-search or withholding even the most basic information, which would allow communities to hold them adequately to account. If we are serious about empowering communities, we need to ensure that members of the public can make recommendations and receive a written response from their chief officers on what those officers will do with that feedback. Will the Minister make that a statutory requirement?

The importance of getting stop-and-search right is made clear by academic literature on procedural justice, which suggests that the way people are treated by the police has an impact on their trust and confidence in the police and, by extension, on their perception of the state’s legitimacy, which determines their willingness to co-operate with the police and obey the law. It is therefore no surprise that anti-police riots have been fuelled by experiences of stop-and-search. All of that makes it even more important that we get stop-and-search right, no matter how long it takes.

One type of encounter that tends to be ignored and that is shrouded in secrecy is stops under schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000, which are the most draconian of all police stops. The schedule provides powers to detain the travelling public for up to six hours, which could mean they miss their flights, without the right to compensation. They are separated from their family and friends to be questioned, searched and potentially strip-searched. They have their biometric data taken, irrespective of the outcome of the stop, and have data from their mobile phones and laptops downloaded without their knowledge or consent. This has a deeply negative psychological impact on British Muslims and on those mistaken for Muslims, such as Sikhs and men with beards. This power does not require there to be suspicion that individuals are involved in terrorism, so British Muslims are left wondering why they have been detained, other than by virtue of their faith.

Young Muslims have had the bizarre experience of being asked if they personally know where international terrorists such as Osama bin Laden are hiding. These law-abiding citizens are made to feel humiliated, distressed and fearful, as well as alien to the country they know and love. That has created a sense that British Muslims have become the new suspect community. What will the Government do to eliminate religious and racial profiling at ports?

There is more data and research on police stops than ever before. It shows a consensus that these powers are ineffective in anything other than highly individual scenarios and that they continue to impact negatively on innocent people’s lives. Now is not the time to rest on our laurels and assume that the job is done, simply because the overall numbers are down. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the Government are doing to empower communities to hold their police to account, to deliver on promises of reform and to tackle the false notion that knife crime is linked to stop-and-search.

I will finish on this:
“nobody wins when stop-and-search is misapplied. It is a waste of police time. It is unfair, especially to young, black men. It is bad for public confidence in the police.”—[Official Report, 30 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 833.]
Those are the words of our current Prime Minister when she was the Home Secretary. This year marks 20 years since the Macpherson inquiry started, and last month was 25 years since the stabbing of Stephen Lawrence. The Macpherson report in 1999 noted on stop-and-search that there remained
“a clear core conclusion of racist stereotyping”.
In 2009, the Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, reported on progress since the Lawrence inquiry. It noted that minority ethnic people remain “over-policed and under-protected within our criminal justice system.”

It may be easy, from a position of privilege, to view this as a fad, but for many in our black and minority ethnic communities, racial profiling and discriminatory policing are real. They are corrosive, and they are undermining trust in public institutions. If we have learned anything from the Macpherson report, it is this: institutional racism needs to be dismantled if we are to build a society based on values of procedural justice and public accountability.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), on securing the debate. It may not surprise her or you to hear that I disagree with virtually everything she said. I will explain why.

This debate is about the effect of police stop-and-search on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. I believe that the recent changes in the culture on stop-and-search are very much hurting parts of those communities, and it is not on. They are suffering not from the overuse of stop-and-search, as the hon. Lady would contend, but from the potential underuse of it.

I appreciate that some people will look just at the headline facts, take the consensus view and then want to be seen to be doing something to solve the problem they have identified. I wish, not just on this issue but on many others, that we in Parliament would look more closely at the evidence; we are not here to represent the loudest voice of the day. Apart from that being sensible in itself, if the problem identified is the wrong problem, doing something to fix it could actually be more harmful than helpful, despite people’s very best intentions.

It cannot have escaped anyone’s attention that young people are dying on our streets at a frightening rate, particularly in London. If we look beyond the statistics to the real lives being lost, they are predominantly not white. I am no fan of dividing people up by the colour of their skin—in fact, I often think that the people who see everything in terms of race are the real racists—so all such references in my speech are simply to reflect that that is the way in which the debate is framed.

Extreme violence is one of the real problems facing us, and by and large it is non-white people who are the victims in these murders. The 2016 statistics on race and the criminal justice system show that, in the three-year period from 2013 to 2016, the rate of homicide was four times higher for black victims, at 32 victims per million people, compared with white victims at eight per million and other victims at seven per million. Therefore, when it comes to the most serious offence of all—murder—it is clear that black people, and in particular black males, are far more likely to be victims. They are also more likely to be murderers.

Following a parliamentary question I asked in 2016, I was given the following information about the ethnicity of murderers. While white people made up 87% of the population, they were responsible for 67% of murders. Black people made up 3% of the population but 14.5% of murders. Asian people were 6% of the population but were responsible for 12% of murders, and mixed race people were 2% of the population but responsible for 5.5% of murders.

It is also a fact that black people are more likely to use a knife or a sharp instrument to kill. According to the 2016 statistics on race and the criminal justice system, for victims from the black ethnic group sharp instruments accounted for nearly two thirds of homicides, but they accounted for only one third of white homicides. Cressida Dick said last year that young black men and boys were statistically more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of knife crime, having made up 21 of 24 teenagers murdered at that point that year.

That is the background and those are the facts. I am not sure anybody disputes them, because they are the official facts. If no crimes were taking place, we would not need stop-and-search, but in the real world there is crime, and it is a serious problem. The use of stop-and-search is just one way to fight against crime and one tool to try to prevent it, but it is a very important tool.

**Naz Shah:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, my neighbouring MP, for his input. How does he respond to the fact that for the majority of stop-and-searches that take place, when police officers make their recordings they are made for the purposes of addressing drugs, not knife crime or violent crime, despite what he reads?

**Philip Davies:** I will come on to address those points in my remarks, but the implication of what the hon. Lady says is that drug offences are not serious offences and therefore the police should be turning a blind eye to them. That is not a premise I accept. Drugs are a blight on our society and cause misery for a lot of families, and it is absolutely right that the police try to crack down on drug offences. I do not take the view that drug offences are something that the police should not focus on.

**Mr Hayes:** The association is more intimate than that, is it not? Very often, these crimes are the result of gang activity, and those gangs are involved in both the drug trade and the violence that leads to knife and gun crime and ultimately fatalities.

**Philip Davies:** My right hon. Friend makes a good point; it is difficult to disaggregate drugs from some of the violence we see. The two often go hand in hand, and he puts that point particularly well.

I do not have time today to go into as much detail as I would like on this subject. I know that one of the reasons for stop-and-search relates to drugs. The 2016 statistics on race in the criminal justice system show that 34% of black offenders, and only 15% of white offenders, were convicted of drug offences, making that the largest offence group for black offenders. It seems to me perfectly obvious that black people are therefore
more likely to be stopped and searched for drugs than white people, because more people are convicted of those crimes. That seems to me to be partly obvious. Drug offences were also the largest offence group for the Asian ethnic group, accounting for 28% of its offenders.

One of the other purposes of stop-and-search is to check for weapons. According to the Ministry of Justice’s figures, black suspects had the highest proportion of stop-and-searches for offensive weapons, at 20%. As far as I am concerned, it is irrelevant how many people from each background are being stopped and searched. What is relevant is how many of those who are stopped and searched are guilty of those crimes.

If those from certain communities were being stopped and searched and were consistently found to have done nothing wrong, I would be the first to say, “This is completely unacceptable.” In fact, that was one of the reasons why I started to do my own research on this subject, because I was constantly being told that people from ethnic minorities were much more likely to be stopped and searched but to have done nothing wrong, and therefore they were simply being stopped and searched because of the colour of their skin. If that were the case, it would be unacceptable, but that is absolutely not the case.

I asked a parliamentary question about this in 2016. I was told that the following were the percentages of searches that resulted in an arrest. For white people who were stopped and searched, 13% were arrested as a result. For black people it was 20%, for Asian people 14% and for mixed race people 17%. The evidence shows that the community that is much more likely to be stopped and searched and yet found to have done nothing wrong is white people. Those are the facts. They might be inconvenient facts for people who have a particular agenda, but they are nevertheless the facts.

Naz Shah: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but I struggle with it. For me, the common-sense approach to this would be to say that if the police are searching more black people, they will get higher conviction rates. If they were searching the same number of white people, would that not correlate with convictions? The truth is that from the outset, black people have been stopped and searched much more than their white counterparts, so there will be a reduction in those figures, will there not?

Philip Davies: It is a proportion, not a number. It is a proportion of the number of people who are stopped and searched who were found to have done something wrong and were arrested as a result. The numbers are irrelevant; I am talking about the proportion. As I say, I am not a big fan of dividing people into ethnic groups, but that is the purpose of this debate. The fact of the matter is that the ethnic group most likely to be stopped and searched and found to have done nothing wrong is white people. That is the fact.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): For the avoidance of doubt, is the hon. Gentleman saying that the disproportionate levels of stop-and-search exercised on black people, Muslim people and people from south Asia is because we are more criminal?

Philip Davies: I am giving out the facts, and the facts of the matter are, as I went into earlier—I am sure the right hon. Lady was listening—that for certain offences, black people are more likely to be found guilty than white people. That is a fact. I gave the figures for murder. They are official figures. They are not my figures; I have not made them up. It is not a contention I am making. I am merely quoting the facts. I know the right hon. Lady is not always known for wanting to deal in facts, but they are the facts.

Ms Abbott: I heard what you said, and I ask you—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I am saying nothing; it is the hon. Gentleman.

Ms Abbott: I heard what the hon. Gentleman said. I ask him, “Are you saying that black, Muslim and Asian people, as a whole, are more likely to be criminal?”

Philip Davies: I have just answered that question, but I will answer it again for the right hon. Lady’s benefit. The fact is that for certain categories of offence—murder, drug offences and so on—black people and people from ethnic minorities are more likely to be guilty than white people. That is a fact. I am not making a particular contention. That is the evidence. That is the rate of convictions. That is done by the courts. It might be that she has no confidence in our courts system in this country; that may be her contention. I, as it happens, do. Those are the facts.

Naj Shah: I am really struggling with this. What I am saying, and what I have put before the House today, is the fact of the disproportionalities of young black men being stopped and searched in the first instance. Had we not had that disproportionalilty—if we had it equal—does he not agree that those figures would then be more fairly representative—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I will just say to the Opposition Front Bencher and the sponsor of the debate that they will get an opportunity to respond to the debate.

Philip Davies: Thank you, Mr Owen. I will try to resist more interventions on that basis.

I do not accept the premise the hon. Lady starts from, which is that police officers in this country are inherently racist and are going out of their way to deliberately stop people from ethnic minorities whom they know there is no basis for stopping. I do not accept the premise of that argument. I have a high regard for police officers, not only in my local community but right across the country. I believe they do the job to the best of their ability. The evidence shows that her premise is not right, because the people most likely to be found guilty of something after being stopped and searched are people from ethnic minorities, which would indicate that police officers are not doing as she and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) allege.

The Ministry of Justice’s most recent publication says that “the rate of prosecutions for the Black ethnic group was four times higher than for the White group. The Mixed group had the second highest rate, which was more than twice as high as the White group.”
That mirrors the higher stop-and-search rate in that same period, when black individuals had a stop-and-search rate around four times higher than white individuals in London, and about five and a half times higher in the rest of England and Wales. In many respects, the rates of stop-and-search based on different people's ethnicity only mirrored the exact same difference in conviction rates for those ethnic groups. The two were entirely in line. The most recent figures show a bigger gap between the rates per 1,000 who are stopped and searched by ethnicity, and time will tell whether those rates continue to mirror the same pattern within the criminal justice system.

When it comes to youths, the difference is even starker. According to the Ministry of Justice report:

“The number of juveniles prosecuted for indictable offences in relation to population size varied by ethnicity. Prosecution rates per 1,000 people aged 10-17...were highest for Black juveniles (12 juveniles per 1000 people), followed by Mixed (4 per 1000), Chinese or Other (2 per 1000), White (2 per 1000) and Asian (2 per 1000).”

In 2016, the black ethnic group represented 4% of the general population aged 10 to 17 but 19% of all juvenile prosecutions for indictable offences, whereas the white ethnic group represented 82% of the general population aged 10 to 17 but 67% of juvenile prosecutions. In answer to the shadow Minister, the figures suggest a clear pattern in youth offending, and particularly in serious youth offending. Those are the facts. They might be uncomfortable, but we cannot get away from them just to suit our political narratives.

I do not even accept the premise set by the hon. Member for Bradford West that people from ethnic minorities feel that the criminal justice system and stop-and-search are discriminatory against them. Again, I do not see the evidence to suggest that. A group of young BAME people were asked if they agreed that, if used fairly, stop-and-search is a good tactic to help reduce crime. Some 71% either agreed or strongly agreed, and only 9% disagreed. Why did only 9% disagree that stop-and-search is a good thing? Could it be that they believe and realise that the police predominantly protect them through the use of stop-and-search? Without stop-and-search, they are much more likely to be the victims of these serious crimes.

Another survey, with the results published in “Statistics on race and the criminal justice system”, was done back in 2014. It found that the ethnic group with the highest confidence in the criminal justice system was Asian people, with 76% of them having confidence in the criminal justice system. For mixed race people it was 66% and for both white and black people it was 65%—exactly the same. Again, I do not see any evidence to suggest that people from ethnic minorities have less confidence in the criminal justice system. Those surveys certainly do not suggest that.

The hon. Member for Bradford West may well have seen the article in The Sunday Times last weekend with research from Cambridge University that found that Muslims are no more likely than white Britons to be stopped by police on suspicion of committing a crime. I hope that she will read that report, because it is a helpful piece of research.

Are police officers guilty of racism towards non-white individuals in the street? That, in effect, is the allegation that Opposition Members are making. Actually, that does not even take into account the fact that BAME officers themselves engage in stop-and-search. According to the Home Office’s latest police workforce figures, 6% of police officers are non-white. In London, where stop-and-searches occur far more than in any village in my constituency, 13% of officers are BAME. As of 31 March 2017, there were 7,572 BAME police officers in total, and many of them will themselves use stop-and-search on other people from ethnic minorities. Are they being racist towards people from ethnic minorities? They are part of the statistics I have quoted.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): To follow the hon. Gentleman’s line of thinking, this is all about stopping crime. Bearing in mind that, in 2016-17, 62% of stop-and-searches were for drugs, compared with 11% for offensive weapons, 9% for going equipped and 1% for firearms, does the hon. Gentleman agree that higher priority must be given to searches? That would help to reduce the rise in killings in London, for example. Stop-and-search is a way of preventing crime, and it is very important.

**Philip Davies**: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful to him for that support.

Why are more black people being stopped? If the uncomfortable truth is that they commit more of the crimes for which they are stopped, we need to accept that and deal with it. If that is not the case, we need the evidence to show what the issue is. The Prime Minister said that institutions should explain or change. I say that this evidence needs an explanation, and it may well be that it should result in a change to the recent policy on stop-and-search, and that stop-and-search should be used more.

As a result of this politically correct chatter about stop-and-search, the number of stop-and-searches has reduced dramatically. One reason is that the police fear stopping and searching people in case they are branded racist. In fact, one police officer told me that, in their training, they were told to avoid stopping and searching somebody from an ethnic minority because it could easily get them into trouble. What a message to send out to our police officers, who try their best to combat crime. Cressida Dick is reported to have said of police officers last August:

“I think there are some who have become concerned that they will be accused of racism, that they may get a complaint and that if they do get a complaint, that may inhibit their work in other ways, or they may not be supported by their bosses. When I look at it, there’s a very low number of complaints, and the vast majority of those are resolved very, very quickly and in favour of the officer.”

Of course there will be the odd bad egg in any institution or organisation, and of course that should never be tolerated. Modern technology in the form of body-worn cameras can help to allow greater transparency, and those who abuse their position can be weeded out. I understand that 94% of Metropolitan police officers now wear those cameras, so what is anybody worried about?

All the evidence as to whether people are treated fairly or unfairly is there. Let police officers get on and do their job. They do a fantastic and important job in keeping us safe. The last thing they need is meddling politicians, who know barely anything about what they
are talking about, interfering in their operational work. Their job is hard enough as it is without people in this place making it even harder for them. Let us trust them to get on and do their job. They do their job with great skill and dedication, and we should support them.

It is totally unacceptable to have a situation in which officers leave criminals free to commit crimes simply because they want to avoid racism complaints. We need to ensure that everything is done to stop the needless killings and other crimes on our streets. Above all, we need to trust the police and let them get on with their job. There are plenty of political correctness wallahs in the police anyway nowadays, so there are plenty to look after that agenda. We need to give the police the best chance of fighting crime and protecting all our people, black, white or whatever—their skin colour is completely irrelevant. I am not sure that debates and agendas like these help with that unless they are based on evidence and facts.

At the beginning of May, the Evening Standard reported on parents who have lost children to knife crime leading a peace march and rally in London. The article said:

“Hundreds of marchers are expected to take to the streets in Hackney and Islington amid a growing outcry over the number of fatal stabbings. There were also calls for the Metropolitan Police to boost the number of stop-and-searches in London to detect knife carriers.

March organiser Janet Collins, who runs the youth intervention project The Crib, said: ‘We are saying we have had enough. There are no police on the streets, we do not see them walking on the streets in Hackney and Islington, they are in their cars. We need to bring back stop-and-search. If people object to it, I ask do they want to see kids running around with big knives?’”

That is the real view of people out in the streets, but it is a view that this House seems completely out of touch with. I think that most people in this country expect us to support the police in the work that they do. I certainly do. I hope other Members will do so too.

10.8 am

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on bringing this important subject before us. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who made his case with his usual Yorkshire bluntness. I will be a bit less monochromatic; I am a sociologist, so I will introduce some light and shade and context to the debate. I will quote very few opinion surveys, because as a sociologist, I am always suspicious of the sampling techniques used to seemingly pluck figures out of the air, such as the use of self-selecting samples. I used to teach sampling methods.

It is important to remember the context. Disquiet at the excessive use of stop-and-search long predates expressions such as “institutional racism”, “hostile environment” and other terms with which we are now familiar. It has its origins in the sus laws, and in the Vagrancy Act 1824, which allowed any person to be arrested on suspicion of loitering and was scrapped in the 1980s. These are not new debates.

We have a sense of déjà vu. In 1981, there were headlines about rising violence on the streets. The Specials’ “Ghost Town” was No. 1, and the streets of Brixton and Toxteth burned. At the same time, a royal wedding was being celebrated. I queued up to see the fireworks for Prince Charles and Lady Diana, I remember. A royal commission in 1981 found that there was an excessive use of stop-and-search, and in the end it was scrapped. That year’s riots were the result of the heavy-handedness of the sus laws and of the use of stop-and-search against ethnic minority communities. It is often a knee-jerk reaction to step up stop-and-search. Nobody doubts that it is an important tool in the toolbox of police and law enforcement when there is rising crime, but it can be a blunt instrument, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West pointed out. We need to think about the implications that it has for community relations, for trust and confidence, and for transparency.

Of course, the events I mentioned were in 1981, before the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and before interviews had to be recorded, and there are a lot of scary examples of how it was used indiscriminately on our streets. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West pointed out the alarming figures, and the fact that some people are eight times more likely to be searched, which is quite disturbing. My intervention was going to be figure-free and has grown into a speech as I have been sitting here. We still have Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which authorises officers to stop and search people without reasonable grounds but where there is a risk of violence, or where it is believed weapons are being carried. A Section 60 stop-and-search order is something that should not be slapped on lightly.

What we are talking about is racial profiling, as a sociologist would say. There has been some to-ing and fro-ing on drugs policy in the debate. I have figures from the most recent British crime survey—a robust exercise, not simply an opinion survey—that say that BAME people are much less likely to use drugs, including cannabis, than white people, yet black people are stopped and searched for drugs at a rate nine times higher than their white counterparts, compared with eight times higher for all other reasons for a search. Asian and mixed-race people were also stopped and searched for drugs at a rate three times higher than their white counterparts, compared with two times higher where there were other reasons for a search. There are disparities there; we cannot get away from that.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): A key part of addressing racial bias in the police force is making sure the force reflects the community it serves. When I joined Greater Manchester police, there were only a handful of such officers. Things have improved since then, and there has been good work, through unconscious bias training, positive action co-ordinators and independent advisory groups, but there is still an issue with minority ethnic officers rising to the top ranks. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government and politicians should do what we can to encourage forces to reflect their communities at all ranks?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who has served as a police officer and a lawyer, and is now a shadow Minister—so he speaks with great authority. There is a need for greater training, and for things to be seen in a less monochromatic, dogmatic way, rather than as political correctness gone mad, and to address the issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford
West has pointed out, the Prime Minister said when she was Home Secretary that communities are alienated when stop-and-search is used willy-nilly.

There are some reasons to be cheerful. According to figures from the Mayor of London’s office, from 2011 to 2012, fewer than one in 12 instances of stop-and-search culminated in arrest; but now one in six leads to arrest, and of those, one in three produces a positive outcome. No one disagrees with stop-and-search if it is done properly—if it is targeted and intelligence-led. There are many instances of that, and I can give some anecdotal ones. As I have said, I am always suspicious of opinion polls of any sort; at the general election, they predicted my demise, and my majority went up 50 times. However, the polls cited by the Mayor of London show that 74% of Londoners and 58% of young people support stop-and-search. I do not know where the figures came from.

The hon. Member for Shipley pointed out the use of body-worn cameras, which could be a game changer; we shall have to see how that plays out. In the past, police interviews were not even tape-recorded. We live in an age when everyone carries a smartphone and many more things are recorded.

As I have said, my speech is really an overgrown intervention. I wanted to share a personal experience that all Opposition Members present may be able to identify with—the fact that because of our pigmentation we are treated differently. The in-built suspicion of people and the idea that they can be stopped while going about their lawful business pervades all levels of society. I have been stopped more times in this place since my election in 2015 than in 43 years outside. It still occurs daily, presumably because my face does not fit. I have the correct pass, and the last time I gave the rejoinder that I had every right to be here, a complaint was made against me through the office of the Serjeant at Arms. We all face that kind of thing. I am sure that it is not a completely alien scenario even for my right hon. Member for Shipley. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has been here many years.

Last year I was on a cross-party delegation to the state of Israel, and I was told that often the person of colour on a delegation is the one who gets problems. I thought that it would not happen. I shall not go into the details of being strip-searched at Ben Gurion International airport, but it happened to me as a Member of Parliament. Those things do happen, and perhaps a cultural shift is needed in society, in the light of such things as the hostile environment policy. The assumption that anyone of the wrong pigmentation may be up to no good, and the idea that all public servants, NHS staff and landlords must suddenly turn into Border Force and ask for passports at every turn, is what we get under a hostile environment policy. Noises are being made about restricting stop-and-search and carrying it out in a more targeted way. I should be interested to hear from the Minister about that.

Hearing that I do not want to quote opinion polls, I have some actual data from 2014-15—the most recent figures I could find. They show that of a total of 82,183 citizens in London who were arrested and subsequently released without charge, 45% were white Londoners. It is not necessary to be a statistician to work out that that is hitting black and ethnic minority people disproportionately. If 45% were white, 55% were not, for the benefit of anyone who is not quick at maths.

As a sociologist, I also want to draw attention to poverty and a critical error that is made in this context. The new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has said—I have a counter-quote to the one given by the hon. Member for Shipley—that we need higher rates of stop-and-search. However, the idea that higher rates of stop-and-search will lead automatically to a reduction in violence is a false promise; they cannot, on their own. It is poverty that we need to address, because the violence is taking place in the most acutely deprived communities. There have been police cuts, and police numbers are down 20,000. Cuts, including cuts in the Home Office, have consequences; that is the reason for the massive errors about the Windrush generation. If there are fewer Home Office staff and everyone else is expected to act as border police, anomalies occur. I am glad that the new Home Secretary is addressing those matters. I hope that the change will be to not just wording, but the mentality and climate. This may be politically unpalatable, but rising crime also has to do with rising poverty in society. Anyway, this is an overgrown intervention; it was not intended to be a speech, so I will end there.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): We will now hear from the Front Benchers. We have a bit of extra time, so I ask that they use it wisely to give the Minister a full opportunity to respond, and to enable Ms Shah to wind up the debate at the end. If hon. Members have come in late and wish to make interventions, that is fine, but they are not to make long interventions or speeches.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Nadhim Zahawi) for securing time for this important and, as it turned out, lively debate. She highlighted the risk of inappropriate stop-and-search undermining confidence in the police. That is a real concern. The key is that use of stop-and-search has to be appropriate. We heard the counter-arguments made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who argued that there was an underuse of stop-and-search, but as I have said, the key for me is appropriate use of it.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) placed the debate in its historical context and gave a very balanced view of the current situation. I am obviously a Scottish Member; in Scotland, criminal justice and policing are devolved, and the Scottish National party is taking action to ensure that there are no inappropriate stop-and-searches, but there is still work to be done.

For every debate that I take part in, I like to consider my own constituency cases, but having had a quick look, I have to say that we have had none on this issue, although in fairness, policing is devolved, and if people had a complaint, they would be more likely to go to my Scottish Parliament counterpart. I have also checked with local organisations, and they have had no recent cases. The only anecdote that I can give from my own knowledge is a personal one. It is from my partner, Nidhin. She was stopped and searched when she lived in London, and it had a traumatic effect on her, giving her anxiety and stress-related issues that continue to this day. I am pleased to say that she is largely over that now, but I have seen at first hand how stop-and-search can be counterproductive if used inappropriately.
Scotland has a much smaller BAME population. According to the 2011 census, the size of the minority ethnic population was just over 200,000, or 4% of the Scottish population. That represents a doubling since 2001.

The Scottish Government introduced a new code for use of stop-and-search powers. It came into effect a year ago and, among other things, it requires the police to monitor trends in who is being stopped by them. Since 11 May 2017, police are able to stop and search people only with reasonable grounds. That has ended the so-called consensual searches, whereby people were searched with consent but without legal basis. The new code is about finding the balance and maintaining the trust between the police and the public.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Michael Matheson, said:

“The ability of police to stop and search individuals can be an intrusion into liberty and privacy, but remains a valuable tool in combating crime.”

He went on to say that he had spent time with officers on the streets and was convinced that such searches would be carried out with “fairness, integrity and respect”. It is vital that that is how stop-and-search is handled.

Under the code, Police Scotland must carefully monitor the use of stop-and-search in relation to specific sections of the community, including different ethnic groups. That will enable Police Scotland to identify any concerning trends or seemingly disproportionate use of the powers, and to take action if necessary. There has been an improvement: an increase in the number of minority ethnic entrants to the police workforce. Police Scotland’s positive action team have implemented the Introduction to Policing programme, known as ITPP, which supports potential minority ethnic candidates through a training and mentoring programme. The first course had 54 participants and the second 58, with the direct result that more than 10% of the recruits who joined Police Scotland in September 2017 were from a minority ethnic background. That stands us in good stead, given that people from such a background make up 4% of the population.

When stop-and-search is used in a way that is perceived to be unfair or ineffective, it has a lasting detrimental impact on people’s trust in the police—particularly when it is used against the young—and their willingness to co-operate with them. Consequently, the police’s ability to carry out investigations and reduce crime is undermined, so it is in everyone’s interests to get this right. Stop-and-search can be a valuable tool in combating crime, but it is important that we get the balance right between protecting the public and the rights of individuals and, critically, maintaining the trust between the police and the public.

10.24 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on bringing forward this very important debate. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for their important interventions, to which I will return.

Nothing has poisoned relationships between the police and the communities they serve more than non-evidence-based stop-and-search. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said there is a lot of support among ethnic minorities for stop-and-search that is used “fairly”, but he missed the important point about that word. Everybody supports stop-and-search where it is used fairly. The concern arises when there is no evidence to justify the stop and the search—when it is felt that there is disproportionality. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton said, one thing that can allay these concerns is a police force that looks more like the community it is supposed to be serving. That is the point about fairness that the hon. Member for Shipley does not seem to have engaged with.

Although I defer to the hon. Gentleman in all matters, I know a little bit more than him about stop-and-search, because one of the earliest campaigns I was involved in as a young woman in the early 1980s was the campaign against the sus laws. I was part of that campaign together with Lord Boateng—he is now in the other place—but also a number of mothers. What gives the lie to the notion that stop-and-search has no harmful effects is that those mothers, who were working with us to take forward the campaign and ultimately to have the sus laws abolished, were concerned about the effect on their sons—the unfairness and the possibility that disproportionate stop-and-search was actually criminalising their sons, with effects they feared.

The first thing to say about stop-and-search is that it has to be seen to be used fairly and on the basis of evidence. But the next thing to say about stop-and-search is that it does not work in the way some Members seem to think. That is the verdict of research from the Home Office, from the College of Policing and from the Greater London Authority when the current Foreign Secretary was the Mayor of London. And the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, said:

“I strongly believe that stop and search should be used proportionately, without prejudice, and with the support of local communities”.

She also said that misuse of stop-and-search was an “affront to justice”. Government Members do not seem to consider the possibility that, certainly in the recent past, it was misused, but the current Prime Minister considered that possibility, and on that point, if on that point only, I agree with her.

The whole history of stop-and-search is that it is not used proportionately; it is used in a prejudicial way, and local communities frequently feel that it is unfairly imposed on them. The House needs to reflect for a few moments on the 1981 Brixton riots. This was one of the worst riots, up to that point, on the British mainland, and it was triggered specifically by Operation Swamp 81 in Brixton, where, in a matter of days, 943 people were stopped and searched and 82 were arrested.

Nobody—I have to repeat this—objects to targeted, intelligence-led stop-and-search, but too frequently, and certainly until the current Prime Minister introduced her reforms as Home Secretary, stop-and-search has been random, mass and indiscriminate. Local communities too often feel that the only reason they are targeted is the ethnic composition of the community.

Stop-and-search is used vastly more disproportionately on ethnic minorities. Formerly, if someone was Asian, they were three times more likely to be the subject of
stop-and-search. If someone is black, that rises to six times more likely. And the situation is getting worse. This is no time for people to be complacent and assume that communities welcome stop-and-search. The disproportions had been narrowing up to 2015, but now the disproportionality has risen once again. As of 2016-17, black people are eight times more likely to be stopped and searched. The scandal of discrimination is growing.

According to the Home Office, in 2016-17 there were four stop-and-searches for every 1,000 white people, compared with 29 stop-and-searches for every 1,000 black people. Ministers have to understand what it does to a young man, often just going about his business—going to his education or his job—to know he has this wildly disproportionate vulnerability in terms of being stopped and searched.

Philip Davies: Is it the right hon. Lady’s contention that police officers in this country are institutionally racist?

Ms Abbott: There are disproportionate levels of stop-and-search, which poison the relationship between the police and the community. As the hon. Gentleman will understand, we cannot effectively contend with crime unless we have the co-operation of communities.

Philip Davies: The right hon. Lady gave a very interesting answer, but it suffered from not answering the question I actually asked. I will ask it again to see if we can get a straighter answer: is her contention that police officers in this country are institutionally racist?

Ms Abbott: My contention—it was also the contention of the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary—is that disproportionate levels of stop-and-search were damaging to police-community relationships. If the hon. Gentleman queries that, maybe he should ask the Prime Minister why she thought that.

Some hon. Members and many pundits believe that stop-and-search is the answer to a rise in serious violence on our streets, including knife crime, gun crime and acid attacks. However, there is no evidence, only tabloid headlines, to support that assertion. In academic circles, there is the phrase “policy-based evidence-making”—that is, searching desperately for any evidence, however flimsy, to support a preconceived policy. Policies formed in that way frequently fail, but their advocates draw no lessons from that failure. They often demand more of the same—more failure.

The truth is that when the levels of stop-and-search decreased, the arrest rate as a whole actually rose. In Hackney, my own borough in London, they brought down levels of stop-and-search, but their arrest rate increased. According to Home Office data, 71% of all stop-and-searches result in no further action. Only 17% of stop-and-searches result in any arrest. Many of those are not for the possession of weapons or any serious crime at all, but for the possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use. Stop-and-search on its own will not end knife crime and gun crime.

The random, untargeted and discriminatory use of stop-and-search is worse than useless. Imagine belonging to one of the groups of people who are routinely discriminated against. Imagine feeling that you have been picked on by the police because of how you look. Is that likely to make you, your friends and your family more favourable to the police or more distrustful of the police? The answer is self-evident. Any large-scale increase in stop-and-search that is not intelligence-led runs the risk of leading to even greater resentment against the police.

In the debate in the Chamber on the serious violence strategy yesterday, the Government’s introduction, although well meaning, was a lacklustre and ill-considered defence of their strategy. The strategy itself is ill-considered, and violent crime is rising. Young black and Asian men must not be the scapegoats for this Government’s failings on policing and crime. Increasing stop-and-search can and will win cheap headlines, but it will not lead to lower levels of serious violent crime. As all the evidence suggests, it will lead to little increase in arrests for possession of weapons, and it may well lead to far greater resentment in the communities where it is imposed.

I can remember the children of the women who were my friends in the ’80s and ’90s, and how upset those women were by the treatment meted out to their children in the name of stop-and-search. I had a friend whose son was wheeling his bicycle back home, and the police stopped him, believing he must have stolen the bicycle. If that happens once, that is one thing, but if that sort of targeting of people because they look different happens over and over again, how can it improve police-community relations?

In conclusion, stop-and-search is clearly a legitimate weapon against crime when it is targeted and there is some evidence base, but as the Prime Minister—a former Home Secretary—said, ill-targeted stop-and-search is an abuse, which cannot help relationships between the police and the community. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West that we have to ensure we leave behind some of the obvious abuses, which are reflected in the figures, of the disproportionate use of stop-and-search, so that it becomes what it has always had the possibility to be: a useful tool in the fight against crime. It is certainly not the be-all and end-all if we are talking about violent crime.

10.36 am

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for bringing this debate before us and for her contribution. Stop-and-search is a vital policing tool, and I welcome the fact that everyone who has spoken in this debate has recognised that it has a place in policing. I believe, however, that if that power is misused, it is counterproductive, has a negative impact on police-community relations, and is a waste of police time.

I patrolled some of the most hostile community areas in my early life. I patrolled the Turf Lodge in west Belfast, Northern Ireland and carried out stop-and-search there. At the time, that community was far more hostile than any on the mainland of the United Kingdom. I was also an intelligence officer two years later.

The nub of the issue is that stop-and-search is a tool that is often tactical rather than strategic. As the Minister responsible for security in the United Kingdom, I have the strategic responsibility of trying to keep people safe. That is what I am here to do. I will empower our police,
intelligence services and communities to use whatever tools they can to do that. Sometimes we have to balance tactical and strategic needs.

I agree with Opposition Members that what really stops crime is gathering good intelligence, when communities speak to police and community representatives and tell them, as they would say in Lancashire, who’s a wrong’un. As a Lancashire MP stuck between two Yorkshire MPs from either side of the House, I felt in a somewhat difficult position in this debate. What stops crime in the long term is when the community is on the side of the police and gives them information. That can be casual information or well-sourced information, and it could come from police working hand in hand with community groups to deliver the knowledge needed to use targeted searches. Sometimes that will mean doing less stop-and-search, if it means that there is a longer-term investment in communities to ensure a better flow of intelligence.

We should be slightly cautious about that, because every community is different. I joke about west Yorkshire, but it is different from Lancashire. Our communities behave differently and our ethnic communities often behave differently among themselves, so we have to be acutely aware of individual sensitivities at a local policing level. In my view, one of the most important decisions a chief constable can make is the right appointment of the chief superintendents in the divisions that they police, because at that rank of the police force people hold in their hands the relations with the community. If they get it right there is a massive decline in crime, but there can sometimes be a rise just across divisional borders when they get it wrong.

After being spat at, abused or petrol-bombed, or after one of my soldiers had been murdered, it used to be tempting for me to walk down the street in west Belfast and abuse back. That would be tempting and understandable for any human being who had seen people killed who they owed a duty of care to, who they valued and, sometimes, who they loved. But it does not fix the problem in the long run. In the long run, the problem is solved when the community realises that the police are its help and saviour, not its enemy. That is why we have to get the balance right on stop-and-search, and why the Government started that process by introducing a reform package in 2014.

I make the point to the Opposition that if we are to be less tactical and more intelligence-led, it is important to give our police and intelligence services the power to gather that intelligence. It is no good saying on the one hand that we want less indiscriminate or blanket targeting, but on the other that we oppose Prevent or some of the investigatory powers measures that allow us to gather that intelligence, to be more targeted at people committing wrongdoing and to ensure that we can leave the population alone to live their lives free of interference. That is an important point.

Good intelligence gathering and good intelligence measures and powers are how we can allow our police to leave people alone to carry on their daily business free, and how we can ensure that we do not end up with such a disparity that we get into the circular debate that I have heard today about whether we go after more people from certain groups because those groups commit more crimes, or vice versa. I urge the Opposition to reflect on that in discussions about Prevent and other issues.

Ms Abbott: The Minister has raised the issue of Prevent. I certainly have called for a review of it, but the concern is not that we do not need that type of strategy, but that the current Prevent operation has done what I have argued that stop-and-search has done: it has not helped to heal relationships or promote better relationships between certain communities and the state. We want a Prevent-type strategy, but we want one that works. The problem with Prevent is that in many communities—not all, but many—it has become a tainted brand.

Mr Wallace: I have published the figures, and I would venture that Prevent is working. It allows people who have set off on a path of violent extremism to be diverted from that path and to re-engage in society, and in doing so, it protects many of us on the streets. The figures show that hundreds of people who had been a serious concern are not in prison—we did not cut corners and lock them up without trial, or that sort of thing—but back in their communities, and some of them, hopefully, are back in the mainstream.

We all have a job of recognising and communicating that Prevent is about safeguarding. When we do, and when I speak to communities up and down the United Kingdom, we find that although some in the communities are worried about it or do not like it, a growing number of people realise that it is a safeguarding tool that works.

We have had many debates about Prevent before, but it is about allowing communities, alongside local police, to engage, and about seeing what we can do to make people desist, disengage and turn around. In some communities it works, but I know that, as the right hon. Lady says, we have more work to do in other areas. Whenever I say, “Please give me an example of your version of Prevent,” every single person just describes Prevent. They do not usually come up with anything different, because at the end of the day it is effectively a safeguarding measure.

I need to press on to the heart of the debate about stop-and-search. In 2014, when we started work on a major public consultation on the use of the power, troubling evidence came to light that it was not being used fairly, effectively or, in some cases, lawfully. For example, figures showed that of 1.2 million stop-and-searches carried out in 2010-11, only 9% led to an arrest. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, as it was known at the time, found that potentially more than a quarter of stops carried out by the police were without sufficient legal grounds, and it also found poor knowledge of the law on stop-and-search among officers and their supervisors.

Statistics also showed that if someone was black, they were seven times more likely to be stopped and searched than if they were white, and three times more likely if they were Asian. That was a cause for considerable concern, and still is. It is not that we have forgotten about it, and I would not like the Opposition to venture that that was the case.

As a result of extensive public consultation and community engagement, and of working closely with the police and other partners, the Government introduced...
several measures, such as clarifying “reasonable grounds for suspicion” in PACE code A, which governs the use of stop-and-search powers, and publishing stop-and-search data on police.uk, which offers local transparency to understand how the police serve their communities.

I take the point of the hon. Member for Bradford West, who asked how there could be oversight. She made a point about police and crime commissioners that I was disappointed with, and if what she said is the case, we should all do more to ensure that it is not. They should have a role in that regard, and they should have it further up their agenda. They have the power to hold chief constables to account. I do not know what the response from her local chief constable is, but if something is troubling the local community, that is the point of our PCCs. They should be communicating, taking those things on board and seeing what steps they can take to ensure that such things are not happening.

Philip Davies: The Minister trotted out a rather meaningless statistic about the proportion of stop-and-searches on different communities. Is he saying that it is Government policy that there should be the same proportion of stop-and-searches for each ethnic group of the country as their make-up of the population? Otherwise, what on earth is the point of him saying that a certain ethnic group is stopped and searched more often than another? Does he accept that it is inevitable that some ethnic groups will be stopped more often than others, or is he saying that it should be the same figure for every ethnic group?

Mr Wallace: I am saying that it should always be clearly targeted. The geographic breakdowns give a better picture. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) talked about sociology and statistics, and it is important to look below the national figure at the local figures. Often, they show where we can put things right, where there is a disparity, or where the figures are just a reflection of the crime trends, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) talked about.

Before this debate, I asked for some regional statistics. In 2016, in Merseyside, if someone was Asian, they were less likely to be stopped than if they were white, and someone was 2.8 times more likely to be stopped if they were black. In West Yorkshire, they were 1.5 times more likely to be stopped than if they were white. In Lincolnshire, someone was less likely to be stopped if they were Asian than if they were white, but if they were black, they were 4.8 times more likely to be stopped.

Those regional or county statistics are really useful, because they help to answer other questions. I had assumed that the figure of black people being 8 times more likely to be stopped was predominantly driven by London, but in the Metropolitan police area, someone who was black was only 3.8 times more likely to be stopped. If they were Asian, it was about the same as if they were white.

When I look at those figures, I ask myself about community relationships, about whether we have a tactical rather than a strategic approach, and about the relationship between PCCs and the chief constables. By looking at the information at force level, we will get a more informed picture on the circular debate about whether it is because people commit more crimes, whether we as the state are doing something wrong, whether communities are not supporting the police, or whether there is a particular problem with organised crime groups in certain areas.

The 1981 riots are important to consider, and they came up in yesterday’s debate on serious violent crime. One of the biggest differences between crime in 1981 and today is the scale of organised crime and the ability for it to be organised through mobile telephones and encryption, as I said yesterday. We should recognise that organised crime is colour-blind. It does not care whether someone is black or white; it will shoot or stab them, and sell them drugs, no matter what. I suspect that some of the least racist people in this country are the drug dealers—they are delighted to sell anyone their poison.

We must remember that one of the differences between 1981 and now is the modus operandi of organised crime. It targets communities using county lines, meaning that some of our communities are more vulnerable to being exploited than they were before. I do not know the exact answer to that. Some of it will be an increase in stop-and-search where there is a particular problem with organised crime groups, because that may be the only tool that the local police have at that moment in time. Some organised crime groups have become much more involved in moving into a community before a crime occurs, they spot them, and then delivering their drugs, moving people around and moving couriers from outside an area into it so that the local community does not recognise them.

Also, communities are much less settled now than they were in 1981, which is a challenge. How do our frontline police deal with what is sometimes a very dangerous threat but short-term threat, whereby people move in, carry out their crime and then move on again? Addressing that will be a challenge. Stop-and-search will play a strong role in meeting that challenge, but more than anything, intelligence will play a role in stopping these criminals and hopefully preventing them from getting ahead of us.

We rolled out the voluntary Best Use of Stop and Search scheme, introducing greater transparency and public scrutiny, and the measures in that scheme have all been delivered. Every force in England and Wales signed up to the scheme, putting in place all of its components, which enable the public and the police to better understand how stop-and-search is used and how it can be improved upon. PACE code A, which governs how stop-and-search is carried out, was changed to make it clear that “reasonable grounds” cannot be based on race or stereotypical images, and the College of Policing developed and rolled out national standards and training, including mandatory unconscious bias awareness. We expect to see further improvements following on from those changes.

In answer to the hon. Member for Bradford West, the Home Office—in collaboration with the College of Policing through its national policing curriculum, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and community interest group representatives—is reviewing the Best Use of Stop and Search scheme, to take into account the three years of operational experience and feedback from practitioners, organisations and the public. A refreshed version of the scheme is currently being developed, with a view to a nationwide launch by the end of the year. The refreshed version will place further emphasis on community involvement and the need for forces to monitor and explain their use of stop-and-search.
Mr Wallace:

HMIC has observed improvements across the 43 forces in a number of areas. For example, in 2012 the inspectorate found that 27% of stop-and-search forms that it examined did not show that there had been sufficient grounds for a lawful search. By 2017, that figure had dropped to 6%.

As for race and ethnicity, in 2016-17 substantially fewer black individuals were stopped and searched than before; the figure was down by 74% from 2010-11, when there were more than 110 searches for every thousand black people. The number of Asian individuals being stopped and searched has also fallen by 79% since 2010-11. By anyone’s yardstick, those figures represent a significant change and show that things are going in the right direction.

Nevertheless, the figures still show that if someone is black, they are more than eight times more likely to be stopped and searched than someone who is white. As I said earlier, I think that to explore those statistics further and perhaps understand what is behind them, we should look more at our force levels.

Philip Davies: I appreciate that the Minister is in a difficult position, because he has to defend the remarks on stop-and-search that the Prime Minister made when she was Home Secretary, which are virtually indefensible and which are unravelling, as we speak, on the streets of London. However, it is reported in the newspapers today that the Home Secretary is at the Police Federation conference and will say that she has only been in his job a few weeks and he is not going there to tell the police how to do their job. Yet I get the impression here that the Government are still trying to tell police officers how to do their job. What I want to hear the Minister say today is that we have a great police force, they do a great job, we trust them to get on and do their job, and the Government will support them. Can he bring himself to give that message to our police officers today?

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister responds, I ask him to leave a couple of minutes at the end of the debate for the hon. Member who secured the debate to sum up.

Mr Wallace: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley quoted earlier. The truth remains that we are far from having a reflective workforce. A reflective workforce would benefit the police.

This debate was never about telling the police how to do their job; it is about supporting the police. True leadership consists of two things: challenging and

One response is strategic and one is tactical, and we can all pay to the gallery and just play to the tactical side for the daily headline. However, my hon. Friend might want to reflect that my job is to deliver strategic security for this United Kingdom, which means balancing risks. Getting the right stop-and-search, which is intelligence-targeted, without setting communities against each other, will be the best way to deliver a strong, strategic and secure community.

So I am not playing for the Daily Mail headline for my hon. Friend; I am playing making my community safe. That is the reality. The Prime Minister had the wisdom to spot that and we in the Home Office are going to deliver it. We will listen to the Opposition and urge them to support us on some of our intelligence-gathering measures, which may mean their having to balance risks. It is important to do things that way. I am determined to deliver, and we are on the right track.

I want to make sure our communities are engaged with that approach.

We all accept that stop-and-search is a tool, and we can use it and use it well. Nevertheless, the best tool is when someone in the community picks up the telephone and speaks to their local police force, and as a result we manage to arrest the people carrying the knives and dealing the drugs before they are on our streets.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the Minister for leaving time for Naz Shah to wind up the debate.

10.56 am

Naz Shah: Thank you, Mr Owen, for again calling me to speak.

I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this debate: the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies); my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq); and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan); our shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott); and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day).

I will address a couple of the issues that have been raised. My neighbouring MP, the hon. Member for Shipley, talked about valuing our police. I do value the police. It is in that vein that I sit on the Home Affairs Committee and that I am part of a national roundtable led by Chief Constable Boucher, which looks at diversity on behalf of the National Police Chiefs’ Council. It is in that vein that I am committed to the police. The hon. Gentleman and I share the same chief superintendent, Scott Bisset, and I have extensive and very good relationships with my local police force. I have full confidence in Chief Superintendent Bisset’s attempts to create a diverse workforce in the police.

Talking about a diverse workforce, what my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton said today was really important. We do not have a diverse workforce, despite the figures that the hon. Member for Shipley quoted earlier. The truth remains that we are far from having a reflective workforce. A reflective workforce would benefit the police.

This debate was never about telling the police how to do their job; it is about supporting the police. True leadership consists of two things challenging and
supporting. If we are to be real critical friends to the police, we must both challenge and support them in delivering the objective of keeping our communities safe. This debate is about making our communities safer.

Every study that has piloted unconscious bias training has shown a direct correlation between a change of attitude, a change in crime and a change in the nature of how we police, so that it is better for our communities. That is what this debate is about; it was never about hammering the police and having a pop at them. Unfortunately, it has gone that way, which disheartens me.

I thank the Minister for agreeing that policing is about intelligence and relationships. We build relationships with communities not just by attending the funerals but by attending the weddings, too. It is about building relationships between the police and their communities, and that is not done by creating an experience for a child, which will sit in their mind, of being searched just because they happen to be black or just because their pigment colour is a few shades darker than that of other people, which shows them that they do not belong, they do not matter and they are not protected. That is what this very important debate today has been about, and I thank you, Mr Owen, for your chairmanship and all the Members who have contributed to it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of police stop and search powers on BAME communities.
[Scott Mann]

and would she commend Cornwall Council, which is looking at reducing the size of developments to support smaller supply chains?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention; that sounds like an eminently sensible solution. Part of the reason for the tone of this debate is that it should be down to local communities—such as Cornwall Council, no doubt at the instigation and with the support of local Members of Parliament—to do the right thing for their area. My hon. Friend makes a good point: it may well be that smaller sites are more deliverable. The only caveat is that often, smaller builders find it harder to get the finance to get started, and Ministers are aware of that.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way on this important point. I was a member of the local plans expert group on behalf of the Government. The group looked at this issue; we advised that the five-year land supply should be an annual event, and that once it went into the monitoring report of the local council, it not be challenged; I think that is coming through. We have also introduced a three-year land supply for organisations that have a neighbourhood plan. For the first two years, they only have to follow a three-year land supply.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He raises two interesting points. I did not know about the three-year land supply, and I am not entirely sure how many others do. A number of villages, including Burton on the Wolds, are in the process of preparing neighbourhood plans, and others have done so.

John Howell: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nicky Morgan: I want to respond to my hon. Friend’s point first. He made a point about an annual event for measuring the five-year land supply. I am not sure I agree with him, because I know of examples where, for reasons of scheduling, the plans committee has missed the deadline. We have one example in Charnwood, where several hundred housing units have just been approved—very sensibly with the support of the local community—but the committee missed that annual event, so it looks as though the council does not have a five-year land supply.

John Howell: I want to make two quick points. First, I try to tell people as often as possible about the three-year land supply. As the Government’s neighbourhood planning champion, I am happy to speak to her parish councils about it. Secondly, we argued that once things were in the annual monitoring report, no legal challenge should be possible. It is the legal challenge that costs councils a fortune.

Nicky Morgan: I certainly agree, even as a former solicitor, that lawyers can be extremely expensive—we all know that—particularly when it comes to involving barristers and others. I am sure that my parish councils would be interested in speaking to my hon. Friend further. It would be helpful if something could be done to take into account the fact that sometimes planning committees are delayed. The council might have done the right thing in getting the five-year land supply, but those delays might mean it feels unable to turn down certain applications because developers are taking advantage. It is about having a bit of flexibility in the system to take account of local demand, local need and local community views.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she agree that one of the most frustrating things is when a neighbourhood plan has been put forward and excludes a site, and that site is then brought forward anyway? Local communities feel totally disempowered. It is not the way to do planning.

Nicky Morgan: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. In defence of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), I do not think that is how the system is meant to work. The hon. Gentleman talked about local communities being disempowered, and that word is absolutely at the heart of this debate.

Local people understand the desire for more housing—it is often their children and grandchildren who want to move into it—but they need to know that their views are being taken into account, and I will talk about local infrastructure in a moment. Obviously I am looking forward to reading the final conclusions of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset about the slow build-out rate. That will be an important document, as the Minister will appreciate.

My second point is on notification of appeals. Last year, I spoke at an inquiry concerning the proposed development of land east of Seagrave Road in Sileby, another village in my constituency. When the council again rejected the application, the developers and landowners took the case to the High Court. However, neither I nor the local councillors who spoke at the inquiry were notified of that. Another example concerns the Storer and Ashby area residents group, which had a similar experience. In November last year, it sent me an email about another local planning application, detailing its concerns that none of the objectors were notified by the Planning Inspectorate or Charnwood Borough Council that a decision had been made, or of what it was. The residents group was not provided with a copy of the decision, or information about where it could access the relevant information online.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): So many planning objections could be prevented if all councils consulted properly, and if the Government respected these plans. Basically, if planning decisions were made with residents and not done to them, that would solve a lot of the problems, would it not?

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Again, it is about trying to get the balance right. Many people, having moved into an area, do not want it to change, and it is always difficult to respect that and to account for local housing. She is absolutely right that planning should be done with local people and not done to them. That would save an awful lot of angst. I am sure we all have constituents who have become planning experts, not because they wanted to, but because they felt that they had to. That probably includes Members of Parliament.
I will return to the Storer and Ashby area residents group. It wrote to me:

"The only way for objectors or any member of the public to be aware that a decision had been made was to be vigilant in interrogating the Charnwood Borough Council website page for the planning application. Even then, the website page did not provide a link to the relevant decision document, and still does not. Such abrogation of duty in maintaining communication with parties who have taken time and resources to engage with the lawful process brings the Planning Inspectorate into disrepute and the Minister in charge of Planning—one he is responding to this debate—must be held accountable for this."

The Minister will be aware that I wrote to his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), about the Seagrave Road case, and to him about the case mentioned by the Storer and Ashby area residents group. So far the response has failed to clarify whose responsibility it is to inform all those who have contributed their views to a planning appeal inquiry about any subsequent events. Is it right that the responsibility has passed from Bristol to the local planning authority? If so, who can provide councils with clear guidance on their responsibilities in such instances?

My final point is about poorly worded planning conditions. Planning conditions are many and varied, but some conditions clearly serve an important purpose in protecting existing residents by ensuring that the local infrastructure is improved to support the increase in housing. In Barrow upon Soar, another village in my constituency, a poorly worded planning condition has led to a development being allowed to connect to the village’s foul sewers before the whole system could be upgraded to prevent more burst pipes. Residents warned repeatedly about that danger at all stages of the planning process. They felt very much not listened to, and their ability to rely on the sewers will remain at risk until Severn Trent is able to upgrade the local infrastructure.

I thank the chief planner for his assistance in reviewing that case. I am sure that the eventual conclusion—that the wording of conditions should be considered very carefully—is right, but it is cold comfort to the residents of Barrow upon Soar. I understand that the Planning Inspectorate has provided all inspectors with guidance on the use of conditions, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on whether the inspectorate feels that more needs to, or could, be done.

Some conditions require the payment of money by the developer to cover the costs of improving or extending local infrastructure. I am very grateful for the meeting I attended recently at the Banks surgery in Sileby, at which staff clearly set out just how little money has got to them in recent years, in spite of 1,600 units being built in the village over the past 25 years. New residents need general practitioners just like the rest of us. As a local MP, I am sure that the Minister knows that communities, as we have heard, are much more likely to accept the need for new development if the availability of GP appointments and school places are not strained by the new housing. What work is he undertaking to ensure that those common problems are resolved?

Like colleagues from across the House, I receive regular emails from frustrated constituents who are concerned that their views on planning applications and developments in their communities have been ignored. I have also heard from my local council that, even though it is fulfilling its obligation to provide permissions for sufficient housing, developers are not providing the houses that they have committed to building.

I would like to hear from the Minister what incentives local communities have to produce local neighbourhood plans, to share their views on proposed developments, and to participate in appeals if their area is not sufficiently protected from overdevelopment. Their infrastructure, and the services on which they depend, are being overburdened, despite planning conditions being imposed, and they are not being given the right information to challenge planning applications. I would also like to know whether the revised national planning policy framework will take those issues into account.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my right hon. Friend for Loughborough raised the key role of communities in the planning system, and the need for local people to believe that being involved is worth while. Community participation is vital to their accepting the development required to meet our housing needs. My right hon. Friend referred to a number of specific planning cases but, as she kindly acknowledged, I am not in a position to comment on the detail or merits of those ongoing planning applications and appeals. However, I will talk more generally about the importance that the Government place on communities when it comes to plan making and planning decisions, and I will address the three areas of concern that she highlighted.

Local plans are prepared in consultation with communities and play a key role in delivering development and the necessary infrastructure in the right places. They provide clarity to communities and developers about where homes should and should not be built, so that development is planned rather than the result of speculative applications. It is crucial that local authorities have up-to-date local plans, produced in consultation with local people. As my right hon. Friend mentioned, her constituents are concerned that some development is placing pressure on existing infrastructure and services in their communities.

Up-to-date plans are an important means of identifying where infrastructure needs to be strengthened, and I am pleased to tell my right hon. Friend that the Government are introducing reforms specifically in that area. Those reforms will mean that developers know exactly what contributions are expected of them and that local communities are clear about the infrastructure that they will get in their area alongside new homes. Two separate consultations—one on developer contribution specifically and a broader one on the NPPF—have just concluded, and both included questions on that topic. The Government
will introduce proposals in those areas later in the year, but the point that my right hon. Friend made is spot on: local communities need to know that infrastructure will be there alongside the housing that they are accepting in their area.

More broadly, as my right hon. Friend will know, the Government are agreed that supporting infrastructure is important. That is why we recently announced a £5 billion housing infrastructure fund, specifically to fund the types of infrastructure referred to in areas where it can make the difference between a housing development happening or not. I hope that provides some reassurance.

My right hon. Friend pointed out that some authorities, including her own, are deemed not to have a five-year land supply due to land banking and slow rates of delivery. That lack of supply means that plan policies are not considered to be up to date, and applications are assessed against the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Importantly, the presumption in favour of sustainable development does not mean development will still need to be taken into account. Our housing White Paper acknowledged that the current policy on five-year land supply, although it has been effective in delivering homes, has had some negative consequences, such as those experienced in my right hon. Friend’s constituency.

In response, the Government have proposed some reforms to how land supply is calculated. The draft national planning policy framework offers local authorities the opportunity to have their five-year housing land supply agreed on an annual basis and then fixed for a one-year period, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) rightly mentioned. That is included in the NPPF, and provides a buffer on the five-year land supply so that areas are not vulnerable to individual sites being built out slowly. That way, they can ensure that individual developers and speculators do not hold an advantage.

Obviously, in exchange for that new ability, local authorities need to be realistic about meeting their planning needs, and we are addressing that through the NPPF revisions. It seems that my right hon. Friend’s local authority is being forward-looking regarding its housing needs. It is sensible for all local authorities to have a broad range of sites, especially small ones, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) rightly mentioned. That is included in the NPPF, and provides a buffer on the five-year land supply so that areas are not vulnerable to individual sites being built out slowly. That way, they can ensure that individual developers and speculators do not hold an advantage.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough was right to highlight the very large gap between the number of permissions that have been granted by local authorities across the country and the number of new homes that have been built. The housing White Paper said that a third of all new homes granted planning permission between 2010 and 2015 had not been built out. That was quite a striking statistic, and there was clearly a concern, which my right hon. Friend highlighted, that it is the interests of speculative developers and speculators to snap up land for housing and then sit back and wait for prices to rise. Clearly, that would not be appropriate. That is why, as she acknowledged, the Government appointed my right hon. Friend. The Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) to examine that issue. We will see his initial conclusions shortly, and I know that she, like the Government, will be very interested to hear what he has to say.

**Nicky Morgan:** The Minister is making a very helpful speech, which I shall study with great care. Our right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset states in his interim report that, once detailed planning permission is granted for large sites, the fundamental driver of build-out rates appears to be the absorption rate. That is the rate at which newly constructed homes can be sold—or, importantly, at which the housebuilder believes they can be sold—successfully into the local market without materially disturbing the market price. I hope that will be at the forefront of the final report and the Government’s response. Housing is needed, and although we are on the side of enterprise, as I am sure the Minister will agree, we must also be on the side of people trying to get homes. It is not just about developers’ profits.

**Rishi Sunak:** My right hon. Friend understands the power of enterprise and makes her point well. I shall ensure that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset is aware of her point. It would be wrong for me to prejudge the final conclusion of his report, but she highlights a point of interest and I am sure that it will be taken into consideration in his deliberations.

I am delighted that we were joined in the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, who is the Prime Minister’s champion for neighbourhood planning. I attest to his personal ability to galvanise and support local communities as they go through the local neighbourhood planning process, not only in my constituency but up and down the country.

**Scott Mann:** On local democracy, I see the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), in the Chamber. We were vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for local democracy and firm believers that town and parish councils should be given the ability to allocate within their developments some registered social landlords’ properties, taking them away from the local authority and putting them into the hands of the real decision makers. Will the Minister look at that at a later date?

**Rishi Sunak:** I applaud the work in support of local democracy not only of my fantastic PPS, but of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall. Indeed, it was a pleasure to attend the conference for star councils held by the National Association of Local Councils, which highlights the important work of parish councils. I am happy to look into the matter he raises, but he will forgive me for not giving a specific answer right now.

Through neighbourhood planning, communities may have an even greater say in how their areas are planned and real power to shape the future development of their areas. Neighbourhood planning provides communities with a powerful set of tools to say where developments such as homes, shops and offices should go, what they
should look like, and what facilities should be provided. I am delighted that more than 2,400 communities have begun to shape the future of their areas. Some 13 million people across England now live in a neighbourhood planning area, and four of those areas, including Barrow upon Soar, are in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough. I am grateful for her previous contributions in the House, which have demonstrated her support for community-led planning.

My right hon. Friend asked about support. The Government continue to support groups not just through the valiant efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, but financially, too—£23 million has been made available for various support programmes, from this year through to 2022. Support is also given through regulation: when a planning application conflicts with a neighbourhood plan that has been brought into force, planning permission should not normally be granted.

We recognised, however, that some neighbourhood plans were being undermined because the local planning authority could not demonstrate the five-year land supply. To remedy that, in December 2016 the Government issued a written ministerial statement to ensure that national planning policies provide additional protection to such communities. The specific change was to protect neighbourhood plans that are less than two years old and that allocate sites for housing, as long as the local planning authority has more than three years of deliverable housing sites. That was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley made. I understand that the local authority of my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough has a supply for more than three years, so that protection should be particularly helpful in her case.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): In councils such as mine, which have not particularly pushed neighbourhood plans, when a parish council does not want to take up the opportunity of such a plan, will the Government look at the potential for other interested resident groups in the area to do something similar to a neighbourhood plan even when the parish council is unwilling or unable to propose one?

Rishi Sunak: I suggest that my hon. Friend should, in short order, invite my hon. Friend the Member for Henley to visit his area. I honestly believe that when we bring together people from the parish council and the local area to listen to my hon. Friend, they will be galvanised into action. The powers contained in neighbourhood planning are significant, and a local community would be hard-pressed not to want to seize those powers and to shape its own destiny once it has received my hon. Friend’s wisdom.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I speak from a Scottish angle, and I am interested in this debate as the former chairman of Moray Council’s planning committee. Does the Minister agree that there is a real risk that when communities get involved in decision-making processes and a planning committee such as Moray Council’s agrees with them, but then the decision is then overturned by the national Government in Scotland, as we see more and more often, those communities are left disenfranchised? The great work they can do locally is lost, because they do not feel that their say is being heard.

Rishi Sunak: I agree with my hon. Friend. This Government very much support local communities shaping their own destinies. That is why we have supported neighbourhood planning so strongly and strengthened the provisions under which local communities shape their own futures. I know that he will welcome that, and I hope that it provides an example for the Government in Scotland to follow.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough also talked about people being consulted on planning applications. She expressed some concern about people who objected to applications not being notified. I appreciate how distressing that must be for communities, especially for people who have taken time to engage in the process, as she rightly highlighted. The planning appeals regulations, however, already require the local planning authority to notify everyone who made representations during the planning application process that an appeal has been lodged. That notification should include information on where to send any representations on the appeal and by when. Also, when appeals are decided by a hearing or inquiry, the Planning Inspectorate notifies the appeal parties of the decision and publishes all appeal decisions on its website. The inspectorate will also send copies to any interested party who has requested one. I hope that that is of some help to my right hon. Friend. I appreciate that the process is not fully inclusive, but she will understand the need to trade off the burden in large situations where multiple people have engaged in the process against the ability to request notification.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that response. Of course there is a trade-off, but modern technology—in spite of the general data protection regulation, which we are all struggling with at the moment—means that notification of large numbers of parties is possible. I encourage him to look at that in the spirit of doing things with local communities, rather than doing things to them.

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend makes her point well. I shall certainly ensure that the Minister for Housing is aware of that.

Finally, in the brief time available, I turn to the question of Government guidance on the drafting and discharge of conditions, and whether that guidance is sufficiently robust. Normally, the drafting and discharge of conditions is a matter between the individual local planning authority and the developer. Planning inspectors are required to follow national guidance, and their internal training manuals are continually updated. The Department is not aware that the quality of guidance has been raised as a problem elsewhere, but if my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough or her local planning authority think that the guidance in any specific area is lacking, we would be delighted to consider any suggestions that she has for how it might be improved. We look forward to receiving those in due course.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate and to all hon. Members who have contributed to it. All of us as constituency MPs receive the correspondence to which she alluded. We know how
important the place in which we live is, and how it develops and evolves in housing and all other aspects is incredibly important. That is what people tend to talk to us about when we knock on their doors—not about Brexit—so it is absolutely right for this topic to receive our attention and focus. I am delighted to say that the Government strongly support the principle of local communities shaping their future, using the powers that they have been given through the neighbourhood planning process and local plans. I hope that the reforms that we are making will go some way to addressing some of the concerns that my right hon. Friend has expressed today, but I look forward to continuing the dialogue with her in the months to come.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*
attempt to broker a solution to the crisis. I understand that the British Government support that suggestion, and I am sure that sentiment is shared by hon. Members present today—particularly the chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

The subject of this debate is our relationship with Qatar and how we can further that relationship against the backdrop of this crisis. In exploring that, I will talk about four issues: labour reforms, human rights, defence and security, and economic ties and sport.

Despite being a small country geographically, Qatar consistently ranks as one of the richest countries in the world per capita, and it has experienced a period of rapid growth, due in part to the FIFA World cup. However, with that development come challenges. Thousands of workers have moved to Qatar to work on infrastructure projects, and the law governing those workers has gained international attention.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): When my good and hon. Friend talks of per capita income, is he talking just of Qataris, or is he including the people who come to work in the country and increase the build, as it were?

**Sir David Amess**: That is a very good point, and I will come to that a little later in my remarks on the economy. My good and hon. Friend has made an excellent point.

Human Rights Watch and other groups have raised concerns about conditions that workers face while working on building sites, such as football stadiums. I did not go to the football stadiums myself, but other members of the delegation did. One gentleman was killed under terrible circumstances while involved in the construction that was taking place. Human Rights Watch says that people have been exposed to extreme heat and humidity, have lived in poor accommodation and have earned low wages. As I said, workers are reported to have died on such projects, although I think the Qatari Government would dispute the figures. Even though the figures are disputed, the British Government would obviously have some concerns about that issue.

I think Qatar has made progress in recent months in introducing new laws that provide greater protection and freedom for migrant and domestic workers. I was pleased to hear that Impactt, a UK-based ethical trade consultancy, has been working closely with the state as its external compliance monitor for the World cup, and some of our delegation met a number of officials. Work has involved an extensive audit of working conditions at sites under construction, and Impactt’s second report, published in February, highlighted the progress on recruitment fees and enhanced worker representation. I believe that the United Kingdom will always support the upholding of workers’ rights, and I welcome Qatar’s labour reforms.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): On the point about labour market reforms, did my hon. Friend become aware on his visit to Qatar and in his discussions with officials there—as I have become aware—that they genuinely sense that the eyes of the world are on them in the run-up to the World cup? They are making genuine attempts to demonstrate that their labour market reforms are real, and they are delivering real improvements to the lives of the guest and migrant workers in the country.

**Sir David Amess**: My right hon. Friend has made the point far better than I would be able to. It is a real lesson in not lecturing people: with a little bit of encouragement, and the knowledge that the world is looking very carefully, a lot of progress has been made. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Qatar has made similar progress in the field of human rights. The state has been at the forefront in the promotion of a free press in the region. Indeed, the chairman of the Qatar Media Corporation recently acknowledged that the right to knowledge and expression is universally recognised as a right that transcends cultures and nations.

As part of the recent parliamentary delegation to Qatar, I had the honour of meeting the Shura council. That 35-member assembly, which advises the Emir, is made up of both male and female members, with the number of women increasing. Although it is currently an appointed body, it is set to have a democratic element, with the first Qatari legislative election currently scheduled for 2019. That little bit of progress will introduce democracy to the country for the first time. Although we have heard such democratic soundbites since 2006, this is most certainly going to happen.

Rather perversely, the diplomatic crisis has, arguably, exacerbated human rights issues in the country. Non-governmental organisations have highlighted the detrimental effect of the embargo on the flow of medical supplies, the impact on education and how the embargo has separated families. However, as always, the United Kingdom is a champion of human rights, and everything possible should be done to prevent the abuse of human rights in the country—especially abuses said to have emanated from the crisis.

The third issue I want to touch on is defence and security, and also co-operation with the United Kingdom. We work with regional powers in the middle east in promoting stability and fighting terrorism. The Royal Navy recently re-established a permanent base at HMS Jufair in Bahrain. Although that is a key strategic base for our operations in the region, we should acknowledge our deep and enduring military co-operation with Qatar. Bilateral co-operation between London and Doha is an equally pivotal partnership and is in the interest of our mutual security. Qatari cadets train at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Joint training operations between the RAF and the Qatar Emiri air force regularly take place at al-Udeid airbase. The base is at the heart of Qatari-British collaboration, and it played a vital role in our operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. More recently, it has been at the forefront of Operation Shader and our engagement with the so-called Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the emirate has been a valued member of the coalition against ISIS, and it shares our opposition to the Syrian President.

It was announced in January that our two nations should establish a joint operations air fleet. This group will not only enhance our bilateral fight against terrorism but be crucial in the protection of Qatari airspace during the World cup tournament.

**Bob Stewart**: When defence is mentioned, my ears prick up. Having visited Qatar prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, I am clear that quite a number of British service officers are serving with the Americans in Qatar. They are very well received by the country.
Sir David Amess: I welcome that added information from my hon. Friend. No doubt, the Minister will pick up on that point in his response.

Notwithstanding the intelligence standpoint, Qatar is a valued ally of the United Kingdom. The country is a member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and in 2014 it signed a security pact with the United Kingdom. That ensured that our security agencies work together in countering the dangers of jihadism and cyber-warfare. This profound defence partnership not only ensures our safety but contributes considerably to the UK’s economy.

I am pleased to say that, in December last year, the UK signed the largest export deal for Typhoon aircraft in a decade. The delivery of 25 Typhoons by BAE Systems to Qatar is valued at some £6 billion. The deal is essential to sustaining jobs at BAE’s Warton site, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). There have been further conversations to increase the number of Hawk trainer aircraft that will be delivered to Qatar, and for MBDA to supply missiles for the Typhoons.

I now want to speak about trade and investment with Qatar. As we are all aware, the United Kingdom is set to leave the European Union by 29 March next year. Regardless of which side Members are on in the argument over Brexit, we should all agree that, in the post-Brexit world, new alliances must be forged and links with established trading partners must be invigorated. Qatar is one such trading avenue that should be enriched. I am grateful to the City of London for sending me an email this morning to let me know that, in 2016, the UK exported £3 billion of goods and services to Qatar and had a trade surplus of £0.9 billion in services with it. Two years ago, the then Lord Mayor had high-level meetings, and the current Lord Mayor, Charles Bowman, recently met representatives of the Qatar Financial Centre in London. I welcome all that.

There is no greater indication of the UK’s global appeal than the statistics I have given. Qatar is estimated to have £40 billion invested in the UK economy, including the £5 billion announced during the 2017 Qatar-UK Business and Investment Forum. Foreign direct investment from Qatar shows no sign of being deterred by the UK’s exit from the EU. In fact, our delegation would humbly claim credit if it was boosted.

Although Qatari investment may be focused on London, it ranges across industries—my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde benefits from that. It ranges from banking to aerospace, and from property to hospitality. Qatar has a unique and broad multitude of investments in the UK. Those investments include Canary Wharf, including the HSBC tower and Barclays; 20 Fenchurch Street, known affectionately as the Walkie Talkie; the Shard; Heathrow airport; British Airways, by way of Qatar Airways’s stake in the International Airlines Group; the former US embassy in Grosvenor Square; Claridge’s; the Savoy; Harrods; Sainsbury’s; and the 2012 Olympic village. Such is the degree of Qatar’s UK interests, it was reported in March last year that Qatari is own more of our country than the Mayor of London’s office, and own a staggering three times more than Her Majesty the Queen. That is quite astonishing.

Furthermore, 29% of the United Kingdom’s gas imports are made up of liquefied natural gas, the majority of which comes from Qatar via the South Hook LNG terminal at Milford Haven, which is in turn over two-thirds owned by the emirate. Those imports contribute heavily to the diversity of the UK energy industry, and I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) will elaborate on that point.

None the less, an increasing number of UK companies are operating and investing in Qatar. It is well located between Europe and the far east, while the scale of its infrastructure projects makes it a viable location for UK investment. That is evidenced by the 120 UK-based companies that have engaged with Qatar in the past three years across an array of sectors. In fact, in terms of trade in goods and services between the UK and Qatar, we registered a trade surplus in six of the 10 years between 2007 and 2016.

We can all remember the scenes of jubilation in the Qatari royal family when they won the World cup bid. Privately, I was totally cynical about it: I thought it was absolutely ridiculous, not least because of the physical geography and the fact that it is so very hot there. Although I have not seen the facilities, a number of colleagues on the delegation have, and those facilities are absolutely wonderful. I was totally wrong about my initial view of Qatar winning the bid, and I hope it may help the general feeling towards the region.

Mr Kane, the captain of the England team, said that England could win the World cup, and yes we could—we could also win the Eurovision song contest, but unfortunately we did not. I am prepared to say that we could win the World cup when we go to the event in Qatar. It will be the first time that the tournament has been staged in the region, and it is extremely encouraging that so many British companies are involved in the project.

Professional services firms, which are the bedrock of the UK’s economy, have been prominent in building the World cup infrastructure. Architects Foster and Partners have designed the Lusail stadium, the largest venue, which is set to host the final of the tournament. Furthermore, Zaha Hadid Architects has designed the al-Wakrah stadium. Consultancy firms such as Arup, Turner & Townsend, Gleeds and RLB have also pioneered innovative projects such as climate control for a range of facilities. Some of the UK’s biggest construction firms have been equally prominent. Interserve has Qatari ownership, and Balfour Beatty has been involved in World cup projects and the Qatar expressway programme in recent years.

There can be no doubt that links between Qatar and the United Kingdom are wide-ranging and historic. It is imperative that those ties endure through the contemporary embargo and strengthen as the United Kingdom transitions from being a member of the European Union to being an independent trading nation. Our relationship with Qatar should give us much to be confident about and serve as an example of how we are a truly global Britain.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing the debate, which is timely for a number of reasons, and on the way he set out his case. He did so in a fair degree of detail, which I will not bother Members by repeating. He highlighted the importance of Qatar as both a trading partner and
a security partner for the United Kingdom at this time. That relationship is important, but it will never be simple or straightforward.

Before I go any further, I too should remind Members of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last year and the year before, I was part of a delegation to Qatar funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I served as chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group.

Let me pick up the point the hon. Gentleman made about the conduct of such delegations. As chair of the all-party group, I led the delegation in February last year. There has never been any restriction on the movement of any member of the delegations of which I have been part. I can say with some feeling, having led the second delegation, that MPs and peers have a tendency to wander off, talk to people and do their own thing. That was certainly the case—I might even have been guilty of it once or twice—when we visited the workers’ villages that were built by Qatar to accommodate migrant workers engaged in construction contracts, particularly for Qatar 2022. Those were illuminating moments. Those people did not always give us exactly the same message as the one we were given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or anyone else with the group, but there was certainly no restriction. It was also clear to those of us who were part of the delegation that the migrant workers we engaged with felt uninhibited and free to tell us about their experiences.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the problem with the blockade is that those very workers were probably the first to suffer from it?

Mr Carmichael: There might be other contestants for the claim of being the first, but those workers are certainly a significant interest group that will be affected. Qatar has been measured in its response to the blockade—I think of incidents such as the one involving the cockle pickers at Morecambe bay a few years ago. I am quite prepared to lecture, but I always do so in a spirit of humility, remembering that we in this country do not always meet the high standards that we set ourselves. That is relevant because the discussion will move on now that the kafala system has been abolished, and we must ensure that high-level agreements and Government commitments are actually enforced by the companies and contractors that employ people on the projects concerned.

In the time that I have been engaged with Qatar and it has engaged my interest as a politician, I have seen significant progress, but I am always at pains to say that I want it to do a lot more. I am quite happy to engage and work with it, to make the case for change and to explain the benefits that will come from that. The law of unintended consequences may well come to operate—the blockade, about which we will no doubt continue to speak, may actually hasten the process of modernisation, the increase in democratisation and the improvement of human rights in Qatar. As we look towards 2022, that will only accelerate.

There has been a lot of international scrutiny—a lot of it quite negative—of labour conditions in Qatar. The Qataris have made big changes in that respect, but there will be other issues. The one I always raise with them is the position of the LGBT+ community, and we should look to them to make progress in that and other areas. There is, though—I speak as someone who is completely uninterested in football—a really exciting story to be told about Qatar 2022, which will be the first Arab World Cup. Phenomenal resources have been committed to it. Before the debate, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked about the construction of the stadiums. Constructing entirely air-conditioned stadiums is a remarkable feat of engineering. At the conclusion of the World cup, a number of those stadiums will be dismantled, removed from Qatar and given to countries that would not, if left to their own devices, have the resources to build a stadium of that sort.

Bob Stewart: Having visited, my concern was about how anyone could play football in such great heat. Presumably there is a fix for that.

Mr Carmichael: That is where the air conditioning comes in—that is why I say it is quite a remarkable feat of engineering. Having been brought up on the west coast of Scotland, where my antipathy to the game was
I am conscious of the passage of time, so I will finish by drawing the House's attention to an opinion piece from the Financial Times on 19 April headed "The continuing blockade of Qatar makes no sense". It points out first the most recent ratcheting up of the conflict, with reports about Qatar being turned into an island instead of a peninsula by Saudi Arabia's excavating a Suez-style canal on the land border, and various unpleasant things being put into that canal. It is a good, measured piece that I commend to all those who have an interest in the region. It concludes:

"Short of volunteering for vassal status it is difficult to see what more it"—Qatar—
"could do, beyond some gestures. Rather, the onus should be on the states that created the crisis to bring it to an end."

It goes on:

"Toning down the rhetoric would be a start. Lifting the blockade incrementally should be the next."

When the Minister responds, I would like to hear what he thinks the United Kingdom can do, inevitably working with the United States, which has a well-documented significant interest in the region. I think President Trump has spoken about some sort of discussion at Camp David later this year, and I hope that would be helpful. Frankly, Qatar being at odds with its neighbours has an impact beyond its border and those of its neighbours. It leaves us in a situation where the Gulf Co-operation Council, the most important body in the region and the means by which we western nations should seek to engage with Gulf countries, is unable to operate in the way it is intended to. For a region as important to us as the Gulf, for all manner of reasons—economic, trade, security—that is surely where our interest as a country must lie. In looking at our relations with Qatar, we must identify what our interest is and how we might further it and go beyond it in the wider interests of the region.

3.7 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing this timely and important debate, and on the brilliant job he did in describing where we are in UK relations with Qatar and our diverse range of mutual interests in continuing to foster a close and growing relationship. It is also a pleasure to follow my good friend, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who spoke with characteristic intelligence and wisdom about a difficult, challenging neighbourhood that we have relationships with; he offered thoughts about the way forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West alluded to my constituency interest in Qatar, which was the starting point for my interest in that country and in our relationship with the state more broadly. As a Welshman, I feel a natural affinity with small, ambitious countries that want to punch above their weight on the world stage. I could extend the comparison and talk about complicated relationships with larger next-door neighbours, but that might risk upsetting some of my English colleagues.

In May 2009—almost exactly nine years ago—we had the official opening of the South Hook liquefied natural gas terminal in my constituency. At the time, it was by far and away the largest single investment in Pembrokeshire for more than a generation, and it remains
South Hook represents a growing relationship based on energy security. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West mentioned, we are becoming increasingly dependent on imported natural gas as our domestic production from the North sea has declined over the past 10 years, and a large share of our imported liquefied natural gas comes from Qatar. In fact, the South Hook terminal in my constituency has capacity for about 25% of the UK’s natural gas supply at any one time. It is an enormous investment. If hon. and right hon. Members in this room are interested, I encourage them to come to my constituency and see the scale of the energy facility. Such imports will be more important in future. The Qatari investment has given the United Kingdom more diversity in our energy supplies, so that we can help build increasing resilience and energy security at a time when we have become more dependent on imports.

As well as providing excellent, high-quality jobs, the South Hook terminal has been an incredibly generous and intelligent supporter and funder of local charities in my constituency. If Members were to visit Preseli Pembrokeshire, I wager they would find that no constituency outside London has a greater proportion of constituents who can describe with some knowledge our relationship with Qatar than mine. For the past 10 years, we have been very aware of the importance of the relationship.

The relationship is not just about energy security, important though that is. At the start of this month, we had the first commercial flight between Doha and Cardiff airport—an exciting development for the latter, given that it is relatively small for a capital city airport. It is a big statement of ambition that the leadership of the airport was able to secure a deal with Qatar Airways and have a commercial service fly between Cardiff and Doha. It helps put Wales on the map, and helps open up the Welsh economy. It is an exciting development for the latter, given that it is relatively small for a capital city airport. It is a big statement of ambition that the leadership of the airport was able to secure a deal with Qatar Airways and have a commercial service fly between Cardiff and Doha. It helps put Wales on the map, and helps open up the Welsh economy.

I pay tribute to the chairman of Cardiff airport, Roger Lewis, who has done a brilliant job in taking forward the vision of cementing a strategic relationship with Qatar Airways. The Welsh Government, who I do not always have a lot of positive things to say about, have played a positive and constructive role in driving forward the airport’s relationship with Qatar.

Bob Stewart: I am intrigued. Presumably, Welsh tourists go to Qatar on holiday. Do they make up a percentage of the people on board the aeroplanes?

Stephen Crabb: I am cautious about the number of Welsh tourists visiting Doha. In the first instance, we are trying to develop the business travel market, but all these things have potential. Students from Doha visit the United Kingdom, and increasing aviation links from the UK regions to Doha can only support that.

When I was Secretary of State for Wales in 2015, I was pleased to give early support, and tried to inject a little momentum into the vision for a Qatar-Wales link. I am absolutely delighted that that has been brought to fruition, and I wish it every success. I do not expect the Minister to comment on this, because it falls far outside his Department, but for a long time the Welsh Government have been asking the UK Government to devolve air passenger duty to them, so they can use that as an extra tool to help them develop the long-haul overseas aviation market. I put on record that I was not able to convince David Cameron or George Osborne to change the policy, but it is probably time to look at that again, given that the leadership of Cardiff airport has been so successful in striking up a relationship with the Qataris.

On the wider diplomatic front, I find Qatar’s ambitious foreign policy a thing of wonder. It is extraordinary how ambitious it has sought to be over the past 10 years. It has an interesting, wide and complicated set of relationships in the region and globally. It is able to have direct conversations with partners in the region that, perhaps for political reasons, we are not able to have. There is enormous opportunity for the United Kingdom and the international community to work with Qatar to develop deeper, more constructive diplomatic ties in what is, as I say, a very challenging and difficult neighbourhood.

There is the immediate issue of the blockade and its conflict with its immediate neighbours. It has to be in our national interest to see that conflict brought to an end and resolved. Looking to the longer term, that Qatar has demonstrated that it is a resourceful, agile, diplomatic player globally, and we need to work with Qatar to see positive things happen in the region.

The Minister knows that I have an interest in other countries in the region. In particular, I have an interest in the quest for security for Israelis, alongside the quest for statehood for Palestinians. I am absolutely sure that Qatar has a role to play in that, given its resources and its network of relationships across the region. It is often, as I say, able to have direct conversations with players in ways that we cannot. We want Qatar to play a constructive role in the region.

I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland about having frank conversations with the Qatari Government and their ambassadors in London. I have had those frank discussions, and have always been impressed with how open and willing they have been to discuss quite difficult issues. That is what friendship is all about. Having a good friendship with a state such as Qatar means that we can have those difficult, challenging conversations. We can talk about the questions that get raised around terrorist financing and human rights, and what role Qatar can play in supporting peace between the Palestinians and Israel in the middle east. Friendship does not prevent us having those discussions; it provides a strong platform that enables us to do so.

In conclusion, this is a good moment to recognise, appreciate and celebrate the UK’s relationship with Qatar, and a good moment to think about some of the immediate challenges. I encourage the Minister to offer us his thoughts on where he sees the UK-Qatari bilateral relationship going and what benefit the UK can get from Qatar’s wider set of relationships internationally.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing this debate. I spoke to him before to learn where he was coming from. Right hon. and hon. Members have made significant contributions. Mine will be similar, but a wee bit more careful. The issue with Qatar is not straightforward. Although we are supportive of our allies, it is not as simple as saying, “The enemy of my friend is my enemy.” That does not work in international circles. Although I respect some of the Saudi Arabian demands, and am fully supportive of its goal of halting involvement in terrorism and, in particular, support of ISIS, we cannot follow suit and cut all ties with Qatar. We are a trading nation. As other Members have indicated, we have strong defence ties that need to be maintained and strengthened; that, I think, is the intention of the Government. We need to have what influence we can.

Things are not always black and white. They never can be when it comes to considering a different country, with a different culture, characteristics, goals and focus. There is a role for our Government to play in advancing peace in the region. That can be done only by making the best of the ties that make our relationship mutually beneficial to some extent. We have a relationship of sorts, and with that, we have the ability at least to attempt to influence things and effect change; we would not have that with a hard-line stance. I do not want to adopt a hard-line stance. I want to see how we can bring about some change. I certainly agree with the British ambassador, Mr Sharma, who recently said:

“The UK wants the dispute to be resolved as quickly as possible. The UK is fully supportive of the Kuwaiti mediation efforts and of course it is doing its own work through its contacts, its relationships to support the resolution. We want it to be solved as quickly as possible.”

The briefing provided by the Library, which I thank for the great work it does, clearly outlines our trade standing with Qatar. In 2016, the UK exported £3 billion-worth of goods and services to Qatar and imported £2.2 billion, resulting in a slight surplus of £0.8 billion. A small deficit in goods was offset by a surplus in services of £0.9 billion. Exports to Qatar represented 0.6% of all British exports in 2016. We are hopeful, of course, that when we have the freedom that Brexit will give us in March 2019, we shall be able to do more. Imports from Qatar represented 0.4% of all UK imports. Overall, Qatar was the UK’s 32nd largest export market and 42nd largest source of imports in 2016. The figures underline the importance of Qatar and the region to our economy, as well as the importance of building the relationship and doing more.

British exports to Qatar peaked at £3 billion in 2016, and UK imports from Qatar peaked at £5.1 billion in 2011, so we have turned things around, as we are now into surplus. We want that to continue. The UK has recorded trade surpluses with Qatar in six of the past 10 years for which goods and services trade data are available, although it recorded a series of trade deficits between 2010 and 2013, the largest of which was £3.3 billion in 2011.

I turn to the exploitation of workers. I was thinking about the use of the word “exploitation” before the debate, and I do not think we can ignore what is happening in the construction sector in Qatar. We cannot ignore the fact that workers have died on building sites and that others have been injured. Living conditions are atrocious, workers are underpaid, and many of them are living in small buildings. Those are facts, and they come from various sources. The Minister may want to respond on that matter, and suggest how we can use our influence—as I think we should—to make sure that workers are not exploited and are accorded the same rights as everyone else.

In a related Westminster Hall debate on 14 March, in which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) took part, I commented at column 400WH that people going to work in the construction sector in Qatar did not expect to get killed—they were not heading off to war. We need regulations—or at least discussions about regulations—regarding what happens to those workers.

The trading relationship, which benefits both our nations, certainly enables our ambassador to step in and speak to Qatar to try to foster a better relationship between neighbouring countries, which would benefit us all. When the World cup comes to Qatar in 2022, the eyes of the world will be on the country, and now is certainly the time for it to work to make changes to end terrorism links permanently. The issues have been stated clearly, and answers are needed.

Anyone who knows me will understand that I do not advocate for peace at any price; that has never been the way I do things. I believe we have a duty to stand against wrong at all costs. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. We have to stand for that idea, and the costs can sometimes be high. However, it is my firm and sincere belief that sometimes that means affirmative action, while at other times—this is one of them—it means using diplomatic measures. The Minister is very much a diplomat, and responds accordingly to issues that we put to him, so I believe that he would be keen on that approach. There has been movement by Qatar on addressing issues, and that progress must continue to foster peace.

We should not promise or intimate that we will stay out of things and keep Qatari money at any price. In my view, we are exercising wisdom and striving to influence. It seems that we have had success thus far. However, we always reserve the ability to react differently to whatever scenario arises. Only to that extent do I support the governmental approach thus far.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Sir Henry, and to begin the summing up. It has been an interesting debate, because I do not think anyone has said anything that anyone else has disagreed with. It is notable and perhaps disappointing that we have not exactly got the gender balance right this afternoon. I suspect that has prevented the debate from reaching the high quality it might have, but it has certainly been interesting.

We are discussing a country that is thousands of miles away, with a population slightly less than half that of Scotland. Yet the immense wealth that has come its way in the past few decades means that it has the potential to play a major part in decisions taken there and in the region. It has been hinted at—and I think it is true—that an issue that still needs to be worked through in the middle east is that the big, powerful neighbour needs to accept that it does not get to call all the shots,
and that some of the smaller ones, including Qatar, want a say. They sometimes want to say something different from what the Saudis would like them to say.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) graphically outlined the huge financial impact that the Qatari sovereign wealth fund has in the United Kingdom—particularly, but not exclusively, in London. When he listed the buildings and property it owned, I felt almost that if something is tall enough to be seen above the rest of the London skyline— or, in the case of a hotel, if it is too expensive to go into—it probably belongs to Qatar. That in itself creates an issue. We must make sure in our dealings with Qatar that the massive financial investment it has made in a lot of infrastructure in London and other parts of the UK does not prevent us from criticising it when that is needed. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) eloquently pointed out, sometimes criticism needs to be made. We can welcome the progress made in Qatar in recent years, but we must also remind it that there is much more to be done.

A few months ago my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) spoke in a debate in this Chamber and referred to the “human rights abuses that we have seen—workers being tied to a single employer, low pay, poor accommodation, labouring in dangerous heat and, sadly, hundreds of unexplained deaths”.—[Official Report, 14 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 402WH.]

That is in one of the wealthiest countries in the world; it has not happened because the country is intrinsically poor. Despite that enormous wealth, human lives are treated with contempt and, cheaply. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly pointed out that some things for which we now criticise such places as Saudi Arabia and Qatar happened in the United Kingdom not that long ago, and that we must encourage people to move forward rather than trying to order them to stop doing what UK legislation allowed until 40 or 50 years ago.

It was only 10 years ago that the Christian population in Qatar was first allowed openly to practise its religion. That was when the first church in Qatar was opened. It was only 10 years ago that the Christian population in Qatar was first allowed openly to practise its religion. That is in one of the wealthiest countries in the world; it has not happened because the country is intrinsically poor. Despite that enormous wealth, human lives are treated with contempt and, cheaply. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, a lot of those countries need to examine their consciences about some of the groups that they have supported in other countries. It is, for example, a bit much for Saudi Arabia to object to the fact that Qatar appears to be supporting unpleasant acts in other countries, while it is bombing civilians to death in Yemen and elsewhere.

Mention has been made of some of the demands that the Saudis and their neighbours have made on Qatar, but as I said when I intervened on the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, a lot of those countries need to examine their consciences about some of the groups that they have supported in other countries. It is, for example, a bit much for Saudi Arabia to object to the fact that Qatar appears to be supporting unpleasant acts in other countries, while it is bombing civilians to death in Yemen and elsewhere.

Bob Stewart: I have been interviewed on al-Jazeera, and it seemed a very reasonable English-speaking station that talked sense. I gather, however, that the Arabic version may not be quite the same, and I hope that the Minister will say something about the difference when he responds to the debate.

Peter Grant: Not being an Arabic speaker I do not watch al-Jazeera in Arabic—I seldom watch it in English—but as reported by the BBC, some of its coverage of the terrorist murders of innocent hostages, for example, was highly insensitive. It appeared to be designed to give a propaganda victory to the terrorists, which we cannot condone.

Mention was made of the close military links between the United Kingdom and Qatar, and the current Emir and his father who preceded him are both graduates from Sandhurst. One reason—not the main one—why we must hope that the current diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar does not escalate into anything else is that both countries use British planes and pilots who were trained in Britain by the RAF. It would be terribly ironic if a conflict that cost lives in the Gulf involved two parties using British-made technology against each other. That is a salutary lesson, and we must be a bit more careful about who we are prepared to sell weapons and military hardware to. We cannot always be sure that those weapons will be used against the people we might wish them to be used against.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to his difficulty in imagining the need for air conditioning at a football match. He is one of four or five of us in this debate who, if we were fanatical football fans, would find it difficult to imagine a situation in which it mattered a jot where the World cup was being played—I can just about remember the last time that Scotland went, and I do not think Wales have been there since 1958. I hope they will get there at some point.

Qatar is obviously using the World cup to try to persuade the rest of the world that it is moving forward, but we must ensure that progress continues after 2022. I welcome a lot of the promises made last year about improved protection and rights for workers, but we must ensure that those promises start being delivered this year, and continue to be delivered not just until 2022, but into the late 2020s, the 2030s and beyond. The improvements and changes must be permanent.

Mention has been made of some of the demands that the Saudis and their neighbours have made on Qatar, but as I said when I intervened on the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, a lot of those countries need to examine their consciences about some of the groups that they have supported in other countries. It is, for example, a bit much for Saudi Arabia to object to the fact that Qatar appears to be supporting unpleasant acts in other countries, while it is bombing civilians to death in Yemen and elsewhere.

Although some of the demands and requests appear to be reasonable, Qatar is being asked to break all contact not only with terrorist groups in certain countries, but with political opposition groups. Imagine if the United States Government asked us to stop sending parliamentary groups over to meet Democrats at the time of a Republican President, or to stop going to European countries and speaking to Opposition politicians as well as those in the Government. That is effectively what the Saudis are asking for, and although some of the demands are perfectly reasonable—any allegations of state funding of terrorism anywhere must be
independently investigated by an international court or tribunal—we must also say to our friends in Saudi Arabia, “Just wait a minute, you’re going a wee bit too far with this.”

Some of the rhetoric we are seeing from the Saudis and some of their allies reminds me of some of the inflammatory language that we have become far too used to in the claims and counter-claims between Israel and its Palestinian neighbours. They are not just talking about digging a ditch to physically cut off Qatar from the rest of the continent; they are talking about deliberately dumping nuclear and toxic waste on the Qatari border, where the potentially lethal impact will affect Qataris as much as—or more than—anybody else. That sounds to me like a threat of chemical and biological warfare. It might simply be rhetoric, and perhaps the claims are being made more for the consumption of the Saudi Arabian population, to convince people that their Government are standing up to Qatar, but any such threat should be dealt with by a firm response from the international community. Saudi Arabia should be asked to explain itself at the United Nations. All too often in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, once people start talking the language of atrocity the action of atrocity follows quickly afterwards.

We should call on all sides in the dispute in the Gulf to tone down their language, resort to diplomacy, and look to get some kind of agreement. We must also make it clear to Qatar that if there are credible allegations of serious crimes against international norms, whether or not the Government are directly involved, it must be open to having them investigated.

**Stephen Crabb:** The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. Has he sat down with any of the diplomats at the embassy in London and had this discussion with them? If he has, what feeling did he get from them?

**Peter Grant:** I have not personally had such discussions, although I would be perfectly happy to.

As I was saying, we should be prepared to seek independent investigations into alleged funding or support for terrorism by Qatar, but we should also seek independent international investigations into the 150-plus allegations of war crimes against Saudi Arabia. It is not good enough for the UK Government to say that we should just let the Saudis investigate themselves. Although I hear some of the optimistic noises about new trade with Qatar and other countries after we leave the European Union, I hope we can get an assurance from the Minister that if we seek to increase our trade with any country, that will be done in terms that recognise the need for improvements in human rights. Trade should not simply mean a trade in weapons that can be used for the wrong purposes, or a trade in infrastructure that benefits the wealthy royal family of Qatar at the expense of the working conditions and lives of native born Qataris and permanent or temporary migrants.

In some countries, people live in difficult situations because that country is intrinsically poor, and we have a responsibility to help lift those countries out of poverty. Qatar, however, does not have that excuse. Any poverty or poor conditions endured by anyone in Qatar are a deliberate choice by the Government of Qatar, and at times we must call them out for that and say that we expect things to improve.

I am pleased to have contributed to the debate, and I would be happy to take up any offer to meet representatives from the Governments of Qatar or Saudi Arabia, should they want to explain their countries’ policies to me and my colleagues. I hope the Minister will assure us that although a large part of Qatar’s relationship with London is about money, when it comes to the crunch it will not just be money that talks, and that the lives of people in Qatar and its neighbouring countries will be seen as being at least as important as the money that flows in from the coffers of the royal family.

3.38 pm

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank all those who have contributed this afternoon, and as ever it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on securing the debate—it is timely for us to discuss Britain’s relations with Qatar. He said that he visited Qatar for the second time in February and met the Emir. He also passed on thanks to the excellent ambassador in London, Yousef Ali Al-Khater. I have met him on several occasions in my role, and I agree that he is one of the finest ambassadors at the Court of St. James’s. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned one of the people who works there—a British national called Ibrahim Pasha, who I believe is of Turkish-Cypriot origin. He does a very good job working for the embassy and linking and liaising with British parliamentarians, and I echo those thanks.

The hon. Gentleman gave us a brief history of the blockade of Qatar. I will not go into that further this afternoon, because we have already heard quite a lot about it. He mentioned the 13 demands and the fact that Kuwait is acting as an intermediary. He talked about labour reforms, human rights reforms, the defence relationship, and of course the cultural and sporting relationship. He said that our links with Qatar are wide-ranging and historic, and I certainly agree.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), with his great experience and his position as chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group, made an important contribution to the debate. He mentioned that he had led delegate visits to Qatar and pointed out that there was never any restriction on members of that delegation talking to workers or to people outside Government supervision, and that nobody told them who they could and could not talk to. He was encouraged by changes in Qatari law, but he also quoted the Financial Times as saying that the continuing blockade of Qatar makes no sense at all. The Opposition certainly concur with that.

**Bob Stewart:** I entirely agree that the continuing blockade of Qatar makes no sense. One problem with it is that it may well push the Qatariis toward the Iranians, which is exactly what Saudi Arabia and others would not want.

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for that contribution. That danger is always there, but from what I have seen myself and from speaking to people from Qatar—people within the Foreign Ministry
and visiting dignitaries here in London—I have the impression that the Qatars want to become a beacon of openness and liberalism in the region, rather than falling into the hands of one of the larger regional superpowers. I hope that that will continue and that they will press ahead with that. I will say a little more about that in the time I have remaining, but I want to leave time for the Minister.

The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) talked of his affinity for small nations, which I believe is even smaller than Cardiff airport. He also mentioned the direct flights from Doha to Cardiff; I urge Qatar Airways to open direct flights to Leeds Bradford airport as well, which I believe is even smaller than Cardiff airport.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned charitable donations, a very important issue for Qataris. I have met officials from the Qatar Charity and I was impressed at the way they collect charitable donations and ensure that, as part of their faith, they distribute those donations wisely, sensibly and for the best possible use of those less fortunate than they are. That is a duty that all Muslims, Christians and those of other main faiths share, but the charity carries it out with great aplomb.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about strong defence ties and said that things are not always black and white—we know that, but we always need to be reminded of it. The relationship with Qatar should, of course, be mutually beneficial. He mentioned another important player in Britain’s relations with Qatar, our excellent ambassador Ajay Sharma, whom I have met and with whom I was extremely impressed.

Qatar, as we know, has a population of 2.6 million, of whom only 313,000, or approximately 12%, are official Qatari citizens. Qatar is a former British protectorate; the UK has had an embassy in the emirate since 1949, and Qatar has had an embassy in London since 1970.

We have heard a lot this afternoon about the emirate getting ready to host the 2022 World cup. Qatar is allegedly spending up to $500 million a week on World cup-related infrastructure projects.

The UK Government have consistently highlighted the fact that their close links with Qatar allow them to speak candidly with the emirate, in a friendly manner, on issues relating to human rights, migrant labour issues and so on. The Government see their close ties as a means to promote regional stability in a well-known unstable region. Since the blockade of Qatar by its neighbours, the UK has been a firm supporter of the Kuwaiti mediation process that is attempting to end the crisis. We in the Opposition totally support that policy, and the work the Kuwaitis are trying to do.

Finally, we know that the effect of the blockade has been to liberalise the constitution—the opposite of what was intended. There is an improvement in the role of women, a reform of the education system is taking place and there is now discussion of citizens’ rights for non-Qatari’s, so that many of those who have lived in the country for more than 30 years will be able to become citizens even if they are not Qatari-born. The increasingly
popular young Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has been Emir for nearly five years, since 25 June 2013. He was born after I got married; his birth date was 3 June 1980, so he will be 38 next month. He has become increasingly popular, not unpopular, as a result of the blockade.

We in the Opposition also call on all the states that have implemented the blockade to lift it, and we hope, as other hon. Members have said this afternoon, that progress toward liberalisation and openness will continue beyond 2022, as it must.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Before calling the Minister, I just remind him, although I am sure he does not need to be reminded, that the proposer of the debate would like to have two minutes at the end to wind up.

3.49 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): In company with all colleagues, may I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) for securing the debate.

It is always a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), not only because we are such good friends but because his summarising of the debate means that I do not have to. He very effectively covers the speeches of colleagues and picks out the salient points, so I hope colleagues will not mind if I do not do exactly the same. However, I am grateful to all Members who have taken part by making speeches and for the several pertinent interventions from my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart).

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West. His visit to Qatar in February with members of the all-party parliamentary group helped to underline the importance of UK-Qatar relations, as he mentioned, and it covered important issues, including the regional Gulf dispute and workers’ rights, which we will come on to. I had not quite picked up the idea of “taking the hump” in the way he did, but I will look out for an opportunity to do so on one of my many visits to the region.

I also commend my hon. Friend for what he said about His Excellency the ambassador of Qatar to London, who is a good friend. I have many friends among the ambassadors of the countries that I have ministerial responsibility for, and they do an excellent job. My hon. Friend was right to mention His Excellency, just as the hon. Member for Leeds North East was right to mention Ajay Sharma, who does a great job on our behalf over there, as do my colleagues the ambassadors in other middle eastern and north African states. I am grateful for the contributions and points raised by the various states to meet the UK to discuss our bilateral relationship with the GCC. We remain very much of the view that a strong GCC is good for the region and for the world.

Our bilateral relationship with Qatar is neatly summed up in the name chosen for our bilateral dialogue—sharaka, an Arabic term for partnership. In March, I visited Doha for the fourth sharaka with my counterpart, deputy Foreign Minister Soltan al-Muraikhi. Our discussions ranged over the full breadth of our relationship, which it is important to note stretches far beyond the obvious trade and security co-operation. My visit came almost exactly a year after my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister signed an historic agreement with her Qatari counterpart to increase co-operation across the board and to mark the UK as Qatar’s partner of choice in the implementation of its 2030 national vision.

That ambitious plan will improve opportunities for Qatars, focusing on development across four pillars: economic, environmental, human and social. Achieving that will require more than £140 billion of infrastructure development, reforms to improve health and education, and diversifying the economy. My discussion with my counterpart covered our co-operation across all four target areas and how the UK can work in partnership with Qatar in each area.

Following the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), it will not surprise Members that about half of our bilateral trade is in energy, with Qatar supplying around 20% of the UK’s natural gas imports over the last three years to our early trading links in the 1820s. Since its independence in 1971, Qatar has remained a trusted and valued friend to the United Kingdom. Today, the bilateral ties between the UK and Qatar are more than just the legacy of our shared history, and I thought it was particularly pertinent that Members from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales all spoke about the influence of Qatar right across the United Kingdom. Ours is a modern relationship based on shared values; a shared interest in our mutual prosperity and security; co-operation in the fight against terrorism; and, as we have heard many times, a shared passion for cultural and sporting excellence.

Most colleagues mentioned the ongoing Gulf dispute, and I will make very clear the United Kingdom’s position. Gulf Co-operation Council unity matters to the United Kingdom. It supports regional stability and security, which is why, since last June, the UK Government at all levels have continued to support Kuwait’s mediation efforts. We work closely with international partners, including the US, to support the GCC to find a resolution, and we remain a firm friend of all GCC states. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have been actively engaging with our Gulf partners. Our role remains to support Kuwait.

We have always said that demands of Qatar should be measured and realistic, and we encourage those involved in the dispute to take that into account. There is a need for all sides to maintain dialogue and to find a resolution that everyone can support. Gulf states need to find a way of de-escalating the situation and lifting the current embargo and restrictions. We continue to call for de-escalation, for GCC unity, for Qatar to engage seriously on its neighbours’ concerns, for its neighbours to take steps to relax the restrictions imposed and for everyone to get behind Kuwait’s mediation efforts. We believe a solution is most likely to be found from within the GCC.

The UK’s determination on this was shown by a recent meeting at Wilton Park, at which we brought together a number of experts and senior officials from the various states to meet the UK to discuss our bilateral relationship with the GCC. We remain very much of the view that a strong GCC is good for the region and for the world.
years in the form of liquefied natural gas to the South Hook terminal in Milford Haven. It might surprise Members, and yourself, Sir Henry, to know that the UK actually has a trade surplus with Qatar, with more than 500 UK companies registered to work there and many already benefiting from the opportunity to support Qatar’s growing infrastructure needs and provide goods and services to its people.

Our countries also share a close defence and security relationship, an example of which was the joint exercise between the RAF and Qatar’s air force last year. As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the formation of the RAF, the UK has announced a new air squadron to be based at RAF Coningsby, which will temporarily integrate Qatari personnel, including pilots and ground crew, as part of a multibillion pound deal to supply 24 Typhoon aircraft and training to Qatar.

I will address the World cup and migrant rights in the moments I have remaining before my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West speaks again. The hosting of the 2022 World cup has seen an increased focus on human rights in Qatar. On migrant worker issues, the steps taken to date by Qatar have been genuinely significant, in terms of not only the region but construction. Most recently, on 29 April, the International Labour Organisation opened an office in Qatar, following the technical co-operation agreement signed between the two in November 2017. The opening of that office for at least three years, along with the progress made on labour rights, contributed to the closure of the ILO complaint against Qatar.

We really welcome the positive steps taken to tackle the issue of migrant workers’ rights, including, but not limited to, amendments to labour law and the exit permit system, agreement with the ILO, and improvements in health and safety. I genuinely think that some of the complaints made about workers’ rights now are based more on history than on what is actually happening.

Finally, we welcome not only the holding of the World cup in Qatar but the involvement in it of UK companies. Having seen the plans for the tournament and the stadiums, I assure my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham that there are imaginative plans to ensure that refrigerated air covers the pitch. It looks as though it will be a quite spectacular operation.

Like the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), I hope strongly that Scotland will be represented at that World cup, which would be its first since 1998. There is a decent chance of that. We hope for a successful and peaceful World cup and for the continuing of strong relations between the UK and Qatar and the whole of the GCC.

3.58 pm

**Sir David Amess:** This has been a splendid debate. I thank colleagues for their contributions, which have been entirely positive. The House has spoken with one voice in not only celebrating the excellent relationship between our country and Qatar at the moment, but wanting to see that further developed and enhanced. In conclusion, it is my earnest hope that the 2022 World cup final is between Qatar and England, and that, in a close match, England might prevail.

*Question put and agreed to.*
*Resolved.*

That this House has considered UK relations with Qatar.

4 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*
Leaving the EU: Higher Education in Wales

[Sir Christopher Chope in the Chair]

4.15 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of leaving the EU on the higher education sector in Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

Higher education is now devolved; Brexit, though, is not. As we have seen in the last few days, there are some people—just some in Wales—who are delighted to reverse the progress of devolution achieved with so much effort over the last 19 years of our Assembly's life, delighted to relinquish power and responsibility, and happy to enfeebles our Assembly on the pretext of easing Brexit into the world. After the fine words of resistance, after the pledged solidarity with Scotland, they are glad to compromise on behalf of the Welsh nation without a fight. I am reminded of Idris Davies' poems in The Angry Summer, particularly number 48, referring to the breaking of the triple alliance in 1921, “The Telephones are Ringing”. Perhaps some hon. Members were there at the time, or perhaps not. A few lines will suffice:

“The telephones are ringing
And treachery's in the air.
The sleek one,
The expert at compromise
Is bowing in Whitehall.
And lackey to fox to parrot cries:
'The nation must be saved.'
What is the nation, gentleman,
Who are the nation, my lords?”

When the smoke and the noise of Brexit have cleared, the actions of some people in Wales in yielding our powers to London will be seen clearly for what they are. Yes, the telephones are ringing and treachery is in the air.

This debate is doubly timely, being about Brexit and devolution, two of the major problems that have plagued the mainstream parties here for many years. This Government, with such great finesse, have brought down on their own feeble shoulders both problems simultaneously. Plaid Cymru has been consistent on devolution, of course, and on the EU as well. We were in favour of remaining and then in favour of continued membership of the customs union and the single market. I am gratified to see other parties now moving crab-like in our direction. That would be a real compromise, which would avoid many of the predicaments that now face us, particularly in respect of higher education.

This is the first debate specifically on Brexit and higher education in Wales. There is a danger that issues that are important in themselves, even vital to the future of our country, become obscured and forgotten in the morass of mind-numbing detail around Brexit.

In a debate in this Chamber sometime last autumn I asked the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), when he was merely a Wales Office Minister and had not been translated to greater things, what had happened to all the legislating we used to do on the economy, justice, benefits and pensions before we became obsessed with the fate of European Union regulations about the size and shape of fish fingers. His reply was that that was a good question. He said little else. Higher education is one of the vital issues to our country that may be overshadowed.

I have argued in this place that a thriving university sector, teaching, researching and applying that research, is central to the intellectual, moral and economic health of Wales. That has long been recognised. When we were last independent, a mere 600 years ago, the Pennal letter, sent by Owain Glyndŵr to the King of France in 1406, outlined, among other matters, his three key policies, one of which was to establish two universities, one in the north and one in the south. That was the time when great universities were being established throughout our continent, from Padua to Oxford and beyond. I sometimes wistfully imagine what our future would have been had that great ambition been fulfilled. As it was we were detained by other, less noble matters until the 19th century. Nevertheless, the long struggle to establish our universities with the support of working people throughout Wales—quarry families, colliers and others—shows clearly the value that we, as a Welsh society, place on education.

Enough of the history; let us turn to something that this Government really do understand—hard cash. Higher education contributed about £1.4 billion to the Welsh economy in 2017. Indirectly, it powered about a further £1.4 billion through related industries. In part, that was facilitated by the European Union through funding grants or loans to Welsh institutions and through the student mobility and research collaboration that freedom of movement enabled. In the rest of the UK, the private sector provides 45% of total research funding. In Wales, that drops to about 10%, which highlights the fragility of our economy and the greater importance of European money to Welsh institutions.

I will make some specific points about structural funds, research and collaboration, EU students and EU staff. First, we get money from structural and investment funds in Wales partly because of our poor economic performance over decades and to ensure social cohesion. Those moneys address the shortfall in innovation funding and in private investment in research and development in Wales.

Swansea University hugely expanded its Bay campus with £95 million of EU funding. The Cardiff University brain research imaging centre was opened using £4.5 million of EU funding. In my constituency, Bangor University secured £5 million of EU funding to help to create the centre for environmental biotechnology. All those projects were funded through Europe, and all are essential to the prosperity of our university sector. It is essential that that funding scheme, or an equivalent, continues undisturbed.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Before he moves on, I add that the Aberystwyth innovation and enterprise campus has also benefited from the European regional development fund.

Hywel Williams: My hon. Friend makes a telling point, which could be repeated for the seven universities throughout Wales. To a greater or lesser extent, they all depend on European money. It is essential that that funding stream continues undisturbed, because research, and particularly scientific research, does not follow the fads and fashions of what today's politicians see as all-important or what tomorrow's politicians ignore as old hat.
After we leave the EU, decisions on the allocation of those moneys should be taken by the Welsh Government. Any replacement funds should ensure that money is directed on the basis of need, as well as being place-based and Wales-specific. It is essential that money does not go disproportionately to the south, or rather to the south-east and London. We know full well what happens when funding allocations are not protected: the loudest voices, which are closest to the centre, drown out the rest. A simple example comes from a Labour Member in the Welsh Assembly, who said, when talking about rail infrastructure in Wales, that Wales has 5% of the population, 11% of the rail network and 1.5% of the network infrastructure investment. The voices from Wales are weak; those from the south-east are strong. That is why the money must be protected.

I am not convinced that the UK Government had those basic principles of meeting need or protecting funding in mind when they designed their legendary UK shared prosperity fund. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I have asked 12 questions about the shared prosperity fund, what the Government have decided and how they will operate it, and I have not had a single answer yet. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be good to hear today from the Minister exactly how it will work?

Hywel Williams: The hon. Lady makes the point that I was going to make next. In fact, when I asked a similar question in the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, the answer persuaded me that I might have been better off researching unicorns.

Last week, in that Committee, I questioned Dr Main of the Campaign for Science and Engineering and Professor Brook of the Association for Innovation, Research and Technology Organisations—people who should know their businesses—about the shared prosperity fund. They both confirmed that they had not heard much about it since it was announced, so it is a fund in name only. We do know that it is under the remit of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which I think is significant, because that Ministry is England-only, which speaks for itself.

On research and collaboration in Wales, there has been historical under-investment in research infrastructure compared with the rest of the UK, and a lower level of science, technology, engineering and maths activity. A recent Royal Society report said that Wales has the lowest percentage of research infrastructure in Great Britain. It has benefited greatly from EU funding, however. In 2016-17, Welsh higher education institutions received about 19% of their research income from EU sources, compared with about 15% for other UK higher education institutions. We depend more heavily on them. In particular, Welsh higher education institutions received money from such programmes as Erasmus and Horizon 2020. In 2014-15, the total EU research grants and contracts income for Wales was approximately £46 million, which represented about 21% of the total research grants and contracts income in Wales for that year. Again, universities and the higher education sector in general in Wales have a greater dependence on those sources.

Horizon 2020 has a budget of about €70 billion for the period between 2014 and 2020. The Welsh higher education sector has been successful in winning funds from that highly competitive programme. Universities have accounted for nearly two thirds of the Welsh participation in Horizon 2020 so far. When the money is there we compete successfully, and universities do disproportionately better.

Interestingly, on Monday, the Prime Minister said that she wants us to be part of any future such schemes—the successor schemes of Erasmus and Horizon 2020. More surprisingly, she said that she was willing for us to pay, but that we should have a “suitable level of influence”. That exemplifies the unreal nature of the Government’s thinking. Those are EU programmes. We are leaving the EU. We will become a third country. In respect of Horizon 2020 and Erasmus, Times Higher Education has said that associate countries are not in the European Council or the European Parliament, and they have no say in the research budgets. The fantasy is that we will somehow leave, but stay in—that we will benefit and be able to fix the rules—but we will be a third country. At some point, the Government will collide with reality, and the sooner the better as far as I am concerned.

Now and again I get angry emails from frustrated Brexiteers, usually late at night, which say, “We’re leaving. Get on with it.” I only wish that the Government here would get on with it. Uncertainty is the most obvious feature of Brexit, for higher education as for everyone else, and that goes for people who are in favour of leaving and those who are in favour of remaining.

An alternative might be that the Welsh Government take charge, if they can be shaken awake on the matter. After all, Quebec, which is a province of Canada on the other side of the Atlantic, takes part in Erasmus+, so why not Wales? Needless to say, the Scottish Government are way ahead of us already, and are using their offices in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Dublin to lead the charge. I am not sure whether we have an office anywhere apart from Cardiff these days.

Another strong pillar of our HE sector are the thousands of EU students who study in Wales and bring academic, economic and cultural benefits to our universities and our communities. That is particularly obvious in Bangor, where the population almost doubles and a large proportion of the students are from EU countries and other foreign countries. They bring enormous benefits. The latest figures for 2016-17 show that more than 6,000 EU national students were at HE providers in Wales, but applications are down. Perhaps the Minister can confirm the Institute of Welsh Affairs’ figure that there has been a drop of 8% this year.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that we are already seeing a financial impact of Brexit on our universities, in the reduction of the number of EU students? The excellent University of South Wales in my constituency had to propose laying off fully 5% of its staff last year, explicitly citing Brexit and the reduction in the number of EU students as the reason.

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes a very telling point—the effects are with us already, even though we are still in.

There are also effects that are not so apparent in facts and figures, which are to do with the morale of lecturers and students from abroad and perhaps even their commitment to their work, in the face of offers that
they might get from universities outside Wales and outside the UK. That effect is beginning to make itself apparent. In fact, it is one of the early signs of the impending Brexit vote hangover.

The Welsh Labour Government should give EU students who are starting courses in Wales now or in the near future some guarantees—for example on fees, loans and grants—to reassure them that Wales welcomes them to study and to contribute. The Welsh Labour Government should do that, but whether they will is yet another Welsh Labour mystery.

I come to the last pillar for today’s debate—staff from the EU who have chosen to research and teach in Wales. We have universities and individual departments of outstanding quality. That is no accident. We have built on our strengths, and EU staff and staff from other countries have been attracted here because of those strengths. The latest information I have shows that there are 1,355 staff from the EU at Welsh universities. They need to be reassured that they have a future with us, working at the forefront of their fields and building Wales’s future.

I have some brief questions for the Minister. What representations have the Welsh Government made regarding the design and implementation of the UK shared prosperity fund? I think we would all be glad to hear something about that. What representations have the Welsh Government made regarding Wales’s future participation in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+? What discussions have Welsh Office Ministers had with the Home Secretary about immigration arrangements for EU students who might want to study in Wales? What assurances can the Minister give me that universities in Wales will still be able to attract and retain talented academics from the EU? Lastly and perhaps most importantly, will he give a guarantee that Wales will receive “not a penny less” after we leave the EU? He will recognise those words, as they were a promise by the Leave campaign.

We have great strength in our universities. We would be foolish in the extreme to allow a political vote, or a petty, clueless, split and confused Government here in London and a somewhat indifferent, somnolent one in Wales, to drag them down.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I thank the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for securing this debate, because I, too, welcome the opportunity to discuss the impact of leaving the EU on the higher education sector in Wales. I think we all realise what an important issue this is.

The UK has a world-class higher education sector, and Welsh universities are an integral part of it. Including students in the Open University, almost 130,000 people were enrolled in higher education in Wales in 2016–17, and the fact that more than 20,000 of them came from overseas is testament to the quality of the education on offer. That quality is also demonstrated by the fact that half of Wales’s universities are ranked in the top 50 in the UK and in the top 500 worldwide by Times Higher Education.

We want to make sure that the UK remains a leader in this field after we leave the EU, and because higher education is devolved in Wales, the UK Government, the Welsh Government and Welsh stakeholders will all need to work together to ensure that that happens.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has already convened a high-level working group of stakeholders in this sector to consider the implications of leaving the EU. It includes university leaders from across the whole of the UK, including the vice-chancellor of Cardiff University. Within my Department, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth recently chaired a roundtable with the leaders of the Welsh universities to hear their concerns. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has also convened an expert panel, which includes representation from the higher education sector in Wales. In addition, on a day-to-day level, policy teams from the Department for Education continue to engage with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations, including those in the Welsh Government.

At home, the Government’s industrial strategy offers many opportunities for researchers in universities in Wales and the rest of the UK. We envisage universities across the UK playing a key role in addressing the grand challenges identified as part of the strategy, in partnership with public and private sector stakeholders. As part of the industrial strategy, we have pledged to raise investment on research and development to 2.4% of GDP over the coming decade.

The industrial strategy challenge fund alone will invest £725 million in a range of programmes to boost innovation as part of its second wave, with the third wave due to launch next year. Institutions in Wales are already home to researchers working on projects in a number of areas that have the potential to transform our economy and society, and that tie into the industrial strategy in many ways. To give just one example, SPECIFIC—the Sustainable Product Engineering Centre for Innovation in Functional Coatings, which is based at Swansea University—is working on creating “active buildings” that will generate the electricity they need. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales visited the centre in Swansea last year and announced £800,000 of funding from the UK Government for the project.

We have been clear all along that we will continue to co-operate with the EU on matters of mutual interest, including scientific research and innovation, and cultural exchanges. Consequently, we have already announced that we are committed to the principle that UK-based universities and researchers can continue to take part in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ for the lifetime of their projects, despite our departure from the EU. That was made clear in the 8 December joint report. Even in the event of a no-deal exit, which remains highly unlikely, that principle stands, and successful applications to Erasmus+ that were submitted while the UK was a member of the EU will continue, even if they have not been approved at the point at which we leave the EU.

It is much the same story for UK researchers taking part in Horizon 2020. We have guaranteed to underwrite the funding for all successful bids made by UK participants that were submitted before our departure from the EU.

As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech in March, we are committed to establishing a far-reaching co-operation agreement with the EU on
scientific research and innovation, and to pursuing educational and cultural programmes. We look forward to full and comprehensive discussions with the EU about collaboration in these fields, about UK participation in EU programmes, and about new ways of fostering co-operation and dialogue between researchers and academics in the UK and EU member states.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): May I throw in another project? I am sure that the Minister welcomes the collaborative work going on between the University of South Wales and Thales, which is obviously a big European company. They are jointly developing the cyber-graduates and the cyber-capability in Gwent, alongside the Welsh Government. Does he agree that it is absolutely vital that we keep up these relationships and this collaboration, which is in its early days?

Stuart Andrew: I certainly agree, and that is exactly our ambition. As I said a moment ago, the Prime Minister has been very clear that she wants the UK to build that type of relationship. The project that the hon. Lady just mentioned sounds incredibly interesting; perhaps I could hear more about it from her in the future.

Owen Smith: I am pleased to hear, once more, the guarantees about access to funding and programmes for institutions and individuals that had made bids prior to our leaving the EU. However, I take it that the corollary of the guarantee that the Minister has just offered is that there is absolutely no guarantee that once we have left the EU, any of those institutions, including Welsh universities, will necessarily have access to Erasmus+ or Horizon 2020 and their successors.

Stuart Andrew: As I have already said, the Prime Minister made it very clear in her Mansion House speech that the UK is committed to establishing that relationship. We want to work with the EU on designing that agreement; we welcome full and open discussion about it. We are considering all sorts of ways in which the UK can participate in these EU programmes and in ways of facilitating new bilateral and multilateral collaborations with EU member states, as well as ways of opening channels of dialogue between the EU and UK experts in science and innovation. The future partnership paper published on 6 September explores how the UK and the EU can achieve that objective. We are determined to seek that agreement, and we will continue to pursue it.

On individual staff and students, we have listened and responded to the higher education sector’s concerns about their presence and role in the UK. In England, we have confirmed that current EU students, and those due to start their courses in 2017-18 and 2018-19, remain eligible for home fee status and student loans after the end of the implementation period, if they meet the eligibility criteria.

Going forward, we will continue to listen to the sector’s concerns and the issues will be considered as part of the wider discussions on our relationship with the EU. Meanwhile, the British Council, working with our universities, will continue to promote colleges and universities in Wales and across the UK as world-class places to study and do research. The Department for International Trade is also helping higher and further education providers to establish and expand their presence in key markets abroad, and it will continue to do so.

The hon. Member for Arfon raised a few other points. First, on the structural front—I can see he is leaning forward in anticipation; I hope he is not disappointed—as we transition to longer-term arrangements, we will ensure that all parts of the UK are treated fairly and their circumstances are taken into account. We have promised to engage the devolved Administrations as we continue to develop the UK prosperity fund. I welcome the Welsh Government’s paper on regional funding. It is an important contribution to our work on EU exit. I fully recognise the importance of EU funds to Wales. The guarantees set out by the UK Government show the importance we place on those funds, as does the position we have since reached with the EU on participating in the 2014-to-2020 EU programmes. Our manifesto was very clear in its commitment to creating the shared prosperity fund. We want it to be more effective than previous funds. Let us not forget that despite receiving £4 billion, Wales remained at the bottom of the gross value added table. We want this prosperity fund to be more effective, and to help Welsh universities.

I am conscious that time is running out, so I will move on. On student visas, the hon. Gentleman will know that we are considering the options for the future migration system very carefully. To help the Government make decisions on migration after the implementation period, they have commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee to report on the impact of exiting the EU on the UK labour market, and on how the UK’s immigration system should be aligned with a modern industrial strategy. That should be done by September this year. We have commissioned the committee to provide an objective assessment of the impact on EU and non-EU international students by September this year. Those are important opportunities for the sector to provide evidence, and I am pleased to say that the sector has been actively engaged in that process.

I will get back to the hon. Gentleman on a couple of the other points he raised. Time is running out, and I want to give him a much fuller answer than just one line; if it is agreeable to him, I will write to him.

We are determined to keep our higher education sector on the cutting edge, and to ensure that it continues to be a major player on the global stage. Welsh universities are very much part of that. I pay tribute once more to the hon. Gentleman and other Members who have taken part in the debate. I assure them that in this role, I will be an advocate for the higher education sector in Wales.

Question put and agreed to.
Psychoactive Substances

4.44 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on new psychoactive substances.

Thank you for chairing this afternoon’s sitting, Sir Christopher. I hope that we will have an interesting discussion on a topic that is live and interesting for many people. I declare an interest, as I chair the all-party parliamentary group for new psychoactive substances and volatile substance abuse, ably supported by the charities Mentor and Re-Solv, which give advice and support to the group free of charge to help address some of the challenges in this area.

Today’s debate is timely, because the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 came into force on 26 May 2016 to combat the sale and supply of new psychoactive substances, which were formerly known as legal highs. Members may be aware that some of those products were known under street names, such as spice or MCAT. There was also the use of nitrous oxide as laughing gas. It is a serious matter, because more than 100 people died in the year before the 2016 Act came into effect. It has had a good success rate, which I want to talk about, but I also want to put some questions to the Minister.

The Act includes a statutory provision to review the legislation 30 months following its commencement, and that time is approaching. I want to hear what the Minister’s initial thoughts are and what the pathway is to ensuring that that review takes place. There are a number of views about the operation of the Act to date, and I want to raise a number of questions with him. I will give him advance notice of those questions and then discuss them in more detail.

First, what is the Minister’s assessment of the operation of the 2016 Act to date? There was some concern at the time about its methodology and what it would achieve and how, so I would welcome his assessment. When does he intend to publish the review of the Act? That has been looked at for some time, and I will return to that issue later. As the Minister for Policing, what is his assessment of the impact of the Act on police forces to date? What has it meant for police forces, and what is their understanding of the Act? What use have they made of the Act to date?

The charities I am involved in are interested in harm reduction and supporting the community in prevention. What steps are local authorities taking to understand the new challenges of psychoactive substances, given their responsibilities? What knowledge and understanding has the health service gained? What partnerships are in place or being developed to understand this new emerging trend, and how has the Minister dealt with that? I will return to that in due course.

I want to get the Minister—if not today, then at some point—to publish some data about the 2016 Act. Section 4 of the Act relates to an offence of producing a psychoactive substance. How many convictions have there been? In section 5 there is the offence of supplying or offering to supply a psychoactive substance. How many convictions have there been? Section 6 is about aggravation of offences. How many convictions have there been? Section 7 relates to possession of a psychoactive substance. How many convictions have there been? Section 8 relates to importing and exporting. How many convictions have there been? Section 9 relates to possession of a new psychoactive substance in a custodial institution. I will return to that matter shortly, but how many convictions have there been?

Convictions are one part of a metric on reducing usage, and I will return to other areas that are critical in prevention, understanding and harm reduction, but what assessment have the Government made of the impact of NPS on communities? I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) here. He had a particular challenge this time last year with a flood of NPS coming into the community in Wrexham. There was a need for a challenge, involving local authorities, the police and the health service together. Are the Government monitoring the impact of such things? The same thing happened in Manchester. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell)—she cannot be here today—has played an active role in the group looking at such matters: why are communities being impacted? What is the mix that has led to NPS being used in Wrexham, Manchester or other areas? What steps are the Government taking on NPS in prisons?

What assessment has been made of the key issues discussed during the passage of the Act: education and understanding for young people; the resilience to refuse; and help and support for those who are potentially the most vulnerable—the homeless, who have been targeted with NPS in many areas? We need to know what figures the Minister is collating on the number of deaths, given what happened before, and on hospital admissions and the support that is given to people when incidents occur.

That is the framework of the questions that I want the Minister to address. I will now touch briefly on some specific issues. Spice and other new psychoactive substances have been manufactured in China and India and shipped to Europe by people who wish to make a profit out of them. Before the Act, online retailers, high street shops and non-retail sources, such as friends of drug dealers, were used for that.

The Act had support from all parties in the House, and there has been some success. There has been a marked reduction in the public availability of NPS through high street shops, because they have gone as a result of the Act. However, anecdotal evidence shows that there is still online access to NPS—I would like to know what the Minister thinks about that—and that the illicit drug market is now playing a more important role than it did in the past. Because it is illicit, it is even more dangerous. I would like the Minister to comment on those issues.

The European body monitoring this issue, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, has indicated that there are now some 620 types of NPS on the market. We need not only a criminal justice response but an education and health response on the various aspects of NPS, how parents, teachers, youth workers and individuals themselves understand them, and how we have support interventions from a range of bodies to warn people and to prevent use in the first place.

The Home Office’s latest figures showed that 332 retailers were no longer selling psychoactive substances, and that the police had made 186 arrests around the time of the Act coming into force, which is good. The Home Office
outline in the framework document detailing the review of the Act said that there had been a reduction in the use of NPS. Figures from the crime survey for England and Wales show that, among 16 to 24-year-olds, NPS use has fallen from 2.6% to 1.2%. Among the older cohort, overall use has reduced by about 50%—a statistically significant change. However, the survey does not include student residence halls, NHS nurses’ accommodation, prisons or homeless people, so I would welcome the Minister’s assessment of the full picture in due course. I have said that I want the review, and I think I have said enough on that—we need to know when the 30-month review is happening, because it seems to be drifting. I would welcome the Minister’s confirmation that it is not.

Prisons are a No. 1 concern. There have been efforts on the streets to remove NPS, but there has been a 2,625% increase in use in prisons since 2010. Spice cases have shot through the roof in prisons, and methadone cases are still important. Attacks on prison officers have increased—largely, in many cases, as a result of the use of spice. We have a lot of anecdotal evidence of NPS being smuggled into prisons on plain A4 paper, impregnated as a narcotic. Prison officers are concerned about the lack of sniffer dogs in prisons, and about secondary consumption of NPS in prison cells. People in prison who use NPS go into health centres. We know anecdotally that nurses are concerned about spice use in prisons continuing to worsen and, because healthcare professionals go into cells, about being exposed to it themselves.

I have looked at this month’s papers through a quick google this morning. I saw a prison inspector reporting on HMP Nottingham, where NPS was leading to a “dangerous, disrespectful, drug-ridden jail”. At Holme House Prison, frequent and alarming medical emergencies are contributing to high levels of staff sickness, and the safety and stability of the prison is being affected by NPS use. A report from an independent monitoring board noted:

“Like most prisons, HMP Northumberland faces a rise in the use of illegal substances and the consequent potential for violence.”

Those are just examples from one Google search this morning of what has happened this month with NPS in prisons. I would like to know from the Minister, although I know he does not have direct responsibility for prisons as a whole, what the strategy is, what action there is against criminal gangs, what the health implications of NPS in prisons are, and what action he is taking.

My constituency is in Wales. In November 2017, Public Health Wales produced a report that highlighted some important facts. It showed that the use and number of such substances has decreased, and that is attributable to the Act, which is good. However, those that have been identified are more toxic and more potent, and represent a greater harm to users than other drugs. People are using NPS in that way now because of the Act. I would welcome the Minister’s assessment of that trend. Is there a more dangerous drug out there now because of the changes, which have driven NPS underground? If so, what is the Government’s strategy? That is not a criticism—I am just asking what the Government’s strategy is on harm reduction, advice and information. I am not just talking about advice for people who end up using NPS. Because NPS means new psychoactive substances—I emphasise the word “new”—youth workers, health professionals, police officers, local government staff and housing officials who deal with homeless people need to be kept up to date with the impact of that information.

The leader of the substance misuse programme in Wales has said:

“New psychoactive substances coming onto the market in Wales and across Europe pose a number of threats, with users at risk of acute harms which are well evidenced in this report. The long-term risks associated with these drugs are currently unknown.”

I would like to know from the Minister what research is being done into the long-term effects, and how the Government will work with agencies to reduce harm.

Policing is one thing—I have touched on the fact that we need to look at that in detail—but education and prevention are also important. What are we doing about educating young people, educating teachers and raising awareness of all these issues? That takes effort, money and time, but it is important.

I will make a further point, given that the Minister here today is the Policing Minister. The all-party group that I chair has been looking at volatile substance abuse and new psychoactive substances, and has held regular meetings with a number of interested bodies. Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham, we met with Wrexham Council. We have also met with Greater Manchester police, who had an effective operation targeting cannabinoids with a street value of £6.6 million. Two important issues arose out of the police and community response. The first is the need for a multi-agency approach. Wrexham Council triaged all services in one room, but with NPS it remains difficult to get that engagement, because the health service, the local council and the police need to be around the same table to deal with an extreme spike such as my hon. Friend had in his constituency this time last year.

One of the things that I took from the police in Manchester was that they were having difficulty in knowing what the pathway is to treatment after identifying somebody who had been using NPS in the community. If someone was out of their head, very often in Manchester they were a homeless person. Once the police had identified that person and lifted them from the street, without necessarily taking the criminalisation route but just to try to find them a place of safety, the path to treatment was particularly difficult. I would welcome the Minister focusing on what the triaging path is.

I would also welcome some information about the Minister’s understanding of whether the law is clear. I say that not because I believe it is not, but because I still receive representations from Release, the drugs, law and human rights charity. I quote from its letter to me today, which is worth placing on the record:

“The confusion created by the Act is apparent in enforcement mistakes made by police on the street, and the fact that of those arrested since the Act came into force only one third were actually cautioned or charged.”

Release also provided some freedom of information figures—they may or may not be accurate, I do not know—from a survey of 41 police forces: 805 arrests were made under the Psychoactive Substances Act between May 2016 and September 2017, with 274 cases proceeding to caution; and in London 68 charges arose from 313 arrests. I do not comment on the figures, but will the Minister give some information on what the police know about the Act, how they are using it, and how the Act is taking people from arrest to potential conviction? Whether today
[David Hanson]

or tomorrow, or in a parliamentary answer if need be, I ask him for the figures on the operation of the Act as part of the final review.

I wanted to hold the debate today so that we could air these issues. There are four main questions for the Minister to absorb. When will the review happen? What impact has the Act had on the reduction of NPS? What actions is he taking on hotspots and to raise awareness of the Act among important agencies such as housing, local councils and the police? What steps is he taking to intervene in education and health to ensure that when people are found to be using NPS, whether by the police or another agency, some mechanism triages them on to a pathway that stops them offending, facing difficult challenges and using, and that leads them to a positive future life?

The use of NPS is a small part of a much wider drug problem, but it is important. I wanted to air the matter in the House not to be critical of the Government but to raise an issue that I hope they will look at today or after the debate.

5.2 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing the debate, which is a welcome opportunity to review a piece of legislation that was not uncontroversial when it passed through the House a couple of years ago. I shall touch briefly on a couple of points that he made and pick up on the issue of research, in particular, which was something that I raised during the passage of the Bill.

The then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), recognised some of the challenges and barriers to effective research that might arise from the Bill—research not only into psychoactive substances and their effects, but into finding effective treatment for people who become physiologically addicted to such substances or dependent on them in other ways.

I shall press the Minister on research, because it is important for us to facilitate research and treatment in this area and to have a joined-up approach. It is no good just having punitive regulations and laws unless we also find a way to help people who are in need of help because they are using these substances. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber agrees on that.

I shall also touch a little more on the need for more joined-up working and on the focus on prevention, which was another issue raised during the passage of the Bill that led to the Psychoactive Substances Act. Too often after criminal justice legislation has been passed, we forget that we want to avoid the need to enforce these laws and that we want to help people to make informed and better choices in the first place. The right hon. Member for Delyn was right about the challenges to having a joined-up and effective approach across local authorities, the NHS and the police in many areas of drugs policy.

The changes introduced by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 fragmented healthcare provision in substance abuse services, making local authorities the primary commissioners. That has not helped the police or others much in the task of providing effective and joined-up preventive care or in improving education for people about the choices that they make when they take psychoactive substances or other drugs.

On research, a number of researchers and research institutions are clearly somewhat confused by some aspects of the law. The way in which the 2016 Act is drafted means that we are potentially criminalising what would otherwise be legitimate research. That was my reading of the legislation as it passed through the House, and there are still concerns in the research community. As drafted, the law makes it difficult to perform legitimate research on, for example, methods of treating people who develop a physiological dependence on spice, which is a topical new psychoactive substance and cannabinoid on which an estimated 15% of users develop a physiological dependence—a higher figure than for those smoking skunk, because of the nature of the substance and its ingredients.

To help people with a physiological dependence—for example, people with an opioid dependence—we have drugs such as methadone and buprenorphine. Over time, those drugs have been put through clinical trials, and they have been used to support people who are addicts—who need, for example, to be treated to come off heroin. The concern is that, while we recognise that some of the new psychoactive substances have the potential to cause higher levels of physiological dependence than some other drugs that we recognise from the past—I used the example of spice compared with cannabis that is smoked—it is difficult under the 2016 Act for researchers necessarily to research effective ways of dealing with that physiological dependence.

Drugs that can be used include the benzodiazepines, but it is difficult to research such use. The barriers to research put in place by the Act, and indeed the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, have not helped. Those barriers make it difficult for researchers to research effective medications to help people who are addicted. The Government need to look at that, not only because reducing addiction and dependency is important, but because the then Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, said during the passage of the Bill that he would take the issue away and look at it. I would be grateful for an update on what the Department has done during the intervening time to look at this.

I took Professor Sir Robin Murray to meet the Minister to discuss more broadly some of the barriers to research on cannabis, such as the need for a Home Office licence. We were not talking about therapeutic treatment for people with physiological dependence, but the principle is the same, and it is one I hope the Department is able to look at, because it is about improving the health and wellbeing of people who often have a multitude of health and complex social issues to deal with. That is something we need to address if we want to deal with addiction and help researchers develop effective treatments for people who have addiction to new psychoactive substances.

The second point I wanted to raise briefly, which picks up on a point raised by the right hon. Member for Delyn, is the need for a broader focus on prevention and, more generally, for more effective joined-up working between the police, health services and the Prison Service.
We know about the problems that many prisoners face and about the high number of deaths there are among prisoners with heroin addiction on leaving prison, due to their reduced tolerance, and there is a spike in the first two weeks after they leave prison. More broadly, we know that new psychoactive substances such as spice are widely used in prison. It has been made an offence to use new psychoactive substances in prison, but that does not deal with the fundamental issue of how we help people to make better choices and how we help those with addiction to engage more effectively with the NHS and healthcare services.

Whatever treatment may be available in prison, the problem is that there is not joined-up working when people leave prison, partially because NHS care for addiction is now commissioned by local authorities. That care is incredibly fragmented, and there is not the national focus that the NHS could bring to the issue. I urge the Minister to have further discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care. We have to revisit the 2012 Act, which has done a great disservice to substance misuse services. It has resulted in fragmentation, which we see very vividly in the context of prisoners leaving prison and more broadly in the variability in commissioning. In tightened economic times, the variability of resources means that different local authorities commission in incredibly different ways—some more effectively than others.

The lack of joined-up working I have outlined between local authorities and prisons, and between the NHS and local authorities in engaging wider mental health services with substance abuse services, is a real issue. I hope the Minister will take that away from the debate and discuss it with the Department of Health and Social Care. It would be a disservice to some very vulnerable people if he did not do so, and I am sure he will look into this.

With those two points—on the potential barriers to research into therapeutic treatment and the need for a more collaborative and joined-up approach between prisons and the criminal justice system and, more generally, in the health service—I will bring my remarks to a close. I hope that the Minister will take those points in the constructive tone that has been set in the debate, look at them and recognise that improvements are needed if we are to make the Government’s policy on dealing with new psychoactive substances more effective.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Before calling Ian Lucas, I would just say that Front-Bench winding-up speeches will start at 25 past 5. There are three people seeking to catch my eye, so I hope they will be able to divide the time between them reasonably fairly. I call Ian Lucas.

5.13 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Christopher. I will be brief. I thought it might be helpful to recount the situation we had in Wrexham last year and the steps that we have taken. That may assist the Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson). I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for arranging this debate.

About a year ago, we had an extremely disturbing situation develop very quickly in Wrexham. It was a manifestation of new psychoactive substance use on the streets. It presents with individuals in a very disturbed state, and it hugely upsets people who see them. It has an enormous and immediate impact as far as the town is concerned, not only for those who are taking the substances, but for the community as a whole. There was a great deal of reaction in my constituency office to what was an extremely serious, fast-moving and worrying situation.

I am pleased to say that, a year on, some progress has been made, and I want to assist by describing how that has been achieved. However, I want to make it clear that this is a continuing issue, and I am sure that such incidents are not just occurring in Wrexham. I want to recount what we had to do to address the issue.

We hear the phrase “joined-up working” regularly; it trips off the tongue, but it is much more difficult to achieve than to talk about. After my re-election in the general election, the first thing I did was to bang extremely hard on the desk of the local authority and refuse to move until action was taken on this issue. That involved working with the police and the local health board to bring everyone together to try to find a way ahead. It was a new situation for virtually everyone concerned.

The civic community of Wrexham has come together in an inspiring way to address what was a new situation for everyone, but we have had to rely on voluntary action. For example, we have a general practitioner who gives her morning as a volunteer to hold an event to support individuals with substance misuse issues. As I speak, we still do not have a real structure in place to support the work we are doing. We have a lot of voluntary organisations that seek to engage with affected individuals and that work with them to try to address their difficulties, but that is in the context of great financial pressures on local authorities, health boards and the police. It is very, very difficult.

We sought assistance, and I met a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State from the Home Office for funding, but I was referred to the police and crime commissioner, who I am afraid has not been involved and has not provided funding to support the work we are doing. We are determined to continue this work, but unfortunately we are not getting support from the statutory services, and the structures do not appear to be in place to support our work. We have created relationships and a structure that has begun to address the issue. However, there needs to be a much more co-ordinated structure. We need financial commitment and support from all the agencies involved.

For anywhere else that encounters this issue in the future, my advice is that it must be approached quickly, seriously and with a correct time allocation for the professionals concerned to address it. It is very important that action is taken in a co-ordinated manner.

We have begun to take steps forward. I am really grateful for the support and assistance from my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hansen), and for the work that we have been doing together in Parliament on the issue, but we all need to be doing a lot better—the Government, local authorities, health boards and all individuals concerned.

I would value more engagement from the national Government on the issue. It is one that will keep arising, particularly in market towns such as Wrexham, which I represent; it is not going to go away, and it feeds the
general perception that towns are not getting the attention they deserve from the Government. The Government need to take the issue extremely seriously.

5.18 pm  
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on bringing this issue to this Chamber, and commend him for his hard work. He described the scourge of these so-called legal highs on our streets. He is not alone: we all have constituents who are massively affected.

Back in 2015, a constituent of mine tragically lost his life due to a legal high. I can well remember the meeting we had with the local police, whose hands were tied when it came to addressing the issue. The concern that my constituents raised rose to such a pitch that there was a successful and respectful silent protest, during which hundreds of local people stood outside the shop in the town that was selling the legal highs. The shop closed down very soon afterwards. The end in Newtownards of a young life with so much potential was heartbreaking and effected a sea change in the way that adolescents and parents alike viewed and discussed the highs. It was very important.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland were the first to bemoan the lack of legal ability to make arrests, and to stop the scourge on the streets. Steps were taken in the form of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, which made it possible for officers to react in a small way to legal highs. However, the scourge has not ended. As recently as Christmas, there was one of the largest ever discoveries of legal high substances in Northern Ireland. Officers found some £800,000-worth of the drugs at a house in Portadown and a business premises in Lurgan over the course of two days. That as much as anything underlines the fact that although legislation may be in place, the threat is simply evolving. I support the right hon. Gentleman in his quest to see whether we may be in place, the threat is simply evolving. I support the right hon. Gentleman in his quest to see whether we have the correct investment in education, health, and guidance in dealing with this matter. I have spoken to the PSNI in my area; it says that although it can be done. We look to the Minister to do just that.

5.21 pm  
Graham Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this important debate.

In the short time that I have, I want to make a particular appeal to the Minister. The approach to these new psychoactive substances unfortunately is repeating the same failed drugs policy that we generally apply. I am quite saddened, having taken part in a number of these debates, and having served on the Psychoactive Substances Bill Committee, that the Government seem to ignore pleas to pilot evidence-based harm reduction treatment programmes, which I believe have been advocated by right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. We need to look at this issue. If we continue to criminalise users, rather than treating addicts and referring them to a public health programme dealing with a public health issue, we risk repeating the same mistakes over and over.

I thank Chris Hicks and the eight leading UK drugs policy organisations for kindly including me in their correspondence to Amanda Healy, who is the director of public health for Durham. I share their concerns about the alarmingly high rate of drug-related deaths in my area, and the increased use of psychoactive substances, particularly spice.

The debate focuses on psychoactive substances, but it is important to recognise that in 2016, there were 3,744 drug-related deaths in the United Kingdom. That is the highest number since records began in 1993. The national drug death average is 44 deaths per million. In the north-east, that figure is 77 deaths per million. We have a large and growing problem that we need to address as a public health crisis. We need to ensure that we have the correct investment in education, health, and health interventions. We need to try to ensure a co-ordinated approach.

The figures stack up. The cost to the public purse through the involvement of the police and social services and other costs is £65,000; by comparison, a treatment programme is about £15,000. Those figures were given to me by my local police and crime commissioner. I appeal to the Minister to look at the evidence on public health interventions, and at running a pilot scheme somewhere in the country where there is support for such an initiative. I am sure he would have tremendous support for such an approach.

5.24 pm  
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on bringing forward the debate, and on the very valuable work that he and his colleagues are doing in the all-party parliamentary group. I had not been aware of its existence until this week, but if he has an application form handy, I would be very happy to join.
My Scottish National party colleagues and I supported the Government’s Psychoactive Substances Act, which quite rightly introduced a broad prohibition on the manufacture and supply of these substances, essentially in order to stop dealers circumventing the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 by endlessly modifying products to create new substances.

In 2014 alone, there were more than 100 new substances identified in the EU. That highlights the need for a new approach. We raised concerns about some aspects of the Bill; a number of them were based on a report published by the Home Affairs Committee at the time. We welcome this opportunity to revisit how the 2016 Act is operating, and to express our view on exactly what the Government’s review should look at and on how we go about measuring whether the Act has been successful.

Importantly, the right hon. Member for Delyn made the subject of the debate policy overall, not just the Act. That reminds us that the Act was never going to be a silver bullet; it was to be just one of several policy levers designed to combat new psychoactive substance use. One of the principal aims of the legislation was to close so-called head shops—indeed, that seems to have happened—in order to remove these substances from the high street. That was about displacement. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we need to know whether people are instead buying these substances from dealers in controlled drugs. That was expected to an extent, and it appears to have happened—but to what extent? Has there been displacement in the sense that former psychoactive substance users have switched to controlled drugs? Has there been displacement through sales moving to the internet, including the dark web? What steps are the Government taking to close down the sites involved?

Concerns were expressed during debates on the Bill about enforcement and prosecution. How would prosecutors prove potential psychoactive effect? Would that require expert evidence? What would the costs be? The evidence at the time showed that Irish legislation had led to very few prosecutions, so it will be important to know what has happened in this country. It will be interesting to hear the Minister’s comments on the figures that the right hon. Member for Delyn gave.

Hon. Members have highlighted, as the Home Affairs Committee did at the time, that non-legislative measures need to accompany the Act. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted education; we need to accompany the Act. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) made a powerful argument for a proper public health approach. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made a thoughtful contribution on the importance of research and making sure that that is not caught up in the legislation.

Given that we have heard that new psychoactive substance use seems more significant among vulnerable populations, particularly homeless people, what steps can we take to focus efforts there? It was very interesting to hear about the joint working approach in Wrexham.

Ultimately, this is about people. The hon. Member for Strangford did us the service of highlighting the tragic case of his young constituent. We want fewer people to be harmed by new psychoactive substances. We need evidence that the passing of the legislation has resulted in fewer people being affected. The statistics seem encouraging, but as the right hon. Member for Delyn said, it is not quite as simple as that. Clearly, we still have a lot of work to do to tackle the scourge of new psychoactive substances, and we look forward to engaging with the Government again on this issue.

5.29 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing the debate, and I wish Hansard the best of luck with deciphering what is left of my speech from the crossings-out.

Before the Psychoactive Substances Act came into force two years ago—I sat on the Bill Committee with my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris)—our high streets up and down the country were awash with shops selling what were termed legal highs. Those substances were unpredictable and dangerous, and in far too many devastating cases they destroyed lives. A statutory provision was built in for the Home Secretary to review the Act and report the results of that review to the House within 30 months of the Act’s commencement. We are now 24 months in and the Government have not yet announced what we can expect from their report.

The Act had fast and encouraging results. High street retail sales almost entirely ceased in a very short time, and the fact that the market for the products did not merely shift underground is positive. Figures released in July last year from the crime survey for England and Wales indicate strongly that the reduced availability of psychoactive substances resulted in a reduction in exposure and related harm.

However, we need transparency from the Government about conviction data. The Act clearly details all the offences and penalties, including producing psychoactive substances; supplying, or offering to supply, psychoactive substances; aggravated offences; possession with intent to supply; importing and exporting substances; and, probably most importantly, possession in a custodial institution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn eloquently described that problem, and I have witnessed it all too often on my visits to prisons. We now need the stats about how many convictions there have been for each of those offences.

Will the Minister commit to providing us with an impact assessment of how the police and local authorities have handled new psychoactive substances in the two years since the Act was introduced? Although we know that it greatly diminished the supply of psychoactive substances, we would be naive to think that we were anywhere near solving the problem. The Government need to give us guarantees that they are reviewing legislation, monitoring current crime statistics and protecting our vulnerable communities from the dangers of these addictive substances.
The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher. I join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) not just on securing the debate but on the genuinely valuable work of the all-party group for new psychoactive substances and volatile substance abuse. I also join him in congratulating Mentor and Re-Solv on the support they give that group.

This is a very important issue. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we are talking about more than 100 deaths a year, which in itself should focus minds, but I have heard the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) speak before about the unsettling impact on communities, too. Although my constituency is not directly affected, I have been on patrol with the police in Newcastle, where I saw for myself the impact of spice on individuals. This does matter, and the right hon. Member for Delyn is quite right to hold the Government’s feet to the fire. He asked a long list of questions. As a courtesy, he did so up front so that civil servants had plenty of time to fill in some gaps in ministerial knowledge—in theory. I will do my best to answer them in the short time I have.

The right hon. Gentleman’s main question, and that of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), was about the status of the review. It is due to be out in November. It is quite right to have the review, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) pointed out. Many Members served on the Psychoactive Substances Bill Committee. It was a controversial piece of legislation, so a review is the right thing to do, and it will be out in November.

I think there has been an omission in engagement with the review. I asked officials to what degree the all-party group had been engaged in it, and I was told that it had not been. I would like to correct that, and I hope that the right hon. Member for Delyn will accept my invitation to engage with officials on the review so that we get the view of the House. I imagine that the Members in that group self-define as those whose communities are most affected by this issue. Their voice, and their evidence, needs to be brought into the process.

Fundamentally, the right hon. Gentleman asked for my assessment. I share his overall view, which was reflected in the hon. Member for Swansea East’s comments, that some of the results are encouraging. The prevalence data suggest that less than one in 200 adults aged 16 to 59 used a new psychoactive substance in 2016-17. That is about 147,000 adults, which is significantly lower than the figure in the 2015-16 crime survey, which suggested that around 244,000 adults used new psychoactive substances. The percentages are higher among young adults, but there still seems to be a downward trend, and I am sure the House welcomes that. The number of young people in treatment for problems with new psychoactive substances fell by 45% between 2015-16 and 2016-17—the first year in which that number has decreased since data on NPS treatment have been reported.

The right hon. Member for Delyn asked about deaths. There were 2,593 drug misuse deaths in England and Wales in 2016, a 5% increase on 2015 and the highest number since comparable records began in 1993. There were 123 deaths related to new psychoactive substances, an increase of 8% on the 114 deaths in 2015. So there is some encouraging news on prevalence and some continuingly depressing news on deaths.

The right hon. Gentleman cited figures on the disruption of supply. Since the Act came into force, more than 300 retailers across the United Kingdom have closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances. Police have arrested suppliers, and action by the National Crime Agency has resulted in the removal of psychoactive substances from sale on UK-based websites.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about convictions. In 2016, there were 28 convictions in England and Wales, and seven people were jailed under the new powers. Understandably, he pressed for more detail and asked for a breakdown by offence. I am assured that those data will be available for scrutiny by the House before the publication of the review. I think it is fair to say that the Act has had some good impacts, but it is clear—and the mood of the debate was clear—that we all agree that there is some way to go and that we cannot rely on legislation alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich said.

Perhaps I can give Members some reassurance about our work with partners to address misuse and build recovery. Public Health England is piloting a new system, “Report Illicit Drug Reactions”—RIDR—to collect information about adverse reactions and harms caused by NPS. A clinical network of leading clinicians has been established to analyse the data that comes out of RIDR, identify patterns and harms, and agree appropriate clinical responses. In addition, we have the evidence-based clinical guidelines produced by the Novel Psychoactive Treatment: UK Network—NEPTUNE—project, which is funded by the Health Foundation. The intention is to support and promote NEPTUNE II, a national online learning programme for frontline workers designed to improve the detection, assessment and management of the acute and chronic harms associated with NPS.

I was asked about education, which is clearly hugely important. I am satisfied from the evidence that a lot of education, prevention, treatment and recovery action is going on. We have an online resilience-building resource called “Rise Above”. FRANK, the Government’s drugs information and advice service, continues to be updated to reflect new and emerging patterns of drug use—obviously, the context here is a cat-and-mouse game between the Government, enforcement agencies and legislators, and the manufacturers of these products. Public Health England has developed its role in supporting local areas. There are toolkits to help local areas prevent and respond to the use of psychoactive substances, and clinical guidelines to aid with that. There is a lot going on.

I was pressed on whether there is evidence that the police understand the issue and the degree to which there is effective partnership working. I think the hon. Member for Wrexham expressed frustration about what is happening in his area. I have not yet received firm evidence of systemic failure in the approach by the police or at local level, but I am more than happy to work with the all-party group and use any powers I have to ask questions of people in authority and responsibility in hotspots where Members feel that local partnership is underpowered. If that means writing to PCCs, I am more than able to do that.
In the short time I have left, I would like to talk a little about prisons, which the right hon. Member for Delyn quite rightly focused on and where there is a problem.

The former prisons and probation ombudsman said: “I am clear that NPS have been a game-changer in terms of reducing safety in prison, with troubling links to our rising numbers of suicides, as well as to other types of death”.

The Government have invested in improving security in prisons to respond to the criminal gangs who have capitalised on the money they can make from the sale of spice. For example, more than 300 sniffer dogs have been trained, and of course it is a criminal offence to possess these drugs in prison.

We became the first prison service in the world to introduce mandatory drug tests for psychoactive substances, which is a significant step. In addition, in April 2018 NHS England published a new service specification that instructs the commissioning of recovery-oriented and integrated substance misuse services in prisons in England. I will certainly ensure that the Prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is well aware of the concern of the all-party group and the House about the management and handling of psychoactive substances in prisons. It is clearly a major issue, which is part of the reason why it is addressed in law.

Finally, I will pick up on a couple of individual points. I was asked about the degree to which the Government know why certain communities are affected more than others. That is really important in trying to understand the root of the problem. We need to understand the risk factors that make people such as those in the homeless community vulnerable to drugs misuse. The Home Secretary has commissioned the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to understand those factors and what can be done to address them, and we expect it to report on that within 12 months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly reminded us of the debate about barriers to legitimate research. There are substantive concerns on that. I reassure him that I am in correspondence with the ACMD on some of its suggestions and that a further meeting is planned for next month to work through some of those issues and legitimate concerns.

On balance, in the time I have had, I hope I have reassured the right hon. Member for Delyn on his central point. The review is not drifting; it is on track.

I would like his all-party group’s engagement with that process, but it is on track to be published and scrutinised in November. On the basis of what I see and—he asked me for this—my assessment of the results that flow from the Act, I take some encouragement, but there is clearly no room for complacency. The House is quite right to remind us that this cannot be about legislation alone; a huge amount has to be fixed and worked on around that. Whether that is a more joined-up approach on commissioning, effective partnership working on the ground, or clear understanding by the police, all of those things in the round underpin effective legislation, which is what we want to counter a serious problem that blights far too many communities and towns across the country.

I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman again on securing the debate, and I give him a minute to reply.

5.44 pm

**David Hanson:** I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) and for Easington (Grahame Morris) and the hon. Members for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for contributing. I am grateful for the comments from colleagues on the Front Benches, particularly the Minister. I want to leave him with this point: the review of the 2016 Act, which he has indicated is serious and will take place, must look at all the issues I have tried to put on the table. It must also look at issues pertinent not to the Act but to solving the challenge, such as health, prevention, education and awareness, and help and support when people have been using new psychoactive substances. There is a real opportunity to make a positive impact.

The debate was not meant to be critical; it was meant to raise the issue, shine a light on it and show the Minister that, as well as him and his officials, other people in the House take an interest in this topic. I thank him for his contribution, and I thank you once again for your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered Government policy on new psychoactive substances.

5.45 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 May 2018

[SIR HENRY BELLLINGHAM in the Chair]

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

1.30 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I place on record my thanks to the Chairman of Ways and Means, who allowed this debate to be facilitated before the House goes into recess.

The situation in Gaza for its 1.8 million residents is nothing short of inhumane, but before I turn to some of the specific concerns of many in Gaza and the wider Palestinian community, I want to comment briefly on the events of the last two months, which cannot possibly be divorced from the broader realities facing Palestinians.

The brutal response to the protests on the Gaza border during the last two months are a mark of shame on a deadlocked international community, giving succour to an Israeli Government acting with a lethal culture of impunity. That, I am afraid, has been exacerbated by the feeble response of our own Government, whose voice carries weight yet has been barely audible, and of course by the disgraceful comments and actions of President Trump.

The violence at the Gaza border since 30 March has been truly shocking: 112 Palestinians have been killed, 13,000 have been injured—3,500 of them with live ammunition—and 13 children have been killed. One Israeli soldier has been injured. Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge explicitly the responsibility of Hamas in stoking the protests and provoking Israel. Hamas is a terrorist organisation that refuses to recognise the right of Israel to exist, and Israel has a right to defend itself. As an occupying force, however, Israel’s response as “surgical”, and the Israeli Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed that there are “no innocent people” in the Gaza strip. Such an inquiry by the Israeli Government could not be independent and would have no credibility in the international community.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): We should all agree that the slaughter of unarmed civilians in Gaza is abhorrent. We need to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people at this time. While I agree with my hon. Friend on a UN-led inquiry, does she agree that a two-state solution is the only solution to the conflict and that we should be impressing that on all parties?

Louise Haigh: I agree. It remains Labour party policy, and indeed Government policy, to support a two-state solution, which is the only way forward for Israel and Palestine.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know that Government policy and Labour party policy is a two-state solution, but I am increasingly concerned about how that could work practically on the ground. That makes me think we will have to find another way—perhaps a one-state solution, with everyone equal. I do not know, but the two-state solution becomes increasingly impossible as those tentacles of settlements go into places such as Area C in the west bank.

Louise Haigh: Of course, I understand hon. Members’ and indeed wider society’s concerns about the two-state solution and their frustration about its achievement, but I do not see a one-state solution as a possibility—I do not envisage that ever being acceptable to Israel. From conversations I have had with the Israeli Government and Israelis, it seems unacceptable from their perspective. However, I will make a little progress, if I may.

On the unacceptability of an Israeli-led inquiry, I ask the Minister: what does it say about the upholders of a rules-based international order that one of its principal architects, the UK, would allow the alleged perpetrators of violations of international law to conduct the investigation themselves? It makes an utter mockery of the international order. When repressive regimes the world over look at the actions of the democratic Israeli Government and the muted international condemnation, it is little wonder that they think, “Anything goes.” What more evidence do the Government need to support calls for an independent investigation and to uphold that international order? The UN experts have been very clear.

The basic principles on the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials require law enforcement officials to refrain from using lethal force on demonstrators “unless strictly unavoidable” to protect their own or others’ lives. Their safety must be in actual danger. Those are the words of the independent UN. So my first ask of the Minister is, will they confirm what wording the Government would support in a UN resolution, and is the UK actively pushing for a more acceptable form of wording at the UN?

The Government have called for the Israeli authorities to conduct their own so-called independent inquiry, but the Israeli Government have already made clear what they think of the incidents on the Gaza border. Israel’s ambassador to the UK, Mark Regev, has described Israel’s response as “surgical”, and the Israeli Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed that there are “no innocent people” in the Gaza strip. Such an inquiry by the Israeli Government could not be independent and would have no credibility in the international community.

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The direct and immediate humanitarian consequence of the Israeli security forces’ actions has been on hospitals in Gaza. Even prior to this series of protest-related mass-casualty events, Gaza’s health system was, according to the World Health Organisation, already “on the brink of collapse”. A medic who spoke to Medical Aid for Palestinians said that the types and numbers of injuries “would overwhelm any European hospital and be classified as a ‘major incident’, let alone a local hospital in Gaza with a shortage of disposables and man power for this kind of injury.”

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case on the need for a proper international reaction to Gaza’s humanitarian emergency. Does she share my concern that hospitals in Gaza were seeking to deal with an incredibly serious issue yet did not even have some of the basic supplies that would be needed? Gauze, syringes and surgical gowns were all running out. Does she agree that we have a duty as part of the international community to ensure not only that there is not a repeat of the bloodshed but, as Medical Aid for Palestinians has called for, that Gaza’s health sector is supported to develop in line with the needs of its residents?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more. The health system in Gaza has long been under extreme pressure and on the brink of collapse, but now the medicines and materials needed to treat the wounded are dwindling. My hon. Friend mentioned several of those, and even saline solution is in short supply.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In fact, there is another aspect to all of this. I visited Gaza when I first visited Palestine about 10 years ago, and I saw the rudimentary hospital conditions there at that time—goodness knows how they must be now. However, if I wanted to go back, I would not be able to, because it is next to impossible for parliamentarians from the United Kingdom to get into Gaza. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister could do something about that, and that that would help us all in this situation?

Louise Haigh: I recently visited Palestine and was unable to visit Gaza, so that would be very welcome.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening the debate. She is right to highlight the acute pressure on the health services in Gaza in relation to physical health. Of course, there is also a long-term mental health crisis in both Gaza and the wider region—including Israel—for people who are living constantly in the shadow of this terrible conflict. Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have a responsibility to ensure that those mental health needs are properly cared for?

Louise Haigh: Absolutely. The ongoing psychosocial, as well as physiological, implications of the wounding around the protest and of continued life under the blockade and the occupation cast a very long shadow for the entire Palestinian people. I believe Save the Children did a recent survey of children in Gaza and found that a very high percentage of teenagers were bed-wetting due to continued trauma.

According to WHO estimates, 11% of people injured since the start of the demonstrations risk developing a permanent disability. That is more than 1,000 people who will be permanently disabled, putting further pressure on the health system.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I apologise that a prior speaking engagement means I cannot stay for the whole debate, although I will try to return. My hon. Friend makes an important point in setting out the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Does she agree that that situation legitimately demands protest—that it is legitimate to protest against it, regardless of the responsibility of Hamas or others for stoking the protests? Does she agree that the failure of the Israeli Government to allow and enable peaceful protest is not only causing the mental health issues, but ensuring that the situation grows worse and that there seems to be no other way but violent protest?

Louise Haigh: Each of us—every person in this world—has a fundamental human right to peaceful protest. Is it any wonder that ordinary people living in Gaza want to go and exercise that right, given the situation and the lives they are living?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is setting out a very powerful case for UK intervention. Does she also agree that the UK should lead the call to remove illegal blockades of goods into Gaza?

Louise Haigh: Yes. The illegal blockade and the continuing occupation of Gaza by the Israeli Government are a fundamental part of the issue facing Gaza.

If our Government are unwilling or unable to put pressure on the Israeli Government to ease some of the causes of the humanitarian situation, we have a responsibility to the Palestinian people to address some of the symptoms that I have laid out today. The Government have committed £1.9 million in funding to UNICEF through the humanitarian fund of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs. However, answers to written questions suggest that the Government will not be renewing support to that fund. OCHA is renewing calls for urgent support for its humanitarian funds to meet the desperate humanitarian situation in the Gaza strip. Can the Minister commit to renewing support to that fund? The immediate medical needs in Gaza are dire, and the sheer number of injuries alone will require long-term support. It is surely unjustifiable to withdraw support at this time.

The recent mass-casualty event has only exacerbated a whole-system collapse in Gaza. As I mentioned earlier, I visited Israel and Palestine in February this year, with my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). We were taken there by the excellent organisations the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestine. We did not visit Gaza, but the situation there cast a long shadow across the rest of the country.
We visited Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem, a charitable hospital that provides healthcare to Palestinians, although they obviously struggle to access it because of restrictions on travel and as a result of checkpoints, the wall and the blockade of Gaza. We saw three newborn babies—triplets—born only days before. They were premature and tiny, in incubators and hooked up so that they could breathe properly. Their mother, a woman who had given birth to three babies only days before, was back in Gaza, having been ordered to leave East Jerusalem—part of Palestine, but annexed by Israel—because she was considered a security threat. She was separated from her newborn triplets.

We met a little boy who had a brain stem tumour and who was waiting to be operated on the next day. He was chatting away and laughing, blowing kisses at my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley and telling her that she was beautiful because she had rosy cheeks. There is an age restriction of 55 years on travel from Gaza, so his great-aunt was with him rather than his parents. He was being operated on the next day, and the surgeon was not hopeful about his chances. He was six years old.

The continued blockade of Gaza since 2005 and the restrictions on travel and trade have undeniably played their part in the horrific situation Gazans live in today. In 2012, the UN warned that Gaza would be unliveable by 2020. Unemployment is as high as 45% for men and 80% for women. At least 90% of the water is not fit to drink. The birth rate continues to increase in the most overpopulated place on earth. Only 40% of the 12,000 houses demolished during the 2014 war have been rebuilt.

For the last three months, families in Gaza have been receiving around two to four hours of electricity per day. Gaza receives electricity from Israel. Egypt and a single power plant near Gaza City. Around 28 MW of electricity are provided to Gaza from Egypt every day, but there are frequent disruptions. The sole power plant in Gaza produces around 60 MW per day. Israel ordinarily provides around 120 MW per day to Gaza, but on 11 June last year Israel’s security cabinet made a decision to reduce the supply by 40%, significantly exacerbating an electricity crisis that has long impacted Palestinian residents of Gaza.

Gaza now has daily blackouts of 18 to 20 hours, meaning that patients who rely on life-saving medical equipment are put at risk on a daily basis, and hospitals generally cannot function at their full capacity to ensure the health and wellbeing of patients. Water desalination facilities have been severely impacted by the lack of electricity. The impact on the hygiene and public health of the population is severe and a matter of grave concern, as sewage water cannot be treated or pumped away from residential areas. Currently, around 80% of Gaza’s shoreline is polluted by untreated sewage, enabling the spread of waterborne diseases.

Is it any wonder, in these conditions, that what the former Prime Minister David Cameron called an “open-air prison” is a hotbed for extremism? The threats from the United States over funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency will inevitably mean that half the schools in Gaza funded by the UN will struggle, and children will be sent instead to Hamas-run schools. The humanitarian situation and Israel’s actions are Hamas’s best recruiting tools.

I know the Minister shares my concerns, but we need to step up. We cannot allow the desperate situation of Gazans to continue. Taking action will only serve to quell extremism and weaken Hamas. We need to hear a stronger, louder voice from the UK in the international community. We must bring pressure to bear on the Egyptian Government for their role. We must see UNRWA and OCHA properly funded and, yes, we must consider sanctions if international law continues to be flouted. Most importantly, we must ensure that the blockade is lifted and Gazans are allowed to travel, trade and have access to healthcare. If we do not do everything in our collective power to achieve that, the blood of many more Palestinians and Israelis will be on all our hands.

1.47 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), on securing this debate and the powerful way in which she has introduced it. I apologise to hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister: I must get back to my constituency for an engagement later this afternoon, so depending on how long this debate goes on for, I may not be able to stay for the winding-up speeches. I will ask the Minister some questions, and I will avidly read his replies to them in Hansard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, graphically laid out the nightmare that has been unfolding in Gaza—a nightmare that, frankly, we knew was coming. Back in 2012, the United Nations said that life in Gaza would be unliveable by 2020 because of the conditions that my hon. Friend described, but Robert Piper, the UN co-ordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities, says:

“that unliveability threshold has been passed quite a long time ago.”

That is the reality of living in Gaza today.

I want to ask the Minister about the UK’s response to that humanitarian crisis, but before I do, I remind hon. Members that perhaps the greatest humanitarian issue of all is the right to life. More than 100 Palestinians have been killed and more than 12,000 injured since 30 March, most from the use of live fire by the Israeli military. I will press the Minister on the accountability for those deaths and injuries.

The Minister knows—my hon. Friend repeated this point—of the widespread concern in the House over the United Kingdom’s failure last Friday to support the creation of an independent commission of inquiry by the United Nations Human Rights Council. What is the UK’s position on the HRC’s inquiry, now that it has been set up? Does the United Kingdom now accept the collective decision to create that body, even though it disagreed with it? Will it get behind and support that inquiry, and urge Israel to co-operate with it? If not, is the Minister saying that there is an obligation on member states to get behind collective decisions by the HRC and other UN bodies only if states happen to agree with them? If so, is that right reserved to the United Kingdom, or does he expect all states to exercise it?

Israel announced that it will conduct its own inquiry into the events in Gaza, as my hon. Friend said. Answering the urgent question on Monday, the Minister said that if such an inquiry “is done solely by the Israeli legislative and judicial system, it is unlikely to carry the sort of confidence that the international community is looking for.”
He was not kidding about that. The United Nations commission of inquiry on the 2014 Gaza conflict said in 2015 that Israel has a “lamentable track record in holding wrongdoers accountable”. B’Tselem, the respected Israeli human rights organisation, said:

“The military’s announcement that the general staff investigation and judicial inquiry mechanism led by Brig. Gen. Motti Baruch will look into the incidents in which Palestinians were killed, focusing on civilian deaths, is pure propaganda, intended—among other things—to prevent an independent international investigation.”

To address those concerns, which the Minister seems to understand are out there, he told the House on Monday that he believes that the Israeli inquiry “must have an international element to it.”—[Official Report, 21 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 578.]

“Must” was used. Has that been put to the Israeli Government? If the Israeli Government accept that there should—must—be an independent international element to the inquiry, what mechanisms does the Minister think should be put in place to monitor that international element, to ensure that it provides transparency and independence, rather than a fig leaf for an “inquiry” that, in reality, is anything but?

What will be the UK’s response if Israel refuses that independent international element? Will the United Kingdom say at that stage that all we are left with is the HRC inquiry, and that we will get behind it? Will the UK argue proactively for another international mechanism? If so, what will that mechanism be? Or will the reality be that, if Israel says no to that international element, and the United Kingdom, United States and Israel absent themselves from the HRC inquiry, accountability will just go by the board? That would underline both what B’Tselem said about the recent events—that Israel is finding a way of avoiding accountability—and what the UN commission of inquiry in 2014 said, with this being another example of Israel’s lamentable record of holding wrongdoers to account. The difference will be that this time, the United Kingdom would be complicit in that process.

The second area of accountability on which I will question the Minister is arms sales. In the past two years, export licences to Israel have been provided for categories of arms and arms components including sniper and assault rifles, pistols, weapon sights, targeting equipment, ammunition for small arms and grenades, smoke canisters, tanks, combat and military helicopters, military support and combat aircraft and civil riot control protection equipment. The consolidated arms export criteria, under which the UK operates, say that licences should not be granted if there is a serious risk that arms or arms components will be used for “internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law”, and that the need “not to affect adversely regional stability in any significant way” must be considered.

There is widespread concern about whether UK-supplied weapons or components have been used in Gaza. I raised the subject in a written question to the Minister before last week’s events. He told me in his reply that the Government “do not collect data on the use of equipment after sale.” I asked the Minister for clarification of that on 15 May, and he told me that thorough risk assessments are undertaken prior to the granting of licences, and that in the light of recent difficulties in Gaza, “we have looked at all extant licences in relation to Israel.”

He went on to say that “we have no information to suggest that UK-supplied equipment has been used against protesters.”—[Official Report, 15 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 127.]

I would like clarity from the Minister on that latter point. Is he saying that weapons or weapons components exported from the UK being used in the recent events in Gaza would constitute a breach of the consolidated criteria? I am also unclear about the Minister’s saying that “extant licences” have been looked at. Is he saying that Ministers have looked to see if any new orders are likely for items covered by those licences, but with no concern about what arms already supplied have been used for? Or is he saying that he is making inquiries about the uses of items already supplied to inform decisions about future licences?

If it is the latter, how is he making those inquiries? Is it simply a question of asking Israel if arms or arms components exported there from the UK have been used in Gaza, or are any other checks being undertaken? I ask because in 2009 the Foreign Office decided that because of misleading statements made by the Israeli Government about such matters, it would no longer regard their word as reliable or sufficient to decide whether to grant an arms export licence. Has the Foreign Office changed its mind about that? Does it now see Israel’s word about the uses to which it puts arms and arms components imports from the UK as reliable enough? If so, what has changed to give the UK more confidence in that word? If the UK still does not see assurances from the Israeli Government as sufficient, what other checks are in place?

Before I close, I will say a couple of words about the UK’s response to the humanitarian crisis that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, described. I was encouraged by the Minister’s commitment last week, when he said he was calling on the special representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations “to bring forward proposals to address the situation in Gaza.”—[Official Report, 15 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 138.]

I would be grateful if the Minister outlined whether our Government will make any recommendations to go with that call, and if so, what they will be. Will he engage with the Quartet on its proposal to address the water and electricity crisis in Gaza? I would also be interested to hear from the Minister on the likelihood of support for engagement with those processes from other international parties, including Israel.

To follow up on that, the Minister will be aware that in March the White House held a summit on Gaza that UK officials attended, and very little information has come out about that, so I would be grateful if he could outline whether any plan or proposals were discussed at the summit and what, if anything, is likely to come out of it.

I would like to add to the questions that my hon. Friend put to the Minister about the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs humanitarian fund. Last year, £1.9 million was donated to that fund through the UN Children’s Fund. That has
been supporting up to 1 million people in Gaza by providing clean water and rehabilitating sanitation facilities. I appreciate the efforts that the Minister put into securing that money.

However, the UN is now calling for an urgent replenishment of the humanitarian fund, because of the deteriorating situation in Gaza—a situation made worse by the cut in funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency from the United States. The pooled fund, which is being replenished now, is being supported by a range of countries, including Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland. However, we have still heard nothing from the UK Government about that. Despite their supporting the fund last year, responses from Ministers to written questions that I have tabled have given no indication at all about whether the Government plan to contribute to the fund this year. Given that the fund is addressing urgent needs in Gaza and that this Minister has said repeatedly—wearing, I guess, his Department for International Development hat, rather than his Foreign Office hat—that his Department stands ready to respond to spikes in need, will he accept that we are seeing a very obvious spike in need in Gaza, and will he give us a clear indication today of whether the UK Government will support the United Nations OCHA humanitarian fund?

I would be very grateful if the Minister could respond to the points I have made when he replies to the debate, and I again apologise if I am not able to be here to hear that reply.

2.2 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing this important debate. May I add my apologies? Whether I am able to be here for the whole debate will depend on what time it ends. I certainly hope that I can, but if not, I apologise to you, Sir Henry, to the Minister and to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton).

Last week’s tragic events on the Gaza border underline the need for urgent action to address the plight of the Palestinian people. In the past decade, Gaza has endured three wars. Ending the spiral of violence requires us to tackle the toxic cocktail of hopelessness and desperation that underpins it. As Labour Friends of Israel set out in its pledge for Gaza earlier this year, we need a multifaceted approach, with political, diplomatic and economic strands.

First, Israel should lead an international effort to assist with the economic revitalisation of Gaza. That should utilise its burgeoning relationships in the Arab world—something that Avi Gabbay, leader of the Israeli Labour party, suggested last week that Benjamin Netanyahu has singularly failed to do. In February, Israel presented an international conference with a list of infrastructure projects in Gaza that it would like donors to fund, and offered to provide technical support and know-how. Those projects included installing a new high-voltage line that would double the amount of electricity that Israel supplies to Gaza; laying a natural gas pipeline from Israel to Gaza; and building a sewage purification plant. I urge Israel to go further and urgently consider the plans, first presented by the Labour member of the Knesset Omer Barlev in 2014 and since discussed by Ministers, for a seaport on an artificial island off the Gaza coast that would both ease the flow of goods into and out of Gaza and meet Israel’s legitimate security requirements.

Secondly, the international community should honour the reconstruction pledges made at the Cairo conference in 2014. Britain, the US and our European partners have done so, but Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have thus far failed to meet their obligations. World Bank figures show disbursement ratios of significantly less than 50%.

Thirdly, the Palestinian Authority’s control over Gaza must be reasserted. Previous efforts to secure a reconciliation agreement have foundered, and the PA’s misguided attempts to exert pressure—for instance by cutting the supply of electricity to Gaza—have simply added to the suffering of the Gazan people. I commend Egypt for its attempts to re-establish the PA’s authority in Gaza and urge a new, more imaginative and less blunt effort by President Abbas’s Administration.

Finally, the root of Gaza’s problems lies in the brutal rule of Hamas. It has deprived the people of their civil rights, including their right to new elections. It has used Gaza as a base from which to launch terrorist and rocket attacks on Israel and, as the Red Crescent made clear last year, shown callous disregard for the lives of the Gazan people.

Bob Stewart: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Joan Ryan: I will not, because there is time for hon. Members to make a contribution should they so wish and should you call them, Sir Henry.

Hamas has spent Gaza’s resources arming itself and preparing for war. Indeed, it is estimated that the cement used for the 32 Hamas tunnels that Israel uncovered at the outset of the 2014 conflict could have built two hospitals, 20 clinics, 20 schools or two nurseries. As well as restocking its arsenal of weaponry, Hamas has used the past four years to rebuild its terror tunnels, placing them underneath apartment blocks, schools and the Kerem Shalom crossing—the main route into Gaza for humanitarian aid. The Oslo accords require the demilitarisation of the Palestinian territories. President Abbas demands the principle of “one state, one government, one gun”. The international community must take action to stop the flow of weapons to Hamas and to assist in its disarmament.

I have had the pleasure of visiting on a number of occasions the Nir Oz kibbutz on the Gaza border. Its brave and resourceful people live under the constant threat of Hamas rocket attack and have suffered terribly in the past. However, they bear the people of Gaza no ill will; they wish for them only the peace and security that they wish for themselves and their children. Their attitude should be an example to us all as we strive for an end to violence, and the pursuit of co-existence, reconciliation and, yes, a two-state solution as the only route to a lasting peace for Israel and Palestine.

2.7 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this very important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it.

I do not want to repeat the statistics that have already been referred to, but I think that we need to look dispassionately at the evidence of the unfolding catastrophe that we are witnessing in Gaza. I would like to echo the
[Grahame Morris]

comments of other Members. My experience when I was part of a delegation to the occupied territories was that we were not able to effect entry into Gaza. I appeal to the Minister to try to make representations to the Israeli Government to ensure that that is possible.

According to Oxfam, at least 80% of the population in Gaza rely on humanitarian aid to survive. It is clear that many—in fact, nearly all—of the key industries were destroyed during the three military interventions, and as a consequence more than 60% of Gazan youth are unemployed. I understand that that is the highest rate in the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) referred to the actions of Hamas. Clearly, Opposition Members and, I think, Members across the whole House condemn violent actions. In truth, the Gaza blockade began long before Hamas came to power in Gaza. I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends that it started with Israel cancelling the general exit permit out of the Gaza strip in 1991. To suggest that the current situation in Gaza is down to Hamas alone does not fit the facts or the realities on the ground. Gaza has been accurately described as a vast open prison, a strip of territory hermetically sealed from the outside world by Israel and Egypt. Since 2007, Israel has repeatedly attacked fisherman off the Gazan coast. A number have been killed and more than 30 injured in recent years as a result of the policy of restricting the distance from the coast that the Gazan fisherman are allowed to fish to between three and six nautical miles.

The irony is that Gaza does potentially have some natural resources and some opportunity to trade, not least the quite extensive gas reserves that have been discovered off the coast, with an estimated value of $4 billion. Israel’s military completely destroyed Gaza’s seaports in 2002 and its airport in 2001. That prevents Palestinians from engaging in direct trade with the outside world. Palestinians are barred from using about 20% of their own land space, as this is kept as a buffer zone, which Israel maintains as a kill zone, whereby Palestinians risk death if they dare to enter the area near the Gaza fence.

Not a single rocket has been fired from Gaza in the last two months, yet Israel, as we have seen, has used lethal violence against Palestinians in Gaza, while the Israelis are claiming to be the victims. I saw figures relating to the recent short period in May, which showed that 68 Palestinians were killed. Israel has multiple non-lethal methods of addressing civilian protests, and it uses them frequently. It has much expertise in such methods. Indeed, it sells them to the rest of the world.

In the opinion of many, shooting live ammunition into mass, dense protests—indeed, any protest—is a war crime, and there must be repercussions. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have indicated, there must be an independent international investigation into these events. The use of live ammunition must be the very last resort and can only ever be justified where there is proven immediate threat to life and not under any other circumstance.

On Monday 14 May, there were at least 1,359 patients in Gaza’s hospitals with a variety of gunshot injuries, some of them life-changing. That was in a single day. I saw reports in our own newspapers of the Canadian President, Justin Trudeau, protesting about a Canadian doctor who was deliberately shot while he was tending to wounded Palestinians at some distance from the border fence. Palestinians are protesting in life-threatening situations because they are willing to risk their own lives for what they believe in. They believe in dignity, freedom of movement, access to electricity, clean water and the right to return home. Those are fundamental human rights, which I believe everyone in this room would support.

In Gaza, 95% of the water is undrinkable. There are between two and four hours of electricity a day, on average. There is at least 45% unemployment, and over half of the children are suffering acute mental stress. A very large percentage are suffering acute anaemia, presumably as a consequence of the unsafe drinking water. Over the half the population in Gaza are refugees from places within short journeys just outside the strip, in Israel. According to Jason Cone, the executive director of Doctors Without Borders, most of the wounded patients in Gaza felt that they had no hope, nothing to lose and no jobs. They told medical staff that they were willing to go back and die at the protest sites. Many wounded protesters were returning to the demonstrations with casts, on crutches and with external fixators holding together their shattered bones.

The level of violence, with the throwing of stones and petrol bombs and other such activities, did not reach the stage that would justify the hostilities threshold, and therefore the use of live rounds should be limited to non-lethal law enforcement methods. Israeli police have used violent repression against Palestinian citizens in Israel protesting against the Gaza violence, even breaking the leg of one protestor and arresting scores of others. The only way we can alleviate the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza is simply for Israel to lift the blockade and allow Gaza to have a viable electricity supply, clean drinking water for the population, access to decent medical supplies, a fully functioning sewage system and freedom of movement.

2.16 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I welcome this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it. It gives us the opportunity to discuss what has been happening in Gaza.

I have been contacted by more than 800 constituents since Monday of last week, when, as we have been reminded, 60 people died in protests in Gaza and 2,771 were injured, 1,359 of them by live ammunition. The protests, which had been building up over a period of weeks, were provoked in part by the reckless decision of the United States to move its embassy to Jerusalem. I regret that that decision was taken and has been put into effect. It was predicted what would happen if that decision was taken, and that is precisely what has happened.

There are a variety of views about the rights and wrongs of what happened in Gaza on Monday last week. I want to quote Human Rights Watch, whose judgments are broadly accepted as fair. It summarises:

“Israel has a right to defend its borders, but shooting unarmed protesters who haven’t breached its frontier is disproportionate and illegal.”

I think that most of us would share that conclusion on the rights and wrongs of what happened.
My hon. Friend referred to the culpability of Hamas in all of this, and was absolutely right to do so. To pursue that point further, I will again quote Human Rights Watch on the contribution of Hamas to events last week. It said:

“Certainly Hamas has supported the protests in Gaza, where its control is palpable. Criticism of Hamas rule can be punishable by arrest and torture, as Human Rights Watch has documented. Hamas reviews the sermons at Gaza’s mosques, and those sermons now tell worshipers to join the demonstrations at the Gaza border. On ordinary days, Hamas police officers prevent demonstrators from coming within 1,000 feet of the border fence inside Gaza, the distance that Israel has declared to be a ‘no go zone.’ Since March 30, Hamas has allowed protesters through and hired buses to transport people to the demonstrations.”

Like my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, I affirm Hamas’s culpability in what is happening, but those observations underline the strength of Human Rights Watch’s conclusion that what happened on the part of the Israeli army was nevertheless disproportionate and illegal.

I visited Gaza a long time ago—13 years ago—with Christian Aid to look at the situation. At that time, it was very, very grim. I remember meeting families who could not get basic healthcare for their children, farmers whose everyday livelihood was being interfered with by petty restrictions and difficulties of one sort or another, and other people, such as a student on holiday from university who was stuck at the border crossing for a week and unable to go home, where she had hoped to spend her vacation. There were endless indignities and problems.

That was 13 years ago, and the position today is vastly worse. Under international law, Israel, as the occupying power in Gaza, has primary responsibility for meeting the humanitarian needs of Palestinians, but the position is dire. We have already been reminded that in 2012, the United Nations forecast that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020. In July, it published an update to that view. In his foreword, Robert Piper, the UN co-ordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, said that “life for the average Palestinian in Gaza is getting more and more wretched.”

The report continued:

“Reviewing the indicators which in 2012 led the UN to question whether Gaza would become ‘unliveable’ by 2020, it is clear that very little progress has been made” in the intervening five years, and said:

“Despite the warnings issued by the UN in 2012, Gaza has continued on its trajectory of de-development”.

When I visited 13 years ago the position was grim, but a couple of years later the blockade began. It has been in place for more than 10 years. According to the UN’s July report, in that period GDP has fallen by half; unemployment has reached an extraordinarily high level, with youth unemployment at about 60%, as we have heard; and access to safe drinking water through the public water network has plummeted from 98.3% in 2000 to 10.5% in 2014.

Other hon. Members have referred to the daily blackouts in the electricity supply and the strain on the health service. I vividly remember meeting families who could not get access to basic healthcare. The World Health Organisation reports that in 2017, the number of permits issued by Israel for Palestinians to leave Gaza to access healthcare reached a record low. The proportion of those who applied who actually got a permit was 54%, the lowest since the World Health Organisation started to keep the figures in 2008. The WHO made the point:

“There has been a continuous decline in approval rates since 2012,” when 93% were successful. It also reported that in 2017, 54 Palestinians died following the denial of a permit or a delay in issuing a permit. Of those, 46 had cancer. It is very difficult to understand why people who need urgent cancer treatment are being denied permits to leave Gaza to obtain it.

Another problem that people in Gaza have to contend with is a basic lack of calories. In the assessment I referred to earlier about what is going on in Gaza, Human Rights Watch said:

“Until 2010, Israel counted the number of calories that Gaza residents would be allowed to consume, sorted by age and gender, and then used mathematical formulas to restrict the amount of food entering Gaza to no more than what...officials deemed necessary.”

That was defended as “economic warfare” aimed at weakening Hamas by restricting supplies to residents of Gaza and halting production and trade. It had the opposite effect. Faced with these shortages, the Hamas regime in Gaza consolidated power, handing out food and cash to the poor, hiring the unemployed as public servants, and opening a lucrative trading system via tunnels underneath the border with Egypt.

We all dearly want to see a two-state solution—a secure Israel alongside an autonomous and independent Palestinian state—but we can all see that time is running out for achieving that solution. I genuinely do not know what the Israeli Government think the long-term solution will be, but the viability of a two-state solution is being continually eroded by the establishment of settlements pepper-potting Palestine. It is increasingly difficult to see how what appears to be the only possible secure and peaceful outcome can be achieved.

I will finish by underlining the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), asked and pressing the Minister on whether the British Government will contribute again to the Occupied Palestinian Territories humanitarian fund. I welcome the fact that we contributed to it last year, and the need for it seems as compelling as ever. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us whether, as I hope, the British Government will contribute again this year.

2.27 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. Monday 14 May will go down as a dark day in history. In Jerusalem, crowds listened to Baptist minister Robert Jeffress reading a prayer to mark the opening of the American embassy—a man who has previously made deeply offensive comments about Jews, Muslims, Mormons and gay people. In Tel Aviv, people danced the night away to the music of their new Eurovision winner, Netta. And in Gaza, an hour or so down the coast, 60 people, including children, were killed under live fire.

This is, of course, an emotional debate. It has touched us here, and it has touched my constituents. At times last week, I was receiving emails at a rate of more than
one a minute. My constituents are angry and upset about what happened, and so am I. As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to represent that anger, but we also need to think seriously about what happened and what a meaningful response might look like, so I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing the debate. As we heard again this afternoon, she is a powerful, articulate and passionate advocate for the causes she takes up.

Before I go any further, I want to make it clear that I do not defend or dispute the disgraceful conduct of Hamas. They waved swastikas in the protests, which was a simply awful thing to do. They supplied maps to protesters, with directions to homes in the nearest Jewish communities. They spread downright lies about breaches in the fence, manipulating protesters and encouraging them to run towards the heavily armed and fortified fence. They have also claimed that 50 of the 60 people who died on 14 May were part of their organisation. I understand this, and I do not condone it—in fact, I utterly and totally condemn it.

However, I think that most of us can agree that the response of the Israeli Government was massively disproportionate. I think it came from a legacy of seeing the people of Gaza as nothing more than a security threat and shamefully denying their humanity, their rights and the conditions in which they have been living. In every so-called “Gaza war”, we have seen civilians being treated like enemy soldiers. It is a systemic problem.

The testimony of one Israeli defence force officer, given to the Israeli organisation Breaking the Silence in 2014, is a stark example of that. He said:

“The rules of engagement are anything inside”—

that is, inside the Gaza strip—

“is a threat, the area has to be ‘sterilised’, empty of people—and if we don’t see someone waving a white flag, screaming, ‘I give up’...then he’s a threat and there’s authorization to open fire”.

The interviewer asked the officer:

“When you say open fire, what does that mean?”

The officer replied:

“Shooting to kill. This is combat in an urban area, we're in a war zone. The saying was: ‘There’s no such thing there as a person who is uninvolved.’”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley said earlier, Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Defence Minister, echoed that officer’s sentiments just last month, when he said:

“There are no innocent people in the Gaza Strip...Everyone’s connected to Hamas.”

There is plenty more like that. There are similar testimonies describing Operation Cast Lead in 2009, Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014—the repeated bloody episodes that have marked the blockade of the Gaza strip, which has now been going on for more than 10 years.

Again and again, we hear reports of the devastation of life in Gaza, which, in my view, often amounts to war crimes. We are told that such action is legitimate self-defence, but we need to say loudly and clearly that self-defence does not allow free rein to kill, to destroy property and infrastructure, and to effectively enact collective punishment of a people. Avi Dichter, chair of the Knesset’s foreign affairs and defence committee, said that Israel’s security forces

“won’t let anyone put soldiers, and certainly not civilians, in danger”. Then he said:

“The IDF has enough bullets for everyone.”

He said that last Monday, while the death count was still rising.

Again and again, security is linked with deadly, disproportionate attacks on civilians. I want to add my voice to that of my hon. Friend. The Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) when he called for a suspension of the export of arms to Israel. I cannot see that there is any justification for us to continue those exports.

Security was the excuse for Myanmar’s attacks on the Rohingya people. Security is also the excuse for the attacks on the Kurds, who are our allies in the fight against Daesh, and who I feel this Government have abandoned. And, for many years now, security has been used as an excuse for what can only be described as collective punishment in Gaza.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has already said, when the blockade began, Israeli defence officials calculated the bare minimum of food needed to avoid malnutrition in Gaza. Surely that was not necessary for security. As my right hon. Friend also said, 54 Palestinians died last year waiting for travel permits, which they needed to receive life-saving medical care outside the Gaza strip. Surely that was not necessary for security. Now in Gaza, as we have heard, there are about four hours of electricity each day; between 90% and 97% of the water is contaminated, mainly by sewage; food is scarce; 80% of people are dependent on foreign aid; and, for some children, breakfast is a cup of hot water with a sprinkle of salt. Is that what security has to look like?

The people of Gaza have nothing, so they have absolutely nothing to lose. Omar Ghrabieh, a journalist and blogger in the Gaza strip, said in January:

“Despair isn’t even the right word to describe what’s going on here because things are getting worse and worse”.

Many of the protesters knew that they risked their lives by going to the demonstration last Monday, because the IDF had considerably dropped leaflets to tell them so, but many thousands of people protested peacefully anyway. I think that the protesters’ decision to attend a demonstration when they had been told that doing so would put their lives at risk speaks volumes. They had faith in their future as a nation, but they no longer had hope for themselves individually.

I have to tell the Minister, who knows—I hope—that I hold him in really high regard, that we have reached an absurd situation. We have always said that a decision on the status of Jerusalem would be postponed until it could be part of a negotiated peace. Now the city has effectively been recognised as the Israeli capital by the United States, which is arguably the most powerful country in the world. The United States has seemingly made a unilateral decision on behalf of us all.

I do not think that we can allow this reckless US diplomacy, for want of a better word, to represent the international community, because it clearly does not. In the other place, the International Relations Committee
has recommended “serious consideration” of the recognition of the state of Palestine, so I have considered it, and it seems to me that this is the kind of important, pivotal moment when recognising a Palestinian state would do meaningful good.

I do not believe that there has ever been a more urgent need to recognise Palestine. Is there a more opportune moment waiting for us just round the corner? I have been observing and speaking about this situation for years, and a realistic peace process seems to be getting more remote. I honestly think that we need to go towards a shared future together, and so that the people of Gaza can imagine a better future for themselves and their children. I do not believe that prevaricating about when we should do this remains a viable option. The status quo in Gaza is no longer an option. The time is now.

2.37 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I begin by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Last November, I travelled to the west bank as a guest of Medical Aid for Palestinians, which does excellent work not just in the west bank but in Gaza. I am grateful to it, to Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights, Palestine Briefing, and of course the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), for the briefings that they have provided for the debate.

We have the rare privilege of time this afternoon. I do not intend to abuse that, for once, and I will not repeat the excellent speeches that have already been made, not least that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who gave a superb introduction to this subject. I congratulate her on securing this debate from the Chairman of Ways and Means.

I hope that this debate gives the Minister time to answer questions at greater length than is normally possible in Question Time or during statements in the Chamber. I do not want to butter him up, but he has immense knowledge of his brief and thinks about it in a considered way. Let me put it this way: Opposition Members are always very indignant when junior Ministers turn up when Secretaries of State should be there, but I never hear that in the case of the Foreign Office. However, there could be two reasons for that. I will leave it at that.

Rather than going through the facts and figures we have heard—they are important—I will give my impression from my visits to Gaza. I first went nearly 10 years ago with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield. We went through Erez from Israel in 2009. I think we were probably the last parliamentary delegation that was allowed in. A couple of years later, I had an exciting fast drive with the military across Sinai to Rafah with my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and Lord Steel. I wish I had been able to go to Gaza since then. I have been to the west bank several times since, but I do not believe it is possible to go to Gaza now. I think Sinai is too dangerous at the moment. Can the Minister address whether we can get Israel to allow, in addition to the visits it allows from humanitarian organisations, parliamentary delegations to visit?

The visit I made at the beginning of 2009, which was less than three weeks after the conclusion of the first war on Gaza in recent years—Operation Cast Lead—was the most traumatic experience I have had. The only thing I can think of that compares with it is Grenfell last year, and that was not an intentional act and was on a much smaller scale, although it was much closer to home. Some of the things I saw there were utterly horrific and barely describable. I met survivors in families in which 20 or 30 members had been killed. Some had been killed by sniper fire. Others had been killed by more severe weapons of war, such as jets, gunboats and tanks.

What really made an impression on me was visiting hospitals that had been shelled by tanks. We visited industrial estates and villages that had been completely razed to the ground. We saw mosques, other public buildings and the Parliament, which had been deliberately destroyed. I visited a garden in the hospital that had been funded by DFID where phosphorous—illegal weaponry—was still smoking three weeks later. Those are war crimes. They are breaches of international humanitarian law and the Geneva convention, but Israel commits such breaches every day.

In three wars on Gaza—not just Protective Edge, which was the most recent in 2014, but Pillar of Defence in 2012 and Cast Lead—more than 5,000 Palestinians died. Most of them were civilians, and many were children. That is a consequence of waging war on a very densely populated civilian area. Obviously those wars were far more severe than what has happened in recent weeks, but we saw what happened in recent weeks. Often we do not see what happens in Gaza as a result of bombing and shelling, or we can only bear witness to it afterwards. Some 53% of injuries between the end of March and the middle of May were by live fire—the majority. We saw people a long way back from the border being picked off by sniper fire, and weaponry being used that maimed and permanently maimed. That is not accidental; it is a deliberate strategy. Even if one accepted a need for Israel to use force in the circumstances, I do not believe for a moment that that type of force or that type of weaponry or live fire needed to be used. That is what is so outrageous.

According to the Medical Aid for Palestinians briefing, 238 health personnel were injured in that period. Some 38 ambulances were damaged and 16 medical workers were hit by live ammunition. One was killed. That is targeting, as often happens, of medical and relief facilities, which again is illegal. That is the situation we find ourselves in. The counter-briefing about it all being Hamas people and so forth does not explain those facts.

We need to remind ourselves of certain basic facts in relation to Gaza. First, as the UK Government acknowledge, Gaza is still under occupation. Even though there was a withdrawal of Israeli settlers and troops to the border of Gaza, it is, under international law, considered to be under occupation because it is completely constrained.

The point is often made by supporters of the Israeli Government that although Israel withdrew, that did not solve the problem. The motivation for withdrawal, given what has since happened with the wars and blockade, was less to do with the withdrawal of relatively small numbers of settlers—certainly as compared with what has happened in the west bank—than it was about demography. It is about Israel having its cake and...
eating it. As the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, Israel does not want a one-state solution, but it makes a two-state solution impossible, so the compromise is the creation of these Bantustans like Gaza. That is what withdrawal from Gaza is about: it is about isolating almost 2 million Palestinians so that they do not count, and do not raise questions about why they do not get a vote and why a one-state solution is not possible.

I would like to hear from the Minister on some issues, if he has time to address them. The march and the demonstrations were primarily about the right to return. That issue is not often addressed by the British or other Governments because of the other more pressing matters, but it is a real concern. The vast majority of the population of Gaza are refugees from ‘48, or possibly from ‘67 more recently, or from elsewhere. What is our policy on that? It is one of the final status matters that has to be addressed. That is a specific issue that is being raised here. In what Palestinians refer to as Nakba, 700,000-plus people were forced to leave their home or fled in terror. They want to know what the solution is to that issue. It is a perfectly reasonable request to make, but it is one that is not addressed.

The more immediate problem that we often address is the blockade, the imprisonment of 1.8 million people in this open prison, and the act of collective punishment, which is clearly what this is. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) gave the example of the rationing of food, bringing people down to starvation levels to put pressure on the Government. That is a clear indication of that collective punishment. What is the UK Government’s response to that punishment continuing—and accelerating because of the effect on water and sewage systems, and the cumulative effect of this having gone on for a decade or more? What are we doing to help the peace process, and the process of Palestinian unity?

I have no more time for Hamas than anyone else who has spoken. It did win a free and fair election in 2006, but its conduct since then has placed it beyond the pale. There has not been the opportunity to have an election since then, and Israel’s active co-operation is needed for that to happen. Of course the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Hamas and the other parties also need to enable that to happen—that is not impossible with international support—but Israel is the key, as are the attitudes that we and other EU countries take. Elections would be an important step forward—one that we do not hear much about.

Earlier this week, I raised the issue of human rights organisations. In response, the Minister said he thought I had made my mind up on the issue. I referred to the case of Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch in Israel and Palestine, whom I met last year. He is a well respected, hard-working individual in the international human rights community, but he is threatened with deportation. Yesterday, a court granted an injunction to allow him to stay in Israel until proceedings have completed. That is good news, and it is right that we recognise that an Israeli court made that decision, but I do not agree with the Minister that there is nothing the Government can do in such cases. Other Governments have raised concerns about that.

If I have made up my mind about this, it is on the basis of evidence. The organisations that we meet, both here and when we are over there—B’Tselem, Breaking the Silence and Israeli human rights organisations; Palestinian organisations, including al-Haq; and international organisations such as Amnesty International—are constantly under pressure from the Israeli Government and parts of the Israeli establishment in a way that they have not been before. They are made enemies in their own country. We have to support them not just financially, by encouragement, and by meeting them and listening to them, but by taking up their case, because they do extraordinary good work and are instrumental in trying to bring communities together.

I make no apologies for raising the issue that we always raise: recognition, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned. It is difficult to see, given not just the vote in Parliament but the facts on the ground, why the UK Government will not recognise the state of Palestine. The answer given is: “We don’t believe it’s the right time.” I would like the Minister to say why he does not think it is the right time, and what indicators might lead us to suggest that it is the right time.

Settlements are a huge part of the problem, and not just because they are a form of colonisation. With settlements come the whole infrastructure of occupation—the wall, checkpoints and everything like that—which then need security, for the protection of the settlers. I am not talking about boycott, divestment and sanctions. I have never been a particular supporter of BDS because it is a blunt weapon. We should address the specific issues where Israel has got it wrong, and where we have got it wrong. One is on recognition; another is on trading with settlements.

I cannot for the life of me understand why, given that—as we repeat constantly—settlements are illegal under international law, we say that it is a matter of choice for people in the UK to buy settlement goods. Settlement goods should not be available, and British companies that support settlements, financially or otherwise, should not be doing so. Those would be good steps, along with those already mentioned. I cannot better what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield, said about arms, an issue that he has looked into. Where atrocities have been committed—as they are being at the moment—including during the wars on Gaza, we should not have supplied arms to the Israelis. I accept that Israel is an ally and a friendly country to us in many ways, but we have to be tough with our friends sometimes. I cannot see why we continue to do that.

The issue at the bottom of this is always the occupation. This is a 60-year occupation, which is very unusual, even in what is an incredibly dangerous and quite horrific world at the moment, given the many things that are happening. It is a matter of shame to the international community that we have not done more to address it. What causes most difficulty for those of us who advocate for the Palestinians is that there is very little recognition by Government of the inequality of arms. It has to be, “Yes, 5,000 Palestinians have been killed, but some Israelis have been killed as well.” Of course every single death is a tragedy, but I was struck by the column that Gideon Levi wrote in Haaretz this week, in which he posed the question: what would happen if it was the other way around? What would happen if 60 Israelis had been killed while the Palestinians...
were celebrating a music festival and opening an embassy in Ramallah! I think there would have been extraordinary international outcry. I cannot bear the double standard.

There is so much to admire about the state of Israel and everything that it has done in that time, but its treatment of the Palestinians is a stain, and is something that we should not shy away from, but confront. If the Minister were able to put a bit more flesh on the bones of these issues than is normally possible, we would all be very grateful.

2.54 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few brief things in this timely debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing. I remind hon. Members of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—I serve as a member of the advisory board of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, which funded a trip that I made last year to the west bank, along with Medical Aid for Palestinians.

I will not repeat the excellent points that have been made in this afternoon’s debate. Like the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), I want to allow the Minister as much time as possible to respond. For the benefit of the record, I concur with everything that has been said about the excessive use of force in recent weeks. We have seen the tragic results of that, and of the incredible situation of the United States opening its embassy in East Jerusalem.

I regret the United Kingdom’s abstention in the United Nations Human Rights Council vote last week. It is a principle of natural justice that nobody should be a judge in their own cause. Even if we thought that Israel could be relied on to conduct an investigation into what has gone on there in recent weeks, notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary, we should not wish to see that happen, and Israel herself, if she is to respect the norms of international law, should not seek to do so. However, we are where we are.

The Minister put the Government’s position on the record very fully on Monday in answer to an urgent question, but the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) has asked the questions that need to be answered today. What is the view of the United Kingdom Government in relation to the conduct of that Human Rights Council investigation, and what demands will the United Kingdom make of Israel to ensure that there is international and objective input into the investigation that it is to carry out, if that is how it is to be done?

The answers to those questions need to be robust if the position that has been taken by the United Kingdom last week and this week is to have any credibility in the eyes of the international community. Other hon. Members have said that we have a substantial voice on the world’s stage that should be heard and has not been heard, which is a fair comment. That is why it is all the more important that we hear what the United Kingdom is going to do to ensure that it can honour the basis on which it has advanced its position.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith spoke about the position of Omar Shakir, so I do not think that I need to do so, other than simply to say that I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said. It would be good to hear from the Minister today what representations we are making to the Israeli Government, because Omar Shakir’s position is a novel one. This is the first occasion on which Israel has used those deportation powers in relation to somebody who is already resident in Israel in accordance with all Israeli law and immigration regulations.

Over the years, I have worked very closely with different groups in my constituency, as well as those with whom I work here. In Orkney, I have a very active group called Orkney Friends of Palestine. Over the years we have built links with agricultural communities on the west bank. Orkney is a farming community, so we understand the issues that they face. When dealing with something of the nature and scale of the situation facing the people in Gaza, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the enormity of it and to lose sight of the human impact, so the aspect that I want to put to the Minister today is the position of the Gazan fishing industry. I represent Orkney and Shetland, and I am an islander by birth and by choice. One third of Shetland’s economy depends on fishing, so when we consider the position of the Gazan fishing community and industry, we understand just how desperate their situation is, and how the enormous entrepreneurial, self-starting instincts of so many people in Gaza have been constantly thwarted. That is how they become so frustrated and ground down.

Currently, the Israeli Government permits Palestinians to fish up to only six nautical miles from the coast. The Oslo accord says it should be 20 nautical miles. In fact, they have never been allowed to fish beyond 12 nautical miles. B’Tselem reports that the Israeli Government routinely prohibit entry into Gaza of all the normal materials that we would find in every boatyard and every chandler’s shop in Lerwick today. The steel cables, the fibreglass and the spare parts are all denied to the Palestinian fishermen, because, in the view of the Israeli Government, they are dual-use materials.

The scale of oppression is difficult to understand. I ask myself how I would feel if the fishermen of my constituency were denied the opportunity to ply their trade and pursue their lifestyle, because fishing is, of course, more than their occupation—it is a vocation of sorts. On behalf of the Gazan fisherman, I say to the Minister, surely something can be done.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael in the Chair]

3.1 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I assume the change of Chair was a planned changeover and that Sir Henry is not bolting just because I was up next.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate. Without meaning to be flippan, to get a last-minute debate on the afternoon before recess shows commitment, and I commend her for bringing it forward. The importance of the Gaza humanitarian situation is reflected in the turnout here this afternoon. There have been Back-Bench contributions from seven hon. Members and other interventions in support of them.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley set out the problems well and outlined the scale of the violence, commenting on its disproportionality—there has been...
only one Israeli soldier injured, compared with all the deaths and injuries for Gaza’s population. She stated that the resolution that the UK Government refused to back is not biased and, correctly, called on them to make clear what wording would be acceptable. I would like to hear the Minister’s response to that.

The hon. Lady and other hon. Members highlighted the effects of the illegal blockade and the need for the UK Government to commit to OCHA funding. Overall, it was a powerful speech. She was slightly emotional when talking about her visit to the hospital and her encounter there, which is understandable. It shows the importance of parliamentarians being able to make such visits to get first-hand understanding. I echo the call to see what can be done to allow future parliamentary visits to Gaza, which are currently denied to hon. Members. In her closing remarks, the hon. Lady said that if there was no further action, there would be blood on all our hands. That was a powerful way to end her speech.

I commend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) for his work as chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group. It does fantastic work and puts on a lot of events that allow people to find out more information. I wish I did not have so many clashes when those events are on, because they always look valuable. He said that the current situation in Gaza is a nightmare—I think that is the correct word—and that it was predicted in 2012. The World Health Organisation predicted that Gaza would be uninhabitable by 2020. We have now reached that tipping point in living conditions. The hon. Gentleman also highlighted the basic fundamental human right of the right to life, which has been denied to so many people. The recent deaths underpin just how that philosophy has been eroded completely.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech, summing up all the issues that face civilians in Gaza at the moment. The UN reports that 90% of Gaza’s drinking water is not fit for human consumption and that 60% of the population depend on humanitarian aid. Often, issues such as purified water are missed in the grand scheme of things, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is an abdication of Israel’s responsibility? Israel is the occupying force and should be supplying and funding the infrastructure, rather than asking the international community to do so. She also highlighted the possible benefits of the Palestinian Authority, rather than Hamas, regaining control of Gaza. I think we would all agree with that, but equally a change in political leadership would be a silver bullet—far more work needs to be done to end the conflict, although I agree with the philosophy that we need an end to the violence.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) is one of the few parliamentarians who have been lucky enough to visit Gaza. He discussed the observations of Human Rights Watch on the disproportionate use of violence, as well as Hamas’s involvement in the protests. He also highlighted the effects of the blockade on what he called the de-development of Gaza, which I think is a fair comment, and the issue of exit permits. There is real suffering for people who need urgent healthcare; they are being denied their right to that healthcare and some are dying as a consequence. We really need to appreciate the gravity of the situation for so many of the population.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) highlighted the work of Breaking the Silence and the testimony of a former soldier. I too pay tribute to that organisation for its work. I have met its representatives, and it was a real eye-opener for me; its books and publications would bring tears to the eye. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her speech, and I agree that some of the recent actions should be called war crimes. That is why we need a robust, independent inquiry. There is a general lack of hope for individuals living in Gaza, which exacerbates the current situation.

I agree with the hon. Lady’s call on the need to recognise Palestine. It is time that the UK Government stepped up to the plate on that.

The hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) made a balanced speech, although I think she sometimes came at it from the wrong perspective. She highlighted the fact that Israel has presented a raft of infrastructure projects for the international community to fund. Frankly, that is an abdication of Israel’s responsibility. Israel is the occupying force and should be supplying and funding the infrastructure, rather than asking the international community to do so. She also highlighted the possible benefits of the Palestinian Authority, rather than Hamas, regaining control of Gaza. I think we would all agree with that, but equally a change in political leadership would be a silver bullet—far more work needs to be done to end the conflict, although I agree with the philosophy that we need an end to the violence.

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I agree with the hon. Lady’s call on the need to recognise Palestine. It is time that the UK Government stepped up to the plate on that.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has also been lucky enough to visit Gaza. He highlighted just how traumatic that visit was, which again underlines the value of parliamentarians being able to visit and see things at first hand, explain their observations to other people, get the wider population to understand, and then put pressure on the Government. He asked the Minister about the UK Government’s policy on the right to return—again, it will be good to hear the ministerial response—and why the Government continue to say that this is not the time to recognise Palestine. So what are the reasons? We really need to understand them.
The final Back-Bench contribution came from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He talked about the inquiry and used the phrase: “Nobody should be a judge in their own cause”, which underlines the concerns that hon. Members have about how the inquiry will go forward. He also spoke about the persecution of fishermen and was able to relate to the impact it would have on his community if there were similar persecution on the fishermen there.

I have also visited the west bank—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—and I have seen at first hand the controls on the Palestinian population and the security walls and checkpoints. I have visited Bedouin villages where demolitions have occurred and further demolitions are continually threatened. I have seen how natural assets are misappropriated for the use of new settlements to the detriment of the indigenous population. I have visited the village of Khan al-Ahmar, where an aid-built school is constantly under the threat of demolition. That gave me a flavour of what life is like for some Palestinians, but it did not even come close to allowing me to have an understanding of what life is like in Gaza. Obviously, I will not be able to visit Gaza unless the situation changes.

The same Israeli Government tactics mean that people are hemmed in by security barriers and assets are controlled by the Israeli Government. There are fuel and power shortages, and as other hon. Members have said, water plants are unable to operate around the clock and 96% of groundwater is unfit for human consumption. The sewage treatment plants are not operating, 80% of the shoreline is polluted, and there is pressure on hospitals. It really is no wonder that Gaza is labelled an open-air prison. Just recently, the UN Human Rights Commissioner stated that 1.9 million people are imprisoned in Gaza “from birth to death in a poisonous favela”, which really underlines what international organisations think.

As others have said, Gaza has the highest unemployment rate in the world, estimated at 44%, and 80% for women. UNICEF estimates that nearly 80% of the population are dependent on international aid. Is it any wonder that there are protests when people live like that? Save the Children analysis has revealed that almost 8,000 people, including 700 children, have been injured in protests since 30 March. More than 250 children in Gaza have been shot with live ammunition, and we have heard that there have been approximately 60 deaths. Clearly, the recent opening of the moved US embassy in Jerusalem did nothing but inflame matters. Again, that was highlighted by the right hon. Member for East Ham.

Israeli campaigners highlight how the settlers have been removed from Gaza and that Gaza is therefore under the control of Palestinians, as though that has been a good move. However, that makes it easier for the Israeli Government to control the Gazan population. People bristle at the term “apartheid”, but if the Gazan population is completely hemmed in, is that not apartheid?

I have also visited the city of Hebron, including an area of the city that Palestinians are not allowed to enter. There are checkpoints that they have no option but to enter. Again, that can only be apartheid. We need to understand that and not shy away from using such language.

On Thursday 17 May, the Israeli ambassador to the UK held a meeting with the Scottish Government’s External Affairs Secretary, Fiona Hyslop. She delivered a forceful message on behalf of the Scottish Government that the 50 years of Palestinian oppression, the illegal occupation of the west bank, the illegal expansion of settlements and the illegal siege of Gaza must end, and that a two-state solution must be found to bring peace in the region. The Scottish National party also supports the UN Secretary-General’s call for independent investigations to be carried out following the recent conflict—a call that has been widely backed by hon. Members in today’s debate.

We need the UK Government to step up to the plate. It was shocking that they did not vote for an independent investigation into the killings by the IDF. The UK Government have so far refused to back calls that trade with the illegal settlements should be halted. Such trade clearly gives legitimacy to the settlements, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith identified. The UK Government have also refused to demand compensation for aid-funded structures that have been demolished. They call for an easing of the blockade rather than a proper public statement that the blockade can no longer be seen as illegal and should be lifted. As we have heard, they continue to sell arms to Israel, which causes concerns for hon. Members, and many of my constituents have contacted me on that matter.

Although the UK Government maintain support for a two-state solution, we seem to be further away from that than ever, and I echo the calls that other hon. Members have made: it is time for the UK Government to formally recognise Palestine if we are to move the situation forward.

The west bank is in danger of being split in two, and as we know, Gaza is already completely separated from the west bank. In practical terms, it seems almost inconceivable that two states will be created—the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) expressed that concern in an intervention.

We need to see clearer international action to resolve the Gaza situation and the wider geopolitics of Israel. I repeat my phrase: the UK Government need to step up to the plate.

3.16 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David, as well as that of Sir Henry, who has now left the Chamber. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing the debate and on introducing it so passionately and clearly. She made it clear that the situation for 1.8 million Gazans is inhumane, and one cannot but agree. She also pointed out our Government’s weak response to the bloodshed on the Gaza border. I know the Minister will address those points in his response. My hon. Friend said that Israel has the right to defend itself, and that the role of Hamas has not helped the situation, although the UK Government’s abstention on the Human Rights Council resolution was, in her words, “disgraceful”.

My hon. Friend drew our attention to the fact that the Israeli ambassador, Mark Regev, described the Israeli response last week as “surgical”, which is appalling, especially coming from a man who is so well respected in the diplomatic community. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) intervened to reaffirm his
commitment to a two-state solution as the only way forward to peace, and he asked my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, to affirm hers, which she duly did, of course.

The only Conservative Member present, the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is not in his place right now, said that the two-state solution might be becoming increasingly difficult to achieve, and asked whether it would be possible to accept a one-state solution. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, said no, and that a two-two state solution was the only way forward for peace, which is what the Labour party completely supports.

We had a further intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who pointed out the mental health crisis in Gaza as well as the physical health crisis. We often forget that mental illness can be as debilitating as physical illness or injury if not more so. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) asked about the illegal blockade of goods going into Gaza. There is no doubt that there is a massive crisis in healthcare on the Gaza strip, with no supplies of basic dressings or medication, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, pointed out. There are serious water shortages, increasing pollution of that water, and diminishing water tables. My hon. Friend said that action by the United Kingdom and the international community would help to diminish the ability of Hamas to recruit, and she is absolutely correct.

We next heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), whose record on standing up for the rights of Palestinians is as exemplary as it is long. I have known him for more than 40 years, and even as a student he was a champion of the rights and cause of Palestine. I remember clearly the poster on his student room wall: a reproduction of an airmail letter that said “Palestine: return to sender—no such address.” He asked for the UK Government’s view on a further intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—and I were in Israel and the occupied territories six months ago. Avi Gabbay has suggested economic aid from Israel and its Arab neighbours, which could be extremely positive but is of course being thwarted by the appalling Government of Binyamin Netanyahu. The idea of a sea port is such an obvious one.

It could solve not just the economic problems of Gaza but the security issues. Why can that not be created, if not by Israel then by her Arab neighbours and the international community, supported by the United Kingdom?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North also said that of course Palestinian Authority control of Gaza must be reinstated. One can only agree with that sentiment; it would be good—although, of course, as other hon. Members have pointed out, Hamas was actually elected in the last elections to be held, which were more than 10 years ago. My hon. Friend also commended Egypt for its efforts. She said that the root of Gaza’s problems lies in the brutal rule of Hamas there, and there is no doubt about that.

My hon. Friend mentioned the kibbutz of Nir Oz, which I had the privilege of visiting in November with the shadow Foreign Secretary. I was struck not only by its nearness to Khan Yunis across the Gaza strip—you could see it from the kibbutz—but by the stories that we were told about mortar bomb attacks and shelling from Gaza, and the lack of anger from Nir Oz residents. Of course they were upset and did not want to live under gunfire and shelling—and people in a nearby kibbutz had been killed by shelling. However, one resident told me he could understand the anger and frustration of Gazans, and why they were so angry that they wanted to attack anyone in Israel. He said something had to be done to relieve the appalling plight of those living in Gaza, and to allow them to live as the residents of Nir Oz could live. That was extraordinary, because there was no anger, or desire to kill Gazans or react to the shelling or violence. There was simply a view that it would be possible to live in peace if the circumstances were right and the Government did something more positive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has left his place, but he has a strong record of standing up for the cause of the Palestinian people. He talked about the Gaza blockade having begun long before Hamas gained power in the Gaza strip, and said Gaza was a vast open prison, hermetically sealed by Egypt and Israel. He said that there had not been a single rocket fired from Gaza in the past two months—but of course that rather covers up the fact that there have been many rockets in the past 10 years.

It was 10 years ago, in fact, that I had the privilege of visiting Gaza, when it was still possible for parliamentarians to go there, and I was struck by the appalling damage that Operation Cast Lead had done—supposedly striking individual buildings without damaging hospitals, although that was actually far from the case. We saw damage to residential blocks and two medical facilities, and the way in which food aid has to be handed out in an area that is very fertile. If they were allowed to, people there could grow their own food quite easily. That was being stopped by the political situation. We also saw damage to the British war cemetery, which is carefully managed by Gazans and kept as it should be. My hon. Friend condemned, as we all do, the use of live ammunition, which should be a last resort but of course was used to pick off demonstrators, whether they were attacking the fence or running away from it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) is another colleague and friend who has always stood up for peace and the rights of the
Palestinian people. He mentioned the concern of his constituents, from whom he has had 800 messages since Monday. I have had a few, but not quite that many. He quoted Human Rights Watch’s description of Israel’s response as “disproportionate and illegal”—a theme echoed by almost every speaker this afternoon. He also mentioned the culpability of Hamas. Human Rights Watch has said that it has certainly supported protests, and that criticism of Hamas can be met with arrest and torture. My hon. Friend mentioned high unemployment, which must be a contributory factor in people’s anger and frustration, living in that prison. He also mentioned the plummeting water quality.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made a passionate, emotional and extremely articulate speech. She always speaks very well. She said that Monday 14 May was a dark day in Jerusalem, with the US embassy opening to great celebration and fanfare, while 60 protesters had died from live fire in Gaza an hour down the coast. She condemned Hamas and the waving of swastikas, the spreading of lies, and the manipulation of protestors, but she noted that the response of the Israeli Government was disproportionate—that word again. She quoted an Israeli commentator saying that Gaza is a war zone and shooting to kill is justifiable in the circumstances. That is shocking and appalling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) was with me and the shadow Foreign Secretary in November in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. He has long been a champion of the cause of the Palestinian people. He spoke of the devastation caused by Israel during three wars in Gaza, in which more than 5,000 people died, mostly civilians and children. We have seen clearly on the news the death, destruction, injuries and terrible bloodshed caused by the Israel Defence Forces shooting directly at protestors on the grounds that they were terrorists, and were all Hamas members. If we do not believe most of Hamas’s propaganda, why do we believe the statement that virtually all the protestors killed were Hamas members? I do not believe a word of that, either, frankly.

The majority of injuries in recent unrest were caused by live fire, but as my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary pointed out in column 139 of Hansard when asking an urgent question on 15 May, those live fire rounds are designed to destroy every organ of the human body, or of any organism or creature that might have the misfortune to be hit by one of those bullets. Why do the IDF use such lethal rounds, when clearly non-lethal crowd-control means could have been used at the Gaza border to repel those trying to break the fence?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith pointed out the deliberate targeting of 38 ambulances, which were damaged by the IDF. Medical relief facilities were also deliberately targeted. I saw that for myself when I was there 10 years ago with other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. My hon. Friend talked about recognition of the state of Palestine, as did many other hon. Members. That is Labour party policy; if elected, Labour will recognise the state of Palestine immediately. I wish that the Israeli Government would do the same. It would go a long way towards a two-state peaceful solution in the region. My question to the Minister is why the Government do not recognise Palestine right now. If not now, when?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said something else very important. This debate is often polarised; people on either side are unable to see both sides at the same time, even if they have a very strong view of violence, bloodshed, cruelty and the appalling way in which people treat each other. He said something important: “There is so much to admire about the state of Israel”—I repeat, “so much to admire” —I passionately agree with that. I wanted to repeat it because he is rightly known for championing the cause of the Palestinian people, but he says something like that about Israel. He also said that Gaza is a stain on Israel, and I cannot but agree with that, too.

Finally, we heard from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I have heard him speak twice in 24 hours—yesterday it was on the subject of Qatar and UK relations with it. He always speaks with great clarity, and he is a very accomplished Member of this House. He concurred with everything that had been said this afternoon. He, too, was very concerned about the United Kingdom’s abstention last week on the issue of an inquiry by the Human Rights Council. He, too, said something important, which was that, as we all know, the United Kingdom has “a substantial voice on the world’s stage”, but it is not being heard on the violence in Gaza. What more can we do to ensure that it is?

To be clear, in such a critical but apparently intractable situation, it is more incumbent than ever on the global community, and not just the United Kingdom Government, to act to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the residents of Gaza. It is therefore too appalling for words that the Trump Administration have chosen this critical moment to halve their funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, as so many have mentioned this afternoon.

For almost 70 years, UNRWA has helped hundreds of thousands of Gaza residents and millions more Palestinians across the region with their essential humanitarian needs. Its budget last year was $760 million and, as a direct result of its work, tens of thousands of children in Gaza received schooling, and tens of thousands of their parents received healthcare that would otherwise not be available to them. Goodness knows that if it was not available, there would be nothing whatever.

This year, however, UNRWA must deal with the fact that Donald Trump has cut its funding by $65 million, because—I quote his tweet—“we pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect”.

In January in Davos he went further, saying that the money had been cut as a direct result of the Palestinian authorities’ refusal to meet Mike Pence, and that he considered the money to be “on the table” now, as a negotiating chip to force the Palestinians to accept the mythical US peace plan. So young children in Gaza are being denied education and medicine, until the Palestinian authorities start showing Donald Trump some “appreciation or respect”. If it was not so cruel, it would be laughable.

Other countries, including most recently Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have tried to plug the gap in UNRWA’s funding, but when all they can offer are one-off contributions rather than annual additions, the funding crisis is only delayed rather than stopped. That is why we have called on the Government to take the lead on a longer-term solution, by initiating a
special global funding conference, such as those held in response to humanitarian emergencies, the difference in this case being that we must not wait for the emergency to strike before acting—it has already struck and is present every single day.

My fear, however, is that the Government are unwilling to act—though I hope they are not. Why? Because their friend President Trump will say: “What are you doing? I’m punishing them, and you’re letting them off the hook. I’m trying to blackmail them into accepting my peace plan, and you’re removing my leverage.” If that is the argument, however, I respectfully say to the Minister that they should not just differ in private; the Government must have the courage to differ in public, and to tell President Trump that he is wrong.

This is no time for passivity. As we have heard throughout the debate, Gaza cannot afford to wait. There is a massive opportunity for someone to step into the global leadership gap that Donald Trump’s America has left in Palestine. I urge the British Government to listen to what they have heard today, and urgently fill that gap.

3.34 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, as it was to serve under Sir Henry’s earlier.

With the rare luxury of a little extra time to respond to the debate, I shall do my best to do so. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on securing it, and I thank her for speaking as ably as she did. I also thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his excellent summary of the debate so far. We have become a bit of a double act, in which the hon. Gentleman does that—he does it so well—and I then do not have to spend half of the 10 minutes that I normally get to respond to a debate covering it, which means that I am left with the time that I need. In this case the time did not matter, and as he went through the debate he stole a number of my best lines—I would have drawn attention to a number of the same things as he did.

Before I turn to the script and before my officials worry too much, let me say a little off script and respond in the tone that has been used in the debate, because that is important. First and foremost, I would like anyone interested in the subject to read this debate. I do not agree with every word that has been said—I can make that clear without picking out the individual points in question, although people may understand which they are, and I shall cover quite a lot of them in my response—but I want to say this: I know well most of the Members who spoke, and I have known many of them for a number of years. They are not in this Chamber last thing on a Thursday afternoon just before the recess as a mouthpiece for anything; they are here because that is important. A few hon. Members may understand the complexities.

As the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed out, quite a number of colleagues who have strong positions, particularly in support of Palestinians, made very strong remarks about Hamas, and about recognising the good things in Israel. Those points are not always heard. As I have mentioned before, for instance in responding to the urgent question this week, the issue has become incredibly binary. I know what Members who have spoken in the debate will get on Twitter and Facebook tonight, because I get it as well. There is no acceptance on one side or the other of anything that remotely reflects the complexities and difficulties that have to be faced. All hon. Members who have spoken will receive something tonight from someone who will be bitter and abusive about something said in the debate that they have picked up on one way or the other. Anyone who cares to read the debate and wants to go down that line, however, should know the sort of Member involved—they are people who care about all this.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) was in a relatively lonely position in putting her case today, but she mentioned things that needed to be said, and other hon. Members picked up on them. The little bit of extra time enabled colleagues to go a little wider in their remarks that usual, which I feel was necessary in the circumstances. We have to deal with the specifics of what happened recently and the specifics of the Gaza humanitarian crisis, but we cannot do that without understanding the wider issue.

Let me pick out a couple of other points made in the debate. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I spoke together in the holocaust debate not long ago; we spoke about Auschwitz. I understand the deep feelings that she has about both sides of this issue. She spoke about hope and the absence of hope, and for me that lies at the heart of everything. I have campaigned for years for an end to all this, as colleagues know. Responsibility for the failure to find the answer to the middle east peace process is shared by so many. We can point to no one group and say, “They, and they alone, are responsible.” But the collective failure over years has left people wondering where their hope will come from.

On my last visit to the west bank, I talked to the Palestinian leadership. After years of working on the basis of going for statehood, the concern is what their process will be if that does not happen. Who do they talk to then? How do we move forward? In Gaza, the hopelessness caused by a combination of governance by Hamas and the pressures put upon the area from Israel has left a miserable situation where so many people are dependent on humanitarian access—the smell of the sea and all that sort of thing.

There are things we do not talk a lot about. We do not much talk about the difficulties and failures of Palestinian political reconciliation, or the lack of democratic accountability. We do not talk much about incitement to terror and the commemoration of those who have committed acts of quite serious atrocity on others. That is because we cannot cover everything, but it is also a part of the mindset that has led to this binary situation where neither one side nor the other can move.

Israel sees everything in Gaza as a potential security threat. To respond to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), it sees the waters as a place from which attacks can be launched—because they were. It sees approaches to the border fence as a potential for attack—because they were. There is a strong sense from those in leadership in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that security therefore trumps everything else.

Of course, there is a point beyond which it cannot go. I have made the point on behalf of the Government that defence and security are about more than just...
having more weapons than your opponent. Ultimately, the security that we need is provided because of the relationship we have with our friends and neighbours. That is not in place in the circumstances we are discussing. Those are the fundamentals of the issue.

Rather than digress further, I will come to some of the main points and perhaps to some questions that were asked. That context is really important, because when this House discusses this issue, there is a shortage of time and we just have sharp questions, and people can get the view that we are part of the binary discussion and that colleagues have narrow views. They do not; they understand the situation, and I am appreciative of being able to respond.

The situation in Gaza is deeply troubling. The loss of life and injuries through violence at the border are tragic. I am grateful to Members for their concern and for the many excellent suggestions made today about how international partners might alleviate the situation. Both sides must urgently prioritise steps to resolve the situation in Gaza. We must not let those events reinforce violence further, but we ensure that, at last, they signal a new time for leadership, negotiation and peace, because we should not go through this again.

We have been in close contact with international partners to monitor the humanitarian situation in Gaza. In relation to the immediate issue, I am in urgent consultation with the International Committee of the Red Cross to support its appeal. A contribution to the appeal will address urgent needs in Gaza’s health system. Some 11 hospitals need support to cope with increased need for surgery, through the provision of materials including surgical equipment, drugs and disposables, wound-dressing kits and assistive devices.

The ICRC appeal will also help in the evacuation of patients requiring medical care that is not available in Gaza and physical rehabilitation services for some 4,000 persons with physical disabilities. It will provide fuel and spare parts so that the 11 hospitals can keep functioning. I am in urgent contact with the ICRC about what we can do to support that.

We are all aware of the situation, but I want to say a little more about what we are trying to do. The UK has supported up to 1 million people by addressing critical needs through UNICEF and a different situation in Gaza.

For the humanitarian funding, it is incumbent on all parties to ensure justice and for both Palestinians and Israelis, they understand the situation, and I am appreciative of being able to respond.

On the political front, it is vital that all parties urgently work together to unblock the barriers to medical care and access in Gaza. Besides providing impartial humanitarian funding, it is incumbent on all parties to redouble political efforts to realise a two-state solution, to ensure justice and for both Palestinians and Israelis, as so many colleagues have spoken of today. As right hon. and hon. Members rightly understand, the UK’s long-standing position is that a negotiated two-state solution is needed, with Jerusalem as the shared capital.

Before I get into further areas where we may not agree with one another, let me touch on the recognition of the state of Palestine. The UK keeps that possibility very flexible, because we can never know the most appropriate time to do it. The time is not now. It is easy to say that we are always waiting for something else, but the possibility of the United States’ envoys coming up with their proposals provides a target for all of us at the moment to make progress in the middle east peace process.

The recognition of the state of Palestine would be an important issue and a symbolic gesture for the United Kingdom, but it is important for it to be more than symbolic—it must go along with other steps taken by the Palestinian leadership and by the state of Israel to cement Palestine’s position. Otherwise, I say in fairness to all colleagues present that it could just be accepted, forgotten and moved on from, and that could become a further barrier for those who are looking for states to take one side or the other.

We all know what the reaction has been to the United States’ decision on Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority said, “Well, that’s it. The Americans have changed their position. It is clear that they cannot be an honest broker. They have made this decision.” I am not willing, and I do not think the Government are willing, to risk the possibility of such an important step as the recognition of the state of Palestine, which we want to take, being seen in such a way. That is why it is important to make it clear that the decision can be made, and that it is not dependent on anyone’s veto or on any set of circumstances beyond those that we think will be most conducive to peace. At the moment, the distance between the parties is so wide that it would not be the most effective use of such an important step, but the United Kingdom keeps it under active consideration. That is where we are with that.

Louise Haigh: I assume the Minister is not equating the US’s decision to move its embassy with the UK’s potential decision to recognise the state of Palestine. Does he accept that Palestine feels abandoned by the international community and by a country that, wrongly, it felt it could rely on for support? It would be more than purely symbolic for the UK to come forward and recognise the state now; it would be an important move to rebuild the peace process.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady is right that I am not equating the two at all. The United Kingdom opposed the United States’ decision to move its embassy because we were concerned, first, that it broke an international convention and a UN resolution on the status of Jerusalem.
and, secondly, that it indicated a move by the United States that made its position more difficult as an important interlocutor in this difficult situation. That is my point—the reaction to it made that more difficult. The two are not comparable, and of course the UK could recognise the state of Palestine at any time. Sadly, unless that were grounded in something meaningful for the process, it might be just symbolic, and is very important that it should not be. I fully accept that recognition is the Opposition's policy. It is not ours, for the reason I have given. We will not change that this afternoon, but we still want—and will be able—to use recognition at the time when we think it is most effective. That remains our policy.

The situation in Gaza is complex, and the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas make the situation extremely difficult. We recognise Israel's legitimate security concerns and urge Hamas to renounce violence and move towards the Quartet principles long needed for peace. I did not hear any suggestion to the contrary from any colleague who spoke, whatever their position. We reiterate our support for the Egyptian-led reconciliation process and the return of the Palestinian Authority to full administration of the Gaza strip, because that causes practical issues in Gaza. That is as important as a number of the other things we have spoken about.

The UK continues fully to support the need for an independent investigation into the Gaza protests and the response to them, as I have made clear. I will go into a little more detail about that to answer colleagues' questions, and I am happy to take further questions. We are concerned about the high number of deaths and casualties, and about the volume of live fire used. The Foreign Secretary, the Human Rights Minister and I have raised the issue of force with Israeli authorities. The Foreign Secretary spoke to President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16 May and encouraged them to call for calm and work to de-escalate the situation. I spoke to the Israeli ambassador to the UK on 17 May and to Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Hovlovich on 13 May, urging restraint and a reduction in the use of live fire.

There is a need to establish the facts, including why such a volume of live fire has been used and the role that Hamas has played. That is why we support an independent and transparent investigation. Everyone has seen different things—clearly, there are questions to answer on both sides about how this came about, and colleagues raised a number of them.

On the independent investigation, during the UN Human Rights Council session last Friday we abstained on calls for a commission of inquiry into recent violence. The substance of the resolution was not impartial and balanced. We could not support an investigation that refused explicitly to examine the action of non-state actors such as Hamas. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley said, and her reading of the resolution is the same as mine, but it is notable that the Human Rights Council in particular loses no opportunity to name Israel—it does so on every single occasion, including in the notorious item 7. It would not have been difficult to name Hamas, but the Council does not and will not. The possibility of the council conducting an inquiry that has acceptance where it needs acceptance is genuinely limited.

We continue fully to support the need for an independent and transparent investigation into recent events. We call directly on Israel to carry out a transparent inquiry into the IDF’s conduct at the border fence, and to demonstrate how it will achieve a sufficient level of independence. We believe that investigation should include international members, and we urge that its findings be made public and, if wrongdoing is found, those responsible be held to account. We joined European allies—Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia—in our position. I understand why we have been picked out, but 14 states in all said, “Look, this isn’t the right way to go.” We regret that the substance of the resolution was as it was, but what is important now is that the inquiry that states want to see is carried out.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others asked, “Why should Israel do this?” Israel should do this because the first responsibility for such an incident usually lies with the state party itself, as has happened with inquiries in the United Kingdom. I made the point in the House—I think others have made it, too—that the reality is that if the Israeli authorities did this alone, they would be very unlikely to convince international parties. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made reference to a court case just the other day, where the Israeli Supreme Court will hold against the Israeli Government. So Israel does have a structure, an investigative system and the rule of law, but in circumstances such as these it is difficult to imagine that, without some independent element, people who have seen what they have seen on the television and in film will feel there has been an adequate response.

It is essential that all aspects are covered. There are real issues about being able to investigate in Gaza and to talk to those connected with Hamas to see what might be revealed. Again, we cannot gloss over that. The hon. Member for Leeds North East made the point that Hamas claimed that a number of its “operatives” were involved. That may well be the case—we do not know. Hamas is under a lot of pressure in Gaza for what happened. Many people in Gaza are deeply distressed by the event and feel they might in some way have been used in all this. Hamas may have its own reasons for putting forward the claim that many of its operatives were involved. I do not know the answer to that question—none of us does. It is important to ensure that the investigation can cover both sides, but the need for Israel, in the first place, to accept a degree of responsibility for examining what happened and to recognise that an independent element will bolster the international community’s confidence in such an inquiry seems to me to be self-evident and very important.

Louise Haigh: Can I just seek some clarification? Do the Government not support the Human Rights Council undertaking an independent investigation, because of some of the concerns the Minister has just outlined, or do they not support the resolution that was drafted by the Human Rights Council? If it is the latter, will the Government work with the other countries that abstained, which he mentioned, to draft a new resolution and ensure that a truly independent investigation can go forward?

Alistair Burt: Our concern was about the resolution itself. We worked with other parties to see whether we could get a resolution that would be acceptable. I genuinely
do not know whether it is possible to reopen that, because a decision seems to have been taken. If people were going to change the resolution, it would have been changed at the time.

Let me say this about what is happening now. The UK is not required formally to take any further action or participation in the HRC-mandated inquiry until the final report is published, but as supporters of commissions of inquiry in general, we will encourage parties to engage constructively with the HRC and its mechanisms. At the same time, we will work to ensure that the commission of inquiry is as independent, transparent and balanced as possible in its approach.

Rachael Maskell: I really appreciate the Minister’s giving way on this point. We are in a really imperfect situation, and I think we all recognise that it will be impossible for all parties to have complete buy-in to any investigation. However, the investigation that is on the table is the closest we can currently get to an independent investigation. However, the investigation that is on the table is the closest we can currently get to an independent investigation, so surely we should give it more support. Although Israel can carry out its own investigation and that, too, should be considered at its conclusion, this independent investigation certainly requires the UK’s support at this time.

Alistair Burt: Well, I have said what I have said. We will encourage parties to engage, but we did not support the resolution, for the reasons I have given. As I said, the HRC’s relationship with Israel over the years makes it difficult for it to claim to be an independent sponsor. I understand that other nations do not see it that way, but if we want to get to the bottom of this situation, as in any inquiry, we need as much buy-in from as many of the parties as possible. If we know right from the beginning that we will not get that, it will be a false trail in the first place. As the hon. Lady says, there is nothing else there at present. Presumably, that is why the HRC has taken the line that it has taken. We disagree with it, but rather than leave it completely, we want to do exactly as we have indicated.

We have taken this issue directly to the Israeli authorities—that was one of the questions raised—and we will continue to do so. We will wait to see what the response is and what Israel has planned. I would be extremely surprised if Israel did not want to take matters forward in some way, but we will need to make those judgments as they come along. However, just because something imperfect is the only thing in town, that is no reason necessarily to back it if it will not work practically. That is why we have taken the view on the inquiry that we have.

Let me turn to Gaza. The restrictions imposed on movement and access to Gaza contribute significantly to the pressures that the Gazan people face. One of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Hammersmith was about what I thought about the demonstrations. I can only go off what we have—the diplomatic intelligence and everything that we get—and my sense is that it is a combination of those factors that colleagues have brought out. There is an inevitable frustration in Gaza, typified by so many of those comments, but there is a practical and realistic recognition of the politics of the situation and the dreadful combination of what happened last week, together with other events taking place elsewhere.

Colleagues have already spoken of the political incitement that was given during that time. My sense is that it is a terrible mixture of those things, and ultimately the only resolution of that is to take away all the seeds of such frustration. That can be done only with developments in Gaza as a first and urgent step, followed by the political process.

Stephen Timms: I appreciate the thoughtful way in which the Minister is answering the debate. I do not think he has yet addressed the question I asked about the United Nations Occupied Palestinian Territories humanitarian fund, which was supported by the British Government last year. Will he give us some hope that the Government will support that fund this year as well?

Alistair Burt: As I said to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley, we responded to an appeal in relation to Gaza at the end of last year—I think that was with £1.9 million. We have no current plans to do so, but we are reviewing all our possibilities in support of Gaza. I indicated what we are doing at this moment in relation to the ICRC. Just because nothing is immediately on the table, that does not mean that it will not happen. I will go on to talk about what we hope to do in Gaza and open that up a little.

We note Israel’s recent efforts to ensure the delivery of goods to Gaza, despite the serious damage done at the Kerem Shalom crossing by protestors during recent weeks. We will continue to work hard with Israel for an increase in the entry of goods to Gaza to stimulate economic activity.

The Gazan health sector is of course under immense strain. As I mentioned earlier, medical facilities are already stretched by the long-standing shortages of medical, electricity and fuel supplies. Delays in approvals for medical referrals and difficulty in reaching facilities mean that people have to wait a long time for medical treatment. Do we make representations on that? Yes, we do. Like other colleagues here, I find it difficult to see how cancer patients can be any risk to those looking after border controls and the like. We do indeed make representations where we can on that. While we always recognise that there are those who will seek to exploit anything, we would want to see the discretion that we would expect, which is used by Israel in a number of cases, extended to all those genuine medical cases.

The tragic events during the recent protests at the Gaza border have exacerbated the chronic strain on the health system. Emergency services are overwhelmed and overstretched, and the WHO is calling for essential drugs, medical disposables and medical kits for surgery and trauma. The ICRC recently stated that the health system is close to collapse, which is why we are in urgent consultation with it at this moment.

We welcome the decision by the Palestinian Authority to provide critical medical supplies and doctors to Gaza. There is also a desperate ongoing need for access to clean water. As I mentioned earlier, the UK is supporting approximately 1 million Gazans through support to UNICEF’s work to provide clean water and rehabilitate sanitation facilities, helping to stop the spread of disease.

We are also a long-term supporter of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees, which provides basic health and education services to 1.3 million people in Gaza, as well as over 800,000 refugees in the west bank. The United States is responsible for its own policy, but the UK will deliver its next round of financial support earlier than originally planned to help meet the
[Alistair Burt]

growing needs of Palestinian refugees across the region. We remain keen to support UNRWA in its work. We are one of the top five UNRWA donors, and we remain keen to ensure that all donor partners recognise the part it plays, and to help and assist in dealing with any queries or concerns that others may have.

News of Egypt opening the Rafah crossing for Ramadan is encouraging, and we urge Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority to work together to find a resolution to the situation in Gaza. The UK will continue to work with the UN special representative of the Secretary-General to facilitate that.

In connection with that, Nikolai Mladenov, the special representative, presented to the UN Security Council yesterday and addressed the situation in Gaza. He brought forward commitments, including on the need to advance urgent infrastructure and economic development projects, to improve access and movement, and to support the Egyptian-led reconciliation process. In particular, he spoke about his aim to fast-track the delivery of priority projects agreed over the past two years by the ad hoc liaison committee, such as the Gaza central desalination programme, the implementation of the Red sea-Dead sea agreement to provide clean water to Gaza, support on sewage treatment, and the 161 line for better electricity supply. As he noted, failure to implement during the next six to 12 months some of the achievable projects already approved by the relevant stakeholders would amplify the humanitarian crisis.

We stand ready to support the areas of work that Mr Mladenov and the UN have identified. We also support him in an engagement and co-ordination role, working with the Palestinian Authority, Israel and Egypt to overcome any political, administrative and logistical blockages that may emerge. That work will help to improve the humanitarian situation, stimulate economic activity and ensure a long-term future for Gaza.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) asked about the Quartet proposals. I met John Clarke, the economic director of the Quartet, about two weeks ago, when we discussed some of the ongoing work, and I indicated the United Kingdom’s support. We are planning to upscale our support for the economic development of Gaza in order to increase trade and job creation, enable greater movement and access for people and goods, and enhance the supply of electricity and water.

Mr Carmichael: The point I must put to the Minister is not directly relevant to Gaza but has a bearing on the current climate there. As we have debated, the Israeli High Court has handed down the judgment of Justice Solberg, rejecting a petition against the demolition of the community and school at Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin community of 100 souls on the west bank. Obviously, that entitles the state to demolish the community, but it does not require it. Is this not an opportunity for the Israeli Government, as the occupying force in the west bank, to demonstrate a bit of good will, which might ease the tensions elsewhere in Palestine?

Alistair Burt: I endorse the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. I have been to Khan al-Ahmar, as colleagues know, and as a number of colleagues have. We disagree with the possible demolition. We will continue to make representations to Israel on our sense of the damage to the community, and because this is something that would demonstrate renewed commitment to resolving issues by looking to find a pathway forward together, rather than taking action that might be legally possible but not seemingly appropriate. The UK maintains its position on demolitions and settlements as set out before.

Andy Slaughter: I do not know when the Minister was last in Gaza or if he plans to go again—I know that successive consul-generals from Jerusalem go there regularly—but will he or his Department make representations to the Government of Israel that Back-Bench Members of Parliament from any party should be allowed to travel to Gaza?

Alistair Burt: Yes, we will. Ultimately, it is a decision for the state of Israel to take, even in relation to my trips. If I seek to go, they have to be sure of the circumstances and everything else. I would not want to take that away, but I always feel that contact is vital, helpful and necessary, and of course I would encourage it.

The UK is committed to addressing the underlying cause of humanitarian strife in Gaza—it is so pertinent to what we have been discussing—by increasing our support for economic development. The Palestinian economy is not growing at the rate needed to create the necessary jobs for a growing labour force or to improve living standards. As a result, unemployment continues to rise. Israeli constraints on movement, access and trade are the key impediments to economic growth.

In Gaza, that is compounded by the dire water and energy situation. Issues over power and energy remain. As colleagues have said, Gazans currently have access to only four hours of electricity per day. Our support will help to lift the overall standard of living by increasing trade and job creation, enabling greater movement and access for people, and enhancing the supply of electricity and clean water.

There is a glimmer of positivity through the work that the special envoy, whom I spoke to last week, is moving forward in an otherwise difficult time. We will continue to channel our support to that work, in addition to diplomatic efforts. We are keen to focus on areas where there is Israeli-Palestinian co-operation, of which there is much more than I think some people outside this place would necessarily recognise, and to support the financial sustainability of the Palestinian Authority.

As I have the time, let me deal with one or two of the specific questions raised. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked about Omar Shakir. We are obviously aware of the case but, as I said in the House the other day, ultimately it is a matter for the Israeli Government. We have been in touch with Human Rights Watch about the case. Officials from the embassy in Tel Aviv have also raised the gentleman’s case with the Israeli authorities, and did so two days ago.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, who I think knows more about the subject than I do after all the long years he has spent on it, spoke about increasing funding to UNRWA, and I have already mentioned that. He spoke about the recent conference in Washington, which a UK senior official attended. We discussed projects to help to transform Gaza, and we will continue to support those efforts and US leadership. US engagement is vital, of course, to help to encourage and support
Israel in its work on that. In view of the fact that we might not get movement on the middle east peace process as quickly as we would like, Gaza is something that could be done more quickly, and because it is urgent, putting some emphasis into that is the right thing to do. He also mentioned MPs visiting Gaza, and I have answered that point.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley spoke about both mental health and UNICEF. I answered the question about UNICEF, but the situation is such that we are reviewing what support we can give, particularly looking forward to the projects in Gaza that I mentioned. On mental health, our support to UNRWA helps to support mental health services. All our experience of seeing trauma in many places around the world leads us to recognise that the damage done to people by being part of this situation, and particularly the damage done to children by what they may have witnessed, requires that attention is given to mental health services.

I have detained the House for far too long. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been able to say a little more than in the rushed five minutes I usually get at the end of a debate. As I said earlier, I know that all colleagues who have taken part in the debate care about this issue very deeply. I know also that there are often things that the House would like the UK Government to do that we cannot, but there are positions that we believe are the right way to try to move forward, and we will continue to press those. We remain absolutely convinced both of the need to recognise Israel’s existence and its needs for defence and security and of the legitimate right to justice of the Palestinians.

We recognise that the windows that we have all been looking for are closing very quickly. If not two-state, what? If we are not now to move forward, when? We will continue to press that. I hope and believe that the balanced position we seek to take, recognising the complexities, and having this debate read in many different capitals around the place will enable states and friends of both Israel and the Palestinians to recognise Parliament’s desire for peace, its understanding of the complexities of the situation, and its determination to recognise that the humanitarian situation of those affected has now reached such a state that there must be an even greater degree of urgency than before.

This is something that cannot be left or managed or that will disappear of its own accord. Hopefully, the sort of determination and comments that colleagues have expressed today will make a difference, and the United Kingdom will be able, in time, to be part of a process that will deliver what so many colleagues in this House desperately want to see.

4.14 pm

Louise Haigh: I thank you, Sir David, the Minister, the shadow Minister, the Scottish National party spokesperson and all hon. Members for participating in the debate today—the last thing before recess. I know many hon. Members will have cancelled constituency arrangements to be here—it delayed my trip to Benidorm for my cousin’s hen do by a day, so I did not really mind being here so much.

I thank the Minister for his, as ever, thoughtful response. I welcome the Government’s commitment to early funding of UNRWA and their support for and involvement with the parties in the independent investigation. I also welcome the Minister’s commitment that he will review humanitarian support. May I say, though, that it is the case not that the Government cannot do more but that they will not do more? It is now desperately urgent for the Government to step up and take more action—to exercise our unique responsibility in this conflict, to fill the vacuum America has left behind and to secure a future for the people of Gaza.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

4.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.
**Written Statements**  
*Monday 14 May 2018*

**DEFENCE**

**Astute Boat 7**

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I am pleased to announce today that we have reached a major milestone with the investment of £1.5 billion for the whole boat contract with BAE Systems to build the seventh boat in our Astute class submarine fleet. I also have the privilege to announce that this submarine will be named AGINCOURT.

AGINCOURT is the final boat of the Astute class, underpinning the commitment made by this Government in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review. AGINCOURT is expected to come into service with the Royal Navy in the mid-2020s to undertake a wide range of tasks in support of military operations worldwide.

[HCWS680]

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**BBC World Service**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The BBC Chairman and I have agreed the “Objectives, Priorities and Targets” (OPTs) for the BBC World Service Licence. The OPTs have been set for a five-year period 2017 to 2022. The licence can be found on the BBC website: http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/managementstructure/bbcstructure.

The BBC World Service is the world’s largest international broadcaster, broadcasting news, documentaries and discussions in 42 languages. The World Service continues to provide insight and fresh perspective across the major global stories of the year. The total weekly reach of the World Service in 2016-17 was a record 346 million (up from 320 million in 2015-16) and the BBC remains on track to achieve its ambition to reach a global audience of 500 million by 2022.

While many broadcasters are increasingly partisan, people around the world have confidence in the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC’s journalism. The BBC World Service is one of the most influential and trusted of British institutions and it is instrumental in helping to promote Britain and our values around the world. The FCO will continue to support them to enhance the lives of millions of people, making high-quality independent news and analysis accessible in markets of need.

The objectives for the World Service contribute to the fulfilment of the mission and the promotion of the BBC’s public purposes, including providing high-quality news coverage; current affairs; and factual programming to international audiences, which is firmly based on British values of accuracy, impartiality, and fairness. The objectives focus on four key areas:

- maximising the reach of all language services;
- protecting the BBC World Service’s position as the most trusted provider of accurate and independent international news;
- delivering essential news and content that allows audiences to engage in democratic processes as informed citizens, and reflects the values and culture of the United Kingdom to the world; and
- demonstrating value for money and transparency, seeking alternative sources of funding where appropriate.

The BBC will report annually against the objectives, priorities and targets I have agreed with the BBC Board. This will include assessment of progress against quantitative targets.

I will meet the BBC Chair (or their nominated representatives) annually to discuss the services, review the performance report, and consider any adjustments that need to be made, including targets. If the BBC Chair and I agree, we may also consider adjustments to services outside this timing, in response to significant changes in market conditions or world events.

[HCWS681]

**NORTHERN IRELAND**

Legacy of Northern Ireland’s Past

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my objective is to build a more peaceful, stable and prosperous Northern Ireland, that is fit for the future.

As part of this, we need to address the legacy of Northern Ireland’s troubled past, which continues to cast a large shadow on the present.

There is broad agreement that the current processes for addressing the past are not working well for anyone.

In 2014, the UK Government, along with the main Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government reached the Stormont House agreement, which contained the most far-reaching proposals yet for addressing the past.

The Government believe that the proposed new legacy bodies in the agreement have the potential to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors and ensure there is no unfair and disproportionate focus on former members of the armed forces and police officers. The new bodies will be under clear statutory obligations to operate in ways which are fair, balance and proportionate.

Having discussed these proposals extensively with political parties in Northern Ireland, we believe that the time is now to allow for a wider public consultation, as we committed to in our 2017 Northern Ireland manifesto.

Now is the time for everyone with an interest in addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past to have their say.

This consultation will run until 10 September and be published on the Government’s website at: http://www.gov.uk/nio.

I have placed a copy of the consultation document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS682]
Written Statements

Tuesday 15 May 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Consumer Policy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I am today publishing the Department’s investigation into the safety of the Hotpoint fridge freezer model FF175B which police identified as being involved in the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June last year.

The safety of consumers is a key priority for this Government, which is why the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), my right hon. Friend the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) ordered an immediate examination of the appliance by independent technical experts. Within days the Department had undertaken a preliminary assessment and issued advice following a meeting convened by the Government’s chief scientific adviser including public health advisers. The advice to owners of the model concerned—Hotpoint FF175B—was that they could continue to use their fridge freezer as the public health risk of advising not to use the appliance was judged to be of greater risk. Owners were advised to contact the manufacturer to register their appliance so they could be contacted directly should any further action be necessary.

At the same time the Department began a thorough and comprehensive product safety investigation into the model to identify whether there was any wider safety risk to the public. BEIS experts conducted a product safety investigation, examining the Grenfell Tower appliance, commissioning independent examination and testing of example FF175B appliances, undertaking analysis of data and documents and risk assessment. Whirlpool has co-operated with the investigation and has undertaken its own investigation in line with its legal obligations as the manufacturer of the product.

The full investigation has now concluded. It confirmed the advice that was given to consumers in June, that there is no need for a product recall or for any other corrective action for this model, and that consumers can continue using the product as normal. The investigation concluded that the product met legal safety requirements and that the risk associated with the model is assessed as low. The findings have been confirmed by separate and independent tests, under the supervision of the BEIS chief scientific advisor, carried out by scientific and technical experts including the Health and Safety Executive and Intertek.

We have shared the results of our investigation with the Metropolitan police, the Grenfell inquiry, and, of course, with the Grenfell residents through appropriate channels.

The Government continue to place huge importance on consumer safety. This is why, on January 21, 2018, we accepted all the recommendations made by the Working Group on Product Recall and Safety to upgrade the UK system of product safety, and we established the Office for Product Safety and Standards.

A copy of the risk statement and technical reports relating to the investigation have been published and copies of the documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS684]

TREASURY

Counter-Terrorist Asset-Freezing Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAF Act 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on it by part 1 of TAF Act 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the periods of 1 July 2017 to 30 September 2017 and 1 October 2017 to 31 December 2017.

This report also covers the UK’s implementation of the UN’s ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda asset-freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU’s asset-freezing regime under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU (also referred to as the CP 931 regime).

Under the ISIL-AQ asset-freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through its Office of Financial Sanctions implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaeda (asset-freezing) regulations 2011.

Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAF Act 2010.

A new EU asset-freezing regime under EU regulation (2016/1686) was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous al-Qaeda and ISIL (Daesh) listings. Once a designation is made under this regime it will appear in the annexed tables.

The annexed tables set out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during each quarter.

The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill currently before Parliament will help ensure that UK counterterrorist sanctions powers remain a useful tool for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to consider utilising, while also meeting the UK’s international obligations.

Under the Bill, a designation could be made where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the person or group is or has been involved in a defined terrorist activity and that designation is appropriate. This approach is in line with the UK’s current approach under UN and EU sanctions and would be balanced by procedural protections such as the ability of designated persons to challenge the Government in court.

Attachments can be viewed at:

[HCWS685]
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

UK-EU Security Partnership

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): On 9 May, we published the framework for the discussions with the EU on the UK and EU’s future security partnership. These slides have been produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU, in order to inform the development of the future framework. This framework will set out the terms of our future relationship and will be concluded alongside the withdrawal agreement later this year.

The United Kingdom wants to build a new, deep and special partnership with the European Union, enabling us to protect our shared interests and ensure we act together for our mutual benefit. The threats we face do not recognise the borders of individual nations. The security partnership we are seeking with the EU builds on the breadth and depth of our shared interests and values, and goes beyond any existing third country arrangements.

Copies of these slides will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS683]
The Government immediately sought advice from the independent expert panel, which was appointed by this Government following the Grenfell Tower fire to advise on immediate measures needed to ensure building safety and to help identify other buildings of concern. The expert panel has consulted representatives from the Metropolitan police, the Government’s chief scientific advisers, the National Fire Chiefs Council, and technical experts. Following this, the expert panel advised that the risks to public safety remained low and there was no change to the fire safety advice that the public should follow. As outlined in the statement on 15 March, further investigations, including testing have been taken forward in relation to flat front entrance doors manufactured by Manse Masterdor.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has advised the expert panel that the risk to public safety remains low. The expert panel has recognised that, based on the evidence, the risks to public safety have not changed significantly. However, as a result of our tests, they have concluded there is a performance issue with composite 30-minute flat fire doors that have been manufactured by Manse Masterdor, a company which ceased trading in 2014. These doors were manufactured by the company in such a way that the glazing and hardware components fitted would not consistently meet the 30 minutes of fire resistance in furnace tests required for these doors to meet the current building regulations guidance.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has advised the expert panel that buildings affected by this issue need to review their fire risk assessment to take into account this new information.

The expert panel’s advice is:

- Building owners with Manse Masterdor front entrance flat fire doors should review the fire risk assessment of their buildings to assess the overall fire risk and determine whether mitigations are needed.
- The risk to public safety remains low.
- Fire doors prevent the spread of fire and smoke and the performance deficiencies identified are different to risks from aluminium composite material cladding which assists the spread of fire.
- All fire doors should be assessed regularly to make sure they are likely to meet the minimum standard.
- The replacement of Manse Masterdor fire doors should take place using a risk-based approach.
- Further testing of other suppliers should be undertaken to make sure the issues with manufacture are not wider than this single supplier’s products.

The National Fire Chiefs Council has confirmed its previous advice that the risk to public safety is low and evidence does not suggest this has changed. It continues to advise that, in the event of a fire, people should follow existing fire procedures for the building. Residents should also test their smoke alarms regularly to ensure they work and ensure that their flat front door is fitted with a working self-closing device. All doors provide essential protection in a fire if they are properly closed.

I am therefore advising owners of buildings where Manse Masterdor composite front entrance 30-minute fire doors have been installed in flats, to review their buildings’ fire risk assessments, and to consider how quickly these doors should be replaced.

The expert panel has published guidance for building owners who are replacing flat front entrance fire doors and this can be accessed from my Department’s website:

My Department is writing to customers of Manse Masterdor identified in the company’s records as having been supplied with 30-minute fire doors and is working closely with the Local Government Association, the National Housing Federation, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the industry response group to consider what further support building owners may require to assist with taking timely action.

In testing its product range Synseal Masterdor, the company that took over the operation from Manse Masterdor, has withdrawn its entire composite 30-minute fire door range and has notified all its customers of the issues identified. Unlike the case of Manse Masterdor where the company is no longer trading, Synseal is a company still in operation. It is therefore working with trading standards to determine further action to ensure its products meet relevant standards, in line with usual good practice.

The expert panel endorses this approach with Synseal.

We are continuing our investigations into the wider fire door market, and intend to test fire doors from other door suppliers. This will form part of the work my Department takes forward to respond to the findings from Dame Judith Hackitt’s review.

[HCWS686]
Written Statements

Thursday 17 May 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and I wish to reiterate the Government’s view that there are potentially substantial benefits from the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources and to set out in this statement to Parliament the actions we are taking to support our position. This joint statement should be considered in planning decisions and plan making in England.

The UK must have safe, secure and affordable supplies of energy with carbon emissions levels that are consistent with the carbon budgets defined in our Climate Change Act and our international obligations. We believe that gas has a key part to play in meeting these objectives both currently and in the future. In part as a result of the UK’s diverse range of energy sources, which include natural gas, we have had competitively priced energy since 1990 while reducing carbon emissions across the economy by 49%—a leading performance among developed nations. Gas still makes up around a third of our energy mix and every scenario proposed by the Committee on Climate Change setting out how the UK could meet its legally binding 2050 emissions reduction target includes demand for natural gas. As set out in the clean growth strategy, innovations in technologies such as carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) have the potential to decarbonise this energy supply still further and prolong its role in our energy mix.

However, despite the welcome improvements in efficiency and innovation from companies operating in the North sea, the ongoing decline in our offshore gas production has meant that the UK has gone from being a net exporter of gas in 2003 to importing over half (53%) of gas supplies in 2017 and estimates suggest we could be importing 72% of our gas by 2030. Our current import mix, via pipelines from Norway and continental Europe and LNG terminals that can source gas from around the world, provides us with stable and secure supplies. However, we believe that it is right to utilise our domestic gas resources to the maximum extent and exploring further the potential for onshore gas production from shale rock formations in the UK, where it is economically efficient, and where environmental impacts are robustly regulated.

We also believe that further development of onshore gas resources has the potential to deliver substantial economic benefits to the UK economy and for local communities where supplies are located by creating thousands of new jobs directly in extraction, local support services, and the rest of the supply chain. A potential new shale gas exploration and production sector in the shale basins of England could provide a new economic driver. We also see an opportunity to work with industry on innovation to create a “UK Model”—the world’s most environmentally robust onshore shale gas sector—and to explore export opportunities from this model, a core theme of our modern industrial strategy.

But to achieve these benefits, we need to work with responsible companies prepared to invest in this industry as they proceed with the exploration process, to test the size and value of the potential reserves and to ensure that our planning and regulatory systems work appropriately while assisting local councils in making informed and appropriate planning decisions. So we are setting out a series of actions, including those committed to in the Government’s 2017 manifesto to support the development of shale gas extraction.

PLANNING

The UK has world-class regulation to ensure that shale exploration can happen safely, respecting local communities and safeguarding the environment. The development of the shale gas industry so far has already led to millions of pounds being invested in the UK, supporting businesses and the supply chain, and creating British jobs. We have recently seen four planning approvals for exploratory shale development. The Government remain fully committed to making planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new development, and to ensure that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them. These are long-standing principles. No one benefits from the uncertainty caused by delay which is why, in September 2015, Government set out a range of measures to help ensure every planning application or appeal was dealt with as quickly as possible.

However, recent decisions on shale exploration planning applications remain disappointingly slow against a statutory time frame of 16 weeks where an environmental impact assessment is required. So we are announcing a range of measures to facilitate timely decisions. These measures only apply in England.

Planning policy and guidance

This statement is a material consideration in plan making and decision taking, alongside relevant policies of the existing national planning policy framework (2012), in particular those on mineral planning, including conventional and unconventional hydrocarbons.

Shale gas development is of national importance. The Government expect mineral planning authorities to give great weight to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy. This includes shale gas exploration and extraction. Mineral plans should reflect that minerals resources can only be worked where they are found, and applications must be assessed on a site by site basis and having regard to their context. Plans should not set restrictions or thresholds across their plan area that limit shale development without proper justification. We expect mineral planning authorities to recognise the fact that Parliament has set out in statute the relevant definitions of hydrocarbon, natural gas and associated hydraulic fracturing. In addition, these matters are described in planning practice guidance, which plans must have due regard to. Consistent with this planning practice guidance, policies should avoid undue sterilisation of mineral resources, including shale gas.
The Government have consulted on a draft revised national planning policy framework (NPPF). The consultation closed on 10 May 2018. In due course the revised national planning policy framework will sit alongside the written ministerial statement.

We intend to publish revised planning practice guidance on shale development once the revised national planning policy framework has been launched ensuring clarity on issues such as cumulative impact, local plan making and confirmation that planners can rely on the advice of regulatory experts.

**Planning decision making**

To support a decision-making regime that meets the future needs of the sector we will progress our manifesto commitments by:

- Holding an early-stage consultation, in summer 2018, on the principle of whether non-hydraulic fracturing shale exploration development should be treated as permitted development, and in particular on the circumstances in which this might be appropriate.
- Consulting, in summer 2018, on the criteria required to trigger the inclusion of shale production projects into the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime.
- Further, we will strengthen community engagement by consulting in due course on the potential to make pre-application consultation a statutory requirement.

**Support for those involved in decision making**

We are aware that the shale applications and the planning process can be complex for local authorities. Building capacity and capability within local authorities to deal with shale development is a vital step towards speeding up decision making. We will help achieve this by announcing today:

- The launch of a new £1.6 million shale support fund over the next two years to build capacity and capability in local authorities dealing with shale applications.
- The creation of a new planning brokerage service for shale applications to provide guidance to developers and local authorities on the planning process to help facilitate timely decision making. The service would focus exclusively on the planning process and will have no role in the consideration or determination of planning applications. The service will not comment on the merits of a case and will also have no role in the appeals process.

In addition, the Government recognise that early engagement with local authorities, including capitalising on formal pre-application discussions, is critical in building confidence in decision making and securing support for development proposals and set realistic timeframes for decisions. We expect this to be formalised by a planning performance agreement providing certainty for all parties. And we then expect all parties—including decision makers in local authorities—to stick to the timetable.

**Opportunities for redress**

While we are confident that the measures announced in this written ministerial statement will speed up decision making on shale applications, we cannot be complacent. Therefore:

- We will continue to treat appeals against any refusal of planning permission for exploring and developing shale gas, or against any non-determination as a priority for urgent determination by the planning inspectorate, making additional resources available where necessary.

Under the written ministerial statement in 2015 the criteria for recovering planning appeals were amended to include proposals for exploring and developing shale gas. This was applied for a two-year period subject to further review.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has conducted a review and remains committed to scrutinising appeals for these proposals. We are therefore announcing that the criteria for considering the recovery of planning appeals are continued for a further two years. The new criterion is added to the recovery policy of 30 June 2008, *Official Report*, column 43WS.

The Government continue to commit to identifying underperforming local planning authorities that repeatedly fail to determine oil and gas applications within statutory timeframes. When any future applications are made to underperforming authorities, the Secretary of State will consider whether he should determine the application instead.

**Shale Regulator**

The UK regulatory regime for shale gas is considered among the most robust and stringent in the world. However, we acknowledge that it is also complex, with three regulators, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Oil and Gas Authority, all with responsibilities for regulation. It is not always transparent to both the public and industry who is responsible for what. Therefore, the Government are setting up a shale environmental regulator which will bring the regulators together to act as one coherent single face for the public, mineral planning authorities and industry. We intend to establish the regulator from the summer.

We anticipate that the plans for the shale environmental regulator and future consultations will only apply in England.

**Community Benefits**

We strongly believe that communities hosting shale gas developments should share in the financial returns they generate. The Government welcome the shale gas companies’ commitment to make set payments to these communities, which could be worth up to £10 million for a typical site. Actions to support local communities are an important complement to the planning actions set out above. With that in mind, we want to go further, and we will work with industry to see how we can improve this offer.

In addition to this offer we also announced in the autumn statement 2016 that the shale wealth fund will provide additional resources to local communities, over and above industry schemes and other sources of Government funding. Local communities will benefit first and determine how the money is spent in their area.

[HCWS690]

**EDUCATION**

**Schools and Colleges Guidance**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): This Government are committed to keeping children safe. All children, from whatever background and no matter what challenges they face, deserve a safe environment in which they can learn.
Today my Department is publishing the Government response to the recent Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) consultation. KCSIE is statutory guidance that schools and colleges must have regard to when carrying out their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Children in this context includes anyone under the age of 18.

Alongside revised statutory guidance, the Department is publishing revised advice covering child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment.

The KCSIE consultation ran between 14 December 2017 and 22 February 2018. We were delighted to receive 311 responses. Officials have carefully considered every response and we have made additional changes to strengthen KCSIE as a result.

The most significant revision to KCSIE is the inclusion of a new part 5 to support schools and colleges to respond to reports of child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment. It is an important step in protecting children to include a dedicated part, covering this complex issue, in the statutory guidance. We were pleased that 87% of respondents agreed explicitly that schools and colleges holding more than one emergency contact number for each child was sensible. As such, we have included this in the revised guidance. Other changes include making the guidance even clearer that where staff have a safeguarding concern they should act on it immediately and providing more information about vulnerable children who may benefit from early help.

The sexual violence and sexual harassment advice has been strengthened to, among other things, be clear that it is relevant for all schools to be clear that child-on-child abuse can take place between children of all ages, provide more details as to what sexual harassment can look like and provide additional links to specialist support. The revised advice is published today and is available immediately to support schools and colleges.

As part of the Government response, we are publishing the revised KCSIE for information. This will allow schools and colleges time to consider any changes they might want to make to their policies and procedures before the revised guidance comes into force on 3 September 2018. Until the revised guidance comes into force, schools and colleges must continue to have regard to the existing KCSIE 2016 guidance.

Copies of the Government response, KCSIE and the sexual violence and sexual harassment advice will be placed in the Library of the House and are available on the Government website here:


and https://www.gov.uk/education/safeguarding-pupils.

[HCWS693]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Regulations and Fire Safety

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake a thorough review of building regulations and fire safety, with a particular focus on multiple-occupancy high-rise buildings. Her final report is being published today. It is available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-building-regulations-and-fire-safety-final-report and copies are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses. I intend to give an oral statement to the House later today to provide further detail on the publication of the report.

[HCWS692]

Planning Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and I wish to reiterate the Government’s view that there are potentially substantial benefits from the safe and sustainable exploration and development of our onshore shale gas resources and to set out in this statement to Parliament the actions we are taking to support our position. This joint statement should be considered in planning decisions and plan making in England.

The UK must have safe, secure and affordable supplies of energy with carbon emissions levels that are consistent with the carbon budgets defined in our Climate Change Act and our international obligations. We believe that gas has a key part to play in meeting these objectives both currently and in the future. In part as a result of the UK’s diverse range of energy sources, which include natural gas, we have had competitively priced energy since 1990 while reducing carbon emissions across the economy by 49%—a leading performance among developed nations. Gas still makes up around a third of our current energy usage and every scenario proposed by the Committee on Climate Change setting out how the UK could meet its legally binding 2050 emissions reduction target includes demand for natural gas. As set out in the clean growth strategy, innovations in technologies such as carbon capture usage and storage (CCUS) have the potential to decarbonise this energy supply still further and prolong its role in our energy mix.

However, despite the welcome improvements in efficiency and innovation from companies operating in the North sea, the ongoing decline in our offshore gas production has meant that the UK has gone from being a net exporter of gas in 2003 to importing over half (53%) of gas supplies in 2017 and estimates suggest we could be importing 72% of our gas by 2030. Our current import mix, via pipelines from Norway and continental Europe and LNG terminals that can source gas from around the world, provides us with stable and secure supplies. However, we believe that it is right to utilise our domestic gas resources to the maximum extent and exploring further the potential for onshore gas production from shale rock formations in the UK, where it is economically efficient, and where environment impacts are robustly regulated.

We also believe that further development of onshore gas resources has the potential to deliver substantial economic benefits to the UK economy and for local communities where supplies are located by creating thousands of new jobs directly in extraction, local support
services, and the rest of the supply chain. A potential new shale gas exploration and production sector in the shale basins of England could provide a new economic driver. We also see an opportunity to work with industry on innovation to create a “UK Model”—the world’s most environmentally robust onshore shale gas sector—and to explore export opportunities from this model, a core theme of our modern industrial strategy.

But to achieve these benefits, we need to work with responsible companies prepared to invest in this industry as they proceed with the exploration process, to test the size and value of the potential reserves and to ensure that our planning and regulatory systems work appropriately while assisting local councils in making informed and appropriate planning decisions. So we are setting out a series of actions, including those committed to in the Government’s 2017 manifesto to support the development of shale gas extraction.

Planning

The UK has world-class regulation to ensure that shale exploration can happen safely, respecting local communities and safeguarding the environment. The development of the shale gas industry so far has already led to millions of pounds being invested in the UK, supporting businesses and the supply chain, and creating British jobs. We have recently seen four planning approvals for exploratory shale development. The Government remain fully committed to making planning decisions faster and fairer for all those affected by new development, and to ensure that local communities are fully involved in planning decisions that affect them. These are long-standing principles. No one benefits from the uncertainty caused by delay which is why, in September 2015, Government set out a range of measures to help ensure every planning application or appeal was dealt with as quickly as possible.

However, recent decisions on shale exploration planning applications remain disappointingly slow against a statutory time frame of 16 weeks where an environmental impact assessment is required. So we are announcing a range of measures to facilitate timely decisions. These measures only apply in England.

Planning policy and guidance

This statement is a material consideration in plan making and decision taking, alongside relevant policies of the existing national planning policy framework (2012), in particular those on mineral planning, including conventional and unconventional hydrocarbons.

Shale gas development is of national importance. The Government expect mineral planning authorities to give great weight to the benefits of mineral extraction, including to the economy. This includes shale gas exploration and extraction. Mineral plans should reflect that minerals resources can only be worked where they are found, and applications must be assessed on a site by site basis and having regard to their context. Plans should not set restrictions or thresholds across their plan area that limit shale development without proper justification. We expect mineral planning authorities to recognise the fact that Parliament has set out in statute the relevant definitions of hydrocarbon, natural gas and associated hydraulic fracturing. In addition, these matters are described in planning practice guidance, which plans must have due regard to. Consistent with this planning practice guidance, policies should avoid undue sterilisation of mineral resources, including shale gas.

The Government have consulted on a draft revised national planning policy framework (NPPF). The consultation closed on 10 May 2018. In due course the revised national planning policy framework will sit alongside the written ministerial statement.

We intend to publish revised planning practice guidance on shale development once the revised national planning policy framework has been launched ensuring clarity on issues such as cumulative impact, local plan making and confirmation that planners can rely on the advice of regulatory experts.

Planning decision making

To support a decision-making regime that meets the future needs of the sector we will progress our manifesto commitments by:

- Holding an early-stage consultation, in summer 2018, on the principle of whether non-hydraulic fracturing shale exploration development should be treated as permitted development, and in particular on the circumstances in which this might be appropriate.
- Consulting, in summer 2018, on the criteria required to trigger the inclusion of shale production projects into the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime.
- Further, we will strengthen community engagement by consulting in due course on the potential to make pre-application consultation a statutory requirement.

Support for those involved in decision making

We are aware that the shale applications and the planning process can be complex for local authorities. Building capacity and capability within local authorities to deal with shale development is a vital step towards speeding up decision making. We will help achieve this by announcing today:

- The launch of a new £1.6 million shale support fund over the next two years to build capacity and capability in local authorities dealing with shale applications.
- The creation of a new planning brokerage service for shale applications to provide guidance to developers and local authorities on the planning process to help facilitate timely decision making. The service would focus exclusively on the planning process and will have no role in the consideration or determination of planning applications. The service will not comment on the merits of a case and will also have no role in the appeals process.

In addition, the Government recognise that early engagement with local authorities, including capitalising on formal pre-application discussions, is critical in building confidence in decision making and securing support for development proposals and set realistic timeframes for decisions. We expect this to be formalised by a planning performance agreement providing certainty for all parties. And we then expect all parties—including decision makers in local authorities—to stick to the timetable.

Opportunities for redress

While we are confident that the measures announced in this written ministerial statement will speed up decision making on shale applications, we cannot be complacent. Therefore:

We will continue to treat appeals against any refusal of planning permission for exploring and developing shale gas, or against any non-determination as a priority for urgent determination by the planning inspectorate, making additional resources available where necessary.
Under the written ministerial statement in 2015 the criteria for recovering planning appeals were amended to include proposals for exploring and developing shale gas. This was applied for a two-year period subject to further review. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has conducted a review and remains committed to scrutinising appeals for these proposals. We are therefore announcing that the criteria for considering the recovery of planning appeals are continued for a further two years. The new criterion is added to the recovery policy of 30 June 2008, Official Report, column 43WS.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will actively consider calling in shale applications particularly where statutory deadlines have been exceeded. Each case will be considered on its facts in line with his policy. Priority timeframes for urgent determination will be given to any called-in applications.

The Government continue to commit to identifying underperforming local planning authorities that repeatedly fail to determine oil and gas applications within statutory timeframes. Where any future applications are made to underperforming authorities, the Secretary of State will consider whether he should determine the application instead.

SHALE REGULATOR

The UK regulatory regime for shale gas is considered among the most robust and stringent in the world. However, we acknowledge that it is also complex, with three regulators, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the Oil and Gas Authority, all with responsibilities for regulation. It is not always transparent to both the public and industry who is responsible for what. Therefore, the Government are setting up a shale environmental regulator which will bring the regulators together to act as one coherent single face for the public, mineral planning authorities and industry. We intend to establish the regulator from the summer.

We anticipate that the plans for the shale environmental regulator and future consultations will only apply in England.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

We strongly believe that communities hosting shale gas developments should share in the financial returns they generate. The Government welcome the shale gas companies’ commitment to make set payments to these communities, which could be worth up to £10 million for a typical site. Actions to support local communities are an important complement to the planning actions set out above. With that in mind, we want to go further, and we will work with industry to see how we can improve this offer.

In addition to this offer we also announced in the autumn statement 2016 that the shale wealth fund will provide additional resources to local communities, over and above industry schemes and other sources of Government funding. Local communities will benefit first and determine how the money is spent in their area. [HCWS689]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment: Aid Sector

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Following the written ministerial statement of 20 March, Official Report, column 11WS, I am updating the House on what the Department for International Development (DFID) is doing to protect recipients of UK aid and those working in the sector from harm—safeguarding for short—within our focus on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

Ensuring DFID’s programmes meet the highest standards

Around 60% of DFID’s funding is delivered through multilateral organisations. On 21 April I co-hosted with the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation a roundtable with senior representatives of international financial institutions—I am placing the list of names in an annex to this document and libraries of both Houses—and discussed how we can pool best practice and resources to tackle this issue across the sector. All 10 institutions signed a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to preventing sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation, both within their own institutions and their operations, many of which are funded by DFID. I will be pressing for them to translate this commitment into further concrete actions in 2018.

From my recent meetings in Washington it is clear that multilateral organisations are taking this issue extremely seriously and looking to learn from previous cases and improve their systems and processes. For example, the World Bank has strengthened its staff rules covering sexual misconduct and abuse and is rolling out staff training and a wider review of its human resources policies with respect to sexual harassment and exploitation.

The UN Secretary-General has made clear his zero tolerance approach to both sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment. In the past two weeks I have discussed safeguarding with the heads of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. At the UN system chief executives board meeting in London earlier in May, Secretary-General António Guterres led a special session with the heads of 31 UN agencies, funds and programmes on addressing sexual harassment within the UN system. This included a new 24-hour helpline for staff to report harassment and access support, so fast-tracking complaints. I am pressing for agreement to a consistent UN-wide approach on reporting, investigation and outreach, and support when cases of sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment occur.

I am also pressing all organisations that DFID funds to learn from best and worst practice. Last month Save the Children UK withdrew from bidding for new UK Government funding while it looks to learn lessons and the Charity Commission carries out a statutory inquiry into its handling of internal cases.

Following my letter to DFID partners seeking assurances on their safeguarding policies and procedures, I have now received responses from our top suppliers, multilateral partners, development capital partners and research partners. This is a total of 283 organisations. I will publish a high-level summary of the returns on gov.uk later this month updating the information published on 20 March on the 179 charities directly receiving UK aid. I am including the link to that document in an annex to this document in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the 5 March summit organised by DFID and the Charity Commission, DFID has convened four NGO working groups and an external experts group to
develop concrete ideas. I met representatives of the working groups and the experts this week to discuss which of their initial proposals could make the biggest difference. The work is focusing on:

- accountability to beneficiaries and survivors—prioritising those who have suffered and survived exploitation, abuse and violence, and designing systems of accountability and transparency that have beneficiaries at their centre;
- how the aid sector can demonstrate a step change in shifting organisational culture to tackle power imbalances and gender inequality;
- ensuring that safeguards are integrated throughout the employment cycle, including work on the proposal for a global register/passport; and
- providing full accountability through rigorous reporting and complaints mechanisms, and ensuring that concerns are heard and acted on.

Ensuring all UK aid meets the highest standards

On 28 March I chaired a meeting of UK Government Departments that spend official development assistance (ODA). I updated Ministers on DFID’s work including the new safeguarding due diligence standards which I announced in March. Following a successful pilot, the new process will be rolled out to other programmes later this month. DFID will write to all other UK ODA spending departments with the details should they wish to adopt the same approach.

This month senior DFID officials have held further meetings with opposite numbers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Cabinet Office and the Charity Commission to discuss how we can raise our own performances on safeguarding and that of others in the aid sector.

I am in contact with the Ministry of Defence about pre-deployment training for peacekeeping operations, and DFID’s HR director has been working with colleagues across Whitehall to drive up internal HR standards.

Working with other donors to drive up standards

The Department is working closely with Canada as G7 presidency and at a meeting of G7 Development Ministers at the end of May I have been asked to lead a discussion on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

DFID is now chairing monthly meetings of a group of 15 donors—I am placing the list of names in the Libraries of both Houses—to seek collective action including in our key implementing partners.

DFID is also working with the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to explore how to measure donors’ performance on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment as part regular peer reviews. I plan to write to all DAC donors, observers and other major donors updating them on our work and seeking their suggestions.

The UK is leading the change needed on this issue. We have made good progress since March and I will use every opportunity possible in the coming weeks and months to push for much more. I will host an international conference in London on 18 October.

Attachments can be viewed online at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-05-17/HCWS694/.

[HCWS694]
The prime responsibility for this would sit with political parties themselves. However within this, there will be ways the Government can help too, for example by looking at extending the support we already provide in other areas such as employment to enable other activities such as volunteering or representing their communities.

Within 12 months we hope to have political parties offering and advertising support, as well as solutions to help independent candidates.

While this work is ongoing we want to ensure that disabled people can run for office, so we are announcing a fund of up to £250,000 to support disabled candidates, primarily for the forthcoming English local elections in 2019. We will set out further details about the scheme in the near future and any measures taken to ensure such costs are not considered to be part of a candidate’s election expenses.

Establishing this fund should not disincentivise political parties from continuing to develop their own measures. Instead, it should help them prioritise this issue and take action to ensure no one is disadvantaged in the democratic process.

I hope that the interim fund will also help us gather further evidence of what good practice looks like.

I will keep the House updated on further developments.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt)
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith)
The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton)

[HCWS695]
Written Statements

Monday 21 May 2018

DEFENCE

Call-Out Order (Mali)

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
A new call-out order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called out into service to support operations in Mali.
Currently, we plan on calling out only willing and available reservists who have the support of their employer.
The order took effect from 18 May 2018 and ceases to have effect on 17 May 2019.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media Matters

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock):
On 7 May 2018, Comcast Corporation formally notified the European Commission of its intention to acquire the entire issued share capital of Sky plc.
Under section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002 (“the Act”), the Secretary of State has the powers to intervene in certain media mergers on public interest grounds.
Having reviewed the relevant evidence available, I can confirm that I have today written to the parties to inform them that I am minded not to issue an EIN on the basis that the proposed merger does not raise concerns in relation to public interest considerations which would meet the threshold for intervention.
This is a quasi-judicial decision and I am required to make my decision independently, following a process that is scrupulously fair and impartial, and as quickly as possible.
I will now allow until 5pm on Thursday 24 May for interested parties to submit written representations, and aim to come to a final decision on whether to intervene in the merger shortly.

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council will take place in Brussels on 22 and 23 May 2018. Lord Ashton of Hyde will represent the UK at the Youth session of this Council on 22 May. The UK’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU will represent the UK on 23 May for the meetings on culture & audio-visual and sport.

Youth
This session of the Council will begin with the adoption of Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe. The Council will then seek to adopt Council conclusions on the role of youth in addressing the demographic challenges within the European Union.

Also tabled for this session is a policy debate on the future priorities for EU youth policy.
In addition, there will be information from the Commission on European Youth Together, followed by information from the Belgian and French delegations on the Franco-Belgian declaration of Ministers responsible for youth on the prevention of violent radicalisation.

Culture/Audio-visual
This meeting will begin with the adoption of Council conclusions on the need to bring cultural heritage to the fore across policies in the EU.
There will be also be a policy debate on the long term vision for the contribution of culture to the EU after 2020, in particular looking forward to the next multiannual financial framework (2021-2027).
Additionally, there will be a public deliberation of current legislative proposals. For this, the Council will first welcome information from the German delegation on the directive amending directive (2006/112/EC) as regards rates of value added tax-actively engaging in negotiations from a cultural policy perspective. In extension to this, there will be information from the French delegation on the regulation on the import of cultural goods. No legislative decisions will be made in these debates, so there are no implications for the parliamentary scrutiny reservation.

Information will be provided by the Lithuanian and Luxembourg delegations, on their respective hosting of the European capitals of culture 2022.

Sport
The sport session of EYCS will begin with the adoption of Council conclusions on promoting the common values of the EU through sport. This will be followed by a policy debate on the commercialisation of elite sports and the sustainability of the European Model of Sport.
The EU member states representative in the World Anti-Doping Agency Foundation Board, will present information on the foundation board meeting on 16-17 May. The French delegation will present information on the informal meeting of the EU Minister for Sport (Paris, 31 May 2018) signing of a declaration for a Europe of Sport on the horizon of the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic games.

Other
There will be information from the Austrian delegation, setting out their work programmes as the incoming presidency, for the second half of 2018.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Early Recovery Assistance: Overseas Territories

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The United Kingdom is strongly committed to supporting the recovery of the British overseas territories of Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands following the devastation caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria last September. Through the conflict, stability and security fund we...
committed £72 million to support the immediate needs of the affected territories from September 2017, of which £15 million was approved on top of the initial commitment of £57 million to support early recovery needs. This allocation was first brought to Parliament’s attention in the written ministerial statement made on 14 December 2017; Official Report, Vol.633, columns 30-31WS[HCWS355] following the Joint Ministerial Council on Tuesday 28 and Wednesday 29 November. This funding, supplemented by Foreign and Commonwealth Office programme funds, supported overseas territory Governments in meeting their immediate needs.

The overseas territories directorate has led on disbursing this funding in consultation with overseas territory Governments, to achieve the following early recovery deliverables each worth over £100,000:

**Anguilla**

1) Repairs to educational infrastructure in Anguilla, with a value of up to £344,000 for phase 1, ensuring there is sufficient space for examinations, language tuition and theatre productions. This work is still ongoing.

2) Orders worth £1,170,000 that provided Anguilla with a temporary air traffic control tower, fencing and ground lighting which contributed to the recertification of the territory’s airport.

3) Reimbursement to the Government of Anguilla for £2,740,000 of invoices for island-wide waste clean up, interim infrastructure repairs and generator/electrical works for school buildings, and buildings costs on the Anguilla fire and rescue services building.

4) Repairs and safety equipment for Her Majesty’s prison, totalling £211,000.

**British Virgin Islands**

5) Promotion of employment in the construction sector in the British Virgin Islands, worth £363,000. This project is supporting the reform of the labour market and laws, as well as vocational training (construction and maritime) to prepare for the recovery and to promote more resilient building practices.

6) Immediate repairs to housing for vulnerable families with inadequate insurance coverage, worth at least £1,260,000. This project is working with the British Virgin Islands Government to repair 70 to 100 homes and provide technical advice to use the repairs to spearhead the BVIG US$15 million housing recovery programme.

7) A temporary magistrate’s court, worth up to £320,000. This will provide secure premises for tackling the backlog of criminal cases, increasing public confidence in visible and effective rule of law while longer-term criminal justice infrastructure is addressed.

8) Ongoing prison infrastructure repairs worth up to £676,000 to restore perimeter and internal fencing, roofing and locking systems, so that prisoners and staff have secure and decent living and working conditions.

9) The repair of seven reservoirs on the British Virgin Islands, worth up to £1 million, that will restore the potable water network and enable basic water access for the majority of the population.

10) Repairs to the sewage and waterworks infrastructure and the procurement of maintenance vehicles to prevent it falling back into a state of disrepair, worth up to £1.1 million.

11) The deployment of UK police personnel at a cost of £1,008,000 to provide surge support for law enforcement and support the Royal Virgin Islands police force to sustain public order.

12) A programme of further support to meet the immediate capacity building needs of the Royal Virgin Islands police force, currently worth £1,349,000 with plans for continuation of training and leadership development support during the coming year.

**Turks and Caicos Islands**

13) Ongoing and planned prison infrastructure repairs worth up to £580,000 to repair perimeter lighting and install internal zonal fencing, improving movement and management of prisoners, and enabling the temporary restricted regime in place since the hurricanes to be lifted.

14) Restoration of the radar system on the Turks and Caicos Islands, worth up to £350,000, enhancing border control and contributing to the security required for long-term recovery.

**Cross-Territory Support**

15) An order worth £5,296,000 that supported the electricity authorities in Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands to restore power to both territories.

16) Orders worth £522,000 to provide uniforms and equipment for the police forces in all three affected territories.

17) The deployment of security personnel to TCI, BVI and Anguilla to fill staffing and capability gaps and support prison leadership and management. Support delivered in TCI up to the end of March 2018 (at a value of £475,000) has been extended (at a further cost of £119,000) to ensure basic safety, security and leadership development while repair work proceeds and TCI Government recruits additional staff. Additional personnel support to Anguilla from the same organisation (£217,000) has provided enhanced leadership planning and capability following the impact of the hurricanes. Support to BVI at a value of £194,000 has provided interim support until the arrival of the Scottish Prison Service in April 2018 to assist with enhanced security and management measures.

18) The provision of technical assistance and advisory support on recovery worth £547,000.

19) An order worth up to £1.2 million to provide equipment for the tackling of the spread of vector-borne diseases across the affected OTs, which will be funded from the FY 2018-19 OT CSSF programme.

The provision of this assistance was in line with the Government’s hurricane recovery objectives for the overseas territories. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials, along with UK Government advisers oversaw the procurement and delivery process. Where applicable, memoranda of understanding have been agreed with the Anguilla, Turks and Caicos Islands and British Virgin Islands Governments to cover their responsibilities once ownership has been transferred.

In November 2017 the Prime Minister confirmed a further £70 million package of recovery and reconstruction support. £10 million of this has been allocated to the British Virgin Islands and £60 million to Anguilla. In the British Virgin Islands it will be supplemented by up to £300 million of UK loan guarantees. The British Virgin Islands House of Assembly has passed legislation to establish a recovery and development agency that will take this programme forward.

In Anguilla funds have been released for six priority projects, which the Government of Anguilla have estimated at approximately £10 million. The release of further funding by UK Ministers is conditional on agreement of a medium-term economic and fiscal reform plan to put Anguilla’s public finances on a stable footing for the long term.

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

Human Medicines Regulations 2012 Advisory Bodies: Annual Report 2017

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

I have received the annual reports of the Human Medicines Regulations Advisory Bodies for 2017, which has been laid before Parliament today in accordance with the requirements of Part 2 Section 12 (4) of the Human Medicines Regulations 2012.
I am glad to acknowledge the valuable work done by the distinguished members of the Human Medicines Regulations Advisory Bodies and thank them for the time and effort dedicated in the public interest to this important work. I attach a copy of the report.

Attachments:

Attachments can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-05-21/HCWS703/ [HCWS703]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department has today laid the European Union (Definition of Treaties) (Canada Trade Agreement) Order 2017 to designate the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement as a treaty in accordance with the European Communities Act 1972.

The European Union and Canada have concluded negotiation and signature of this agreement, which was provisionally applied on 21 September 2017 and requires ratification by the EU member states to come fully into effect.

We have laid this order which will be followed shortly by the laying of the text of the agreement as a Command Paper under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act for scrutiny. This is, in effect, the start of the formal process of ratification of the agreement in the UK.

This agreement will boost the economies of the UK, Canada, and the EU, promoting bilateral trade and economic growth. It removed 98.2% of Canadian tariff lines with provisional application on 21 September 2017. This will rise to almost 99% over the next seven years. The agreement also reduces non-tariff measures that businesses face when trading goods and services and when investing in Canada.

The Government remain committed to supporting the EU’s ambitious trade agenda including the free trade agreements it is putting in place. We see UK ratification of CETA, while the UK is still an EU member state, as a sound demonstration of this commitment.

The Government have been clear that they will seek to ensure continuity in their existing EU trade agreements and other preferential arrangements as we leave the EU, including CETA. The Prime Minister and the Canadian Prime Minister have confirmed that both countries remain committed to a seamless transition of the trade preferences between the UK and Canada brought into effect with this agreement.

We have also laid before the House an explanatory memorandum to this order. This explains the background and rationale of the agreement and ratification. At the same time, we are publishing our economic impact assessment of this agreement and the external study on which it is based. Copies of these documents are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS700]
report for the second road investment strategy period (2020-2025) Highways England proposes funding to support the provision of better roadside facilities, which would include lorry parking. The department has consulted on this proposal and is carefully considering the responses received.

Secondly, I have written with the Minister for Housing, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who has responsibility for planning to local planning authorities to draw their attention to the survey results, which show a strategic national need for more lorry parking and highlight shortages in specific areas.

In addition, I am asking Highways England to develop its existing role as a statutory consultee on all proposed developments that are on or that directly affect the strategic road network. In future, Highways England will seek to use its unique network-wide perspective to assist local authorities in actively identifying areas of lorry parking need and potential solutions, including in the context of specific planning applications where these might help alleviate the situation.

Thirdly, the Department will consider further steps to make it easier for local authorities to take enforcement action against hauliers who park inappropriately. In Kent the trial on a stretch of the A20 of innovative enforcement approaches has had considerable success in its first six months of operation, with a significant fall in the number of vehicles parked overnight, and increased use of commercial parking facilities in the area, especially at weekends. Subject to the findings of this 18-month trial, we will be looking to promote the wider application of such measures elsewhere.

[HCWS698]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Jobseeker’s Allowance Trial

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It has been a long-standing policy of successive Governments that claimants on work-related benefits are generally expected to undertake certain activities in return for financial support through the benefit system. This system of “conditionality” can lead to sanctions, which deduct benefit from claimants when they fail, without good reason, to meet a conditionality requirement, such as failing to attend a jobcentre interview or failing to search for work. This ensures a fair, proportionate and effective use of public money, in support of employment and wider outcomes for society.

Today, we are publishing the jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) sanctions early warning trial’s final evaluation report (“JSA Sanctions Early Warning Trial Evaluation - Final report”) and qualitative research (“Jobseekers Allowance: Sanctions Early Warning Trial”).

In October 2015, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that it would be trialling a new process for JSA sanctions in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee’s recommendations to review the JSA sanction process.

The trial was delivered between April and September 2016 and involved 6,500 claimants. It tested an approach of adding an additional step into the sanction decision-making process, by informing claimants through a “sanction warning letter” that, on the basis of information available, the decision maker intended to apply a sanction. Claimants were then given a further 14 days (on top of the standard seven days they already receive before the decision is initially considered) to submit evidence of good reason for not meeting their conditionality.

The aim of the trial was to consider whether such an approach would have an effect on:
The volume of claimants that provide reasons for not meeting their conditionality requirements.
The volume of claimants sanctioned who request a mandatory reconsideration of the initial sanction decision.
The service received by the claimant and whether this represented value for money.
The effectiveness of the process as perceived by decision makers.

The key findings of the trial were:
13% of those receiving a “sanction warning letter” responded to it during the additional 14 days and provided evidence. In around half of these cases the evidence provided did not contain a good reason for the labour market decision maker to change their decision and the sanction was applied.

There were some indications that the trial had an impact on reducing the proportion of cases where a decision review or mandatory reconsideration was carried out. However, as these findings are based on low volumes, they are indicative only.

The qualitative evaluation concluded that given the additional burden placed on the departmental resources and marginal gains achieved, the trial did not appear to be an effective use of the Department’s resource.

Results from the qualitative evaluation showed that there was support from staff for the intentions underpinning the trial, however evidence from interviews with staff suggested that in practice the trial appeared to make little difference to the outcomes of claimants.

Given the low proportion of cases in which claimants provided further evidence and the even lower proportion of cases where decision outcomes were changed, we do not consider that the benefits of the approach are sufficient to justify the extra time and cost it adds to the process.

We are now exploring the feasibility of an alternative process to give claimants written warnings, instead of a sanction, for a first sanctionable failure to attend a work search review. The aim will be to conduct a small-scale proof of concept to obtain qualitative feedback from staff on this new process, followed by any subsequent tests. More details will be made available once we have progressed with the design work.

[HCWS697]
Written Statements

Tuesday 22 May 2018

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Clean Air Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today, the Government published their consultation on a clean air strategy. At the most fundamental level, our health and prosperity depend on the health of the planet on which we live. From the air we breathe to the water we drink, the food we eat and the energy which powers our homes and businesses, we need to ensure we have a healthy and sustainable environment.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of air quality. Air pollution is a major public health risk ranking alongside cancer, heart disease and obesity. It causes more harm than passive smoking.

This clean air strategy sets out the case for action and demonstrates this Government’s determination to improve our air quality. Leaving the EU provides us with an excellent opportunity to be even more ambitious about achieving cleaner air for the health of the nation, and for our environment and the biodiversity it sustains. We want to do all that we can to reduce people’s exposure to pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, ammonia, volatile organic compounds, particulate matter and sulphur dioxide.

Air pollution has improved since 2010, but we recognise that there is more to do. This comprehensive clean air strategy sets out how we will tackle all sources of air pollution, making our air healthier to breathe, protecting nature and boosting the economy.

Governments must act to tackle air pollution which shortens lives. We are already acting to reduce concentrations of nitrogen dioxide (NO2) around roads from cars, but vehicles are not the only source of toxic emissions. Air pollution is a result of the way we currently generate power, heat our homes, produce food, manufacture consumer goods and power transport. Better, cleaner technologies and simple changes in behaviour will tackle the pollution that claims lives.

The new strategy is a key part of our 25-year plan to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. It sets out the comprehensive action that is required from across all parts of government and society to meet the challenge. By 2025, we will halve the number of people living in locations where concentrations of particulate matter are above the World Health Organisation guideline limit of 10 μg/m3, protecting public health.

Through the introduction of new primary legislation, we will introduce a stronger and more coherent legislative framework for action to tackle air pollution, giving local government new powers to take decisive action in areas with an air pollution problem.

We are investing £10 million in improving our modelling, data and analytical tools to give a more precise picture of current air quality and the impact of policies on it in future. Alongside this, we will seek ways to support further investment in research and innovation, in partnership with UKRI, which will help the UK become world leaders in clean technology and secure further emissions reductions.

From farming to consumer products, a large range of other day-to-day practices, processes and products produce harmful emissions. Of particular concern is burning wood and coal to heat a home, which contributes 38% to harmful particulate matter emissions. It is why we will ensure only the cleanest fuels will be available for sale and only the cleanest stoves will be available to buy and install.

For the first time, the Government will take concerted action to tackle ammonia from farming by requiring and supporting farmers to invest in the infrastructure and equipment that will reduce emissions. The agriculture sector accounts for 88% of UK emissions of ammonia, and action by farmers can make a big difference in reducing the impacts of excess nitrogen on sensitive habitats and reducing the overall background levels of particulates in the atmosphere.

Government cannot act alone in tackling air pollution, and our strategy sets out how we will work with businesses, farmers and industry to implement lasting solutions to reduce air pollution, and the importance of each of us taking action and playing an important role in cleaning up our air for the next generation.

These actions will, we hope, ensure that this country is recognised as the leading global champion of cleaner air for the next generation.

[HCWS705]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU (Withdrawal) Bill: SO No. 830

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 83O in respect of any motion relating to a Lords amendment for Commons consideration of Lords amendments stage for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

[HCWS704]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 16 April. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Syria

The Council discussed the latest developments in Syria, including the targeted US, French and British airstrikes on chemical weapons facilities. Ahead of the Brussels Conference on Syria and the region, Ministers discussed the need to relaunch a political solution to the conflict in the framework of the UN-led Geneva process. The Council adopted conclusions on Syria.

Iran

Ministers agreed on the need for unity on continuing the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). They encouraged the diplomatic efforts to ensure that there continues to be strong commitment to the agreement by all the parties involved. Ministers also discussed other issues outside the scope of the JCPOA, in particular the role of Iran in regional conflicts, not least in Syria and Yemen, as well as the EU’s concerns at Iran’s ballistic missiles programme and its human rights situation.

Russia

The Council agreed unanimously on the continued relevance of the five guiding principles that were agreed in March 2016. Following the Salisbury attack and the European Council conclusions that were agreed in March 2018, Ministers highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience of the EU and its neighbours against Russian threats, including hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns. Ministers commended the work carried out by the East StratComms taskforce in the European External Action Service. Ministers also highlighted the importance of supporting Russian civil society and continuing to develop people-to-people contacts.

Western Balkans

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the Western Balkans in preparation for the EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018.

External action financing instruments

The Council held a preliminary exchange of views on the future financing of external action instruments after 2020. The Commission is preparing its proposal for the EU’s next long-term budget (the future multiannual financial framework, MFF).

Members agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council approved the annual progress report on the implementation of the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which covers activities carried out in 2017;
- The Council adopted conclusions on chemical disarmament and non-proliferation ahead of the Fourth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to review the operation of the chemical weapons convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their destruction. This session will take place in The Hague on 21-30 November 2018;
- The Council adopted conclusions on South Sudan;
- The Council adopted conclusions on malicious cyber activities that underline the importance of a global, open, free, stable and secure cyberspace where human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law fully apply;
- The Council approved the High Representative’s six-monthly report on Operation Atalanta, which covers the period from 1 September 2017 to 28 February 2018;
- The Council adopted a decision approving Mazars and KPMG S.A. as the external auditors of the Banque de France, the National Central Bank of France, for the 2018-23 period.

[HCWS707]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Suspect Vehicles: Police Pursuit

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I announced in September 2017 that the Home Office would lead a review of the legislation, guidance and practice surrounding the police’s pursuits of suspect vehicles. As I said in September, this Government are determined to get ahead of and tackle emerging threats like motorcycle-related crimes, including those involving mopeds and scooters. People must be able to go about their daily lives without fear of harassment or attack and criminals must not think they can get away with a crime by riding or driving in a certain way or on a certain type of vehicle.

I am today publishing the review’s findings for public consultation. The findings will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House. The consultation sets out and seeks views on a number of proposals, including:

- Judging whether a police officer’s driving is careless or dangerous against the standard of a careful and competent police driver of a similar level of training and skill, rather than any careful and competent driver, as now;
- Requiring that specific driving tactics employed by the police are authorised appropriately and are both necessary and proportionate to the circumstances;
- Making clear that the police are not responsible for the standard of driving of a suspect being pursued; and
- Clarifying the various emergency service exemptions to traffic law to reduce the potential for confusion.

I have been clear from the outset that we must ensure that the end result of these changes enables the police to do their job effectively and keep us safe while ensuring that we continue to keep our roads among the safest in the world. It is important therefore that we seek the public’s views on these proposals, given their potential to affect all those who use our roads. I look forward to hearing the views of all those interested in the proposals before the consultation closes on 13 August.

[HCWS706]

JUSTICE

Prison Service Pay Review Body

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has extended the appointment of Dr Peter Knight CBE as chair of the Prison Service Pay Review Body for the period 1 March to 31 July 2018. The extension has been made in accordance with the governance code on public appointments.

[HCWS708]
The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government have today published an updated set of single departmental plans for 2018-19, covering the duration of the Parliament.

These set out each Government Department’s objectives and how they will achieve them. Taken together, they show how Departments are working to deliver the Government’s programme.

For the first time, the plans also include equality objectives that each Department has set itself to help it advance equality. This is just one of the steps we are taking towards improving outcomes for all citizens and making the civil service the UK’s most inclusive employer. They also indicate how Departments are contributing to the domestic delivery of the sustainable development goals.

Single departmental plans allow Parliament and the public to track the Government’s progress and performance against a number of indicators. Annual report and resources accounts show how a Department has performed against the objectives in their single departmental plan, at the end of the financial year.

Single departmental plans will be revised annually to reflect new priorities or changes in responsibilities.

[HCWS714]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I would like to thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions to the Opposition day debate about the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland on 7 March 2018. The passionate and constructive comments of Members clearly demonstrated this House’s support for our armed forces.

The covenant has always applied throughout the UK, including in Northern Ireland and there are a number of initiatives underway to ensure the armed forces community in Northern Ireland is treated fairly, supported, and not disadvantaged in accessing public and private goods and services.

The newly-formed Northern Ireland veterans support office (NI VSO)—embedded in the reserve forces and cadets association for Northern Ireland and acting on behalf of the confederation of service charities—functions as a single point of contact for veterans who feel unable to access public bodies or service charities for services.

We have allocated £300,000 over five years to improve the capacity and capability of local authorities and other service providers in Northern Ireland to apply for covenant funding.

Any UK armed forces veteran living in Northern Ireland who feels that they cannot access the support they require from public sector service providers should contact the NI VSO, either direct or via the network of local veteran’s champions. The NI VSO can provide bespoke support and advice through its partner organisations tailored to the specifics of each individual case.

[HCWS711]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Today we are publishing two documents produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU.

These cover:
- Science, research and innovation
- The exchange and protection of personal data

These will be available on gov.uk and a copy of both will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS712]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The conflict in Yemen is now in its fourth year. Houthi rebels took the capital Sana’a by force in 2014 and displaced the legitimate Government of Yemen, as recognised by the UN Security Council. Coalition action is designed to facilitate the restoration of effective governance.

The Houthis have consistently failed to adhere to UN Security Council resolutions, including by launching missile attacks against Saudi Arabia and shipping in the Bab al-Mandab strait. Saudi Arabia continues to be the subject of regular missile attacks from the Houthis in Yemen. Since November 2017, Riyadh has been targeted on at least six occasions. In addition, the Houthis continue to launch frequent rocket attacks against the southern cities of Jizan, Najran and Khamis Mushayt. The Houthis have stated their intention to continue these attacks against Saudi Arabia and to launch additional attacks against neighbouring countries, seriously endangering regional security. The UK supports the legitimate right of Saudi Arabia to respond to this critical threat. The UK has a national interest in stopping Houthi missile attacks that serve only to escalate the conflict and worsen the humanitarian situation.

The United Kingdom remains committed to supporting the legitimate security needs of Saudi Arabia and guarding against the danger of regional escalation. The UK has now agreed to work with the Saudis to mitigate the threat from these missiles. This will involve UK personnel providing information, advice and assistance limited to this particular objective. To be clear, the UK is not a member of the Saudi-led coalition. We do not have any role in setting coalition policy, or in executing air strikes. All UK military personnel in Saudi Arabia remain under UK command and control.
The UK’s partnership with Saudi Arabia also demands that we provide them with honest advice. We regularly remind the Saudi Government, and other members of the military coalition, of the importance of compliance with international humanitarian law. I did so most recently with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on 17 May. The UK Government take their arms export responsibilities very seriously and operate one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. All export licence applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, taking account of all relevant factors at the time of the application. The criteria state that the Government will not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in a commission of a serious violation of IHL.

This war has gone on for too long. The UK continues to lead diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the conflict. We are committed to supporting the work of the UN special envoy for Yemen. We have been clear that there can be no military solution. We continue to encourage all parties to return to negotiations and engage in the UN-led political process in good faith, to work towards a political settlement.

Meanwhile, the people of Yemen continue to suffer. As well as pressing hard for a comprehensive political solution, we are addressing the humanitarian crisis. This is a key priority for the UK. On 3 April, we pledged an additional £170 million to Yemen to cover the financial year 2018-19. This makes the UK the fourth largest humanitarian donor to Yemen. UK funding will meet the immediate food needs of 2.5 million Yemenis, and comes on top of over £400 million in bilateral support since the conflict began in 2015.

Yemen is a priority for the Government. The solution remains political, not military. As the UN special envoy said to the Security Council on 17 April, there is a risk that military escalation by all sides may undermine the prospects for peace. The legitimate national security interests of Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries must be preserved. At the same time there is a need for all sides to get behind the UN special envoy’s plans for stopping the conflict and reaching a comprehensive political settlement. This is the best way to protect the people of Yemen and address their needs. We intend that our additional support to Saudi Arabia will help to provide enough reassurance regarding their national security to enable them to focus their efforts on supporting a political solution.

[HCWS716]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fit and Proper Persons Requirement

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): On 8 February 2018, the Government accepted the recommendations made by Dr Bill Kirkup in his report into Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust. This included a recommendation to the Department of Health and Social Care to undertake a review of the fit and proper persons requirement (FPPR). The current scope of the FPPR is to ensure that people who have senior level responsibility for the quality and safety of care are fit and proper to carry out their role. The FPPR was introduced in response to concerns raised following investigations into Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and Winterbourne View Hospital.

Today, I can announce the arrangements for the review, which will be led by Tom Kark QC. The review will commence shortly, with a document review to begin in June and July 2018 and principal evidence gathering to be undertaken in August and September 2018. Tom Kark QC led the team of counsel to the public inquiry into the serious failings in care at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust from 2010 to 2013.

The review will consider the scope, operation and purpose of the fit and proper person test as a means of specifically preventing the re-deployment or re-employment of senior NHS managers where their conduct has fallen short of the values of the NHS. It will engage and discuss these issues with a range of interested parties, including, but not limited to, the Care Quality Commission, NHS Improvement, NHS England, relevant parliamentarians, and patients and relatives. I have discussed the terms of the review with the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper).

NHS Improvement (NHSI) has led on the health and care system’s wider response to the recommendations made in the Kirkup review. The NHSI board paper published on 22 March sets out NHSI’s response to the recommendations in the Kirkup review, and a further update on progress against these agreed actions will be discussed at NHSI’s next board meeting on 24 May.

The Kark review will aim to report its conclusions and recommendations by autumn this year. The report will be published and I will make arrangements for its presentation to Parliament. A copy of the draft terms of reference, which will be finalised with input from Tom Kark QC, is available as an online attachment. Attachments can be found online at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-05-23/HCWS713/[HCWS713]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Ebola

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Following the declaration of an outbreak of Ebola in Equateur Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on 8 May, I am updating the House on what the British Government are doing to support the response.

The Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the World Health Organisation are leading the response. They have issued a joint funding appeal and response plan. The UK has acted quickly in support of the Government and the WHO.

I have announced today that the Department for International Development (DFID) will be providing £5 million in funding to the World Health Organisation’s response plan. This money will be made available immediately and will support the delivery of a range of WHO activities, including: surveillance, case management, laboratories, co-ordination, logistics, and operational readiness in neighbouring areas.
In addition to direct support to the joint Government of DRC and WHO appeal, the UK has already supported a variety of elements of the response to the outbreak. The UK has been in emergency mode ever since; that lessons have been learned from previous Ebola outbreaks. For example from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, we have learned the importance of acting early and making sure sufficient resources are allocated from the outset. We have invested heavily in global preparedness, early response mechanisms, and vaccines.

In 2014, DFID worked with the Wellcome Trust to develop an experimental Ebola vaccine: thousands of doses of this vaccine are currently being issued by WHO, Médecins Sans Frontières and the Government of DRC through support from UK aid and Gavi, the Vaccines Alliance. Health workers and other frontline staff began receiving the vaccine on 21 May.

Three experts from the Department of Health and Social Care’s UK Public Health Rapid Support Team—two epidemiologists and a data scientist—are being deployed to the DRC imminently to assist our partners in tracking the spread of the disease so that it can be tackled quickly and effectively. Laboratory support has also been offered.

The UK is also a major supporter to a wide range of organisations and response mechanisms which are currently tackling the outbreak. The UK is the largest contributor to the United Nations’ central fund for emergencies and the second largest contributor to the World Health Organisation’s contingency fund for emergencies, including £4 million from the Department of Health and Social Care in March this year. Each of these have provided £2 million for the response. DFID has also made available £1 million from its joint research initiative on epidemic preparedness with Wellcome to support improved diagnosis and treatment. The UK aid-supported Start Network of 42 international aid agencies has mobilised £250,000 to help tackle the outbreak. The UK also provides funding to the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service, which has mobilised two helicopters and an aeroplane to meet the logistical needs of the Ebola response.

In addition to the emergency Ebola response, DFID’s new £40 million Tackling Deadly Diseases in Africa programme (TDDAP) is enhancing longer-term preparedness, detection, and response in the region. £20.5 million will enable WHO to do this. It builds on the UK’s support to WHO’s reform efforts and systems strengthening following the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. This is already delivering a much-improved and better co-ordinated response to the current Ebola outbreak in DRC, helping to prevent it from developing into an epidemic that could seriously threaten more lives and prosperity across Africa and the world. In the future, the programme will also support another specialist regional organisation; this component is currently out to tender. TDDAP also contains a contingency mechanism of up to an additional £20 million, which allows the UK to swiftly respond to emergencies like in the DRC.

The WHO’s International Health Regulations Emergency Committee met on Friday 18 May and concluded that the Ebola outbreak in the DRC did not presently constitute a global health emergency. However, the committee concluded that the risk to the public in the DRC itself was “very high” and the risk to countries in the region was high.

In our increasingly interconnected world, diseases like Ebola do not respect borders. As a result of lessons learned from the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the UK is working to strengthen the international response to health threats in order to ensure future outbreaks are identified quickly and tackled effectively. This has included supporting the WHO in Africa to reform and improve their response. Helping countries to identify diseases early—and to limit their spread across borders—is beneficial for all of us: preventing potentially devastating damage in developing countries, and reducing risk to the UK population at home.

The WHO continues to assess the international risk of this outbreak as low. Public Health England has assessed the risk to the UK as negligible to very low and will continue to review this. Led by the Government Chief Scientist, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Chief Medical Officer, with support from the Cabinet Office, colleagues across Government have ensured that the UK is in a state of readiness to respond should that risk change. The Government will continue to monitor the situation closely and will adapt their international and, if necessary, a UK domestic response as the situation evolves.

[HCWS710]

JUSTICE

Courts Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today we have introduced the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill in the House of Lords.

New legislation underpins our agenda to modernise the courts and tribunals, make them fit for the 21st century and deliver better value for taxpayers. We are working alongside the judiciary to deliver these far-reaching reforms, which will make access to justice quicker and easier for all. The Bill will support and enable these vital reforms to the justice system.

We are delivering significant reform in advance of legislation. For example, we have delivered high-quality, new digital services through a number of pilots: the public can now apply for uncontested divorce online, apply for probate online, make pleas online for low level offences (such as traffic offences or evading bus fare), respond to jury summonses, track social security appeals online, and issue and respond to civil money claims. Over 6,000 people have used these pilots and got straightforward, digital access to the courts for the first time.

Today’s Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill contains measures that are essential to enabling the judiciary to respond to the changing demands of a reformed courts and tribunals system and delivering better services to users. Our world-class judiciary are a highly valuable resource and we want to enable them to continue to deploy their time and expertise where and when it is most needed. The Bill will introduce much greater flexibility to the deployment of judges. It will also free up judges’ time to focus on more complex matters by allowing suitably qualified and experienced court and tribunal staff to be authorised to handle uncontroversial, straightforward matters under judicial supervision. The measures in the Bill will also increase the efficiency of the courts and tribunals.
Further court reform legislation will follow, as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I am placing the delegated powers memorandum and the accompanying impact assessments in the Libraries of both Houses.

TRANSPORT

High Speed 2 Ltd: Framework Document

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have today laid before Parliament a revised framework document for High Speed 2 Ltd (HS2 Ltd).

HS2 Ltd is a corporate body established on 14 January 2009 to develop, promote and deliver the UK’s new high-speed rail network.

The document deals with matters relating to the Secretary of State’s role as shareholder of the company, its relationship with the Department and respective accountabilities and governance.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-05-23/HCWS709/.
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Competitiveness Council will take place on 28 and 29 May in Brussels.

Day one—internal market and industry

The Council will receive a presentation from the Commission on the “competitiveness check-up” examining linkages between the internal market and industrial competitiveness from a sectoral perspective. The Council will discuss the regulation on mutual recognition (part of the “goods package”) with the presidency hoping to reach a general approach. The Council will also hold a policy debate on the regulation on platform to business relations.

Under AOB the Commission will provide information on recent initiatives in the digital single market, the copyright package, the new deal for consumers package, the company law package, supplementary protection certificates for medicinal products and the supplementary protection certificate for medicinal products. The Commission will also provide information on the outcome of initiatives and conferences in the field of tourism and provide an update on the current state of play on the unitary patent and Unified Patent Court.

Day one will conclude with information from the Austrian delegation on their incoming presidency work programme.

Day two—space and research

Day two of the Competitiveness Council will start with a policy debate on the future of European space policy.

The research sessions will begin with a progress report on the regulation on establishing the European high performance computing joint undertaking. The Council will then adopt Council conclusions on accelerating knowledge circulation in the European Union and conclusions on the European open science cloud.

During the afternoon session the Council is expected to agree on the regulation on the regulation on the research and training programme of the European atomic energy community (2019-20). This will be followed by a policy debate on research and innovation within the context of the next multiannual financial framework.

Under AOB, the Commission will provide information on the outcome of the presidency event dedicated to space (held in Sofia on 17 to 19 April 2018).

Day two will conclude with information from the Austrian delegation on their incoming presidency work programme.

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 25 May 2018. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 24 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Banking package

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach to the banking risk reduction package including proposals for legislative amendments to the capital requirements regulation (CRR) and directive (CRD), single resolution mechanism regulation (SRMR), and the bank recovery and resolution directive (BRRD).

Strengthening administrative co-operation

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach to strengthen administrative co-operation in the area of VAT.

General reverse charge mechanism

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on the VAT general reverse charge mechanism.

E-publications

The Council will be invited to agree a general approach on reduced rates for VAT e-publications.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Bulgarian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European semester

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the in-depth reviews of macroeconomic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure, and the implementation of 2017 country-specific recommendations as assessed in the Commission’s country reports, published on 7 March.

2018 ageing report

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the 2018 ageing report on age-related spending and the sustainability of public finances.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I wish to update the House on the Government’s strategy to eradicate bovine TB (bTB) in England by 2038. The measures I am announcing today will help to strengthen disease control and expand our options to tackle new outbreaks of bTB.
Following the recent consultation on the principle of allowing badger control in the low risk area (LRA) of England, I am announcing my intention to enable badger control measures in the LRA in the rare event that disease in badgers is linked with infected herds. This will allow any such outbreaks to be tackled rapidly to prevent bTB from spreading further within the wildlife and cattle populations. It will also help preserve the LRA's low incidence status.

Badger control in the LRA is expected to be permitted only in very exceptional circumstances where veterinary epidemiologists judge an area to meet the published criteria for a bTB “hotspot”. Any decision on whether to implement badger control in a specific LRA location will be taken by the Defra Secretary of State after considering all relevant scientific and veterinary advice. All the stringent licensing criteria set out in Defra’s guidance to Natural England will need to be met by the cull company.

In summer 2017, we consulted on a proposal to pay compensation at 50% of the average market price for any animal brought into a TB breakdown herd which then fails a TB test while that breakdown is still ongoing. This already happens in Wales and I have decided that it should apply in England from 1 November 2018. The proposal is intended to encourage herd owners to take further steps to improve their disease controls in a sensible and proportionate manner. One way they can do this is to seek accreditation under a scheme based on the standards laid down by the Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS) body. Herds which are accredited at the time of the breakdown will continue to receive 100% compensation for all compulsorily slaughtered cattle.

In a further strengthening of our testing regime, in December 2017 we confirmed that surveillance testing for most herds in the high-risk area will take place at six monthly intervals to improve early detection and eradication of disease, and to prevent it spreading to new areas. We have decided that this change should take effect from early 2020, when the next generation of TB testing contracts with veterinary delivery partners will be put in place.

The TB strategy review led by Professor Sir Charles Godfray, announced in February, is considering how to take the strategy to the next phase, so we are able to deploy all tools to tackle this terrible disease. Currently in their evidence-gathering phase, the reviewers are examining progress with implementation and how we can improve, enhance or accelerate our approach.

Copies of the summary of consultation responses and way forward document have been placed in the Library of the House.

These cover:
- External security
- Internal security
- Galileo
- Economic partnership

These will be available on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Tomorrow we will be publishing a document on the exchange of classified information, which was produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU. This will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS725]

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Today we are publishing four documents produced by the UK negotiating team for discussion with the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Brussels on Monday 14 May 2018. The agenda covered the multiannual financial framework (MFF) post-2020, the annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018, and rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/05/14/ Multiannual financial framework (MFF) post-2020

Gunther Oettinger, European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources, presented the Commission's proposal for a post-2020 MFF. He set out the political context and the need for funding for new priorities, such as migration and defence. I expressed the UK’s interest in participating in programmes promoting science, education and mutual security.

Annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 28 and 29 June 2018

The presidency presented the annotated draft agenda for June European Council (JEC), which included: migration; security and defence; jobs, growth and competitiveness; innovation and digital; and external relations. Trade and enlargement may also be added to the agenda.

I intervened to highlight the importance of maintaining momentum in facing challenges like terrorism and organised crime. I also welcomed discussion on a continued response to the attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury on 4 March. On trade, I expressed that the UK remained concerned over US proposals to introduce tariffs for aluminium and steel imports and continued to press for an EU-wide exemption. I also stated that the UK would welcome discussion of this issue at JEC.

Rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans updated Ministers on the ongoing dialogue between the Commission and Poland. He concluded that Poland’s recent reforms were insufficient to remove the risk of a threat to the rule of law and that more progress was needed. Ministers highlighted the need for continuation of dialogue and further reforms by Poland. The Commission indicated its intention to continue dialogue with Poland and provide a final opinion on the matter at the June GAC.

I intervened to highlight the importance of the rule of law, welcomed the progress so far, and emphasised that the best solution was one reached through constructive dialogue.

[HCWS724]
European Union Citizenship

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Her Majesty’s Government welcomed the sincere and well-informed debate on this highly topical subject on 7 March 2018, and therefore did not oppose the motion.

From the very beginning citizens have been at the heart of Her Majesty’s Government’s approach to negotiations. The Prime Minister was clear that safeguarding the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU was her first priority. This is a commitment we have delivered, and the agreement reached and set out in the withdrawal agreement text will provide citizens with certainty about their rights going forward.

The agreement grants citizens certainty about a wide range of rights, including residents’ healthcare, as well as pensions and other benefits. This will mean that UK nationals who are legally resident in the EU by the end of the implementation period will continue to benefit from rights that stem from their EU citizenship today. After the end of the implementation period, those rights will be provided for by the withdrawal agreement, which will enshrine them and take the status of international law, having direct effect in EU member states. The agreement will also be written into UK law by Parliament, to put in place reciprocal protections for EU citizens resident in the UK.

Her Majesty’s Government will always be happy to listen to any proposals on our exit from the European Union. However, as EU treaty provisions make clear, only citizens of EU member states are able to hold EU citizenship. This will mean that when the UK ceases to be a member of the European Union, UK nationals will no longer hold EU citizenship, unless they hold dual nationality of another EU member state.

To that end, associate EU citizenship is not one of our negotiating objectives and is not provided for by the EU treaties. For UK nationals to remain EU citizens after the UK’s exit from the EU, an amendment to the EU treaties would be required. Citizenship is the fundamental status of nationals of EU member states and while the EEA EFTA states are in the single market, the position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and there can be no cherry-picking. Instead, we are seeking the broadest and deepest possible partnership with the EU—covering more sectors and co-operating more fully than any free trade agreement anywhere in the world today.

Her Majesty’s Government believe that UK nationals were citizens of Europe long before the introduction of EU citizenship through the Maastricht treaty in 1993. The United Kingdom may be leaving the political and legal structures of the EU, but UK nationals will not be any less European as a result.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 28 May. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, Iran, DRC, Post-Cotonou and Venezuela and possibly the middle east peace process (MEPP).

The FAC will give an initial political steer to the Commission, Ministers will have an initial discussion on the political situation in the DRC. They will consider progress towards overdue presidential elections, now scheduled for 23 December 2018, which we hope will see the first peaceful transition of power in the independent history of the country. The UK is a leading voice in international efforts to ensure these elections take place as planned. We will focus on the need to ensure that the international community remains united in putting pressure on the Government of the DRC to meet the democratic aspirations of its people.

The FAC will adopt the negotiating mandate for a post-2020 agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of countries. The FAC will give an initial political steer to the Commission ahead of the negotiations, which will be formally launched at the EU-ACP Council of Ministers in Togo on 31 May.
Venezuela

Ministers will discuss the political situation in Venezuela following presidential elections held on 20 May. The FAC will also consider how to respond to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela and its impact on the region.

MEPP

Following the opening of the US embassy to Israel in Jerusalem and recent violence along the Gaza border, Ministers will have an exchange of views on prospects for the middle east peace process.

Any other business (AOB)

Under AOB, the UK and France are planning to update the FAC on their ongoing efforts to strengthen compliance with the chemical weapons convention.

Council conclusions

The FAC is expected to adopt conclusions on strengthening civilian CSDP, enhanced EU security engagement in and with Asia, the special report by the European Court of Auditors: “Election Observation Missions—Efforts made to follow up recommendations but better monitoring needed”, and on small arms and light weapons.

Home Department

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I have been very clear that the Government deeply regret what has happened to some of the Windrush generation and about our determination to put it right. Both my predecessor as Home Secretary and I have set out to Parliament the immediate steps that we took to assist those in the Windrush generation but were clear that this was simply a precursor for a more formal arrangement.

I have today laid a statutory instrument which will bring into force the “Windrush scheme” which will ensure that members of the Windrush generation, their children born in the UK and who arrived in the UK as minors, and others who have been in the United Kingdom for a long period of time, will be able to obtain the documents to confirm their status and, in appropriate cases, be able to obtain British citizenship free of charge.

The Windrush scheme, which will be a distinct scheme, will make it easier for those concerned to receive the support they need and to understand what is on offer. Those applying under the scheme will benefit from the services of the taskforce which will help people to navigate the immigration system and continue to take a sympathetic and proactive approach when assisting people in confirming their status.

The new scheme will come into operation next Wednesday, 30 May. Breaching the normal 21 day rule between laying a Statutory Instrument and its commencement is not something I have done lightly and I am very mindful of the need to observe normal parliamentary protocols. However, my judgment is that the imperative to get the new scheme up and running as swiftly as possible requires this course of action. The Immigration Minister has written to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee to explain further our reasoning.

The new scheme will ensure that members of the Windrush generation—Commonwealth citizens who were settled in the UK before 1973—will be able to apply to become British citizens more easily. They will be deemed to have met the normal requirement for knowledge of language and life in the UK and will not be required to attend a citizenship ceremony, unless they want to. There will be no fees to pay.

Commonwealth citizens who were settled before 1973 but who do not wish to become British citizens, those who are not eligible, and citizens of other nationalities who were settled before 1973 will be provided with documents which confirm their right to remain permanently in the UK and to access services. Again, there will be no fees payable.

Children of the Windrush generation who were born in the UK will themselves be British, though in some cases they may wish to obtain a document to confirm that status. Others will have the right to register as British. We will facilitate that through the taskforce and waive any application fees involved.

We are providing that a child of a member of the Windrush generation who was born abroad and who came to live in the UK before they were 18 and is still here is eligible for a free application for a document confirming their status or, if they wish, a free application for citizenship.

My predecessor undertook to consider the position of those who came to the UK between 1973 and 1988, when immigration and nationality law changed. Unlike the earlier generation, these people should have had documentary evidence of their entitlement to be in the UK but may no longer be able to prove it. Where they are lawfully in the UK, they can apply for the necessary documentation confirming that free of charge.

There is already provision in the immigration system for people whose permanent residence status has lapsed, through a prolonged absence from the UK, to resume their residence here, by obtaining a returning resident visa. It is limited to people who have spent most of their lives in the UK. I am adjusting the visa rules to ensure they are interpreted generously in respect of the Windrush generation, who spent a considerable time in the UK and who may have been unaware that they were forfeiting residence here when they left, for example because they considered themselves British. Again, that application will be made available free of charge.

Equally, there are those of the Windrush generation who retired to another country but want to return to the UK temporarily as visitors to see friends and family. I believe we should make a generous offer to them, recognising their special position and relationship with this country and those who qualify can apply for a visit visa free of charge, valid for 10 years.

In my written statement of 10 May, I announced the opening of the call for evidence on compensation. I am pleased to say that there has been a good response with almost 100 responses received to date. In addition, the Home Office has started an active programme of outreach to understand better the experiences of individuals and help inform the design of the compensation scheme.
My officials have made contact with a number of community organisations and their representatives, and have attended events in a number of hon Members’ constituencies. This programme will continue and expand in the weeks ahead, working with Martin Forde QC, the independent person that is overseeing the design of the scheme.

All of this is about swiftly putting wrong the injustices that have been done to the Windrush generation. However, it is also fundamentally important that the lessons from this episode are learned for the future, so that this never happens again.

As I made clear to the House on 2 May, I will therefore ensure that a thorough review is conducted of what happened and why, looking particularly at:

how members of the Windrush generation came to be entangled in measures designed for illegal immigrants;

why that was not spotted sooner; and

whether the right corrective measures are now in place.

I will also be taking steps to ensure that the review is subject to robust independent oversight and challenge.

[HCWS722]

Europol: Personal Data

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Until the UK leaves it remains a full member of the European Union with all the rights and responsibilities this entails. The Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

The Government have decided to opt-in to Council decisions authorising negotiations between the EU and Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Algeria to conclude agreements on the exchange of personal data with Europol.

The UK values the role of Europol in helping law enforcement agencies co-ordinate investigations in cross-border serious and organised crime and terrorism. As Europol does not currently have data sharing agreements with any other countries in the Mediterranean and north African region, these agreements could help to increase the security of the UK through helping to improve counter-terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration efforts in that region.

Opting in provides an opportunity for us to influence the negotiation of these agreements, including to ensure that UK concerns around human rights are reflected.

[HCWS723]

JUSTICE

Prison Education and Employment

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today, the Government are launching the Education and Employment Strategy for adult prisoners. It builds on the ambitions of the November 2016 White Paper “Prison Safety and Reform”.

Work has the power to change people’s lives, especially those of ex-prisoners. A prison sentence rightly serves as a punishment, depriving someone of their liberty. However, for those offenders who want to turn their backs on crime, prison should also be a catalyst for change. The vision at the heart of this strategy is that when an offender enters prison they should be put, immediately, on the path to employment on release.

We know that people with criminal convictions face significant barriers on release from prison, with access to employment and education being at the forefront. Not only are many ex-prisoners often unprepared for employment on release in terms of their skills and training, there remains a stigma among some employers about hiring people with a criminal conviction. With reoffending costing the UK billions each year, this strategy sets out to help break down the barriers and prejudices offenders often face in trying to secure employment.

Our reforms to prison education will give governors the tools they need to tailor provision to the requirements of employers and the needs of their prisoner populations. This approach builds on the commitments we made in the White Paper “Prison Safety and Reform”, putting into practice the key principles of governor empowerment and accountability that underpinned the recommendations in Dame Sally Coates’ seminal review. Governors will control their education budget, will decide what curriculum is most appropriate for their learner population, how it is organised and, crucially, who delivers it. These are far-reaching changes that governors themselves demand.

It is essential that prisoners develop their skills and gather experience through work during custodial sentences. Prison jobs are a key part of this, as is release on temporary licence (ROTL), which enables prisoners to undertake work in real workplaces. Evidence published today underlines the link between increased use of ROTL and reduced reoffending and we are also today consulting those who make ROTL decisions and those who provide ROTL placements on how to get more risk-assessed prisoners out of their cells and into real workplaces.

For offenders who play by the rules, we want to use incentives like workplace ROTL to encourage continued good behaviour and help support a turn away from violence and disorder in our prisons. We will develop a new operational policy framework that will allow prison governors to better tailor their ROTL regime to the circumstances of each offender and the opportunities available.

The strategy also sets a range of commitments to boost employment for prisoners once they are released. These include:

- The New Futures Network (NFN) will engage and persuade employers to take on ex-prisoners, with experts placed in every geographical prison group in a phased roll-out across England and Wales.

- The civil service will recruit ex-prisoners, providing jobs and acting as a role model for other employers.

- The DWP and Ministry of Justice will work together to explore new ways to deliver enhancements to the current benefit claim service, so that prison leavers have immediate easier access to financial support on the day of release.

[HCWS719]
Petition

Thursday 17 May 2018

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Musgrove Park Hospital

The petition of residents of Taunton Deane,

Declares that the current condition of some of Musgrove Park Hospital’s operating theatres are not up to the high standards expected in the NHS; further that the pre-1948 buildings that house the operating theatres, intensive treatment unit and high dependency unit are now outdated and are no longer fit for purpose; further that the hospital’s plans to build a new surgical centre in a more central location would complete the redevelopment of the surgical facilities and provide six new endoscopy rooms, eight operating theatres and a further twenty-two critical care beds; and further that the patients and staff at Musgrove Park Hospital deserve the very best facilities to enable them to maintain their outstanding rating for patient care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the petitioners in their efforts to raise the standards in Musgrove Park Hospital to build a new Surgical Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rebecca Pow, Official Report, 21 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 355.]

Observations from the Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay):

Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust’s (TSFT) theatres and critical care facilities at the Musgrove Park Hospital are housed in pre-war buildings that are at risk of critical infrastructure failure due to their age and condition.

The Trust set out proposals to invest £79.6 million in the development of modern fit-for-purpose operating theatres, a critical care unit and an endoscopy unit. However, because of Taunton and Somerset Foundations Trust’s (TSFT) financial position, it is unable to finance the proposed build from funds generated and held internally. The Trust therefore made a bid for funds made available through the Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) capital bidding process.

At the Autumn budget, the Government set aside £760 million to modernise and transform NHS buildings and services in the year of the NHS’s 70th birthday. The Government recognise that Musgrove Park hospital’s theatres and critical care facilities need to be improved significantly, and have since announced that Somerset STP will receive up to £79.4 million to replace outdated theatres, endoscopy and critical care facilities at TSFT. These new facilities will provide a better patient experience, more efficient working environment, improved efficiency from better service co-location, and provide sufficient capacity to sustain services.

The allocation is subject to the standard business case approvals, including demonstrating recurrent savings and value for money. It is also conditional on the STP having a robust plan for disposing surplus land and buildings, and moving towards shared local clinical and financial accountability.

The Trust has submitted its Outline Business Case (OBC) to NHS Improvement, and it is due to go to its Resource Committee in June, following which it will come to the Department for approval through Ministers and HM Treasury, as required for all business cases over £50 million.

Following OBC approval the Trust can undertake the procurement for its scheme and it is planning to submit its Full Business Case with the full affordability and commercial arrangements to NHSI in April 2019. DHSC is committed to working with the Trust and NHSI to expedite the process where possible.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fibromyalgia as a disability

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.—[Presented by Toby Perkins, Official Report, 25 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 985.]

Observations from the Minister for Care, (Caroline Dinenage), received 18 May 2018:

Fibromyalgia is incurable and debilitating long-term condition that can have a serious impact on an individual’s quality of life.

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”, and defines long term as “having lasted, or being likely to last for at least 12 months, or likely to last for the rest of a person’s life”. By this definition fibromyalgia would be considered a disability.

Although there is no cure for fibromyalgia, some treatments can ease symptoms and support improved quality of life for patients. The treatments offered will depend on the severity of a patient’s condition, but may include: pharmacological pain relief; physiotherapy; dietary and exercise advice; counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy; and self-management programmes which aim to give patients the skills and confidence to manage their conditions more effectively. There are also a number of NHS trusts that offer specialist fibromyalgia clinics, such as the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases in Bath, which patients can access on referral from the clinician responsible for their care.

Through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), we are investing over £1 billion a year in health research. The NIHR welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including fibromyalgia. It is not usual practice to ring-fence funds for particular topics or conditions. Applications are subject to peer review and judged in open competition, with awards being made on the basis of the importance of the topic to patients and health and care services, value for money and scientific quality. NIHR support for fibromyalgia research over the last five years includes £1.8 million funding for research projects; £0.6 million funding for clinical trials through the NIHR clinical research network; and the NIHR has managed infrastructure supporting fibromyalgia research.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 15 May 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Office for Product Safety and Standards

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the Office for Product Safety and Standards on 9 May 2018.

Andy Slaughter: I think the Minister has said that one of the office’s duties will be to maintain a recall register. How is that progressing, and will manufacturers be under an obligation to ensure that the register is notified of all recalls?

Andrew Griffiths: I confirm that there is an obligation in place for manufacturers to notify the Office for Product Safety and Standards. I will come on to how the database will work further on in my speech.


Letter of correction from Andrew Griffiths.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

The correct response should have been:

Andrew Griffiths: I confirm that there is an obligation in place for manufacturers to notify the relevant market surveillance authority. I will come on to how the database will work further on in my speech.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 16 May 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 15 May 2018.

T8. [905313] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Residents of North Devon regularly raise with me their concerns about the continuing illegal international trade in wildlife and wildlife products. Will my right hon. Friend please update the House on how we are tackling that?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the House that this is a subject that arouses the grave concern of the entire British people. The illegal wildlife trade is currently worth about £1.7 billion, and it is of course associated with many other criminal activities. That is why, in October, we are holding a global summit in London on that very matter, which I think will attract the interest of the world.


Letter of correction from Boris Johnson.

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

The correct response should have been:

Boris Johnson: I can tell the House that this is a subject that arouses the grave concern of the entire British people. The illegal wildlife trade is currently worth up to £17 billion, and it is of course associated with many other criminal activities. That is why, in October, we are holding a global summit in London on that very matter, which I think will attract the interest of the world.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 22 May 2018

EDUCATION

School Funding

The following is an extract from an answer given by the Minister for School Standards to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) during the Opposition day debate on 25 April 2018:

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.


Letter of correction from Mr Gibb:

An error has been identified in the answer given to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on 25 April 2018.

The correct response should have been:

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 when the national funding formula is implemented in full—a 5.4% increase in funding.